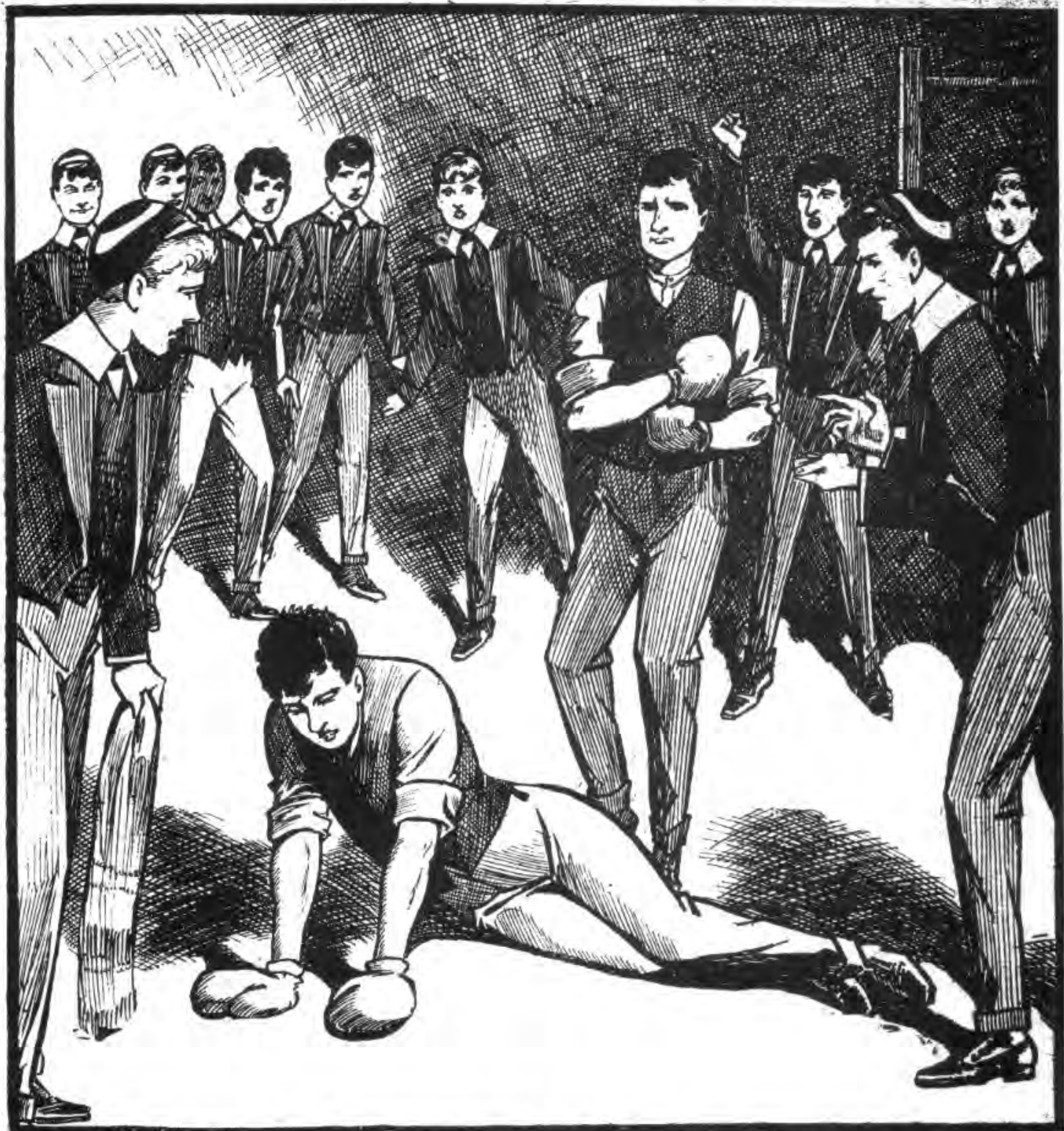


HARRY WHARTON'S RIVALS!

A Grand Long Complete School Tale of Harry Wharton & Co.



DOWN AND OUT!

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HARRY WHARTON'S RIVALS!

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

By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Peter Todd on the War-path!

"RATS!"
It was Peter Todd, of the Remove Form at Greyfriars, who uttered this ejaculation.

Tea had just come to an end in Study No. 1 on the Remove passage.

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, who shared that apartment, had been entertaining several guests to a first-rate spread.

Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Harree Jamset Ram Singh, Nabob of Bhanipur, the other three members of the Co. known as the Famous Five, scarcely counted as guests. It was a pretty general habit with them to take tea in No. 1.

But Mark Linley, Peter Todd, Sampson Quincy Illey Field, known as Squiff owing to the fact that life is brief—though it might have puzzled him or another to prove that Squiff is a shorter name than Field—Tom Brown, Piet Delarey, and Herbert Vernon-Smith were also assembled there.

"You're rude, Toddy!" said Squiff reprovingly.

"Oh, go and eat coke, you fathead!" answered Peter, with quite unusual moroseness of tone. "I'm getting fed-up."

"So you ought to be!" growled Johnny Bull. "It would take Bunter himself to put away a bigger whack than you've got yourself round, Toddy, for all you're so skinny!"

"Rot! I haven't wolfed any more than you've done!"

"Sha'n't argue about that, my pippin. 'Tain't worth while. I freely admit that I'm fed-up, in that sense, if it's any benefit to you to know it."

"It's not!" snapped Peter.

"Right-ho! Have it the other way if you like. Wharton and Nugent have done us too jolly well for me to want to quarrel—until I begin to feel a pain inside my waistcoat, anyway. If you'll call again about that time, I dare say I shall be ready for a row—that is, if you're still pining for one, of course!"

"Who says I'm pining for a row?" howled Peter.

"You don't sound very peaceful, anyway, old son," remarked Squiff.

Peter looked around him and scowled. This was the more noticeable because Peter Todd, who was quite a good-tempered individual, was not in the habit of scowling.

His long, lean face was not handsome. It lacked the sunniness of Bob Cherry's physiognomy, or the girlish beauty of Frank Nugent's face; but it seldom wore an unpleasant look.

"What the merry dickens is the matter, Toddy?" asked Bob.

"Everything!" snapped Peter.

"The fedupfulness of the esteemed and disgusting Todd must be indeed terrific if the matterfulness extendfully reaches—"

"Oh, dry up, or else talk English!" broke in Peter. "You can if you like. That broken lingo of yours is just swank!"

Inky scarcely looked pleased. It might

be true that he could talk proper English if he chose, but certainly it was not swank that kept him from doing so.

"What's bitten you, Toddy? This ain't at all your usual style," said Squiff.

"I've told you. I'm jolly well fed-up, and that's all about it!"

"But what with?" asked Nugent, wrinkling his brows.

"Ham, sardines, tongue, salmon, tarts, cheesecakes, sultana cake, dough-nuts—"

"Oh, dry up, Brownie, for goodness' sake! I don't want any of your funnositities! And I don't mean grub; you know that jolly well!"

"Don't pull a long face, Toddy," said Delarey lazily.

"You leave my face alone! It's as good a face as yours any day!"

"Better, old chap. So much more of it, you know," replied the Afriander, with a friendly grin.

Peter snorted.

"What is really the matter, Toddy?" asked Wharton.

"I was waiting for you to ask that, Wharton! It looks a bit off, I know, to rag a chap in his own study, after he's just stood you a princely tea; but I'm fed-up, and that's all about it!"

"Natural result of the princely tea," said Bob, grinning.

"Dry up, Bob! There's something on Toddy's mind, and the sooner he gets it off the better," Mark Linley said.

"There's an alternative, Linley," remarked the Bounder. "Todd might retire without saying it, and I'm not at all sure whether that would not be his best line."

Peter Todd looked at the Bounder very narrowly. He could see that the majority of those present were not taking him seriously. But Wharton was, and so were Vernon-Smith and Linley. All three saw that something had gone wrong with his temper. Perhaps the Bounder and Mark guessed what it was.

Good fellow as he was, Peter Todd was not quite free from the vice of jealousy. He was unquestionably one of the ablest juniors in the Remove—good at games, well up in class work, and given to using his brains in more ways than most.

Vernon-Smith, who in his time had been hard up against Wharton and the Famous Five generally, could well understand that there were occasions on which Toddy found it rather hard to play a consistent second—or sixth—fiddle to them.

And the conversation at tea had run rather markedly on the last exploit of the Remove leaders—in which, as it chanced, neither Peter nor the Bounder had shared.

There had been no bragging. It was not Harry Wharton's way to brag. But—well, there it was! The conversation had seemed to indicate that, on the whole, the Famous Five were rather remarkable individuals, and that their acknowledged leader, Harry Wharton, was unquestionably IT!

The Bounder had noticed it himself. Perhaps quiet Mark Linley had noticed it. It is even possible that the Three Colonials—as Greyfriars was getting into the habit of calling Squiff, Tom Brown,

and Piet Delarey—had noticed it too. But they would not be likely to mind much.

They had the Colonial way of assuming that the company they were in must necessarily recognise them as being as good as the next man—if not a trifle better. It is a frame of mind that need cause offence to none, and is uncommonly gratifying to the possessor of it.

"This is the long and short of it!" rapped out Peter. "You fellows talk as though No. 1 Study was head and shoulders above all the rest. It isn't that you brag—at least, not openly; but the notion's there all the time."

"Clean off the rails, Toddy!" said Squiff. "For my part, I'm open to back No. 14 against any blessed study of them all! What say you, Bull?"

"You're right, Squiff!" growled Johnny Bull. "Toddy's talking rot, and he knows it!"

"My only Aunt Sempronia! What about No. 13?" demanded Bob Cherry. "That ain't exactly a back number in the way of studies—eh, Inky?—eh, Marky?"

"Hear, hear, Bob!" said Mark.

"The hear-hearfulness is terrific, my venerable and ludicrous Marky!" purred Inky.

"Oh, you chaps—I was reckoning you all in!" returned Peter, with some heat. "At least, not Field or Linley, but you five. It's the Famous Five this, and the Famous Five that, till—"

"Poor old Todd gets a fit of the green sickness!" grinned Tom Brown. "Go and take a liver pill, Toddy! That's what you need!"

"Then you've got your back up against us, Toddy?" said Harry Wharton, very quietly.

Peter hesitated a moment before answering; but it had to come out.

"Yes, I have, if you put it that way!" he snapped. "I'm not running you down, you know. You're all decent chaps. But—"

"Can't say as much for you, Todd, at the present moment," said Johnny Bull, who was given to candour that was often positively painful. "'Tain't the decent thing to wolf a chap's grub and then round on him like this!"

"Poor old Toddy! He can't help himself!" grinned Bob Cherry. "It's the green-eyed monster working in him!"

"Oh, dry up, you two!" protested Harry. "There's nothing at all in that. We've all had tea with Toddy before now, and there isn't one of us that would have shied at talking to him as straight as we wanted to directly afterwards!"

"Thanks, Wharton!" said Peter. "You've got more sense than some of these shrieking asses, if you do ride the high horse a bit too much—and too often! As for you, Cherry, and you, Bull—oh, hang it all, I'm jolly well fed-up with the whole crowd of you! You're silly sheep, not fit for anything but to follow Wharton's giddy lead!"

"Toddy's got 'em again!" murmured Squiff.

"He sounds like Skinner in a wax," said the Bounder, who, sharing a study with the end of the Remove, had had plenty of opportunity to learn his little ways.

"Skinner be boiled!" hooted Peter. "I'm not going to be insulted by being compared with that rat!"

"All right—don't be insulted," replied the Bounder equably. "You can do just as you like about that, anyway!"

Vernon-Smith evidently had no notion of quarrelling with Peter; and, for that matter, it was not with him Peter felt like quarrelling. He would have been glad of the Bounder on his side; but he knew there was small hope indeed of that.

"Todd thinks he'd make a better skipper than you, Harry," said blunt Johnny Bull.

"Todd's like Bruce's spider," said Tom Brown. "He's had more than one shot at making No. 7 top study; but he don't know when he's licked. He'll try, try, try again—if it busts him!"

"Now, I always thought Todd was pretty fly myself," said Delarey.

"Ah, he hasn't gone in for lunacy since you came, old scout!" said Squiff.

"Is that the game, Todd?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Well, and suppose it is?" snapped Peter.

Really, it had not been. Peter Todd had come to tea quite in his ordinary good temper; but he was thoroughly enraged now. In his cooler moments he would probably see that there really had not been anything much to get his wool off about. He had not been kept out of anything intentionally or of malice. He had just happened not to be there, that was all.

And he certainly would not have put forward as a grievance—the fact that the Famous Five went about without him. No fellow in the Remove was more sturdily independent than Peter. He had his own interests, and in some of them these good chums of his quite naturally did not share, nor did he ask to share in all of theirs.

But Todd had a good deal of natural doggedness, and it was fairly aroused now.

They wanted to know whether he was going to buck against Wharton.

They should have their answer.

Yes.

And when Peter Todd bucked against anybody or anything he bucked hard.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Gage of Battle!

"WILL you howling idiots shut up and let me speak to Wharton?" rapped out Peter.

"Query, which of us are the howling idiots? And are the rest allowed to go on talking while you give Wharton the priceless benefit of your eloquence?" asked Squiff.

"There ain't any rest!" retorted Peter. "At least—well, Linley and the Bounder aren't such asses as some of you. And I'm not sure that the Rebel is."

"The Rebel" was Piet Delarey's nickname. Delarey murmured politely:

"Thanks, awfully, Todd!" The Bounder only smiled that caustic smile of his, and Mark Linley neither spoke nor smiled.

"See here, Wharton, I don't say you're a bad skipper," said Peter. "In fact, I'll go so far as to say that you are a pretty good one. But you ain't the only possible one, you know. There are other pebbles on the beach."

"I have never denied it," said Harry, looking Todd straight in the face. "I don't deny that you would make a good skipper. But that's for the Form to decide, isn't it? It's not a matter you and I can settle between us. If I resigned, it doesn't follow that you would step into my shoes."



Peter Todd speaks out.
(See Chapter 2.)

"You haven't any notion of resigning?" said Peter grimly.

"Not at present. I see no reason for doing so. But if I find out that the Form wants me to, I sha'n't hesitate."

"What's the giddy use, Todd?" demanded Bob Cherry, beginning to look serious now. "We all know there are some chaps who are always up against Wharton—Bolsover, Skinner, and that measly gang. But they ain't your sort, and they would bar you every bit as much as they bar Harry. They haven't any use for a decent chap."

"Oh, it's all right, Bob," said Johnny Bull. "Todd's shaping jolly well for getting down to their level."

Which was, on the whole, about the nastiest thing he could have said. Peter fairly glared at him, but answered not in words.

"Todd isn't counting on them," said Tom Brown. "It's from Study No. 7 his backing is to come, of course."

"Oh, my eye!" roared Bob. "That blessed crowd of freaks—Dutton and the Owl and poor old Lonzy!"

Peter flushed angrily, and retorted hastily:

"What's the matter with Dutton, I'd like to know? He's as decent a chap as any of you!"

"Dutton's all right—oh," said Squiff—"that is, if you only want him as an ornament! He's all right to look at, and to listen to. He doesn't use swear words, and he doesn't talk bigger rot than the rest of us. But I should say that a first lieutenant who can't hear a giddy word you say would be a bit of a frost, Todd."

Peter knew that well enough. Tom

Dutton's unfortunate deafness was a terribly big handicap.

"For all that, Dutton's miles ahead of Alonzo and that fat ass Bunter," said Frank Nugent.

"What's the matter with Lonzy? He's as good as any of you!" snapped Peter.

Peter Todd always stuck up for his cousin, the mild and eccentric Alonzo; but it was going rather far—even for Peter—to rank that gentle and guileless youth as the equal of the ruling spirits of the Remove.

"Better!" said Tom Brown cheerily. "Lonzy's as harmless as a giddy lamb. And, of course, he's got a vote, though I don't feel so sure he's got know-how enough to put his cross against the name of the chap he wants to vote for. And, anyway, he ain't exactly a——"

"You leave Lonzy alone, Brown!"

"I always do, Todd. He ain't the sort of chap for whose company I quite yearn."

"Bow-wow!" remarked Bob Cherry. "You must admit Bunter's a hopeless case, Todd."

"I don't admit anything of the sort. I'm going to make a man of Bunter yet!"

"With a cricket-stump?" asked the Bounder.

"You cut it, Smithy! 'Tain't your bizney how I keep order in my own study, is it?"

"Certainly not. Can't say I should relish the job. You're welcome to it, Todd."

"Anyway, Bunter's better than Skinner."

"Possibly. But Skinner, though he

shares my study, is not under my paternal control."

"You'll never make a man of Skinner."

"My dear chap, I don't go in for attempting impossibilities."

Peter turned away from the Bounder. There was no change to be got out of him.

"Well, that's the size of it, Wharton," he said. "If I can get enough of the other fellows to back me up, I shall call for a new election, and take over your job if I win it. There's no malice; but—well, of course, it would be rather absurd to pretend that we're still friendly in the circles, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so," said Harry. He spoke rather wearily, and Frank Nugent and Mark Linley both noticed that he looked more worried than the occasion seemed to call for. They were not inclined to take Peter's rivalry very seriously.

"There's my hand on it," said Toddy.

