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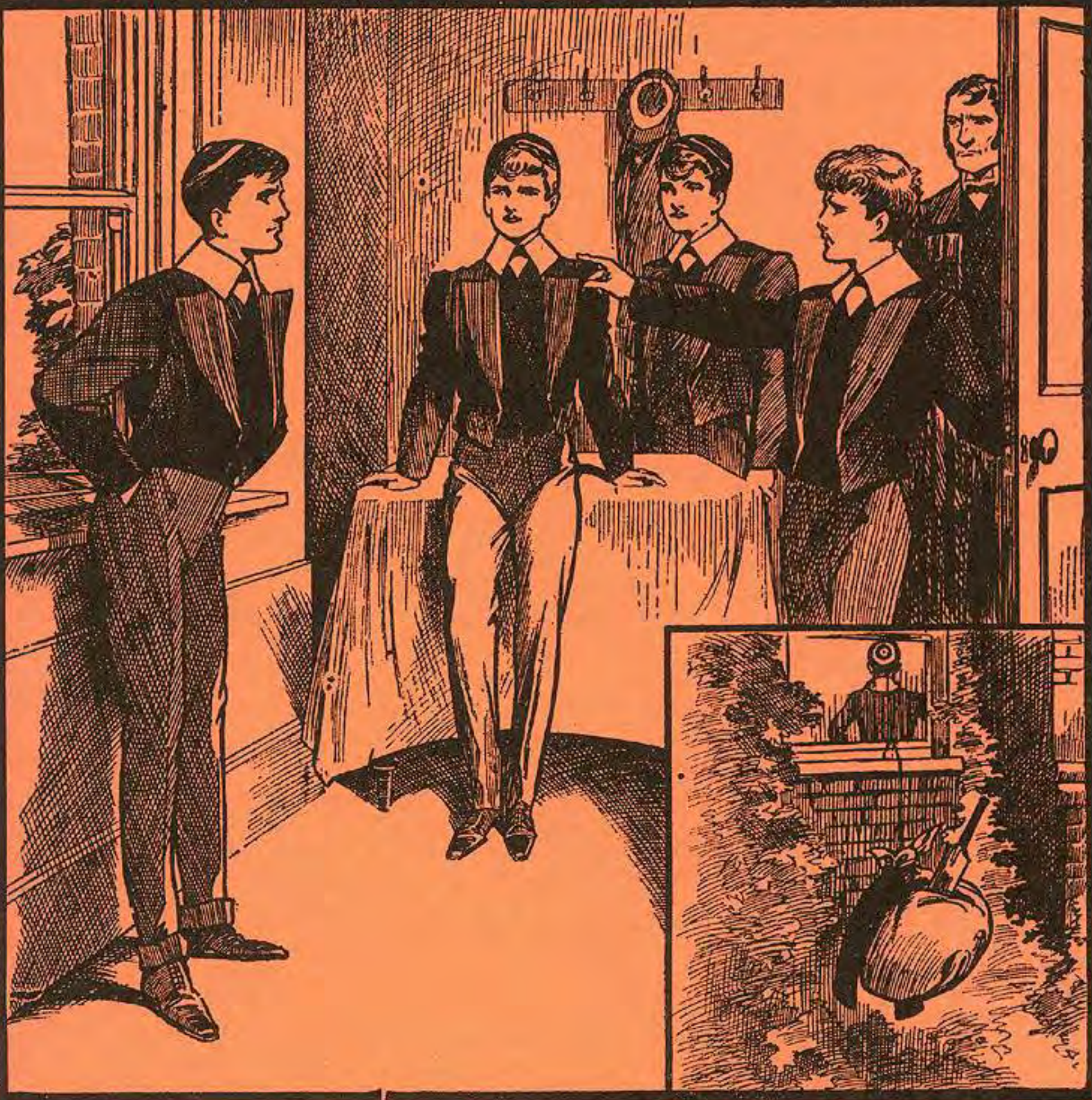
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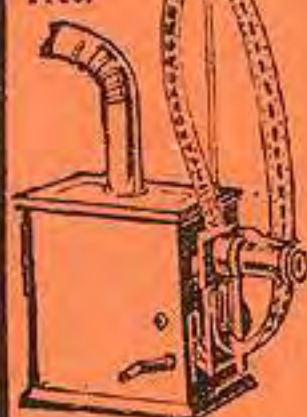


Frank Nugent, in defence of his chum's honour, passionately accuses the cad of the Remove, and demands that his study be searched for incriminating evidence.

How the culprit conceals the evidence of his guilt. (See the 24-Page Complete School Tale in this issue.)



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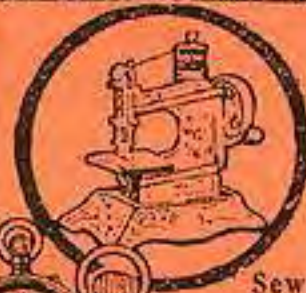
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at Greyfriars.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

Remove Form at Greyfriars were in their study, No. 1, in the Remove passage. It was very seldom that angry voices were heard proceeding from that study; Wharton and Nugent pulled together, wonderfully well.

Wharton, it is true, was supposed to have a somewhat touchy temper; but Nugent was sunny and good-humoured, and would have got on well with anybody.

But just now the tempers of both the juniors were perilously near danger-point. Harry Wharton was pale with anger—though his anger was not directed against Nugent. Frank Nugent was looking impatient and exasperated.

"You needn't put it like that," he exclaimed heatedly; "I suppose I shall help you if you want me to. But I think it's a rotten idea."

"I haven't asked you what you thought about it," said Wharton tartly, "I simply asked you if you would help me out of the dorm. to-night?"

"If I'm going to help you, you can have the benefit of my opinion as well," said Frank. "I think the idea's rotten, and it will get you into trouble."

"I don't care."
"If Loder cuts up rusty over it, the matter will come before the Head."

"Let it!"
"You might get expelled from Greyfriars."

Tap! Harry Wharton was pacing to and fro in the locked room when the sound fell upon his ears. He glanced towards the window as he heard the tap on the glass, and uttered a cry of surprise. A face was pressed to the glass. "Frank!" Nugent tapped again. (See Chapter 14.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Advice Not Wanted.

BETTER not, Harry!"
"I've made up my mind."
"But—"
"I tell you I've made up my mind!" exclaimed Harry Wharton irritably. "You can help me or not as you like, but I've made up my mind about what I'm going to do."

Frank Nugent compressed his lips. The chums of the

"I'm going to risk it."

Frank Nugent made an impatient gesture. He was very near to losing his temper.

Harry Wharton, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, turned away, his handsome face darkened by a frown. There was no doubt that Wharton had a temper, when he gave it play. As a rule, he was quiet and pacific, and reserved; but when his temper was provoked it was almost too much for him to control. More than once that had caused him trouble in his career at Greyfriars. He turned to the window, and stood looking out into the Close, his eyes gleaming under his knitted brows.

It was a keen, sunny afternoon. From the study window Wharton could see the football ground, and several teams playing there. The sight would have interested him at any other time; but now he hardly noticed it. Even the shout of "Goal!" from the distance failed to make him glance again.

Frank Nugent watched his chum uneasily. There was silence in the study. As Frank looked at his chum, he saw his profile, and he saw a dark bruise on Wharton's forehead, just under the dark, curly hair. He started a little.

"Where did you get that bruise, Harry?"

Wharton swung round.

"Oh, that was Loder!" he said, with a bitter smile.

"The hound!" Nugent exclaimed indignantly.

"I'm going to make him smart for it, Frank!"

"If the Head knew what a rotten bully he was, he wouldn't be allowed to remain a prefect," said Frank.

"But he doesn't know."

"Look here, Harry, old man, I know you must feel savage at being handled that way by Loder," said Nugent earnestly, "but—but I don't like to see you so revengeful. There are other ways of paying him out, besides the one you've thought of. I wish you'd give up the idea, Harry."

Wharton's face set obstinately.

"I'm not going to give up the idea," he said.

Nugent bit his lip.

"You might be civil about it, at all events," he said sharply.

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"The question is, whether you will help me or not," he exclaimed. "If you won't, I'll ask Bob Cherry. You can say yes or no."

"Tell me exactly what you mean to do."

Wharton gave another impatient shrug.

"I've told you once, Nugent. Loder licked me this afternoon, for nothing, before a crowd of chaps! He pitched me across the passage when he'd finished. I've got this bump to show for it. It's all because of the resistance we made about fagging for the Sixth; but Loder has some lie ready, if I complained about him. But he knows I won't complain."

"Well, sneaking is barred," said Nugent.

"Exactly. The cad feels quite safe about that. But I'm going to take the matter into my own hands. I'm going to his room to-night, with a horsewhip, and I'm going to thrash him. I'm not big enough to tackle him with my hands, or I'd fight him, prefect as he is; but that's no good. But to-night I shall yank him out of bed and horsewhip him, before he knows what's happening to him. He can smash me afterwards if he likes, but he can't alter the fact that he's been horsewhipped by a junior."

"It would serve him right," said Nugent slowly.

"I'm glad you admit that," said Wharton sarcastically.

"But I don't like the idea."

"Why not?" demanded Harry sharply.

"Well, I don't like the idea of taking a chap by surprise in bed, for one thing; and—"

"I shouldn't have any chance against the big brute otherwise."

"I know; but—"

"And was it fair of him to tackle me as he did—a fellow not high enough to reach his shoulder—and three years younger?"

"Well, we don't expect Loder to play the game," said Nugent. "He's a howling cad, I know that. But there's no need to imitate his methods. I—"

Wharton clenched his hands.

"So I am acting like a howling cad, eh?" he exclaimed.

"I didn't say so—"

"But you meant it."

"Look here—"

"I've heard enough. I don't want your opinion, Frank Nugent. If you don't want to help me, I can get another chap to do it," said Wharton savagely. "Enough said."

"But—"

"Oh, cheese it!"

Nugent's eyes flashed.

"I know you're upset by what's happened this afternoon. THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 196.

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noon, or you wouldn't be allowed to talk to me like that," he exclaimed angrily.

"Oh, rats!"

"Look here, Wharton—"

"Oh, give us a rest!"

Nugent clenched his fists. Wharton's hands were clenched, too, and they faced one another with blazing eyes. The chums of the Remove had never been so near to laying hands upon one another; and in one second more, probably, blows would have been struck. But in that second, fortunately, there came an interruption. The study door was kicked open, and a ruddy, cheery face looked into the room.

"Hallo; hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry cheerfully.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Bob Cherry, the Peacemaker.

BOB CHERRY, of the Remove, looked curiously at the chums of No. 1 Study. Harry Wharton dropped his hands, looking very sheepish, and Nugent turned away with a crimson face. Both the juniors felt ashamed of having been caught in such an attitude. Bob Cherry grinned.

"Sorry to interrupt the circus," he said. "If you two fatheads are going to hammer each other, don't mind me. I'll sit on the table and keep time."

"I—I—"

"You see, Bob—you—you see—"

Bob Cherry nodded.

"No, I don't see," he replied; "but that's all right, hammer away! There are some fags in the passage, too; I'll call them in to look on; they'll find it amusing."

"Look here, Bob—"

"And Vernon-Smith, and Bolsover, I dare say they'd be glad to see you hammering one another," said Bob Cherry sarcastically. "Go it!"

"You see—"

"You blithering asses!" said Bob Cherry, changing his tone. "What are you rowing about? Don't you feel jolly well ashamed of yourselves?"

"We're not rowing," said Wharton, blushing.

Bob Cherry grinned.

"It looked remarkably like it, when I came in," he exclaimed; "but I dare say my eyes deceived me. I suppose you were really arguing out some point in Latin grammar?"

Harry Wharton laughed—he could not help it. It was very difficult to remain in a bad temper with Bob Cherry in the room.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Bob! I suppose we were both getting rather ratty. Nugent doesn't want to help me carry out an idea of mine—"

"I didn't say I wouldn't help you—"

"And I don't want him to, anyway," said Wharton. "It's simply a question of helping me out of the dormitory window to-night, with a rope, and you can do it, Bob."

Bob Cherry looked serious.

"Breaking bounds at night!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, I'm not going far!"

"How far?"

"As far as Loder's study!"

Bob Cherry whistled comprehensively.

"Oh, you've had trouble with Loder?"

"Yes," said Harry, between his teeth, "I've been licked, and chucked about, because I took the lead in stopping fagging for the Sixth. I'm going to horsewhip Loder in his own room."

"Pshaw!"

"Nugent doesn't approve—"

"I didn't say exactly that—"

"It's a good idea," said Bob Cherry, "I'll come and help."

Wharton shook his head.

"No, you won't," he said, "there may be trouble over it, and I'm not going to drag anybody else into it. But you can help me out of the dorm. window on a rope. I can't get into Loder's room by the door—it's kept locked at night on the inside. I shall have to get in at the window."

"Like a giddy burglar?"

"That can't be helped."

"I say it's a rotten idea," burst out Nugent, "and it will jolly well lead to trouble."

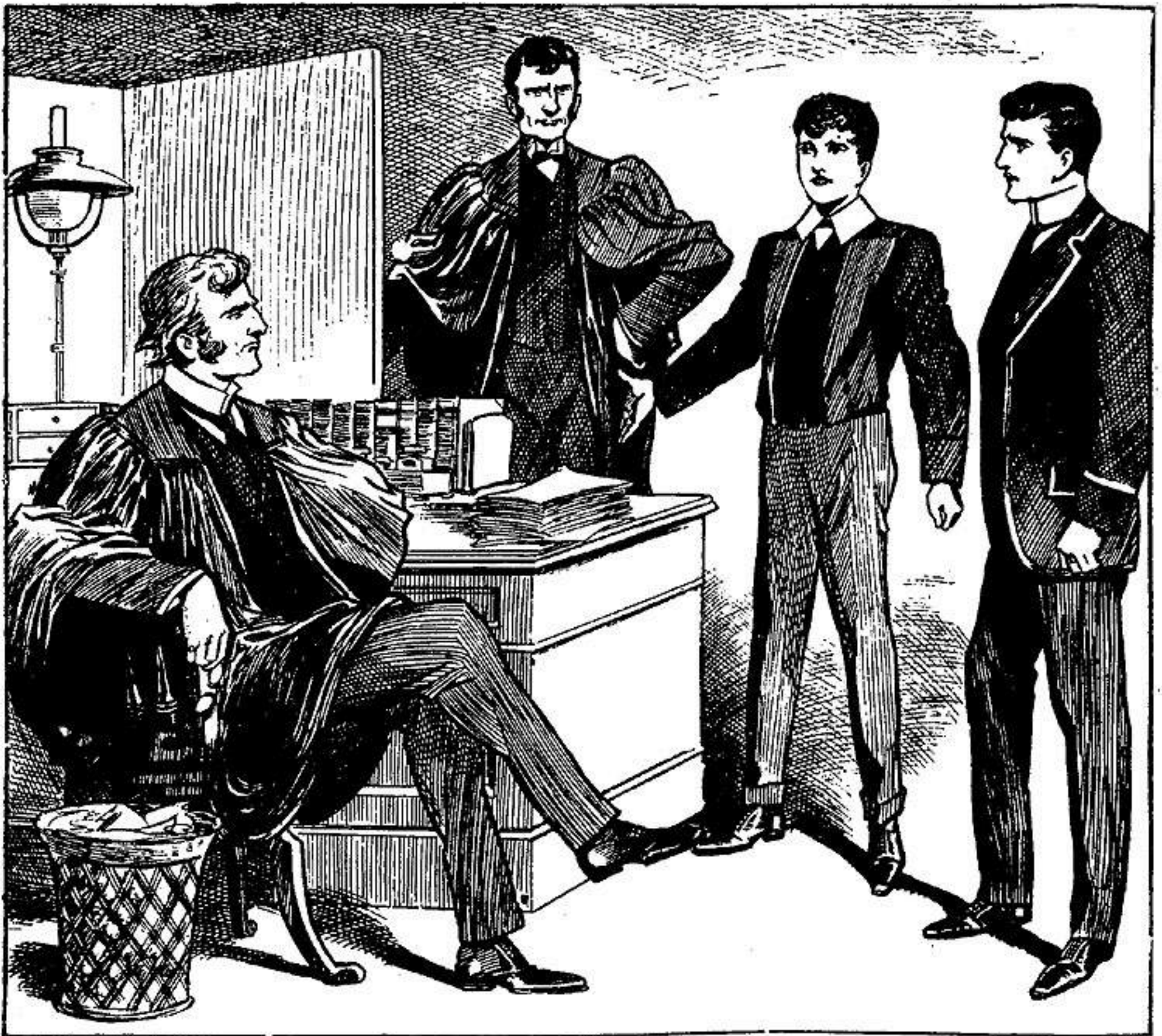
"I don't care if it does."

"Oh, you're a silly ass!"

"Look here, Nugent—"

Bob Cherry waved his hand pacifically.

"Order! Order!" he exclaimed. "Cheese it, both of you! I don't see that the wheeze is a bad one, Franky; but if you don't like it, I'll help Wharton instead of you. Loder ought to get it in the neck, I know that. He was



Wharton gave a wild look round at the condemnatory faces. "I—I am innocent!" he muttered, huskily. "Doctor Locke! Ask Mr. Quelch—ask Wingate—ask any of the fellows, if I've ever done a rotten cowardly thing like that before." "Talk is useless, Wharton" said the Head, sternly, "Take him away!" (See Chapter 12.)

bullying Skinner to-day in a rotten way. I know Skinner's a cad, but Loder was ragging him for nothing. He seems to have made up his mind to come down heavy on the Remove, since we stopped the fagging. He ought to be made to sit up."

"He's going to be made to sit up to-night," said Harry Wharton, compressing his lips.

"There's one thing you've overlooked—suppose he's out?" grinned Bob Cherry. "I know that Loder spends at least one night a week down at the Cross Keys in Friardale, gambling with Mr. Cobb and his set."

"If he's out to-night, I can try again to-morrow."

"It's a rotten idea," said Frank Nugent, "and I won't have anything to do with it."

"I don't want you to," said Harry.

"Peace, my children, peace!" said Bob Cherry. "You can stand out of the matter, and Wharton can go ahead, and you'll both be pleased that way. You can agree to differ. No need to slang one another and pommel over a little matter like this."

"Wharton's an obstinate ass——"

"Nugent's in a funk——"

"What!" roared Nugent.

"Hold on!" shouted Bob Cherry.

"Br-r-r! I'll jolly well show the obstinate chump whether I'm in a funk or not!" yelled Nugent.

He rushed at Wharton.

The latter, nothing loth, put up his hands to meet him;

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and the two chums were nearer than ever to a desperate encounter.

But Bob Cherry rushed between.

"Hold on! Stop! Ow! Wow! Yow!" roared Bob Cherry.

The unfortunate Bob had suffered the fate of many peacemakers—the wrath of both parties had descended upon him. Wharton and Nugent were both hitting out, and Wharton's right crashed upon Bob Cherry's ear, while Nugent's left caught him in the eye.

"Yow! Yowp! Yaroo!"

"My hat——"

"Sorry——"

"Yaro-o-ooh!"

The unfortunate Bob rolled on the carpet, quite dazed. Wharton and Nugent dropped their hands, and stopped and helped him to rise. Bob Cherry looked quite dazed as he stood upon his feet. He caressed his eye with one hand, and his ear with the other.

"Sorry, Bob——"

"Ow! You frabjous asses!" roared Bob Cherry. "You unspeakable chumps! You horrible idiots! You dangerous jabberwocks!"

"Ha, ha, ha! I—I mean I'm awfully sorry——"

"Yow! Ow!"

"Quite accidental! You see——"

"Yow! You can punch each other's silly heads as much

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as you like. I've had enough of peace-making!" said Bob Cherry indignantly, and he tramped out of the study.

But there was no more head-punching in No. 1 Study. Harry Wharton followed Bob Cherry out of the study, and Nugent was left alone.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Bully of the Sixth!

"FAG!"

"Fag!"

It was Loder's voice.

A scuttling of feet followed the call.

Every junior who heard Loder's voice hastened to put as much distance as possible between himself and Loder.

The question of fagging had lately been thrashed out at Greyfriars. It had been decided, once for all, that the Remove—the Lower Fourth—were not subject to fagging for the Sixth. But there had been a hard struggle on the point, and the Sixth had taken their defeat with a very ill grace.

Wingate, the captain of the school, was good-humoured enough about it. He had declared that Remove fags were just as much a nuisance as Third Form fags, and that one was as good as another, and as bad, and that for his part he would be thankful and contented to have no fags at all. But most of the Sixth felt that their personal dignity had suffered in the matter; and the worst set in the Form—Loder, and Carne, and Walker, and a few others, had lost no opportunity of visiting their chagrin and anger upon the successful juniors.

Fagging the Remove was over and done with, but Loder chose to revive it on his own special behalf. And his authority as a prefect gave him the power to order the juniors about, and to cane them for disobedience, and it was rather difficult to tell where the proper authority of a prefect began and ended. Juniors naturally felt chary about entering into conflict with a prefect, and Loder had things very much his own way in dealing with them.

When Loder wanted a fag, the safest thing for the Removes to do was to run. And most of them did so. A few proud and stiff-necked fellows like Wharton refused to run, and stood upon their rights; and upon those fellows the hand of Loder fell very heavily.

"Fag!"

Loder came down the passage, and two or three juniors who had not had time to escape crowded into the window recess to avoid his glance. But Loder spotted them there, and came up with an angry frown. There was Skinner, of the Remove, and Tubb, of the Third, and Nugent minor—Dicky Nugent—of the Second Form.

"Did you hear me call?" demanded Loder.

"Ye-es," said Skinner nervously.

"Why didn't you come?"

"You can't fag the Remove, you know."

Loder glared at him. The rules of Greyfriars allowed him to fag either Tubb or Dicky Nugent, as he chose. But he did not choose. He stretched out his hand, and seized the Remove by the collar.

"Come on!" he said.

"Look here, Loder—"

Loder shook him savagely.

"I—I—I'll complain to Mr. Quelch," stammered Skinner.

"Will you?" said Loder grimly. "Then I'll give you something to complain about. Come into my study."

Skinner was marched into the study of the bully of the Sixth.

Loder gave him a twist that sent him spinning into the middle of the room, and Skinner, throwing out his arms wildly to save himself, knocked a vase off the mantelpiece.

