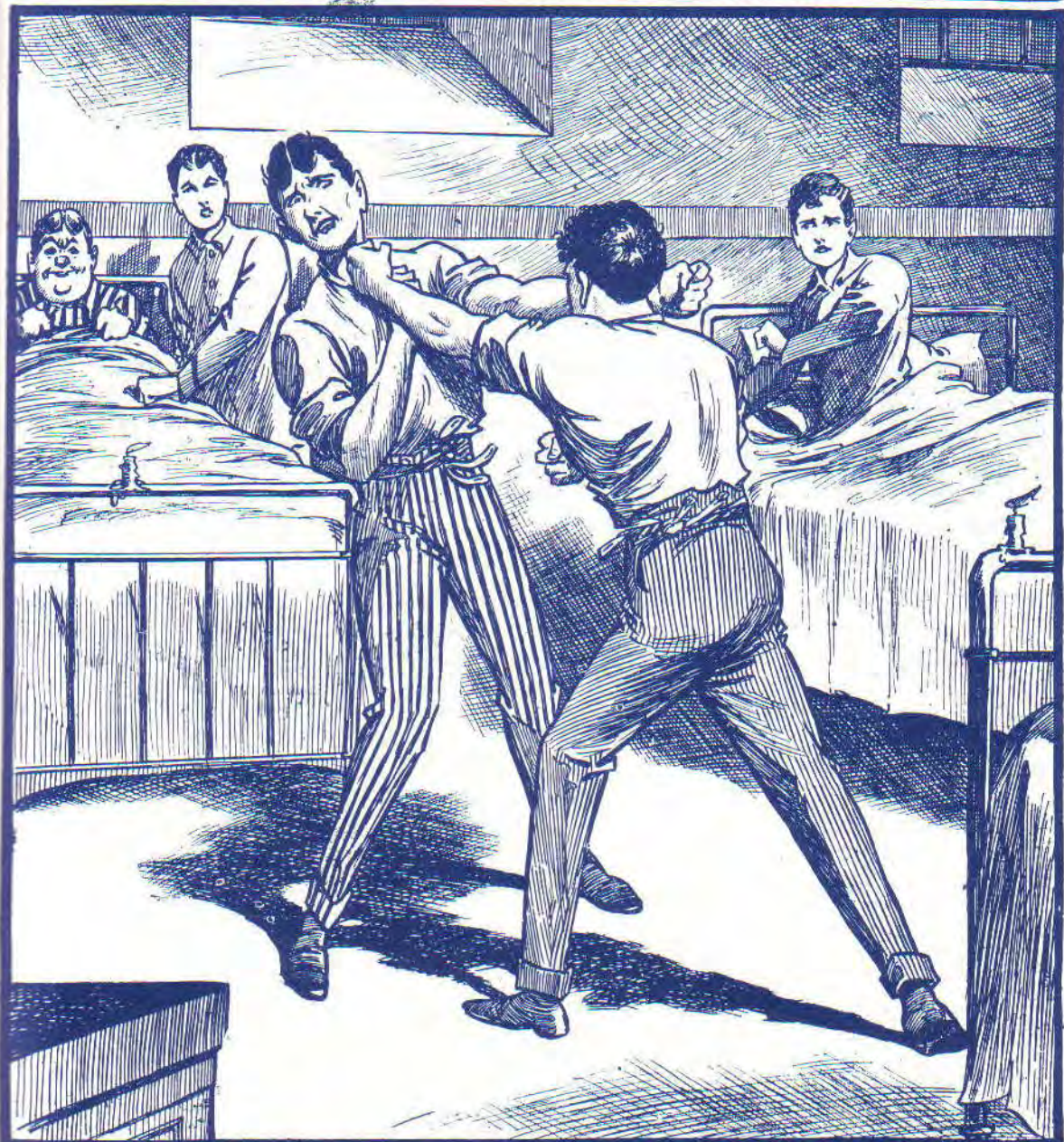


THE LAST STRAW!

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



THE FIGHT IN THE DORMITORY!

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THE LAST STRAW!

By FRANK RICHARDS.

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

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

To Fight or Not To Fight!