"And here's mine. No malice on my side, either, Todd. And I'm not at all sure that I shall be sorry if you get what you're playing for. It isn't all violets, being skipper of the Remove."

"I say, Harry, old scout, are you sickening for anything?" asked Bob Cherry, in sudden alarm.

Harry Wharton laughed, but the laugh was rather a strained one.

"I've made up my mind," began Peter, not feeling quite sure that he did not rather wish he had not, now that it was too late to go back on his declaration of war.

"And now you've made it up, you'd better take it outside and bury it!" said Bob.

"Oh, no! Too drastic!" grinned Tom Brown. "It only wants disinfecting, that's all."

Peter glared at them. Then he looked round, with a vague half hope of finding at least one supporter among the small crowd.

His eyes fell upon Delarey's face. Piet Delarey was not called "The Rebel" for nothing. It was not only because of the lying story put about that his father had been in the De Wet business that the name stuck. He was just a trifle lawless at times. He and Mr. Quelch did not hit it at all, and once or twice already he and Wharton had come slightly in collision, though on the whole they were good friends.

"Are you on my side, Delarey?" asked Peter bluntly.

"Not at present, Todd. I'll let you know if I change my mind later on," answered the Afrikaner coolly.

And, with a loud snort, Peter Todd departed.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Study No. 7 and Its Inmates!

"YAROOOH! Lemme alone, Toddy! Ow-yow! Chuckit!"

Such were the words that came to the ears of those left in Study No. 1 the moment Peter Todd had left it, closing the door behind him with a slam.

No need for any of them to ask whose dulcet voice that was. All knew the tones of Billy Bunter. Peter had caught him spying again.

It was no surprise to Peter. He knew all about the Owl's nasty little tricks. But it was a bit trying to his already sorely-trying temper, coming as it did so soon after his announcement that he still cherished the unlikely project of making a man of Bunter.

"You—you fat reptile!" hissed Peter. "You slimy toad! You sneaking porpoise! Just as I was sticking up for you, too!"

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"I—I—I wasn't doing anything, Toddy—really I wasn't!" burred the Owl. "I—I only stopped tut—tut—to—"

"Admire the scenery, I suppose, or tie your watchchain in knots, or eat your bootlaces, eh, you eavesdropping Prussian? Come along with me!"

"I—I've got an appointment, Toddy."

"You're coming along with me, porpoise! Blow your appointments!"

"I—I won't—there! I ain't going to be ordered about by you any longer! I'm on Wharton's side, I am, and I think I shall change back into Study No. 1. Yaroooooh! Wharrer doing? Ow-yow! I ain't coming, I tell you! Can't you hear me?"

"Your mistake, porpoise! You are!" said Peter grimly.

And Bunter found that he had to. Peter had grabbed one fat ear, and evidently meant to take that with him at least. On the whole, the Owl thought it advisable to go with his ear.

Inside Study No. 1 the fellows looked at one another and grinned.

"Rough luck on Toddy!" said Squiff. "There's one of his hopefuls. Toddy's a rare one to stick at a job, but I don't believe the chap's born who could make anything out of Bunter."

"Except a perambulating tuckshop," suggested Tom Brown.

"Off it, Browney! He's that already."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's a pity about Toddy, though," said Harry Wharton.

"Rats! Toddy can't do a blessed thing!" said Johnny Bull.

"He's tried before, and what did it amount to?" added Frank Nugent.

"And it will be a ditto repeato this time," said Bob.

"I wasn't really thinking so much about what he can do," Harry confessed. "Only that it's a pity to quarrel with an out-and-out decent chap like Toddy."

"He quarrelled with you, Harry, not you with him," said Mark Linley quietly.

"All the same, it takes two to make a quarrel," remarked Vernon-Smith. "But my opinion, for what it's worth, is that on the whole this isn't half such a bad thing. We've had enough peace and quietness to be going on with, and if Todd really gets a move on him it ought to liven things up a bit."

But Harry could not look at it in the same way. He had more at stake than the Bounder, and he hated being on ill terms with a chum.

Meanwhile, Peter Todd was leading the howling Bunter down the passage to No. 7.

"Leggo, Toddy! I don't want to go in there; and, what's more, I won't go!" wailed Bunter.

"Your mistake, porpoise! You will go!" answered Peter.

He kicked open the door.

Tom Dutton and Alonzo were both in the study. It was a wretched day, and the bright firelight seemed cheerful and welcoming to Peter. Not so to Bunter, who had his own reasons for desiring to keep clear of Tom Dutton just then.

Dutton was writing lines. Alonzo, with both elbows on the table, chin on palms, and a corrugated brow, was absorbed in a learned tome lent him by that mighty genius Skimpole of St. Jim's. Alonzo was a simpler soul than Skimpole—no more than a humble disciple at the feet of that great master. Perhaps Skimpole understood as much as fifty per cent. of Professor Bahny-crumpet's monumental works. At a rough guess, Alonzo may have understood one-fiftieth as much as Skimpole. But Alonzo struggled on, with devotion worthy of a better cause.

The deaf junior glanced up and saw Bunter.

He was on his feet in an instant.

Bunter made an attempt to get behind Peter Todd. The attempt was not altogether a successful one. It rather resembled a hippopotamus trying to find cover behind a giraffe. Part of Bunter was concealed, but most of him may be said to have lapped over.

The situation was further complicated by the fact that Peter refused to let go of the Owl's ear. On the whole, it showed some resolution on Bunter's part to get even partially behind a fellow who held him grabbed by one ear. But he did it somehow, and it was plain that he was more afraid for the moment of Tom Dutton than of Peter Todd.

"Keepimoff, Toddy!" gasped Bunter. Tom Dutton made in to the attack, and got a grip on Bunter's other ear.

"Groooh! You'll pull my head off between you! Yooop! Don't!"

"Serve you right, you swindling clam! What's the row, Dutton?"

"Eh?" asked the deaf junior.

He was hanging on to Bunter's fat ear with such intentness that one might have imagined that, knowing his own hearing apparatus defective, he cherished a notion of bagging the Owl's and doing something weird in the grafting way.

"Yaroooooh!" howled William George Bunter.

Alonzo looked up from his book.

"My dear Peter, what has the unfortunate Bunter been doing?" he asked mildly. "Constant association with him has naturally gone far to convince me that his actions are not always ruled by the dictates of conscience, but—"

"Ring off, Lonzy, and don't be a bigger ass than you jolly well can't help being! This dishonest oyster doesn't know what conscience means!"

"Oh, really, Toddy! You ought to be ashamed to take away a fellow's character like that!"

"Your character, you bladder of lard! Your character, you lump of blubber! You ought to be giddy grateful to anyone who'd take the thing away in a dustcart and bury it!"

"It is to be admitted, I fear, my dear cousin Peter, that the moral character of our study-mate is not of an elevated nature," said Alonzo mildly. "But I deprecate the theory that personal violence is likely to have any uplifting effect upon it."

So did Bunter. In fact, Bunter knew that personal violence, however fully deserved, had the effect of making him feel positively Hunnish. But Bunter was not grateful to Alonzo.

"Rats, you chump!" he said. "I should think my charac—"

"Oh, dry up you porpoise!" snapped Peter, tweaking his captive's ear.

"Our Uncle Benjamin would be shocked—nay, disgusted—"

"Oh, blow Uncle Benjy! Put the old back-number in a wheelbarrow and trot him along to a nice new cemetery!" said Peter. "You're dead in this act, Lonzy, so don't you go forgetting it! What is the row this time, Dutton?"

"Cow? I don't know anything about any cow, unless it's the one that died of the tune the fiddler played her, or the other one with the crumpled horn. But what are you gassing about nursery rhymes for, Toddy? It's my half-crown I want, and I jolly well mean to have it, too!"

"Oh, carry me out to die!" gasped Peter. "Nursery rhymes!"

"Our Unc—"

"Our Uncle Benjy be fried in—in Bunter fat, Lonzy! If you mention his name again I—I'll do something desperate!"

"Ow-yow! Yaroooooh! Lemme alone, Dutton, you rotter!"

"Give me my half-crown, you fat shell! I know you had it!"

"I didn't! I swear I didn't! I mean it's no good talking about paying it back yet! But I'll pay you when my postal-order comes! I shouldn't wonder if it comes by to-night's post. It's a long time overdue, you know!"

"It is!" said Peter, giving the Owl a shake. "It's been overdue since before I came here—before old ass Lonzy came, for that matter. But you don't mean to say you've been sneaking chink after the lesson you had a few weeks back?"

"No, I don't—I haven't! Yaroooh! Leggo my ear, Dutton! I never saw your measly half-crown!"

Alonzo held up his hands in shocked amazement.

"Oh, Bunter, Bunter! When I myself—"

"So it was you who gave me away, was it, Lonzy? Right-ho! Just wait till I get you alone, that's all! I'll—Ow-yow! Yooop!"

"Yes, that's about all you will do!" said Peter Todd. "Anyway, you had better not let me catch you meddling with Lonzy! What's this about half-a-crown, Dutton?"

"I didn't say anything about Tom Brown, Toddy! Hang Tom Brown! No, I don't exactly mean that. Brownie's all right. But it's my half-crown I'm thinking about!"

"So—am—I!" howled Peter, at the top of his voice. "Oh, crikey! What's a chap to do with a thieving porpoise, an utter idiot, and a deaf donkey on his hands?"

Somehow, Tom Dutton caught that, after the manner of deaf people when they are not intended to hear.

"I'm not deaf; only a little hard of hearing," he said, with dignity. "And as for being a donkey—well, I ain't donkey enough to let this fat sweep collar my money without fetching him up to the scratch, anyway!"

"Then Bunter's been bagging your chink, Dutton?"

"Think? I don't care what you think, Peter Todd! You may think I'm an ass, but that don't prove there ain't two of us!"

"My only aunt! My saintly Uncle Benjy! This is enough to make reason totter on her throne!" gasped Peter.

"Yaroooh!" howled Bunter, as Peter shook him by one ear and Dutton by the other.

"Has—this—rotter—been—boning—"

"I don't care a row of pins how much he moans! Just you let go of him, and give me an innings!"

"Did—Bunter—steal—your—cash?" howled Peter.

"Yes! Why didn't you ask me that before, fathead, instead of talking nursery rhymes, and calling me names, and gassing about this fat beast moaning? I'll make him moan!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

A Financial Transaction and a Recruit!

"**N**OW, then, porpoise! What do you mean by boning Dutton's cash?"

"Yow! I didn't bone it, really, Toddy! Only borrowed it, you know!"

"That tale's no go! It won't wash! Dutton didn't know he was lending you it, I suppose?"

"Yes, he did! I told him! But perhaps he didn't hear. It ain't my fault if he's deaf, I suppose, is it?"

"Oh, tubby, tubby, you'll live to be hanged! I'm sure you will!"

"He may not have properly understood," went on Bunter, fancying he perceived signs of relenting in Peter Todd. "But you can't blame me for that. My throat's rather delicate, and I can't

be bawling at him all day long. It's my opinion that deaf chaps should be educated privately. They're a nuisance at a school!"

"Oh, you needn't talk about your brother who's a private, you fat rotter!" said Dutton. "We know all about that game now!"

"There you are, Toddy! How can a chap be expected to make an ass like that understand anything?"

Dutton had now released Bunter's left ear, and, with a hand behind his own right ear, was trying hard to follow the conversation. Dutton had a great deal of faith in Peter Todd, though he had none whatever in William George Bunter.

"Sit down, you pilfering porpoise, and don't you stir till I tell you you may!" snapped Peter, pushing the Owl into a chair as he spoke.

Bunter sat down with suddenness and a groan, as of a pure spirit wrongfully suspected.

"I suppose this thieving oyster went to your desk and collared the little bit of oof?"

"Roof, Toddy? What's the matter with the roof? I haven't heard anything about it."

"Stole—the-half-dollar—out—of—your—desk!" shouted Peter.

"You needn't shout the place down, Toddy! Just speak clearly, that is all I want. I told you before I ain't deaf, only a little hard of hearing!"

"Oh, lor'!" gasped the head of Study No. 7, in desperation.

"Besides, I don't believe you did anything of the sort! That ain't your line! It was Bunter!"

Peter had produced half-a-crown from his pocket, so Tom Dutton's mistake was not altogether an unnatural one.

Billy Bunter's greedy little eyes gleamed behind his big spectacles. It was not very often that Peter Todd, the son of a struggling solicitor, was in funds. He had to be pretty careful, and Bunter considered him mean.

"Oh, really, Toddy, you might have told me you had some chink! Then I shouldn't have tak—I mean I needn't have borrowed from Dutton. I'd much sooner be in your debt. Though I am compelled to associate with Dutton, I have never regarded him as a pal, like you, Toddy!"

"Oh, you ring off!" hooted Peter. "Look here, Dutton, you chump, Bunter bagged it! But—"

"What did you want to make out you did for, then, fathead? Of course, he ought to be bumped! But it's him I want half-a-crown from, not you!"

"Catch hold of this! I'll jolly well see that Bunter cashes up to me next time he has any cash!" howled Peter in Tom's ear. "Anyway, if you're stony you need some, and I suppose you ain't too proud to borrow from me, are you?"

"I'm stony, too, Toddy!" said Bunter piteously. "And it's a heap harder for me to bear than it is for Dutton! That stands to reason. If you've got half-a-dollar to lend, you'd much better hand it over to me. Of course, I only borrowed Dutton's money. I told him I was going to. I am surprised at myself now for not being too proud to ask such a mean beast. But I did ask him, didn't I Lonzy?"

"My dear Bunter, ready as I always am to oblige you in any way consistent with the dictates of my conscience, I really cannot—"

"Oh, ring off, Lonzy! We all know that you did it with your little chopper, and that your name is Norval! Let's get on with the washing—do!"

"But, my dear Cousin Peter, my name is not Norval, and I have no little chopper. Such inaccurate statements

must not be allowed to pass unchallenged. I—"

"You'll get bumped if you don't ring off! Here, Dutton, freeze on to this!"

But before Tom Dutton could take the outstretched coin Bunter's fat hand had grabbed at it, and Bunter's fat fingers would have closed upon it had not Peter been too quick for him.

"Oh, really, Toddy! Lend it to me, and I'll owe Dutton the half-dollar till my postal-order comes!"

"And when will you pay me, you clam?"

"Pay you? But—but you were going to cash up for me, so there isn't any question of that! And I want the cash just now much more than Dutton does. So if—"

"You fat spoofer, if I let you have this you'll be owing five bob! Don't you see that?"

"No; I don't see it at all," replied Bunter crossly. "I don't think you're very good at figures, Toddy. I owe Dutton half-a-dollar, and you were going to pay him it. If you paid, I shouldn't owe him anything. If you hand over the half-dollar to me, I shall still owe him half-a-dollar—but only till my postal-order comes. I shouldn't think of being in the mean beast's debt a moment longer than necessary."

Peter Todd stared at Bunter. The Owl really seemed to believe that his method of reckoning was correct.

"And where do I come in?" asked Peter.

"Oh, really, Toddy, I didn't think you wanted to make a profit out of it!"

"Is Bunter to have this, Dutton?" howled Peter.

"Kiss? What, Bunter? I shouldn't think anyone would be potty enough to want to do that," said the deaf junior.

"That's all he knows!" smirked William George. "All the girls—"

"Oh, cheese it, both of you! Catch hold of this half-dollar, Dutton! That makes pilfering prodigal porpoise straight with you, and when he gets any cash—if ever—he can settle up with me. I'll take the interest out of his trousers with a cricket-stump!"

"No, you won't, Toddy!" said the Owl coolly. "Because, if you do, I sha'n't back you up, and then where will you be, I'd like to know?"

"Back me up in what, you idiotic incubus?"

"In getting to be skipper instead of Wharton, and making No. 7 top study, of course! You can't do that unless we back you up, so you'd better be civil to me and Dutton, anyway. Lonzy won't matter; he's such a worm."

Peter had almost forgotten his projected campaign in the effort to put the financial affairs of No. 7 on a sounder footing. A lurid gleam came into Peter's eyes at this reminder of it.

"I knew you were listening, you fat toad!" he said.

Alonzo looked mournfully at his cousin.

"Beware of ambition, Cousin Peter!" he said solemnly. "By that sin fell the angels!"

"Go and pick 'em up, then!" rapped out Peter. "Haven't I as good a right to be ambitious as any other chap? I'm not saying Wharton's a statesman—I like Wharton. But a change of government is a jolly useful thing—we all know that. Now then, you—you obtuse oyster, I'm jolly well going to settle with you for sneaking round study doors and listening at keyholes!"

"Oh, really, Toddy, I can't think how you can be so suspish! Because a chap's bootlace comes undone—"

"Enough to make anyone suspish when the chap's wearing button boots!" said Peter grimly. "But I'm inclined

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to let you off this time, porpoise, on condition that you mend your ways at once, and back me up for all you're worth—not that that's much, at best!"

Billy Bunter disregarded the slight. He rubbed his fat hands together, and smiled a fat and oily smile.

"I'll do that, Toddy, you bet!" he said. "I've got no end of good schemes for getting even with those rotters! There's my ventriloquism, you know."

"That might be useful," said Peter thoughtfully, "though I don't quite see how; and, anyway, it's not a scheme—"

"You can't wait to let a chap explain!" said Bunter peevishly. "I think you had better understand from the start, Toddy, that if you want my help you've got to treat me with more respect. I insist upon that!"

