

THE MYSTIC CIRCLE!

A Magnificent Long Complete Tale of the Chums of Greyfriars. By Frank Richards.



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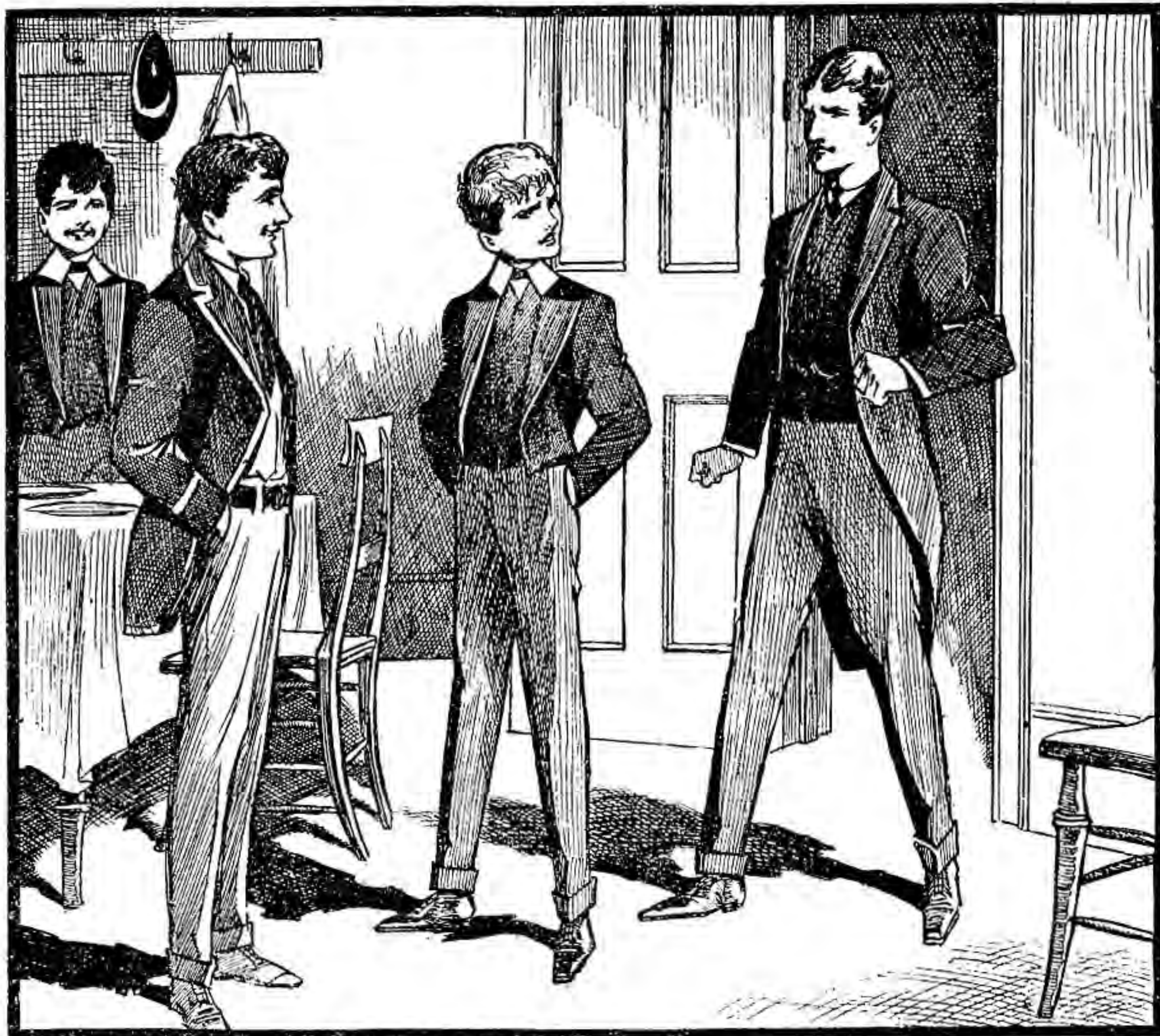


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THE MYSTIC CIRCLE

A New, Long, Complete Tale of Harry Wharton & Co.
at Greyfriars School.

By FRANK RICHARDS.



"Ain't you coming in, Loder?" asked Harry Wharton cheerfully. Bob Cherry wheeled round, and stared. "Mum-my hat!" he ejaculated. "F-fancy you being there, Loder, old man! I was just telling these chaps what a dutiful prefect you are, and how you always refrain from bullying and prying—" "You young rascal!" exclaimed Loder angrily. "I heard all you said!" (See Chapter 1.)

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Trouble With Loder!

"L ODER'S a beast!" Thus Sampson Quincy Idley Field, of the Remove Form at Greyfriars. As life was too short for such an array of formidable names, he was generally known as "Squiff."

Squiff leaned against the wall of the Remove passage and pressed his hands to his sides. Judging from the expression upon his face, Squiff was in considerable pain.

"Loder's a beast!" he repeated emphatically—"a beastly beast!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There seem to be a lot of beasts

about!" remarked Bob Cherry, of the Remove, suddenly appearing round the corner. "Who's paying compliments to the gentle Loder bird? Oh, it's you, Squiff. You look happy, my son!"

"Ow! I'm in pain!" growled Squiff.

Bob Cherry grinned.

"What's the trouble, fair youth?" he inquired cheerfully. "Come into No. 1 Study, and ventilate your grievance to sympathetic ears."

Harry Wharton and Nugent, who shared No. 1 Study, were at home; and they had visitors in the persons of Johnny Bull, recently returned from abroad, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. It was nearly tea-time, and the juniors were busy making preparations.

"Hallo, here's Squiff," exclaimed Nugent genially. "Tea's just upon ready—"

"Blow tea!" growled Squiff.

"I always do blow tea if I want to make it cold," said Nugent humorously. "What's the matter, old man? You look seedy."

"It's Loder," said Squiff wrathfully. "He's just caned me, the rotter! Caned me for doing nothing—absolutely nothing! Four rotten swipes!"

Harry Wharton looked doubtful.

"Loder's a prize bully, we know," he said, "but surely he didn't lam you for doing nothing at all?"

"He did!" declared Squiff—"at least, it wasn't much!"

"Ahem!"

"Nothing to get ratty about, anyhow," went on Squiff indignantly. "I just happened to slide down the balustrade into the hall!"

"And Loder caned you for that?" asked Johnny Bull. "Four swipes?"

"Yes!"

"The rotter!"

"Just like Loder!"

"The just-like-Loderfulness is terrific!" remarked Hurree Singh, in his weird version of honest English.

"Loder was in the hall, then?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Yes, of course," said Squiff, rubbing his hands. "As a matter of absolute fact, he was just at the bottom of the stairs when I whizzed down—but I couldn't help that, could I?"

"Ahem! Hardly!"

"And he caught you fair and square?" asked Nugent.

Squiff grinned.

"Well, I think I caught him fair and square!" he said.

"You see, the silly ass got right in the way, and my feet landed on his tummy! We both rolled over on the floor, and, somehow, my elbow got into Loder's mouth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The rotter scrambled to his feet, snatched up his cane, and gave me four terrific cuts. The only consolation I've got is that his front teeth are nearly knocked out!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I reckon it's getting a bit too thick," went on the Australian junior, "when Loder takes to caning chaps for doing absolutely nothing—"

"Ahem!"

"What did you say, Nugent?"

"I only coughed, Squiff!"

Squiff looked round suspiciously.

"I believe you chaps think I really did something that could warrant Loder giving me four swipes with the cane," he exclaimed.

"Well," said Wharton, "I think Loder's got something on his side. I'm blessed if I should like fourteen stone plumped on to my tummy all in a hurry—to say nothing of a whacking great elbow in my chivvy!"

"I'm not fourteen stone!" growled Squiff.

"Well, that's near enough," exclaimed Bob Cherry. "I certainly think that Loder was to blame, because he oughtn't to have been at the bottom of the stairs just at that moment—it was very inconsiderate of him. All the same, you know, it was a bit thick!"

"Well, let's have tea," said Wharton cheerfully.

"The whole thing was an accident," pursued Bob, who had his back to the open door. "Under the circumstances, Loder had no right to cane you. Accidents will happen on the best regulated balustrades. Loder's a prize rotter—"

"Shut up!" muttered Nugent.

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Nugent was facing the door, and he had just seen Loder, of the Sixth, pause outside at the mention of his name. Bob Cherry, quite unconscious of the prefect's close proximity, looked at Nugent in surprise.

"Why should I shut up?" he asked. "I don't care who hears me talking! I say that Loder is a beastly bully, and he never ought to have been made a prefect. He's always sticking his nose into— What the dickens is the matter with you, Nugent? What are you making those horrible faces at me for?"

Nugent gasped.

"You—you ass!" he hissed.

The other occupants of No. 1 Study had seen Loder by this time, and they were wondering when the storm would break. Loder stood outside, and glared at Bob Cherry's back.

"Ain't you coming in, Loder?" asked Harry Wharton cheerfully.

Bob Cherry wheeled round and stared.

"Mum-my hat!" he ejaculated. "P-fancy you being there, Loder, old man! I was just telling these chaps what a dutiful prefect you are, and how you always refrain from bullying and prying—"

"You young rascal!" exclaimed Loder angrily, "I heard all you said!"

Bob sighed resignedly.

"I don't suppose it did you any harm," he said. "There's an old saying that listeners never hear good of themselves—"

"You cheeky young hound!" roared Loder. "If I had my cane here I'd thrash you soundly! As it is, you'll do three hundred lines—and bring them to me before bed-time!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Bob Cherry stared at Loder in dismay.

"I say, that's a bit thick, isn't it?" asked Harry Wharton. "You weren't supposed to hear what Cherry was saying, Loder. He didn't cheek you to your face—"

"That's enough!" snapped Loder viciously. "If he doesn't do the lines before bed-time, they'll be doubled!"

And the unpopular prefect strode away.

"You fatheaded chump!" exclaimed Nugent hotly.

"It'll mean sticking in the study all the giddy evening," growled Bob. "And what am I a fatheaded chump for?"

"Why, for not easing up when I gave you the tip!"

"Is that what you call giving me the tip—making ghastly faces at me?" asked Bob Cherry warmly. "How the dickens could I know Loder was there? I thought you were having a fit! Why couldn't you have warned me properly?"

Nugent snorted, and took a gulp of tea from his cup, which, being extremely hot, nearly choked him.

"Ow! I'm scalded!" he roared.

"Serve you right!" growled Bob Cherry callously.

And tea in No. 1 Study proceeded under rather strained conditions. What with Squiff's sore hands, Nugent's scalded mouth, and Bob Cherry's thoughts of an evening's drudgery, cheerfulness seemed to be at a discount.

The spirits of the Removites couldn't remain damped for long, however, and Johnny Bull made a suggestion which met with instant approval, and restored the smiles. The suggestion was that the six of them should all swot away at the lines until they were done. It would only mean fifty lines each, and they could easily copy Bob's list.

Bob Cherry himself voted the idea to be simply terrific.

Accordingly, as soon as tea was finished with, the Famous Five and Squiff set to work with pens and paper, and the three hundred lines were finished in record time. Just as they were on the last lap, the door opened, and a fat face inserted itself.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Go away!"

"Clear off, Bunter!"

Billy Bunter, of the Remove, came into the study, and blinked curiously at the busy juniors through his big spectacles.

"You're all jolly industrious," he remarked. "What's the idea?"

Bob Cherry looked up.

"Are you going out on your feet or your neck?" he asked ominously.

"Oh, really, Cherry?" exclaimed Bunter, bending over the table. "What are you all writing lines for? And why are you copying Cherry's list—"

"You'll cop Cherry's list in a tick!" growled Bob. "Buzz off!"

Billy Bunter backed towards the door.

"I believe you're doing lines for Loder," he said. "I happened to hear Loder a little while ago. He gave you three hundred lines, Cherry, and I thought it was rotten of him! I think Loder's a beast!"

"You're quite right, Bunter—but clear out!" said Squiff.

"Loder's a regular rotter!" went on Bunter. "I think you've been badly treated, Bob, old man! I—I say, can you lend me five bob—"

"Oh, that's why you're sympathising with me!" grinned Bob Cherry. "Well, it won't work, my buck—and don't call me 'Bob, old man' again!"

"Don't get ratty, old chap. I—I'm expecting a postal-order."

"You're not expecting a thick ear, are you?" granted Bob. "Well, you'll get one in two shakes!"

"Oh, don't be a fathead!"

Bob Cherry pushed his chair back, with a sigh of resignation.

"I suppose it's got to be done," he said, shoving back his cuffs.

But Billy Bunter, recognising the signs, hastily retired and banged the door.

"Beast!" he muttered, rolling away down the passage. "He jolly well deserved those lines! If I wasn't so much of a sportsman I'd go and tell Loder that all his pals are helping him!"

Down in the entrance-hall he ran into Loder as the latter came in from the Close. Bunter's little eyes gleamed.

"I—I say, Loder—"

"Well, what is it?"

Loder paused, and looked at Billy Bunter.

"I heard you give Bob Cherry three hundred lines about an hour ago," said Bunter, blinking round to make sure they were alone. "Well, if I were you, I'd look at 'em jolly carefully when he brings 'em to you."

"What are you getting at? Oh, I understand, Bunter!" exclaimed Loder grimly. "Thanks for the tip. I'll make the young rotter sit up if he's been up to some tricks!"

Loder passed on, and Bunter rolled into the common-room, telling himself that he had certainly not sneaked.

Just before bedtime Bob Cherry presented himself cheerfully at Loder's study, and planked the lines down on his table. Loder picked them up, and glanced through them.

"There you are!" said Bob. "Three hundred! Good-night!"

"Hold on!" rapped out Loder, scanning the lines closely. "These lines aren't written all in your hand-writing!"

"Ahem!" said Bob, inwardly dismayed.

"Did anyone help you?"

"Ahem! Don't be an ass, Loder!" said Bob Cherry. "Who'd help me to do lines?"

"Did anyone help you?" repeated Loder grimly.

"I—I— Ahem! Well, I didn't do 'em all!" admitted Bob reluctantly.

Loder threw them into the fireplace.

"When I give you lines I expect you to write them yourself!" he said unpleasantly. "It's pure impertinence on your part to get someone to help you. Perhaps you need a lesson. I don't accept those lines, and you'll write double the amount as a punishment!"

"My hat!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"And if you don't bring me six hundred lines before afternoon lessons to-morrow I'll gate you for the rest of the week!" said Loder. "That's all! You can clear!"

"But—but I can't do 'em!" protested Bob indignantly. "It's impossible to do six hundred in that time, Loder."

"I can't help it!" snapped Loder. "Clear out!"

And Bob Cherry cleared out, nearly boiling over with wrath.

"The beastly cad!" he exclaimed hotly, when he rejoined his chums in No. 1 Study. "He knows jolly well I can't do 'em! It'll mean being gated for the rest of

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the week; and we've got an away match on Saturday, too!"

"Hard lines!" said Squiff sympathetically. "How on earth did the cad spot the difference in the writing?"

"How do I know?" growled Bob. "I'm not going to do the lines, and I'll go to old Quelch to-morrow and ask him to cane me. I'd rather have six swipes than be gated!"

It was rather a forlorn hope, for Mr. Quelch was not accustomed to interfere with the prefects. But the Remove-master could hardly fail to see the unreasonableness of the imposition, and he might decide that a severe caning would meet the requirements of the case.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Mystic Circle!

"HALLO! Wherefore that worried look, my son?"

Peter Todd, of the Remove, appeared on the School House steps, and addressed his cheerful remark to Bob Cherry. Bob was standing against one of the stone pillars, with his hands deep in his pockets. His usually sunny face looked troubled.

"I've got the blessed pip, Toddy!" he growled.

"I can't see any adequate reason why you should have the blessed pip on a grand, crisp spring morning like this!" exclaimed Peter Todd calmly. "It's nearly breakfast-time."

"Blow breakfast!"

"I heard a rumour about Loder," began Todd.

"The rotter!" said Bob Cherry. "Yes; that's what's up with me, Toddy. At dinner-time I've either got to receive a terrific caning, or be gated for the rest of the week! Then you talk about brekker! How can I think of food with weights like that on my giddy mind?"

Peter looked sympathetic.

"Well, buck up and look pleasant," he suggested.

"You might escape, after all. An earthquake might happen, or a fleet of Zeppelins might swoop down."

"Oh, dry up, you ass!"

Vernon-Smith, the former Bounder of Greyfriars, strolled over from the entrance-gates.

"Who's been performing artistic efforts with a piece of chalk?" he inquired enigmatically.

"What the dickens do you mean?" granted Bob. "My sole thoughts at the present moment are concerned with old Quelch's cane. I expect he'll be performing artistic efforts with that on my hands at dinner-time—if I'm lucky."

"If you're lucky!" echoed Vernon-Smith, in surprise. "You seem to relish the prospect."

"Well, I'd rather be whopped than be gated for the rest of the week," explained Bob. "But what's that you were saying about chalk?"

The Bounder pointed to the gates.

"Some funny merchant has designed a whacking great circle on the wall outside," he said. "Come and have a squint."

Bob Cherry detached himself from the stone pillar.

"Might as well humour you," he said resignedly. "Come on, Toddy!"

When they arrived outside the gates they found Micky Desmond, Bulstrode, and one or two other Removites staring at the wall.

"Seen this, you chaps?" asked Bulstrode.

"I have," said Vernon-Smith. "What does it mean?"

"I'm no good at conundrums," answered Bulstrode. "Perhaps Micky can tell us."

"Sure, and it's puzzled meself I am, intirely!" exclaimed Micky Desmond. "The fellow who drew that intended it to be seen by a blind man. It's big enough, begorrah!"

Bob Cherry and Peter Todd looked at the wall curiously. Chalked upon it was a very large, thick circle, neatly executed, and within the circle were the letters "L. J."

"'L. J.'!" said Bob Cherry thoughtfully. "What do those letters stand for? There's nobody at Greyfriars with those initials that I know of."

"There's Jones of the Upper Fourth," remarked Peter Todd.

"Yes, fathead; but his initials are H. J.!" said Bob. "Perhaps these letters don't stand for anybody's initials at all."

"What about 'Loony Juggins'?" suggested Peter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blow the thing!" exclaimed Bob. "There goes the brekker-bell! I think I'll have a bite or two, after all, Toddy."

The mystic design on the wall was soon forgotten. The general opinion was that it had been drawn by some mentally-deficient junior, who wanted to make a mild mystery. As it was not desirable that he should be encouraged, the fellows ignored the thing.

Bob Cherry did not look very happy during morning lessons. This was not very surprising, for he was not feeling at all merry and bright. He had made no attempt whatever to do the six hundred lines, for the simple reason that it would have been impossible to get them done.

When the Remove was dismissed he had half a mind to speak to Mr. Quelch then and there. But, upon duly considering the matter, he resolved to await his interview with Loder—which, as events turned out, was very lucky for Bob Cherry.

"I'm blessed if I'm going to be gated for the rest of the week," declared Bob, as he strolled out into the Close with his chums. "If old Quelch refuses to overrule Loder's decision I shall go to the giddy Head!"

"Fathead!" exclaimed Nugent. "The Head wouldn't listen to you."

"I've got my doubts about Quelch," said Harry Wharton thoughtfully. "If you'd swotted away at the lines all your spare time this morning he might have realised the rottenness of the impot. But, as you've done nothing, I reckon he'll leave the matter in Loder's hands."

"The Loder bird now approacheth," said Johnny Bull, spying the unpopular prefect emerging from the gym.

"My hat! I'm going to dodge him," said Bob quickly. "He might have forgotten, and I don't want my lovely face to remind him."

And Bob hurried off at top speed, leaving the others grinning.

"I can just imagine Loder forgetting an impot!" chuckled Nugent.

Bob Cherry successfully carried out the retreating movement, and the interview with Loder was postponed for the time being.

After dinner, however, Bob Cherry resigned himself to the inevitable. It was nearly time for afternoon lessons when Gerald Loder came striding across the Close to the spot where the Famous Five were chatting. The prefect's face wore an unpleasant expression.

Bob Cherry sighed.

"What must be, must be," he remarked dolefully.

"Now for the giddy bust-up!"

"The bust-upfulness will be terrific!"

"My hat, if he gates me——"

"Shush!"

"The shushfulness is terrific!" grinned Nugent.

Loder halted in front of the Famous Five.

"I've been waiting for you, Cherry, in my study!" he snapped. "Where are those lines?"

"Lines?" repeated Bob Cherry vaguely.

"Yes; you young sweep!" said Loder unpleasantly. "Where are they?"

"Well, there are some railway-lines down at Courtfield, and I dare say Mrs. Kebble has got some clothes-lines round at the back," said Bob calmly. "It all depends what sort of lines you want!"

There was a subdued chuckle from the juniors.

"You cheeky rascal!" shouted Loder, who had decided objections to being made fun of. "I ordered you to do six hundred lines by afternoon lessons to-day. Where are they?"

"Oh, those lines!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "I'm blessed if I know where they are, Loder!"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, how can I know where they are when I haven't done 'em?"

Loder scowled.

"Haven't you done any at all?" he demanded.

"No!"

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"Do you mean to tell me——"

"I mean to tell you that it was a rotten trick to give me six hundred lines to do when you knew jolly well that I shouldn't have time to do them!" exclaimed Bob Cherry warmly. "I didn't start them because I knew I couldn't finish. And, what's more, I'm going to Mr. Quelch——"

"You cheeky young hound!" roared Loder. "I'm dealing with this matter, and Mr. Quelch won't interfere with my authority. As you haven't done the lines I'll punish you in another way."

"You're a beastly bully, Loder!" said Bob Cherry warmly.

"The beastfulness of the esteemed bully is terrific!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh softly.

Loder turned to the Indian junior with a scowl.

"Take a hundred——"

But Squiff, who came running up at that second, interrupted the prefect's sentence.

"I say, you chaps, just squint at this!" he exclaimed. "It's another one of those giddy circles. I just found it close by the wall, as if some funny merchant had chucked it over!"