BOB CHERRY thumped at the door of Study No. 4 in the Remove passage and pitched it open.

Bob's cheery face was unusually grave in expression as he entered.

Skinner was sitting on the corner of the table smoking a cigarette. He hid the cigarette hastily in the palm of his hand as the thump came at the door. But it came into view again as Bob's rugged features looked in.

Skinner bestowed an impudent grin on Bob Cherry, and replaced the cigarette between his thin lips.

Bob did not even look at him. He had not come there for Skinner.

His glance turned upon Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars.

The Bounder was stretched in the arm-chair, his hands driven deep into his pockets, and his brows knitted in a moody frown.

He looked up, his brow growing darker at the sight of Bob Cherry.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob, but without the accustomed cheery ring in his hearty voice.

"You've come for me?" asked the Bounder, with a sarcastic smile.

"Not exactly come for you. But I'm Wharton's second, you know, and the arrangements have got to be made," said Bob. "If you'd rather leave it to your second, tell me his name, and I'll buzz off and interview him," said Bob.

"I'm Smithy's second," said Skinner, accompanying the remark with a puff of smoke towards Bob.

"Shall I settle it with Skinner, Smithy?"

"No," said Vernon-Smith; "you can settle it with me. What's wanted?"

"Well," said Bob, a little puzzled, "you're going to fight Wharton this afternoon, and as it's rather a serious matter, it's best not to get into the gym. We don't want prefects stopping the fight."

"Naturally!"

"My idea is to have it in the old spinney," said Bob. "That's not too far from the school, and not too near. That suit you?"

"Anywhere you like," said the Bounder indifferently.

"Right-o! The old spinney, then! What time would suit you?"

"It's all one to me."

"An hour from now?" asked Bob.

"Right!"

Bob looked very curiously at the Bounder.

Vernon-Smith's moody expression had not changed, and his answers were quite mechanical.

If Bob had not known that the Bounder of Greyfriars was as hardy and resolute a fellow as could be found within the walls of the old school, he would certainly have suspected funk. For if ever

a fellow looked as if he did not enjoy the prospect of a scrap, Vernon-Smith did at that moment.

But among the Bounder's many faults and failings want of courage had never been counted. His courage had been put to the test more than once, and never had it been found wanting.

Bob hesitated a few moments.

He had been friendly enough with the Bounder until quite lately, and there was no relish in the affair for him.

"Four o'clock in the old spinney, then," he said at last.

"That's settled!"

"I—I'm sorry it's come to this, Smithy," said Bob slowly. "I—I wish —" He broke off rather lamely.

"Thanks!" said the Bounder, unmoved.

"I suppose you knew trouble would follow what you did?" continued Bob, after a pause.

"It was really too thick, Smithy, you know! You couldn't expect it to be overlooked, could you?"

"No."

"I don't see that Smithy was to blame," said Skinner, with another puff of smoke. "Wharton turned him out of the Remove Eleven. Smithy wasn't going to take that lying down."

Bob did not answer him.

"Smithy warned Wharton that he'd play in the St. Jim's match," went on Skinner. "And he did it! He stranded your merry eleven in a barge on the river, and I can only say that you deserved all you got for being such howling asses as to be caught like that!"

"Oh, dry up!" growled Bob.

"Oh, rats!" retorted Skinner. "I'm sure I hope you enjoyed a half-holiday on a barge. Ha, ha! Smithy took an eleven to St. Jim's that beat them, anyway; and I doubt if your crowd could have beaten them. If the Remove knew what was what, they'd sack Wharton, and make Smithy Form captain. I'd vote for him!"

"Shut up, Skinner!" snapped Vernon-Smith.

Skinner bit his cigarette savagely. The Bounder of Greyfriars was not encouraging to his too-zealous follower.

Bob Cherry left the study, closing the door after him.

The Bounder did not move. He remained with his chin almost sunk upon his breast, staring straight before him with fixed eyes.

Skinner watched him in silence, while he finished the cigarette.

"Dash it all, Smithy," he said at last, "what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing," said the Bounder, without looking up.

"You're not funky?"

Vernon-Smith's eyes glittered for a moment.