Crash!

The vase dropped into the grate, smashing to a hundred fragments, and there was a shout of rage from Loder.

"You clumsy young scoundrel!"

"I—I—I couldn't help it, Loder!" stammered Skinner. "I—I'm sorry."

"I'll teach you to wreck my study."

"I—I—please let me go, Loder."

"You cheeky young sweep!"

"I—I'll fag for you with—with pleasure, Loder, if you like!"

Loder smiled grimly. Skinner was not of the stuff of which heroes are made. He was spiteful, and he could save up a grudge for a very long time; but he was not brave. But even a brave fellow might have been dismayed at being shut up in the study with the powerfully-built senior. In a tussle with Loder, Skinner would have had no more chance than a fly against a spider.

"I'm going to bring you young scoundrels to your senses!" said Loder. "Complain to your Form-master, will you?"

"I—I didn't mean that, Loder."

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Loder was selecting a cane. Skinner watched him with terrified eyes. It was not always safe even to submit to the bully. Loder bullied for the amusement of bullying. He came towards Skinner, and the Remove dodged desperately towards the door.

Loder made a clutch at him.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Skinner did not stop. He reached the door, and dragged at the handle. At the same moment Loder's grasp descended upon him, and he was dragged back into the study.

Then the cane sang through the air, and lashed upon Skinner's back and legs.

Lash! lash! lash!

"Yow! Ow!"

"You young cub!" said Loder. "You'll complain to Mr. Quelch, will you! Take that!"

"Ow! ow!"

Lash! lash!

"Yaroor! Help! Oh!"

Loder caned the junior till his arm was aching. Skinner squirmed about wildly, but he could not escape the bully's grip, and he could not elude the lashing of the cane.

"There!" exclaimed Loder, at last, flinging the junior from him. "Now go and complain to your Form-master. I've caned you for breaking a vase in my study, do you hear? Now get out."

And he opened the door.

Skinner rushed out, narrowly escaped a kick from Loder's boot, and sprinted down the passage. Loder slammed the door after him.

Skinner, gasping with pain and rage, ran out of the Sixth-Form passage, and in the hall almost ran into Bob Cherry. Bob caught him by the shoulder and steadied him.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" he exclaimed. "In trouble again?"

"It's Loder!" gasped Skinner.

"Oh, the cad!"

"I'm going to complain!" howled Skinner. "I won't be caned for nothing. I'll make a complaint to Mr. Quelch."

"Better think it over," said Bob. "Prefects have the right to cane, you know, and Loder's too deep to leave marks on you. He'll say you've done something, and he gave you a flick or two. I know him."

Skinner ground his teeth. He realised that Bob Cherry was right. Loder was utterly unscrupulous; and there was no doubt that, if a complaint was made, he would represent that Skinner had broken a vase in his study from pure mischief, and that he had caned him for it.

"Oh, I suppose he's too deep for me!" panted Skinner.

"But I'll make him suffer for this, somehow."

"The cad ought to be kicked out of the school!" said Harry Wharton, between his teeth. "But he will be sorry for himself to-night."

Skinner looked at him quickly.

"What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Never mind. No need to ask questions. If you don't know anything about it, you can't be supposed to have had a hand in it, if there's trouble," said Harry.

"If it's anything up against Loder, I'll help."

Wharton's lip curled a little. Skinner had been hardly used, and he was sorry for him; but he did not like Skinner. Skinner was the cad of the Remove, and he was quite capable of making his peace with the bully of the Sixth by betraying Wharton's plan, if he knew of it. Wharton had not the slightest intention of trusting him.

"You don't want my help?" said Skinner savagely. He was in a mood to quarrel with anybody over anything just then.

"No!" said Wharton curtly.

"You mean you don't trust me?"

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

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"Well, if you want me to speak quite plainly, I don't!" he replied.

Skinner gritted his teeth.

"You confounded puppy!" he muttered. "We shouldn't be in all these rotten rows with the Sixth if it wasn't for you and your cocky ways. I—"

Wharton turned on his heel and walked away. Skinner was left alone to propound his views to the desert air. He gritted his teeth, and tramped away into the common-room, where he met with a great deal of sympathy.

Billy Bunter was most sympathetic. The fat junior rolled up to Skinner, and blinked at him through his big spectacles in a most friendly manner.

"Been licked?" he asked.

"Yes!" growled Skinner.

"There's a ripping lotion to rub on your hands when you've been licked," Bunter remarked. "Would you like me to go down to the village and get you some, Skinny?"

Skinner stared at him. It was not like Billy Bunter to make obliging offers like this, and Skinner did not "catch on."

"I've not been licked on the hands!" he grunted.

"Ahem! Well, the lotion is just as good anywhere else," said Bunter. "I can get it at Mr. Pryson's, the chemist's, and I should be very pleased. Of course, I shall pay for it myself. I want to treat you to it."

"Look here, what are you getting at?" demanded Skinner suspiciously.

"Oh, really, Skinner! The fact is, I'm rather short of money at the present moment," Bunter said, somewhat hurriedly. "I'm expecting a postal-order, but there's been some delay in the post, and it hasn't come yet. Could you advance me five bob, and have my postal-order when it comes this evening?"

"You—you—"

"Then I could get your lotion, you see, and I will square up this evening when my postal-order comes—ow!—ow!—oh, really, Skinner—yow!—I say, you fellows, hold him, he's gone mad—yow—yow—yow!"

And Bunter rolled out of the room, with Skinner's boot making active play behind him, and vanished yelling. And Skinner felt somewhat comforted.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Wharton Cuts up Rusty.

HARRY WHARTON received many curious looks when he came into the junior common-room some time later. His trouble with Loder had been the talk of the Form, and the fact that Wharton had been licked, and "chucked out" by the bully of the Sixth, was a very interesting item of news to the juniors. Wharton held his head very high, and there were a good many fellows who were not sorry to see him taken down a peg or two, as they expressed it.

The quiet, set look on his handsome, proud face showed how much he felt the blow to his pride; and he was not exactly the sort of fellow to sympathise with, either. It had leaked out, too, that Wharton had some scheme for getting even with the bully of the Sixth.

Skinner knew something about it, and he had chattered—and it was rumoured in the common-room that it was some scheme that Nugent did not approve of—for it was easily to be seen that Wharton and Nugent were not on their usual chummy terms.

Wharton did his preparation in the common-room, while Nugent did his in the study, and that alone was quite sufficient to indicate that all was not well in No. 1 Study.

The fellows wondered what Wharton's scheme might be, but they did not venture to ask. The expression upon his face prevented either questioning or remarks upon the subject of his trouble with Loder. But there was no doubt that Wharton looked as if he meant mischief.

He did mean mischief. The injustice and brutality he had had to submit to rankled bitterly in his breast. It seemed as if the junior could not rest until he had repaid Loder in kind. And that was what he meant to do.

But he did not say a word on the subject.

During the evening he was very silent. Temple, Dabney, & Co., of the Upper Fourth, came over to him presently to talk—somewhat injudiciously. They ought to have been warned off by his look, but they did not take warning. As a matter of fact, the Upper Fourth fellows did not approve of the Remove objection to fagging. They considered that the youngsters were putting on airs in the matter. And Temple, the captain of the Upper Fourth, was very much given to delivering lofty lectures.

Wharton was sitting by the fire, with his hands in his pockets, staring moodily into the flames, when the Fourth-Formers strolled over to him. Temple planted himself in front of the gloomy Removite, and wagged a forefinger at him.

"I hear you've been licked!" he remarked.

Wharton glared. Any reference to that fact touched his sensitive nature on the raw; though, as a matter of fact, he

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had nothing to be ashamed of, for it was not to be expected that a junior could hold his own against one of the biggest fellows in the top Form at Greyfriars.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

"And I must say," went on Temple, "that I approve. You Remove kids have been getting your ears up altogether too much lately."

"Oh, rather!"

"Just what I think," said Fry. "And it may save us the trouble of licking you, Wharton, so don't look so grumpy about it."

"Shut up, you Fourth-Form asses!" called out John Bull, of the Remove. "You will go out of this room on your necks, if you jaw!"

"Well, you cheeky fag—"

"We're not fags in the Remove now," said Tom Brown, "and we don't want any cheek from the Upper Fourth! Shut up!"

"Yes, rather!" said Mark Linley. "Shut up, for goodness' sake, Temple! You go on like a gramophone."

"You'd better shut up!" said Wharton, with glinting eyes. "For two pins I'd wipe up the floor with the three of you!" Temple, Dabney, & Co. burst into a roar of laughter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop that cackling!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Temple. "Hear us smile! Ha, ha, ha!"

Smack!

Wharton's open hand came upon Temple's cheek with a sounding report, and the captain of the Fourth staggered back.

"Now perhaps you'll shut up!" said Wharton.

"M-m-my hat!"

"Serve you jolly well right!" said Bob Cherry. "Shut up!"

"I'll smash you!" roared Temple.

Wharton rose to his feet.

"Come on, and do the smashing, then!" he said.

Temple did not need twice bidding. He rushed on, and his fists sailed in the air in a terrifying way. But Wharton's guard was perfect. He brushed Temple's wild drives aside, and put in an upper-cut with his right that laid the captain of the Fourth on his back on the floor with a crash that shook the room.

"Hurray!" yelled Bob Cherry.

"Collar him!" shrieked Temple.

Dabney and Fry rushed at Wharton. In a moment a couple of Removites—Bob Cherry and John Bull—rushed to Wharton's aid. Then Temple scrambled up, and joined in, and so did Mark Linley, and in a few minutes more a general row was in progress, Upper Fourth and Remove joining in on all sides.

"Stop that row!"

Loder, the prefect, looked in at the door.

His face was very angry, and he had a cane in his hand. The row ceased.

Loder strode into the room. His eyes glinted as they fell upon Wharton. Wharton and Dabney had been fighting hammer and tongs.

"I'll have order kept in this room, or I'll know the reason why!" said Loder, with a scowl. "Who started this?"

There was silence.

"Who started it, I say?"

No reply.

"Will you answer me, some of you?" roared Loder.

"Oh, I—I fancy we all started together!" said Temple, rubbing his nose ruefully. That organ was very red, and felt as if it had suddenly doubled its size.

"Who struck the first blow?" said Loder, with his eyes upon Harry Wharton.

It was quite possible that the prefect had seen the beginning of the row. At all events, he certainly seemed to suspect Wharton.

There was no answer.

"Very well!" said Loder. "If the fellow is afraid to own up, I shall punish all of you."

Wharton's eyes flashed.

"I struck the first blow," he said.

Loder smiled unpleasantly.

"Oh, you did!" he exclaimed. "I thought as much. You are the most quarrelsome boy in the Lower School, Wharton, and—"

"Hold on!" said Temple. "I was ragging Wharton, and it's no wonder he landed out. I don't bear any malice."

"That's not the question. Hold your tongue, Temple!"

"But I say—"

"Hold your tongue! Wharton, I shall report this to your Form-master!"

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, report away!" he said.

"Look here!" said Temple. "Wharton was no more to blame than I was, and—"

"Hold your tongue, I tell you!" growled Loder. "I shall report this to Mr. Quelch, Wharton. It is useless for me to cane you."

Wharton smiled grimly. He had his hand upon a heavy inkstand on the table, and if Loder had tried to cane him, that inkstand would have gone whirling at Loder's head. The prefect knew it, and he did not use the cane.

He turned and strode from the room. Wharton threw himself into his chair again.

"I—I say, I'm sorry!" said Temple.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

Wharton nodded carelessly.

"It's all right!" he said.

And he did not say another word. But when the Remove went up to bed, Wharton's teeth were hard set. Bob Cherry looked at him rather uneasily.

"Don't take it too much to heart, Harry," he said. "Loder is a beastly bully, and it doesn't matter much what he does."

"I'm fed up with him," said Wharton, in a low, concentrated voice. "I'll make him sorry for what he has done."

Bob Cherry was silent. He knew that it was of no use to argue with Harry Wharton when he spoke in that tone. Nugent glanced at his chum once in the dormitory, but did not speak. They went to bed without saying good-night.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Night Expedition.

HARRY WHARTON did not sleep. He lay awake after the rest of the Remove were buried in slumber, and listened to the regular chimes from the clock-tower.

The junior's mood was very bitter.

On the morrow he had to face Mr. Quelch, after Loder's report. He would not be able to deny that he had struck the first blow and so started the row in the common-room. He would be in the bad books of his Form-master now, to add to his other troubles. His resentment against the bully of the Sixth was bitter and undying. He was not in a mood to think it over calmly. He knew that it was his duty to banish revengeful feelings from his breast, but for the present he could not do it. Afterwards, when he had punished Loder, perhaps, but not now.

Eleven strokes boomed out from the clock-tower.

Wharton sat up in bed.

"Bob!" he called out softly.

There was no reply. Bob Cherry was fast asleep. Wharton slipped out of bed, and shook his chum gently by the shoulder. Bob granted.

"Groo! 'Tain't rising-bell!" he murmured drowsily.

"Lemme alone! Groo!"

Wharton smiled faintly.

"Get up, Bob!" he whispered.

Bob Cherry opened his eyes wide.

"Groo! Oh! Is that you, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Oh, all right! I think I was asleep."

"I think you were, Bob. It's eleven o'clock."

Bob Cherry turned quietly out of bed. The two juniors dressed themselves. Frank Nugent opened his eyes, as if warned by an instinct that his chums were awake. A faint glimmer of starlight came in at the high windows. Frank looked over the bedclothes towards the two juniors.

"Can I help you?" he asked quietly.

"Thanks, no!" said Wharton.

Nugent compressed his lips, and closed his eyes again.

Bob frowned a little.

"Where's the rope?" he asked, rather abruptly.

"Here it is."

Wharton drew a coil of strong rope from under the mattress. He unwound it, and handed it to Bob, who looped it over his arm. Then Harry extracted a short, strong riding-whip from under the mattress.

Bob Cherry chuckled softly as he looked at it.

"Is that for Loder, Harry?"

"Yes."

"Good egg! He will feel it, especially if you catch him without his things on."

"He's sure to be in bed at this time."

"Unless he's gone out on the razzle," grinned Bob Cherry.

"You know his little ways."

"I must chance that."

The two juniors moved towards the window. Wharton pulled a washstand under it, and mounted, and Bob handed up the rope. He fastened the end of it to the leg of a bedstead, and Wharton opened the window and lowered the rope out. It dangled down the wall, and the end reached the ground below.

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"Careful now, Harry!"

"I'm all right!"

Wharton clambered out of the window, and knelt on the sill and groped for the rope. Bob Cherry handed out the riding-whip, and Wharton held it in his teeth.

"All serene?" whispered Bob.

"Yes."

"Mind how you go. It means a broken neck if you drop!" said Bob Cherry anxiously.

"All right! Take in the rope when I'm gone, Bob. One of the masters might find it if he makes his rounds this way, and there's plenty of starlight."

"Right-ho!"

"I'll toss up a pebble when I come back, and you can lower it. I know it's rotten to ask you to stay awake perhaps an hour."

"Rot!" said Bob Cherry. "I offered to help you, didn't I?"

"Thanks, Bob, old man!"

Wharton slid down the rope, and disappeared into the shadow of the wall.

Bob Cherry watched anxiously. A sharp pull upon the rope told him that Wharton had landed safely upon the ground. He hauled the rope in quietly, and coiled it up, and hid it under the nearest bed. Then he closed the window, and moved the washstand back to its place. Then he arranged the pillows and bolster in Wharton's bed to give it an appearance of being occupied. It was always possible that some master or prefect might look into the dormitory.

Bob Cherry went back to his bed when he had finished, and sat down.

He did not intend to sleep, in case he should be asleep when Wharton returned and gave the signal for the rope to be lowered.

But Bob Cherry was very sleepy.

He sat on the bed, and put a pillow behind his head and leaned back, and in spite of himself he closed his eyes several times.

Each time, however, he made an effort, and came back heavily into wakefulness.

Once, as he started from semi-slumber, he thought he heard a noise in the dormitory, and looked round quickly and suspiciously.

He listened, but no sound came from the window. It was not a pebble on the glass that he had heard. Probably it was only one of the fellows moving in his bed.

"You awake, Nugent?"

There was no reply.

"Any of you fellows awake?"

Silence!

Bob Cherry, satisfied that it was nothing, did not speak again. In the dimness of the dormitory he could see only a few of the beds; but the silence, broken only by the sound of low, steady breathing, and an occasional snore from Billy Bunter, convinced him that everybody in the Remove dormitory was asleep, with the exception of himself.

He resumed his drowsy watch, but as the long minutes passed, he became more and more drowsy and less and less watchful, till at last he dropped off. There was no suspicion in Bob Cherry's mind that the faint, indefinable sound he had half heard was caused by someone stealthily leaving the dormitory. He had no suspicion that there was now another empty bed in the room, and the dimness hid it from his sight!

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Vengeance!

DARKNESS in the Close, broken only by a dim glimmer of starlight, struggling through the foliage of the old trees.

Harry Wharton paused close by the School House wall, and listened. The riding-whip was grasped in his hand now.

His resolution was inflexibly fixed.

Even if master or prefect had been abroad on the look-out for fellows breaking bounds, Wharton would not have turned back with his purpose uneffected.

He would have waited, and bided his time.

He stepped out of the shadow of the wall at last, and made his way with cautious steps towards the window of Loder's room. The Sixth Form studies, which were also bed-rooms, were on the second floor, and the windows were quite easy to reach. All along that wall ran the old ivy in great masses, and it was well-known among the juniors that Loder frequently left his study at night by means of the ivy.

For Loder was the black sheep of the Sixth, and his reckless doings were known to a good many fellows in the school, and suspected by a good many more. And he was the more easily able to carry out his rascally expeditions by virtue of



Loder stared at Frank Nugent with his single visible eye. "I wish you luck in your investigations," he said. "I want to have the right party found, of course. But it was Wharton, right enough." (See chapter 17.)

being a prefect, for if found out of his quarters at unusual hours he had only to explain that he was making his rounds to assure himself that nothing was wrong among the juniors. As a prefect, too, he had a key to the side gate, by which he could let himself in and out of the school.

Wharton reached the ivy under Loder's window, and glanced up. A large elm threw its shadow over the wall here, but there was a glimmer of starlight on the window. It was partly open.

Wharton watched it keenly. The fact of its being open made his entrance easier, but he wondered if it meant that Loder was not in his study. Had the prefect gone out, as Bob Cherry had suggested, on one of his mysterious expeditions?

Wharton started suddenly.

There was a footstep in the darkness under the elms.

He paused, listening breathlessly.

He had been out of the dormitory now for some time—a quarter of an hour, perhaps. Had his absence been discovered?

He looked cautiously round him.

Where he stood a glimmer of starlight fell upon him, but under the trees was deep gloom, and he could see nothing there. He could be seen, but whoever had made that sound was invisible.

Wharton backed away into the shadow of a buttress on the wall.

There he waited, watching, breathing hard.

There was no other sound from the trees.

The footstep was not repeated.

The junior was puzzled.

That someone was under the trees, or had been there,

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he was certain; but why did he not appear—why was he silent?

Was it Loder?

If the prefect had left his study, and was returning to it, he would have to pass under the old elms, certainly; but why should he lurk there, concealing himself?

That it was another prefect, or a master, was impossible. Someone who had nothing to hide would have shown himself at once. Whoever was under the trees was anxious that Wharton should not see him.

Wharton shivered a little as it occurred to him that it might be some lawless visitor to the school—a burglar whom, perhaps, he had surprised when about to begin his work. But that was not likely.

It was a mystery.

Wharton waited.

Half-past eleven had already struck, and now a quarter to twelve chimed out from the clock-tower of Greyfriars.

Still there was no sound, no movement, from the deep shadows of the elms.

Whoever had been there had doubtless crept silently away, or else was hiding in the thick black shadow of the old trunks. But Wharton would wait no longer.

All Greyfriars was sleeping now—even the lights in the Head's private quarters had gone out, and not a single gleam twinkled from any window in the great mass of buildings.

Harry Wharton crept along the wall towards the study window, and paused close to the ivy. As he did so, there was a footstep under the shadowy elms again, but it seemed heavier than the one he had heard before.

Then there was a sharp exclamation.

"Wharton, what are you doing here?"

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It was Loder's voice.

Wharton started, and swung round.

The prefect had just emerged from the shadow of the big elms outside the study windows. He had been coming towards the School House, evidently to climb into his window by the ivy, when he caught sight of the junior under the window.

He halted in amazement.

Wharton grasped the whip convulsively, looking at him. It was easy to see that Loder had been breaking bounds. His face was flushed, and his eyes had an unnatural glitter, and as the starlight caught his face Wharton knew that he had been drinking. It was easy to guess that he was returning from one of his midnight visits to the Cross Keys in Friarale.

Yet Wharton was puzzled. Loder had evidently only just come upon the scene. Then whose footstep was it that he had heard a quarter of an hour ago?

He had no time to think about the matter now. Loder's eyes were fixed upon him with a deadly look. The prefect had seen the riding-whip, and he guessed.

"You young cub!" he exclaimed, coming towards Wharton. "You young hound! What are you doing here? Were you going into my room?"

Wharton faced him grimly.

"Yes," he said.

"What for?"

"To horsewhip you."

Loder seemed scarcely able to believe his ears.

"To—to horsewhip me—a prefect!" he gasped.

"Yes, you cur!"

"By the Lord Harry!" said the prefect, between his teeth, "I'll smash you!"

"Stand back!"

Loder laughed savagely, and sprang forward. The riding-whip lashed through the air, and came down fairly across the prefect's face.

Loder staggered back with a cry.

Across his face, suddenly white, was the red mark of the lash, and Wharton stood looking at him with blazing eyes, ready to repeat the blow.

Loder's hand flew up to his face. He stood dazed.

"You—you young villain!" he muttered thickly, at last.

He sprang madly towards the junior. Wharton struck, and struck again, and then the whip was wrenched from his hand by the maddened prefect. Loder grasped it, clubbing it to strike the junior down with the butt. He was so enraged that he hardly knew what he was doing.

Wharton sprang away.

Loder rushed at him, striking savagely. One terrible blow just missed Harry as he dodged, and then the junior dashed into the cover of the trees.

"Stop, you young hound!"

Loder ran into the trees after the junior.

But the sudden darkness baffled him, and he paused. He caught his foot against a root, and stumbled.