Peter Todd simply gasped.

"I've another dodge—raiding their grub!" went on Bunter, imagining that he had produced an impression. "I don't mean once in a way—that's no real use. Keep on raiding it! Blockade the beasts—like our Fleet's blockading Germany!"

"Rotten! Clean off the rails!" snapped Peter.

"What's that about pails?" asked Tom Dutton. "Have you gone back to your nursery rhymes about cows, Toddy?"

The door opened at this moment, and Dick Rake appeared.

"Hallo, Toddy! Meeting of insurgents?" asked Rake cheerily.

"What do you mean?" demanded Peter.

"Oh, it's no secret, old scout! Squiff and Brownney have been telling us all about it in the Common-room. Quite a good notion, I reckon—nailing good! I'm on, for one. Wharton is a decent fellow; but there is such a thing as getting into a blessed rut, and that's no sort of use. I've been thinking for some time of having a go at him myself. But you're first in the field, and I fancy you would make the right sort of skipper, so I'll back you up!"

Peter Todd was pleased. Rake was the right kind of supporter. He counted for something in the Remove, for he was a lively, plucky, go-ahead fellow, with notions of his own.

"Right-ho, Rake! Jolly glad to have you! Dutton is all serene; but Lonzy ain't much real use, though he means well, and as for this porpoise—"

"You can't expect to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, Peter!"

"Don't be rude, Rake! You needn't suppose that you are going to take second place in this affair. I'm next in command to Toddy, ain't I, Toddy?"

"Yes—I think not, clam! No, Rake; you can't do that. But if you get a whole pig to operate upon—"

"I sha'n't back you up if you insult me, Peter Todd!" said Bunter, with dignity.

"Consult you? I don't know who'd be ass enough to consult a fat idiot like you!" said Dutton.

"It's a scratch pack, Toddy!" grinned Rake. "A vote each when it comes to the election—that's about all they are worth."

"Toddy knows where to come if he wants to consult anybody," went on the deaf junior, who had not heard a word of what Rake said.

"Yes; but it's a bit of a drawback that a megaphone is needed—especially when you can't borrow one, and haven't the funds to buy one," said Peter drily.

Peter really thought a good deal of Tom Dutton; but there were times when he found him every bit as trying as Bunter.

"Who's crying?" asked Dutton. "Bunter ought to be, but he ain't."

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"Yah!" squealed the Owl, putting the table between himself and Tom. "You couldn't make me blub, you—you howling gatepost!"

"Banter, Bunter! My Uncle Benjamin would be shocked—nay, disgusted if he heard you alluding in that unfeeling way to the affliction of a study-mate! Pray, Bunter—"

"Sha'n't!" hooted the Owl. "What have I got to pray for, ass?"

"Oh, let's get out of this, Toddy!" said Rake. "Come and have a talk in the Close."

"Good idea!" said Bunter. "Come along, Toddy!"

"This," said Peter Todd, "is where you exit, porpoise!"

"Eh?"

"You ain't on the stage in the next scene, that's all."

"Oh, but, Toddy—"

"Rats! I'm on, Dutton. Stay where you are, tubby. If I catch you within a hundred yards of us I'll make you sit up, I promise you!"

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

In the Darkness!

THE dark Close was deserted, for there was a bitter nip in the air, and out-of-doors had few attractions at that hour of the day, in any case.

"I mean this thing seriously, Rake," said Peter, as they paced up and down together.

Lights twinkled in many windows. Now and again searchlights stabbed the cloudy sky. The old historic school lay under the pall of night; and for the life of them the two juniors could not help feeling a bit like deep and dark conspirators.

"So do I, old chap," said Dick Rake soberly. "Not but that I reckon on getting some fun out of it, too."

"The first thing is to find out who will back me up," said Peter.

"That's so. Well, I guess I know a few. But, see here, Toddy! I want to make one condish with you. It may be a bit late to say so now, p'raps, but I'm not in this if Skinner and that gang are."

"Wouldn't touch 'em with a barge-pole," answered Peter promptly. "I want this thing on the square, and there's no getting a square deal if Skinner's in it."

"Right-ho! That settles that. We can count on Wibley. He's a bit fed-up with Wharton just now, over that squabble in the Dramatic Society."

"Wib's pretty useful."

"He is! And I've a scheme for getting the most use out of him. But that will keep. Then there's Hazel. He's sulky with Wharton again about something. I'm not dead sure what. You know Hazel."

"I do; and I can't say I value him so high as Wib."

"Still, he counts one. Desmond's all right. He's come in if only for the sake of a row. He loves 'em—almost any sort!"

"That's three. What about Kipps?"

"Yes, I can work him. Not so sure about Russell, or Newland."

"We sha'n't get either of them," said Peter.

"There's Delarcy."

"No go! I did think he might. He's just the sort of chap to get on his ear at Wharton's lordliness. But he and Squiff and Brownney are as thick as thieves."

"We might get Squiff and Brownney," said Rake thoughtfully.

"No such luck!"

"Rats! You can't tell."

Peter thought he could tell. Squiff was almost like one of the Famous Five. He had taken Johnny Bull's place in the little band of stalwarts when Bull had been away from Greyfriars for a time. And Tom Brown had always been on pretty good terms with them.

"You see," said Rake, "the only thing that's really the matter with Wharton is just the thing that may upset those chaps any moment. He is a first-class chap every way—and he knows it! I'm not saying he brags. He's too proud for that. But he's got a good opinion of himself and his own judgment, and he lets everybody see he has."

That was true, though perhaps Rake overrated Harry Wharton's good opinion of himself. But Peter thought it would take more than that to bring the three Colonials into the hostile camp.

"We'll write them off," he said. "The Bounder, too—and Linley, of course. And we'll let Skinner and Snoop and Stott and Bolsover and that Yankee rotter alone. But that leaves quite a lot of fellows who may back me up—Elliott, Trevor, Treluce, Smith, and plenty more."

"Thing is, how are we going to start?" said Rake.

"Yes; that is a bit of a puzzle."

"Got anything up your sleeve?"

"Not a thing!"

"Well, I have. I say, what's that?"

"What's what?" asked Peter.

"Sounded rather like somebody sneaking behind us to listen."

"If it's anybody, it's my porpoise," said Peter Todd. "And if it's my porpoise, he'd better be warned and clear off, for I've only to catch him at it, and I'll make the fat criminal wish he'd never been born!"

Rake fancied that he heard something like a hollow groan after those dread words. But it might only have been the wind, as Peter suggested.

"There's Bulstrode and Ogilvy," said Rake.

"Bulstrode might stand in with us. He's got no grudge against Wharton now, though. Ogilvy won't, unless Russell does. Not even then, perhaps. Trust these Scots chaps to stand on their own feet!"

"I heard something again!" said Rake, catching Peter by the sleeve.

"It's your nerves, old chap!"

"Not likely! I haven't got any that I know of, and if I have they don't make noises like a cow groaning!"

"Was there a noise like a cow groaning?"

"Near enough. More like that than anything else I can think of. Some distance away, you know."

The mention of a cow naturally took Peter's thoughts back to No. 7, and Tom Dutton's absurd notion about nursery rhymes. Perhaps it was Bunter. It would be just like the Owl to sneak after them to listen. On the other hand, it would be hardly like the Owl to leave a warm, well-lighted study for the dark, cold Close, even to spy.

Peter stood still, and peered into the gloom. But he could neither hear nor see anything.

"What's this scheme of yours, Rake?" he asked.

"A dodge for making use of old—I say, Toddy, it's not good enough! I'm jolly sure there's somebody listening—sneaking after us! And if it's that fat ass Bunter, I might as well give the thing away to the whole school and have done with it!"

Again Peter listened intently. And this time he heard something. It was such a sound as a rat might have made—a sort of squeak, half suppressed.

"There is somebody!" he said, and

moved at once in the direction from which the sound seemed to come.

But in the darkness it is difficult to locate sounds.

Peter had moved twenty yards or so, followed closely by Dick Rake, when Bunter's unmistakable squeal from quite another direction caused him to whip round.

"Yarooogh! Gerroff! Ow-yow! Help!"

Out of the gloom came those familiar tones. But nothing could be seen, and Peter was not sure where Bunter was until he blundered over him.

Over him—and somebody else! For there were two of them—two spies!

They must have been acting each on his own, and have collided by accident. Nothing could be more certain than that the Owl was very much alarmed at finding himself in the grip of someone who was obviously neither Peter Todd nor Dick Rake.

"I've got Bunter! Collar the other rotter, Rake!" cried Peter.

But the other fellow was on his feet, and Rake's effort to collar his half-seen form was in vain. He eluded the eager clutch, and vanished like a phantom in the darkness.

It was impossible to identify him. It was impossible to track him down. At least, Dick Rake found it impossible. He tried to follow; but within a score of yards knew that there was no telling whether he was following or getting farther away.

To him it seemed likely that the second spy, whoever he might be, would make direct for the School House. But as he ran towards it he realised not only that there was no sign of his quarry ahead, but also that he would only bolt in that direction if he was as big a fool as, say, Bunter.

Now, Dick Rake did not believe that there was in all Greyfriars another fellow who was as big a fool as Bunter. And Bunter was fast in Peter Todd's grip. Allowing to the unknown even a small amount of cunning—a quality seldom lacked by a spy—it was likely that he would lurk out there until those who were after him had gone inside, and then steal in behind them. That might give an off-chance of capturing him, perhaps. Nothing better than an off-chance, for there was more than one possible way in.

Rake gave up what struck him as a hopeless quest, and returned to Peter and the Owl.

But the gloom seemed to have grown denser. He could distinguish nothing in it.

"Where are you, Toddy?" he called, at length.

"Here I am, duffer!" came Peter's voice from quite close at hand. "Can't you hear the porpoise wheezing?"

Rake could hear now.

"I shouldn't choke him if I were you, old scout," he said. "I don't mean that I object personally; but he'd make a beastly awkward dead body to get rid of; so much of him, you know."

It appeared that Peter relaxed his gentle grasp on the Owl at that warning, for out of the gloom sounded the lugubrious voice of William George Bunter.

"Ugh! You beast, Rake! Talking about dead bodies when a chap's just had a fight with a ghost!"

"Are you a ghost, too, Bunt?" asked Peter Todd. "I'm going to pinch you to make sure. If you're a ghost you naturally won't be able to feel it."

"Ow-yow! Stop it, Toddy! You hurt!" howled Bunter.

"He isn't a ghost, Rake," said Peter, in tones of satisfaction.

"Sure, Toddy? I should pinch him again if I were you."

"Yow! Don't, Toddy! Don't be so beastly ungrateful!"

"Ungrateful, you burbling bladder of lard! What do you mean?"

"So it is ungrateful, when I followed that rotter Cherry out and tracked him down like—like a sleuth-hound, so that he shouldn't hear what you two were saying."

"My hat! It was a ghost a moment ago, and now it's Bob Cherry!" gasped Rake.

"It wasn't any ghost, and it wasn't Cherry," said Peter. "Who was it, Bunter? Tell the truth now, or you'll get it where the chicken got the chopper!"

"I—I—I am telling the tut-tut truth—really, I am, Peter, old man! I was Cherry; at least, I think it was. I couldn't be quite sure; it's so beastly dark, you know."

"But if you followed him out—"

"Well, I didn't exactly follow him out, you see. I happened to come out after him, that's all."

"Or before him—which?" snapped Peter.

"Well, it might have been before him; a chap can't be quite sure in darkness like this. Blessed if it ain't worse than all the plagues of Egypt!"

"I see, porpoise! You followed him out, but you ain't quite sure whether he was ahead of you or behind you?"

"That's it, Toddy. It's plain enough if you only give a chap half a chance to explain."

"Clear as mud!" said Dick Rake.

"And you feel pretty sure it was Cherry?" went on Peter, with deceptive smoothness.

"Yes. At least— Yes, I'm near!"

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sure it must have been. Look at the way the beast gripped me!"

"Can't. That's like what the soldier said, porpoise—it ain't evidence. And if it wasn't Cherry, then it was a ghost?"

"Ye-e-es!" replied the Owl, with chattering teeth. "I say, Toddy, let's get inside! I'm half frozen, and—and I don't like this, you know. If that was a ghost, there might be a lot more of the beastly things about!"

"You came out to please yourself, tubby, and you'll stay out just as long as it pleases me!" snapped Peter, giving the trembling Owl a smart shake. "Now, I'm jolly sure it wasn't Cherry. Tricks of your sort aren't in Bob Cherry's line. And I know it wasn't a ghost."

"Then," burred Bunter, "it must have been someone else!"

He seemed to regard this as quite a happy inspiration. Peter Todd was less pleased with it.

"Of course it was someone else!" he growled. "Question is—who?"

"Might have been Skinney," suggested Rake.

"But I'm sure it wasn't; at least, I'm almost sure. Though, now I come to think of it, the voice was something like Skinney's."

"Oh, he spoke, did he?"

"No, of course he didn't speak, Toddy! Don't be so silly! If he'd spoken I should have known he wasn't a ghost, shouldn't I?"

"Oh, he didn't speak, but you think you recognised his voice, and that it was like Skinner's? My hat, Bunter, don't you ever get into trouble that will bring you into the law courts! You'd make about the finest witness anyone ever saw—I don't think!"

"You chaps do confuse a fellow so, and it is so beastly dark!" whined Bunter. "I'm not sure about Skinney; I don't mind owning that. One the whole, I'm inclined to think it was Snoop, or perhaps Fishy."

"Or the Head, or Quelchy, or Gosling—Go on, Bunter! No charge for extra shots, you know!" grinned Rake.

"It wasn't Snoop," said Peter decidedly. "Snoop would have squealed. So would Fishy. It might have been Skinner, or Stott. Of course, it is just possible that it was one of the enemy; all's fair in love and war, some chaps say. But I can't think which of them, and I'm sure not Cherry. You come along, tubby! Beastly cold, ain't you?"

"Yes; I'm perishing, Toddy!" said the Owl forlornly.

"Well, don't be in too big a hurry to perish, because as soon as we get back to No. 7 I'm going to warm you up with a cricket-stump!"

The Owl groaned as he went in. Dick Rake grinned. Peter Todd looked his grimmest.

Ten minutes after they had entered the School House Harold Skinner, the cad of the Remove, stole out of the dark Close and made his way in, unseen by anyone.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Rounding Up Skinner!

"SKINNER here?" asked Peter Todd, looking in Study No. 6.

"Unless he's under the table—no," answered the Bouncer.

"You are welcome to look, if you like, Todd. I assure you I haven't hidden him, though."

Peter granted. He did not look under the table. But he did not go at once.

"I shouldn't recruit Skinner, if I were you, Todd," said the Bouncer coolly.

"I'm not going to!" growled Peter.

"I've no use for that sort of sweep."

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"No, I certainly shouldn't recruit Skinner," went on Vernon-Smith, as if he had not heard. "You wouldn't care to be elected by the help of rotters of that type——"

"Don't I tell you I haven't any notion of asking their help?" broke in Peter, his voice and his temper rising together.

"And you simply haven't a dog's chance of getting in without 'em," said the Bouncer, quite unperturbed.

"We'll see about that!" snapped Peter.

At this moment Skinner came in. He gave a start when he saw the visitor, and his tactics thereafter were a trifle queer. It seemed to the Bouncer that what he desired above all things to avoid was letting Peter see his back.

And for some reason, to which Vernon-Smith had not the clue, Toddy seemed particularly desirous of seeing Skinner's back.

The Bouncer watched them with a kind of detached interest.

"Hallo, Skinner! Been out?" asked Peter.

"Not likely, on a beastly night like this!" replied Skinner readily. "Indoors is good enough for me."

Now, the Bouncer felt pretty sure Skinner had been out. His nose had a distinct tinge of red, and his face showed the cold, as the faces of fellows who don't take enough exercise to keep their blood moving freely are apt to do.

Moreover, there was mud on the back of Harold Skinner. The Bouncer could see it. Todd could not, as yet; but the Bouncer felt tolerably sure that Todd would before he left the study.

"Frowsting by the Common-room fire, I suppose?" said Peter sweetly.

"Well, I have, then, if you like to call it frowsting," Skinner said, with a gathering frown. "I don't see what bizney it is of yours, anyway, Todd."

The Bouncer was quite sure that Peter knew Skinner had not been in the Common-room. He had made certain of that, no doubt, before he came along to Study No. 6.

"Queer thing," said Peter thoughtfully. "I say, Skinner, have you read any of Wells' books?"

"Some of 'em—why?" Skinner returned, still very politely facing his questioner.

"Ever read 'The Invisible Man'?"

"Look here, Todd, what m thunder are you driving at?"

"Nothing much, Skinner. Don't let your guilty conscience drive you to blushing!"

"Guilty conscience be blowed! I haven't one!"

"Guilty or otherwise," said the Bouncer blandly.

Neither of the two took any notice of him. They were facing one another like duellists.

"Queer thing," said Peter again. "The chaps in the Common-room say they haven't seen you for the last half-hour or more."

"Who says so?" snapped Skinner.

"Bolsover and Stott, who are by way of being particular chums of yours; Desmond and Bulstrode, who aren't; and two or three more."

"Looks as if you must have some rather special business with me, to go and make all those inquiries!" sneered Skinner, whose reddened nose showed up the pallor of his cheeks now. "But it's no go. You and I never did pull together, Todd, and we're never likely to. You may as well chuck it!"