"If you want your head banged into the coal-locker, Skinner, you'd better ask me that question again," he said quietly.

"Well, I know you're not," said Skinner hastily. "But what have you got on your mind? You don't look cheery."

"I don't feel cheery."

"But what's the matter? You'll very likely lick Wharton—you're as strong as he is, and as big, and as good a boxer, or very nearly. It would be ripping to see him well licked!" said Skinner eagerly.

"That's just what that crowd want—to be taken down a peg like that. Licking him would help you, too, if you made up your mind to have a go for the captaincy. Anyway, it would be so much to the good."

The Bounder did not answer.

"Even if he licks you, you'll give him jolly nearly as good as he sends," went on Skinner. "You're his match, anyway. He won't be feeling much merrier than you afterwards."

He paused, but Vernon-Smith did not speak.

"You're getting off pretty cheap, too," said Skinner. "Most of the fellows wanted to make it a Form ragging, for your dishing the Remove Eleven as you did."

Between ourselves, it was a bit thick—helping the Fourth to bag one of our own fixtures, and stranding that crowd on a barge. Ha, ha! It's settled that you're going to fight Wharton for it. That's better than a ragging. You don't seem to enjoy the prospect."

The Bounder looked up.

"I'm not going to fight Wharton!" he said.

"Wha-a-at!" Skinner stared. "It's all fixed up for you to fight him this afternoon, Smithy."

"I know that."

"But—but you can't cry off!" ejaculated Skinner. "You won't be allowed to. If you don't turn up, they'll come here for you!"

"Very probably."

"You'll be called a funk, Smithy!"

"I don't think any of the fellows will call me a funk twice," said Vernon-Smith quietly.

"But—but—but you can't get out of it," stammered Skinner, in utter amazement. "It's fixed—all cut and dried!"

Vernon-Smith rose to his feet and stretched his limbs.

"I'm going over to see Pousonby," he remarked calmly. "Care to come?"

"You—you—you're going over to Highcliffe?"

"I've said so."

"But—but—but—Skinner blinked at him helplessly. "Smithy! If you don't turn up, what will the fellows say? What will they think?"

"What they like. Are you coming?"

"Ye-es, I'll come. B-b-but—"

"Come on, then."

Vernon-Smith left the study, and Skinner, almost dumbfounded, followed him. Skinner felt like a fellow in a dream. Was this the cool, iron-nerved

Bounder—the fellow whose reckless courage was almost a proverb in the Remove — this fellow who was deliberately going out for the afternoon to avoid a fight with the junior he had tricked and wronged? Skinner prided himself upon being keen, and upon seeing as far into a millstone as most fellows, but he had to admit that he was beaten now. He simply could not understand it.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Funk!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. were in the quadrangle, when Bob Cherry rejoined his comrades.

Wharton's handsome face was unusually serious.

As captain of the Remove he had been bound to take up the matter with Vernon-Smith. It was impossible for the Bounder's action to be passed over. He had cunningly tricked the Remove Eleven into missing one of their most important cricket fixtures. He had taken a team of the Fourth to St. Jim's to play Tom Merry & Co., leaving Harry Wharton's eleven stranded on a barge in the river, guarded by half a dozen rough river-men whom he had paid for the service. It was a serious enough matter, and would have meant serious consequences for the Bounder if it had become public.

The Remove fellows had no intention of making it public; but the trickster had to be called to account.

That the reckless Bounder would even think of avoiding the encounter with the captain of the Remove no one suspected for a moment. He had stood up to Bob Cherry in combat, and Bob was a terrific slogger. Smithy had had the worst of it on that occasion, but he was as hard as nails, and could take a licking. There was no reason why he should seek to avoid the fight.

"All serene!" said Bob, as he joined his chums. "Four o'clock in the old spinney."

"Good!" said Wharton.

"The goodness is terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Well, it's got to be gone through," said Frank Nugent. "Smithy must be stopped playing such tricks."

"He wants a jolly good hiding!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Well, he's going to get one," said Bob Cherry. "I wish it hadn't happened, all the same. I can't understand Smithy going to the dogs as he's done, after keeping straight so long."