There was a footstep close to him in the darkness.

Loder swung round.

"You young hound! Oh—oh, help! Oh!"

A crashing, blinding blow, a thousand lights dancing before his eyes, dull, aching pain, and oblivion.

Crash!

The whip dropped from Loder's hand as he reeled back, and he fell with a crash upon the ground, stunned and senseless.

There was a scurry of hurried footsteps retreating.

Then silence.

Loder did not move.

Leaves from the trees, falling in the cold wind, pattered gently upon the prefect's upturned face.

He did not move.

He lay quiet, with a streak of blood upon his white face—quiet, motionless, as one dead. Under the old shadowy elms, there was no sound, no motion, save the sigh of the wind, and the soft pattering of the falling leaves.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Bob Cherry Is Anxious.

CLINK!

Bob Cherry started.

He had fallen quite asleep at last, and he was dreaming that he was sliding down ropes from a window, with Loder waiting at the bottom with a horsewhip, when the clink of the pebble on the glass awakened him.

Clink!

Bob started, and rubbed his eyes.

He blinked round him in the darkness of the dormitory, and for a moment wondered where he was, and what was happening.

Clink!

"My hat, it's Wharton!"

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Bob Cherry bounced off the bed, and ran to the window. He dragged the washstand under it, mounted, and opened the window and leaned his head out.

"All serene!" he whispered softly.

"Right!" came a breathless whisper from below. "But buck up, for goodness' sake."

"Is he after you?"

"I think so!"

"I'll be quick!"

Bob Cherry dragged the hidden rope from under the bed, and lowered it from the window. It tautened as Harry Wharton's weight was flung upon it below. Bob heard the scraping of boots as Wharton clambered up to the window. The head of his chum appeared, outlined against the grey of the sky.

"Let me help you! Where's the whip?"

"Loder's got it!"

"Been a struggle?"

"Yes."

"My hat!"

Bob Cherry helped Wharton in at the window, and closed it. He unfastened the rope, and concealed it under a mattress, replaced the washstand and came towards his chum. Wharton had sunk down upon his bed, gasping.

"What's happened?" asked Bob, in a whisper.

Wharton panted.

"Loder was out. He came back while I was under his study window."

"What rotten luck!"

"He spotted me, and I lashed him with the whip. Then he got it away, and swiped at me with the butt, and missed me, and I got away in the dark. I heard him after me."

Wharton paused.

"Is that all?"

"Yes."

"He didn't catch you again, then?"

"No."

"Curious he didn't make in this direction. He must have guessed how you got out, I should think."

"He didn't follow me far. As soon as I got out of the trees I listened, but I couldn't hear his footsteps."

"Then he's gone into his study?"

"I suppose so."

"I wonder whether he'll come along here to-night?" said Bob Cherry uneasily.

"Hardly. He would have to explain being out in the Close if he made the matter public."

"Oh, he would soon think of some lie!" said Bob Cherry.

"He's jolly deep. He would say that he suspected you of breaking bounds, and was out to look for you."

Wharton laughed shortly.

"Well, let him come if he likes; I'm ready for him. If he comes into this dormitory, I shall use a cricket-stump to defend myself. He won't lay a finger on me again, prefect or no prefect. I'd be expelled sooner than let him lick me."

"Quiet, old chap—you're getting excited," said Bob Cherry soothingly. "After all, he could have been here before this if he was coming. I suppose he won't come."

"He may know better than to come," said Wharton between his teeth.

"Quiet, old chap!" Bob Cherry gave a sudden start as he peered at his chum's face in the dim starlight from the window. "What's that?"

Harry Wharton stared at him.

"What?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

"Have you been hurt?"

"No. I ran against a tree in the dark, and biffed my nose, that's all."

"Oh, that's all right, then!" said Bob Cherry, in considerable relief. "There's blood on your face, Harry."

"It's from my nose, then."

Bob Cherry drew a quick, keen breath.

"Oh, all right! I—I was afraid—"

Wharton gave him a sharp and almost angry look.

"You were afraid—of what?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Did you think I had injured Loder?" said Harry, with a bitter laugh. "You needn't have been afraid of that, Bob Cherry. I don't hate him enough for that."

Bob Cherry coloured.

"I'm blessed if I know what to think," he said. "You're in such a queer temper, Harry, I hardly know what to make of you. You always were a rather rum beggar, you know, when your dignity was ruffled."

"Oh, rats!"

"You're sure you didn't swipe Loder with the butt of the whip, by mistake?" asked Bob Cherry anxiously.

"Of course I am!" said Harry irritably.

"Oh, all right! Don't get ratty! Better wash that juice off your chivvy before you go to bed, or you'll stain the sheets."

Wharton nodded, and stepped to his washstand. He dipped the sponge in cold water, and bathed his face. He was burning with exertion and excitement, and the touch of the cool sponge was grateful and refreshing.

Bob Cherry stood watching him with anxious eyes. When Wharton was in that strange mood, his chum did not understand him.

Wharton towelled his face.

"Let's get to bed," he said.

"Stopped the bleeding?"

"It wasn't bleeding."

"Oh, all serene! Hark!"

Bob Cherry made a gesture, and bent his head to listen. His quick ear caught a faint sound from the corridor outside the dormitory door.

"Was that a footstep?" he breathed.

"I heard nothing."

"Quiet—a minute!"

But the sound was not repeated. Bob Cherry breathed more freely.

"I thought it was Loder, for a moment," he murmured.

"I shouldn't care if it was," said Harry.

"I should, though. And you'd be sorry afterwards, Harry, if you brained him with a cricket-stump, beast as he is."

"Oh, rate!"

"Let's turn in," said Bob.

The two juniors undressed and went to bed. Wharton was calming down now; he felt a little sick and exhausted after the excitement he had gone through. As he settled his head upon the pillow, he caught a glint of open eyes from Nugent's bed, which was next to his. He raised his head again.

"You awake, Nugent?"

"Yes," said Frank shortly.

Wharton hesitated a moment.

"I'm sorry I was so ratty with you, Frank," he said at last. "I am beginning to think that you were right, and I've been on a fool's errand."

Nugent laughed a little.

"I only hope there won't be a row about it to-morrow," he said. "Loder is hardly likely to forgive you a lash across the face with a riding-whip."

Wharton's look became dogged.

"I don't care if there is a row," he said.

"Well, good-night!"

"Good-night, Frank! Good-night, Bob!"

Bob Cherry grunted as he settled down in bed.

"Good-night! I'm jolly sleepy."

And in two minutes Bob Cherry was asleep, and Wharton and Nugent soon followed his example. It was a little while later, as Wharton was sinking into slumber, that some vague sound in the dormitory caused him to start and raise his head.

Was it Loder?

He peered round the dormitory in the shadows, but there was no fresh sound, no movement, and Wharton settled down to sleep.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

A Mystery of the Night.

MR. QUELCH, the master of the Remove at Greyfriars, started and awoke.

Mr. Quelch was a light sleeper. He would awake at the least sound; and when he was once awake, he experienced some difficulty in getting to sleep again, for which reason it did not improve his temper to be awakened at night.

"Dear me!" he murmured, as his eyes came wide open, with that wideness which indicates to the unfortunate seeker of slumber that it is not of much use closing them again.

"Dear me! How annoying!"

He wondered what had awakened him, and he lay listening.

Creak!

Mr. Quelch knitted his brows in a deep frown. He felt certain that that creak was caused by someone creeping upstairs. Some junior had been out of his dormitory—perhaps it was one of the endless japes between the Remove and the Upper Fourth—and it had spoiled his night's rest.

Mr. Quelch stepped out of bed, drew on a dressing-gown and a pair of slippers, and opened his door, and peered out into the dark passage and over the shadowy stairs. He thought he heard another faint creak in the distance, and that was all.

Mr. Quelch's jaws came together very hard.

Whoever it was that made the stairs creak—if it was anybody at all—was beyond the reach of vengeance now. And the sound had been so faint that it might have been caused by a rat behind the wainscot.

Mr. Quelch sniffed and returned to his room. The moon was rising over the clock-tower, and a silvery light came in at Mr. Quelch's window. The master of the Remove threw up his window, and gazed out into the Close.

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School Tale Next Tuesday:

"HIS LAST MATCH!"

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ONE
PENNY.

Mr. Quelch was feeling curiously uneasy. It seemed to him that he had heard sounds in the house and sounds in the Close, but he could not be sure, nor could he quite tell what he imagined the sounds to be. He gazed out into the Close, with an eerie feeling that something was wrong. The moon glimmered over the clock-tower, and the Close was patched with brightness between the shadows of the old elms. Leaves were fluttering to the ground as the wind moaned amid the branches of the great trees.

The scene was very silent and very still. Not a single light gleamed from a window of Greyfriars. A strange sense of loneliness fell upon the Form-master as he looked out. Two hundred souls were sleeping round him, but he had a feeling of loneliness, of eeriness, as if alone among the dead.

Suddenly he started.

From the shadows of the elms that stood in a grim, dark row at a short distance from the house a sudden low sound had come.

Mr. Quelch could hardly believe his ears.

"Good heavens!" he murmured.

He bent his head from the open window, and listened again—intently. The sound was repeated. It was a low groan—a groan of pain.

The Form-master's face was pale now. That it was a human groan was unmistakable; but who was it that groaned with pain at the hour of midnight under the shadowy old elms of Greyfriars?

The Form-master leaned further out from the window, and called out in firm tones:

"Who is there?"

There was no reply. But after a few moments came the groan again.

"Who is there? Answer me!"

A faint groan, and then silence. The Form-master called again, but no sound answered him. The groaning had died away.

A thrill of horror ran through the master of the Remove. That there was a human being under the elms, and that he was hurt, he could not doubt. Was it some midnight robber, who had fallen to the ground in an attempt to enter the school? Even so, he was a fellow-being, and must be succoured.

Mr. Quelch hastily dressed himself, and ran along the passage to Mr. Prout's room. Mr. Prout was the master of the Fifth Form, and as he was a great sportsman, and always kept a gun or two in his study, he was exactly the assistant Mr. Quelch required at this moment. Mr. Prout's guns were harmless enough, as he never loaded them, but they looked very imposing, arranged upon the walls of his room.

Mr. Quelch knocked at his door and ran in.

"Mr. Prout—Mr. Prout!" he exclaimed.

The Fifth-Form master started up in bed.

"Eh? What? Who is that?"

"It is I—Mr. Quelch. There is someone in the Close. I heard groans—"

"Good heavens!"

"Will you come with me? I think perhaps it is some burglar who has fallen in trying to get into a window."

Mr. Prout bundled out of bed at once. Mr. Prout's dreams were of great adventures, of shooting bears and dervishes, but very few adventures came in the way of a Form-master at a public school. Mr. Prout was not likely to allow an opportunity like this to escape him. He made one bound into his trousers.

"One moment!" he exclaimed breathlessly. "If it is a burglar, we must be armed. I will get my rifle—the one I used in the Rockies in ninety-five—"

"Pray hasten, then! I will get a lantern."

"Very good. It may be a ruse," said Mr. Prout—"a trick of the ruffians to get someone to open the door so that they can rush in."

"Dear me! I never thought of that."

Mr. Prout smiled superior in the darkness.

"You have not roughed it in the Rockies, as I have, my dear Quelch," he said. "When I was in the Rockies in ninety-five—"

"Yes, yes; but pray hurry! I think the man, whoever he is, is very much hurt."

"I will hurry. I must load my rifle, however, in case of accidents."

Mr. Quelch thought that the Fifth-Form master would increase the probability of accidents if he loaded his rifle, but he did not like to say so. He hurried away to get a lantern, and came back with an acetylene lamp belonging to Wingate in full glare. By that time Mr. Prout had his rifle ready, and had it under his arm in a business-like way, with the muzzle pointed down to the floor. Evidently the

Fifth-Form master did not wish to kill Mr. Quelch, if he could help it.

"Are you ready?" asked the Remove-master hastily.

"Quite ready."

"Then pray follow me."

The two masters hurried downstairs, and Mr. Quelch, holding the glaring lamp in his left hand, began to unfasten the bolts and chains of the door. Mr. Prout stood a little behind him, with his rifle ready for action.

"It is very probably a ruse," said Mr. Prout, in a thrilling whisper. "When the door is opened the scoundrels may rush in, and then I shall be ready for them. I shall blaze away at once."

Mr. Quelch shuddered.

"Please do not kill anybody, my dear Prout!"

"My dear Quelch," said Mr. Prout ferociously. "They must take their chance. If the scoundrels rush in, they will find me ready."

The chain clinked down, and Mr. Quelch flung the door open. There was a rush of wind, but that was the only rush; the scoundrels with whom Mr. Prout's lively imagination had peopled the Close did not appear. Mr. Prout lowered his deadly weapon with a grunt of discontent.

"They are on their guard!" he said.

"My dear Prout, we do not know that there are any of them there yet," said the master of the Remove mildly. "I heard a groan—that was all."

"It was a ruse, my dear Quelch; I am convinced of that."

"We shall see."

Mr. Quelch led the way into the shadowy Close, holding up the glaring lamp before him. Mr. Prout followed him, rifle in hand.

"Don't be afraid, my dear Quelch," he said, as the Remove-master made a sudden movement. "Pray do not be nervous. I am here!"

"I am afraid of nothing but your rifle, Mr. Prout," said the Remove-master, with some asperity. "Please keep it pointed away from me."

He started and listened.

"Did you hear that?" he exclaimed breathlessly.

It was a groan in the deep silence of the quadrangle.

Mr. Prout changed colour a little.

"Dear me!" he said. "That sounds like someone in great pain!"

"Come on!"

Mr. Quelch ran on quickly in the direction of the sound. It came from the dark shadows of the trees before the study windows of the Sixth. Mr. Quelch plunged under the trees, with the other master at his heels. He almost stumbled over a body that lay stretched among the dead leaves.

"Good heavens, here he is!"

Mr. Quelch flashed the light upon the upturned face. Then he started back with a cry of horror.

"What—who is it?" cried Mr. Prout.

"It is Loder!"

"What!"

"It's Loder, of the Sixth!"

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

By Whose Hand.

L ODER stirred and groaned again.

He was not yet fully conscious. The blow he had received in the darkness was a terrible one, and it had stunned him, and he was only beginning to come to his senses.

Mr. Quelch handed the lantern to the other master, and dropped upon his knees beside the prefect. There was blood upon Loder's white face—there was blood clotting his hair. A big, black bruise was on his forehead, and under his hair, telling where a fearful blow had fallen.

"Is it—was—was it an accident?" gasped Mr. Prout.

The Remove-master shook his head.

"No; he has been struck down."

"But—but how comes it that Loder is out in the quadrangle at this hour of the night—fully dressed, too?" Mr. Prout exclaimed, in amazement.

"I cannot guess."

Mr. Prout cast a quick glance round.

"He may have heard some sound, and come out to see what it was, and fallen by the hand of some ruffian," he exclaimed.

"It is possible. Let us get him into the house, and then you can wake Gosling, and get the mastiff out and search the place."

"Very good!"

Mr. Prout leaned his gun against a tree, and helped the Remove-master raise the insensible prefect from the ground. Loder was quite inert in their grasp. He groaned as he was moved, but he did not open his eyes. The two masters bore

him into the house, and up to his room, and Mr. Quelch tried to open the door. But it was locked on the inside.

"That proves that he must have gone out by the window," he remarked.

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Prout. "It is very curious. We had better take him into the next room and wake Wingate."

Mr. Quelch nodded, and knocked at Wingate's door and opened it. The captain of Greyfriars was already awake. He had heard the noise in the passage as the two masters carried the insensible prefect up to his room.

"Is anything wrong, sir?" he asked, jumping out of bed.

"Yes, Wingate. Loder has been injured. Will you let us place him in your bed? His own door is locked on the inside."

"Certainly, sir!"

Wingate lighted the gas at once, and Loder was carried into the room and laid upon the bed. Wingate gazed in horror at the pale face of the prefect, stained with streaks of blood.

"Good heavens, sir!" he exclaimed. "What has happened?"

"We do not know yet, Wingate—only that we found Loder in the Close, under the trees, in this state. He has been struck down by someone, that is clear; we know nothing more than that. We must get a doctor here as quickly as possible. Will you go on your bicycle to Friardale and call Dr. Short?"

"I'll be ready in five minutes, sir."

"Thank you, Wingate!"

Loder lay inert upon Wingate's bed, while the captain of Greyfriars hastily dressed himself. Mr. Prout called two or three other prefects, and with them searched the Close, while Mr. Quelch remained with Loder. But there was no trace in the Close, or round the buildings, of any intruder—and Gosling, the porter, had seen and heard nothing. Mr. Prout returned to tell the Remove-master of his ill-success. Mr. Quelch nodded. He had fully expected it.

"I do not think that it was anybody from outside the school who struck this blow, Mr. Prout," the Remove-master said quietly.

"But—not another Greyfriars boy surely!" Mr. Prout ejaculated.

"I fear so."

"But—that is terrible! Who could have done so dreadful a thing?" exclaimed the Fifth-Form master, utterly horrified.

"That is what we must find out," said Mr. Quelch. "Loder was, I believe, very unpopular with the juniors, and there were many seniors who did not like him. I have no doubt we shall get at the truth when Loder can speak."

"He may not have seen his assailant in the dark."

"We shall see."

Mr. Quelch had bathed the prefect's injury, and done all he could for him, but Loder had not yet recovered consciousness. Occasionally he uttered a low groan, and that was all.

"It would be better to call the Head, I suppose," Mr. Prout suggested.

"Yes, I think so. Pray do."

Dr. Locke was aroused, and he came a little later to Wingate's room, his face very pale and startled. It grew paler as he looked upon the ghastly face of the injured prefect.

"This is terrible!" he muttered. "And Mr. Prout tells me that you have no idea how it happened, Mr. Quelch."

"None, sir."

Dr. Locke bent over the prefect.

"He has been struck very hard; with some heavy weapon—a club of some sort, perhaps a cricket-stump, or a bat," he said. "He must have been stunned instantly. I cannot understand who could have made this ferocious attack. It must surely have been someone from outside the walls of Greyfriars."

Mr. Quelch was silent.

They waited, watching over the unconscious prefect, waiting anxiously for the return of Wingate with the medical man from Friardale.

Loder stirred and groaned.

His eyes opened, with a wild look in them.

"Oh!" he muttered. "Oh, you murderous young scoundrel!"

Dr. Locke and Mr. Quelch exchanged glances. The semi-conscious prefect was evidently thinking of his assailant. And they had not failed to note the adjective. Loder's assailant was "young," and it was pretty clear that he was a Greyfriars fellow.

They listened breathlessly. Loder did not seem to see them. His senses were wandering a little.

"I'll smash you, you young hound! Do you hear? How dare you be out of your dormitory at this time of night? I'll report this to the Head!"



Figgins, with his chin down and his hands thrust deeply into his pockets, walked on; but Fatty Wynn stood glaring at French and Dibbs, waiting for them to rise, in order to hit out again. (An incident taken from the grand, long, complete story of Tom Merry & Co., entitled "When a Boy's Down," which is contained in this week's number of the "Gem" Library. Out on Thursday. Price One Penny.)

The Head was very grave and silent.

"You—you murderous young villain—Wharton—stand back—"

The prefect groaned, and relapsed into unconsciousness.

Mr. Quelch caught his breath. The Head gave him a startled look.

"Did you hear the name?" he muttered breathlessly.

"Yes."

"It was Wharton?"

"Yes."

"There is only one Wharton at Greyfriars," said Dr. Locke. "Wharton, of the Remove."

"Yes. But—"

"But do you not think it was he?"

"I am sure it was not," said Mr. Quelch, with emphasis.

"Wharton of the Remove has his faults, but he is utterly incapable of an outrage like this. Of that I am convinced."

Dr. Locke nodded.

"From what I have seen of the boy, Mr. Quelch, I am quite inclined to agree with you," he said. "Yet it is strange that his name should be upon Loder's lips now."

"His mind is wandering."

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"Doubtless. Has there been any trouble between Wharton and Loder lately, do you know?"

"I do not know."

There was a sound below. Dr. Locke rose to his feet.

"The doctor has come!" he said.

And Wingate came in with little Dr. Short of Friardale.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Under Suspicion.

"TIME to get up!"

Courtney, of the Sixth, looked into the Remove dormitory that morning with the announcement.

The juniors blinked at him in surprise from their beds. Tom Brown looked at his watch; it was ten minutes past the usual hour for rising, and the rising-bell had certainly not clanged out yet.

"Up you get!" said the prefect.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "'Tain't rising-bell yet, Courtney!"

"The rising-bell will not ring this morning?"

"Wh-what!"

"HIS LAST MATCH!"

By FRANK RICHARDS.
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"No rising-bell!" exclaimed Bulstrode, the captain of the Remove. "What on earth's the matter, Courtney?"

"Gosling tipsy?" asked Snoop.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rope broken?" asked Skinner.

"What's the row, Courtney?"

"What's wrong?"

"Someone is ill!"

"Oh!"

"Who is it?"

"Not the Head?"

"Or Quelch?"

"No," said Courtney quietly. "It's Loder. Don't ask any more questions. Get up quietly and dress yourselves, and come down quietly. There must be no noise. Loder is in a bad way, and he has to be kept quiet."

And Courtney went out and shut the door.

The juniors turned out of bed in amazement. Loder ill—so ill that quiet had to be kept all over the house, and the rising-bell was not to ring. Nobody had ever known Loder to be ill before—he seemed far too strong and robust to be ill, and even his reckless ways did not seem to tell upon his stout constitution, as they would have told upon a weaker one. Loder ill! He had been well enough the previous day to make himself very unpleasant, at all events. He had bullied Wharton, and he had been even rougher with Skinner, and he had interfered with the juniors in the common-room in the evening. He had certainly not been ill then. What was the matter with him now?

The juniors wondered, and discussed the matter with great interest while they were dressing. Loder ill! Loder laid up! It is to be feared that there was more satisfaction than sympathy felt in the Remove dormitory. While Loder was ill, at all events, he could not be bullying the juniors, and that was a relief. Many of the Removites were very much inclined to wish him a long illness.

"I say, you fellows, this is luck!" said Billy Bunter, rubbing a bruise on his shoulder which had been caused by a cricket-stump belonging to Loder. "I hope it's something jolly painful, don't you?"