Skinner's attempt at bluff was an abject failure. Peter Todd stiffened at his words. The Bouncer could almost have sworn that Peter's long forelock rose in wrath.

"Pull together!" snapped Peter. "I

should think not! If I ever catch myself wanting to pull with you, I'll go straight to my governor and ask him to put me in a giddy reformatory! That's where you ought to be, you rat!"

There was a moment's silence, during which Skinner sat down at the table and pulled his books towards him.

Vernon-Smith could see plainly now that his back was covered with mud. But Skinner had still been careful to keep it turned away from the visitor.

"Well, I suppose you've said what you had to say, Todd?" said Harold Skinner. "I don't care about your insults, because I don't value your opinion. But it's time for prep now, and I think you had better clear out."

"Said all I had to say!" roared Peter. "Not likely—no, nor half of it! What were you dogging me and Rake in the Close for, you sneaking rotter? Oh, it's no good trying to crawl out of it! You ran against Bun—against another chap playing the same game—and he and you both tumbled over. You've got mud-marks on your back now, you worm! Isn't that right, Smithy?"

"I must decline to answer, Todd," said the Bouncer. "As a true-blue Whartonite, I'm a neutral in this affair. But I should recommend a personal inspection on your part. No doubt Skinner will oblige by turning round and giving you ocular demonstration that your suspicions are unfounded—to that extent, at least."

But even as he spoke the Bouncer's keen eyes were fixed on Skinner's back with a meaning look. As between Peter Todd and Harold Skinner, Herbert Vernon-Smith could not be really neutral.

"I'm not going to do anything of the sort!" said Skinner, rising from his chair and trying to back up against the nearest wall.

"Oh, yes, you are, my pippin!" cried Peter.

He seized Skinner by the collar, and fairly swung him off his feet.

Peter Todd did not look muscular; but Skinner was not the first to discover that there was plenty of strength in the slim, lanky Removee.

Skinner's back was very muddy indeed. This was scarcely to be wondered at, for he had fallen flat upon it in his collision with Bunter in the darkness, and had had the Owl's full weight upon him, pressing him down into the mud.

"Strikes me you'll spare time to shove on your overcoat when you go spying after chaps in the Close next!" said Peter grimly. "You'll save over-colouring your sniffer that way, and if you get floored it will be easy to rid yourself of the incriminating evidence. Take that, you sweep!"

Peter had snatched up a ruler, and seemed to be bent on seeing how muddy he could make it.

"Help! Rescue!" howled Skinner. "Are you going—yarooogh!—to sit there and see me knocked about like this, Smithy, you cold-blooded brute!"

"On the whole, Skinner, I rather think I am," answered the Bouncer deliberately. "As a neutral, I suppose I must not confess to enjoying it. But I really cannot say that at present the pangs you

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ANSWERS

If you are not getting your right PENSION

are enduring cause even mild discomfort to me."

"Yooop! Help! Ow-yow! Rescue!"

Whack, whack, whack!

Peter applied the ruler with great vigour.

In the passage sounded the heavy tramp of big feet in a big hurry.

Bolsover major burst into No. 6.

"Help, Bolsy!" howled Skinner.

"You stop that, Todd!" roared the bully.

"I've just finished," said Peter coolly.

"Ha, ha! You mean you haven't any fancy for going on after a chap nearer your own fighting-weight than Skinner tells you to stop!"

Peter eyed Percy Bolsover up and down in a way that would have made a thinner-skinned fellow squirm.

"I don't know that you are nearer my fighting-weight than Skinner, Bolsover," he said, in a deadly-calm tone. "I'm not sure that Skinner isn't half a stone or so heavier than I am, for that matter. But if you mean that I'm stopping because you told me to, all I can say is that you're dead off it, and your absurd mistake will be the worse for Skinner!"

And with that Peter, who had not relaxed his grip on the cad's collar, recommenced operations with the ruler.

Bolsover dashed in, and seized Peter by the arm. Toddy at once let Skinner go, and turned to face the bully.

The ruler passed from Peter's grip to Bolsover's. But that was only because Peter let it go. As Bolsover struck at him with it, the long right arm of Peter Todd shot out like lightning. The bony fist took Bolsover major fairly under the chin, and he sat down with painful suddenness.

"Oh, well hit, Todd!" cried the rather unneutral neutral. "No; you don't, Skinner! None of your two to one bizney here! If you touch Toddy, I shall touch you—hard!"

Bolsover got up, rubbing his chin, and looking at Peter with a queer mixture of resentment and respect.

"It will be more decent if you take your licking for this in the gym, Todd," he said.

"Right-ho! After morning classes to-morrow, if that suits you, Bolsover. And please bring all your little friends along to see me licked! They will enjoy it so, you know!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

In the Common-room!

"I SAY, Bolsover, is it true that you're going to fight Toddy?"

It was Billy Bunter who asked this question, pushing his fat form eagerly through the crowd gathered about the fire in the junior Common-room.

Bolsover major stood in front of the grate, his thick legs astraddle, his hands thrust into his trousers-pockets, and that portion of his anatomy which his coat-tails might have covered, if he had had coat-tails, turned to the genial warmth.

It did not matter in the least to Bolsover that there were others who would have liked a fair share of that genial warmth. Little things of that kind never disturbed the mind of Percy Bolsover.

He stood there, monarch of all he surveyed at present, in the absence of fellows who might lick him, or might have a chance of doing so if they went all out.

When Bolsover had first come to Greyfriars, a hefty lout, far bigger and stronger than anyone else in the Remove, he had lorded it over the whole Form. Though his supremacy had not gone unchallenged. No one in the Remove could lick him, it seemed. That did not mean

that all knuckled under to him; but it meant that the baser and more timorous spirits did, while the bolder ones went warily in dealing with him. However plucky a fellow may be, he has not much relish for a fight in which certain defeat awaits him.

But Solly Lazarus, of Courtfield Council School, had shown that the burly bully was not invincible, and some of them had taken the lesson to heart. Nowadays there were half a dozen or more juniors of his own Form against whom Bolsover at his best could not be sure of victory. They had gone on improving while he stood still, and their superior activity and skill in glovecraft made up for his weight, strength, and far longer reach.

Bob Cherry, Harry Wharton, Squiff, Mark Linley, Dick Russell, Peter Todd, Piet Delaney, Herbert Vernon-Smith, Tom Brown—any one of these might beat Bolsover, though none so outclassed him as to give him no chance. Some of them had beaten him; some had fallen before his big fists, only to try again and come out on top.

Now he was going to fight Peter Todd, and there was a good deal of excitement about the coming encounter.

Most of those who crowded around the bully were to be counted more or less among his supporters. They were not very loyal supporters. They were liable to fall away from him in the hour of defeat. But, on the whole, they bar-racked for Bolsover, as Squiff would have put it; and none of them was ever quite reconciled to the Wharton regime.

Sidney James Snoop was there—the worst rotter in the Remove. And William Stott, who was only Snoop's superior by reason of the fact that he was not such an utter coward. And Fisher T. Fish, who ran Snoop hard for first place.

Bolsover was better than his followers of this type. Bully as he was, he kept some sense of honour, and he had some feeling. But for the rest—Trevor, Tre-luce, and Elliott, and others of their kind—though they might bow the knee to Bolsover, they were really better fellows than he, with possibilities of good in them, and less real inclination to evil.

The bully answered Bunter roughly.

"Go and ask Toddy!" he growled.

"You're a particular friend of his, ain't you?"

"Oh, really, Bolsover, I'm nothing of the sort! I regard Toddy as a bullying beast—worse even than—I mean to say that I shouldn't think of comparing you to him, Bolsy, old pal! You'd never walk into a chap with a cricket-stump in the cruel way he does, I'm sure!"

"I ain't, then!" said Bolsover frankly. "I'd as soon walk into you with anything that came handy as look at you, you fat, gorging clam! What do you want to come nosing round here for, asking silly questions? Didn't Todd tell you at prep that he was booked to fight me?"

"No; he never said a word about it. I've only just heard—from Skinner, as a matter of fact."

Harold Skinner was not present, so he could not be asked at the moment whether he had told Bunter. But, as all knew, Bunter's story as to how he had come into possession of information was very seldom the truth.

"Couldn't you see it in his face?" asked Snoop, with a sneering grin.

"Whose face—Skinner's? I didn't need to. He told me."

"No, you fat idiot! Your friend Toddy's!"

"See what in his face? You're talking middle Snoop!" said the Owl indignantly.

"Wasn't he jolly uncomfortable at prep?"

"What, Toddy? Oh, no; not at all! He was jolly enough—at least, he didn't say much, but he looked quite the same as usual. Toddy ain't afraid of a lout like—like you, Snoop!" amended Bunter hastily.

But the lame amendment did not mollify Bolsover. He caught the Owl by the arm and twisted it savagely.

"Ow-yow! Stoppit, Bolsover! I—I—I'll tell Toddy of you!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" cackled Stott. "Which side are you on, Bunt—Toddy's or old Bolsover's?"

"Toddy's! Bolsover's a brute! Ow-yow! I didn't mean it, Bolsy, old pal! I'm on your side, really! Oh, stoppit, or I shall tell Toddy!"

Bolsover let go of the Owl's arm, and gave him a kick that sent him sprawling three yards away.

"You're a double-faced rotter!" he said hotly. "If I hadn't friends I could depend on better than on you I should be sorry for myself!"

It was a fair question whether Bolsover's friends were much better to be depended upon than Bunter. But they had at least the cunning to conceal their unreliability.

Skinner entered at that moment.

"Did you tell Bunter that I am going to fight Todd?" asked Bolsover.

"Yes. At least, I told Desmond and Morgan so, and Bunter was there. I wasn't actually talking to him."

"The fat sweep got nearer the truth than usual, then!" growled Bolsover. "Get up, Bunter! You ain't really hurt, you know!"

"Yes, I am! I'm ruined for life! My backbone's busted, and my spinal column injured in three places!" groaned the hapless Owl.

"Rats! You never had a backbone!" said Skinner.

He looked round at the crowd, and saw that all there might be counted as Bolsoverites—at any rate, as long as the star of Bolsover was in the ascendant.

"Your chum Toddy has about settled his hash now, Bunter," he said. "Utter ass, I consider the chap. Here he is bucking against Wharton, and what does he go and do? Make a row with me and Bolsover, the only fellows who could help him to smash up that gang. Oh, he's clean done for himself, has Peter Todd; and after Bolsy here has given him what he asked for to-morrow, I fancy we shall have heard the last of Todd v. Wharton."

"Yes," growled Bolsover. "We could have helped him, and we might have done—I don't say we would, but we might. But that's all off now, of course."

Bunter was sidling towards the door.

"My hat!" said Stott. "I should say you chaps are about right. To-morrow will about put the lid on it all. Who's going to back up a fellow who's just asked for a thundering good licking, and got what he's asked for?"

Bunter had reached the door now. He turned.

"Yah, cads!" he said. "Toddy says he wouldn't touch any of you with a barge-pole! I heard him tell Rake so. And Rake said he wouldn't stir a hand in it unless your measly gang were kept out. And I don't believe Toddy will get licked to-morrow. I believe he will lick bully Bolsover—and serve him jolly well right, too!"

Bolsover made a rush. Sheer amazement at the Owl's audacity had chained his feet for the moment.

He was too late. Billy Bunter was scuttling off as fast as his fat little legs would carry him.

"Did Todd really say that, Skinner?" asked Bolsover, his heavy face scarlet with rage.

Skinner nodded.

"Something like it," he answered. "I wasn't so near as Bunter, and I couldn't catch all the rotters said."

"Sure, an' that was a pity entirely, wasn't it, Skinney, when ye'd taken so much trouble to spy on them? It's sorry for ye I am!"

It was Micky Desmond who spoke. He had just come in, with Morgan, Bulstrode, Hazeldene, and one or two more. "Go to Bath, Desmond!" growled Bolsover.

"Thankin' ye kindly, Bolsover, but it's meself that would rather come to the fire," replied the undaunted Micky; and he and his companions forced their way through the throng. Heroes of the Snoop and Fish type fell back before them.

But Bolsover kept his place, thick legs astraddle, hands in trousers-pockets, a lowering look on his bulldog face.

"Now then, Bolsover!" said George Bulstrode sharply. "There are other chaps besides you who would like a sight of that fire!"

"I'm not looking at it," replied Bolsover sullenly. "You're welcome to look at it all you like;—but I was here first, and I jolly well mean to stay here!"

Bulstrode did not answer in words. He simply gave Bolsover his shoulder, and behind him Desmond and Morgan and Newland and Hazeldene lent their weight. The bully was forced out of his place.

He had to submit. A glance showed him that he could hope for no support from those he counted his followers. He had been keeping the fire from them, too; and, on the whole, they were not at all displeased to see him evicted.

"You chaps will sing smaller after to-morrow!" he growled.

"Why should we?" asked Bulstrode. "You ain't going to fight any of us, are you? Todd will be a big enough handful for one day, I should think."

"That's it. You're Toddites, and you fancy your man's going to lick me. But you'll find that you've made the biggest mistake of your lives!"

"We haven't declared for Todd yet," said Bulstrode, warming his hands.

"Sure, an' I have, though!" cried Micky Desmond. "I've nothing in the wide, wide wuruld against Wharton; but Toddy's a sport, and I'm on his side entirely, an' wid all me heart an' soul!"

"So am I!" said Hazeldene.

That surprised a good many. Hazel shifted his feet as he spoke, and looked uneasy. But he had spoken out, and that before bolder fellows than he had declared themselves.

"And I don't mind owning that I am, too, whatever," said Morgan.

"I'm only thinking about it as yet!" growled Bulstrode. "It ain't so easy to make up your mind between Wharton and Toddy. But when it's Toddy v. Bolsover, my mind don't need making up; it's made up already!"

"Aren't you going to speak out, Sheeny?" sneered Skinner. "You're Toddite, of course?"

"As a matter of fact, I'm not. I'm for Wharton all the way!" said Monty Newland quietly. "And you'd better address me civilly next time, Skinner, unless you're yearning to have your nose pulled!"

Rake, Kipps, and Wibley came in together at this moment.

"Three more Toddites!" sneered Snoop.

"That's so," said Rake. "Hurrah for Toddy, and may he lick bully Bolsover into a cocked hat to-morrow!"

"Oh, Jerusalem crickets! Bolsy's going to make potato-scrappings of him!" squeaked Fisher T. Fish.

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"Sure, then, an' someone must be after lettin' the Food Dictator know, an' Bolsy will get it in the neck for waste!" grinned Micky Desmond. "It's the law to cook potatoes in their jackets now, Fishy, ye spalpeen!"

"Todd will be cooked, anyway, in his jacket or out of it!" growled Bolsover.

"Oh, he'll take his jacket off!" said Dicky Rake. "He isn't the sort of bragging ass who talks big beforehand about what he means to do, you know, or thinks he can win a fight by scowling at the other chap's very name the night before it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bulstrode. "Got him there, Rake! Well, I'm neutral to this extent—I don't care a scrap who licks Bolsover! If Toddy fails, I don't mind having a go at it myself, or seconding Wharton, or anybody else who takes it on."

Bolsover turned on Bulstrode with a flaming face. A fight then and there seemed not at all unlikely.

But Skinner laid a restraining hand on the arm of his furious chief.

"Don't, old chap!" he whispered. "I know a trick worth two of that!"

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Counsel of Skinner!

"NOW, what are you driving at?" growled Bolsover, when he and Skinner had found a place where they could talk alone. This was in Bolsover's study, the other occupants of which were absent for the time being.

"See here! I suppose it would suit your book to be captain of the Remove?" said Skinner.

"What do you think?"

"I think there's a chance for you if you play your cards right. A good many of the fellows seem to be up against Wharton just now."

"Yes—and backing Todd!" snarled the bully. "What's the use of that to me?"

"Lots! They won't back Todd after he's been licked. You know what chaps are. Not many of them will shout for a fellow who's down and out."

Bolsover granted. He recognised the truth of this, but he did not quite see what it had to do with the case.

"That's all very fine and large," he said. "But it seems to me that when I lick Todd I'm only helping to put things straight for Wharton. Not that I care much. On the whole, I think I'd prefer Wharton to Peter Todd as skipper."

"Rats! You'll bring over a heap of them when you knock Todd out. And then your game is to pick a quarrel with Wharton, and knock him out, too. After that you put up against him—sec?"

Bolsover saw now.

He stood looking thoughtfully at his big fists.

"There's something in it," he said slowly. "I fancy I sha'n't have a lot of trouble in smashing Todd up. He's a good boxer, but he hasn't the weight to stand long against me. Wharton—well, yes, I think I can lick him, too. I'm game to try, anyway; but you've forgotten one thing, Skinney. Licking Wharton don't shove him out of his place."

"I've forgotten nothing," answered Harold Skinner, with a touch of irritation. "The whole thing's cut and dried in my mind. You do your part, and I'll see to the rest."

Bolsover looked at him with a touch of suspicion.

"Where do you come in?" he asked.

Skinner laughed harshly.

"My hat! Don't you think it will be enough in the way of benefit for me to

have a pal of my own as skipper, instead of Mr. Magnificent Meddling Maudlin Wharton, or long-nosed, straight-laced Peter Todd? I tell you straight, old chap I hate them both. I'm not sure which I hate most just now. I've always been at odds with Wharton; but Todd's been cutting across my path a deal too much lately, and I don't stand that sort of thing."