Squiff held up a flat piece of slaty stone for inspection. Upon it was drawn a white circle with the initials "L. J." in the centre.

"My hat!"

"Well, I'm blowed!"

"What's the meaning of it?"

Loder glared at Squiff furiously.

"Couldn't you see I was talking to Singh?" he demanded. "Take a hundred lines, Field, for impertinence!"

"Oh, I say, Loder!"

"Silence! I don't want any——" Loder's voice suddenly trailed away, and his face went almost white. For a moment the juniors could not understand the cause of the prefect's sudden loss of composure. Then they saw that Loder was staring, with wide open eyes, at the piece of stone in Squiff's hand.

"Good heavens!" muttered Loder, with a catch in his voice.

He continued gazing at the mysterious chalked circle as though fascinated. Then, without a word, he turned abruptly and strode away towards the School House, leaving the Famous Five and Squiff staring after him in sheer astonishment.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Loder's Mysterious Letter!

"GREAT SCOTT!"

"Well, I'm jiggered!"

"What's up with Loder?"

"He seemed scared out of his wits!"

"The scarefulness was terrific!" said Hurree Singh, in a puzzled voice.

"It was this stone," exclaimed Squiff. "Directly he spotted it he went absolutely green. This giddy circle with the initials in the middle touched Loder on the raw. My hat, I wonder what the dickens he saw in it to startle him so much?"

Harry Wharton looked puzzled.

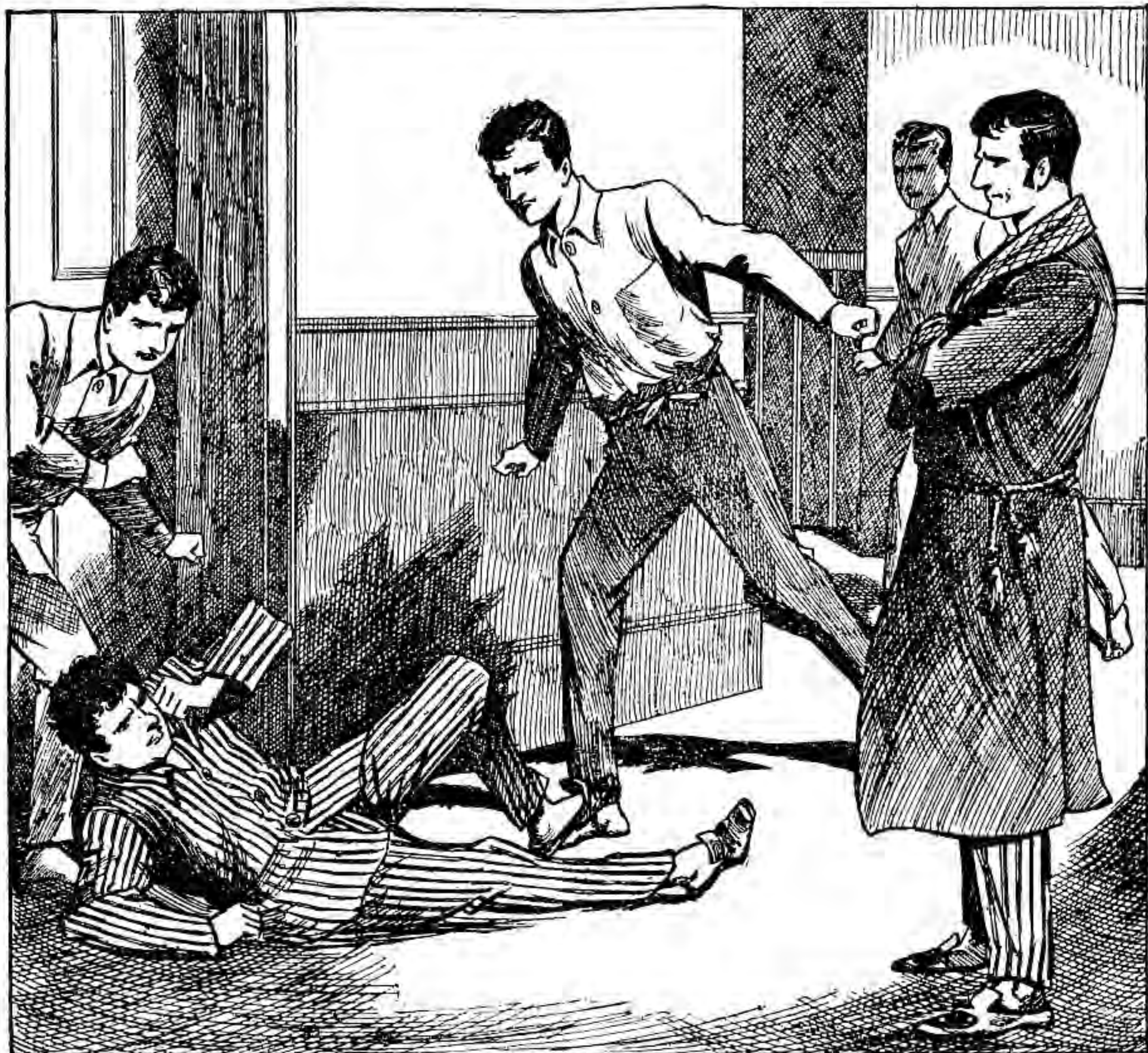
"It's a poser," he said thoughtfully. "Although that design is absolutely meaningless to us, Loder saw something in it that disturbed his peace of mind. It's a mystery, you chaps, and it is up to us to sift it to the bottom."

"Hold on!" said Squiff. "We don't want to pry into Loder's affairs, you know. Perhaps we'd better wait a bit and see if anything else develops."

"Must be something jolly serious, I should say," remarked Bob Cherry wonderingly. "It's not like Loder to buzz off in the middle of giving somebody lines. Why, he didn't even stop to tell me that I was gated. I don't know who designed those giddy circles, but he's a jolly decent chap, all the same."

"Better not be too previous," chuckled Nugent. "Loder's got a fearfully long memory, and he might drop on you later on."

But when Bob Cherry passed Loder in the Fourth-Form passage a few minutes later the prefect did not



"You asses—you fatheads!" howled the burglar. "What the dickens did you bowl me over for?" Wingate jumped to his feet with an exclamation. "Great Scott! It's not a burglar at all!" he ejaculated. "It's Coker, of the Fifth!" (See Chapter 5.)

even look at him; his face was still white, and had taken on almost a scared expression.

There was certainly much for the juniors to wonder at. It seemed pretty obvious that the mysterious circles had been drawn expressly for Loder's benefit. They were utterly meaningless to everybody with the exception of Loder.

The Famous Five said nothing of the matter to the other Removites, but the juniors did not fail to notice the vast difference in Loder's attitude. This was especially apparent after tea. Removites were asking in all quarters whether Loder had seen a ghost. Snoop and Stott put forward the suggestion that he had "gone down the pan" heavily over a horse race. But Loder's uneasy and scared expression seemed to point to something much more serious.

In the prefects' room, too, Wingate, Courtney, and several other members of the Sixth wanted to know why Loder was looking so scared. At last, refusing to answer any questions, Loder flung himself out of the room, and went to his own study. He stood before the fire, and did not trouble to light the gas.

"What can I do?" he muttered anxiously. "I never

expected it would really happen. And it has happened!"

The prefect was evidently in a highly disturbed frame of mind. The mystic circle was of some unpleasant portent to him. As a matter of fact, since the design was unintelligible to all others at Greyfriars, it was obvious that it had been prepared especially for his benefit.

The mystery of the chalked circle was creating quite a little sensation amongst certain members of the Lower School. Harry Wharton & Co. did not concern themselves much, as it was no business of theirs. But Billy Bunter, for one, was extremely anxious to learn more facts.

But he could not very well go to Loder and ask the prefect to explain matters to him. Loder would have objected very forcibly. And, as far as Bunter could see, there was no other way of getting at the truth. The thought certainly struck him of paying a secret visit to Loder's study, but he was deterred from this project by the realisation that discovery would mean dire punishment.

An opportunity for Bunter to satisfy his curiosity

occurred, however, in the Remove passage. Bunter emerged from No. 11 Study, and almost ran into the arms of Trotter, the page-boy. Trotter held a letter in his hand, and Billy Bunter eyed it inquisitively.

"Hallo, that for me?" he asked. "I'm expecting a postal order. I'm jolly glad it's turned up, because I was just wondering what I should do for some cash."

Trotter grinned.

"Sorry, Master Bunter," he said, "but this letter ain't for you. It's for Master Loder of the Sixth."

Bunter's eyes gleamed.

"For Loder—eh?" he repeated, blinking at the letter through his big spectacles. "I—I say, Trotter, there's no need for you to fag along to Loder's study. It just happens that I'm going that way myself, and I'll take the letter."

Trotter shook his head.

"Sorry, Master Bunter, but I'd better take it," he replied. "It might be important, and if anything went wrong I should get blamed."

"Oh, rats! Hand it over!"

But Trotter declined.

"I might get into trouble——"

"Rot!" exclaimed Bunter. "Do you mean to suggest that I can't be trusted with the rotten letter? If you don't hand it over jolly quickly, I'll collar it!"

And before Trotter could suspect his intention, Billy Bunter grabbed the letter from the page-boy's hand. He was intensely curious to know what the envelope contained, and his curiosity was made all the greater when he turned the letter over. On the flap, neatly drawn in ink, was the now familiar circle, with the initials in the centre.

"My only Sunday topper!" gasped Bunter.

His fingers fairly itched to tear the flap open. Here, in his own hands, was the probable explanation of the mystic circle. But for Trotter's presence his curiosity would have got the better of him. Bunter had no scruples about opening other people's private correspondence; he considered it to be a perfectly legitimate means of gaining information.

He glared at Trotter.

"Buzz off!" he exclaimed. "I'll take this letter."

"Sorry, Master Bunter, but you'll 'ave to give it back to me!" said Trotter firmly. "We're wasting a lot of time here."

"Go and eat coke!" snapped Bunter, turning away. But Trotter ran after him.

"Very well, if you mean to take it I shall have to come with you," he said. "I was told to see that letter into Master Loder's hands."

"Look here, you cheeky rotter," roared Bunter, "I'm not going to have you following me about! Clear off! I'll jolly well report you——"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Who are you going to report, Bunter?" inquired Bob Cherry, suddenly appearing round the corner with Harry Wharton and Nugent.

"Trotter was cheeky," growled Bunter indignantly. "The blessed rotter wants to follow me about, and I won't let him. Not likely! I'm rather particular about who I walk with."

"Yes, I don't expect Trotter cares for it much," said Bob. "I'm jolly certain he realises what a favour he is doing you by letting himself be seen with you!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"It's that letter, Master Cherry——" began Trotter.

"Yes, I see," said Bob. "Is it yours, Bunter?"

"Of course! I—I mean—well, yes, it is!"

"Oh, Master Bunter!" ejaculated Trotter.

"Come on, you rotter, hand it over!" said Harry Wharton. "I know jolly well the letter isn't yours. I expect he collared it from you, didn't he, Trotter?"

"Yes, Master Wharton."

"I thought as much," said Bob Cherry grimly.

"Now, you prying bounder, hand it over!"

"I sha'n't!"

"Then we shall be reduced to the painful necessity of taking it by force," replied Bob calmly. "We're not going to stand by and see you nicking other people's correspondence. Come on, you chaps!"

"I—I say," gasped Bunter. "I didn't mean it, you know! I was only spoofing. This letter is for Loder."

and I was just going to take it to him. I didn't mean to open it—just as if I would! I—I was only going to squint——"

"That's enough, Bunter!" interrupted Harry Wharton. "You're a spying beast, and you'd better clear off before we bump you!"

"Oh, really——"

"Buzz off!" roared Bob. "Scat!"

Billy Bunter realised that he would be safer at a distance, so he retired up the passage, looking disappointed and furious. At the corner he paused, and gave voice to a few choice and complimentary remarks. But as the Removites took no notice of them whatever, Bunter's vocal efforts were rather wasted.

Bob Cherry looked at the letter, and then turned it over.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "Here's that giddy circle again!"

"What the dickens can it mean?" asked Nugent, wonderingly. "There's something jolly fishy about all this, you chaps! This proves that it was designed expressly for Loder—there's no doubt about it now!"

"Well, it's no bizney of ours," said Wharton. "You'd better take it to Loder's study, Trotter."

"Yes, Master Wharton," said Trotter.

But as he took the letter Gerald Loder himself appeared, and came striding towards the little group. He was looking thoughtful, and he scowled darkly as Trotter approached him.

"Letter for you, Master Loder."

Loder halted.

"For me?" he asked sharply. "All right; you can clear off. Great Scott!"

He was looking at the design on the flap, and he suddenly became aware that the juniors were watching him with open curiosity. He frowned angrily.

"I suppose you young sweeps have been spying, as usual?" he growled.

"You know jolly well we don't spy!" said Wharton indignantly. "We found Bunter with that letter, if you want to know, and if we hadn't come along he'd have had it open by now. You ought to thank us for preventing your private matters being spread all over the giddy school."

Loder didn't look very thankful. He didn't even reply, but strode off to his own study, went in, and slammed the door with a crash which resounded down the whole Sixth-Form passage.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Day of Reckoning!

LODER lit the gas in his study, and then regarded the letter in his hand with a scowling brow. Apparently he knew from whom it had come, and it was equally apparently not welcome.

"Yes, it must be from Judd—hang him!" muttered the prefect. "Good heavens! I hope he's not coming to Greyfriars!"

The thought seemed to spur him into action, and he tore open the letter. It was only a single sheet of note-paper, and simply bore the words:

"Be at the Cross Keys—private parlour—at ten o'clock to-night, sharp. If you don't turn up there'll be trouble. You'd better come, my boy.—L. JUDD."

Those last few words almost contained a threat, and Loder knew it. He screwed the letter up and threw it into the fire with a savage exclamation.

"Confound it!" he muttered. "How did he find out I was here? I thought he was over the other side of the earth! I shall have to go—if I don't he'll come here, and that'll be ten thousand times worse!"

He paced up and down his study anxiously.

"By Jove, I'll go, but I'll pretend that I don't know him!" he murmured. "That's the idea! What can he do? He hasn't got any witnesses to prove that I'm acquainted with him. Nobody would believe his infernal yarn, either."

Loder seemed to find a certain amount of comfort in the decision he had just arrived at. Nevertheless, he was still greatly upset, and all the rest of the evening he kept to himself in the study. When the juniors went to bed he had to do his duty in the Shell dormitory, and

see lights out. The Shell fellows took care to be on their very best behaviour, for Loder was looking in a very dangerous mood.

The unpopular prefect seemed to have forgotten supper completely. At any rate, he only emerged from his study to see the juniors into bed. Then he returned, and sat impatiently by the fire until the school clock struck a quarter to ten.

Then he slipped on his overcoat and cap and made his way to the dusky Close. Being a prefect, he owned a key to the little side gate, and he let himself out without being observed. Once in Friardale Lane he stepped out briskly, glad that the period of waiting was over.

He arrived at the Cross Keys without meeting anyone, for Friardale went to sleep at an early hour, especially at that time of the year. Loder was well known at the disreputable public-house, for he paid many visits there in order to satisfy his desire for card-playing and gambling. Loder was pleased to consider himself a man of the world, and while at the Cross Keys tried to forget that he was a prefect at Greyfriars.

He entered the building by the little side door, as was his usual custom, and made his way to the private parlour in the rear. A bright fire blazed in the grate, and before it sat a tall, wiry-looking man with a clean-shaven, sunburnt face. He was attired in shabby blue serge, with a reefer coat, the brass buttons of which were dingy and unpolished. Beside him, at his elbow, stood a stiff glass of grog. One glance was sufficient to show that the man was a ship's officer.

Loder advanced into the room, and the seafaring man rose to his feet.

"I thought you'd turn up, young shaver," he said grimly. "I guess those circles made you feel kind of skeered, eh?"

Loder stared at the sunburnt man.

"I don't know you," he replied. "I've never seen you before. Those circles didn't scare me because I don't know what they meant. I've come here to see what it all means—to ask you why you sent me that strange letter."

The other stared in turn.

"You don't know me, Lucas Judd, second officer of the Norisdale?" he demanded, with set teeth. "You've never seen me before?"

"No," said Loder.

"Wal, gee! You're some liar!" exclaimed Lucas Judd.

Loder licked his dry lips.

"You've made a mistake," he said huskily. "I'm a prefect at Greyfriars School. How could I have met you before? You must be thinking of somebody else!"

The sunburnt man laughed harshly.

"So that's the game, eh?" he said. "You're tryin' to bluff out of it? Wal, it won't work, Loder. I'm not such a blamed galoot! Mebbe if I refresh your memory you'll fix me in your miad better."

"I tell you I've never met you before to-night!" muttered Loder.

"You never met me in the saloon bar of the Dog and Bull one evening last August, I suppose?" sneered Lucas Judd. "I suppose that's faded right from your memory? The Dog and Bull at Gravesend, I mean."

Loder seated himself and faced his companion.

"I've never been to Gravesend," he declared untruthfully.

"By gosh! And you're a prefect at a famous public school!" exclaimed Judd grimly. "Say, it's a wonder you ain't fired! Listen to this, and perhaps you'll realise that I haven't come here for the benefit of my health. I'm going to make you remember what happened last August."

Judd took a sip from his glass and commenced filling a pipe.

"You met me in the Dog and Bull," he went on. "I admit I was squiffy at the time—half seas over, as a matter of fact. You suggested a game of cards, and I, being merry, agreed. Wal, we played for three hours, and you won twenty quid off me—just about all I was worth. Being nearly drunk at the time, I didn't kind of realise that you was playing a crooked game. After-

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wards, when I got sober, I remembered everything as clear as I remember you, and I knew that you'd rooked me of twenty pounds."

"It's a lie!" said Loder hotly. "It was a straight game!"

"Oh, so you've remembered now, young shaver?" said Judd grimly.

Loder bit his lip.

"Yes," he growled. "It's no use denying it now. But I played a square game, Judd—"

"You lying hound!" interrupted the American—for he evidently hailed from across the Atlantic. "You took advantage of me; you cheated me of all the cash I had, and then quitted. Say, it was just the meanest trick that ever happened to me. I was blind with rage, and swore I'd have it out with you if ever I located you. Wal, I have, and this is the day of reckoning!"

Loder looked startled.

"How did you find me?" he asked huskily.

"I was talking to a bookie, and I happened to mention your name—said you were just the meanest kid on earth," replied Judd grimly. "I guess I was a heap surprised when he handed out the information that you was a prefect at Greyfriars College—for gentlemen! I reckon your head teacher, whoever the galoot may be, would be pretty surprised if I told him you was a scoundrelly swindler!"

Loder started to his feet.

"You're not going to do that?" he exclaimed, in alarm. "You're not going to tell the Head! You couldn't prove anything—"

"Gee! Couldn't prove anything!" ejaculated Judd harshly. "Guess the landlord of the Dog and Bull would bear witness that you was playing cards in his saloon. That would be enough to get you fired from Greyfriars!"

"You—you rotter!"

"Hold hard! I ain't going to do anything so drastic, if you do as I tell you," said Judd. "But I've got you in my power, young 'un, and I'm going to make use of you. If it pans out good I'll be satisfied. Mebbe

you're wondering why I've let all these months go by. Wal, you see, when I found out your address I was due on board the Norisdale within four hours, and she was bound for New Zealand. When we got out of English waters I sent you a letter from the first foreign port we touched saying that when I returned to England I'd let you know that I was somewheres around by warning you with a chalked circle with my initials inside. Guess your schoolmates was rather puzzled, eh?"

Loder lit a cigarette.

"Of course they were puzzled; but that doesn't matter a hang!" he replied. "They'll never find out the explanation. But you were a fool to make such a demonstration of it. That one letter would have been quite sufficient."

"Mebbe; but I wanted to give you a fright," said Judd. "And now to get to business. I guess I've got the drop on you, young 'un, an' I'm goin' to make you carry out my plans. I dare say you'll jib at first, but you'd better take it from me right now that jibbing won't help you any. You've got to do as I bid without any conditions. Got that?"

"Suppose I refuse?" asked Loder, vaguely uneasy as to the nature of his companion's demands. "What will you do then?"

"Guess there ain't any supposing about it," replied Lucas Judd unpleasantly. "If you refuse I'll get you fired—sacked, that is—from Greyfriars."

Loder tapped his foot impatiently.

"Well, get on with it," he said. "It's jolly late."

"I'll put it to you right slick. I'm in need of ready cash—a whole heap of it—and you've got to help me to get some. Now, see here—"

Judd lowered his voice and bent nearer to Loder.

"Greyfriars is a big school," he went on softly. "It

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would be queer if there wasn't a pile of cash knocking around somewhere. Bein' a prefect, I guess you know where the headmaster keeps his dollars——"

Loder turned pale.

"You fool!" he muttered hoarsely. "You don't mean——"

"Yep, sonny, that's just what I do mean!" exclaimed Judd grimly. "It ain't my line of business as a rule, but just now I'm on me uppers. I've got a chance here of gettin' some cash without much risk—and you've got to help me. At two o'clock in the morning—that's nearly four hours from now—I'll be outside the school. I shall rely on you to let me in, and show me where the cash is kept. Guess I won't need you to help me lift it, but you'll have to keep watch."

"It's impossible!" gasped Loder. "You're mad!"

"Nope. You can take it from me, I'm only hard up," said Judd. "If there was a lot of risk about this I wouldn't attempt it, but it's all plain sailin'. Now, young 'un, just explain to me where the old man keeps his dollars."

Loder rose to his feet with a chalky face.

"I won't!" he muttered huskily.

"I guess you will."

"I'll have nothing to do with it," declared Loder hotly. "Good heavens, I'm not a thief, and I won't take part in this scoundrelly scheme!"

Lucas Judd looked grim.

"You won't, eh?"

"No!"

"Say, you'd better drop that tone before I get riled," said Judd quietly. "There's mighty little of the good little Eric about you, sonny, and I ain't sittin' here to listen to your darned heroics!"