"Oh, shut up!" said Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Blessed if I can imagine what the matter is!" said Bolsover. "He must be gammening. He was well enough last night, I know that."

"It may be an accident," said Mark Linley.

Hazeldene burst into a chuckle.

"Yes, rather! He may have fallen climbing into his window, or something like that, especially if he had been getting squiffy at the Cross Keys."

And there was a laugh.

The juniors were not by any means unfeeling. If Wingate or Courtney had been ill, they would have been concerned enough. Loder had only himself to thank if nobody cared whether he was ill or not.

Harry Wharton did not join in the general discussion, neither did Bob Cherry, nor Nugent. At the first news, Bob had cast a quick, curious glance at Wharton, and since then he had avoided looking at his chum. Nugent said no word. He went about his washing and his dressing with an expressionless face.

Wharton was very pale.

The expedition of the previous night was in his mind now, and he sincerely wished that he had never made it. Nugent had been right, after all. Wharton had let the sun go down upon his wrath—against the warning which was given in olden times. A night's sleep had brought the junior to a calmer frame of mind. Loder was not worth his hatred, and revengeful feelings were foolish and low. Harry Wharton would have given a great deal to recall the happenings of the night. But it was too late to think of that now.

He started as he heard Skinner's voice addressing him. Skinner had spoken before, but Wharton, buried in painful thoughts, had not heard him.

"Wharton! I say, Wharton!"

Harry looked round.

"Did you speak to me?"

"Getting deaf?" said Skinner sarcastically.

"No! What did you say?"

"I was asking you if you know anything about Loder's illness."

Wharton started.

"What should I know about it?" he exclaimed.

"Well, the whole Form knows that you had some scheme for revenging yourself on Loder," said Skinner. "I thought that perhaps this might be the result of it."

Every fellow in the dormitory looked quickly towards Harry Wharton. Skinner's words were sufficient to start suspicion in every mind.

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"WHEN A BOY'S DOWN!"

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Harry Wharton flushed crimson.

"What do you mean, Skinner?" he exclaimed hotly.

"Well, Loder seems to have had an accident, or something," said Skinner carelessly. "If you have been japing him—"

"I have not been japing him."

"Then you didn't carry out your scheme, whatever it was?"

Wharton was silent.

"There may be a row about this," said Bulstrode. "Wharton had better hold his tongue. If there's going to be an inquiry, the less he says the better."

Wharton flushed again.

"I'm not afraid of an inquiry!" he exclaimed angrily. "I'm not afraid to own up to Dr. Locke himself what I did last night."

"Oh! Then you did something!" exclaimed Skinner.

"I don't deny it."

"What did you do, Wharton?"

A dozen voices asked the question.

"Bob Cherry knows what I did," said Wharton. "He helped me get out of the dormitory, and I told him when I came back."

"You told him!" said Skinner. "But he didn't see you do it?"

"No; he stayed in the dormitory."

"Then there's only your word for what you did?"

Wharton clenched his hands.

"Isn't my word good enough?" he exclaimed angrily.

"Oh, yes, good enough for us! Don't get ratty!" said Skinner hastily. "But I don't know about it being good enough for the Head, that's all."

"What did you do, Wharton?" asked Ogilvy.

"I took a horsewhip to lick Loder in his room," said Harry. "Only he happened to be out of doors—Cross Keys, I suppose—and he met me under the window as he came back. I gave him a lash or two, and then he got the whip away. He came for me with the butt of it, and I had to cut. I dodged him under the elms—it was very dark there—and that's all. I came back here."

"And Loder didn't follow?" asked Snoop.

"No!"

"That's very curious!" Russell remarked. "You'd have thought that he'd be raging, and that he'd come tearing up to the dorm."

"Well, he didn't."

"Perhaps he couldn't," suggested Skinner. "You may have hit him harder than you thought, Wharton. He might have been laid out."

"Nonsense! I hit him with the lash, and he was after me after that."

"It's curious that it should make him ill."

"It hasn't made him ill," said Harry sharply.

"You think something else happened after that to make him ill?" asked Skinner.

"I don't know what may have happened. I know that a lash or two across the face with a whip wouldn't make him ill."

"Sure you didn't use the butt?" asked Stott.

"Yes, of course I am."

"My hat!" exclaimed Skinner suddenly. "What's this?"

He was standing by Wharton's bed. Upon the pillow, which lay just as it had lain under Harry Wharton's head, was a stain of red. The stain showed up with startling distinctness upon the whiteness of the pillow.

The juniors stared at the bloodstain in horror. There was no doubt what caused that stain—it was blood!

"Blood!" muttered Bulstrode. "I say, Wharton—I—I say!"

Wharton burst into an angry laugh.

"That's from my nose," he said. "My nose was bleeding last night. I biffed it against a tree in the dark."

"Oh!"

The juniors were very silent after that. Harry Wharton finished dressing himself, and with a darkly-frowning brow, made his way to the door. It opened just as he reached it, and Wingate, of the Sixth, looked in.

"Wharton!"

"Here I am," said Wharton firmly.

"You are wanted in the Head's study."

"Very well."

ANSWERS

Wharton followed the captain of Greyfriars from the dormitory. He left a dead silence behind him. Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent looked at one another—mute! The same thought was in both their minds: What has Harry Wharton done in the darkness of the night?

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Before the Head.

WINGATE did not speak as he led the way. Harry Wharton glanced at him on the stairs, and saw that his face was cold and set—very different from its usual kindly expression.

"What does the Head want to see me for, Wingate?" he asked quietly.

Wingate gave him a look.

"You'll see soon," he said gruffly.

"What about Loder—what's the matter with him?"

"If you don't know already, you soon will."

And Wingate said no more. Wharton followed him in silence to the Head's study. Dr. Locke was there, looking very pale and stern, and Mr. Quelch was also there. The Remove-master looked distressed.

He fixed his eyes upon Wharton as he came in. Wharton met his glance respectfully, but firmly. He was not afraid.

"Wharton!" said the Head slowly.

"Yes, sir."

"You have to answer a terrible charge. In the first place, if you have anything to say to me, and choose to say it of your own accord, I will listen."

"I have nothing to say, sir."

"You do not know, then, what this charge is?"

"No, sir."

"Very well. I hope you will be able to prove your innocence, Wharton. You have always had a good reputation in the school, and it would be a terrible thing if this was proved against you. Not only would you be expelled from Greyfriars, but if Loder becomes worse, the matter will become public, and then you would undoubtedly be arrested and sent to a reformatory."

Wharton shivered.

"What has happened, sir?" he asked, in a low voice.

"I will tell you. In the first place, I will ask you some questions, and I am sure you will answer truthfully. I may tell you that this matter will be sifted to the very bottom, and the truth will, and must, be brought to light. I warn you in the first place against any temptation to prevaricate."

Wharton flushed.

"I hope I am not likely to prevaricate, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Quelch will tell you whether I am truthful or not."

"I have always found Wharton a perfectly truthful boy," said the Remove-master.

Dr. Locke nodded.

"Very well! Were you out of the Remove dormitory last night, Wharton?"

The junior was silent.

"Speak up, Wharton!" said Mr. Quelch. "This matter is so serious that there is no possibility of keeping anything back—nor will any small fault be punished. Dr. Locke is only anxious to find out the truth of the attack upon Loder, and anything else that may come to light will be passed over. Is it not so, sir?"

"Quite so," said the Head. "For the sake of clearing up the one matter, I will pass over anything else that was done, and so you may speak to me with perfect freedom, Wharton."

"I was out of the dorm. last night, sir," said Harry quietly.

The Head drew a deep breath.

"Yes? Did you leave it by the door or the window—I mean, was it some boyish prank upon the other Forms, or did you actually leave the house?"

"I left the house, sir."

"For what reason?"

"To go to Loder's room, sir."

"You confess that?"

"Certainly, sir."

"And what was your reason for going to Loder's room in the middle of the night?" demanded the Head, his voice growing very stern.

"To horsewhip Loder, sir," said Wharton firmly.

"What?"

"Are you serious, Wharton?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Quite serious, sir."

"You intended to horsewhip a prefect?" the Head exclaimed.

"Yes, sir."

"And the reason for this piece of astounding impertinence?"

"Loder had bullied me, and licked me before the fellows—for nothing," said Wharton, between his teeth. "I said that I would be even with him. That was my reason. If I were big enough I would fight him. As I'm not, I meant to catch him in bed and horsewhip him. That's all, sir."

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ONE
PENNY.

"And did you do so?" said the Head coldly.

"No, sir. He was not in his room."

"Ah! Where did you see him? You did see him, I presume?"

"Yes. I was under his study window, when he came through the trees and recognised me."

Mr. Quelch suppressed a groan. He could see how Wharton was incriminating himself, and his belief in the junior's innocence wavered.

"And then?" exclaimed the Head. "Then you struck him down?"

Wharton almost smiled.

"I don't think I could have struck down a fellow so big as Loder, sir," he said. "I hit him across the face with the whip, once or twice or three times; I hardly remember, I was very excited."

"With the butt of the whip?"

"No, sir, the lash. I meant to punish him, not to injure him. I hope you don't think I would act like a ruffian, sir."

"It remains for you to prove that you have not acted like a ruffian, Wharton. But what did Loder do after you had lashed him, as you state?"

"He got the whip away from me, sir, and tried to hit me with the butt."

"Be careful what you say, Wharton."

"I am telling you exactly what occurred, sir."

"What did you do?"

"I cut—I—I mean, I ran, sir," said Wharton. "Loder was in a fury, and didn't know what he was doing, and he might have brained me. I dodged away under the trees."

"And Loder?"

"He missed me in the dark."

"You did not turn upon him?"

"No, sir."

"Nor strike him again with any heavy weapon?"

"I had no weapon, sir."

"He was quite well, then, and had received from you only the lashes on the face when you left the spot?"

"Yes, sir."

"And then you returned to your dormitory?"

"Yes, sir."

"Unpursued?"

"Yes."

"Did it not strike you as singular that Loder did not follow you?"

"Well, I was rather excited and confused, and didn't think much about it, sir," said Harry. "I thought, I believe, that Loder didn't care for the matter to go any further. I intended to tell the exact facts if he complained to you, sir, as he has done. But I rather thought that he would let the matter drop, and take his revenge afterwards in some under-hand way; that would have been more like him. I can't understand his having allowed the matter to come to your knowledge at all, because he knows that I'm bound to give my reasons for acting as I did."

"If Loder was so brutal as you say, Wharton, why did you not complain to me or to your Form-master, instead of taking the law into your own hands?"

"Because that would be sneaking, sir."

"But you have told me now."

"Because Loder has reported me, and forced me to. I'm bound to defend myself, sir."

The Head looked at him searchingly.

"Then you think that Loder has reported your conduct to me, and that that is why I have sent for you?" he asked slowly.

Wharton looked surprised.

"I suppose so, sir. You couldn't know anything about it unless Loder had reported it, could you? I suppose he has reported it, and he is shamming illness to make it out more serious; that would be like him."

The Head's brow grew very stern.

"Then you do not know, Wharton, what has happened to Loder?" he exclaimed.

"I don't know that anything has happened to him, sir."

"You do not know that last night he was struck down by an unknown hand, in the Close, under his window——"

"What!"

"And left insensible?" said the Head harshly.

Wharton staggered.

"It—it's impossible!" he exclaimed.

"Your Form-master, Mr. Quelch, found him there, bleeding and unconscious," said the Head sternly. "For a long time he could not speak. This morning he is able to speak, and that is all. And he has named you as his assailant."

"I, sir?"

"Yes, you, Wharton!"

Wharton held on to the back of a chair for support. His brain seemed to reel, and for a moment the room swam round him.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTEK.

Guilty!

"WHARTON!"

Mr. Quelch's clear, incisive voice seemed to pierce the mist that was closing upon Harry Wharton's brain. The Form-master's strong hand closed upon his shoulder, and held him. Harry made an effort, and collected himself. The Head's eyes were like steel now as they were fixed upon him.

"Wharton, collect yourself!"

"Ye-es, sir," muttered Harry.

"Have you anything to say, Wharton?" said the Head coldly.

"Yes, sir. I—I didn't do it. If Loder has really been injured, I didn't do it. I know nothing at all about it."

"Do you seriously expect that statement to be believed, Wharton?" the Head demanded sharply. "You admit striking Loder; you admit that you went there purposely to take revenge upon him for some wrong, real or fancied; and you deny that you inflicted the injury from which he is now suffering."

"I deny it!"

"You aver, then, that someone else must have found Loder there immediately after you left him, and struck him down."

Wharton was silent.

It certainly did seem a wild supposition, put in that way. That the Head believed him guilty was clear. He looked at Mr. Quelch, but the Remove-master avoided his glance. Harry's heart was as heavy as lead. Mr. Quelch believed him guilty, too!

The boy broke out passionately.

"Oh, sir, you—you can't believe that I'd do a thing like that! I never meant to hurt Loder—only to punish him for bullying me. I hit him with the lash of the whip, and that was all; I swear it."

"I cannot believe you, Wharton. The whip has been found there, but you had another weapon too, probably a cricket-bat. Dr. Short states that Loder's injury was caused by some heavy, blunt weapon, probably a cricket-bat. Do you deny that you had such a weapon with you?"

"I had nothing but the whip, sir, and Loder took that away."

The Head sighed.

"Then you persist in denial?" he exclaimed.

"Certainly, sir, as I am only telling the truth!" said Wharton. "I have not hurt Loder. If he was struck down and stunned, it certainly was not by me. He might have run into a tree, perhaps. I ran into one, and made my nose bleed."

"Loder's injury could not have been caused by running into a tree. He was struck down."

"Does he say I did it, sir?"

"Yes."

Wharton gasped.

"He says I struck him down?"

"Yes."

"But—but it's impossible, sir. If he says so, it's a lie. And if—if he was struck down under the tree, sir, he couldn't see who struck him; it was too dark."

"Loder's statement is that you assaulted him, Wharton, and he followed you under the trees, and there you turned upon him and struck him down."

"I did nothing of the kind, sir."

"You suggest, then, that there was someone else under the elms, lying in wait for a chance to injure Loder?"

Harry Wharton gave a start.

"My hat!" he exclaimed.

"Now I think of it, I remember hearing a footstep under the trees a long time before Loder came up. There was somebody else there."

The doctor shook his head.

"I am afraid that will not do, Wharton. You did not see this other?"

"It was too dark, sir."

"You do not know who it was?"

"I have no idea, sir."

"H'm! And you did not mention the fact at all until now—"

"I had forgotten about it, sir."

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The Head was silent for a few moments, his eyes fixed upon Wharton. The boy stood erect before him. He was dismayed, but he was not afraid.

"You will not confess, then, Wharton?"

"I have confessed everything now, sir."

"You deny your guilt?"

"Most decidedly, sir."

"It is only too clear, Wharton. What is your opinion, Mr. Quelch?"

The Remove-master was pale and grave.

"I agree with you, sir," he said, in a low voice.

"Oh, sir!" exclaimed Wharton. "You—you believe me guilty?"

"I cannot believe otherwise, Wharton. I am afraid that it is only too clear," said Mr. Quelch sadly. "That you were in a state of great excitement, and hardly knew what you were doing, I believe also, but I cannot doubt that you did this. The first name upon Loder's lips when he came to himself was yours."

"He lied, sir."

Mr. Quelch shook his head.

"He spoke your name, Wharton, before he was fully conscious. He was not lying. He might have been mistaken; but I do not see how he could have been mistaken."

Wharton's brain seemed to whirl.

He was beginning to understand what this meant to him. Ruin—ruin—disgrace and condemnation! He gasped for breath.

"Loder is now in a precarious state," said Dr. Locke, in a hard voice. "His strong constitution may pull him round without a severe illness. As yet Dr. Short cannot tell. It is quite possible that he may become worse, and have brain fever. If it comes to that, Wharton, the matter must become public. In that case, you will be dealt with according to law. But if Loder improves, and we are able to keep this unhappy matter to ourselves, you will simply be expelled from Greyfriars. In the meantime, it is my duty to keep custody of you. You will be locked up in a room until we know more."

"Locked up, sir?"

"Yes, Wharton; and if it were not for the disgrace to Greyfriars," said Dr. Locke, his voice rising, "I should have you locked up in the police-station at Friardale, instead of a room in the school."

Wharton shuddered.

"I shall write to your uncle to-day, acquainting him with what has happened," went on Dr. Locke. "I understand that he is now in Paris, and it will be some time before he can get here. In the meantime, you will be kept in custody—"

"I am innocent."

"Do not add falsehoods to your other wickedness, Wharton. You have been guilty of a cruel and barbarous act. That you received provocation I am willing to believe, but nothing can excuse or condone the utter barbarity of this attack upon Loder. I shall keep you in confinement till Loder's state is ascertained more accurately. If he grows better, I shall hand you over to your uncle to take away from the school. If he grows worse, I fear that I shall have no alternative but to give you up to the police. Wingate, will you take Wharton away, and lock him in the empty room in the second passage, and bring me the key?"

"Yes, sir."

Wharton gave a wild look round at the condemnatory faces.

"I—I am innocent," he muttered huskily. "Dr. Locke, ask Mr. Quelch, ask Wingate, ask any of the fellows, if I've ever done a rotten, cowardly thing like that before!"

"Talk is useless, Wharton. Take him away!"

"But—but, sir, I—I can't be locked up!" Wharton exclaimed. "I—I ought to be allowed a chance of looking into the matter to—to find out who really did that to Loder."

Dr. Locke's colour deepened. He was very angry.

"That is sheer impertinence, Wharton!" he exclaimed. "You would do much better to own up to the truth and say that you are sorry."

"I am not likely to own up to what I never did, sir!" retorted Wharton with spirit.

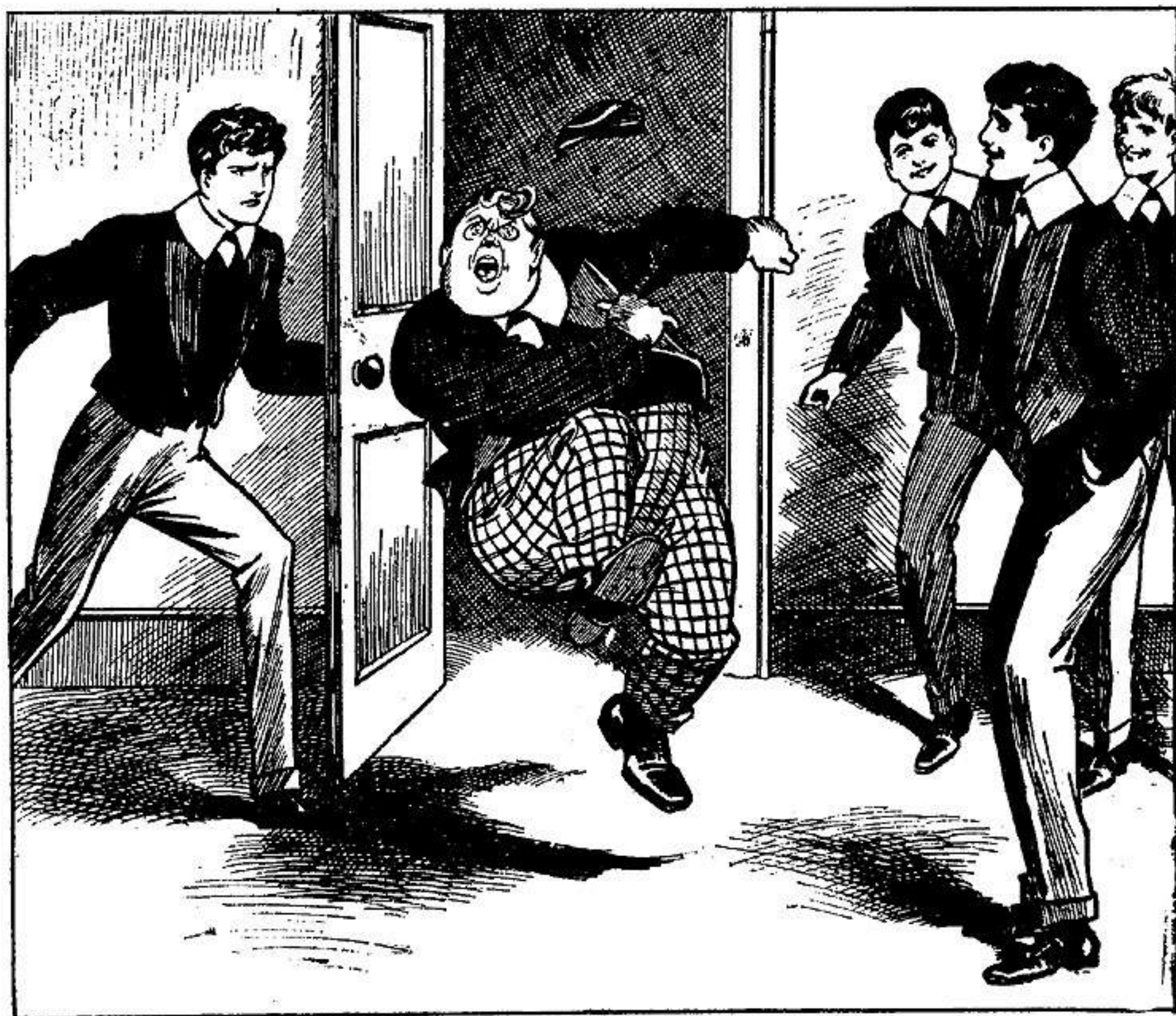
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 will contain another splendid, long complete
 school tale of Harry Wharton & Co. at
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'HIS LAST MATCH!'

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Nugent stepped noiselessly towards the door, taking care to keep out of the line of view from the keyhole. He grasped the handle of the door suddenly and dragged it open. There was a gasping howl as a fat junior tumbled headlong into the room. (See chapter 15.)

"Enough! Take him away, Wingate."

The Greyfriars captain dropped his hand upon Wharton's shoulder. His face was hard and dark.

"Come!" he said.

"You needn't put your hands on me!" said Harry. "I'll come without that!"

Wingate gave him one look, and released him. Harry Wharton followed him from the study. The junior held his head high. He was angry now—quite as angry as the doctor. Wingate opened a door in the lower passage.

"Get in!" he said roughly.

Wharton stepped into the room.

Wingate drew the door shut, and turned the key on the outside. There was a click, and the captain of Greyfriars put the key into his pocket and turned away.