"Are you dead sure Todd's on the job?"

"Of course I am! Didn't I hear him and Rake talking it over in the Close, counting up the chaps they could rely upon and those who were sure to stand by Wharton? Mind you, I didn't hear all I wanted to. That fat idiot Bunter was on the job, too, and he got in my way. It was beastly dark, and we ran into one another. He bowled me clean over, the fat brute!"

"So that was why Todd was getting at you? I'd have done the same in his place, Skinney!"

"I dare say. But you're an ass if you call this spying. I don't. I reckon myself in a state of war with both the rotters, and it's fair enough in war."

"Oh, I dare say! Shouldn't do it myself; but never mind that. How did you get on to it—Todd's setting up against Wharton, I mean?"

"Some of the chaps who went to tea in No. 1 were talking about it. The great Peter got fed-up with Wharton's brag, it seems. I suppose it didn't give him a chance to get in enough of his own, and he let fly," sneered Skinner.

"I don't blame him. But I can't see that I've a dog's chance of being elected if Wharton doesn't resign, and there's nothing much less likely than that."

"Nothing much more likely, you mean, chump! It's only a matter of working on his pride. Get a majority of the Form to tell him they don't want him for skipper, then lick Todd, then lick Wharton, and after that it's only making yourself solid with the fellows and getting an election."

Bolsover scratched his head in a puzzled way.

"Hold on, Skinney!" he said. "You're going too fast, and I reckon you're getting things in their wrong order, too. I'm due to fight Todd after classes to-morrow morning. What time is there before that to work the chaps up against Wharton?"

"That is a difficulty," admitted Skinner. "We must get the fight put off by some dodge or another. Can't you sham ill?"

"No!" roared Bolsover. "Think I'm going to have it said that I fupked that skinny sweep?"

"Well, there are other ways, I suppose? Leave it to me to think of one."

"Then why shouldn't I thrash Wharton before we start out to get his resignation?"

"Hanged if ever I saw so thick-headed a chap as you are, Bolsy! Don't you see how much more effective a licking for him will be at a time when he's considering whether he ought to resign or not? It's just the very thing to force his hand and make him do it."

"My hat! It wouldn't me!"

"Ah, old sport, but you aren't Wharton! You haven't got his silly pride."

"I've got my own, though!" said Bolsover huffily.

"Oh, of course! But it ain't the same silly sort as Wharton's."

"Well, that's true, too. You're a deep one, Skinney, and I'm more than half inclined to agree to your plans."

Very much more than half inclined, as Skinner could see plainly enough! Bolsover could show the obstinacy of a mule at times; but there were other

times when he was as clay in the potter's hands with Skinner.

The cad of the Remove did not press him to give complete assent at the moment. Harold Skinner was far too wily for that.

"Tell you what, old sport," he said. "I shall expect to have the time of my life when once you're skipper."

"So you shall, Skinny—so you shall! I'll boss the show, and you shall be my what-d'ye-call-it."

"Prime Minister?" suggested Skinner.

"Rats! I shouldn't think you'd want to be that—not after some of the specimens we've had! I'd rather be called something else—something a bit politer. What was it the old Eastern johnnies called their right-hand men?"

"Viziers?"

"That's the word. You shall be my vizier, Skinny!"

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

An Awkward Attack of 'Flu!

"MY dear Cousin Peter, I am sure that you are ill!" "Rats! Leave me alone, Louzy, you ass!"

Peter Todd sat in the armchair in Study No. 7, as close to the fire as he could get. He certainly did not look well. So far, Alonzo's anxiety was fully justified.

"Will you allow me to pour out for you a dose of the wonderful cold cure which our revered Uncle Benjamin so strongly recommends, Cousin Peter?"

"Br-r-r-r! No, I won't! Go and poison yourself with the beastly stuff, or give it to Bunter!"

"But really, my dear Peter—"

"Oh, dry up, and leave a fellow alone! I haven't said I've got anything the matter with me, have I? Just you wait till I do before you chip in!"

But the gentle Alonzo was not so easily choked off. He could not bear the sight of anyone suffering. Billy Bunter had had much undeserved sympathy from Louzy. And Bunter was not very dear to the Duffer's affectionate heart. Peter was. The guileless Alonzo considered his Cousin Peter a person of really remarkable ability and character.

"My dear Peter, I am sorely afraid that it is the thought of this regrettable combat which is weighing upon your mind!"

"Oh, go and eat coke, you utter idiot!"

"I do not for a moment wish to infer that you fear Bolsover, Cousin Peter."

"You'd better not! I don't often take the stump to you, Louzy, but I jolly well shall if you get inferring anything at all like that!"

The threat did not move Alonzo. He was capable of facing the stake itself in a case in which his affections and his conscience were alike concerned.

"No; it is not that. But why, oh, why, fight at all when a few words would put the whole matter right? Bolsover is not a person whom I respect or admire. I do not even like him, though I try my best to like everyone. He has more than once been brutal to me—perhaps thoughtlessly—yes, doubtless thoughtlessly. But I am willing to go to Bolsover and reason with him."

"Ass!" rapped out Peter. "Bolsover would cut you up into little pieces, and I should have to flay you alive when you came back!"

"Do not, I beseech you, use such violent language, Cousin Peter! I know that you have no real love of fighting, and to me it seems that you should be grateful to anyone who made peace between you and Bolsover."

"Oh, shut up, or I'll throw you down and jump on you!" snapped Peter.

Alonzo, with a pained look, got up from his seat, and went out of the room.

The Duffer was quite right in one respect.

Peter really had no special love of fighting. He considered it rather foolish than otherwise, except when it was really necessary.

But he was quite a good boxer, and he never funk'd anything.

In another respect Alonzo was just about as far wrong as he could be.

Peter was not worrying about having to fight the next day. He had faced that prospect quite cheerfully from the outset.

What Peter was worrying about was lest he should not be able to fight!

He had had influenza before, and he knew the symptoms. He tried hard to persuade himself that his present

and his brain had seemed unusually dull. He simply could not remember now one single, solitary word of the lessons at which he had worked so hard, either.

"What's the matter, Toddy, old chap?"

It was Tom Dutton now! Why couldn't they leave him alone?

And Dutton was taking it very seriously, too. He had been absorbed in a book during Alonzo's talk with Peter, and had failed to catch a word of it. But he had looked up and seen his chum's face, and next moment he was on his knees by Peter's side.

"Nothing at all. Don't worry!"

"Curry? You didn't have curry for tea, did you? Beastly stuff, I call it. If it's that, all I can say is you'd better not



Peter Todd lashes out.
(See Chapter 6.)

symptoms must be due to something else—something that would pass in the night, and leave him fit for next day's job.

But he could not quite manage it. The aching in all his limbs, the pains in his head, the shivering fits that came over him, the bad taste in his mouth—he knew all those signs.

Except for a headache, he had been all right at tea-time—nearly all right, anyway. He had made a first-class tea. But perhaps he had been a trifle rusty in temper, though he wasn't going to make the 'flu an excuse for that—not he!

It had been pretty cold out in the Close with Rake; but at an ordinary time Peter Todd was not a fellow to worry about cold. But in the course of prep he had several times felt a nasty chill,

touch it again, for you look jolly queer, Toddy!"

"I didn't say 'curry,' I said 'worry'."

"You ain't worrying about Bolsover, are you, Toddy? I think you'll lick him all right. But even if it—Oh, rats! I know you wouldn't bother about the notion of taking a licking! You're ill, Toddy!"

"Tell you I'm not! Shurrup, and leave me alone!"

Alonzo came in again.

"Cousin Peter," he said, "I am rather at a loss as to my proper course."

"Out!" snapped Peter, pointing to the door. "That's your proper course. I won't be worried by you, fathead!"

"But, really! Oh, pray, let me explain!"

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I thought it wisest to consult someone, and I happened to meet Delarey. I do not quite understand Delarey; but he has always been very kindly in all his dealings with me. I like him. I do not think he would impose upon me. And yet there was something so enigmatical—yes, that is the only word for it—in his smile when I asked him whether he considered my plan of seeing Bolsover and endeavouring to make peace a good one that—well, really, I did not—"

Peter grinned. Ill as he felt, he could not help grinning. The Remove knew well by this time that half-cynical smile of Piet Delarey's. The Duffer's proposition had tickled the Afrikaner immensely—Peter was sure of that.

"What did he say?" he asked.

"He replied in words that seemed to me to have a double meaning. He said that it was an uncommonly good idea, and asked if I had arranged about the funeral. And Mauleverer, a very well-disposed person, though not industrious in any way, said: 'Oh, don't be an ass, Lonzy, begad!'"

"Jolly good advice, too!" said Peter. "You leave Bolsover alone, and me, too! It's all right, Tom, old chap, don't you worry. I felt a bit queer for a time; but I really think it's gone now."

And Peter managed to persuade himself that it had gone.

But it hadn't!

The pains in limbs and body came on again directly he was in bed. His head was worse than ever, and his mouth parched and dry, and with a nasty metallic taste in it.

Some of the juniors tried to draw him; but he would not talk. And at length all the rest fell asleep.

But there was very little sleep for Peter Todd that night. Several times he dozed off fitfully, only to wake either bathed in perspiration or shivering, as if an icy stream of water were running over his body.

And with each waking the pains were worse. At times he felt quite light-headed. He imagined himself in the gym, facing Bolsover, with a horrible certainty that he was going to be licked.

Peter must have been nearly delirious when a dream like that seemed so real. For, fit and well, he would never have doubted his ability to lick the bully. He had done it before, when he first came to Greyfriars—new boys who had any fight in them generally had to stand up to the

bully before they had been many days at the school.

And he had surprised the Remove by his victory. Some of them seemed to have forgotten all about that—Bolsover, for one. But the burly bully never did believe that a fellow who had licked him once was certain to do so again. After having been knocked out by quite a number of fellows, he had ceased his attempts to pose as Cook of the Form; but he did not fear trying conclusions again. That was one of the things that kept the Form from ranking him as low as worms like Skinner and Snoop.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

The rising-bell sent its unwelcome notes pealing through the cold, dark air, and many a muffled groan sounded in the Remove dormitory.

Bob Cherry nipped out of bed. If there had been an inch of snow on the floor and a sixty-mile gale from the north-east blowing right down the dormitory Bob would have tumbled out just as cheerily.

"Arouse ye, my merry, merry men!" he called. "Show a leg, my hearties! A leg each, I mean. Better make it two while you're on the job! Roll out, Bunt, or you won't have time to wash!"

"Lemme be!" replied Bunter peevishly. "There's heaps of time yet."

"Gossy's the worst old rotter outside Germany," said Harold Skinner. "He rings that beastly bell earlier every morning."

"Rats! As a matter of fact, he's three minutes, fifty-three and four-fifth seconds late this morning," said Bob. "Now, then, Harry, old scout!"

Billy Bunter turned over and went to sleep again. Two or three juniors were tumbling out—Mark Linley and Dick Rake and Tom Brown. But neither Harry Wharton nor Peter Todd moved yet, and they were generally among the foremost.

"Anything wrong, Harry?" asked Bob.

"No; but where's the blessed hurry? You might give a fellow a minute's grace, old ass!"

Wharton spoke rather irritably. Bob whistled softly, but said no more. Johnny Bull got out, rubbing his eyes. Squiff followed, and Russell, and Bolsover. Then, very reluctantly, Harry pulled down the bedclothes.

But still Peter Todd did not move.

On another morning Bob would have said things to Toddy. But he could hardly do that this morning.

Dick Rake crossed the room to Peter's bedside.

"Anything wrong, Toddy?" he asked.

"No! I'm all serene!" snapped Peter.

His manner was even less pleasant than Wharton's had been.

Rake looked down at him.

"See here, old chap," he began.

"Oh, rats!" said Peter crossly; and tumbled out of bed, with a vague notion that once his feet touched the floor he would be all right.

He was very far wrong indeed. For his feet had no sooner touched the floor than he realised that his legs were a pretty useless pair of things that morning!

They positively refused to hold him up. He slid down, clutching at the bedclothes.

"You're ill, Toddy!" said Rake, in alarm.

"Got a fit of the funks, I should say!" jeered Skinner.

"Dry up, you rotter!" growled Johnny Bull.

A dozen of them crowded round the unfortunate Peter. It was easy to see by his flushed face and watering eyes that he was ill. They all saw it.

But Skinner and his crew did not want to see it, or to believe it.

"You'd better get back into bed, Toddy," said Bob, very gently. "Here, let me give you a hand, old chap. That's better!"

Between them Bob and Dick Rake got Peter back into bed.

Any of those around would have helped willingly enough. They had forgotten all about the quarrel of yesterday now.

"Tell you what, it's the flu!" said Frank Nugent.

"Oh, rot! He's funking it!" squeaked Snoop.

Vernon-Smith stepped across, and Snoop got behind Bolsover.

"If you're responsible for these curs, I'd advise you to stop their wretched yapping, Bolsover," said the Bounder, with curling lips.

"I haven't said anything, have I?" snarled the bully.

"No. I think it's about time you did!" rapped out the Bounder.

"What do you expect me to say?"

"You know that Toddy would never funk anyone, and you ought to be the first to resent a lie like that!"



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The better part of Percy Bolsover's nature knew the truth of that. But the worst half was in the ascendancy. Skinner had given the bully a whispered tip.

"I don't see why," said Bolsover. "I don't pretend to be able to judge whether a chap's a funk or not."

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

In Defence of the Absent!

DICK RAKE and Bob Cherry went to tell the matron as soon as they were dressed, and before the breakfast-bell sounded Peter Todd, well wrapped up, had been taken to the sanatorium. The matron asked questions as to whether symptoms of 'flu had been observed in anyone else, but the two assured her, quite honestly, that they had not seen or heard of any.

"Well, you soon will, that's my belief," said the matron. "We shall not escape with one case."

"Cheerful old dear, ain't she?" said Bob as they came away.

"Old croaker!" agreed Rake. "Well, I hope I don't get it, anyhow."

At breakfast Alonzo was observed to wipe his eyes several times. Tom Dutton looked very serious indeed. But Billy Bunter was quite his bright, cheerful self.

"I say, Lonzy!"

"Yes, Bunter?"

"Ain't you going to eat your bacon?"

"I—I—really, I have no appetite, Bunter. Dear me, this is very distressing!"

"Oh, don't worry, old chap! I'll clear it up for you!" said the Owl generously. And he proceeded to do so, what time Alonzo used his handkerchief so persistently that Kipps, seated next to him on the other side, shifted as far away as possible. Kipps did not want the 'flu, and he thought Lonzy must be in for it.

Bolsover sat between Skinner and Snoop, with Stott on Snoop's other side, and the three were whispering together at intervals throughout the meal.

Keen observers—the Bunder among them—felt sure that the four meant to make some move. But there was no time for anything of the sort between breakfast and classes.

When the Remove had assembled in the Form-room, Mr. Quelch had to be told about Peter Todd's absence, of course.

"Dear me! I am sorry to hear this!" he said. "Does anyone know what is the nature of Todd's illness?"

"Funk!" came a loud whisper from somewhere.

"What was that, Skinner?" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"Nothing, sir—at least, I heard nothing, and I certainly did not speak," lied Skinner.

"It came from your neighbourhood. It must have been either you or Snoop."

"It wasn't me, sir. I never spoke, really!" said Sidney James Snoop, in hot haste.

"Possibly you were the guilty person, Bolsover?"

"I wasn't, then!" replied the bully sullenly.

"Is that the way to speak to me, boy? Come out here—you, and Skinner also!"

"I didn't cheek you, sir!" whined Skinner.

"No; you lied to me. And that, after all, is a very gross form of impudence. Bolsover, you can apologise, and return to your seat."

The burly Removite stood stock-still, silent.

"What does this mean?" snapped the Form-master.

"I can't see what I've got to apologise for!" growled Bolsover. "You say you

know it was Skinner who spoke, and I don't think it is fair play that you should try to drag me into it!"

"I am not going to punish you for what you have not done, Bolsover. But when I ask a boy in my Form a question, his answering civilly and respectfully should not depend in any way on whether he considers I was justified in asking it. That is a matter for me to decide. Hold out your hand!"

Bolsover took the three hard strokes with Spartan fortitude, not even wincing; but he went back to his seat looking positively Hunnish.

"Now, Skinner, what did you mean by the opprobrious epithet you applied to Todd?"

"So he is, sir. Half the fellows here know him for a funk."

Bob Cherry, Dick Rake, Harry Wharton, George Bulstrode were on their feet in an instant. And Tom Dutton followed them. He did not quite understand; but he knew that Skinner had somehow insulted Toddy, and that these fellows were protesting.

"Sit down, all of you!" said Mr. Quelch sharply. "Todd does not need defending. Skinner, you have now admitted that you lied to me, by your attempt to justify your words. Hold out your hand!"

Skinner had double Bolsover's dose, and did not show a tenth part of the bully's fortitude; but he was up to Bolsover's level in looking Hunnish, at least.

"Now, will someone tell me what is the matter with Peter Todd?" said Mr. Quelch.

"The matron says it's influenza, sir," answered Rake.

"Dear me, that is bad! I hope that his will be the only case. Does anyone here feel unwell?"

Billy Bunter got up, putting his hand to his head.