"But——"

"You're a crook, Loder! You swindled me out of twenty pounds last August, an' now you want to make out as you're too honest to help in a little matter like this!"

"It's robbery!" murmured Loder. "Why, the Head keeps over a hundred pounds in his safe, as a rule. I can't do it, Judd!"

"Gee! That's good hearing!" exclaimed Judd, rubbing his hands. "I'm referring to the amount of cash in the Head's safe. As for your 'can't do it,' that don't worry me any. You've got to do it, my son—just got to!"

"And if I refuse?"

Judd's eyes gleamed.

"Wal, there's two things I can do," he replied ominously. "I can git you sacked from Greyfriars, and disgraced for all time. That's one thing I can do. The other is to take you in hand myself, and have my revenge for that swindling business. And I may as well tell you that when I get a little rum inside me I ain't answerable for what I do. Guess you will leave Greyfriars one way or another, if you don't agree to my terms!"

"You mean——"

"I mean that there are a heap of lonely spots around this locality, an' if I met you in one of em, alone, I might git arguing so almighty much that I'd lay you out!" exclaimed the American threateningly. "Now, what's it to be?"

Loder sank back into his chair.

"If I promise to help you," he asked, "will you leave Friardale for ever and never return?"

"Sure!"

"Then I'll do it!" muttered Loder desperately. "At two o'clock I'll admit you into the School House, and lead you to the Head's study. Then I'll stand by and warn you in case of accidents. But I absolutely refuse to help you in the robbery."

Judd rubbed his hands together with satisfaction.

"Guess it's a deal, then!" he exclaimed. "You do your part well, and I sha'n't grumble. Shake on it!"

Loder took Judd's hand, and the scoundrelly compact was settled.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Loder's Treachery!

ELEVEN o'clock boomed out as Loder let himself in at the little side gate. Greyfriars was asleep—at least, the major portion of it. A light gleamed here and there from the masters' windows, but the boys were all in bed.

Loder crossed the Close cautiously, for he did not wish to meet a master. Awkward questions might be asked. And, in any case, Loder had no right to be out so late at night. But he had had much experience of nocturnal visits to the village. He let himself into the School House, and quietly mounted the stairs to his own room. Once inside he lit the gas, took off his overcoat and cap, and sat down upon the edge of the bed.

Loder was in no easy frame of mind. As a matter of absolute fact, he was vastly perturbed, and dreaded Lucas Judd's visit to the school. He had not agreed to take part in the American's villainous scheme—he had been forced into it. There had been nothing else for him to do.

"By Jove, I wish I could find some way out of the difficulty!" muttered Loder anxiously. "I'm in a deuce of a hole! If anybody happens to come along while I'm letting Judd in, or while I'm keeping watch, it'll be all up! I shall be disgraced for life! But what can I do to prevent it?"

It was a puzzling question. The arrangement was made now, and it was too late for any alterations. Loder would have to go through with it, or face Judd's wrath afterwards. And Loder feared the man; he felt that he was capable of any crime.

Another thought struck the prefect as he reviewed the strange position he was in. He had no guarantee whatever that, after satisfying Judd's demands, the man would not persecute him further.

Very possibly, having found that the scheme worked satisfactorily the first time, Judd would visit him again, and probably demand other sums of money. On this occasion he would rob the Head, but in the future he might demand of Loder his own personal cash. Everything was in Judd's favour, nothing in Loder's. Once the man had cleared off with Dr. Locke's supply of bank-notes, the prefect would be as much in his power as ever.

Why should he submit to it?

Loder got up from the bed and paced the room with a frowning brow. He was endeavouring to think out some subtle scheme whereby he could free himself of Lucas Judd's unwelcome attentions. If he could rid himself of the man, once and for all, everything would go on smoothly. As things now were his life at Greyfriars would for ever be troubled with the prospect of another visit from the rascally second officer of the Norisdale.

"If I could only think of some scheme!" Loder murmured perplexedly. "It's out of the question to suppose that Judd will give me any written statement. I must get rid of him some other way. By George!"

Loder started.

A sudden gleam appeared in his eyes. A thought had just entered his head, and, for the moment, it actually startled him.

"And yet, why not?" he asked himself feverishly. "It will be the safest way in the end. And it will be the simplest thing in the world, with hardly any risk. Once Judd's in prison I shall be secure. They'll give him at least two years' penal servitude, and by that time I shall have left Greyfriars, and will be safe from his rotten attentions."

It was a treacherous scheme that had entered Loder's head, but the more he thought of it, the more it appealed to him. After all, Judd was a scoundrel, and deserved to be treated as such.

Loder's idea was to admit Judd into the School House, and then give the alarm. Judd would be captured with burglar's tools upon him, and would be handed over to the police. It was possible that he might, in his rage, accuse Loder of being his accomplice. But the thing would seem so absurd that the Head would not listen.

It was a way out of the difficulty. The plan did not strike Loder as being treacherous. Judd was a dangerous man, and would be safer under lock and key. Loder,

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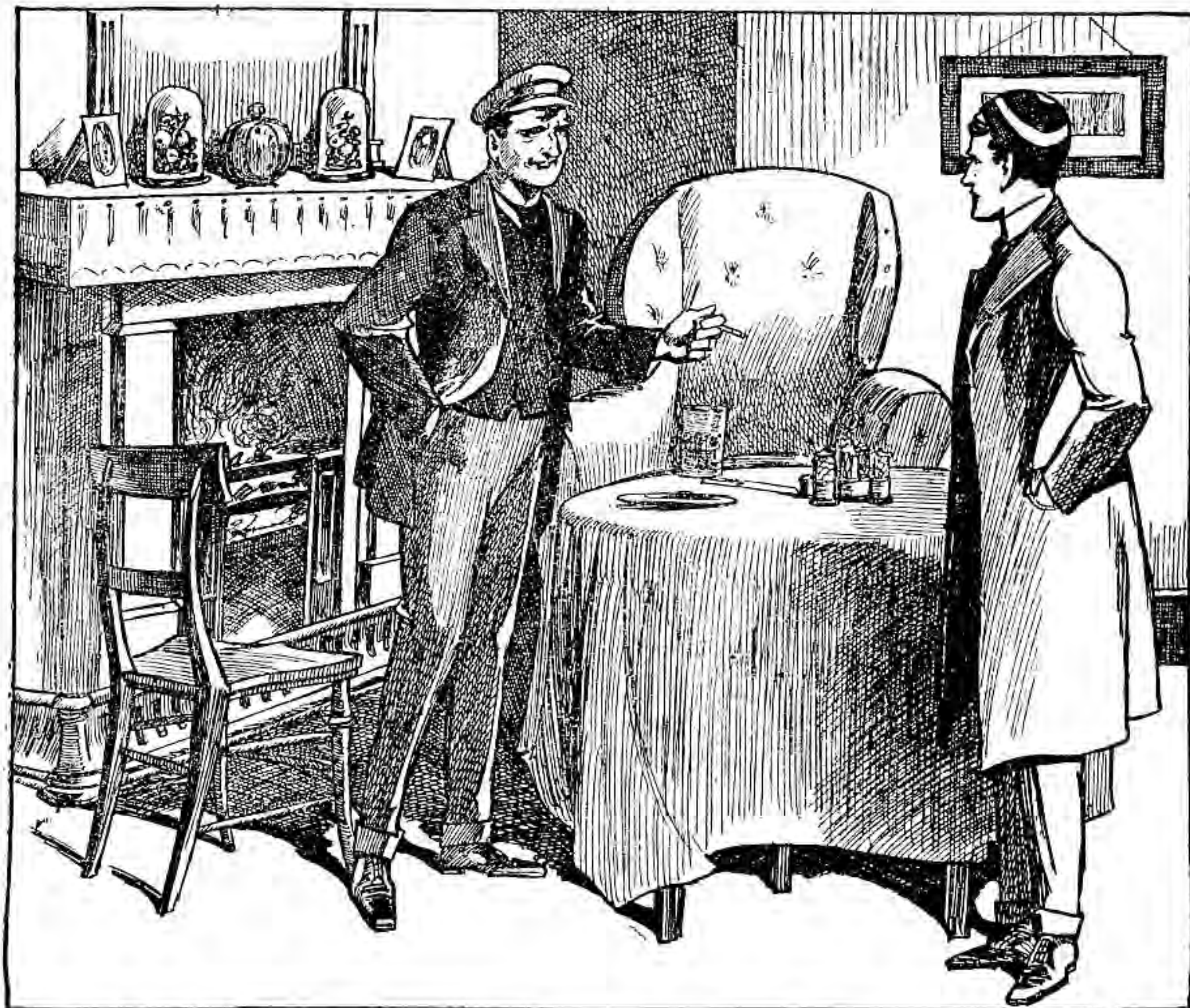
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Loder advanced into the room, and the seafaring man rose to his feet. "I thought you'd turn up, young shaver," he said grimly. "I guess those circles made you feel kind of skereed, eh?" Loder stared at the sunburnt man. "I don't know you," he replied. (See Chapter 4.)

in fact, told himself that he would be doing a service to society at large.

"It's his own fault!" he muttered. "He shouldn't have come here at all! I'm hanged if I'll be a party to such villainy! I'll not let the Head suffer by my hands!"

Midnight boomed out.

"Twelve o'clock!" Loder exclaimed. "Two hours more yet. Well, I've got plenty of time to think the thing out in detail."

Sleep was impossible, under the circumstances.

So the prefect undressed and donned his pyjamas and dressing-gown. Then, lighting a cigarette—there was no danger of discovery in the middle of the night—he lay on the outside of the bed and reviewed the situation.

The time passed slowly. Greyfriars was all asleep. Silence reigned over everything, for there was scarcely a breath of wind.

One o'clock at last.

"Only another hour," thought Loder. "I wish it was all over!"

He began to get restless now, and paced his room impatiently. How would the night's adventures end? What would be the ultimate result of Lucas Judd's visit to Greyfriars? Loder couldn't guess, but he meant to make a determined effort to free himself from the fellow's clutches. Judd's statement that Loder had swindled him

was, in a measure, untrue. For the game had been a perfectly straight one; except that Loder had taken an unfair advantage of his companion's condition. Looking at it in one light, the game had been a swindle, for Loder knew he could never have won the money had Judd been sober.

The time lay heavy on Loder's hands, and it seemed that two o'clock would never arrive. But as the school clock was still ticking away with its usual sedate monotony, it was bound to strike the two solemn notes at the appointed time.

A few minutes before the hour Loder turned his gas out, and slipped a pocket electric lamp into his dressing-gown pocket. Then, very cautiously, he opened the door and stole out into the passage. For a moment he paused and listened. It seemed to him as though he had the whole great building to himself; as though he were the only living thing within its walls.

"Not much risk!" he muttered. "Everybody's dead asleep. Thank goodness we sha'n't have to pass any bed-rooms or dormitories!"

To Loder's ears it seemed as if the stairs creaked with appalling noise. Each trivial noise sounded like a thunder-clap. But this is always the case when one is alone at dead of night. In broad daylight the same sounds pass absolutely unnoticed.

Boom! Boom!

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"Two o'clock at last!" murmured the prefect. "I expect Judd's waiting for me."

Arrived on the ground floor, he slipped along the passages to the rear part of the house, where the domestic offices were situated, and over which Mrs. Kebble presided at all reasonable hours. At the present moment, however, the worthy lady was probably snoring in bed—assuming that Mrs. Kebble indulged in that gentle exercise.

Loder halted at a little side door, which led out into the yard. With extreme caution he slipped back the bolts, and turned the key in the lock. Then, gently opening the door, he peered out into the night.

The silence was complete.

"Hist!" muttered Loder, almost inaudibly. "Are you there?"

Not a sound came in reply, but, with a suddenness that gave Loder an unpleasant start, Lucas Judd appeared from out of the gloom.

"By Jove!" murmured Loder. "You startled me!"

"Guess your narves ain't as strong as mine, sonny," breathed Judd coolly. "Say, this ain't a time for foolin' around. We'll get busy right away."

"You want to go straight to the Head's study, I suppose?"

"Yep, sure!"

"Then follow me!"

Loder carefully relocked and rebolted the door, and then he led the way up the dark passages, showing a light now and then from his electric lamp. At a little window, looking out on to a corner of the Close, he paused.

"Better leave this open!" he murmured. "Then, if you're suddenly alarmed, you'll be able to slip out of the house without any delay."

"Guess that's a good notion," remarked Judd approvingly.

Loder's object in opening the window, however, was very different to that which he had explained. He wanted it to appear that the window had been the means of Judd's entry into the School House.

They went cautiously on until they had arrived at the more familiar parts of the building. Loder led the way, and his heart was beating rapidly. He meant to betray his companion, and it was not exactly a pleasant task. But still, it had to be done; and the sooner it was over the better.

Outside a heavy door they paused, and Judd looked inquiringly at Loder.

"Say, is this the head teacher's study?"

"Yes," replied Loder untruthfully. For, as a matter of fact, they were standing before the door of a large cupboard in the lower hall. The key was on the outside, and as he turned it, eyed rather curiously by Judd, he felt that it was necessary to offer a few words of explanation.

"The Head never locks his study up!" he murmured. "Jolly silly, of course, but it just happens right for you. I expect you'll find the safe a pretty tough nut to crack, though."

Lucas Judd chuckled.

"Leave that to me, sonny," he replied softly.

Loder opened the door. The interior of the "study" was as dark as pitch. Judd was standing beside the prefect; and, without the least warning of his object, Loder suddenly gave Judd a violent shove. The man, with a gasp of surprise, shot forward, and pitched over some object in the big cupboard. Then the door slammed to, and the key turned in the lock.

Loder leaned against the door, panting breathlessly.

"It's done!" he muttered triumphantly.

A violent oath sounded indistinctly through the thick door.

"Say, what's the name of—"

But Loder did not wait to hear Judd's expostulations. He ruffled his hair, and ran towards the stairs shouting wildly:

"Help! Burglars! Help!"

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The shouts rang out with amazing loudness in the stillness of the night, and echoed through the corridors. Loder mounted the stairs three at a time, still yelling,

"Help!" he roared. "Wingate! Help!"

Loder paused on the landing, and listened breathlessly. From below came sounds of dull thuds on the cupboard door. But other sounds were proceeding from nearer quarters. Doors were being opened, and excited voices made themselves heard.

Two figures came hurrying along the corridor, one of them holding a candle. They revealed themselves as Mr. Quelch and Wingate of the Sixth.

"Upon my soul!" gasped Mr. Quelch. "What is all this disturbance? Good gracious, Loder, you are as white as a sheet!"

Loder breathed hard.

"What's the matter?" demanded Wingate sharply.

"It's a burglar!" exclaimed Loder. "It's all right; I've locked him up in the hall cupboard. He's safe enough until the police are fetched!"

"A burglar!" ejaculated Wingate, with a start.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "What a terrible occurrence! You are greatly to be commended, Loder, for capturing the wretch with such admirable promptitude!"

"I couldn't sleep, sir," explained Loder glibly. "I thought I heard somebody out in the Close. Then, in the stillness of the night, a sound came upwards from the lower passages, and I guessed that something was wrong. Without a second's hesitation, I jumped out of bed, slipped on my dressing-gown, and hurried down to investigate. As I was creeping down the hall I suddenly came face to face with a strange man, and instantly floored him. Before he had fully recovered his wits I bundled him into the cupboard and locked the door. He's there now, sir!"

"Dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "Most remarkable, Loder!"

"Jolly smart, anyhow," remarked Wingate. "You must have acted pretty promptly, Loder."

"I didn't want my head smashed," answered Loder. "I happened to get in my bit first, you see. Just luck, I suppose."

While they had been speaking Courtney, and one or two other Sixth-Formers, had crowded eagerly round. Now, as there was a slight pause, the sound of a banging door floated up from the lower regions.

Loder started.

"Good heavens, he's escaped!" he gasped, thoroughly alarmed—as well he might be.

Mr. Quelch opened his mouth, as if to speak, but before he could get a word out, Wingate, Courtney, and Loder dashed helter-skelter down the stairs.

As they turned into the hall a dim figure suddenly appeared out of the gloom—the prefects had brought no light with them, in their haste.

"Capture him!" panted Loder frantically.

With one accord the three Sixth-Formers threw themselves upon the figure. A wild yell sounded, followed by a gasp and a grunt. The unfortunate night marauder disappeared amid a confused collection of arms and legs.

"We've got him, anyhow!" gasped Wingate. "Another minute, though, and he would have escaped."

Mr. Quelch came hurrying down the stairs.

"It's all right, sir," said Courtney. "We've collared him!"

"Ow!" roared the captive, in a muffled voice from beneath the three prefects, "I'm squashed to a jelly! Gerroff me chest, you rotters!"

Mr. Quelch started.

"Dear me!" he exclaimed. "I hope you have not injured the scoundrel! Release him, Wingate, and let him stand up!"

"You asses! You fatheads!" howled the burglar. "What the dickens did you bowl me over for?"

Wingate jumped to his feet with an exclamation.

"Great Scott! It's not the burglar at all!" he ejaculated. "It's Coker of the Fifth!"

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Shock for Loder!

HORACE COKER sat up dazedly.

"Of course it's me!" he shouted ungrammatically. "Couldn't you see it was me?"

"By Jove!" exclaimed Wingate, chuckling.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Courtney. "We've been sitting on old Coker!"

Coker groaned.

"Ow! It's nothing to grin at, you idiot!" he grunted. "I'm bruised all over! Of all the silly, fatheaded asses——"

"Coker!" snapped Mr. Quelch sternly.

"Oh, is that you, sir?"

"Yes, it is I, Coker!" said the Remove-master. "Were you addressing your outrageous remarks to me?"

"Of course not, sir. I didn't know you were there."

"I am glad to hear that, Coker."

"I'm hurt, sir," groaned Coker painfully. "These ass—ahem!—these chaps——"

"It was your own fault," interrupted Mr. Quelch; "your own fault entirely, Coker. In the darkness it was impossible to distinguish your features. What are you doing down here, and how did you get here?"

"I heard yells, sir," answered Coker, "so I slipped out of bed to see what the rumpus was. I came down the back stairs, and——"

"Did you hear a door bang?"

"No, sir; at least, the only door that made a noise was the one I banged myself."

Loder looked relieved.

"Oh, then it's all right!" he exclaimed. "The scoundrel is still locked up!"

Mr. Quelch and the prefects were standing at the corner of the corridor, close to the Rag, and some little distance from the cupboard in which Lucas Judd had been locked. Therefore, they were unaware of what was happening in the vicinity of the burglar's prison. For, although Loder believed Judd to be secure, such was not actually the case. Quite the opposite, as a matter of fact.

And Billy Bunter was the cause of it.

Naturally enough, Loder's urgent shouts had awakened nearly everybody in the building, and the Removites were no exceptions. They scrambled out of bed, lit the gas, and then opened the dormitory door. Excited voices wafted along the passage.

"My hat! There's something up!" said Harry Wharton.

"The upfulness is terrific!"

"Perhaps it's a fire!" exclaimed Skinner nervously.

"Let's get out!" said Snoop, turning pale. "I'm blowed if I'm going to stick up here and be roasted alive! Quick, you chaps! Fire! Fi——"

Vernon-Smith clapped his hand over Snoop's mouth.

"You young ass!" he snapped sternly. "You don't want to cause a panic, do you? There's no fire!"

"But—but——"

Snoop spluttered and gasped as Vernon-Smith removed his hand.

"It might be a fire!" he panted.

"Rats!"

"Shut up, Snoop!"

And Snoop subsided.

"I'm jolly well going to see what it is!" explained Billy Bunter, pushing forward.

"Better wait a bit," suggested Bolsover. "Some of the masters might be about, and then you'd be sent back with a giddy flea in your ear!"

"I don't see why we should stop up here if there's some excitement going on," said Bunter. "I want to know what it jolly well is!"

"Trust you to shove your nose forward," said Bob Cherry. "I vote we stay here a bit. If things quieten down, we shall know it's all right. There's no blessed sense in running into a master and getting lines!"

And the others agreed, with the exception of Billy Bunter. That inquisitive youth found it impossible to contain his curiosity. If there was anything "on" Bunter wanted to be in the know.

"I'm going to find out what the trouble is!" he declared.

The Removites didn't try to dissuade him. It would teach him a lesson if he got a stiff impot for his pains. Not that Harry Wharton & Co. were not curious to learn the cause of the disturbance. They were curious.

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but they thought it wise to wait a few minutes before venturing out of the dormitory. For juniors to be wandering about the corridors at dead of night was a heavily-punishable offence.

The juniors were of opinion that they were the most capable persons to deal with anything that required prompt action and capable handling. Unfortunately, however, the Head's opinion was slightly different. Dr. Locke considered that the seniors were the right and proper fellows to investigate strange happenings at nocturnal hours, provided such investigation was necessary.

But Billy Bunter's curiosity was a thing unquenchable. He never thought of risks or capture until it was too late. The main thing was to satisfy his desire for knowledge, which knowledge, however, was not always intended for his benefit.

He rolled along the passage, and peered over the balustrade at the top of the stairs. The sound of voices reached his ears, but it was impossible to hear what the unseen speakers were saying. So, after a little hesitation, he slipped downstairs, and dodged round the corner into the hall.

Then, just as he was about to creep forward towards the Rag, footsteps sounded above, and somebody started descending the stairs. It was only Potter of the Fifth venturing out to see what had happened to Coker; but Bunter thought it was a master.

Accordingly, he slipped back into the gloomiest corner of the Hall, rather apprehensive now as to the wisdom of his venture. He came to a standstill exactly opposite the door of the cupboard.

He blinked round him in the gloom.

"My hat! This is lucky!" he murmured to himself. "I'm right against the door of this giddy cupboard, so if anyone comes along with a light I can slip in, and be safe as eggs until the coast is clear!"

It was a comforting thought. Perhaps it wouldn't have been quite so comforting, however, had Bunter known what the cupboard contained. And, almost in anticipation of his decision, at that very moment somebody commenced descending the stairs with a light. Apparently the whole of Greyfriars was wide awake for some unexplained reason.