Harry Wharton was alone.

A prisoner—under a terrible charge.

It seemed to him that it was some fearful dream, but he looked round the room, at the locked door, and knew that it was no dream.

He was a prisoner, his honour stained, perhaps for ever, and the terrible sentence hanging over him—expulsion from the school, perhaps prison. Prison! The mere thought of the horrible word sent a chill to his very heart. If only he had taken Frank Nugent's advice the day before!

But it was too late!

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THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

A Staunch Chum.

THAT work was very much neglected in the Remove Form-room that morning we need hardly say.

The Remove were amazed and dismayed.

The news of Loder's injury and of Wharton's incarceration had, of course, spread over the whole school at once.

It caused utter amazement in all quarters.

That any Greyfriars fellow should be guilty of such a ruffianly revenge, even upon a bully like Loder, was shocking enough. But that the guilty person should be Harry Wharton of the Remove made the matter as surprising as it was shocking.

Wharton guilty!

The facts that were known hardly seemed to leave room for any other supposition. Loder, when he recovered in the morning, had told his tale clearly enough—so clearly, that it was pretty evident to some of the fellows that he had thought it over carefully before he spoke a word.

He had heard a noise in the Close, so he said, and had risen to see what it was, suspecting that perhaps some of the juniors were breaking bounds. In order not to alarm the house, he had dropped from his window to look round the Close. He had looked under the elms, fancying that he saw someone there, and as he came back towards the house he

met Harry Wharton of the Remove face to face. Wharton, instead of replying to his questions as to why he was out of the dormitory, had attacked him savagely with a whip, and then run under the trees. Loder had followed him, and Wharton had turned upon him and struck him down with some heavy weapon. Then he was insensible, and knew no more. He had an impression, however, that he had been struck twice. He had not seen any weapon in Wharton's hand excepting the whip, which he had snatched away from him in the struggle. But the junior must have had it with him, or else leaning against a tree in readiness to be snatched up. Loder thought it was a cricket-bat that he had used.

That was all that Loder could tell.

Most of the fellows discounted the first part of the story. They guessed pretty clearly that Loder had been returning from some midnight excursion when he had encountered Wharton in the Close, and had not risen because he had heard a noise in the Close. But that was only a minor point of the story. The essential part of it seemed to be well substantiated.

For Wharton admitted having left the Remove dormitory to make an attack upon Loder, and there was only his bare word to the effect that he had intended only a punishment, not a brutal assault.

Many of the fellows shook their heads over the story, believing Wharton's explanation so far as it went. Loder had got the whip away from him, and started after him with it; then Wharton had snatched up the bat, or the club, or whatever it was, and landed out at Loder. That was the general opinion.

Skinner pointed out that in that case he must have taken the weapon with him to have it ready, which was a point very much against Wharton. It showed that he must have known in advance that his attack upon Loder might turn out to be a severe assault, even if he had not actually intended to make it.

The facts of the case, as they were known, were not concealed—the whole school knew. They were left to form their own opinions about it, but there were few who doubted that it was Wharton's hand that had inflicted the injury upon Loder.

"The chap lost his head when Loder was after him, and biffed him too hard," said Bulstrode. "It was a bit rotten, but Loder can blame himself. I'm sorry for Wharton."

"So am I," said Tom Brown. "There's not much doubt about it, I suppose, but it's rotten hard on Wharton. He never meant to hurt Loder so much. I'm certain of that."

"But he denies the whole business," Mark Linley remarked.

"Oh, he would!" sneered Skinner.

Mark fixed a steady look upon the cad of the Remove.

"You seem to be very much against Wharton all along," he said, as Skinner shrank a little from his glance. "I, for one, believe every word Wharton has said. I don't believe he would tell a lie to escape any punishment."

"Oh, rats!" said Snoop. "Anybody would."

"That may be your opinion; it isn't mine."

"Oh, Wharton denies it, of course," said Skinner. "He doesn't want to be expelled. But we know jolly well that he biffed Loder."

"We know nothing of the sort," said Nugent.

Skinner stared at him.

"You ought to know it better than us," he said. "We all know that Wharton had some scheme on last night to revenge himself on Loder, and you were on bad terms with him about it."

Nugent flushed.

"That was simply his scheme for horsewhipping Loder," he replied. "I thought it was rather too thick at the time, and I think so now."

"I suppose he didn't tell you all this?"

"He did tell me all, and he never meant to hurt Loder seriously. Some cowardly brute did this to Loder," said Nugent. "It wasn't Wharton."

"Oh, rats!"

"Yes, that's too thick, I guess," said Fisher T. Fish. "It's pretty clear about Wharton, you know, though I'm sorry for the galoot, I guess. Yep!"

"Oh, shut up!" said Frank. "Wharton didn't do it!"

He swung away angrily. Bob Cherry, who had been listening in silence to the somewhat heated discussion, followed Nugent into the Close. Morning lessons were over, and the whole school was discussing the affair of Wharton and Loder. Bob tapped Nugent on the arm.

"Franky, old man, you don't believe Wharton did it?"

Frank knitted his brow.

"No; do you, Bob?"

Bob Cherry looked distressed. He ran his fingers through his thick hair.

"Blessed if I know what to think!" he said slowly.

"Wharton is a curious beggar when his temper gets the

better of him, I know that. The fellows are all talking about that blood on his pillow. We know there was blood on him when he came in last night, Nugent."

"That was from his nose."

"Yea, if it was true."

"You don't think Wharton lied, Bob?"

"Well, no."

"Besides, he had nothing with him to hit Loder with like that," said Nugent. "He took the riding-whip, and nothing else. And Loder admits having got that away from him."

Bob Cherry nodded.

"Do you think Wharton told us everything, Franky?"

"What do you mean?"

"Some of the fellows suggest that he had a bat or something hidden on the spot ready."

"Rot!"

"Well, it seems rather thick. Only Harry was in a very peculiar temper last night, and Loder had used him very badly, and—and—"

"He didn't do it, Bob."

Bob Cherry was silent.

"What he did was silly and reckless enough," went on Nugent, "but the rest—hitting Loder and stunning him in that way—was brutal and cowardly. Wharton would never have done a thing like that."

"He might have if Loder had been welting him——"

"Then he would have explained how it was."

"Well, I suppose so, Frank."

"He says he dodged Loder under the trees, and I believe every word of it," Frank said firmly.

"Then there was somebody else?"

"There must have been."

"But whom?"

Nugent made a hopeless gesture.

"Goodness knows!"

"They've got Harry shut up in the empty room," said Bob restlessly. "No chance of getting at him and seeing if he can tell us anything. What are you thinking about, Frank?"

"I'm going to help Wharton somehow."

"But how?"

"I don't know—yet," Frank knitted his brows. "He's innocent, Bob. I don't care if I'm the only chap in the Remove who knows it, but I know it! I'm going to manage to see him somehow and talk it over with him, and then we shall see what can be done."

"He's locked up, Frank."

"I know. But——"

"Wingate's got the key, or else he's given it to the Head," said Bob Cherry thoughtfully. "No chance of getting in at the door. And the room is just over the Form-room windows, Frank—no chance of climbing up without being seen. You can't get at Wharton."

"I'm going to get at him!"

"How, then?"

"I can climb down from the window over the room," said Frank. "There's ivy there thick enough to bear my weight."

Bob Cherry whistled.

"It's risky."

"I don't care! I'm going to stick to Wharton, and we must know what he can tell us about it before we investigate. The elm will prevent them from seeing me from the Close, anyway. I shall manage it all right."

"Look here, Frank, I'll go——"

Nugent shook his head.

"Rats! Besides, you don't believe in Wharton as I do—you've got your doubts——"

Bob Cherry coloured.

"Blessed if I can help it," he said. "You see, it might all have happened so naturally, and Wharton's such a queer beggar, and then the evidence is so clear——"

"It's not clear enough for me," said Nugent quietly. "It's not only that Wharton's going to be expelled—that's not all. He's disgraced for life. If he leaves school with this hanging over him he can never hold his head up among decent people again. It's his honour that's at stake."

"I'll help him if I can, Frank. But——"

"But you don't believe in him as I do," said Frank. "When you were in trouble, Bob, he stuck to you through thick and thin, and he was the only chap who did."

Bob Cherry shifted uncomfortably.

"I know—I know!" he said. "This is rotten! I don't like doubting him. But it's a different sort of thing, isn't it? It's a question whether his temper carried him away, and he's got a queer temper. But——"

"I believe in him through thick and thin," said Nugent quietly; "and I'm going to help him."

And Nugent went into the house, leaving Bob Cherry staring after him with his hands in his pockets, and a very perplexed and distressed expression upon his face.

TAP!

Harry Wharton started. He was alone in the room to which he had been confined. He had been alone there for some time, alone and plunged in gloomy thought. At first he had thought of escape, but he had abandoned that thought. Even if he could get out of the room—which would not be easy—where was he to go? To run away from Greyfriars would be worse than useless; it would be taken as a proof of the charge against him. Yet to be confined to the room like a criminal, and given no chance of investigating and disproving the charge, made him rage inwardly. It was because his guilt was deemed quite clear. And indeed, when he grew calmer, and thought it over carefully, he could see how overwhelming the proofs must appear to anyone but himself. He had, by his hasty and revengeful temper, placed himself in a position where suspicion could not but fall upon him. And now that it had fallen, there seemed to be no hope of removing it.

Tap!

Wharton was pacing to and fro in the room when the sound fell upon his ears. He glanced towards the window as he heard the tap on the glass, and uttered a cry of surprise. A face was pressed to the glass.

"Frank!"

Nugent tapped again.

Wharton ran to the window, and threw up the sash. Frank Nugent, red with exertion, and dusty from the ivy, climbed in, breathing hard. He dropped upon the floor of the room, and stood beside Harry, panting.

"By Jove!" he said. "That was a climb!"

"How did you get here, Frank?"

"By the ivy, of course."

"From above?"

"Yes."

"Frank, it was frightfully risky."

Nugent grinned.

"That couldn't be helped. I had to come and see you. What have you been doing all the morning?"

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"I suppose the whole school knows about this?" he asked.

"Yes, rather!"

"What do the Remove fellows think?"

"They don't know what to think," said Frank cautiously.

"But in the first place, Harry, I know you didn't give Loder that crack on the head."

Wharton looked at him curiously.

"You know that I've denied it?" he asked.

"Yes."

"The Head doesn't believe me."

"I know he doesn't."

"And Mr. Quelch is of the same opinion as the Head," said Wharton, with a bitter smile.

"Yes; I suppose so."

"And you take my word, Frank?"

"Haven't I said so?"

"It's jolly good of you, old chap! On my word of honour, it wasn't I who gave Loder that blow," said Wharton earnestly.

"I felt certain of it from the beginning. Perhaps for a moment—" Nugent paused and coloured. "Perhaps for a minute or so, Harry, I was afraid that your temper had got the better of you, and you had struck him too hard. But —"

"But you don't think so now?"

"Well, I know that if you did it, you would tell the truth about it, at all events," said Nugent. "I know that."

"So I would, Frank. I suppose if Loder had had hold of me, and I'd had a stump in my hand, I might have hit out too hard. But then, I should have explained how it happened. But as a matter of fact, it never occurred. It all happened just as I said—I gave him a lash across the face, and then he got the whip away from me, and hit out with the butt, and I cut. I never saw him again. I haven't seen him since I dodged under the trees to get away from him last night."

"That's what we've got to prove somehow, Harry."

Wharton made a hopeless gesture.

"How am I to prove it, Frank, when I'm shut up here? Not that there seems much chance of doing it, even if I were free."

"You can't!"

"Then—"

"But perhaps I can," said Nugent cheerfully. "At all events, I'm going to try."

Wharton's eyes were moist for a moment.

"It's jolly decent of you, Frank," he said, in a low voice.

"Especially after the way I've treated you lately."

"Oh, that's all right! I know how to take your little ways," said Frank.

Wharton coloured.

"I was ratty about Loder. But I'm sorry I didn't take your advice now, Frank. I knew you were right all the time, THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 196.

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ONE
PENNY.

I think, and that's partly what made me ratty. I suppose I was an obstinate ass."

"Exactly—you were!" said Nugent, with a grin. "And you've got yourself into a fearful hole over it. And I'm going to get you out, if I can. I know you'd do as much for me, even if I had punched your head just previously."

Wharton smiled faintly.

"So I would, Frank."

Frank Nugent glanced round the room. There was a square of carpet on the floor, a couple of chairs, a table, a bed, and a few other articles. The junior drew several packages from his pocket and put them on the table, and Wharton looked at them in surprise.

"What are they, Frank?"

"Grub," said Nugent laconically. "Hard-boiled eggs, and cake, and toffee, and chocolate. They will keep you on short commons here, Harry, and I thought I might as well bring them. Now, let's get to business."

Nugent sat down on the table.

Harry Wharton leaned against the wall by the window, his hands in his pockets. It was a pleasure to him to see and listen to his chum again, and to feel, too, that he was not deserted in his hour of need. The loneliness of the morning in the locked room had made him feel as if the whole school were against him.

"Go ahead, Franky!"

"I want to know exactly what happened last night," said Nugent. "I'm going into this thing, and I'm going to get at the truth. Can you tell me anything to help me?"

Wharton wrinkled his brows in thought.

"I think I've told you all that occurred last night," he said.

"Look here, you didn't biff Loder?"

"No."

"Somebody did."

"Yes."

"That somebody must have been on the spot, because Loder was biffed as he was running after you," said Nugent.

"Yes; if he's telling the truth."

"I think that's pretty certain," said Frank. "I hear that he mentioned your name as the chap who biffed him before he quite recovered himself. He thinks it was you. Of course, he couldn't see you under the trees, any more than you could, but as he was after you at the time, and he didn't see anybody else, he naturally concluded that it was you. If he knew who had done it he would give the name; he would want him punished."

"Yes, that's true."

"Loder thinks it was you, and we can take his story as true, so far as he knows," said Nugent. "There must have been somebody else under the trees at the same time, and he must have been watching for a chance to hit Loder, and he took it when Loder came after you. That seems clear!"

"Yes; it seems pretty clear."

"The question is, who was it? I suppose you didn't see anybody?"

"No," said Wharton thoughtfully, "I didn't see anybody; but I heard somebody."

"Ah! Now we're getting to something!" exclaimed Nugent. "What did you hear?"

"There was a footstep under the trees—that's all. I didn't see anybody. And as there was only just the one sound, I thought the chap, whoever he was, had gone away. That was quite a quarter of an hour before I saw Loder."

"Good! It's pretty certain the unknown chap hadn't gone away, but was lying low in the dark there," said Nugent excitedly.

"I suppose so."

"And he must have been laying for Loder."

"It looks like it."

"We may take it that Loder didn't get up because he heard a noise, as he says. He was coming back from the Cross Keys. Don't you think so?"

"I am sure of it," said Harry. "I was quite half an hour, in all, near his study window, and then he came from the direction of the gates."

"Suppose a chap who had a grudge against him knew, or guessed, that he was going to the Cross Keys last night, and was laying low for him in the trees, waiting for him to come back—"

"Quite possible!"

"Loder came through the trees and passed him—perhaps the chap's nerve failed him then, or he couldn't see Loder in the dark. Then he would hear Loder talking to you, and then, when Loder followed you into the trees, then would come his chance. He only had to stand ready, and land out with the bat, or whatever it was."

Wharton nodded.

"Or," went on Nugent, more slowly—"or perhaps the

chap knew about your scheme of going for Loder, and deliberately let him see you first, so as to leave the impression upon Loder's mind that it was you who struck him down."

Harry Wharton started.

"That would be a horribly mean trick," he said.

"Well, the chap who would bash Loder in that way must be horribly mean, I suppose, anyway."

"Yes; I suppose so."

"And it would be a good dodge, from his point of view, to let the blame fall on you if anything came out, and keep himself safe."

Wharton looked very thoughtful.

"It looks to me as if you're on the track, Frank, so far as getting to know how it happened. But as for finding the chap—"

"I'll do that, too!" said Nugent. "I've got something to go on now. There was another chap there; he was a chap who had a deadly grudge against Loder; he was no friend of yours, because he was willing to let the blame fall on you; and he knew in advance about your plan of being there."

"That would fit half the fellows at Greyfriars," said Wharton, with a faint smile. "All the juniors, at any rate, hate Loder, and a good many of them are no friends of mine."

"But there aren't many who would injure even a chap like Loder for revenge," said Frank; "and he is really injured, Harry. The doctor is talking about concussion of the brain, and brain fever, and so on. I dare say it's mostly gas, but Loder is seriously hurt; there is no doubt about that. There are precious few fellows ruffians enough here to lam a chap right on the head with a cricket-bat."

"Yes; you're right there, Frank."

"We'll find him out," said Nugent confidently. "You see, we—"

Frank Nugent broke off suddenly. There was a sound of the key being turned in the lock. Before the junior could make a movement towards the window the door was flung open, and Gosling, the porter, appeared with a tray in his hands.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER. Nugent Makes a Beginning.

GOSLING tramped into the room with a sulky countenance. Gosling, the school-porter, did not like work, and bringing dinner to the room for the imprisoned junior was an addition to his daily labour which did not find favour in Gosling's eyes. Not that the school-porter had heavy duties to do, but Gosling was one of the many who regard employment simply as a method of drawing wages, and look upon every task they have to perform as a fresh wrong heaped upon them. Gosling slammed the tray down upon the table, and grunted. Under the circumstances, he did not expect a tip from Wharton, and he was at no pains to restrain his ill-humour.

"There you har!" he ejaculated. "Wot I says is this 'ere. I says—"

Gosling paused. He caught sight of Frank Nugent, and his mouth opened wide, like that of an expiring codfish. He stared blankly at the junior, so astonished at finding him within the locked room that for a minute he could not speak. The expression of amazement in his face was almost idiotic, and Frank could not help bursting into a chuckle. The chuckle seemed to recall Gosling to himself.

"Master Nugent!" he ejaculated.

"No; I'm his ghost!" said Nugent. "Touch me not, lest I vanish into thin air!"

"Ho!" said Gosling. "Wot I says is this 'ere. None of your little jokes, I says. You kin in by the winder, Master Nugent."

"You ought to get a prize in guessing competitions, Gosling."

Gosling snorted.

"Which it's agin the rules to climb into winders, and strickly forbidden to come and see Master Wharton," he said. "You get hout of this room, Master Nugent! I am bound to report yer."

"Oh, Gossy! You're not going to report me, are you, when I came here to—"

"Wot I says is this 'ere—"

"On purpose to tip you for bringing in Wharton's dinner," said Nugent solemnly.

Gosling stared at him blankly, and then slowly his rugged visage relaxed into a grin. He had some slight sense of humour.

"Thank you kindly, Master Nugent!" he said. "I dare say you was anxious to speak to Master Wharton. You'd better go hout by the door; it's safer than the winder."

"Thanks, old son; I will."

Nugent pressed a shilling into the school-porter's hand, THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 196.

nodded to Wharton, and quitted the room. Gosling paused for a few moments, in case there should be another shilling to come from Wharton. No shilling being forthcoming, he grunted and followed Frank Nugent, locking the door behind him.

Harry Wharton was left alone again.

But his face was more cheerful now, and his heart was lighter.

He might be down on his luck, but he had a chum who was staunch through thick and thin, and who was working to clear his honour from the stain that had been cast upon it.

Would Nugent succeed?

Wharton hardly dared to hope so. The mystery of the night seemed too deep, too dark to be penetrated.

And yet he hoped.

And even if Nugent failed, it was something to know that his best chum still believed in him and would stand by him faithfully whatever came to pass.

Frank Nugent walked away with a deep frown of thought upon his brow. He had set himself a task which would be far from easy to perform, and he knew it. But he did not think of flinching. He was ready to stand by his chum against the whole school, if need were. He went in to dinner, a little late, and Mr. Quelch glanced at him, but the Form-master did not speak.

After dinner, when the Remove went out, most of them were anxious to know how Loder was progressing. Dr. Short had been to see the prefect. Loder was still occupying Wingate's room, the doctor having advised that he should not be moved. Several of the Removites gathered round the little medical man as he came out. Some of the more suspicious fellows in the Form suspected the little gentleman of making the case out to be unduly serious; Dr. Short was known to have a tendency in that direction. As Skinner remarked, a medical man couldn't be expected to cure all his patients, and then sit down cheerfully and starve to death. And Dr. Short was known to have patients of ten years' standing.

"How is he, sir?" asked Russell.

"A slight improvement—slight improvement," said Dr. Short good-naturedly.

"Can a chap go in and see him, sir?" asked Nugent.

The medical man shook his head.

"No; impossible—quite impossible, in fact, absolutely!"

"Will he have brain fever, sir?" asked Skinner.

"I trust not, my lad—I trust not."

"Thank you, sir!"

"I am glad to see you lads so anxious about your school-fellow, however," said the little gentleman. "That is quite the proper spirit."

"Yes. We want to know whether Wharton is going to prison, or is only going to be expelled," said Bolsover.

"Oh!" said Dr. Short curtly.

And he walked away without saying any more.

Bob Cherry gave the bully of the Remove an angry look.

"That was a rotten, caddish thing to say!" he exclaimed.

Bolsover grinned, and turned away. He was one of the fellows who made no secret of the fact that they were glad to see Wharton "down."

"I want to speak to you, Bob," Nugent said abruptly.

"Go ahead!"

"Not here; in my study. You, too, Bull, and you, Linley."

"Right you are!"

The three juniors followed Frank to No. 1 Study, wondering somewhat. Frank closed the study door after them, taking great care to latch it. The other fellows looked at him in surprise.

"What's the game?" asked John Bull. "Some jape on?"

"I'm not likely to think of japes, Bull, with Wharton locked up under a rotten charge," said Nugent quietly.

"No; I suppose not. But what is it, then? What's the giddy mystery about?"

"I want you chaps to help me, and I don't want any listeners," said Nugent. "That's all."

The juniors exchanged glances.

"About Wharton?" asked Mark Linley.

"Yes."

"What do you want us to do?" asked John Bull uneasily.

"To help me clear him."

The juniors were silent. Frank Nugent scanned their faces.

"Let's have it out plain," he said. "Do you fellows believe he was innocent, or do you think he hit Loder in that rotten, cowardly way?"