"I—I—I don't feel at all the thing, sir," he said pathetically. "I hardly slept a wink last night, and I had no appetite for my breakfast."

"That sounds serious, Bunter," said the Form-master drily. "Let me see your tongue."

Bunter produced a great pink article. There did not seem much the matter with it, except that it appeared rather an over-allowance in tongues for one boy to have.

"H'm!" said Mr. Quelch. "What are your symptoms?"

"I—I don't feel a bit like lessons, sir," squeaked the Owl, eyeing the books on his desk with unconcealed aversion.

"That, Bunter, is not a symptom, but the effect of an incurably lazy mind. I can see no reason to believe that you have influenza."

The Owl was disappointed, but he felt less so when Bob Cherry whispered to him that fellows who had influenza had to go for weeks without any solid grub. Treatment of that sort was not in the least suitable to Bunter's complaint.

Once or twice during classes some junior found Mr. Quelch's eagle eye upon him at a time when he was utterly unconscious of offence. Harry Wharton was one of those who experienced this. He flushed when he met the master's gaze.

"Are you not feeling well, Wharton?" asked Mr. Quelch.

"Oh, yes, thank you, sir!" replied Harry.

"You are quite sure?"

"There's nothing the matter with me, sir, except a bit of a headache."

"You see, Skinner!" whispered Snoop. "Quelch won't put up his pet lamb to construe after that!"

Wharton was not put up to construe. He would have made rather a hash of it

if he had been, for his head certainly did ache, and before classes ended he was finding it difficult to fix his attention on the printed page before him. The black letters seemed to be misty, to swim before his eyes.

But if his head was bad, his temper was worse. He snubbed Nugent, snapped at Bob Cherry, sent Johnny Bull off growling, and very nearly succeeded in quarrelling with Inky—all within ten minutes after twelve o'clock.

At the end of the ten minutes the Famous Five, none of them in a very amiable mood, found themselves in the Common-room.

Lots of other fellows were also finding themselves in the Common-room, which may have been due in part to the fact that the weather was all against playing footer with any enjoyment, but also seemed to be partly accounted for by a general feeling that there was trouble in the air.

Harold Skinner's sneers were not worth taking seriously. Everyone knew that well enough. Yet there was a vague, indefinable sense that somebody had to be brought to book for something.

But for Peter Todd's illness they would have been in the gym by now. But it would not be surprising if they found themselves going that way before long. There was thunder in the air.

Bolsover had taken his favourite place in front of the fire. A hulking, strong brute he looked, taller and heavier by far than anyone else there, and with more than usual truculence on his heavy face.

Around him were gathered those of his faction—Skinner, Snoop, Stott, Fish, Trevor, Treluce, and a few more. Facing them when the Famous Five entered were half a dozen or so of the declared Toddites—Rake, Tom Dutton, Wibley, Micky Desmond, Morgan, and Hazeldene.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry.

"What's up?"

"These rotters are making out that Toddy shammed ill to get out of fighting that graven image there!" said Dick Rake indignantly.

"It's a beastly lie, and they know it!" replied Bob.

"Of course they know it's a lie! But that's no reason why they should be allowed to go on saying it!" growled Johnny Bull.

"We didn't say it!" squeaked Snoop. "All we said was that it looked a bit like it."

"That's all you would say, Snoop, you cad, when there was anyone to answer you!" said Frank Nugent contemptuously.

"My hat, they're all like that!" said Bob. "Unless it's Bolsover. He's been known to show signs of decency—once in a way."

"You ain't very civil, Cherry," growled the big junior.

"Don't mench, Bolsy! Play up, man! Say straight out what you know very well—that Toddy is no more afraid of you than he is of Snoop. You can't say more than that, unless you can find a conscientious objector instead of Snoopey!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the crowd; and Snoop scowled at the genial Bob.

"You expect me to say that because you want me to?" asked Bolsover, in slow, threatening accents.

"Of course he doesn't!" snapped Harry Wharton. "He expects you to say it to show that, however big a brute you may be, you aren't a sneaking, back-biting worm!"

It was not a diplomatic speech, and perhaps it was not wonderful that Bolsover's face should flame redly, and that he should grit his teeth in fury. The compliment implied—that after all he was not of the breed of Skinner and

Snoop—was too well wrapped up to be visible to Percy Bolsover.

"What's Todd to do with you, Wharton?" he snarled. "You've split, I hear. He's trying to collar your job."

"Todd may think he'd make a better skipper than I am. So many others think so—"

"Hear, hear!" chipped in Dick Rake cheerfully. And that did not improve Wharton's temper.

"That's between him and me. But Todd and I have been chums for a pretty long time, and I'm not going to have him slandered!"

"Is it slandering him to say that he funks me?" demanded Bolsover.

"Of course it is!"

"Right-ho! I say so, then! Now what are you going to do, Wharton?"

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Knocked Out!

BEFORE Wharton could reply Tom Dutton had sprung forward, pushing up his cuffs.

"You leave him to me, Wharton!" said Tom. "I'm Toddy's chum!"

The wonder was that Tom should have heard. But he had been trying with almost pathetic intentness to follow what was said, and had got on to enough of it to understand.

"No!" snapped Bob Cherry. "I'm on this!"

"You can't have things all your own way, Cherry," said Dick Rake. "I claim that my right's better than yours or Wharton's, and I don't think Dutton's up to that chap's weight."

Vernon-Smith came in just then.

"What's the row?" he asked.

"Bolsover says Toddy funks him, and half the chaps here want to take Bolsover on. I'm game myself, for that matter," growled Johnny Bull.

"Same here!" said Squiff, who had come in behind the Bounder.

"Count me in, too," said Tom Brown.

"I'm a bit late, but I'm another," said Piet Delarey.

Wharton glared at them.

"Oh, mind your own bizney, you fellows!" he snapped.

The Bounder walked in front of Bolsover, and stood regarding him as one might some curious freak of nature.

"Well?" snarled the bully.

"I never looked upon you as a pattern to anybody, Bolsover—not even when we were chummy," said the Bounder, in his coolest manner. "But I never thought you were quite such a lar as this!"

It might have been accident or design, but as he spoke Vernon-Smith put his lean face temptingly within reach of Bolsover's heavy hand.

That hand was raised to strike. But Skinner caught Bolsover by the sleeve.

"No!" he whispered eagerly. "Go for Wharton!"

Bolsover hesitated.

"The Bounder can go and eat coke!" said Bob Cherry, with a friendly slap on the Bounder's back that rebbed the words of all offence. "I bagged this before him!"

"How many more of us?" asked Herbert Vernon-Smith.

"Oh, only Harry here, and Rake, and Dutton, and Bull—"

"And we three," said Squiff.

"Oh, you don't count! You're too late."

"Am I?" asked Bulstrode.

"Rather!"

"Seems to me that the word is with Bolsover," said the Bounder. "Our friend Todd being laid up, one of us takes his place. It's quite simple."

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Bolsover looked at the small crowd of champions. The Bounder, cool and sarcastic. Harry Wharton, flushed and angry. Bob Cherry, genial but determined. Dick Rake, very businesslike and not at all flustered. Tom Dutton, perhaps the most angry of them all. Johnny Bull, dogged and lowering. Squiff, ready and resolute. Tom Brown, smiling, but no less ready. Delarey, with the cynical smile that Bolsover hated. Bulstrode, of them all the one who was likeliest to Bolsover himself. And as he hesitated yet another voice spoke up—a quiet voice—Mark Linley's.

"Me, too, please!" said Mark.

Still Bolsover hesitated. Dutton would have been the easiest bargain. But he did not think twice of that. He was furious with the Bounder. He could not bear that smile of Delarey's, though Tom Brown might smile as much as he chose without Bolsover's caring. All the old bitterness against Linley welled up in him.

But again Skinner whispered in his ear:

"Go for Wharton!"

And Bolsover remembered that Wharton was the one fellow out of all the eleven of them to lick whom would be something more than a fistic victory.

He put the matter beyond all dispute.

For he strode forward, and struck Harry Wharton full in the face with his open hand.

The other ten could say no more. Even Tom Dutton drew back, though Tom was genuinely disappointed.

Bolsover's choice had been made in such a manner as left no room at all for argument.

A savage gleam was in Harry Wharton's eyes. He did not return the blow; but it was evident that only the prospect of an immediate meeting prevented his doing so.

"At once?" he snapped.

"That's the time for me," said Bolsover, breathing hard.

They flocked towards the gym. By the time the combatants were ready every fellow in the Remove, with the exception of the two Todds, was present, and there were many of the Upper Fourth, Shell, Fifth, and even of the majestic Sixth: while the fags fairly swarmed.

"Harry, old man, you're not fit!" said Bob, taking his chum apart.

"Don't talk rot, Bob!"

"You're in the very dickens of a wax; and that's all against you! But there's more than that to it. I do believe you're booked for the sunny, old scout!"

"Rats! I've a splitting headache; that's all. It won't make any difference. As for temper—oh, I dare say, it's none too sweet! I can't help that."

"Bolsover's a pretty big lump for a chap who's sickening for—the flu to tackle," said Bob gloomily.

"Who says I'm sickening?"

"Quechy thought so."

"Quechy be hanged! He's not a giddy doctor, is he?"

"You've done this sort of thing before, Harry, and it didn't pay."

"Dry up, Bob, or we shall quarrel!"

"Is your man ever coming up to the scratch, Cherry?" asked Skinner, in tones of patient resignation that made Bob yearn to punch him.

What more could poor Bob do? He felt utterly miserable: sure in advance that his chum was booked for a licking. Those heavy drives of Bolsover's were nasty things for a fellow who did not feel really fit. Bob would have faced them with real pleasure; but then Bob was as fit as a fiddle.

Nugent and Inky were whispering together. The Bounder's eyes were on Wharton's face, and the Bounder, too,

was looking worried. As Harry stepped into the impromptu ring he moved forward. Herbert Vernon-Smith had moral as well as physical courage.

"Wait a minute!" he said. "Bolsover, do you feel quite fit to fight?"

Nearly everyone there wondered what he was driving at.

"Oh, rather!" replied Bolsover. "You, or anyone else, Smithy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the crowd. But the Bounder did not even flash.

"Wharton, do you?" he asked, looking straight into Harry's face.

Now a few of them understood, and Bob Cherry blessed the Bounder, inwardly but very fervently. The next moment he was cursing Skinner, inwardly also, and not less fervently. For it was as plain to him as anything could be that Skinner knew—had known all along. His look of acute disappointment showed that.

For just one moment Harry hesitated. He knew that he was really not fit. It might or might not be the flu. But certainly he felt rocky.

But pride stood in his way—pride, and, it may be, some contempt of his clumsy opponent. He was fit enough to beat Bolsover, anyway.

"I'm all right, Smithy!" he snapped.

"What do you ask silly questions for?"

"As I'm to referee, I don't consider the questions exactly silly," replied the Bounder. "But there's no more to be said, I suppose."

Skinner breathed a sigh of relief, and Bob Cherry choked down a groan. What more could be said? The Bounder had said more than Bob had felt capable of saying publicly.

They were at it!

Bob rubbed his eyes.

Had he made a mistake, after all? If Harry could keep going like this, Bolsover would never be able to stand long against him.

The honours of the first round were all Wharton's. Bolsover did not get in a single effective punch, while he took a good many.

But Bolsover could take a good deal without showing it much.

He took more yet in the second round. But he also gave some, and Bob saw with alarm that every slog Harry got told on him. He had lost his temper, too, and his chance was none the better for that.

"Don't be in too big a hurry, old chap!" said Bob, as he sponged Harry's cut lips at the end of the round.

"Oh, rats! I'm not going to play about with the brute! My game's to knock him out as soon as possible. Don't gas, Bob! I want all my breath."

Perhaps it was the best game, after all. Bob began to think it might be, as he saw in the third round plain signs that his chum was not up to the strain of a long fight.

But—and it was a big but—Bolsover major was not the fellow to be knocked out easily when he had so much at stake.

Never had he looked grimmer, more determined. He took with scarcely a wince blows that might have sent a lighter fellow reeling backwards.

And he took them freely now. His guard was too clumsy to keep out Wharton.

In the fourth round, however, it looked any odds on the skipper of the Remove. He got home a regular piledriver on Bolsover's jaw, and the bully toppled over with a crash. He was up just in time to save himself from being counted out, and only the fact that the end of the round was near prevented Wharton from putting the finishing touches to his discomfiture.

But in the fifth round Bob saw with

dismay that with that blow—so very nearly a knock-out—Harry had reached his highest for the day. He was going downhill now—fast downhill!

There was little vim in his punches. They only made Bolsover toss his heavy head and peg away harder. His guard had gone all awry. Bolsover was getting home now.

Yet Harry still struggled gallantly on. He would not admit to himself, far less to Bob, that defeat was looming up before him.

He could stand punishment—yes, and go on standing it, though his head swam, and his loins ached, and his legs felt like lead under him!

So he told himself. But Harold Skinner, after the sixth round, said exultantly:

"You've got him set, Bolsy!"

"I fancy I have. But I can't make the fellow out; he's gone all to pieces! I hope there wasn't anything in what Smithy said," answered Bolsover, with one of those gleams of rough chivalry that came to him at times.

They were wasted upon Skinner; but the cad of the Remove had cunning enough to say nothing as to what he thought while his principal was in that mood.

"Silly ass!" he muttered. "But he'll see it differently later on!"

And now Bolsover was driving Harry all over the ring, raining blows upon him, hitting him again and again with such force that it seemed wonderful Wharton could keep his feet.

"Oh, buck up, old chap!" roared Johnny Bull.

And hardy Johnny's voice shook a bit, for he saw defeat ahead now.

"On the ball, Wharton!" cried Squiff.

"He's done, Squiff," said Piet Delarey quietly. "And he knows it, too! But he takes it like a man, by Jove!"

"You can't go on, Harry," said Bob at the end of that round. "It's no better than a slaughter. I knew you weren't fit!"

"I'm going on," panted Wharton. "I owe that to Bolsover. And if you say another word about my not being fit—Hang it all, I thought myself fit enough to lick the fellow when I started, and it's too late for saying I'm mistaken now!"

Too late! The words echoed in Bob's brain as his chum went forward for the last time—went forward to face a licking that Bob knew well would rankle, good sportsman though Wharton was! For he had insisted on championing Peter Todd, and in going under he would feel that he had let Toddy down. Bob would have felt the same had the case been his. But Bob thought himself wise enough to have handed over the job to another in such a case.

Too late! Harry Wharton crashed down in a heap, and lay there. No chance of his rising! The Bouncer counted—counted neither fast nor slowly—amid a dead hush. Then, "Out!" and Harold Skinner gave an exultant yell, and from a score of fellows with heavy hearts came groans of disappointment that they could not keep back.

"Oh, it's rotten—rotten!" said Frank Nugent, with tears in his eyes. "Poor old Harry! I wish it had been me instead!"

Bob said not a word, but his arm was round Harry's shoulder like the arm of a brother.

"Hanged if I'm not more than half sorry!" said Bolsover awkwardly. "Have I damaged him much, do you think, Cherry?"

"You're not to blame," said Bob. "You fought fairly. But there's a chap I'm going to make sit up for this!"

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Skinner Catches It Hot!

"I SAY, is it all over?" inquired Billy Bunter, rolling up to the gym just as the crowd was coming away.

"Of course it is. You're a day after the fair, tubby!" grinned Stott.

"Who won, then? You chaps are looking uncommonly pleased with yourselves, I must say!"

"Bolsy did—won hands down!" chortled Snoop.

"Made potato-scrappings of the galoot!" chimed in Fishy.

"Who was the other chap, then?" asked Bunter, puzzled.

The Owl had missed it all. Someone else had contradicted Bob Cherry. It was not in the least true, Bunter was told, that influenza meant a starvation diet. On the contrary, "they simply had to feed you up."

So Bunter had gone rolling off to see the matron. He had not yet procured admission to the sanny, but he had high hopes.

"Wharton, of course! Your dear chum Wharton!" sneered Snoop.

"Oh, really, Snoopey! Tell me another—one easier to believe! Bolsy could never beat Harry Wharton!"

"Idiot! He has licked him!" retorted Stott.

Bunter looked from one to the other in amazement—almost in dismay.

Billy Bunter was a most curious compound of knave, fool, and something better.

But there was so much knave in him and so much fool that what was left over hardly got a chance. Yet there were times when he dimly visioned better things, and this was one of them.

He had often wanted to see Harry Wharton licked. Gratitude was not Bunter's strong point. But somewhere deep down in him, seldom reached, was a feeling that in Wharton and Peter Todd he had real friends—friends who had often done a good deal, in their different ways, to keep him from disaster.

And now, when he heard of Harry's being licked, and by Bolsover, tears actually came into his little piggish eyes, and there was quite an uncomfortable feeling in the region which his heart should have inhabited.

"Why, if the silly ass ain't blubbing!" sniggered Snoop.

"Nothing of the sort!" replied Bunter, with dignity, and passed on.

It had scarcely amounted to crying—not much more than a dampness of the eyes. And the Owl was foolishly ashamed of it—far more so than he had been of things a hundredfold more discreditable.

But he really had felt a genuine movement of pity for someone other than himself, and so rare a happening is worth recording.

He went on into the gym. Nearly everyone had gone. In fact, only two fellows were left—Bolsover and Skinner. Battered though he had been in the early rounds, the burly Removite was not desperately in need of immediate repairs, and he had waited because Skinner had something to say to him.