Bunter uttered a grunt.

"Blow it!" he muttered discontentedly.

If he wished to avoid discovery he would have to hide. So, not at all pleased with the way events were shaping, he quietly turned the key in the lock behind him.

And then he got the fright of his life!

As he quietly opened the door he suddenly heard a noise in the interior of the cupboard. There was something in there! Bunter paused, his legs quivering under him.

"Mum-my hat!" he gasped.

A fierce face loomed up, like a horrible nightmare, out of the darkness, and Bunter gave a howl of terror. Lucas Judd grasped his shoulders and swung him out of the way like a bundle of straw. The man was furious with desperation and hatred, although infinitely relieved to find himself at liberty.

Bunter crashed against the wall, and sat down with a thud that shook the whole building. Bunter was hurt, which, considering the circumstances, was not to be wondered at.

"Yarrah!" he roared. "Ow! Oooop!"

Judd glared up the hall. At the foot of the stairs stood the stout figure of Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth Form, holding a lighted candle above his head.

"Who—who is that?" he demanded nervously. "Come here!"

"Hang you!" snarled Lucas Judd desperately. "Guess a fat galoot like you ain't goin' to stop me!"

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Prout.

Lucas Judd had no intention of being captured now that Billy Bunter had considerably set him at liberty. He started forward, with the intention of dashing past Mr. Prout and making for the open window. But at that moment Mr. Quelch and the prefects, startled by Bunter's howl of anguish, appeared round the corner to investigate.

Judd's escape was cut off.
"Great Scott! He's got free!" shouted Loder desperately.

"Stop him, Mr. Prout!" called Wingate. "Hold him, sir!"

"Cer-certainly!" ejaculated Mr. Prout.

He made as if to grasp the burglar as the latter passed. But Judd swung round with a snarl that fairly made Mr. Prout's hair stand on end. The candlestick dropped from his grasp, and fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Good gracious!" gasped the master of the Fifth.

He did not look very valiant, and his appearance was positively ludicrous a moment later. For Judd hit out at desperate random, and his fist caught Mr. Prout, as Coker described it afterwards, "right on his giddy bread-basket!"

It all happened in a second. Mr. Prout collapsed, with a despairing moan, at the foot of the stairs, and, before anyone could take action, Judd had jumped over his prostrate form, and was mounting the stairs three at a time.

"After him!" roared Wingate.

Loder's face was as white as a sheet. He realised what it would mean if Judd got clear away—the man would have revenge for the scurvy trick which Loder had played upon him!

"We must catch him!" panted Loder.

"Rather!"

"After him!"

"On the ball!" roared Coker excitedly.

They all dashed upstairs, but Judd had got a good start. He flew along the upper passage, hardly knowing which way to turn. He was desperate now, and he meant to make his escape by some means or other. He realised that Loder had betrayed him, and his fury was terrible.

Round the corner of the upper corridor he ran at full speed, and then checked himself. Ten yards ahead stood an open, lighted doorway, with an excited crowd round it. Harry Wharton & Co. had heard the shouts and knew that something was seriously the matter.

Judd set his teeth hard.

There was no turning back, for the pursuers were close upon his heels. The only thing to do was to dash forward and scatter the juniors who barred his path.

"My hat! It's a burglar!" shouted Harry Wharton.

And from behind Judd came a shout in Wingate's voice:

"Stop him!"

Only for a second did Judd hesitate; then he flung himself forward with all his strength, meaning to dash through the juniors, and scatter them before him like chaff. But he had reckoned without his hosts. Harry Wharton & Co. were a rather tough crowd to scatter.

As Judd dashed upon them, they grabbed and clawed at his clothing. For a second it was touch and go.

Then, just as Judd was in the act of breaking free, Bob Cherry went down with a thud, having caught a violent blow from the man's fists. Bob's head seemed to be spinning, but he had all his wits about him. In a moment he twined his arms around the scoundrel's legs, and Judd, in the act of moving forward, lost his balance, and pitched over.

"By thunder, I guess I'll——"

What Judd guessed he'd do was never known, for he found himself simply smothered beneath an excited pile of youthful humanity. The Removites swarmed over him like so many ants, and he was utterly spent by the time Wingate and the rest dashed up.

"It's all right, Wingate!" panted Harry Wharton breathlessly. "We've collared the rotter!"

"Thank Heaven!" muttered Loder.

Coker pushed forward.

"I'm blessed if I can see him!" he exclaimed. "I don't believe the young beggars have copped the rotter at all!"

Harry Wharton chuckled.

"Oh, he's here, right enough," he explained. "We're sitting all over him, you see, to keep him down. For the time being, he's invisible."

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"Groooh!" came from beneath the pile of Removites. "Yes, the juniors have captured him, without a doubt," said Wingate. "It was very smart of you, young 'uns! It's all serene, sir," he added, as Mr. Quelch came up. "There's no mistake this time."

"I'm very glad to hear it, Wingate—very glad indeed!" said Mr. Quelch thankfully. "Dear me, all this excitement is quite unsettling me! You had better let the scoundrel get up, and we will search him for evidence of his villainy. He may have purloined many valuables before Loder gave the alarm."

"I don't think so, sir," said Loder.

"Well, we will make certain—one moment!" added Mr. Quelch. "I hear heavy footsteps approaching. It is probably the police-constable from the village; I telephoned for his assistance when the alarm was first given."

P.-c. Tozer strode majestically towards the breathless group.

"Queer goings hon!" he remarked solemnly. "Ah, Mr. Quelch, I 'ope there's nothing wrong, sir?"

"I am afraid there is, Tozer," replied Mr. Quelch. "Some desperate fellow broke into the school and would probably have escaped with a vast amount of booty but for the fact that the alarm was given with really commendable promptitude by Master Loder."

An upheaval suddenly made itself apparent among the Removites as Mr. Quelch uttered the last words, and Loder felt uneasy.

"Well; you seem to have got the villain, sir," remarked Mr. Tozer, looking rather unfavourably at Harry Wharton & Co. "I don't see why these young rips should have interfered, though."

Mr. Quelch frowned.

"It is not really necessary for you to see anything, Tozer—except the prisoner!" he replied sharply. "Had it not been for these juniors the rascal would have escaped. It is your duty to take charge of him and see that he is securely placed under lock and key."

Tozer grunted and stepped forward.

"No need for you boys to hold him any longer," he said pompously. "I've come to take charge—I'm here!"

"Cæsar hath arrove!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors scrambled to their feet, and revealed the figure of Lucas Judd lying prostrate upon the floor. His eyes were gleaming dangerously, and there was a fierce look about his jaw as he rose in response to Mr. Tozer's command.

"Better come quietly, my man," warned the constable. "And I may as well add that hanything you say will be taken down and used as hevidence."

"Say, cut that!" snarled Judd. "Guess I ain't goin' to be jawed by an all-fired jay like you! I'm copped, so you'd best git me around to the police depot slick."

Tozer produced a pair of handcuffs and snapped them on to Judd's wrists. Then he searched the man, but found no valuables upon him. While he was doing this Judd's eyes were fixed upon Loder, and the prefect saw with apprehension that a fierce, baleful light gleamed in them.

"I was betrayed," said Judd quietly, but with deadly hatred. "Guess I'd have fooled the whole bunch of you but for the hound who split! I know who it was—guess there's no boss-sense in mentioning names—and as sure as I'm standing here I'll make the skunk pay for his treachery!"

Loder shivered.

The man's eyes rested upon him for a second, and the prefect knew that Judd meant all he said. Possibly, when he had served his term of imprisonment, he would have overcome his hatred. By that time, too, Loder would have left Greyfriars for good.

So there was nothing particularly to worry about.

Without further ado, P.-c. Tozer marched his prisoner off, and was escorted to the door by Mr. Quelch and several of the prefects. Wingate, meanwhile, remained in the dormitory passage.

"You chaps had better buzz off to bed before Mr. Quelch comes back," he said to Coker, Potter, and several others.

And the Fifth-Formers departed. Wingate went into the Remove dormitory and stood by the gas-bracket.

"Now, then, into bed with you," he said cheerfully. "The excitement's over—thanks to your prompt action! It's half-past two, and if you don't get to sleep you'll be fit for nothing to-morrow!"

He looked round the dormitory.

"Where's Bunter?" he asked suddenly.

Before anyone could reply, Billy Bunter rolled silently into the dormitory, looking very sorry for himself. He was not wearing his spectacles, so, being very short-sighted, he didn't see Wingate.

"My only topper!" he exclaimed. "I only just managed to get here without being spotted. There's a whole crowd of rotten prefects wandering about!"

"Dry up, you ass!" muttered Peter Todd warningly.

"Oh, really Toddy, I don't see why I should dry up!" said Bunter. "I—I say, I didn't see Wingate about, so I suppose the lazy beggar's in bed!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"No, the lazy beggar isn't in bed, Bunter," said Wingate calmly.

"Oh, crumbs!" exclaimed Bunter, in dismay. "Is—is that you, Wingate? I—I was just saying——"

"I don't want any lies, Bunter!" interrupted Wingate sternly. "Where have you been? I believe you had something to do with the burglar's escape!"

"Oh, really, Wingate," protested Bunter. "I didn't see him at all!"

"Why did you utter that tremendous yell?"

"It wasn't me, Wingate; I didn't utter a sound!" said Bunter frantically. "How—how was I to know the rotter was locked up in the cupboard?"

"Ah! So you admit that you knew he was in the cupboard?" asked Wingate sharply.

"Nunno!" gasped Bunter. "You—you see, I went down to get a drink, as I was feeling so beastly thirsty. As a matter of fact, Bob Cherry sent me down——"

"What?" roared Bob.

"I—I mean Peter Todd——"

"Why, you young Ananias!" ejaculated Todd indignantly.

"Well, I don't see why you should accuse me of letting the rotter out of the cupboard!" went on Bunter. "I only unlocked the door so that I could hide in there, and the awful brute whacked me over the napper! I—I mean——"

"That's enough!" Wingate interrupted. "If the fellow hurt you, Bunter, it serves you right! As things have turned out, you didn't do much harm; but you might have been the cause of the burglar making good his escape. You'll take two hundred lines!"

"Oh, really, Wingate——"

But the captain of Greyfriars turned out the gas, and left the Removites chuckling over Bunter's discomfiture. They had warned him not to venture out of the dormitory, and now retribution had come upon him with a vengeance.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Startling News!

NEXT morning Gerald Loder felt somewhat easier. He had spent a sleepless night, but the knowledge that Judd was now safely under lock and key was comforting. The man was out of harm's way, and, as he had not mentioned Loder's name, the prefect felt that he had nothing to fear.

He knew that Harry Wharton & Co. had seen the mysterious circle on the back of Judd's letter; indeed, considering that Bunter had seen it also, it was now quite certain that the whole junior school knew of it into the bargain.

But there was nothing really alarming in this fact. The juniors, of course, would make all sorts of conjectures, but they could not possibly guess the truth. Moreover, as there would be no more of the signs the affair would soon be forgotten. And Loder did not presume that the Removites would connect the mystic

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circle with the burglarious visitor. Even supposing that they did, there was not an atom of proof to substantiate such a connection.

The Famous Five and Squiff were, as a matter of fact, discussing the matter at the present moment.

The morning was fine, and the juniors were grouped against the wall by the entrance gates.

Frank Nugent yawned.

"I feel jolly sleepy," he remarked. "This is what comes of having unwelcome visitors in the middle of the giddy night. It's a bit thick, you know, having our beauty sleep taken from us!"

"Oh, rats!" said Bob Cherry cheerfully. "I'm feeling as fit as a fiddle, though I'm blessed if I know exactly what state of fitness that expresses. Anyhow, I'm bright and chirpy. The thing is, who was the awful scoundrel who broke into the School House last night?"

"Well," remarked Squiff profoundly, "I should say he was an American."

Harry Wharton chuckled.

"Well, there's no need to tell us that," he said. "You could cut his accent with a knife."

"I shouldn't be surprised if it was a pal of Fisby's," remarked Johnny Bull, who shared No. 14 study with Squiff and Fisher T. Fish, the American junior. "A relation, very likely—it's quite possible that he's got some shady connections in the burgling bizney!"

Squiff chuckled.

"Good job Fisby isn't anywhere near!" he grinned. "He'd have your blood, Johnny, for casting those horrible aspersions upon the character of his relations. But, joking apart, one fact has struck me."

"And what's that?"

"Well, it seems queer that this giddy cracksman should break into Greyfriars at the same time as those mysterious circles made their appearance. It looks to me as if they might be connected in some way."

Bob Cherry shook his head.

"No fear!" he replied. "I don't see how that's possible, Squiffy. That circle, you remember, appeared on the back of a letter to Loder. It's too

thick to suppose that Loder had a hand in the affair. He's a howling rotter, we all know, but I think he'd draw the line at that."

"Of course," said Squiff. "I wasn't suggesting that. But how do we know that chap was a burglar—in the ordinary sense?"

"I don't understand," said Harry Wharton.

"Why," went on Squiff sagely, "the chap may have arranged to meet Loder for some other reason—to give him a tip about a giddy horse, or to collect some tin. Then they got squabbling, and the alarm was given. There's no proof at all that the man broke into the building; there are no smashed windows, no clues of any sort. And there's nothing to show why he was here; it's only presumed that he came to commit a burglary."

"That's so," agreed Bob Cherry thoughtfully. "But still, it's all guesswork, Squiffy. You may be all at sea, you know. The chap may know nothing about the mystic circle."

"Still, all the same, it's jolly queer," said Johnny Bull bluntly. "There's a mystery here, and we ought to unravel it. The cracksman's arrested, we know——"

Johnny Bull was interrupted by the arrival of Gosling, the school porter. Gosling had apparently just come up from Friardale, for he was breathing rather laboriously. He halted before the juniors with a solemn expression.

"Good-mornin', young gents!" he said, with a mysterious look. "I've just come up from the willage——"

"Oh, buzz off, Gossy!" interrupted Johnny Bull. "I was talking."

"I've got noos," said Gosling heavily.

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"Noos?" repeated Bob Cherry. "What sort of noos, Gossy? You ain't going to hang yourself, are you?"

"Now don't be funny, Master Cherry," said Gosling, with a severe look. "I said noos, not noose. What I says is this 'ere, Tozer ain't no more fit to take charge of a desperit raskil than our boot-boy!"

"Is this the noos?" asked Harry Wharton.

"I'm just a-comin' to it," went on Gosling.

"Well buck up; it's nearly breakfast-time."

"Wot I says is this—"

"Oh, get on with it!"

"If you young geats wouldn't keep hinterrupting me I should be ever so much quicker," said Gosling. "Old Tozer's a fool, and he deserves to be lying in bed, with a crack over the 'ead which would 'ave killed a nigger. Wot I says is this 'ere—he ain't fit for his job. Fancy a-lettin' that scoundril escape, so's to be a danger to all decent folk!"

Harry Wharton & Co. exchanged glances.

"What's happened, then?" asked Bob Cherry quickly.

"Why, it seems that that burglar broke away from Tozer as he was bein' led to the station," said Gosling indignantly. "Snapped his 'andcuffs clean, 'e did. Afore Tozer could turn round the willain gave 'im a fearful crack on the 'ead, and Tozer was found this mornin' a-mutterin' all manner o' tom-fool things to 'imself."

"And the burglar?" asked Squiff.

"Oh, Master Field, 'e's gone completely!" replied Gosling. "Got clean away, I reckon. Wot I says is—"

And the porter went on his way, muttering indignantly to himself. The Famous Five and Squiff looked at one another significantly.

"Escaped, by Jove!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"Just like Tozer," said Nugent disdainfully. "I always said he was a bit of an ass."

Harry Wharton was looking thoughtful.

"I say, I've got an idea," he remarked. "Just now Squiff suggested that the fellow might have been connected with that mystic circle, and, consequently, with Loder. Suppose we find Loder and tell him the news?"

"What for?"

"Let him jolly well find out himself!"

"Hear, hear!"

"The hear-hearfulness is terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "I have no wishfulness to impart the direful news to the honourable and disgusting Loder!"

"But, you asses—you chumps—can't you see what I'm driving at?" asked Wharton. "If this burglar chap isn't connected with Loder he will receive the news with a smiling chivvy; it won't matter a hang to him whether the chap's in prison or at large. But, on the other hand, if it's as Squiff suggests, Loder will be jolly startled at the news."

"Well, I don't think much of the wheeze, but there's no harm in trying it," said Bob Cherry. "Anything for a quiet life. Come on; it'll be time for brekker in another five minutes!"

The six Removites walked across the Close, still talking animatedly over the rather startling news. As they mounted the School House steps Tom Dutton, of the Remove, came out. Dutton was very deaf, although he wouldn't admit it.

"Have you seen Loder?" asked Bob Cherry, as he and his chums paused.

"No," said Dutton, sniffing. "I can't smell it. The air seems fresh enough to me."

"Who's talking about smells?" exclaimed Bob, in surprise.

"Didn't you say there was an odour?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You—you ass!" gasped Bob Cherry. "I said where's Loder?"

Dutton looked shocked.

"You silly ass!" he said warmly. "You know I don't drink the rotten stuff!"

Bob Cherry gasped.

"Don't drink it!" he said faintly. "Don't drink what?"

"Whisky-and-soda!" replied Dutton. "I'm surprised at you, Cherry. Fancy asking a chap to have some whisky-and-soda!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"I didn't say whisky-and-soda!" roared Bob Cherry hoarsely. "I asked you if you'd seen Loder. Where's Loder? Oh, my only topper, take him away, and put him quietly to death!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Dutton, comprehending. "You want to know where Loder is? Why the dickens didn't you speak up, you ass? You can't expect me to hear if you only whisper, can you? I saw Loder go into his study five minutes ago."

"Good!" said Squiff. "He's in his blessed study!"

"He isn't!" exclaimed Dutton.

"Why, you ass, you just said he was!" shouted Squiff.

"I didn't!" replied Dutton indignantly. "I think you're an ass, Field! I never said Loder was muddy!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Come on!" chuckled Harry Wharton. "We've got all the information we want, anyhow. Thank heavens that deaf ass isn't in No. 1 Study; we should be all off our rockers within a week."

And the Famous Five and Squiff went on their way, leaving Dutton protesting vigorously that he wasn't a sneak.

They arrived outside Loder's door and tapped. Loder was there, and in answer to his gruff demand to know who the dickens was bashing on the door, the Removites trooped in.

"What the deuce——" began Loder.

"It's all right," said Harry Wharton. "We've come to tell you some news, Loder; we thought you might like to hear without any delay."

There was no love lost between Loder and the Removites, and the prefect suspected that there was something behind this visit. He was looking quite cheerful this morning, for he had just been telling himself that he had now nothing to fear, or, as Bob Cherry would have put it, that everything in the garden was lovely.

"Well," he demanded, "what's the news?"

"It's about that burglar——"

"What?"

"It's about that burglar," repeated Harry Wharton, eyeing Loder closely.

The prefect set his teeth.

"Well, what about him?" he asked. "Get it out, you young ass!"

"We've just heard from Gosling that the chap's escaped," said Wharton quietly. "It seems that Tozer let him go on the way to the station last night."

"Escaped!" gasped Loder hoarsely. "Good heavens!"

He started to his feet, and his face became haggard.

"It's a lie!" he shouted desperately. "I don't believe it. It can't be true! You young rotters, I believe it's a trick of yours to frighten me——"

Loder broke off, realising that his consternation was leading him to say too much. The Removites were regarding him curiously.

"Why should it frighten you?" asked Squiff.

"I—I——"

Loder gritted his teeth.

"Is this true?" he rapped out.

"It is, so far as we know," replied Bob Cherry. "Being a prefect, we thought you might like to know. Gosling's just come up from the village, so I shouldn't think there's any mistake about it."

For Next Monday:

- - THE - - SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!

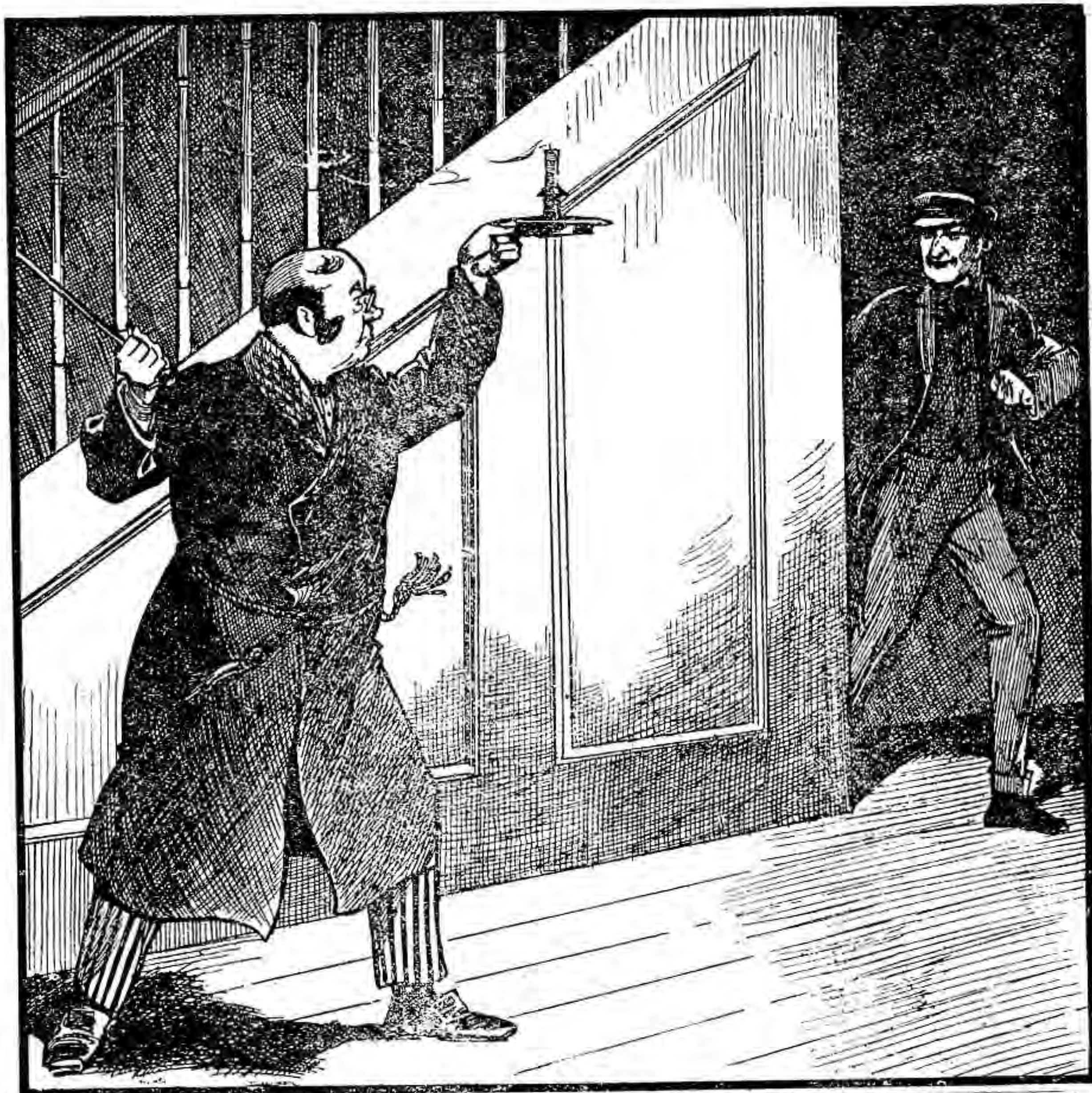
Another Splendid,
Long, Complete Story
of the Chums of
Greyfriars.