"I think it must have been somebody else," said Mark Linley slowly.

"I'm blessed if I know what to think!" said Bob Cherry.

"And you, Bull?"

John Bull coloured.

"Well, I agree with Cherry," he said.

"I believe in Wharton," said Nugent abruptly. "If he's expelled from Greyfriars, I shall ask my people to take me away and send me to the school he goes to."

"Phew!"

"But I want to clear him, if I can. Look here! You chaps have always been chummy with Wharton, I think you ought to help."

"I will, gladly," said Mark.

"So will I," said John Bull. "I don't know what to think about the matter, but I'd give a great deal to get at the truth, and if Wharton could be cleared, nobody would be more pleased than I should be."

"Same here!" said Bob Cherry.

"Then you'll help me?"

"Yes, rather!" said the three juniors together.

"Then we'll hold a council of war on the subject," said Frank. "I'll tell you what I know about the matter, and you can give me your opinion. I—" He paused suddenly, and held up his hand.

There was a distinct creak at the door.

"Someone's listening!" whispered Bob Cherry.

Nugent nodded.

"And who's more likely to listen than the chap who's afraid of being found out?" he said, in a low voice.

"Right, by Jove!"

Nugent stepped noiselessly towards the door, taking care to keep out of the line of view from the keyhole. He grasped the handle of the door suddenly, and dragged it open. There was a gasping howl, and a fat junior tumbled headlong into the room.

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

A Council of War.

"YOW! Oh, really! Yow!"

"Bunter!" exclaimed the four juniors together.

"Ow! I—I was just going to knock. Oh!"

Nugent dragged the fat junior to his feet. He was bitterly disappointed. He had hoped that the listener might prove to be someone whom he could suspect of being the assailant of Loder. But Bunter was above—or below—suspicion. The fat junior would no more have dreamed of an assault upon a prefect than of flying over the roof of the School House.

"You fat cad!" exclaimed Nugent wrathfully.

"Ow! D-d-don't shake me like that, Nugent! You will make my glasses fall off!"

"You fat rotter!"

"Yow! And if they get broken, you'll have to p-p-pay for them. Ow!"

Nugent slung the Owl of the Remove against the wall. Bunter bumped there, and slid down to a sitting posture, and sat there, blinking over his big spectacles, which had slipped down his fat little nose.

"Ow! Oh! Yah! I'm hurt! Yaroop!"

"What do you mean by listening at my door?" shouted Nugent.

"I—I wasn't listening! I didn't hear a word you said, and I don't know you were discussing Wharton at all," howled Billy Bunter. "Besides, it was all Skinner's fault."

"Skinner's! What do you mean?"

"Well, he suggested that you might be plotting something, and I came along to see. I—I mean, I didn't come along to see. I never even thought of—"

"Oh, get out, you lying rotter!"

Nugent kicked the fat junior vigorously. Bunter roared, and squirmed out of the doorway, and rolled into the passage, where he picked himself up and ran.

Nugent slammed the door after him, and turned back to his companions with a frown.

"Nothing there," he said. "It couldn't have been Bunter. I had hoped—"

"Skinner seems to have suggested to Bunter to listen," said Mark Linley, in quiet but significant tones.

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BY MARTIN CLIFFORD.



- - In this Thursday's Number of our Companion Paper - -

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ONE PENNY.

"Ye-es. But—"

"Skinner was very curious, and he must have known that we were here to talk about Wharton's affair, if he noticed us at all."

"Skinner!" said Frank Nugent thoughtfully. "I wonder—"

"My hat!" exclaimed Bob Cherry excitedly. "Skinner was as wild against Loder as Wharton was; I know that. You remember what an awful licking he had?"

"Yes, rather!" said John Bull. "I wonder—"

Nugent's eyes gleamed.

"Skinner will do for a beginning, at all events," he said.

"Look here! I've had a talk with Wharton just before dinner, and he's told me something I didn't know before. Listen to this!"

"Go ahead!" said John Bull tersely.

Nugent explained what he had learned from Wharton, and the others listened with close attention.

"Then there was somebody else on the spot all the time?" said Bull.

"Yes; that's clear enough."

"The question is, who was it?" said Mark Linley. "It

was somebody who had a deadly grudge against Loder—somebody who knew that Wharton was going to be there, too. Now, outside the Remove, I don't suppose anybody heard the chatter about what Wharton meant to do."

"You think it was a Remove fellow?"

"I think it's most likely."

"Skinner!" said John Bull quietly.

"Skinner's no friend of Wharton's, and it would be just one of his rotten tricks to fasten a thing like this on Wharton," Nugent said slowly. "Skinner knew of Wharton's intention of going out, too, and he could easily have stayed awake and watched him go. But could he have left the dormitory without anybody seeing or hearing him, especially as Bob Cherry was awake all the time, awaiting for Wharton?"

Bob Cherry's face was wildly excited now.

"But I wasn't awake all the time!" he ex-

claimed. "I kept on nodding off to sleep; and once, when I woke again, I thought I heard somebody moving in the dorm. near the door. I took no notice of it at the time."

"It might have been somebody going out."

"Of course it might."

"And you remember, Bob, that after Wharton came back we heard a sound outside, and thought perhaps it was Loder coming up?" said Nugent slowly.

"I remember."

"It might have been somebody else coming back to the dorm., and he didn't come in, because he heard that we were awake."

"Yes, rather."

"One of the other chaps might have been out of the dorm. all the time," said Bob Cherry, after a pause. "It was quite dark there, and we never thought of looking. Of course, we never suspected anything of the sort."

"I think we're getting to something now," said Nugent.

"Of course, with no direct evidence to guide us, we shall have to take circumstantial evidence to begin with. If we get on the wrong track, we must start again. Taking it for granted that it was a Remove chap who biffed Loder, how many of them are there who could be suspected of doing such a thing?"

"Not half a dozen," said Linley.

"Skinner, and Snoop, and Stott, and Bolsover, perhaps—"

"And Vernon-Smith!"

Nugent shook his head.

"HIS LAST MATCH!"

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"Vernon-Smith is a cad," he said; "but he's not brute enough to do a thing like that, I think. Besides, he was on better terms with Loder than any other junior in the school. They have a good many tastes in common."

The juniors grinned. The blackguard of the Remove and the blackguard of the Sixth certainly had a good many tastes in common—not tastes to be proud of.

"And then Bolsover," said Bull slowly. "He's a brute, but he's not all bad, as he showed by yanking Gatty out of the fire the other day, when the sanatorium was burnt."

"I hardly think Bolsover would have done this—and he had no special reason. Loder generally let him alone; he was too big to be cuffed."

"And Snoop was cad enough, but he wouldn't have had the pluck," said Bob Cherry. "The same applies to Billy Bunter."

"It might have been Stott," said Linley. "But Loder hasn't been going for Stott lately. Now, we know that he was frightfully rough on Skinner yesterday."

"We come back to Skinner all the time," Nugent observed.

"Yes."

"Looks like it to me," said John Bull.

Nugent counted on his fingers. "Let's run over the points against Skinner," he said. "He had a bitter grudge against Loder, and he's brute enough to injure him to any extent if he could do it safely; he disliked Wharton, and would be quite capable of putting the blame on him; he knew that Wharton intended to go for Loder last night; lastly, he put Bunter up to listening to what we were saying here."

"It's flimsy enough, but it's enough to go upon, when there is no other evidence," said Mark Linley quietly. "Taking it for granted that Wharton is innocent, the evidence looks pretty strong against Skinner."

"But it's putting strong evidence against Wharton aside, in favour of weak evidence against Skinner," said John Bull, with a shake of the head.

"But put the characters of the two in the balance," said Mark.

"Yes, that's so."

"Anyway, it's a beginning," said Frank Nugent. "We owe it to Wharton to do the most we can for him. If another fellow did this, it ought to be brought home to him, and he ought to be punished. It was a brutal and ruffianly thing to do; and as for trying to get the guilt of it fastened on Wharton, that's worse still."

"We'll do our best," said Bob Cherry shortly.

Nugent nodded. He could see that he was the only fellow in the study who had firm faith in Wharton's innocence. But they were all willing to do what they could for the junior who was in misfortune—and that was something.

The chums of the Remove quitted the study. As they came down into the passage, Skinner met them, with a sneering smile on his face.

"I've seen Mr. Quelch," he remarked. "He says that Loder's better, and that there's no danger of brain-fever now."

"Good news!" said Bob Cherry.

"Yes. Wharton will only be expelled now," said Skinner. "If matters had grown worse, he would have been sent to prison!"

"So you believe that he did it?" said Nugent, looking fixedly at the cad of the Remove.

"Yes," said Skinner immediately. "I know he did! So do we all. You know perfectly well that Wharton did it, Nugent."

"I think he did not."

"Oh, rats!"

"And I'm going to find out who did," said Nugent, still watching the cad of the Remove closely.

Skinner laughed scoffingly.

"If you find anything, it will be proof that Wharton is guilty," he said.

"I don't think so. I think that I shall find that somebody else is guilty," said Frank.

"Who?" asked Skinner.

"The fellow who was hiding under the trees last night, watching Wharton while he was having a row with Loder," said Nugent.

Skinner started.

"Was—was there anybody there?" he exclaimed.

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Wharton told me."

"Oh, of course he would say so!" said Skinner, with a sneer. "If it wasn't him, it must have been somebody else—so he's invented somebody else. Rot!"

"We shall see," said Nugent quietly. "We've got a clue, and we shall see."

Skinner started again.

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"You've got a clue?"

"Yes."

"What is it?"

"That's a secret, for the present," said Nugent. "You'll know in good time—perhaps sooner than you'll like, Skinner."

"I don't understand you. If you've got a clue, you ought to tell the Head—or, at least, the prefects, so that they can look into the matter."

"We shall see."

"I suppose you mean that you're going to try to fix it on somebody else, to save Wharton?" said Skinner sneeringly.

"I don't suppose you'll manage it."

"We are going to fix it on the guilty party."

"Rats!"

Skinner strode away, with a shrug of the shoulders. If Skinner was guilty, he certainly had nerve, and Nugent was again disappointed. Suspicion was one thing, but certainty was another, and even suspicion that amounted to a moral certainty was of no use in this case. It was not proof, and it would not clear Wharton.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

Watched!

FRANK NUGENT was very quiet and thoughtful during afternoon lessons that day. His thoughts were not upon his work, however. He was thinking of Harry Wharton, still confined in the locked room. Several times Mr. Quelch called him to order. Nugent certainly was a little trying for the most patient of Form-masters.

In response to a question as to who murdered the princes in the Tower, Nugent answered "Skinner!" much to Mr. Quelch's amazement—and to Skinner's also. The reply earned Nugent fifty lines.

After class was dismissed, Mr. Quelch signed to the junior to remain behind, as he passed his desk. Nugent stopped.

"What is the matter with you this afternoon, Nugent?" Mr. Quelch asked abruptly. "You are usually one of my best pupils, and this afternoon you have been the worst. What is the cause of it?"

Nugent coloured.

"I—I was thinking about my chum, sir," he stammered.

"Wharton, do you mean?"

"Yes, sir."

"You still call him your chum?" said Mr. Quelch, looking at the junior curiously.

"Yes, sir!" said Nugent, in firm tones.

"After what he has done, Nugent?"

"I do not believe he has done anything, sir."

"But the injury to Loder—"

"That was somebody else, sir."

Mr. Quelch smiled a little sadly.

"Your faith in your friend is a good trait in your character, Nugent," he said. "I wish I could share it. I have always had a high opinion of Wharton. With the exception of some faults of temper, I regarded his character as very good. But the evidence is too clear in this case. Wharton's own admissions make it clear."

"But he wouldn't have made those admissions, sir, if he had really done it," said Frank Nugent quickly.

Mr. Quelch shook his head.

"I am afraid you are leaning on a broken reed, Nugent," he said. "I am very sorry that it is so, but I cannot think otherwise. You need not do the lines I imposed, but you must give more attention to your work."

"Thank you, sir. I—I hear that Loder is much better now, sir, and has seen some of his friends," said Nugent.

"That is the case."

"Could I see him, sir?"

"That rests with Loder. He is able to see you, if that is what you mean. But why do you wish to see Loder?"

"I think he may be able to tell me something about what happened, sir, which will help me to clear Wharton."

Mr. Quelch smiled faintly.

"You may certainly try, my lad," he said.

"Thank you, sir!"

Nugent left the Form-room, and made his way at once to Wingate's room, and tapped lightly on the door. The door was opened by Valence, of the Sixth.

"What do you want?" he demanded, staring at the junior.

"May I speak to Loder?"

Valence turned his head towards the bed in the alcove.

"Do you want to see Nugent, of the Remove, Loder?" he asked.

"No!" came a growling voice.

Nugent grinned. He knew Loder's voice, and it did not sound as if the injured prefect was in a good temper.

"Buzz off!" said Valence, with his hand on the door.

Nugent gently inserted his boot into the opening. "Just a minute," he said. "I say, Loder, I want to speak to you on an important matter. You might let me come in."

"Oh, come in, if you want to!" growled the prefect. Nugent passed Valence, and went in. Loder was sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows. His face was ghastly pale, and there were thick bandages over his head, leaving only one eye visible. His look was sick and ghastly, and Nugent could not help feeling sorry even for the bully of the Sixth.

"I say, I'm sorry to see you like this, Loder!" he exclaimed, with such evident sincerity that the bully of the Sixth was placated a little.

"Well, what do you want?" he growled.

"I want to get the right chap punished for biffing you like that," said Nugent. "Look here, Loder, there isn't much love lost between us, but you ought to know that everybody is down on a rotten trick like that. It was a beastly, hooligan thing to do!"

"Well, I'm glad you see it in that light, anyway," said Loder. "I thought you young cubs would be chuckling over it."

"Well, you were off-side, then," said Nugent. "Only, do you feel quite certain that Harry Wharton did it, Loder?"

The prefect stared at him with his single visible eye.

"Certain? Of course!"

"Wharton's told me about it. After you ran into the trees after him, you didn't see him, did you?" Nugent asked.

"It was as black as pitch."

"Then you couldn't see who did it?"

"No—but it was Wharton."

"Suppose somebody else had been there, waiting for a chance to give you that crack—somebody who knew that Wharton was going to be there, and was deep enough to try and put it on Wharton."

"Oh, rot!"

"What do you think it was done with?"

"A cricket-bat, I should say. A stump wouldn't have been heavy enough."

"But you saw that Wharton hadn't a bat with him?"

"He had one ready there."

"But do you think he could have found it so quickly in the dark, even if it was there," Nugent urged. "You were close behind him."

Loder paused. He had certainly not thought of that before.

"Oh, it was Wharton right enough!" he said at last. "He ran into the dark, to get me there, on purpose, of course. There may have been another fellow helping him."

"Still, you didn't see Wharton hit you, and that's something," said Nugent. "I suppose if it wasn't Wharton, you'd be glad to have the right fellow found?"

"Yes, of course—but it was Wharton right enough."

"It think it wasn't; but I'm going to find out," said Nugent. "As for a cricket-bat, I know Wharton sold his at the end of the cricket season, and he hasn't one."

"He could easily have taken one from somewhere."

"Well, we shall see," said Nugent. "We're going to get at the truth, somehow, that's all."

Loder grinned.

"I wish you luck!" he said. "I want to have the right party found, of course. But it was Wharton, right enough. Shut the door after him, Valence."

Nugent quitted the study. He had learned little from seeing Loder; excepting that the Sixth-Former fully believed that his assailant was Wharton. And Loder's firm belief upon that point, of course, gave additional weight to his accusation. Bob Cherry joined Nugent in the passage.

"Well?" he said. "Bull's keeping an eye on Skinner, as we arranged. Mark Linley is going to relieve him in half an hour. What's the use of shadowing Skinner about the house, Franky? Blessed if I quite like this detective bizney."

"I don't, either—but we've got to clear Wharton."

"I know. But what's the use of shadowing Skinner?" said Bob.

"Lots—perhaps!" said Frank. "Bob, old man, I tell you we're on the track. I've seen Loder, and he feels sure it was a cricket-bat he was biffed with. You know Wharton sold off his bat after the cricket season. He hasn't one! Now, look here. Loder's had a frightful crack on the head—worse than I imagined. There must be some signs of it left on that bat."

Bob Cherry whistled.

"The giddy bloodstains!" he ejaculated.

"Yes."

"Well, it's quite likely."

"You remember what you thought when Wharton came into the dorm last night, with stains of blood on him," said Nugent, in a low voice. "It was from biffing his nose on a tree in the dark. Now, there must have been blood shed when Loder got that crack; and there may be some signs of it on the chap who did it, or his clothes. Do you understand?"

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"You ought to be a giddy Sherlock Holmes, Franky," said Bob Cherry admiringly. "I should never have thought of all that."

"I've got to think of it, if Wharton's to be cleared," said Nugent quietly. "If it was a cricket-bat that Loder was biffed with, we've got to find the cricket-bat. And if the chap who biffed him got any stains on his clothes, we've got to find the clothes. See?"

Bob Cherry nodded.

"I see."

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

Nugent Takes the Plunge.

SKINNER, of the Remove, glanced up and down the passage carelessly, or with assumed carelessness, and strolled towards the stairs. John Bull strolled after him. Skinner's study-mates in the Remove passage, Stott and Snoop, were both out in the Close, and Skinner made directly for his study. He went in and locked the door.

John Bull paused in the passage.

The locked door certainly prevented him from following Skinner any further; and yet the investigators had agreed that Skinner was not to be allowed out of sight. Bull returned to the staircase and whistled.

Frank Nugent and Bob Cherry came upstairs at once.

"Well," said Nugent quickly.

"Skinner's locked himself in his study."

"Oh!"

In a moment the three juniors were outside Skinner's door. From within the study came a sound of crackling. Skinner was lighting a fire. As the weather was early winter, and cold, there was nothing surprising in that; nothing really to excite suspicion. But the chums of the Remove were suspicious, all the same. Why should Skinner have locked the door before lighting the fire?

Nugent tapped on the door.

He heard a low, startled exclamation within.

"Hallo!" came Skinner's voice faintly.

"Let me in, Skinner!"

"What do you want?"

"I want to speak to you."

"I'm busy."

"Busy with what—lighting a fire?"

"Mind your own business."

"Open the door, Skinner!"

"I won't!"

"Why don't you let us in?"

"Because I don't choose to."

The three juniors looked at one another.

"He's burning something, or he's going to," whispered Bob Cherry. "And—and we can't prevent him. We can't break into a fellow's study on suspicion."

Nugent's eyes gleamed. At that very moment the suspected junior was very probably in the act of destroying the only evidence that existed against him.

"We're jolly well going to!" he exclaimed. "Bring that stool along, and we'll biff the lock in!"

"I—I say, Nugent—"

"Bring the stool!"

"Oh, all right!"

Nugent's determination carried the day. The heavy oaken stool at the end of the passage was brought along, and the three juniors grasped it, and brought it with a terrific crash against the lock of the door. The door was strong, and the lock was a stout one, but neither was built to resist an attack like that.

Crash! Crack!

There was a howl of rage in the study.

"Leave my door alone!" shouted Skinner.

"Go it, before anybody comes!" muttered Nugent.

"Right-ho!"

Crash!

Crash!

The lock gave an ominous creak. One more smashing blow was all that was wanted to burst it into pieces.

"Hold on!" yelled Skinner. "I'll open the door."

"Better be quick, then."

There was a moment's pause. Then the key grated in the damaged lock, turning with difficulty, and the door was opened. Skinner stood there, white and trembling with rage and perhaps with fear.

"Now, what do you want?" he said, between his teeth.

Frank Nugent looked towards the fire-grate. There was a fire burning, but it was of wood and coal, and there was no trace of any other fuel. But during the attack on the

door Skinner had had ample time to conceal anything he chose.

"What do you mean?" cried Skinner shrilly. "How dare you smash in my door in this way? I'll complain to Mr. Quelch."

"Complain away!" said Nugent. "I dare say I shall have something to say, too. What were you burning?"

"Wood and coal."

"What else?"

"Nothing else."

"Will you let us search the study?" asked Nugent.

Skinner stared at him.

"Search the study! What for?"

"To find what you were going to burn," said Frank.

Skinner burst into a sneering laugh. He was recovering his nerve now.

"What do you think I was going to burn?" he asked scoffingly.

"A cricket-bat, I think—and clothes, perhaps, with blood-stains on them," said Frank Nugent sternly.

Skinner laughed again, but there was a cracked sound in his laugh. It did not ring true, and the chums of the Remove could hear that.

"May we search the study?" asked Bob Cherry.

"No. I'm not going to have my study searched!" exclaimed Skinner savagely. "If you don't get out at once, I'll complain to Mr. Quelch."

"You can complain. As sure as I believe in Heaven, I believe you're the guilty party," said Frank Nugent solemnly.

"Guilty!" Skinner's voice was shrill and discordant.

"Guilty of what, you fool?"

"Of the attack on Loder last night."

"Oh, you are mad!"

"I'm going to search this place."

"You are not. I'll call on Mr. Quelch—"

"Mr. Quelch is here!" said a quiet voice.

The Form-master stood in the open doorway.

The juniors swung round towards him with startled looks. The Form-master's face was very angry. The terrific crashing in the Remove passage had been heard all over the school, and Mr. Quelch had hurried up to see what new mischief his unruly pupils were guilty of. Two or three prefects had followed him, very thoughtfully bringing canes in their hands.

"What is the cause of this disturbance?" Mr. Quelch demanded, in stern tones.

"They have broken into my study, sir," Skinner explained shrilly. "They broke in the lock, sir, because I wouldn't let them in."

"Is that true, Nugent?"

"Yes, sir," said Frank unflinchingly.

"Then why—"

"Skinner wouldn't let us in, sir."

"I suppose he had a right to keep you out of his study if he wished to do so, Nugent," said Mr. Quelch, frowning.

"I thought they wanted to rag me, sir!" exclaimed Skinner.

"Do you hear me, Nugent?"

Frank did not flinch.

"Yes, sir. Skinner was lighting a fire, and we wanted to know what he was going to burn."

Mr. Quelch stared at the junior blankly.

"In the name of goodness, why?" he exclaimed.

"We suspect Skinner, sir."

"Suspect him! Of what?"

"Of having done what Wharton's accused of doing, sir," said Frank firmly.

The Form-master gave a violent start.