They did not see or hear Bunter approach. The Owl guessed that there was something in the way of a secret about, and he drew nearer, still unperceived, until, hidden by the vaulting-horse, he could hear every word spoken.

"I don't believe it!" said Bolsover roughly. "It's one of your yarns, Skinner!"

Harold Skinner shrugged his shoulders.

"Just as you like, old chap!" he said.

"But I don't see how you can help believing after the way the fellow crumpled up. I saw it this morning in class. I've had the 'flu myself, and

seen other chaps with it coming on, and I know!"

"Why didn't you tell me, you rotter?" "My hat! Wasn't it as good as telling you? I gave you the tip to choose him, didn't I?"

"Do you think I'd have gone for him if I'd known this? Not likely!"

"Then you must be an ass!" said Skinner, with absolute conviction.

Bolsover snorted furiously. He looked like going for Skinner.

Bunter hoped he would; but he did not.

"You deserve a hiding!" he said hotly. "I can't very well give you one. But I'd advise you not to tell anyone else. The Form would jolly well send you to Coventry!"

Bunter felt almost happy. He had many an old grudge against Skinner. Within five minutes of his leaving the gym Bob Cherry should know all about this.

But Bolsover and Skinner had to leave before Bunter was safe, and until they went the Owl was on tenterhooks. It was but a minute or two, but it seemed like hours to him. If he was caught lurking there the hand of Percy Bolsover would be heavy upon him.

When Bolsover had stalked out, and Skinner, looking anything but pleased, had followed him, the Owl came out of his hiding-place, and rolled off to find Bob Cherry.

But there was no admittance to No. 1. Bob and Johnny Bull and Inky and Frank Nugent and Mark Linley were there, but no one else could get in. Speculation was rife. In the ordinary way, half an hour in the bath-room would have sufficed a fellow for repairs, even after such a gruelling as Wharton had had.

There must be something serious the matter when Wharton stayed in his study, and only his very closest chums were admitted.

They gathered in the passage—the greater part of the Remove. The three Colonials were there, and Mauleverer with them. The Bouncer was there, and so were Newland and Rake and Russell and Ogilvy and Dutton and Desmond and Bulstrode and Hazeldene. Little Wun Lung glided in and out among them, as anxious as the rest, though his yellow face wore its customary impassive Oriental look.

But the Bolsover faction held aloof.

Wingate came out. This caused surprise, for it had not been known that the Greyfriars skipper was inside.

"I say, Wingate—"

The captain held up his hand.

"One moment!" he said sharply. "Field, will you go and ask Mr. Quelch to come along?"

"Right-ho, Wingate!" replied Squiff, and was off at once.

"Yes, Wharton's pretty bad," said Wingate to the crowd generally. "The young ass insisted on fighting when he must have known that he was not fit. He had influenza coming on, and he's a bit light-headed now, with that and the smashing he got!"

"Bolsover's a hulking brute!" said someone indignantly.

"Rot! Bolsover is not to blame. I don't see how he could possibly have known!"

"If he didn't, Skinner did!" squeaked Bunter.

"What had Skinner to do with it?" snapped Wingate. "You're talking out of the back of your neck, as usual, Bunter!"

"Oh, Skinner was Bolsover's second, you see, Wingate!" explained Bunter lamely.

He had been struck suddenly by the doubt whether a public disclosure of the

supposed iniquity of Skinner was likely to be at all to his advantage.

"Which, of course, makes it very probable that Wharton told him secrets, doesn't it?" said the Bounder sarcastically.

Wingate grinned, and disappeared into No. 1. But some of those present fastened on to Bunter.

"I know what I know," he said mysteriously, but would say no more.

Mr. Quelch came hurrying up, and passed in with no more than a glance at the anxious crowd.

"Quelch was badly upset," said Squiff. "He doesn't like fighting at any time, and he thinks a heap of Wharton. Our friend Bolsover had better mind his p's and q's, I guess, for some time to come!"

The dinner-bell went before the anxiety of the crowd was at all allayed. But Johnny Bull, Inky, Mark Linley, and Wingate came in together a few minutes late, and then the rest got the news.

Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent had stayed with Harry, to help in taking him over to the sanatorium. He was badly knocked about, and a bit delirious; but there wasn't any real danger. No doubt a few days would get him on his feet again. And he would have company in sunny, since Peter Todd was already there.

"I'm not sure either of them is just the company the other would choose just now," said the Bounder.

Bunter sneezed alarmingly and copiously.

"Bunter, are you also sickening for influenza?" asked Mr. Capper, who was presiding, sharply.

"I—I—I really—I'm afraid I may be, sir! But I won't go to the sunny till I'm sure!" said Bunter heroically.

He really did think that he was in for a bout now, though he showed no loss of appetite. And, on the whole, he rather congratulated himself on contracting the disease. If he could only get a few words with Bob Cherry, and then go off to sunny, where neither Skinner nor Bolsover could get at him, all would be well.

Bob and Frank Nugent were very late at dinner. Bunter loafed about outside, waiting for them. He was beginning to wish that he had not eaten quite so much dinner, and to wonder why his head ached so. In point of fact, the symptoms were upon him at last!

Bob was not too ready to believe the Owl's yarn. But, though it was the result of spying, the information he had got hold of fitted the belief Bob himself had formed—that Skinner had known all along Harry was not fit, but had kept the knowledge from Bolsover.

"There ain't time before classes," said Bob. "But I'll round the rotter up afterwards!"

Before afternoon classes were over, Billy Bunter had also gone to the sunny. He really had a touch of influenza, but it was a slight touch compared with the dose of the devastating disease that had fallen to the lot of each of the other two.

It is doubtful whether Bunter enjoyed himself in the sanatorium. It is quite certain that Peter Todd and Harry Wharton did not enjoy themselves, not even when the period of convalescence came.

And that was partly Bunter's fault.

Before Harry was well enough to talk the Owl had told Peter how Wharton had fought in defence of his honour while unfit. Bunter meant no harm, for once; but he did harm.

For, quite naturally, Peter was in a hurry to thank Wharton. Peter was ready to throw to the winds all his schemes of ambition, and to go back to the old friendly terms.

But he tackled Wharton too soon, and perhaps he said too much—though that was hardly like level-headed Peter Todd. Wharton was still feeling very unwell; he still smarted under the disgrace—as it seemed to him—of defeat at Bolsover's hands. In short, he was in a distinctly bad temper.

He was ungracious. Peter got huffy. Bunter put in his unnecessary spoke, making matters worse. The upshot of it all was that Peter and Harry, by the time that both were really fit to talk, were not on speaking terms. Bunter sided first with one and then with the other, made clumsy attempts to reconcile them, and, in general, behaved like the nuisance he was.

After classes on the day of the fight Bob Cherry sought out Harold Skinner.

He found him in the Common-room, with Bolsover and some more of their crowd. Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent, and Mark Linley were with Bob.

"Skinner," said Bob, "I want you!"

"Well, I'm here!" said Skinner.

There was a touch of defiance in his tones, but he looked uneasy.

"I'm going to give you the hiding of your life!" said downright Bob.

"What on earth for?" gasped Skinner. "You leave him alone!" growled Bolsover.

"Better stand aside, Bolsover! I'll do you the justice to say that you're not the cad Skinner is! But if you'd been a real white man, you would have thrashed him yourself!"

"Me! Why should I? Skinner's my pal! You're talking riddles, you fat-head!"

"Do you want it straight out?" flashed Bob.

"Yes, hang you! I'm not afraid of anything you can say!"

"You fellows, Skinner egged on Bolsover to pick out Wharton from the whole crowd of us when he saw that poor old Harry wasn't fit! A cad's trick, I call it!"

"Hear, hear!" cried every decent fellow there.

"He didn't tell me so," said Bolsover hesitatingly.

"I know he didn't! That's why I'm leaving you alone, as long as you have sense enough not to interfere."

Skinner managed a ghastly attempt at a laugh.

"Did I force Wharton to fight?" he jeered. "How could I? It's clean absurd!"

"Of course it is!" murmured two or three, but not with much conviction.

"You couldn't make him! But you knew, you rotter, and you did all you could, out of your miserable spite against a fellow whose boots you aren't fit to black, to work it so that he should go to a certain licking! And I knew, but I couldn't hold him back. And Smithy suspected, if he didn't know—that was why he asked them both if they were fit. And now you're going to get it hot, and if Bolsover, or anyone else, interferes, he'll have cause to wish he'd never been born! Where's that whip, Johnny?"

And nobody interfered—not even Bolsover!

THE END.

(Don't miss "THE REBEL!"—next Monday's grand story of Harry Wharton & Co., by FRANK RICHARDS.)

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Monday:

"THE REBEL!"

By Frank Richards.

Since "The Boy from South Africa" appeared, numerous letters have reached me asking for another story in which Piet Delarey should play a leading part. Next week's thrilling yarn will supply this want. Delarey and Harry Wharton, without real ill-feeling on the part of either, are brought into strong opposition, and the result is that old chums of Wharton, seeing that the Afrikaner is on the whole in the right, support him. Through the story runs, as a second theme, the uprising of the Form in general against Wharton's leadership. Not yet is Wharton deposed; but the party against him is strengthened. He is placed in a very difficult position, but he shows up well in it, as you will see. I feel very little doubt that you will all like

"THE REBEL!"

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THE FOOD REGULATIONS.

It is possible that before these lines appear we may be under some sort of a card system, such as has been put into force in Holland and Sweden. In Germany, as everybody knows, the card system has long been in force, not only for food, but for many other of the necessities of life.

Some of my readers want to know what I think of it all. I will try to answer them briefly and plainly.

It must be taken seriously. There is no doubt about the shortage; and it is up to us all to do our best to see that matters do not become worse. Some people, whose thinking apparatus seems to have gone on strike, say: "Look at the shops full of stuff! Don't tell me there's any shortage!"

No good telling them, I suppose. But I give my readers credit for more sense. The supplies that fill the shop windows have to be continually renewed. In themselves they mean only a few days'—perhaps a few hours'—requirements. When the shops are empty it will be too late to think about guarding against being starved out. Starvation will be here!

Are the rations enough? Well, I find

them more than enough. A bit tight on the sugar, maybe, but with something to spare on the bread, and quite a lot over on the meat. Mine is a small household, too. In bigger ones it generally happens that some members of the family have small appetites, and that leaves a quite justifiable overplus for those with a bigger storage capacity.

The rations are not minimum ones, you know. There is no compulsion or request to live up to them. You may eat as much less as you like!

A growing boy or girl often needs more than a middle-aged man or woman—generally needs more, I might say. But boys and girls don't always need what they want. Think that out. There is quite a big difference between wanting a thing and needing it. You need your dinner. You only want that threepenny-worth of chocolate-cream, or the like.

Your Editor

THE GREYFRIARS GALLERY.

No. 13.—HAROLD SKINNER.

THIRTEEN is considered by the superstitious an unlucky number. In giving it to Skinner, the writer of these sketches is not likely to be hurting anyone's feelings at all badly.

There have been many inquiries as to whether Skinner will ever reform; but the only people who so far have expressed admiration or liking of Skinner as he is are the few readers who seem to have naturally vicious tastes, and who read stories to make heroes of the villains and sneer at the decent fellows. These say that Skinner is a far better sort than Wharton. They are welcome to their hero!

One does not see much chance that Skinner will ever become decent. To say that Vernon-Smith, Talbot, Levison, Bulstrode have all developed into fellows of the right sort is not a good argument. All four of these had far more of the stuff of manhood in them than Harold Skinner.

Yet Skinner has had gleams of the light at times. They have never lasted long; but they have been enough to show him not utterly vile—like Snoop, for instance. One would not know how to say a good word for Snoop. But we will leave him till later.

Skinner is a curious mixture of cleverness, cowardice, envy, hatred, malice, and all uncharitableness. His hatred is not confined to those who have injured him; he is quite capable of hating anyone for despising him. His uncharitableness applies all round. A friend—if such specimens as Stott, Snoop, and their like are worth calling friends—is as likely to come in for it as an enemy. A master is an enemy as being a master. A new boy, unless it is to Skinner's advantage to make up to him, is an enemy as being a stranger. So all get it. And, anyway, it is far easier and more pleasant to Skinner to say nasty things about anyone than the other sort of things!

Let us set down what may be said for him.

Once he sacrificed himself to save Bolsover—so Greyfriars held, at least. The sacrifice may have been exaggerated. As I see the situation, Skinner was bound to drop, in any case; if he dropped sooner he gave his comrade in misfortune a chance; if he held on to Bolsover's legs until Bolsover had to loose his hold on the beam, then both must have crashed down together. He dropped sooner. It needed more pluck, perhaps, than one had been disposed to credit Skinner with. But one has heard of far bigger sacrifices. Then he showed something like decency at the time of the sports tournament for the Howell Cup. That was under the influence of Phyllis Howell, who had hopes of his complete reformation. But it was a mere flash in the pan.

On the other side?

There really is not room to tell it all. Intrigues with others to blacken the characters of his enemies, solitary schemes to the same end, persistence in sordid dissipation, evil influence exerted upon younger and weaker boys, cabals against masters, lies and cheating and sneaking! It is a heavy charge-sheet.

Skinner has ability. He is the possessor of a certain morbid wit which can make others squirm. He is no mean cartoonist. His brains are at least equal to those of any but a few fellows in the Remove. The Bounder is his master in

craft, though the Bounder's wiliness is now used on the right side. Mark Linley is ahead of him for real brain-power. Perhaps so much cannot be said of anyone else in the Form except Peter Todd. This is in no sense meant to imply that such fellows as Harry Wharton, Squiff, and several others who might be named, have not good brains. It only means that Harold Skinner's are quite above the average.

He used his talent as a caricaturist against Wharton in that fine story "A Split in the Study"; against Darrell, the fellow with a past, who was trying his best to run straight at Greyfriars; and more than once against masters.

His snobbery is of the most glaring type. It was the original cause of his persecution of Mark Linley, though, later, there was more than snobbery in the rancorous hatred he cherished of the Lancashire lad. He strove to make Mark out a thief; he plotted to rob him of the story prize; but perhaps the thing Mark felt most, until Skinner so nearly brought



Harold Skinner

about his expulsion, was the chipping of his father, brought to Greyfriars by a faked telegram which Skinner sent. But Wibley wiped that score out for Mark, and Skinner was not allowed for a long time to forget his "Uncle Joseph."

There was his bitter grudge against Laurence Lascelles, the mathematical master, too. He did not score there. He dogged Mr. Lascelles to the boxing-booth, and was caned for his impudence; he let the Head know, only to find that it was not news to Dr. Locke. He stirred up the other juniors—all but a few of the more level-headed and loyal—to heckle the young master about not being in the Army. And, after all, it turned out that there was excellent reason for that!

Some of Skinner's plots have had good results. But that has been, almost without exception, an accidental feature of them. He showed up the Hun school-boy, Von Limburg, which was quite a useful piece of work. But it was not entered upon from any very high motive. There is nearly always cruelty in his schemes. The getting of an actor to take the part of Coker's Canadian cousin was not so bad as some of them; but his playing tiger in a rug from the library, at a time when a tiger was really loose in the neighbourhood, was right off the rails; so was his attempt to discredit

Ferrers Locke; and his exploits as a rival to Bunter in the art of ventriloquism brought him a public flogging, for he carried his tricks a great deal too far. Akin to his feud against Mr. Lascelles were his intrigues against Mr. Charpentier, the good-hearted little French master, and Herr Gans, the German master—no Hun, though a German!

Skinner was one of "The Four Heroes"—Bolsover, Snoop, and Bunter the others—who tried to bag the credit for the plucky rescue of an unknown Colonial from drowning—credit really due to Vernon-Smith. And Skinner went nearer to establishing his claim than the other three, for he had the evidence of Stott—carefully coached beforehand—to help him.

He has been expelled once—for a brutal secret attack upon Loder, the blame for which he managed to fix for a time upon Wharton. He got back by trickery—small promise for a fresh start, especially as the Form knew of the trickery, but, of course, could not tell. He has been near expulsion a dozen times since, and has often deserved it when he has not been near it.

Once he was able to pose as skipper of the Form, and a sorry fiasco his brief reign proved.

He is mean—a vice particularly hateful to boys. Mean not only in his spite and jealousy, but in money matters also. Do you remember his charging the Bounder a sovereign for his place in the Eleven v. Rookwood—a place he did not really care about in the least? It was called a loan; but, of course, he never repaid.

No one knows Skinner better than does Herbert Vernon-Smith. They have gone on sharing a study, though all friendship between them has long ceased. In the days when they were friends Skinner could never understand how it was that the Bounder would go on with his schemes up to a point, then stop dead. Bolsover has puzzled Skinner in the same way. But the explanation is simple—at their worst those two had always some manhood in them!

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THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 477.

IN A LAND OF PERIL!

By BEVERLEY KENT,

Author of "Officer and Trooper," "Cornstalk Bob," "A Son of the Sea," etc., etc.

The Escape.

Ted stretched out his hand eagerly and took the paper. He saw a map roughly drawn, with the marginal notes in cipher. In the centre of the map was a lake. Cape Town was at the corner near his thumb, and here and there the map was shaded to represent mountains.

"He's making for that lake; but there's precious little to show where it really lies," he said.