—By—

FRANK RICHARDS.

Order in Advance.

PRICE ONE PENNY.



Judd glared up the hall. At the foot of the stairs stood the stout figure of Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth Form, holding a lighted candle above his head. "Who—who is that?" he demanded nervously. "Hang you!" snarled Lucas Judd desperately. "Guess a fat galoot like you ain't going to stop me!" "Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Prout. (See Chapter 6.)

Loder caught his breath in sharply, and his face had gone the colour of chalk. The full realisation of the awful news had sunk into his brain. Lucas Judd at liberty, and he had threatened to have his revenge upon Loder! The news was so startling that the wretched prefect could hardly control himself. But at last, realising that the juniors were closely watching him, he made an effort to recover himself.

"Well, what the deuce has it got to do with me?" he snarled angrily. "Do you think I care what becomes of the confounded burglar? It's like your beastly nerve to pile into my study with the idiotic yarn!"

"We thought——"

"I don't care what you thought!" roared Loder, striving to hide his consternation by assuming anger. "You'll take a hundred lines each for impertinence!"

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"Oh, I say, Loder!"

"I don't want any check!" snarled Loder. "Clear out!"

"Look here——"

"Clear out!" roared Loder furiously.

And the Famous Five and Squiff accordingly cleared out. And as they walked down the passage they looked at one another significantly. That interview with Loder had put all doubts at rest.

"Well, we know now," said Harry Wharton grimly. "Loder was startled out of his giddy wits by the news. But why should he be? What possible connection can there be between him and the burglar?"

"I don't expect the chap was a burglar at all," said Nugent.

"Oh, rats!"

"I expect he was a rotten bookmaker, as Squiffy

suggested," Nugent went on. "That's why Loder's so upset. He was just congratulating himself on the fact that he wouldn't have to shell out a lot of tin, when we brought the news that the joker had escaped. Which means that Loder will have to pay up, after all."

"Well, that's one explanation," remarked Squiff. "Somehow, though, it does not seem to be very convincing."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Oh, what does it matter?" he asked. "After all, it's no blessed concern of ours, is it? If Loder likes to be upset because the chap has given Tozey the slip, that's his bizney! No need to worry ourselves about Loder's troubles."

Cling-clang!

"And there goes the brekker-bell," said Bob Cherry cheerfully. "Blow Loder! Blow the burglar! In fact, blow everything, and let's go in and attend to our little tummies! They're more deserving of consideration than a silly ass like Loder!"

And the Removites trooped off to the dining-hall, dismissing Loder and all his works from their minds—for the time being, at any rate.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER. At the Head's Bidding!

AT large!

Gerald Loder sat in his study, thinking of the disaster which had overtaken his plans. He had been worried all day, as a matter of fact—worried most of the time by the uncertainty of the whole matter.

But it was evening now, and all doubts were set at rest. It was known for a fact that Lucas Judd had succeeded in giving Mr. Tozer the slip. Loder, who knew the second officer of the Norisdale fairly well, was not so amazed as the authorities themselves. He knew Judd to possess tremendous strength. A life at sea had made Judd's muscles like whipcord, and the snapping of the handcuffs had not been a superhuman feat.

All the same, Loder was startled by the news—so startled that he hardly realised the full significance of the thing until now.

Judd was at liberty—perhaps within sight of Greyfriars at that very moment.

And he had threatened to exact vengeance upon his betrayer—Loder.

"Good heavens, I'm in a terrible position!" Loder told himself desperately. "Judd will hang about the neighbourhood and await his opportunity to catch me!"

Loder pictured to himself the expression on Judd's face as he had spoken those words outside the Remove dormitory the previous night.

"I know who it was," Judd had said, his voice vibrating with deadly hatred, "and, as sure as I'm standing here, I'll make the skunk pay for his treachery!"

Loder shivered.

Those words had been spoken, not in anger, but with cool, deliberate earnestness. Judd had meant them. He would make Loder pay for his treachery.

"What can I do?" Loder muttered to himself frantically.

And there was no answer. He could do nothing. There was nothing to be done, in fact, except await events. And the period of waiting was likely to prove a terribly anxious time for the wretched senior who had shown himself a traitor.

Loder poked the fire, and made the red embers burst into a blaze.

Outside the wind howled dismally through the old Cloisters and round the Close. The rain pattered heavily upon the window-panes. It was a wretched night.

Loder rose to his feet at last, turned out the gas, and left his study. He felt that if he remained too long alone his absence would be noticeable, and he did not want the other fellows to suspect that anything was wrong.

But, as he was walking along the Sixth-Form passage on his way to the prefects' room, he heard the rustle of a gown, and Dr. Locke appeared, with some books under his arm. He had just come from the Sixth-Form.

room, where he had been delivering a lecture, and was on his way to his study.

"Ah, Loder!" he exclaimed, pausing in the passage. "I wish you to undertake a little commission for me."

"Certainly, sir!" said Loder.

"I have a book here which I promised to let the vicar have to-night," went on the Head. "It is an extremely valuable book, and I do not feel inclined to entrust it to one of the servants. I am sure you will not object to taking it to the Rev. Lamb for me."

"N-no, sir," stammered Loder. "I—I'll take it with pleasure."

But Loder's face blanched at the thought of having to venture out of the school precincts on such a wild night—the very sort of night Lucas Judd would prefer to keep his promise. In all probability, he was even now on the watch, waiting—waiting for his victim!

The Head looked at Loder curiously.

"What is the matter, Loder?" he asked.

"Nothing, sir—nothing at all."

"You seem pale."

"No, sir; I'm all right," Loder said hastily.

"Very well; I will leave the book in your charge," said Dr. Locke. "It will do quite well, Loder, if you deliver it any time before eight."

"Very good, sir."

And the Head nodded and rustled away. Loder stood looking after him, with a queer expression upon his face.

"Hang it!" he muttered savagely. "Why didn't the old fool send someone else? Confound him!"

He glared angrily at the book in his hands.

"Idiot!" he rapped out to himself. "The Head asked me if I was feeling ill. If I'd said 'Yes,' he'd never have suspected anything, and would have sent someone else. Oh, what a dashed fool I was!"

Loder saw it now. In his confusion he had told the Head he was perfectly all right, whereas, by a little tact, he might have got out of the unpleasant task. There was nothing else now except to do the Head's bidding.

"But I can't go—I daren't go!" he murmured. "Judd isn't the man to clear out of the neighbourhood simply because he's eluded the police. He'll stay here until he has seen me—until he's exacted his vengeance! Good heavens, the man may do me an injury! And if I go out now, on a dark night like this—"

A sudden gleam of hope came into Loder's eyes.

"One of the other fellows might be going down to Friardale," he thought. "If so, I can get rid of this rotten book, and so get out of the job. I'll go round and make inquiries, by Jove!"

It was still early in the evening, so it was quite on the cards that one of the seniors would be taking a jaunt down to the village. Almost as soon as Loder started walking down the passage Courtney of the Sixth bustled up.

"I say, Courtney, old man!"

"Hallo?" said Courtney, coming to a halt.

"The Head wants this book delivered to old Lamb," said Loder. "I thought perhaps you might be going down to the village?"

Courtney grinned.

"Not much!" he replied. "You can do your own dirty work, my boy! I'm no more fond of rain than you are!"

"Oh, I forgot the rain!" said Loder.

"You won't forget it when you're walking through it!" chuckled Courtney. "I don't think you'll find a deputy to-night, Loder!"

And Courtney walked on.

"Hang the rain!" Loder muttered. "I forgot it was such a rotten night. It's going to muck things up properly."

And so Loder found.

He put his head into Wingate's study, and found the captain of Greyfriars talking with Walker.

"Hallo, you look worried!" said the latter.

"Well, I am, as a matter of fact," Loder admitted. "I'm not feeling exactly up to the mark, and the Head wants this infernal book taken down to old Lamb. I thought perhaps one of you chaps might be going out?"

Wingate glanced at the rain-bespattered window.

"Sorry," he replied. "We're staying in to-night, thanks."

"None of your swank, Loder!" chuckled Walker. "You won't get us to volunteer, just to save your tootsies getting wet. Thank goodness, the Head didn't ask me!"

Loder grunted, and withdrew. He tried Carne next, and then Carberry, and several other prefects. But the reply was always the same. It was really a wretched night, and nobody was venturing out unless compelled. And Loder was not sufficiently popular to warrant any other fellow doing it for him out of sheer good nature.

There was no help for it; he would have to undertake the journey himself.

He stamped to his study in a fury.

"I won't go!" he exclaimed, slamming the door savagely. "Why the dickens can't the Head get the servants to do his rotten errands?"

But, at the same time, Loder knew that he would have to give a very good reason for not carrying out the Head's order. It would be no excuse to say the night was too wild; for, after all, the vicarage was not far, and the hour was still early.

And, upon consideration, Loder began to take a more hopeful view of the matter. After all, the wildness of the night might prove a blessing rather than a danger. Judd would scarcely be wandering about the lane in such weather on the bare off-chance of meeting his enemy.

"And suppose I did meet him?" Loder thought. "I'm not a kid. I can take care of myself. I'll carry a whacking great ash-plant in case of emergencies!"

So, having decided to risk the dangers of the night—for Loder felt that there were dangers, and he was undoubtedly right—he wasted no time in setting off.

He wrapped the book up thoroughly so that the rain would not get to it. Then, wearing a heavy waterproof, and carrying his ash-plant, he set out.

The Close was quite deserted, as well it might be, for the rain was coming down pitilessly. Overhead the clouds were scudding across the sky at a rapid pace. As Loder trudged down Friardale Lane the roar of the sea smote his ears, and seemed to fill the whole air with noise. The gale was a fierce one, and the sea was accordingly running high.

The night was not exactly dark, for somewhere behind the clouds the moon was shining. Loder hurried on, very alert, but he arrived at his destination without having met a soul. Having got rid of the book, he turned his face towards Greyfriars again.

"I was an ass!" he told himself easily. "I've got nothing to fear to-night."

In fact, he almost laughed at his previous fears, and trudged on cheerfully through the mud and slush.

The rain had nearly stopped now, he noticed. The clouds were breaking a little, and the moon, now and again, peeped out from between the ragged rifts. The gale, if anything, was blowing harder than ever.

And then Gerald Loder received the shock he had half expected when he started out. His worst fears were realised.

A quick patter of feet sounded behind him. He had heard nothing until the footsteps were quite close—and now, as he swung round, his heart leapt into his mouth, and he uttered a choking cry.

Before him stood Lucas Judd!

The man was dripping with water, and presented a strange spectacle in the pale cloud-diffused moonlight.

"I've got you!" he snarled hoarsely. "By thunder, you shan't escape me this time, I guess! You treacherous—"

"Don't touch me!" panted Loder, gripping his ash-plant desperately. "How did you know it was I?"

"I guess I ain't blind!" rapped out Judd. "I was walking up the lane when I saw you come out of the gate of a house. There was a light over the gate, and I reckon I spotted your dial. Gee! Guess I've got a whole lot to talk to you about, you hound!"

Loder looked round desperately, his heart pumping like a steam-engine. He was trapped! He was at the scoundrel's mercy! There was no possibility of help from any quarter—if he wished to escape he would have to use his own strength. Thank goodness he had brought the stout ash-stick!

"Don't come near me!" ejaculated Loder pantingly. "I'll hit—"

But Judd laughed harshly and stepped forward. There was a homicidal look in his eyes, and Loder felt like screaming. He raised his stick to strike.

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"You fool!" shouted Judd with a snarling laugh.

The stick descended with terrific force, but it only whizzed through the air. Then, before Loder could use it again, it was flung far over the hedge. The frightened prefect staggered back, meaning to make a wild dash for liberty.

But it was too late!

Judd threw himself forward, and his iron fist crashed upon Loder's jaw with a thud that shook the senior in every limb. He uttered a choking grunt, and fell to the muddy ground, and lay there silent and motionless.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Missing!

"SEEN Loder?"

It was Wingate who asked the question.

The captain of Greyfriars had poked his head into the prefects' room. There were one or two seniors there, and they all shook their heads.

"No, he isn't here, Wingate."

"Well, it's jolly queer," said Wingate, with a puzzled frown. "Nobody seems to have seen him this last hour or two. He wasn't in Hall at supper-time, and he isn't in his study now."

"He went to Friardale, didn't he?" asked Courtney.

"I think so," said Wingate. "But he wouldn't be gone all this time, my dear chap."

"Unless he looked in somewhere for shelter," said Carne suggestively.

Wingate frowned.

"Don't be silly," he exclaimed. "The rain stopped an hour ago, and it's moonlight now. Besides, Loder ought to have been back before this—he's got his duties to attend to. If he isn't in within ten minutes, Courtney, you'd better see lights out in the Upper-Fourth dormitory. I'll do the Remove."

"Right-ho!" said Courtney.

Wingate went away, still looking worried. It was high time Loder was back. There was nothing to worry about, however. Loder wasn't exactly a model of reliability; and, in short, he wasn't what Wingate would have called an ideal prefect. Still, he was a prefect, and as such he ought to have turned up to attend to his various nightly duties.

"He'll have some glib excuse, I expect," growled Wingate crossly.

But after the juniors had been seen safely in bed, Gerald Loder was still absent. As ten o'clock boomed, just audible above the gale, Wingate uttered an impatient exclamation. He was in the prefects' room with several other Sixth-Formers.

"This is too bad," he said angrily. "I shall want a jolly good explanation from Loder when he does come in."

"Too thick altogether," agreed Courtney.

"Oh, quite," said Carberry. "I think—"

He broke off as a tap sounded on the door.

"Oh, hang, who's that?" he went on irritably. "Come in, whoever you are!"

The door opened and the Head appeared. The seniors all rose to their feet, and Carberry turned rather red. Dr. Locke, however, had apparently not heard Carberry's rather disrespectful invitation to enter. The Head looked round the room.

"I do not see Loder," he remarked.

"We've been expecting him in for the last hour or so, sir."

The Head started.

"Dear me, is Loder still out?" he asked frowning.

"Surely you do not mean to tell me that he is still absent?"

"Yes, sir," replied Wingate. "He went out just after seven, I think, and we haven't seen a sign of him since. He was going to the Vicarage—"

"Yes, yes, Wingate, quite so," interrupted the Head. "But he has had time to go to the Vicarage over and over again. This is really most remiss of Loder—he can have no excuse for being out so late. When he

comes in, Wingate, send him to me immediately, and I will hear his explanation."

"Very good, sir."

And Dr. Locke departed, with a rather severe frown on his brow. Walker uttered a short laugh when the Head's footsteps had died away.

"Nothing very remarkable in Loder being still out," he said. "I expect he called in somewhere for shelter and then forgot all about the time. Probably he met some of those Highcliffe fellows—Langley, or Roper, or some of their set."

"Rot!" exclaimed Wingate. "Loder wouldn't be such a fool as that. He knew that his absence would be noticeable, because it's his turn to see some of the juniors to bed—and he didn't make any arrangements about a deputy."

"Besides," said Courtney, "it's such a rotten night—what? It looks to me as if something's happened to him. The wind's blowing great guns, and he might have been whacked on the napper by a falling tree-branch. You never know."

The prefects laughed at Courtney's words. All the same, they were impressed by them, and the idea that something had happened to Loder grew more and more probable as the time wore on. In fact, the fellows began to get a little uneasy.

Half-past-ten, and still no sign of the missing prefect. It was now full time that the Sixth-Formers were in bed, and some of them yawningly took their departure, declaring that Loder could stop out all night, for all they cared. Wingate, Courtney, and one or two others remained in the prefects' room, however.

"There goes a quarter to eleven, by Jove!" exclaimed Courtney. "I say, this looks pretty bad, you know. If Loder's really been hit by a falling tree he may be seriously injured. Nobody would find him on a night like this, because the lane's sure to be deserted."

"Better wait until eleven," said Wingate, "then I'll go to the Head."

"Oh, I expect he'll roll in before eleven," said Carberry confidently.

But Loder did not roll in, and as the hour boomed out, Wingate rose to his feet.

"I'm going to the Head," he declared. "You chaps had better get prepared to go out."

"Go out!" repeated Carberry. "Not me!"

"We shall have to do something," said Wingate uneasily, "we can't go to bed without making a search. I'm beginning to think that there's something in what Courtney said."

And Wingate departed.

He found Mr. Quelch in the Head's study, and they both looked grave when he told them that Loder was still absent.

"Dear me, I hope nothing is wrong," exclaimed Dr. Locke anxiously.

"Courtney made a suggestion, sir, which might have some foundation of truth," said Wingate. "It's a wild night, and the wind is very high. It is just possible, sir, that a tree might have blown down—or a branch—and struck Loder as he came up the lane."

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the Head in alarm.

"That is a terribly serious suggestion, Wingate," said Mr. Quelch. "I sincerely hope it is nothing more than a suggestion."

"We thought, perhaps, that it would be as well to make a search, sir—"

"By all means—by all means," said the Head briskly. "It will indeed be terribly unfortunate if Loder has met with an accident. You must set off without delay, Wingate. And perhaps, Mr. Quelch, you—"

"Certainly," said Mr. Quelch at once. "I will accompany the boys. If we find no trace of him we will make inquiries at the Vicarage, and ascertain if he delivered the book you entrusted him with."

"This is all very upsetting," the Head exclaimed worriedly. "Please hasten, Mr. Quelch. It is awful to think that the poor boy may be lying injured, helpless, upon such a night as this!"

The Remove master and Wingate took their departure, and in a very short space of time the little search-party set out. They comprised Mr. Quelch, Wingate, and

Courtney. They let themselves out of the Close by the little side gate in silence—if, indeed, the word can be applied with the gale blowing at hurricane force.

The clouds were now sparse, and they hurried across the face of the moon intermittently. It was quite light at times, and the roadway was visible for an appreciable distance ahead.

"A terrible night!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch, with chattering teeth. "Upon my soul, this wind is enough to blow the roofs from the very houses. Our brave sailors are having a terribly rough time of it in the Channel, I'll warrant."

"Rather, sir!" said Wingate. "Just listen to the breakers!"

They trudged on, and, although the trees were bending and swaying in all directions, there was no sign of a fallen one, or even a broken branch.

By the time they reached Friardale it was half-past eleven, and they had seen no sign of Loder.

"Well," said Mr. Quelch, "I am glad to find that there has been no accident. I am wondering whether we had better go to the vicarage and make inquiries. I am afraid the worthy Mr. Lamb would not make us welcome at this time of night."

"Oh, well, sir, it's a jolly serious matter!" replied Wingate. "We'd better go."

And they went.

Fortunately one or two of the Rev. Lamb's household had not retired, and the search-party had no difficulty in gaining the information they wanted. Yes, Loder had been there, but his visit had been between the hours of seven and eight—nearly four hours previously.

"This is very mysterious," said Mr. Quelch, as he and the two prefects stood out in the roadway. "What on earth can have become of the boy?"

"It's more than we can say, sir," replied Wingate. "Well, we can't do much, except, perhaps, make one or two inquiries in the village."

This they decided to do, but the inquiries were fruitless. No one had seen him in Friardale that evening, so far as could be learned. From the moment Loder had left the Rev. Lamb's he had utterly vanished.

The trio made their way back to Greyfriars in a rather anxious frame of mind; for, although Loder was not popular, they did not like to think that he had met with an accident, and was lying in some forsaken spot in a helpless condition. This, however, was an extremely unlikely explanation to the mystery.

Wingate had a suspicion that Loder was safe and well. He knew some of the prefect's past record, and thought it possible that he might have called in at the Cross Keys and had been detained there. But in that event he would almost certainly be back at the school by this time.

But when the search-party arrived at Greyfriars Loder had not returned.

Wingate looked serious, and the Head was in a great way.

Midnight came and went, and still Loder was absent. He did not turn up at one; two o'clock struck, three o'clock boomed out, and still there was no sign.

Throughout the night somebody was awake in case the missing prefect returned. But when the grey dawn broke Gerald Loder was still an absentee—and the reverend Head of Greyfriars paced his study with a haggard face and worried brow.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

The Prisoner of the Cave!

GREYFRIARS was excited.

Loder of the Sixth had disappeared!

Not that this fact in itself caused a large amount of consternation among the junior Forms. As a matter of absolute fact, there were many Removites who declared that it was the best possible thing that could have happened to Loder. There was no love lost between the juniors and the unpopular prefect, and his absence from Greyfriars was looked upon as a blessing rather than a misfortune.