"Nugent, are you serious?"

"Quite serious, sir."

"You suspect Skinner of having made that brutal attack upon Loder last night?"

"Yes, sir."

"He'd suspect anybody, to get Wharton cleared, sir!" exclaimed Skinner, who was white to the lips now. "He'd lie about anybody for the sake of his rotten chum."

"Silence, Skinner! I do not believe that of Nugent for a moment," said Mr. Quelch sharply. "Nugent, you must have some grounds for this astounding statement."

"I have, sir."

"What are they?"

Nugent hesitated a moment. Satisfactory as the grounds of suspicion appeared to him, he felt that they would be flimsy, shadowy, in the eyes of the Form-master.

Skinner burst into a shrill, scoffing laugh.

"He has nothing to say now, sir," he exclaimed.

"Silence! I am waiting to hear you, Nugent."

"Very well, sir. I suspect Skinner. I believe that he hit Loder with that bat, and that he lighted the fire here to

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burn the bat, and perhaps some clothing with bloodstains on it. He refuses to have his study searched. I believe he has enough evidence hidden here to convict him, if the place were searched. If you will order the study to be searched, sir, that will settle the point."

Mr. Quelch looked sharply at Nugent, and then at Skinner.

"Have you any objection to a search of the study, Skinner?" he asked.

Skinner drew a deep breath.

"Not if you order it, sir," he said.

"You hear that, Nugent?"

Nugent turned pale.

His brain almost swam at the thought that he was upon the wrong track after all—that he had suspected Skinner unjustly, and that it was merely Skinner's well-known obstinacy and ill-nature that had given some colour to the suspicions against him. Had he really made such a terrible mistake? If it proved to be so, the consequences would be serious for himself—such an accusation, as that he had made against Skinner, could not be lightly made. For a moment Nugent felt sick.

But he braced himself. Whatever risk he ran, it was for the honour of his chum—and he must not falter.

Besides, was not Skinner bluffing? Doubtless he guessed that Mr. Quelch would order a search in any case—and he was simply bluffing in appearing to invite one. At all events, there was only one course for Nugent to take.

"Let the study be searched, sir. I ask it in fairness to Wharton."

Mr. Quelch nodded.

"Very well. Not a stone shall be left unturned, Nugent, in getting at the truth of this matter; but if you have made a reckless and unfounded accusation against this boy, I warn you that the consequences will be severe for you."

Nugent bowed his head.

"I'm ready to face the consequences, sir, whatever they are," he said firmly.

"Very well, the study shall be searched."

Mr. Quelch called in Courtney and North, the two prefects who were looking in at the door. The Six Formers entered.

"Will you oblige me by searching the study?" he said.

"Skinner is suspected of having hidden here a cricket-bat, and some articles of clothing. In justice to Skinner, if for that alone, the search should be made."

"Certainly, sir," said Courtney.

And the search began.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

The Search.

FRANK NUGENT stood silent, with pale cheeks.

He had made the plunge now.

He had a feeling, which amounted to a moral certainty, that Skinner was guilty, and that proofs of his guilt could be obtained by searching for them. Yet, when he came to look at it dispassionately, as others must look at it, he realised that he had made a plunge in the dark. If proofs were not found, he, Frank Nugent, would be held up to public scorn as a slanderer—a reckless and unscrupulous slanderer. That was what it amounted to. For if no proofs were found, it would show that his accusation was hasty and unjust, and what right had he, or anyone else, to make hasty and unjust accusations, involving the honour of a schoolfellow? Frank realised very clearly that he was treading on thin ice; that search must end in the condemnation of Skinner, or in his own disgrace. There was no middle course. His heart was beating painfully; but he thought of his chum in the locked room, and set his lips.

Courtney and North searched carefully. The Removites stood and watched them at work. Outside, in the passage, a crowd gradually collected. Mr. Quelch had the study door closed, but the fellows outside knew very well what was going on. Skinner's study was being searched! Why?

The reason was soon guessed, or whispered. There was a buzz of excitement in the Remove passage. Skinner was suspected of having attacked Loder, the offence for which Harry Wharton was condemned, and his room was being searched for evidence.

Nugent heard many of the comments passed in the passage, and his brow grew very troubled.

The whole school knew of the matter now.

There was no keeping it in—Skinner's guilt, or Nugent's slander, would be blazoned forth to the whole of Greyfriars.

If Nugent was wrong, he could not stay at the school after that. It would be impossible. He would have to go forth with his expelled chum—both in disgrace.

Bob Cherry, and Bull, and Linley were silent. In the

faces of Bob and John Bull, at least, Nugent could read the thought that he had been too hasty.

Would the search never end?

Could they discover nothing?

Skinner was standing by the window, with his back to the panes, and a sneering smile on his face, his hands in his trousers' pockets.

Evidently he expected nothing to come of the search of the study.

Courtney and North paused at last, and looked towards Mr. Quelch. They had turned out the study pretty thoroughly. Courtney had even raked up the chimney, and brought down a shower of soot. He brought down nothing else. After all, the articles that were supposed to be hidden were not small—a cricket-bat, and a boy's clothes, or some articles of clothing. They could not be thrust into any little nook. And the two prefects had looked into every nook, turned everything out—and the Form-master and the juniors had been watching closely all the time. It seemed impossible—it was impossible—that anything had been missed.

Nugent was sick at heart.

"I think we have finished now, sir," said Courtney in his quiet tones.

The Remove-master nodded.

"I think you are right," he said. "The room has been thoroughly examined, and there is no trace of the articles alleged to have been concealed. Have you anything more to say, Nugent?"

Nugent licked his dry lips.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"What have you to say?"

"Where is Skinner's cricket-bat?" said Frank desperately. "It doesn't seem to be here."

"I haven't one, sir," said Skinner.

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ONE
PENNY.

Quelch opened. He elevated his eyebrows in surprise as he read.

His eyes turned upon Skinner, for the first time with keen suspicion in them.

"Skinner!" he rapped out.

"Yes, sir."

"Mrs. Kebble says that a new nightshirt has been handed out for you, as the one you had has disappeared.

"Oh!" murmured Nugent.

Skinner's teeth clicked for a moment.

"I don't know about that, sir. If it is gone, I suppose Nugent has taken it and hidden it, so as to be able to trump up this rotten charge against me."

Nugent bit his lip hard. How was he to corner this young scoundrel, who had an answer ready for everything? The fact that the shirt was missing changed Nugent's strong suspicion into a certainty; he knew now that he was right.

But how was he to prove it?

Mr. Quelch looked puzzled. Skinner's reply was unexpected, and yet it was perfectly reasonable. If Nugent had intended to trump up that charge against him, his first step would have been to hide the shirt.

But Skinner's face was like chalk now. He knew that he, as well as Nugent, was upon very thin ice.

"Have you anything else to say, Nugent?"

Frank was desperately silent.

What could he say?

His very evidence was turned against himself, and made into a proof of conspiracy against Skinner. What was he to say?

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(Our Popular Companion Paper)

WILL CONTAIN

A DOUBLE LENGTH TOM MERRY STORY!

By MARTIN CLIFFORD

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"Rats!" exclaimed Bob Cherry promptly. "I remember Smith minor offering you four bob for it at the end of the cricket season, and you wouldn't sell."

"I sold it to a pedlar afterwards, for more than that—six shillings, I believe, or six-and-six," said Skinner, with perfect calmness.

Nugent was defeated again. Mr. Quelch's eyes were upon him, hard and stern. The Remove boys had often compared Mr. Quelch's eyes to gimlets, so keen and piercing were they. Never had they seemed so much like gimlets as they did to the unfortunate Nugent at the present moment.

"Well, Nugent?" said Mr. Quelch, and his voice was like iron, "I am going to give you every possible chance of proving your accusation. Have you anything more to say?"

"Yes, sir. If Skinner attacked Loder last night—and I believe he did—there should be some stains of blood on the clothes he wore."

Skinner started.

"I think most likely he put this clothes on outside his nightshirt," went on Nugent. "He wouldn't take the trouble to put on shirt and collar. If we turn out at night for anything, we generally do that. Can Skinner's night-shirt be examined to see if there is any trace of blood on the sleeves, and his jacket also?"

Skinner turned white as death.

"Certainly," said Mr. Quelch, "I think this is verging on the farcical now, Nugent; but you shall have every chance, for if you have wronged Skinner, you will be asked to leave Greyfriars. I will write a message to Mrs. Kebble to do as you wish."

The message was written, and despatched by one of the juniors in the passage. They waited for a reply. In five minutes the sag returned with a written note, which Mr.

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"HIS LAST MATCH!"

By FRANK RICHARDS
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Skinner's face did not regain its colour, but a grin of malicious triumph stole over it.

But Skinner triumphed too soon!

Frank's glance was roving desperately round the study. Suddenly it struck him, with the keenness of a flash, that Skinner had been standing before the window all the time, and had not shifted his position once. Why? Surely his natural anxiety as to the search should have made him move, if only to follow the motions of the searchers. But he had not stirred.

Nugent made a step forward.

"The window!" he cried.

"What do you mean, Nugent—the window?" said Mr. Quelch testily.

"It has not been searched, sir—outside the window."

"Nonsense! You can see the window-sill through the glass—"

"But not under the window, sir—"

"Come, come—"

"There's thick ivy there, sir," exclaimed Nugent hurriedly, "and a cord could be tied there to hold a bundle. And now I think of it, I heard a creak when I was biffing at the study door. It was Skinner shutting the window. Look—look at his face, sir."

Mr. Quelch glanced at Skinner.

The wretched boy seemed about to faint.

If ever guilt was "writ large" in a human face, it was written in Skinner's at that moment. Mr. Quelch gave him one look, and then turned to Courtney.

"Look in the ivy outside the window," he said.

"Yes, sir."

Courtney opened the window. Skinner gave a low moan, and reeled against the wall of the study.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

At the Eleventh Hour.

COURTNEY leaned out of the study window, and scanned the ivy below. He was heard to utter a low exclamation.

"Have you found anything, Courtney?" asked Mr. Quelch, in a quiet voice.

"Yes, sir."

"What is it?"

"There is a cord tied to the ivy, sir, and it seems to be supporting a weight. Whatever it is, is hidden in the ivy underneath. I am pulling it up."

"Very good."

Courtney pulled on the cord. The bundle was jammed in thick, leafy ivy, and it came out with a jerk. Courtney drew it in at the window. Something was wrapped round several articles, and from the end of the bundle protruded the cane handle of a cricket-bat.

There was a general exclamation in the study.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob Cherry. "There's the bat!"

Nugent set his teeth. Had he succeeded at last? Was there some possible twist or turn by which Skinner could escape this terrible evidence?

"Open the bundle," said Mr. Quelch.

It was opened. A cricket-bat and a night-shirt were disclosed to view, as well as a folded Eton jacket. A newspaper had been wrapped round them, and tied with string.

Mr. Quelch picked up the articles one by one. On the wristbands of the night-shirt were red dull stains, and on the cuffs of the Eton jacket the same. There was no doubt what the stains were.

There was a deep, dull red stain on the cricket-bat, too, and deep scrapings on the wood, as if it had been cleaned, to remove the stains, at first before its owner decided to destroy it.

Every eye was turned upon Skinner.

"Well, Skinner?" said Mr. Quelch.

The boy stared at the tell-tale bundle, and his tongue was cleaving to the roof of his mouth.

"Have you anything to say, Skinner?" asked the Remove-master. "Nugent appears to have made out his charge. How do you account for these articles, Skinner?"

"His name is on the shirt, sir," said Courtney.

"They're mine, I—I suppose, sir," muttered Skinner.

"Nugent put them there, of course, so as to hear out what he said."

"It's Skinner's bat, sir," said Bob Cherry. "His initials are on it, and besides, I know the bat perfectly well. I saw Skinner buy it in Friardale."

"That is your bat, Skinner?"

"Nugent put it there, sir."

Mr. Quelch's brow grew very stern.

"That is your bat. Only ten minutes ago, Skinner, you told me that you had sold your bat to a pedlar, for six shillings, or six shillings and sixpence, you did not remember which."

Skinner staggered away.

There was a dead silence in the study. The wretched junior knew now that there was no hope. Out of his own mouth he was condemned.

"Your guilt is perfectly clear," said the Remove-master sternly.

Then Skinner collapsed.

His face worked, and he burst into tears.

"Oh, sir, I—I never meant to hurt him so much!" he groaned. "He—he had been bullying me, and he licked me because I wouldn't fag for him—though fagging's been abolished for the Remove, sir. He was a brute—anybody will tell you what a brute he was! I laid for him under the trees with the bat. I—I knew it was no good trying to fight a prefect, but I wanted to pay him out!"

"You deliberately laid in ambush for a prefect with so dangerous a weapon as a cricket-bat!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"He—he had bullied me——"

"And you struck Loder down——"

"I didn't mean to hit him so hard, sir. I—I just meant to bowl him over, and make a mark or so!" groaned Skinner. "I didn't expect him to be stunned. When he went down in a heap, I was horribly scared, and I ran. And—and you nearly caught me, sir, as I came in—and I was frightened to death—as I couldn't get into the dormitory, the other fellows being still awake! I've had an awful time since, sir."

"And you allowed the blame to fall upon Wharton——"

"I—I—I——" Skinner groaned. "I was afraid of being expelled, sir——"

"You rotten liar!" broke out Nugent angrily. "You

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tried to put it on Wharton because you hate him, as much as anything else! You've been speaking against him all the time!"

Skinner did not reply.

Mr. Quelch drew a deep breath.

"I will not give you my opinion of the baseness of your conduct, Skinner," he said. "You may follow me to the Head, to whom you will repeat the confession you have just made. Nugent, here is the key of Wharton's room. Go at once and release him, and tell him that Skinner has confessed."

Nugent's face brightened.

"Yes, rather, sir!"

He hurried out of the study with the key. Bob Cherry and a crowd of juniors followed him. The news was over the school like wildfire. Skinner was guilty! Skinner had confessed! Wharton was innocent! Fellows gathered round to watch Skinner following Mr. Quelch to the Head's study. Skinner was pale as death, and he walked with his eyes on the floor. Many of the juniors felt sorry for him; he had taken a cowardly and cruel revenge upon Loder, but Loder had cruelly provoked him in the first place. It was his base attempt to shift the guilt upon an innocent boy that met with the strongest condemnation.

Nugent had no further thoughts for Skinner. He raced downstairs, and along the passage to Harry Wharton's prison, as if he were on the cinder-path. After him came a whooping, trampling crowd of juniors. Everyone was anxious to be among the first to break the news to Wharton.

Harry Wharton was pacing the narrow limits of his prison with a gloomy brow, when he heard the terrific uproar in the passage outside. He paused in his walk, and turned towards the door.

There was a grating of a key being inserted in the lock—a click as it turned. The door was flung open. Wharton expected to see Gosling with his tea—but it was Frank Nugent who rushed in—Frank, wildly excited, and gasping for breath. After him came a wildly whooping crowd.

"Hurrah!"

"It's all right!"

"Come out of this!"

"Hurrah!"

Wharton stared at them blankly.

"What on earth——" he began.

"You're innocent!" shrieked Bob Cherry.

"I know I am, ass——"

"I mean, it's proved——"

"It was Skinner——"

"He's confessed!"

Wharton gasped.

"Confessed! Skinner!"

"Yes, rather! He was bowled out, you see—we bowled him out, and he's had to own up!" shouted Nugent. "Do you understand?"

Wharton turned pale, and gasped for breath. It was so sudden, and so joyful, that it almost overcame him.

"Nugent found him out," said Bob Cherry. "Blessed if he didn't stick to the trail like a giddy bloodhound! We had our doubts all the time—but Nugent never had! He stuck to him like—like glue—and bowled him out."

"Oh, Frank, old man——" murmured Wharton.

"Come out of this," said Frank, linking arms with his chum. "Come out! You're going to have tea in the study. Isn't it ripping?"

"Yes, it's ripping! I sha'n't forget this, Franky!"

"Oh, that's all right! I did have a beast of a time, though," said Nugent. "If Skinner had been able to bluff it through, I should have been in an awful hole. But all's well that ends well. Everything in the garden's lovely now. Hurrah!"

And the Removites cheered loudly as they marched Harry Wharton in triumph out of the room where he had been imprisoned.

"Hurrah! Hip, hip, hurrah!"

Harry Wharton's name was cleared—there was no doubt about that. Even Loder himself had to admit it. Skinner left Greyfriars the next morning, and the old school knew him no more—and was glad to know him no more. And Loder, when he recovered, found a little change awaiting him. The Head had investigated the matter very keenly, and Loder's little ways had come very clearly to his knowledge, and Loder found that he was relieved of his duties as a prefect. Which was a source of very great satisfaction to the Remove.

THE END.

(Another splendid, long, complete tale of the chums of Greyfriars next Tuesday, entitled "His Last Match!" by Frank Richards. Also a long instalment of "Beyond The Eternal Ice," Sidney Drew's wonderful adventure serial. Order your copy of "The MAGNET" Library in advance, Price One Penny.)

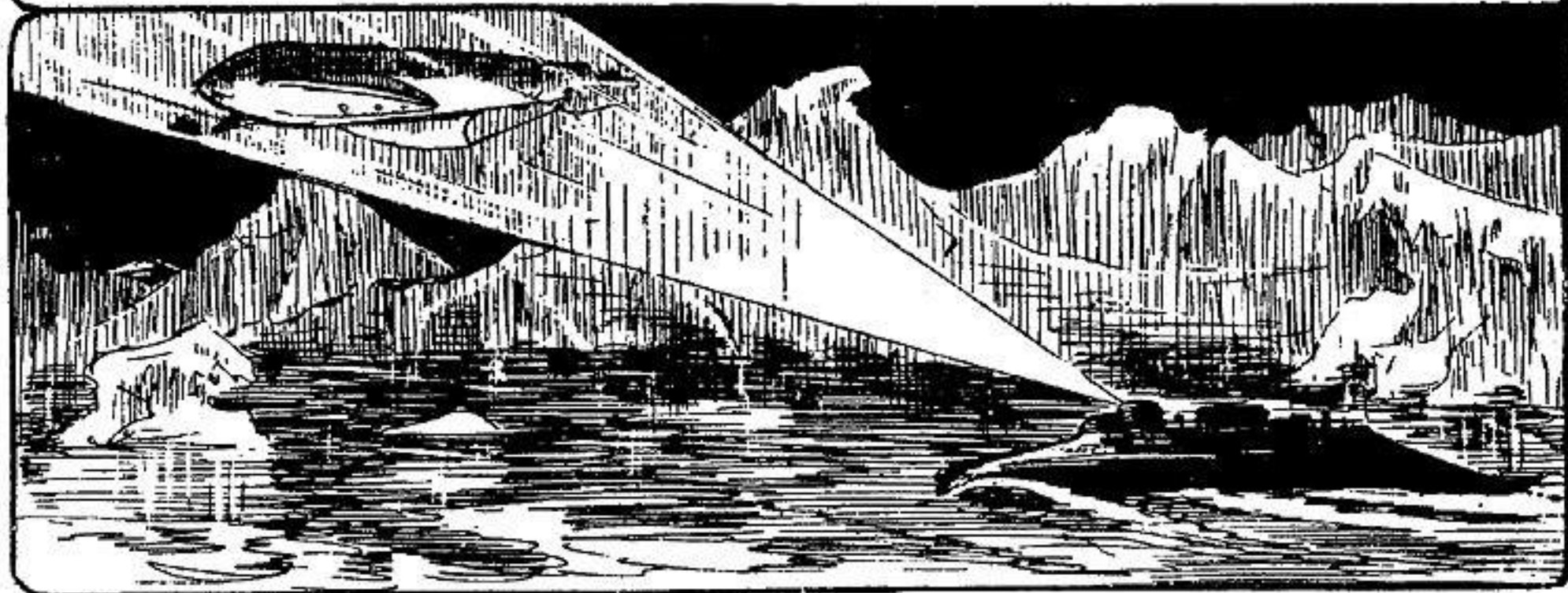
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THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

When Professor Hugley, the renowned American scientist, startles the world by announcing that he is off to find the North Pole in his wonderful air-craft, the Cloud King, there is only one man who dares to enter the lists against him on behalf of Great Britain, and that man is Ferrers Lord, the famous millionaire and inventor. Lord pits his wonderful submarine, the Lord of the Deep, against the Cloud King in the most amazing race the world has ever seen; the goal is the North Pole, and the prize a million pounds!

The preliminaries are soon settled, a judge is appointed to accompany each of the competitors, and the great race commences.

With Ferrers Lord are Ching-Lung, Rupert Thurston, and Gan-Waga, an Eskimo, while Hugley is accompanied by Paraira, a Cuban, and Estebian Gacchio, a huge negro. These latter soon show themselves in their true colours, and the Cloud King no sooner reaches the region of ice than Hugley, and such of the crew as are loyal to him, are murdered, and Paraira and Gacchio assume control of the airship.

In the meantime Ferrers Lord and Thurston, at the head of a party, are exploring a mysterious tunnel, which seems to offer a means of gaining the Pole.

Estebian Gacchio and Paraira, on board the Cloud King, plot to wreck the Lord of the Deep. They drug Sir Clement Morwith, and fire upon the Lord of the Deep. The submarine, however, escapes their fire, and enters the tunnel. Despite every precaution, the Lord of the Deep is stranded in the tunnel at tide turn, and has to wait for two days for the next tide.

Gan-Waga, the Eskimo, thinking the bird in the carpenter's cuckoo clock alive, tries to capture it. He has the misfortune to break the clock, however, and the cook runs to fetch the owner, Joe, to see the remains of the clock.

(Now go on with the story.)

Afloat Once More.

Gan-Waga still sat among the ruins with the bird in his hand when Joe entered the galley. A few of the wheels of the clock were still spinning round with a melancholy buzzing noise, that sounded like the requiem for the defunct cuckoo. Horror chained Joe to the spot.

"Got him!" murmured Gan-Waga. "He peck me in do eye. Sure 'nough—ver' sure 'nough!"

Joe slowly recovered from the shock. He stood behind the Eskimo, and Gan-Waga was in a too dazed condition to notice anything. Even now he could hardly convince himself that the bird was only a piece of carved wood. He had heard it talk, and wooden birds, as a rule, keep their beaks shut.

The cook awaiting developments, and, nearly strangling himself in his efforts to keep silent, stood in the doorway, and Ching-Lung peered in behind him.