"So far, all we can see is that it's north-east of Cape Town," Bob replied. "But whether it's five hundred or a thousand miles distant it's impossible to say, for he hasn't drawn lines for the longitude and latitude. When we have time we may

"Run and fetch it, Ted. If we load the rifles we are safe enough. Faik wouldn't think of taking a gun, and a few shots from us would scare him, I guess."

Ted found the ammunition, and they loaded up. Then they gathered the boxes together, divided the burden, and trudged away. Striking off at right-angles to the river, they went for three miles or so, and then, keeping in line with it, they settled for the night in a clump of mimosa-bushes.

They were now ahead of the caravan. From this spot they hoped to be able to see Faik as he resumed his journey in the morning. After a hearty meal they lay down to sleep, thoroughly tired out.



"Banfa!" thundered Kaasohiki
(See Chapter 20.)

be able to find a clue in those notes in cipher. But just now—"

"Just now we had better hurry up and get hold of that grub and those rifles and ammunition," Ted put in. "And the sooner we put a few miles between us and that rotten bully the better, I'm thinking. He'll put the Kaffirs on us, and they're nailers at following a spoor."

They jumped up and crept from the donga. The moonlight was at once an advantage and a danger; by it they could see the boxes, but by it Faik could see them if he returned. When they found the first box Bob did not stop to pick it up, but kept running on. Before long he had come to the rifles.

"There's some ammunition fifty yards ahead," he said.

They awoke at dawn, and started a careful watch. A couple of hours passed, and they were surprised not to see the caravan wending its way by the river-bank. Bob went out to reconnoitre, and returned with the information that the bullocks were still out-spanned.

"It looks as if Faik is cornered," Ted remarked. "We were pretty useful to him, and yet the brute couldn't treat us decently! Now, perhaps, he won't be able to get on. Or is he tied up, do you think, for the want of that map?"

"He's got the lay of the map in his head by this time, I should say; but, still, he might want the thing itself," Bob answered, looking very grave.

"And why should he?" Ted inquired.

(Continued on page 19.)

"He's not the only one who knows about the lake now," Bob explained. "It's hardly likely to suit him that we should know. And in that case—"

They had been talking earnestly. Now he had looked around, and as he did so he clutched Ted's arm.

"I'm right!" he gasped. "He's after us! Look there!"

Ted looked in the direction to which Bob pointed, and saw three Kaffirs approaching slowly, stopping at times, always gazing down at the ground. The two chums were being tracked down.

"Grasp your rifle and get ready! Make sure it's loaded!" Bob continued. "Of course, we won't shoot them. But a shot or two over their heads ought to scare them pretty quick."

The Kaffirs came on. It was wonderful to see how exactly they kept on the trail. And now, a hundred yards behind them, Faik appeared on his raw-boned horse, moving at a walk. The lads grinned as they saw him. He had no gun.

"Won't he be fair wild when he finds that you bagged the rifles?" Ted chuckled. "Faik, it will be as good as a play to see his ugly old face! Now, shall we loose off? Those black chaps are precious close."

Bob stood up.

"Hallo!" he shouted.

The Kaffirs stopped. They grinned and clapped their hands, and looked back at Faik. To them this was just a bit of fun, and possibly their sympathies were with the lads all the time, though they did not dare to disobey the bully.

As he recognised the fugitives, the latter shook up his horse, and came for them at a canter, brandishing his whip. He thought he had an easy task before him.

"So I've caught you, have I?" he bellowed. "You've had enough of starving, I fancy! Go for them, boys, and round them up!"

"Halt!" Bob commanded.

The Kaffirs ran on.

"Halt!" he shouted.

But they only came on the faster.

Crack, crack!

He raised the rifle to his shoulder and fired twice. The effect was at once startling and ludicrous. Shrieking in terror, the Kaffirs turned and sprinted back.

Faik pulled up, staring, as if he could not bring himself to believe what he had heard. His mouth was wide open. Suddenly, with a yell, he lashed the horse, and made straight for them.

Bob fired again. Ted jumped to his feet, and blazed away. Faik reined up again.

"You young scoundrels!" he thundered. "So you've stolen my rifles? You think that with them you can keep me at bay?"

"What are you talking about? Aren't we keeping you at bay?" Ted laughed. "We're scoundrels, are we? You're wrong there, though it's you that ought to know a scoundrel when you see him, you ugly old varmint! If it's a bullet in your hide you want, just come on!"

Faik's mouth twisted in his fury. His fishy eyes protruded further than ever.

"You can't escape!" he snarled. "You'll starve, for certain, and when you are dead-beat—"

"Starve!" Ted chuckled. "No fear! Here, have a bite yourself!" And, picking up an empty bully-beef tin, he flung it at the bully.

It hit the horse on the haunches, and the animal began to buck. For some seconds Faik had his work cut out to keep his saddle. His face was purple. Shaking his fist—for he was past speech—he swung round and galloped away, belabouring the horse cruelly.

Ted shook with laughter, but Bob's face was serious. As in appearance, so also in temperament, they were different. Bob, dark haired, tall, and with a very powerful frame for one so young, was of a thoughtful disposition. Ted, about the same height, fair in complexion and hair, and slight of figure and lithe as a panther, was light-hearted and frolicsome almost always. But in some things they were alike. Both were courageous, true-hearted, and generous.

Ted turned, wiping the tears of laughter from his eyes. He was surprised to see the steady, thoughtful light in his chum's face at such a moment.

"Why, what's up now?" he asked. "I had forgotten everything in my delight at seeing that old villain bowled out."

"He won't be bowled out for long," Bob replied. "We're up against a big problem, and we'll have to come to a

decision. We have this day before us in safety, and that's about all we can count on."

Ted whistled.

"You're not thinking of chucking the search for the treasure?" he asked anxiously.

"No fear!" Bob replied. "We would have a hard job to get back to Cape Town, and we may as well chance our luck and go on. But we're not done with Faik if we keep by the river. Some night he will catch us unawares."

"And if we don't hang on to him, how are we ever to find the lake?" Ted inquired. "We haven't even a compass to guide us, and that map is not of much use."

Bob pointed to the mountain in the distance.

"It's pretty certain that the river winds in a gorge through those mountains," he said. "Let us make straight for them, and get ahead of Faik by three or four days' trek. We shall then be able to watch for his coming, and by that time he will think that we have given him the slip completely."

"Good idea!" Ted agreed. "He will have chucked up the job of looking for us; and if we let him pass, and take up the spoor of the outfit, we can follow him to the lake. You've a good headpiece, Bob. I hereby appoint you commander of this expedition!"

He laughed again, and set to work with vigour to get the boxes containing the food together. Before long they were on the march; nor did they pause for a couple of hours. Then, after a short rest, they went on, despite the terrific heat as the day advanced. That night they camped some miles from the river, and early next morning they were on the trek again.

But not at all times were they in the best of spirits.

There were moments when a great gloom settled over them, and they trudged on in silence. The mountains still loomed up as distant as at the start. Their supply of food was running short. They were dog-tired with forced marching and their heavy burdens.

Each in his heart often wondered if they had not embarked on a mad adventure that could only end in disaster. But these thoughts they never exchanged. Ted tried to keep up his chum's spirits by jokes and fun; Bob spoke hopefully, even when he had little hope, and his young face took on a more and more resolute look.

And, of course, these moods of depression did not last long; there were other times, especially when they were resting in the evening, when their natural pluck and cheeriness got the upper hand, and the future seemed rosy. And once, when at a bend they sighted the river again, and made certain that it came from the direction of the mountains, their anxiety left them. For if they could hang on to Faik's trail they were bound to find the lake.

So for days they tramped, and at long last they came to the foot of the mountains, which stretched up lofty and with ragged peaks in stately and solemn grandeur. There they camped, and next morning they began the ascent. It proved even more difficult than they had expected. They were only half-way up by the end of the day.

The climate here was very different from that of the plains. A chill breeze blew all through the night, and they were glad to gather brushwood and make a fire. Next morning they started at the break of dawn and toiled incessantly, eager to reach the top and see what lay ahead.

They scarcely stopped to take a meal. Up and up they went, and about an hour before sunset they were on the crest. Their hearts thrilled with delight. The panorama was gorgeous, and they could see the river, like a small strip of silver, winding its way on beyond the mountains. It lay about five miles to their left, and in that clear light they would be easily able to detect the caravan.

"Isn't it scrumptious?" Ted asked, dancing a few steps of an Irish jig in his glee. "We've only to hang on here till we spot old Faik again, then we'll creep along after him like hungry lions. Fling up your cap, Bob, and let us have a good, rousing cheer! I must let off steam somehow, and there's no one in this vast wilderness to hear us."

A mocking laugh was the answer. Turning in amazement, Ted stepped back with a gasp, and nearly tripped over a stone.

For only ten paces away a giant savage stood, leaning on a huge axe, his eyes glinting ferociously.

In a Tight Place.

Never in their wildest dreams had the two lads seen such a being strange and terrifying in appearance. Over his powerful shoulders hung a cloak. Round his neck was a string of fibre, to which were attached a couple of score or so of human teeth. His legs, bare to the ankle, were bound by fringes of hair, and on his head were ostrich-feathers. He stood at least six feet two inches in height, and the long handle of his battle-axe came almost to his shoulder.

"Great Scott!" Ted gasped.

The savage stood blinking. Suddenly he raised the axe, and began a series of astounding battle-play. The axe swung

(Continued on page 20.)



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IN A LAND OF PERIL!

(Continued from page 19.)

round his head with a hiss. It flashed before and around him in dazzling strokes. He cut up and down, to right and left, and as he swung it he advanced, only to step back again. Finally he flung it up ten feet, bent, as if to allow it to fall on his head, jumped to one side in the nick of time, caught the shaft, and leant on it again.

"I am Kaasohiki, and I thirst for a fight!" he said.

"That's all right, old sport! Come along with us, and we'll find you one in two shakes!" Ted replied, seeking to pacify him.

"I am of the tribe of the Kandalyi, who fear neither thunder nor the rage of men!" the savage continued. "With this I smite all who cross my path! See the notches on this axe? One hundred and twenty-four! Before long there will be two more. Naught can escape me. I am as the wind in fleetness, and as the lion at bay. It is death to face me, and death to flee! Which choicest thou? I have spoken!"

Ted was fumbling his rifle-trigger. Bob, with his lips compressed, stood motionless.

"You haven't given us much choice, old bird, that I can see!" Ted replied, seeking to gain time. "Hearken thou unto me." And Bob, hearing this unexpected language from his chum, turned his head involuntarily to stare at him. "I, too, have much to say," Ted continued. "For lo! I am the wonder-worker who makes the thunder! From afar off I stay the bird in its flight, and the hippopotamus ceases to wallow at my bidding. If thou bringest death, lo! thou facest death also, for I am that great king who is greatest of all. I, too, have spoken! Bob, how's that for a yarn?"

"You've given him something to puzzle out, and, unfortunately, he doesn't look as if he quite believes you," Bob replied. "And, whatever you threaten, be sure and don't loose off that rifle unless he comes for us! Probably he has a crowd of his own kidney around here, and the shot would bring them on us like a swarm of mosquitoes. Just keep a steady eye on him."

"You needn't advise that; I'm fair mesmerised by the looks of him," Ted said. "Is it going to sleep he is now?"

Kaasohiki had listened to the lad intently. Now he bowed his head over his axe-handle. The ostrich-feathers fluttered in the breeze. For half a minute he did not stir. Then very slowly he raised his head, and, placing one hand on his middle, he opened his mouth.

"Oolaga! Oolaga! Oolaga!" he shouted.

Then he leaned over his axe again. The cry repeated far and wide. The lads could only stare.

"It sounds as if he's in pain," Ted said. "Perhaps his grub hasn't agreed with him. All the big talk seems knocked out of him, anyhow. Hallo! He's going to start again!"

The savage had raised his head. A smile was on his face.

"I am the lightning that flashes far and wide, and my voice is as the whispering of the night breeze," he said. "All things do my bidding, for, lo! my axe is Jahmagay! Stay hither, or flit away! Naught care I, for well I know I am thy master!"

"Of all the bumptious, bragging fellows I ever came across—" Ted began. "But I wish he would chuck these riddles! What's his game, anyhow, Bob? He spoke about two more notches on that beastly weapon, and that don't sound cheerful. Shall we bid him the time of day and move off, or shall we—"

He stopped. He looked around.

"We're trapped!" he said. "Now I know what that rotten cry 'Oolaga' means!"

All around them ostrich-feathers seemed to be gliding amidst the bushes. Sometimes a face not unlike Kaasohiki's raised itself a few inches above the foliage. Closer and closer drew the circle. Kaasohiki himself paid no heed. He leaped over his axe as if in deep thought, but of a sudden he raised his head and uttered a command.

"Banfa!" he thundered.

At once the other savages jumped to their feet.

Kaasohiki raised his arm.

"As the vultures ye have come. And behold! the pickings are yonder, but not yet," he said. "He of the thunder hath dared me. With him will I deal later on! The other white-face shall fight one of you. Choose ye among yourselves! Thus shall we make merry, but not till the morrow, for the work for which we have recked so far has yet to be done. My eagles have brought the news, so glad ye for the strife, that the yellow-faced one with the owl's eyes go down to death, and his bollocks and all that he hath are mine! I have spoken!"

He sighed, as if full of sorrow, and leant over his axe again. Bob and Ted looked at one another. Now they understood, and Bob squared his shoulders, and whispered to his chum.

"We're in a tight corner," he said quietly, in true British fashion, "but there may be a way out of this. It's a good job you did not loose off that rifle, for perhaps these fellows don't know what it is. There's just that chance, and, anyhow, we have till the morning. They're waiting for Faik. Don't attempt a fight just now. We wouldn't have a dog's chance."

"Hearken to me!" Kaasohiki continued, turning to his followers. "If these whitefaces make fight, deal with them like the lions ye are! But if they will go in peace, let them follow me!"

He turned and strode rapidly off down the mountain-side. With axes raised, his followers closed in on the lads. Bob lifted his hand.

"We know the greatness of the Kandalyi tribe and of him who has spoken," he said. "We go with ye whither ye will! Show us the way, and together we will follow the great chief of the axe!"

He strode forward, carrying his rifle as if it was a walking-stick, and Ted, taking his cue, stepped to his side. The savages rattled their spears; some picked up the boxes of ammunition and food, and in a crowd they went down the mountain after Kaasohiki, who did not once condescend to look back.

Taking a line that kept the river always in view, they marched for four miles or so. Then they turned into a zareba close to the water's edge. Here rough kraals had been built, and before one of these Kaasohiki was already seated. The other savages passed before him in single file, and by a nod he indicated that the two lads were to face him.

"Keep them in safety!" he commanded. "I speak to them no more to-day! Summon the medicine men, for we must arrange about the work to-night."

Bob and Ted were led away by a guard to one of the kraals. The leader of the guard pointed to the opening, and drew his hand across his throat as a hint what their fate would be if they hesitated. They crawled into the kraal, which was rather like a huge beehive, and two of the tribe were posted outside, with axes, as sentinels.

"Well, here's something we didn't reckon on," Ted said. "Nice thing to hear ourselves spoken of as pickings! Ugh! But you were right, Bob, about the rifles; they don't know their value, and, fortunately, we have a good few cartridges in our pockets. What's going to happen next, do you think?"

"It's plain enough," Bob answered. "They'll go for Faik first. Seemingly though he is, yet he's a white man, and I dread to think of the doom before him. And we can't warn him. It seems to me that our own chances are rather poor."

"I can't make out that fellow Kaasohiki," Ted remarked. "I don't believe he has the pluck he pretends. He's a bluffer, I reckon, and would turn pretty green if he found himself on the weak side. He boasts too much to be a true man, and it's my opinion that if firearms are new to him he'd run a mile at the pulling of the trigger."

"There may be some hope in that," Bob agreed.

He was thinking hard.

"Anyhow, as he hasn't got hold of my rifle, we've a chance yet," Ted said. "He's going to deal with me himself to-morrow, he said. Then if I go down in the scrap it won't be by his axe. Some other chap will have to manage that, for I'll put a bullet into Mr. Kaasohiki before he knows what I'm about!"

Bob was gazing out of the kraal. A great hubbub had arisen. Four old savages, with long, grey beards, were grouped before Kaasohiki. They were mumbling and chanting, and the rest of the tribe, lying flat, beat their heads against the ground.

"Those would be the medicine men," Bob remarked. "They are prophesying about Faik, I fancy. No doubt they will be asked to decide our fate also. If the indaba is about us, and we see our lives are to be taken, we might be able to do something that would strike terror into them all. I don't want to kill anyone, but we have the right to defend our lives. And if we send some bullets into those medicine men, who are most likely thought invulnerable—"

"We'll have to do it if we can't escape any other way," Ted agreed.

"Yes; I'm afraid so. But still, there is the hope that another chance may turn up. And— But look yonder! That small chap isn't a bit like the rest."

"And he's coming here."

"Yes, he is," Bob agreed.

A lad, very dark in the face, and without any ostrich-feathers or other ornaments, was advancing towards the kraal. In his hands were a bowl of water and some meabes. He cringed before the two savages guarding the door.

"Slave, what dost thou want?" one of them demanded.

"By the bidding of the Great Hawk, I bring food to the captives," the bearer replied.

Next week's issue will contain another splendid instalment of this exciting story.