Nevertheless, a favourite or no favourite, his dramatic disappearance from the school created unbounded excite-

ment and speculation. Most of the juniors were absolutely in the dark with regard to any possible clues—and, for that matter, so were the masters and seniors.

But the Famous Five had their suspicions.

It was a half-holiday that day, and after dinner they collected in a group on the lee-side of the gymnasium. The day was fine, and the sun shone brightly, but the wind was still blowing great guns, and the roar of the sea could be heard even from where the juniors stood.

News had just come that Tozer—who was now well again—had failed to find any traces of the missing prefect, and this had caused a fresh crop of speculations to be propounded.

"Well, I'm blowed if I know what to make of it!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "But I must say that I've got jolly strong suspicions."

"Suspensions of what?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Well, the thing looks queer, that's all," replied Wharton thoughtfully. "It's my opinion that the burglar who escaped from old Tozer has got something to do with Loder's vanishing act."

"But, my dear chap, how?" asked Nugent.

"Well, everything points to Loder and the burglar being connected," went on Harry Wharton. "We know for a fact that Loder was startled out of his wits when he heard that the burglar had escaped. Why was he startled?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Bob Cherry oracularly. "Why?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Wharton. "This is a jolly serious matter, Bob. Loder had something to do with the chap who broke into Greyfriars—that's an established fact."

"And, now I come to think of it," exclaimed Johnny Bull, "the fellow said something about having his revenge on the rotter who betrayed him. Now, who was that rotter?"

"Loder!" said Bob Cherry dramatically.

"That's what I believe, anyhow," went on Nugent. "I believe that Loder gave the blighter away, and that's why he was so startled when he heard that the fellow had escaped. Last night, when Loder went out, he was collared and carted away somewhere."

"My hat!"

"It's a bit thick!" said Johnny Bull.

"The thickfulness is indeed terrific!"

"Well, it sounds jolly probable," remarked Harry Wharton, "considering all things. But we are absolutely in the dark with regard to motive. We don't even know the name of the chap who broke into the school, or how he was connected with Loder. I vote we let the matter rest for a bit until we get more facts."

"Hear, hear!"

"If Loder's still missing to-night, we'll go to the Head and tell him our yarn," said Nugent. "It's a bit premature to tell him now, because it might be a bit awkward for Loder if he turns up during the day. He's a rotter, we know, but we don't want to pry into his private bizney."

"So we'll give him a rest," said Bob Cherry, "and carry out the arrangement we agreed upon before dinner."

"And what's that?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Ass! Didn't we arrange it all? There's no cricket on this afternoon, owing to the giddy gale, so we'll go down to the beach and watch the sea. It's a sight worth watching in a storm like this."

"Right-ho! We're ready," agreed Wharton. "Anybody else coming?"

"Well, Squiff said something about burdening us with his company, but I think he's been collared by Vernon-Smith for the afternoon," replied Bob.

So the Famous Five started out.

As Bob Cherry had stated, the sea was a magnificent sight when it was in its present angry condition—magnificent but terrible withal.

The juniors arrived upon the beach and stood in a group, watching the rolling breakers.

"Oh, rats!" grunted Bob Cherry. "The giddy tide's nearly out. There's a lot more to see when it's fully up and the waves are breaking all over these rocks."

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NEXT
MONDAY—

"THE SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!"

EVERY
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ONE
PENNY.

"Well, we sha'n't have long to wait—an hour at the most," said Harry Wharton. "The tide's coming in fast, and it'll be high at twenty past four. It's nearly three now."

"Suppose we scramble on the top of those giddy rocks and watch the tide come in?" suggested Nugent, pointing to a great mass of jagged, weed-covered rocks, which towered twenty feet above the beach, and the face of which formed a steep cliff. In the lower part of this cliff were numerous cavities, and when the tide was fully in the sea covered these, and completely washed the rocks with its stinging spray.

"Anything to oblige!" agreed Bob. "Come on!"

They made their way across the slippery rocks and mounted to the summit of the cliff by a roundabout route. Once there, they walked forward to a favourable position, and stood in a group, almost leaning against the wind in order to keep upright.

It was a grand sight. Out at the extremities of the bay the sea was dashing against the tall cliffs with thunderous force, and the spume was flying in sheets. Even where the Famous Five stood the very air seemed to be filled with fine rain. But it was salt rain.

"My hat, what a sight!"

"And not a single ship to be seen," said Nugent. "I don't wonder at it in weather like this."

"Fathead!" shouted Bob Cherry, above the wind. "Just because we can't see a ship it doesn't mean to say that there aren't any on the sea! Nowadays big ships don't take much notice of storms."

"Well, I know one sort of ship that wouldn't venture out in this sort of weather," chuckled Nugent. "They're jolly big ships, too."

"Rats! All big ships can sail in a hurricane."

"Not the kind I mean."

"Well, what kind do you mean, ass?" asked Bob politely.

Nugent chuckled.

"Zeppelins!" he replied. "They're ships, aren't they—big 'uns, too?"

Bob Cherry gave Nugent a withering look.

"You burbling chump!" he exclaimed. "We all know the German

Zeppelins ain't any good except in fine weather. Whoa! What a draught!"

A fierce gust of wind swept down upon the exposed rocks, and the juniors had great difficulty in keeping their feet. Harry Wharton, in fact, did not succeed. He was changing his position when the squall came, and his back was towards the wind. He staggered forward several yards, and then skidded violently on the slippery surface.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

His chums roared as they saw him slithering along. But the next second the laughter died out of their voices. Harry Wharton suddenly uttered a startled cry and disappeared over the edge of a sloping piece of rock. In one second he had utterly vanished! Yet the juniors were standing fully thirty feet from the edge of the cliff.

What had become of him?

"My hat, he must have slid into a giddy hole!" exclaimed Johnny Bull. "I expect we shall find him wallowing in about two feet of rainwater!"

They stumbled forward down the sloping rocks, and then Bob Cherry who was foremost, uttered a startled cry:

"Great Scott!"

"It's a hole, and——"

"And Wharton's slipped into it!" gasped Bull. "My hat, he must have come a frightful cropper!"

"The frightfulness is terrific!" ejaculated Hurree Singh, concernedly.

The juniors gazed at one another with genuine alarm. Before them yawned a black hole; where it led to they could not imagine. It was not exactly sheer, for one side of the cavity was of smooth rock, and led slopingly, but steeply, into unknown blackness.

"Poor old Harry!" muttered Nugent anxiously. "He—he's down there somewhere! Good heavens! We must get help somewhere—"

"Listen!" interrupted Bob Cherry sharply.

They all remained still, and bent down. From out of the depths came an echoing shout. The juniors were on the alert in an instant.

"Hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "Is that you, Wharton?"

"Yes!"

"Where the dickens are you?" shouted Nugent.

"Blessed if I know!" came up from the depths. "It's as dark as pitch down here, and I'm standing on tons of spongy seaweed!"

"Are you hurt?"

"Not much—just a scratch or two."

"Thank goodness!" gasped the four juniors.

They looked at one another with astonishment now, as they realised that their chum was unhurt.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" said Nugent. "What a giddy lark!"

"Fancy the silly ass going off on an exploration tour without telling us!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "But, I say! He got in there easily enough, but how the dickens is he going to get out again?"

There was not the slightest doubt that Harry Wharton had had no difficulty in getting into his present predicament. In fact, he couldn't help himself. He had slipped, and before he could recover himself he had plunged into the black cavity.

In a second he was slithering down into unknown darkness at express speed. He had a vivid thought that in a second he would crash upon the hard rocks with cruel and stunning force. But before the thought was fully shaped he had plunged into a slimy wet mass of substance which felt like a mammoth bath sponge.

As he picked himself up he realised that it was seaweed, and that it had broken his fall. Even if it had not been there, however, he would not have been seriously hurt, for he had slipped down a kind of natural toboggan.

The darkness around him was intense, but up above a shaft of light reflected from the rocks. He could not see the actual outlet, owing to the slope.

He could hear his chums' startled ejaculations. And even as Bob Cherry asked how he was going to get out of his curious position he was putting the same question to himself.

"I can't possibly climb up!" he shouted. "It's too blessed steep—and too smooth."

"Well, the only thing to do," came Bob Cherry's voice, "is to get some ropes, and haul you out!"

Harry Wharton looked round.

"Don't be in a hurry," he bawled; "there might be some other outlet. If so, you needn't trouble about the ropes. You stop there, and I'll go and explore!"

A chuckle floated downwards.

"Yes, we'll stop up here, right enough," said Bob Cherry. "We're not quite so keen on risking the unknown dangers of the bowels of the earth!"

Harry Wharton grinned to himself, and moved across the spongy seaweed. It was pretty obvious that the sea had a free entry into the cavern, otherwise the weed could never have collected there. It might not be large enough for a human being to squeeze through, but there was every probability that it would be.

At first Wharton could see nothing, and he groped forward with his hands outstretched before him. Suddenly he caught his head a whack against the cavern roof, and paused to consider.

"Ow!" he muttered; "that's hurt me more than the giddy fall did! Where the deuce am I?" He felt his way along the rugged rock, and then, quite suddenly, he turned a corner. Right in front of him a dim light showed.

"There's an exit there, anyhow," he told himself.

With the light ahead, dim though it was, he could now proceed in confidence, and in less than a minute he reached a narrow opening. It was near the floor, and only a foot in height. Probably the opening was really much larger than it seemed, for it was choked with seaweed.

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Harry Wharton bent down and squeezed through. Then, as he rose to his feet after a rather damp passage, he looked about him in surprise.

"My hat!" he exclaimed. "I must be in one of the caves!"

He was standing on a ledge seven feet above the surface of the cave. He remembered now that he had visited the cave before, but had never seen this opening, owing to its high level. It was in a dim recess, and probably its existence was unknown.

He let himself down gingerly, for the rocks were rough. Then he looked towards the cave entrance. The tide was still some distance out, but he knew that when it was fully in the cave was filled with roaring water from floor to roof. The cavern he had just left evidently acted as a sort of overflow-chamber.

"It's O. K.!" he murmured. "The tide's well out yet, and I've heaps of time to get round. By Jove, though, I should have been in a pretty pickle if I'd fallen down that chute at high tide!"

He was about to turn his steps towards the exit when a curious sound struck his ears above the roar of the sea. It sounded like a muffled gasp. But how could that be, in a deserted cave?

Harry Wharton paused irresolutely. He had heaps of pluck, but there was something a trifle queer about the sound—it had sounded human!

"Oh, dash it!" he muttered. "It must be the wind!"

All the same, he walked into the dark recesses of the cave. Then, with a startled gasp, he ran forward, his heart in his mouth. Upon the floor of the cavern lay a human figure, and it was perfectly still.

Wharton felt a creepy sensation run down his spine.

But he shook the feeling off, and ran closer. Then he saw that the figure was securely bound, hand and foot, and that a rough gag was placed over the mouth.

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the junior, in horror.

He knelt down by the still form, and saw a pair of eyes looking upon him with unbounded relief. Harry Wharton bent closer, and, with a cry, recognised the prisoner.

It was Loder, of the Sixth!

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER:

Saved from Disgrace!

"L ODER!"

Harry Wharton gasped out the word with absolute amazement.

Loder, in that cave, bound like a felon!

It was astounding!

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the captain of the Remove. "What the dickens are you doing here?"

It was rather a futile question, for Loder was not in a position to answer. Harry Wharton was about to remove the gag when he remembered his chums waiting anxiously on the rocks above. Before he heard Loder's explanation it would be as well to have his chums with him.

"Wait a tick," he said to Loder. "My chums are outside. Better let them know before I start on you, or they'll wonder what's happened to me."

It made no difference whether Loder objected or not—he couldn't voice any objection, anyhow. Wharton ran out of the cave. The tide was coming in rapidly, but it was still a good many yards away.

He ran out on the sand until he caught sight of Bob Cherry and the others on the rocks above. Shouting was useless, as the wind was too high. But they saw him, and understood his signs. In a moment they were scampering down towards him.

"My only topper! How did you get out?" panted Bob, as he and the others reached Wharton's side. "How—"

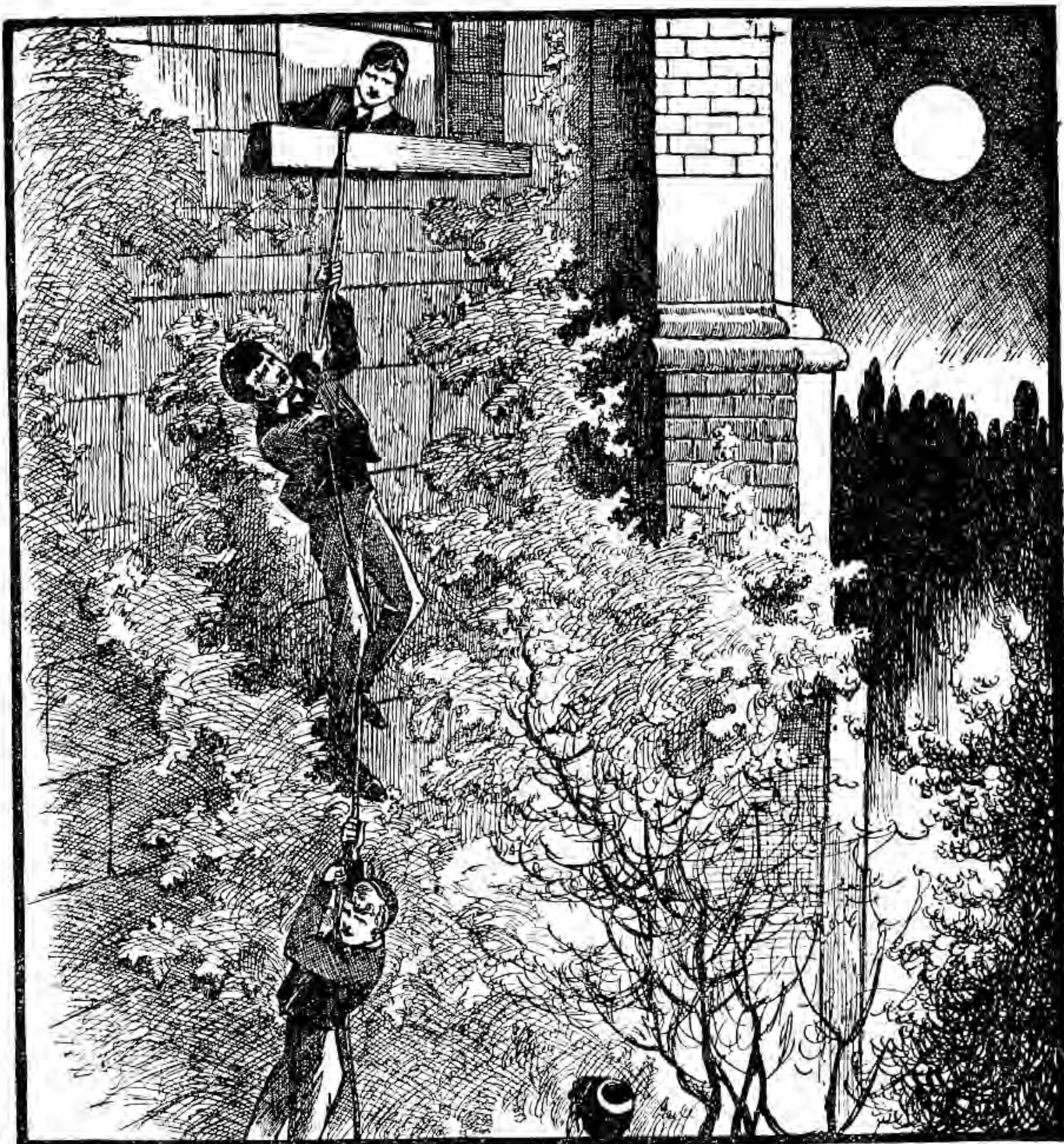
"Never mind that," interrupted Wharton. "I've found Loder!"

"Found Loder?"

"Great pip!"

"The pipfulness is terrific!"

"Fact!" said Wharton quickly, to his amazed chums. "Come with me, and I'll show you!"



Harry Wharton swung himself from the window and went down the rope. Bob Cherry followed, and then Hurree Singh. (For this great midnight expedition read the Magnificent Complete Story dealing with the Early Adventures of Harry Wharton & Co., at Greyfriars School, entitled "THE STOLEN SCHOOLBOY!" in the issue of "THE DREADNOUGHT" now on sale.)

He ran into the cave, followed closely by his companions.

"My hat! It's Loder right enough!" exclaimed Nugent excitedly, as they stood round the bound form. "Well, I'm jiggered!"

The gag was removed, and Loder sat up with a gasp. "Oh! Oh, that's better!" he panted huskily. "By George!"

He looked at the juniors uncertainly.

"What does it all mean?" asked Bob Cherry curiously. "How, in the name of all that's fatheaded, did you get yourself into this fix, Loder?"

Loder panted.

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"I was put here," he said. "By George! The murderous scoundrel!"

"Who did it?" asked Wharton. "You'd better tell us, Loder; you needn't be afraid that we shall blurt everything out to the other fellows—that is, if you want it to be kept private. I may as well tell you that we're pretty certain that you were shoved in here by that rotter who broke into Greyfriars the other night."

"You know, then?" gasped Loder.

"We don't know, we guessed," said Nugent. "We're the only chaps who have guessed, though."

Loder was silent for a moment.

He felt that he would have to tell the juniors everything. If he did that he might prevail upon the juniors

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"THE SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!"

A Grand, Long, Complete Story of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

to keep his secret. With only half knowledge of the facts they might not feel inclined to study him. And, after all, why not? They were his old enemies, but he knew them to be trustworthy, and that their word, once given, was always kept. Besides, they might be able to help him—an idea had struck him whereby they could be of some assistance.

They could help him to get rid of Lucas Judd for ever. "You've saved my life, kids," Loder exclaimed brokenly.

"Rot!" said Bob Cherry. "You weren't dead, or anywhere near it."

Loder laughed harshly.

"What about the tide?" he asked. "It's coming in quickly. In half an hour's time it will begin to lap the entrance of this cave. Ten minutes after that it will only just be possible to reach safety."

"But—"

"Listen! That scoundrel meant to leave me here to drown!"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the juniors.

"It's a fact," went on Loder fiercely. "To drown! No, don't unbind me; I'll tell you why not later on. Just listen to what I have to say; I'm going to tell you the whole rotten story."

And Loder, in a subdued voice, did so. The juniors listened with grave faces. It was strange for them to hear this recital from the bully of the Sixth, their old enemy. He was, in truth, eating humble pie. For he was at their mercy; it was in their power to get him expelled from Greyfriars.

He told them all, right up to the moment when they had found him.

"Last night," he concluded, "Judd attacked me in the lane. He possesses amazing strength. He carried me to one of the caves not far from here, one that the sea never enters. He stayed there all night with me, and this morning, after the tide had receded, forced me in here, and left me, bound and gagged, as you found me. He meant to let me drown, the infernal scoundrel! Thank Heaven, you arrived in time!"

"But how can we help you?" asked Harry Wharton. "When Judd finds that you have escaped, he will probably attack you again. And, even if he were captured, he would tell the whole story, and you would be expelled from Greyfriars. How can we help you?"

Loder looked at the cave entrance anxiously.

"This way," he replied. "Judd is coming back here—I expect him every minute—and he will taunt me. I want you fellows to hide yourselves and wait until he arrives. Then you can listen to what he says, and be witnesses that he meant to murder me."

"But how do you know that he is coming?" asked Bob Cherry.

"He said he would return," replied Loder, "and I feel sure that he will keep his word."

Harry Wharton looked puzzled.

"But if we collar him, as, of course, we should do," he objected, "how will that help you? We should hand him over to the police—"

"For Heaven's sake hide!" panted Loder. "The fellow may come at any moment. Gag me again, and hide!"

The urgency of his tone could not be ignored, and the juniors did as he requested. All five of them clambered up on to the ledge, and remained there unseen, but seeing all.

Loder's story had taken their breath away. The whole thing was so startling that they could hardly believe it. Loder had refrained from mentioning that he had let Judd into Greyfriars for the purpose of robbery. He had led the juniors to suppose that the man had come there for money, and had been discovered.

Perhaps, had the Famous Five known all, they would have hesitated as to their decision. But, much as they disliked Loder, they wished to see him freed from the power of this scoundrelly ship's officer. He had appealed to them for aid, and it would have been brutal to refuse.

And there was no time for hesitation, in any event. The whole thing was rushed through at express speed. Indeed, THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 377.

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it was the only way out of the fix: for Loder had only been discovered at the last moment, and then by sheer accident—a stroke of Providence.

Almost before the Famous Five had settled themselves in their coign of vantage a shadow appeared at the cave entrance, and Lucas Judd crept in.

"Wal, I jest came around to see that you was good'n secure," he exclaimed. "Y'see, I reckon I'm fairly safe in this blamed locality. Nobody knows me by sight, except that galoot of a constable, and I take care to steer clear of him. I'm leavin' this district right now, though; but, by gosh, I've taught you a lesson!"

Harry Wharton bent close to Bob Cherry.

"He doesn't mean to leave Loder to die," he breathed. "I expect it's all bluff. He'll let him go now, that's why he's come back."

"Shut up!" whispered Bob.

Lucas Judd was still talking.

"I guess I'll get along outside!" he exclaimed. "I don't fancy bein' bottled up here to share the same medicine as you! I've brought you in here to kill you; have you got that fixed clear? To kill you! I guess I ain't particular about my words when there's no one else around! You're goin' to die, sonny!"

Wharton nudged his companions, and gave them a meaning look.

"He's said enough to convict him a dozen times," he whispered. "Collar him!"

In a second the Famous Five had leapt to the sandy floor of the cave. In their excitement they scarcely noticed that it was a terrific jump. But they landed on their feet, and Lucas Judd turned on them with a gasp of surprise and fear.

"By gosh! What—"

"On him!" roared Bob Cherry excitedly.