Joe slowly rubbed his hand up and down his trousers, and then looked round for a weapon. There were plenty of

articles available—saucepans, frying-pans, and other culinary utensils, but Joe wanted to smite his best without being court-martialled for murder.

His eye fixed itself upon a heap of flour-bags. They were labelled, "Jones's Patent Self-raising Flour. Seven Pounds net." Joe swung one of them backwards and forwards, and carefully measured the distance. Then, hissing out "Gosh!" he brought down the bag on Gan-Waga's head.

The blow laid the Eskimo among the fragments, and he let out a yell that, on a misty night, would have passed for the report of a fog-signal. Then he bounded up, only to meet a second bag thrown by the carpenter, and to sit down violently once more.

A third bag struck him in the nape of the neck, while he was wondering hazily if the ship had blown up and rolled him across the galley. A fourth thudded into the middle of his back, knocking what little breath he had left completely out of his body.

The muslin of the fifth and last bag tore as Joe was in the act of throwing it. It struck the wall, bringing pots and pans clattering down, burst, and flung a shower of white over Gan-Waga. And then Joe emptied a jug of water over his prostrate, dazed, and breathless enemy, and strode wrathfully away. He stopped as he came face to face with Ching-Lung.

"What's the matter?" asked his Highness. "I thought I heard a yell."

"Just what I thought myself, sir!" growled Joe.

He strode on, and the prince chuckled. The cook was choking into his handkerchief, but no sound came from the galley.

"Don't go in, cook," said Ching-Lung.

"Very good, sir," gurgled the cook.

Ching-Lung sprang up the companion-way and found Prout and Maddock. They were playing draughts.

"Oh!" said Ching-Lung. "Have you seen Gan-Waga?"

Prout "huffed" the bo'sun, and shook his head. "You might find him for me, Tom, if you don't mind. I'll take your hand and finish the game."

"Surtingly, sir," said Thomas.

Ching-Lung cleared the board in two moves, absolutely paralysing Maddock, who prided himself on his skill as a draught player. Meanwhile Prout visited the fore-castle, swimming-bath, and even the state-room, but Gan-Waga was still lying face downwards among the pots and pans, wondering what it was all about. Prout tried the cook.

"Seen the blubberbiter, cooky?" he inquired.

"Well, he cadged some soup out of me about ten minutes ago, Tom, and I left him in the galley."

Prout turned his steps in that direction and entered.

"Great hokey!" he exclaimed. "Well, I'm dashed!"

He walked round the strange object whistling softly. He imagined for a time that poor Gan-Waga, in his innocence, had found a bottle of spirits and was intoxicated. But then Gan-Waga loathed wine, spirits, and beer. He lay groaning softly, with a pile of soft, wet, clammy flour on his back. Prout rubbed his eyes.

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The pile was steadily growing and increasing like some enormous mushroom.

Prout fled. He did not know anything about self-raising flour, and he thought his brain was going.

Then the cook looked in and grinned. Self-raising flour was no mystery to him. Ordinary baking-powder is mixed with the flour, which begins to work when water is applied. The mass was creeping off Gan-Waga's shoulders now, and spreading round him rapidly. The cook heard a snore.

"Well," he said, "if he ain't fast asleep!"

Then he fled to tell Ching-Lung. The wheelhouse rang with laughter, for Ching-Lung had explained the phenomena to Prout. They shrieked again when the cook burst in with the news that Gan-Waga was sleeping placidly among the dough.

"And it is dough!" said the cook. "I never knowed such flour to rise! It'll bury him in an hour! Don't you think I'd better wake him, sir?"

"Not for anything, cook. Don't go near him. Let him sleep on like the warrior taking his rest, with the pots and pans around him, and the beautiful dough for his winding-sheet."

"What flowery language!" murmured Prout. "So sugary!"

"It almost takes the cake!" lisped Maddock.

"Oh, doughn't!" sighed the cook. "There's no raisin for makin' puns."

Ching-Lung gazed at them sadly, and two big tears trickled down his cheeks. They exploded like small crackers as they fell to the ground. Then he produced a small pill-box, the size of a shilling, and took out a handkerchief as large as a small table-cloth, and wiped his eyes.

"Spare me!" he moaned. "It's almost as bad as those silly riddles—'Why did the whale wail?—Because the smelt smelt!' You pain me! Fan me somebody, I feel faint. No 'raisin' for making puns! Great Scott, cook, we ought to make you eat some of your own plum-duff! Apologise at once!"

They laughed, and leaned against the binnacle. Ching-Lung rolled a cigarette. There was a pained, struggling look on Prout's face—the kind of expression a man might wear who had forgotten his own name and address, and was trying to remember it.

"Got it!" he cried. "I'm red-hot at riddles. Here's one for you. When isn't Rupert?"

Maddock and the cook scratched their heads.

"When isn't Rupert?" growled the bo'sun. "Why, it don't mean nothink. It's nonsense."

"Yes it does, you idiot!" snapped Prout. "You know what 'pert' means? It means spry and cheeky like. It's as easy as easy. When isn't Rupert?"

"Give it up," said the cook.

Prout favoured them both with a look of withering contempt.

"Oh, it's so easy! When isn't Rupert? Why, when he's a Thurston, of course!"

Two hollow groans came from Ching-Lung and Maddock, but the cook scratched his head still.

"That ain't no answer at all, Tom," he said. "When he's a Thurston ain't even sense."

"Why, you dunder-headed fossil!" roared the steersman. "Where's your brains? If you've got any take 'em home an' lock 'em up afore they gets lost. I'll tell you again. When isn't Rupert? When—he's—a—Thurston! See? When he's got a th-i-r-s-t on. You ain't very pert when you've got a thirst on, are you? Now perhaps you twig it. Why, one of your blessed gridirons would have seed it first time!"

The cook blew his nose, and thought it over.

"It ain't so bad," he admitted—"not bad at all. Can you answer this one? Why are you like a male donkey?"

"Give it up."

The cook edged cautiously towards the door.

"Why, you dunder-headed fossil," he grinned. "It's as simple as eating tripe. A dead chimpanzee could guess it in one try. You know, don't you, Ben?"

"What do you take me for?" grinned the bo'sun. "I seed it straight away."

Prout did not like to be beaten. He pondered, and the cook edged nearer the door.

"Why am I like a male donkey?" muttered Prout.

"Oh, I know! Because I'd like to kick you!"

"Guess again," said the cook. "That ain't the answer."

"Oh, I give it up!"

The way of escape was open.

"I'll tell you," he said. "You're like a male donkey because you're a Thomas—a Tom ass! See?"

Then he departed hastily, banging the door behind him. Maddock and Ching-Lung shrieked.

"He got you that time, Tom," laughed the prince.

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"Fairly squelched you," put in Maddock. "A Tom ass! Ha, ha, ha!"

Prout joined in the laugh, though it was against himself.

"It wasn't so dusty for cooky," he said; "but my riddle was first-class. Beg your pardon, sir, but what are we going to do about Gan?"

"We'll leave him for an hour or so till you come off duty, then I'll see you."

Joe was rather ashamed of himself in his heart of hearts. He began to think that the destruction of the clock was the result of an accident. No doubt the appearance of the cuckoo had fired Gan-Waga's untutored breast with curiosity, and on examining the—to him—mysterious machine, he had pulled it down.

Joe got into his hammock in a sulky and regretful mood. He grumbled at Prout and Maddock for making a noise when they returned to their quarters, but even when silence fell upon the fore-castle he did not sleep. Then he heard the click of a switch, and opening his eyes, he saw Ching-Lung standing before him.

"Anything the matter, sir?" he inquired.

"Hush; don't wake anyone!" whispered the prince. "Is Gan-Waga here?"

Joe's heart smote him.

"No, sir, he ain't," he answered. "Do you want him?"

"I only wanted to tell him to do something in the morning. He was not in the swimming-bath, and it does not matter particularly. Good-night!"

"Good-night, sir!"

The bait had taken. Ching-Lung had turned out the light, and, listening eagerly, Prout and Maddock heard Joe's feet touch the floor. Joe felt that he must find out where Gan-Waga was, and to make sure that he was all right. Prout and Maddock followed cautiously.

Only one single light burned in the whole corridor. The iron plates were unpleasantly cold to Joe's feet, so he hurried. He did not know exactly where to look first, and he never thought of the galley. The cook would not allow Gan-Waga to stay there.

He pulled up suddenly as he heard a smothered groan.

It seemed to come from the swimming-bath. Shivering, and imagining all kinds of horrors, Joe opened the door and peered into the darkness. At that instant Ching-Lung glided past him unseen, and vanished into the galley. The light from the corridor showed Gan-Waga's hands and feet protruding from the sticky white heap of dough. The Eskimo was snoring softly. A match gleamed.

Ching-Lung tied one end of a rope to Gan-Waga's left wrist, and the other end to his right foot. A blaze of light shone through the door of the swimming-bath. Ching-Lung ran for it, and Joe, perplexed and frightened, heard another muffled groan behind him.

"Why, he's in the galley!" he gasped. "What could have made me think he was here?"

Joe almost jumped out of his skin. There was a loud bang, a sudden spluttering, and an awful yell.

"Oh, murder!" panted the horrified carpenter.

Joe's eyes almost bulged out of his head. A wriggling, yelling monster, with a white body and black legs, came hopping out of the galley like a lame frog. Two things that looked like horns protruded from its shapeless head, and from these shot sparks and bluish flames. It left a trail of white lumps behind it.

Joe's legs refused to run. The thing hopped and yelled, and spat balls of fire from its horns. Then, as the rope snapped, it bounded to its feet, and Joe bolted into the swimming-bath backwards, tripped, and pitched into six feet of water.

The mass of dough peeled away from Gan-Waga's shoulders, and flopped to the floor, the roman candles Joe had taken for horns still spluttering and flinging out balls of fire. Gan-Waga, more frightened than even the carpenter, let out another yell, and turned a somersault into the tank.

And there he met Joe and Joe met him. Though the electric light was burning, they did not recognise each other. Firmly convinced that he was in the clutches of the fearful beast he had seen, Joe made up his mind not to die without several kicks, and Gan-Waga had come to a similar decision.

Locked in each others arms lovingly, they rolled out of the deep water into the shallower end, gasping, kicking, choking, and fighting, Gan-Waga getting the best of it on the whole, though no serious damage was being done.

They were so pleasantly engaged that the entrance of Ching-Lung, Prout, Maddock, and the cook passed unnoticed.

"Keep back!" whispered Ching-Lung. "Get behind those cases!"

He had a large tin basin in his arms filled with the dough. His hands worked like lightning at the sticky pile, and he

magically moulded the mass into the head of a hideous dragon. Two more roman candles formed its horns. He struck a match and lighted the touch-paper of the fireworks.

Joe and Gan-Waga were struggling still, and the grinning faces of the spectators appeared over the cartridge cases. Ching-Lung threw off his blouse and extinguished the light. Then, carrying the basin, he went down the steps and entered the water.

The basin floated well, and he pushed it before him as he swam. At the same instant the two Roman candles began to spit and splutter a ghastly glare over the advancing dragon.

Both men saw it coming towards them at the same time. Stony with horror, they sat with their heads above the water gazing at the horrible apparition.

It came nearer still, and Gan-Waga took one splendid dive that carried him clean across the bath. Joe could not have stirred to save his life. The thing seemed to rise out of the water. The awful features collapsed into shapelessness.

"Murder!"

Ching-Lung had scooped the dough out of the basin, ruining the model. He could see Joe faintly. He raised the dough above his head and pounded it down upon the carpenter's.

Shrieks of wild laughter rang through the darkness, and then silence came.

A damp hand found Gan-Waga, and he heard Ching-Lung's whisper.

"Don't be affaicee, Gan. It's only a tick. Filst chop, eh? Come 'long, quick! No make noise!"

The door opened and shut softly, and the stealthy footsteps died away. After a time, damp and miserable, and utterly bewildered, Joe crawled out.

He sat down to think it all over. Then he turned on the light. At his feet lay the blouse of silk with wide sleeves.

"Oh!" said the carpenter. "Ah!"

He scraped something out of his hair and growled "dough." There was more of it in the water and the floating basin. Joe cleaned the fragments out of his ears and eyes, and sat down again for further reflection. A grim smile crept over his fat visage. Then, taking the blouse with him, he crept away.

"Oh!" he murmured again. "Ah! We ain't seed the end of this!"

But he winced as he glided past the companion as he heard sounds of stifled laughter in the darkness.

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Then came the strains of a tin whistle, and a subdued voice singing:

"Darling Mable, now I'm able to buy the happy home,
Since they raised my screw, love, I've enough for two,
love.

Do not tarry, say you'll marry, answer yes or no;
I remain, though damp and doughy, yours for ever,
Joe."

The carpenter shook his fist in the direction of the singer, and went on his way.

The ship gave a sudden quiver, and Joe forgot his woes. His shout rang through the fore-castle, rousing the sleepers.

"Hurrah, my lads, we're about!"

An hour later, with searchlights flashing and the lead going, the Lord of the Deep was again toiling northwards, slowly and cautiously.

Toiling Through the Black Tunnel—Hopes and Fears—The End in Sight—The Country of the Four Suns.

Night and day alike the Lord of the Deep advanced steadily, shielded by the torpedo-nets. The tunnel made a winding course, twisting and turning aggravatingly, and adding mile after mile to the millionaire's rough guess of the distance.

The searchlights revealed sights wonderful and beautiful to the watchers in the deckhouse. The craggy walls gleamed with precious ores and marvellous stalactites, hanging like spikes of crystal from the roof. But there was no sign of life, either human or animal, except a few small whales puffing up the channel towards the sea beyond.

Van Witter recovered rapidly, and was as merry as a cricket. Between them, Maddock and Joe manufactured an invalid-chair for the Yankee, and when he lay in the wheel-house watching Yaleroo and Hunk, the bear, gambolling together, he swore he was enjoying himself immensely. There is nothing like a happy disposition and a good temper to pull a man through an illness, and Van Witter possessed a good share of both.

The slow, painful advance of the submarine began to become dreary and monotonous. They longed for the sunlight and the fresh, crisp breezes of the open sea. The air of the cavern was hot and sultry, and the heat steadily increased. In two days the mercury of the thermometer rose from 60 to 81. And yet they were nearer the Pole than white man had ever been.

Ching-Lung noticed that Ferrers Lord was restless and abstracted. Excitement spread through the ship. Owing to Ching-Lung's thoughtfulness a huge chart was placed in the fore-castle, and marked with little flags after each day's run. The sailors clustered round it eagerly.

The subdued excitement increased intensely. By reckoning as the crow flies, the Pole lay only twenty-three miles ahead. Even allowing generously for the snake-like twisting of the tunnel, it could hardly be more than thirty or forty miles.

But what would they find?

The eternal, abominable tunnel seemed endless. It seemed almost certain now that they would reach the Pole before they were clear of the cavern—that is to say, that an imaginary line drawn perpendicularly would pierce the exact position of the Pole, and pass through the cavern. And the mysterious Pole itself, that hazy vision that has lured hundreds of brave men to their deaths, would be above their heads.

Thurston and Van Witter were of that opinion, but Ching-Lung was more cheerful.

"What does it matter?" he said. "This beastly tunnel can't last for ever. When we come out we can go back over land or over ice to the place."

"But what if the confounded channel runs clean under the ice-belt, and brings us out on the other side as far as when we started?"

"Then, by Jove, we'll begin all over again, and get there somehow!"

"Bravo, prince," cried Van Witter; "that's the way to talk! Don't croak, Thurston. I haven't been able to take my reckonings, and I'm puzzled. How on earth does Lord manage to work without the sun? Can we rely on his figures? It beats me."

Ching-Lung laughed. It was mysterious, but nothing could shake his confidence in the millionaire.

"It is a bit mysterious," he said, "but I'll bet you a hundred half-crown cigars that when you do come to take your reckoning you will find that Lord isn't a single knot out."

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A Grand New, Long Complete School Tale Next Tuesday.

"HIS LAST MATCH!" By FRANK RICHARDS.

Order your copy early.

"Done!" drawled Van Witter. "And I guess Thurston is witness. We'll chuck in a case of champagne."

"The odds don't seem quite fair to me," said Rupert.

"I'll stick to them, anyhow," laughed the prince. "Hallo, Prout, what's up?"

The steersman was peering forward through the polished glass.

"Beg your pardon, sir," he said, "I thought it was lighter."

Thurston and the prince sprang up, thrilling in every nerve.

"Switch off," cried the prince, "and then we can tell!"

"Seventeen fathoms!" came the monotonous voice of the leadsman. And then, after a pause: "Thirty-eight, by the mark!"

Prout, his hand absolutely shaking with the excitement, stopped the engines, and allowed the vessel to run to a standstill before he dared switch off.

"Fifty-five!" droned the voice.

The water was deepening with amazing speed. The brilliant beams vanished, and the eager watchers closed their eyes to get rid of the glare. And Tom Prout's guess was turned into fact.

Light—light—light! Faint, bluish and ghostly, it flooded the cavern. They could see each other's faces pallid and dim, and dark walls of the rock and the faint figure of the leadsman, the gun in the bows, the grey outline of the rails.

"We are coming to the end," drawled the lazy voice of Ferrers Lord.

The vaulted roof crashed back their cheers. The crew, forgetting all discipline, poured into the wheelhouse, and yelled their delight. Maddock and Gan-Waga, clasped in each other's arms, waltzed across the deck as gracefully as a couple of lame elephants, and Ching-Lung walked about as easily on his hands as Thurston did on his feet.

"Shake, old man!" drawled Van Witter. "Bravo! Bravo!"

Their hands met. At a word from Thurston, Maddock, after saluting Gan-Waga with a smacking kiss, piped his whistle. Laughing and shouting like a pack of urchins let loose from school, the men made for the fore-castle. They knew it was grog, but they bellowed themselves hoarse when Maddock appeared.

"It's champagne, lads, and cigars!" he roared. "Is 'Ighness says so. Give him a yell! Hip, hip—"

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"And butter for the blubberbiter!" yelled Maddock.

"'Rah! 'Rah! 'Rah!" squeaked Gan-Waga, amid howls of laughter.

The cook brought in champagne, and corks popped merrily. Ferrers Lord was toasted, then Thurston, then Van Witter. Ching-Lung came last, but not least, for he was toasted three or four times. He was a favourite of favourites among the crew, and when he came in it was five good minutes before the cheering ceased.

Again the vessel was in motion, and the ghostly light came in through the port-holes with increased strength. The heat was almost oppressive, and here and there masses of weed—the first vegetation they had seen since leaving the cavern of mushrooms—hung from the rocks. Shoals of fish, too, played round the vessel, and the tunnel had widened.

Ferrers Lord paced the wheelhouse impatiently. The lead could find no bottom now. The light grew stronger and stronger. The millionaire was nearing the goal of his hopes, nearing his triumphs. His dream had come true; his unflinching courage and indomitable energy were bringing its reward.

"How much farther?" asked Thurston, his voice hoarse with excitement.

"Eight miles, Rupert—only eight miles."

Eight miles from the North Pole! The very thought was intoxicating.

They could see each other distinctly now. Eight miles

more, and the mysterious spot would be reached. How slowly the vessel seemed to travel! They were shouting, laughing, and clapping in the fore-castle, while Joe was dancing a breakdown to the strains of Ching-Lung's tin whistle. Now and again the leadsman droned out his monotonous news:

"Sixty fathoms, and no bottom!"

"I guess they're having high jinks down there," drawled the Yankee. "It always seems full steam ahead where Ching-Lung is. Hallo! What's that?"

Rupert chuckled, and a smile crossed the millionaire's face. Loud and lusty came the chorus:

"Rule, Britannia, where'er the blue waves roll!

For Britannia's sons have found the Pole."

Good-natured Van Witter was compelled to laugh.

"Waal," he drawled, "you deserved to win. I'm a good American, and I'd have liked to see the Stars and Stripes ahead; but I hope I'm a good sportsman, too. There's just a chance that the Stars and Stripes may be on the spot when we arrive. Give me your fist again, Lord. Here's bravo and jelly good luck! Anyhow, if we can't get there first, I'm glad a Britisher has done, for we get half the victory. It's all in the family, for, by hokey, we've got the same blood in us, the same tongue, and we're cousins. Shake, old man!"

Once more their hands met heartily.

"Your flag shall go up beside the Union Jack," said Ferrers Lord.

"No; be hanged to that, old friend! Fair is fair. Below it, if you like."

"Side by side," drawled the millionaire. "What do you think, Rupert?"

"Side by side," said Rupert promptly. "Listen!"

He held up his hand. The strains of "Yankee Doodle" drifted up from the fore-castle. Maddock was bellowing:

"Yankee Doodle made a bet,

Thinking he could win it.

John Bull said: 'I'll take you on,

But you won't be in it.'"

Then came the chorus, a parody of "Rule, Britannia!":

"Rule, Britannia, where'er the blue waves roll!

Licking creation, they have reached the Pole!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Prout, and then blushed up to the eyes. "Oh, I beg your pardon, sir!"

"Oh, have your laugh out, Tom!" drawled Van Witter merrily. "I don't care a cent. I suppose Ching-Lung put those little rhymes together, and they ain't so dusty. Say, look there!" said Van Witter.

A circle of white shone ahead.

"Fetch the prince, Prout!" said Ferrers Lord.

He seized the wheel. Ching-Lung came running up. The tunnel was as bright as day. The circle widened as Ferrers Lord set the screws lashing at double speed. Bright and dazzling, the light poured in. Then the Lord of the Deep rushed into the light and the sweet, fresh air.

And what they saw held them dumb and spellbound.

A sea of wondrous sapphire blue, calm, waveless, and beautiful. Four suns, hanging in a sky of azure, poured down a silvery light. And beyond the crystal waters lay an island fringed with palms of soft, feathery green, and the towers and turrets of a white city of wonder arose against the sky, throwing back the glare of the suns from every glowing pinnacle.

Behind, far away, blue, jagged, and terrible, lay the glassy peaks of the Eternal Ice!

(This thrilling adventure story will be continued in next week's number of "The Magnet" Library. Order early. Price 1d. "The Ghost Ship," by Sidney Drew, now appearing in the "Boys' Friend," 1d., should be read by all readers interested in "Beyond the Eternal Ice!")



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