Judd was simply borne to the ground by sheer weight of numbers. He was thoroughly frightened, and half his strength seemed to desert him. After a few futile struggles he lay back, limp. And while four of the juniors held him, the other slipped out his knife and cut Loder's bonds.

The prefect rose to his feet stiffly.

"You don't think I meant to kill him?" gasped Judd, looking at Wharton appealingly. "I didn't, young'un! It was just bluff!"

"We have only your word for that!" replied Harry Wharton sternly. "If we hand you over to the police, and give evidence against you, you'll be convicted, and you know it! But we're not going to do that!"

"By gum!" panted Judd.

"We're going to give you the benefit of the doubt," said Wharton. "We're going to let you go free, but on one condition!"

"Guess that condition's complied with!" said Judd quickly.

"If we let you go, you're to clear out, and never return to the neighbourhood of Greyfriars School again," said Wharton slowly. "If you do, we shall have you arrested, and give evidence against you. You are to go right away. Do you agree?"

"Yep!" exclaimed Judd, in relief. "Guess I'll shunt like oiled lightning!"

He was allowed to arise, and the Famous Five knew that, once out of the district, Mr. Lucas Judd would never show his face within a hundred miles of it again.

The whole truth of the wretched affair never came out: the boys of Greyfriars—with the exception of the Famous Five, of course—were mightily curious, but the facts were suppressed.

All things considered, Gerald Loder had come very lightly out of a pretty tight fix, and for quite a considerable time his behaviour was above reproach. But Harry Wharton & Co. guessed—and guessed rightly—that he would soon forget the unfortunate incident, and relapse into his old ways and habits.

He did! And the Famous Five were not surprised in the least!

THE END.

(Another magnificent tale of the chums of Greyfriars next Monday, entitled "The School boy Acrobats!" Order now!)

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"THE STAR OF

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THE FIRST CHAPTERS.

Sir Richard Battingley, a much-travelled scoundrel, has some mysterious reason for wishing the death of Clive Clare, a handsome and daring circus performer, also known as the King of Equestrians. He, therefore, engages another villain, named Paul Murdway, to compass Clive Clare's death for the sum of ten thousand pounds.

Paul Murdway follows the circus in its wanderings, and, under the name of Adrian Deering, leagues himself with a member of Cyrano's Circus, named Señor Miguel Garez, a Mexican dead shot, to bring about Clive's death.

Several plots which the two villains make, however, fail, but they do not give up their intention of injuring Clive when an opportunity occurs.

Ben Ellis, or Professor Durnette, the King of Lion-Tamers, to give him his stage name, tries to force his daughter, May Ellis, to marry Adrian Deering, in order that the latter may give him two hundred pounds to make good the circus funds, from which he has stolen that amount.

Clive Clare hears of the Professor's theft, and draws his entire savings—ninety pounds—from the savings' bank, so that May Ellis or her father may not be under any obligation to Adrian Deering. May gives this money to the circus proprietor, Mr. Adolph Cyrano, who forgives Professor Durnette his theft for his daughter's sake, and reinstates him in his position as circus paymaster.

Bononi, the clown, is much gratified one evening by receiving from an unknown admirer a perfumed love-letter, which he proudly shows to his colleague, Roly-Poly.

(Now go on with the Story.)

present unable to furnish explicit information. You see, I have not yet set eyes on her. Ah, but—but"—he put up a warning finger, to check Roly's outburst of laughter—"she is born for me, and I for her. I know it—instinctively I know it, Joseph. I feel a responsive echo here." Bononi tapped his breast tragically. "And just see how beautifully, how romantically she writes. No, no!" he went on, snatching the letter back. "I'll read it to you myself—or, rather, I will read excerpts from it. Listen:

"You are my ideal of what a man should be. You are my fairy prince, the idol of my waking dreams, the acme of my highest and fondest hopes! Ah, sig! do you love me in return, I wonder? . . . When I first beheld you—twelve months ago next Michaelmas, on your previous visit to this town—you started into a glow that spark which since has developed into a consuming flame. And when, at the performance last evening, I once again beheld my beau-ideal among men—my Apollo in motley—ah me! then I realized to the full the extent of my love for you. . . . Dear Apollo—you will pardon the liberty I take in thus addressing you, I am sure—do you love me in return, I ask again? If so, you can convey that rapturous intelligence to me to-night during your performance. I have engaged for that performance the end seat of the second row of the two-shilling circle. You will see me there, and will know me by the bunch of red roses which I shall wear in my bonnet. Red roses—emblems of a heart that beats alone for you. Ah, my Apollo, if you should let your eyes rest on me for one precious moment! then you will kiss your hand to me, that I may know that, beneath your motley, your heart beats in unison with mine. . . . P.S.—Do not forget, my prince of men—the end seat of the second row in the two-shilling circle, with red roses in my bonnet."

"There!" cried Bononi triumphantly, as he finished reading these extracts. "What do you think of that, Joseph?"

"Oh!" sang Roly.

"Roses red and violets blue,
She's in love, and so are you!"

"Watcher think of that for a voice?"

"What do you think of that letter?" repeated Bononi.

"Well, it sounds all right—spoony enough, anyway. But, after all, Bill, you knows next to nothin' of the lady. Some romantic young gal, I s'pose she is."

"She is nothing of the kind," asserted Bononi. "She is—ahem!—a widow."

"A widder! Shades of Mister Weller senior! Beware of widders!"

"Beware of Wellers and their advice!" retorted Bononi proudly. "This lady has two thousand pounds in Government stock, and—"

"Ho, ho!" drawled Roly. "That explains it!"

"Joseph," said Bononi sternly, "you misconstrue me. Were this fair creature penniless it would be all the same to me. Two thousand pounds!" Bononi curled his lip and snapped his fingers contemptuously. "Pah! what is such a paltry sum when weighed against the finer feelings of a man? Pah! I say." He snapped his fingers again, and glared fiercely at the wall, as if he were a very unrelenting enemy of Mammon indeed. "No, Joseph," he went on, "I do not marry for money. I despise money. It is the root of all evil."

"Well, I wish you'd plant some of it on to me," said Roly drily. "I feel I'm jest the very soil for it. But there, Bill,

Bononi's Unknown Admirer—He Meets the "Widow"—and Makes an Appointment.

"Ho-ho, William!—a billit-dooks, eh? So that's how the wind blows, is it, my gay Lothario?"

Bononi closed his eyes, and squirmed in his seat as if in mental agony.

"Your figures of speech, Joseph," he protested, "are most outrageously inapt. The blowing of the wind! Too harsh!—too harsh! Why not the gentle waft of a divine zephyr? Much more appropriate that, Joseph—much more appropriate. This, as you rightly conjecture, Joseph, is a missive from a lady—best and loveliest of her sex."

"Ah, they're allus that, Bill."

Bononi shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "In this case none but herself can be her parallel!"

"Well, Bill, jest stop spoutin' Spokeshave, and give us a few details. What's she write about?" And Roly held out his hand for the missive.

"Hands off!" cried Bononi dramatically. "Affairs of the heart are too sacred for—"

"All right, if you won't let me see the letter, what's she like—fair, dark, blonde, or brunette?"

Bononi scratched his head and coughed.

"Regarding her complexion, Joseph," he said, "I am at The Magnet Library.—No. 377.

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"THE SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!"

A Grand, Long, Complete Story of Harry
Horton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

I wish you luck, ole pal. And now I must trot along. I've got a few things to attend to. So long, Apoller, me giddy, scrumptious fairy prince!"

And Roly-Poly, with difficulty suppressing his merriment, which for the past few minutes had been almost bursting him, took his leave.

And once out of earshot of Bononi he leaned against a wall, and hugged himself.

"Oh, lor! Oh, lor!" he gurgled. "Who'd a thought as Bill 'ud 'a' bin took that way! In love wi' a widder as 'e's never seen; who's got two thousan' golden quidlets in the bank; and who's a-goin' to wear red roses in her bonnet, in the end seat o' the secon' row o' the two-shillin' sukkle. What-ho!—as the pirit king said—there's fun a-loomin' in the hoffing—a sort o' fun what one don't hoffing see!" With which somewhat mangled quotation from the "Gory Chief of the Spanish Main," Roly-Poly hoisted his slacks in most realistic nautical fashion, and walked, or, rather, danced, in great glee towards the lodgings which he was sharing during the four days' stay in Oldchester with Lieutenant Tremaine, the ventriloquist.

"He's took it, Tremaine—swallowed it like a bloomin' fish!" exclaimed the fat little clown as he burst into the sitting-room.

"Took it?" inquired the ventriloquist. "Who's took it? Swallowed it! Swallowed what?"

"Tremaine, you surprise me!" cried Roly. "Who should I mean but Bononi? He's got the letter that you and me faked up, and he's swallowed every blessed word of it! Thinks that our worthy landlady here—Martha Lobb—is in love with him! Thinks she's got a couple o' thousan' poun's—in fact, William's been and fell head-over-heels in love with the lady, though he ain't never set eyes on her! How he'll carry hon to-night when he spots the red roses in Missis Lobb's best bonnet—which o' course she'll wear, seein' as how I've give her a couple o' tickets for the two-hob reserved seats—goodness only knows! Wot a lark—wot a lark! Hold me tight, Tremaine, or I'll bust!"

And Roly-Poly leaned back in his chair and laughed as though he would never stop.

"What d'you think'll happen?" said Lieutenant Tremaine presently.

"Ask me not, for blowed if I know!" chuckled the clown.

"But there's going to be some fun, you bet!"

"I suppose Mrs. Lobb is certain to go to the circus to-night?"

"Ray-ther! Why, she's full o' the idea. She's a-goin' along wi' a certain worthy plumber wot's to be her second husband in a couple o' months' time. Told me so herself."

"Ho, ho!" laughed Tremaine. "Then, if Bononi gets too spoony in his attentions, there's likely to be ructions between him and that same worthy plumber."

"In course," agreed Roly. "That's jest where the fun's a-comin' in."

"Yes, but where's the joke going to end?" inquired the ventriloquist doubtfully.

"Oh, blow the ending!" Roly rejoined. "Let's make a beginnin'."

"That's all very well," said Tremaine, with a contemplative grin; "but we ought to round the joke off somehow. Now, let me see."

He relapsed into a state of hard thinking for a minute or two, then started up from his chair, and banged the table.

"By Jove! I have it!" he exclaimed.

"What's up now?" asked Roly.

"Never mind yet; I'll tell you later. But if all goes well to-night—if Bononi catches on, and the plumber don't annihilate him—I've got an idea for completing the joke. Wait, Roly—you just wait and see!"

That night, before his turn to go into the ring came, Bononi passed the time in a state of the highest suppressed excitement. He didn't seem quite to know whether he was standing on his head or on his heels. All Roly-Poly's gibes he allowed to pass unanswered, while he flitted from his portion of the dressing-tent to the arena-entrance every two minutes. Time after time he craned his long neck round the canvas and scrutinised the rapidly-arriving audience. But from where he stood only a portion of the people were visible, and up to the moment of his own entry into the ring no sign of a bonnet trimmed with red roses rewarded his anxious and continual search.

But when at last, in company with Napoleon, the educated donkey, Bononi had houp-la-ed into the arena, and had gone through the preliminary part of his show, he presently had an opportunity of getting a full view of all the people seated around. And when he did so, there, sure enough, on the end seat of the second row of the two-shilling reserved circle, was a lady with imitation red roses in her bonnet.

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Bononi looked at her for a moment, and his impressionable heart commenced to thump within his breast. Yes; it was she—the adored one who adored him, and called him her beautiful ideal of men.

As to her, Bononi at once felt that he worshipped the very ground she walked on. Buxom she was; age about forty; with a face which, at the moment he caught sight of it, was wreathed in smiles—smiles for him, Bononi, of course. For was he not her Apollo? Was he not her fairy prince?

Bononi's bosom swelled at the thought of it, the blood rushed to his face, and he felt himself blushing through his chalk. For an instant their eyes met, and she seemed to smile more than ever. And such a smile! Irresistible to Bononi. He blushed again, and he bowed low; and then, with all the grace that he could put into the movement, he placed his left hand upon his heart, and the fingers of his right hand to his lips, and blew to her whom he adored the most tender kiss of which he was capable.

The widow still smiled, whereupon Bononi, growing bolder in his wooing, placed his fingers to his lips once more, and blew kiss after kiss towards his charmer. He heeded not the ripples of laughter that came from every side—for the audience of course thought this blowing of kisses part of the regular performance—and he was absolutely ignorant of the fact that the middle-aged man sitting in the seat next to his adored one was scowling at him with all his might.

But although Bononi had in a measure lost his head in the contemplation of the buxom widow, it was not to be expected that he would be allowed to pursue his strange wooing without interruption.

Mr. Patross, the ringmaster, indeed, began to get a trifle suspicious. It was quite an ordinary thing for a clown to blow indiscriminate kisses among his audience; but for Bononi to concentrate his favours on one particular corner of the auditorium was quite a new feature in his performance. Mr. Patross was compelled, therefore, to utter a sharp, whispered rebuke, which had the effect of recalling Bononi to himself.

Even after that, however, while the infatuated clown was going through his exhibition of buffoonery, he would pause now and then, glance furtively round, and throw a hurried but passionate kiss in the direction of Widow Lobb. Which peculiar iteration had the peculiar effect of eliciting much laughter from the audience, who thought Bononi on this night funnier than ever.

The humorous side of it did not occur to Bononi for a moment—he was, as a matter of fact, in deadly earnest—nor did it appeal to the man with fierce black whiskers and bristly moustache who was seated beside the widow.

Bononi was, indeed, in deadly earnest. The wonderful flutter of excitement in which Roly found his colleague immediately after the show was proof of that.

"Don't interrupt me now, Joseph!" exclaimed Bononi excitedly, as, with a stick of cocoa-butter, he was smearing his face to remove all traces of his make-up. "Don't talk to me, please; I have a most important appointment."

"Ah, another fond message from your adored one, Bill?" said Roly, eyeing with suspicion a second pink note, which lay on the improvised dressing-table.

"Precisely. And, oh, Joseph, isn't she a beauty—isn't she handsome? Throw the eternal advice regarding widows to the winds; I'll none of it!"

"For she's the darlin' of me 'eart, though her Christian name ain't Sally!" sang Roly-Poly mellowly. "Well, Billyum, me boy, I wish you the best o' luck! But, oh, be careful, beware the breach-o'-promise court!"

Bononi waved away the warning with an impatient hand. Quickly he removed every atom of paint and powder from his long visage; then doffed his clown's attire, and donned his ordinary suit, bestowing much care on the arrangement of his cravat. In a few minutes he had hurriedly left the circus.

At the corner of a road, about a hundred yards away, he overtook a lady, who was walking slowly along. She was heavily veiled, but the red roses in her bonnet were unmistakable.

Had that thick veil been lifted, however, there would have been revealed the features of Lieutenant Phil Tremaine, the ventriloquist. The female disguise had been hastily adopted by him after he had finished his performance, and formed part of the plan which, earlier in the day, he had hinted at, but had preferred not to disclose in its entirety to Roly-Poly. Tremaine chuckled to himself as he heard the approaching footsteps of Bononi, and then half-turned to greet the clown.

Bononi gracefully raised his hat.

"Good-evening, madam," he said, in polite and tender tones. "I believe I have the great honour of addressing Mrs. Lobb?"

The pseudo-widow bowed, and mincingly acknowledged that she was that lady.

"I received your letter," proceeded Bononi, with emotion; "in fact, I may say both your letters. The inestimable honour which you have thus conveyed to my humble self is, if I may say so, reciprocated from the bottom of my heart!"

The make-believe widow bowed again, and then turned her head away, as though in modest embarrassment.

"Mrs. Lobb—Martha—may I call you Martha?" went on Bononi—"I love you—love you passionately! Brief as our acquaintance has been, yet for years within my heart there has existed that craving for an affinity—a craving which found response only when I received your sweet letter. Ah, Martha, can you realise the depth of my affection for you? I fear me not. But if you could, then I say you would at least deem me in some degree worthy of the honour you have conferred upon me, many as my imperfections are!"

Bononi placed his hand upon his heart as he concluded this carefully-rehearsed little speech, and at the same moment congratulating himself that he was getting on very nicely indeed. They had paused for a moment in their walk, and Bononi took the opportunity of seizing the "widow's" hand.

"Martha," he whispered, with intense feeling, "I love you! Will you be my wife?"

For a moment the bogus widow did not reply; then, with a semi-hysterical sob, she uttered the three words, "William, my William!" and buried her face upon his shoulder.

Bononi's heart beat high with hope, for the widow and—quite incidentally, of course—her two thousand pounds seemed to be already his. But although there appeared to be no doubt about the widow's full reciprocation of his affection, he could not persuade her to give him a definite answer. It occurred to him that the reason for her hesitation was that he had perhaps been too precipitate. He hinted as much.

"No, no, William dearest!" she hastily assured him. "It is not that—not that! It is something else. Oh, how can I ever tell you? There is an—an obstacle!"

"You are not promised to another?" anxiously cried Bononi.

"No, no, my William—not that!"

Bononi heaved a sigh of relief.

"Then tell me what it is," he said dramatically; "for, short of that, nothing shall ever come between you and your devoted William!"

The widow had seemed to be in a state of semi-hysteria; but now Bononi's words, spoken so firmly, apparently steadied her nerves.

"The obstacle," she explained, "is my brother. You saw him with me at the circus to-night. He is quite averse to my ever marrying again; and, as he has very great influence over me, my position is—terribly difficult. He would never consent to my marrying you!"

"But what right has your brother to interfere?"

"Ah, William—dear, dear William!" came the mincing rejoinder. "You don't understand. He has ever been a good, kind brother to me—the best of brothers! No, I am certain he would never consent to my marrying you."

The manner of the "widow," though mincing, was also convincing. Bononi debated within himself for a minute.

"Martha," he whispered presently, "I must and will marry

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you! Your brother will know nothing about it till afterwards."

"William—my ownest—William—what do you mean?"

Bononi squared his shoulders and set his jaw.

"Martha," he said, in clear, determined tones, "we must elope!"

The widow gave a little scream, and once more buried her face on Bononi's willing shoulder.

"Yes, my darling Martha," went on Bononi, gaining courage as he contemplated his scheme, "we must elope! You will agree, won't you?"

"Y-yes, my prince," she responded, with another half-sob; "since you propose it, I—I consent!"

"My own brave, precious darling!" said Bononi fervently. "I will arrange everything."

"And you will let me know the final arrangements in the morning, dearest?"

"Yes," promised Bononi, "I will let you know in the morning. Shall I call personally?"

"Oh, no, no, William!" replied the widow hastily. "My brother might be about, and it would spoil all. Send a note round, telling me where and at what time I am to meet you, and I shall be there, never fear. And now, William darling, I must bid you farewell till to-morrow."

"Farewell, Martha!" said Bononi brokenly; and, with the gallantry of a knight of old, raised "her" gloved hand tenderly to his lips.

Then, as she whom he quite believed to be Mrs. Lobb, tripped away, the clown gazed after her with bright eyes. When she was out of sight he drew himself up, proudly, smacked himself across the chest, and said to himself:

"William, you're in luck—your fortune's made, my boy! Two thousand pounds in Government stock! Ah! In the bright horizon of my life do I now behold the neatest and snugget of nice little pubs, with host Jenks sitting in the bar-parlour all day long, smoking a churchwarden, whilst Mrs. William Jenks supplies our very select circle of thirsty patrons with whatever they like to call for—and pay for! William, you can congratulate yourself! Houp-la!"

With which "shoppy" expression the lean, lath-like clown terminated his soliloquy; then, with chest inflated and head erect, strode with great dignity towards his lodgings.

Bononi's Letter, and the Plumber's Wrath—An Unexpected Reception.

How the widow—or rather, Lieutenant Tremaine—laughed when he got home that night! And how Roly-Poly laughed, too, when the ventriloquist recounted to him all that had taken place.

"I tell you, Roly," chuckled Tremaine, "it's the finest joke I've ever been in! Why, old Bononi has actually proposed to—to elope!"

He exploded into a fresh burst of laughter when he gasped out the word.

"W-what!" almost screamed Roly. "He-lope!" And he also went off into a paroxysm of mirth. "But, I say, old feller," he went on presently, "where's it all goin' to end, eh?"

"Don't quite know yet," returned the ventriloquist; "but I mean to see the thing through. To-morrow morning Bononi's going to write a note and send it to his beloved. Of course, the real Mrs. Lobb, our landlady, will receive it, and then—"

Tremaine paused, and roared anew.

"Then there'll be ructions, for a cert!" put in Roly.

And "ructions," true enough, there were next morning. For hardly had the clown and the ventriloquist finished breakfast than there came sounds of heavy footsteps up the stairs. There was a rap on their door the next moment, and a big, burly-looking man, with fierce black whiskers, entered.

It was Jim Coles, the "worthy plumber," and the affianced of Mrs. Martha Lobb. Upon his face was an ominous look, in his great brawny hand was a letter.

Tremaine rose as he entered, and civilly inquired to what they owed the honour of this early visit.

"Dunno about honour, misters!" growled the worthy plumber. "I'm on'y a plain man meself!"

"Exact'y," assented Roly; then added in an aside: "Hidjus plain!"

"Yus, I'm on'y a plain man," went on Jim Coles; "but I wants me rights. Missis Martha Lobb is me rights, seein' as 'ow I'm a-goin' to lead 'er to the halter in next to no time!"

"To the halter? Exact'y," observed Roly again.

"Sich bein' the case," proceeded the worthy plumber, with-

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NEXT
MONDAY—

"THE SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!"

A Grand, Long, Complete Story of Harry Wharton & Co. By FRANK RICHARDS.

out relaxing his scowl for one instant. "I wants to know the meanin' o' this 'ere!" He shook the letter savagely as he spoke. "I see it last night—oh, dear, yus, I see it! Jim Coles don't go about wi' his eyes shut—not 'im! I see the low feller a-smilin' and a-smirkin' and a-kissin' of 'is 'and to 'er! I see it all—and most abominable and disgustin' it were!"

"May I ask to whom you refer?" inquired Tremaine suavely.

"To who I refers, is it?" snorted Jim Coles. "Why, who should I refer to 'cept this 'ere Mounseer Boneyoney—a low, common cirkis-clownd! I comes to you, as mates of 'is, workin', as you does, on the same job, and I asks yer to say if that 'ere ain't shameful!" And the indignant plumber thumped his fist on the table, and pushed the letter fiercely over to Tremaine.

The ventriloquist picked the missive up. It was in Bononi's handwriting, and read thus:

"My own darling and most angelic Martha,—Meet me without fail at the cross-roads near the hollow tree on the Claybury road at twelve noon to-day. My own unworthy self will be there with a suitable equipage to meet you and greet you. In that equipage we will fly together. I propose driving to Claybury Station. From there we take train to London, where I will secure the marriage-licence, and, if all goes well, we shall be man and wife before the sun sets once more above our heads.

"Don't forget, my beloved—twelve o'clock near the hollow tree at the cross-roads.

'Yours, with all the love in my over-brimming heart,

"WILLIAM JENES-BONONI."

Tremaine placed the letter back on the table, and, with a great effort, restrained his inclination to laugh. He looked very serious indeed.

"I'm a-goin' to demarnd satisfaction, misters," went on Jim Coles. "I'm a-goin' to be at the cross-roads near the holler tree at twelve o'clock, and I'm a-goin' to make the serpint apolergise! If 'e won't apolergise—well, I'm jest a-goin' to make wot 'e calls 'is hover-brimmin' 'cart leak a bit! You leave it to Jim Coles!" The black-whiskered plumber paused, and scowled more ferociously than ever; then suddenly concluded: "'Avin' a-told yer so much, misters—enuff to make yer ashamed o' yer colleeg—I wishes yer good-mornin'!"

With which remark Jim Coles made his exit.

"Tremaine," whispered Roly-Poly, with a ghastly grin, as soon as the plumber was out of earshot, "what's goin' to happen now—earthquakes, volcaners, or havalanches? It's gettin' serious. Ain't it goin' a bit too far? Mightn't poor old Bononi come to some harm?"

"Oh, don't be alarmed, Roly," replied the ventriloquist. "We can prevent that, I fancy. The worthy plumber intends to put in an appearance near the hollow tree at the cross-roads, so we must be there, too; and we'll let young Clive Clare into the secret, so that he can come with us."

At twelve o'clock noon precisely there might have been seen at the junction of the cross-roads, on the Claybury road, a weary-looking four-wheel fly, with a weary-looking driver, and a wearier-looking horse.

Pacing up and down the road, with jaunty step and sprightly air, was Bononi. He was dressed up quite elegantly for the occasion—tall hat, a grey, rather tight-fitting frock-coat, lavender gloves, and a white flower in his buttonhole.

While he thus awaited the coming of his expected bride, that identical person might also have been seen trudging, with anything but fairy footsteps, along a winding lane which led to the cross-roads.

Mrs. Martha Lobb was walking very firmly indeed; her lips, too, were pressed very firmly together, and the big alpaca umbrella she carried was clutched very firmly in her right hand. Upon her head was the identical bonnet, trimmed with red imitation roses, which she had worn at the circus on the previous night.

Directly he caught sight of that bonnet now, Bononi made a frantic rush forward, with his arms outstretched. But there was no look of loving welcome upon the round, red face of Widow Lobb. Instead, she stepped back a pace, and surveyed the somewhat discomfited clown from head to foot.

"M-Martha," expostulated Bononi, "what ails you? Why have you changed so in your manner? Why do you so cruelly repulse me? Oh, why—"

His speech was suddenly interrupted, for the irate widow, swinging aloft her huge umbrella, brought it down with a smashing bang on to the crown of Bononi's tall silk hat.

At the same moment there leapt into the road, from behind a hedge, the form of a big, fierce-looking man with black whiskers. With great steps he advanced at a run towards the now terror-stricken Bononi. It was Jim Coles, the worthy plumber. There was mischief in his eye, and a club in his hand!

It looked as if Bononi was in for a sound thrashing. The clown was tall and lithe, and strong enough, for that matter; but for the ferocious-looking Jim Coles, with his formidable club, he seemed to be but a poor match. Moreover, Bononi was altogether unnerved by his unexpected reception at the hands of Widow Lobb, which probably accounted for the listless fashion in which he awaited the attack of the worthy plumber. The strong hand of Jim Coles was at his collar before Bononi appeared capable of offering any resistance, and the club was raised aloft, and was about to descend upon the clown's shoulders.

It did not descend, however; its impending flight was suddenly arrested from behind. One pair of strong hands seized the arm that held the stick, while another pair of strong arms was thrown around Jim Coles's body.

At the same moment a voice fell upon the astonished ears of the plumber. The voice was Roly-Poly's; the arms that encircled the plumber's body were those of Clive Clare, and the hands which grasped his arms those of Lieutenant Tremaine.

"Steady, my hearty!" quoth Roly. Whereupon "my hearty" simply scowled, and endeavoured with all his strength to shake off those who held him.

Bononi, in the meantime, having got himself free, withdrew a few yards, and stood looking on in bewilderment.

"Look 'ere," yelled the irate plumber, "wot d'yer mean by this 'ere conduct, misters? I've come to get satisfackshun from this long, skinny, and 'ungry serpint of a Mounseer Boneyoney—that's wot Jim Coles is 'ere for! Missis Martha Lobb 'ave been insulted most scandlus, and I means to 'ave satisfackshun!"

"Well," at length interposed Bononi, who had now, to some extent, recovered his wits, "isn't this a free country, me man? And can't I propose marriage to a lady if I choose, me man?"

"No, you can't me man—see!" retorted the plumber. "I ain't a free-borned slave no more nor you, and this 'ere lidy is me fiancée, me man!"

"Five Nancy, eh?" interjected Roly-Poly. "'Pon me word, I thought the lady's name was Martha."

"So it is," said Bononi sarcastically—he was getting quite brave now. "This fellow means that she's his financier. He's thinking of her two thousand pounds!"—this with a withering glance at Mrs. Lobb.

Jim Coles looked from one to the other in amazement.

"Two thousan' poun's!" he gasped. "Who's got two thousan' poun's?"

"Why," returned Bononi, "Mrs. Martha Lobb has. She told me so herself—in writing, too."

The plumber looked about in greater amazement than ever. Mrs. Lobb herself was about to speak, but a sudden burst of explosive laughter from Roly and Lieutenant Tremaine interrupted her.

Bononi turned upon them savagely.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded indignantly. "Why are you behaving like a pair of jackasses?"

"Hist, brother!" responded Roly, holding his sides, and recovering his composure—"hist, brother jackass, and we will explain. Mister Coles," he went on, turning to the plumber, "there has been a horrible mistake. All the fuss has been the outcome of a little innocent joke concocted by me and my gallant friend here."

"If yer've got any hexplanashuns to make, make 'em. I wants to 'ave this hout," said the plumber.

"You're talkin' like a dentist, Mister Coles," observed Roly. "But I knows what you mean, and I'll explain. And he went on to tell them of all that had happened since the joke against Bononi was first thought out; how Bononi had taken the bait; and how Lieutenant Tremaine had impersonated Mrs. Lobb, till at last all was revealed.

During Roly-Poly's somewhat involved explanation, Bononi, Mrs. Lobb, and Jim Coles had been gazing about them in profound amazement. The end reached, however, the plumber once more looked at Mrs. Lobb. Mrs. Lobb looked at the plumber, and then both burst into hearty laughter.

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!" roared the plumber, looking Bononi full in the face. "You're a beauty to ask a lidy to fly with yer, you are! But there ain't a-goin' ter be no flyin' to-day 'cos you ain't fly enuff! Ho, ho, ho, ho!"

"Now, look here, sir," said Bononi, going red and then white, and then red again. "I've had enough of this, sir. I wish you good-day!"

"Ho, ho, ho, ho!" rejoined the plumber. "And I didn't want to 'urt yer feelin's, nor yet nobody's. Jim Coles don't bear no malice, and if so be as I 'ad the good forchin ter be this good lidy's 'usband, why, blowed if I wouldn't ask the whole blessid bilin' of yer to come round and pick a bit o' dinner wi' us."

The glum look on Bononi's countenance faded away at men-

tion of dinner, whilst Roly's face, which had been straightened for a moment, became once more wreathed in smiles.

"Well, I'm quite sure, Jim," broke in Mrs. Lobb with an amiable look, "that the gentleman is puflick welcome. There's a beefsteak-puddin' a-bilin' away like hanythink in my biggest sorsepan, and if so be as these gentlemen 'ud care to jine us, why, they're welcome."

An Invitation—The Wager—Clive Clare and Lady Vixen.

"There!" exclaimed Mr. Adolph Cyrano, a few mornings later, after reading a letter which had just reached him at the George Hotel, Chalfont. "There! This is what comes of running a high-class show! This is the just reward of business enterprise in giving the British public the best talent that money can procure! What do you think of that, professor—eh?"

And, with a look of pride upon his face, Mr. Cyrano passed the letter to Professor Durnette, who was seated with him in the coffee-room of the hotel.

The lion-tamer took the letter, upon whose heading was an embossed crest. This is what he read:

"Sir Richard Battingley presents his compliments to Mr. Adolph Cyrano, and requests him to be good enough to reserve the best eight seats he can for to-night's performance at his circus."

"There!" repeated the circus proprietor, with a gasp of pride. "What do you think of it, Durnette? The aristocracy are finding us out, you see—they are recognising us! Mark my words, professor, we shall be 'commanded' to give a show before his Majesty yet!"

"Well, and if we ever do receive that honour, Mr. Cyrano," responded the tamer, "we sha'n't disgrace ourselves."

"I should think we won't!" rejoined Cyrano, rubbing his hands together in a gratified manner. "Well, Durnette, this is really good biz. Eight of the best seats! Sir Richard shall have 'em. You'll arrange that, Durnette. And, what's more, you might arrange for a brand-new strip of carpet for Sir Richard and his friends to rest their feet on!"

Durnette—who was to some extent the business manager of the circus, as well as a star performer—noted the proprietor's instructions in his pocket-book, and presently withdrew, leaving Mr. Cyrano to hug himself with delight at the prospect of the aristocratic patronage about to be accorded him that night.

Sure enough, a few minutes before the performance was due to begin in the evening, two gorgeous carriages drove over from the neighbouring village of Battingley with Sir Richard and his friends.

Mr. Cyrano had already acquainted the performers of the fact that the grand party would be present, with a result that the artistes were all upon their mettle. That night every "turn" was a brilliant success. There wasn't a hitch anywhere. Pintoli, the wire-walker, had never shown himself so intrepid before; Sando and Dando surpassed themselves in the ease and grace with which they went through their feats of strength; Durnette's exhibition with the lions thrilled everybody; while Clive Clare and May Ellis simply delighted the audience with their superb equestrian acts. In short, every turn was applauded to the echo, and no one present seemed more appreciative than the principal patron of the evening—Sir Richard Battingley.

Adolph Cyrano was a proud man indeed. And when, after the conclusion of the entertainment, Sir Richard did him the honour of coming "behind" with several of his friends, to congratulate the circus proprietor, the latter's cup of happiness was full.

The baronet requested to be introduced to the leading artistes, and shook hands and chatted with several of them. Furthermore, before departing he invited Cyrano and half a dozen of the performers to lunch at his house on the following day.

The luncheon next day at Battingley Hall certainly furnished a testimonial to Sir Richard's hospitality. All kinds of good things to eat and drink were provided, and to these the circus-party did abundant justice.

It was after the repast that the baronet, strolling on the lawn with Adolph Cyrano, raised the question of horses and horsemanship.

"You've a very fine horseman in that young fellow Clive Clare," he said—"a very fine horseman indeed!"

"You're right, your grace," responded Cyrano, who had not yet quite made up his mind as to the proper mode of addressing a baronet; "and I'm very proud of your lordship's appreciation. Yes, that lad Clare, I can assure you, Sir Richard, is a marvel! I've seen many a good horseman in my time—jockeys as well as circus-riders—both in this country and America, but though there may be others as good as Clive Clare in the world, I've never seen a better. What's more, I've never yet seen a horse that the lad couldn't ride!"

The baronet looked round quickly.

"You don't mean quite that, of course, Mr. Cyrano," he

said, with a smile. "You don't mean to say that Clare can ride any horse?"

"But I do, my lord!" Cyrano responded enthusiastically, for his professional judgment seemed to be here challenged—"I certainly do! I'd stake a level fifty pounds—the proceeds to go to the nearest hospital—that Clive Clare can ride any horse that may be produced!"

"What!" laughed the baronet. "You would lay a level fifty, Mr. Cyrano—you would really bet?"

"I would, Sir Richard—and reckon I was on a certainty!"

"H'm!" ejaculated the other, and there came into his eyes for a moment a queer, unfathomable look. "You are extremely confident, Mr. Cyrano, and but that I have the utmost respect for you, I'd take that bet. As it is, however, you are my guest, and it's scarcely good form for me to take fifty pounds out of a guest's pocket."

The circus proprietor halted abruptly, and flushed.

"Really, Sir Richard," he said, "you will excuse my saying so, but you talk a little mysterious. I repeat, however, most emphatically, that I will lay fifty pounds Clive Clare rides any horse you can produce!"

The baronet's hand shot out eagerly.

"Done!" he exclaimed. "I'll bet you fifty pounds that Clive Clare doesn't ride my black mare Lady Vixen over a course of two miles."

"Done with you, Sir Richard!"

And, with a most businesslike air, Adolph Cyrano's hand dived into his pocket, and drew out a bulky notebook, in which he quickly entered the newly-made wager.

"That's what I call fifty pounds easily earned, Sir Richard," he observed quietly.

"Not so easily," rejoined the baronet; "as you will admit, I fancy, when you see Lady Vixen. She's the most beautiful mare you ever set eyes on; but her temper—well, I can't describe it! I've never yet known the man who could stick on her back for five minutes. My grooms have to exercise her with a halter. She'll put up with that; but once let a man throw a leg across her, and she simply goes tearing mad!"

Mr. Cyrano smiled.

"Very likely, Sir Richard," he said—"very likely. But then you can't compare a groom or any ordinary horseman with Clive Clare. He's a marvel, I assure you—a perfect marvel!"

"That may be; but he won't be the first expert horseman who has tried to ride Lady Vixen," observed the baronet.

"Oh, well," said Mr. Cyrano, with a shrug of his shoulders, "just give Clive Clare a chance, and you'll see the difference, Sir Richard."

"I shall be delighted! But remember, Mr. Cyrano, if, after seeing the mare, you wish to back out of your bet, you are, of course, at liberty to do so."

"I sha'n't back out of my bet, Sir Richard, providing Clive Clare is willing to undertake the winning of it," was the confident rejoinder.

Half an hour later there was a somewhat excited assemblage in the yard adjoining the stables of Battingley Hall. The whole of the baronet's guests were there—including the circus people—talking together somewhat excitedly, and looking with curious eyes at the jet-black mare which a couple of grooms were leading up and down.

Lady Vixen was indeed a beautiful creature. In the sunlight her sleek black coat looked like satin. Thoroughbred perfection she was in appearance, but in her eyes there was a restlessness and a fire that abundantly supported her owner's description as to her temper.

"It's a shame to ask anybody to ride 'er!" murmured a sulky-looking groom who was looking on.

"Why?" inquired Lieutenant Tremaine, who happened to be standing near.

"Why!" retorted the groom, pressing his teeth hard against the straw he was chewing. "Why, becoss it's like committin' suicide fer anybody to try an' ride 'er! I dunno what the master's thinkin' about, that I don't! Nobodys tried to ride 'er since young Squire Thestleton got throwed. 'E used to fancy 'isself in the saddle a bit, but 'e'll never agen throw a leg across a hoss's back, pore feller!"

"What happened to Squire Thestleton, then?"

"What 'appened? Why, Lady Vixen throwed 'im on these 'ere very stones, and rolled over 'im, and crushed 'im summat terr'ble. Fer a couple o' days the young squire lay on his bed fightin' fer 'is life—an' 'e lost!"

"Do you mean he died?"

"Yes; an' 'twas Lady Vixen as killed 'im!"

At this moment the conversation, which had been carried on in an undertone, was interrupted by a cheer from the assemblage. Tremaine looked up, and saw coming towards them the lithe figure he knew so well—Clive Clare's.

(Look out for next Monday's instalment of this exciting yarn. Order your MAGNET early!)



YOUR EDITOR.

MY READERS' PAGE

The Editor is always pleased to hear from his chums, at home or abroad, and is only too willing to give his best advice to them if they are in difficulty or in trouble. . . . Whom to write to: Editor, The "Magnet" Library, The Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.

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decidedly clever; and, secondly, that you take in both the "Magnet" and "Gem" every week. I hope your attachment for the companion papers may long continue.



FOR NEXT MONDAY:

"THE SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!" By FRANK RICHARDS.

The rollicking humour which abounds in next week's splendid long complete story of the chums of Greyfriars will give great delight to all readers of the "Magnet." The old school is thrown into a state of uproar by the arrival of an amazing new boy, who displays astonishing prowess in the aerobic line. His peculiar craze catches on among the other Removites, and life and limb are often placed in jeopardy, until the powers that be assert their authority and forbid any further antics on the part of

"THE SCHOOLBOY ACROBATS!"

TO FURTHER THE FAME OF THE "MAGNET."

Most of my chums have read, or heard, of our popular girl characters in "The Gem" Library, Marie Rivers and Ethel Cleveland. In order to test the loyalty of my girl Gemites, I issued on the "Chat" page of our companion paper a special appeal to all girls named Ethel or Marie to purchase an extra copy of that week's "Gem," and to hand it to a non-reading chum.

The result of this scheme was astonishing. I expected my chums of the fair sex to rally round, but never to such an amazing extent as they did. Through their splendid efforts an appreciable rise became at once apparent in the circulation of the "Gem," and the whole thing was such a singular success that I am putting the same idea before my "Magnet" chums this week.

My appeal is directed to all boys whose Christian names are Harry, Frank, or Bob, these being the first names of Wharton, Nugent, and Cherry. I want every boy who is thus named to do me the favour of purchasing one extra copy of this week's "Magnet" and giving it to a non-reader. By this means much good may be done for the old paper, and I hope my chums will not fail to back me up in this great scheme.

If all the Harrys and Franks and Bobs who carry out my suggestion will kindly write and notify me of the fact, I shall have the pleasure of personally thanking them on this page a few weeks hence.

AN INGENIOUS PARAGRAPH.

One of my Winchester chums sends me the following paragraph, which he has cleverly constructed from the titles of recent "Magnet" and "Gem" stories:

"Carried Away" by the charms of "Master Marie." "Special Constable Coker" took to "The Path of Dishonour," stealing "Bunter's Banknotes" to win her. But it will be "The Last Plunge," for "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" "The Fall of the Fifth" will take place. "Surprising the School" greatly. Coker will receive "A Waster's Reward," but not so "Levison's Double," who succeeded in "Winning his Spurs" by passing "Through Fire and Flame" "For Another's Sake."

Good for you, my Hampshire chum! Your interesting contribution goes to prove two things—first, that you are

REPLIES IN BRIEF.

Frank Cunard, Electrical Artificers' Mess, H.M.S. Queen Mary, First Battle Squadron, care of G.P.O., London, would be glad to receive reading matter, such as old copies of "The Magnet," etc., for distribution on his vessel.

A Loyal Reader (Linaskia).—Many thanks for your letter and loyalty. Mr. Richards has not, of course, overlooked the characters you mention, and you will doubtless see something about them in future stories of Greyfriars.

Robert A.—I presume you mean the top Form. The First has no captain. Wingate is the captain of the top Form, and also, of course, of the school.

Sylvia Prentice (Reading).—The Bounder is fifteen years of age. You will see that Master Clare's suggestion has been duly adopted.

James Greave (Manchester).—Very many thanks for your cordial letter! Doubtless by the time this appears in print Johnny Bull will have returned to Greyfriars.

L. Suckling (Leyton).—I am beginning to grow just a little tired of explaining why it is Harry Wharton & Co. do not advance into higher Forms. If such a state of affairs came about the interest in the stories would obviously be destroyed. Many thanks to you and your chums for your further efforts to popularise my papers.

"Two Ardent Australian Readers" (Sydney).—I am very pleased indeed with your welcome letter, and wish that you had given an address, so that I could have replied direct. Many thanks for your praise of the "Magnet" and "Gem." Am always glad to hear from my Australian readers.

K. Brown (Marylebone).—I am sorry I cannot give you the information you require. Perhaps the C.O. of the regiment you mention could help you.

E. W. (Bristol).—Many thanks for pointing out error. The author of the story referred to was stranded in Switzerland when the war broke out, and I was consequently compelled to publish two stories out of their order. That is how the error crept in. Congrats. on your cuteness.

G. A. D., B. D.—Bob Cherry and Harry Wharton are both fifteen.

"The Terrible Three" (Halifax).—I very much appreciate your efforts to obtain new readers. Very many thanks.

"Not Satisfied" (Northampton).—Stockbroking is a risky game, and, while some men are lucky at it, there are many failures. Bunter's people were, of course, only comparatively poor. I hope this explanation will satisfy you.

W. H. (Northampton).—I am very sorry to have to disappoint you in regard to the "Magnets" you require. They are all out of print. Bob Cherry is the best boxer in the Remove, but Squiff, however, runs him pretty close.

A. T. (Tufnell Park).—You will see that your suggestion regarding the earlier Harry Wharton stories has been carried into effect. They are now appearing in the "Dreadnought," published on Thursdays.

R. W.—Squiff plays centre-forward in the Remove matches when the Famous Five are not playing.

A Constant Reader (Preston).—Tom Dutton is not, of course, stone deaf, but manages to hear people when they shout at him. In this way he picks up sufficient knowledge to enable him to follow the class books, even though he is sometimes unable to hear the master's instructions.

The Editor



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