"What's bred in the bone—" growled Johnny Bull. "I'd rather Wharton left it to me. Sticking us on a dashed barge for a day—"

"It was too thick!" agreed Bob. "Now, most of the fellows are coming along to see the fun, and we'd better not all go together. We don't want Loder or Walker nosing it all out. I'll get the gloves—I suppose you're going to use gloves, Harry?" He hesitated.

"Oh, yes," said Wharton.

"It won't be much of a licking!" grunted Johnny Bull. "A Form ragging was what the rotter wanted. That's what I approved of."

"Well, it's settled now."

Johnny Bull gave another grunt. Of them all he was least disposed to take a lenient view of the Bounder's conduct.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh, buzz off, Bunter!" said Wharton crossly. He was not in a mood to be bothered by the Owl of the Remove.

Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Five through his big glasses.

"Oh, really, Wharton! I was going to offer to be your second, you know."

"Bob's my second, tubby."

"Well, I shall come along," said Bunter. "I think Smithy ought to be licked. He's a beast, you know! What do you think he did to-day?"

"Oh, rats! What did he do?"

"I asked him to cash a postal-order I was expecting," explained Bunter warmly. "I told him plainly that if he advanced me the five bob I'd hand him the postal-order the minute it arrived. I couldn't say fairer than that, could I?"

The Famous Five went along to the cricket-ground, where a good many of the Remove were busy.

Billy Bunter rolled after Vernon-Smith and Skinner. He overtook them in the gateway, gasping.

"I say, you fellows! I say, Smithy!"

Vernon-Smith walked on.

"Smithy, old chap!" gasped Bunter, panting out into the road after him. "I say, would you like me to be your second?"



"Come on, Smithy!" said Ponsonby. (See Chapter 6.)

And the beast pushed me over—actually pushed me over, you know—and I sat down in a puddle—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at! I'm on your side, Wharton. I'm backing you up all the time," said Bunter impressively.

"Thank you for nothing!"

"Oh, really, you know! I'm backing you up! I'd always back up an old pal like you, Harry!" said Bunter affectionately. "By the way, could you cash that postal-order for me—"

"Oh, buzz away!"

"Of course, I'll hand you the postal-order immediately it comes," said Bunter. "It's for five shillings—from a titled relation of mine—Yaroooh! If you shove your rotten hoof against me again, Bob Cherry, I'll—Yaroooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!" howled Billy Bunter, as he retreated. "Yah! I hope Smithy will lick you! Yah! I'm backing up Smithy! Yah!"

And the fat junior rolled away, leaving the Famous Five grinning.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the Bounder!" said Bob Cherry.

Vernon-Smith came out of the School House with Skinner.

The two juniors passed close to the group, but did not even glance at them. They walked on towards the gates.

"Smithy doesn't mean to be late," said Nugent.

"Well, there's no hurry if it's at four," said Harry. "We may as well get some practice at the nets."

"Good idea!"

"No, you fat fool!" snapped Vernon-Smith.

"Oh, really, Smithy! I'm backing you up, you know," said Bunter, in an injured tone. "I feel bound to back you up, Smithy, as an old pal!"

"Oh, get away!"

"I hope you'll lick Wharton," went on Bunter. "He's a mean rotter, Smithy! I—I say, could you manage that postal-order for me? It's bound to come to-night, or Monday morning at the latest—"

The Bounder quickened his steps, and Billy Bunter was left to waste his sweetness on the desert air.

He blinked savagely after Vernon-Smith and Skinner.

"Beasts!" he said. "What are they going to Courtfield for? Bob Cherry said they were going to fight in the old spinney. That's the other way."

And Bunter rolled back into the quadrangle, with a faint, lingering hope of discovering some other fellow who would cash his celebrated postal-order in advance.

At about half-past three Remove fellows began to stroll out of the school gates in twos or threes. It was very important that that record scrap should not become known to the authorities. The Remove did not want a master or a prefect to appear on the scene before it was finished.

For that reason they left the school in twos and threes, and sauntered away with an elaborate air of carelessness and unconcern.

Billy Bunter joined Peter Todd and Tom Dutton, his study-mates, and started

with them, his postal-order still uncashed. Bolsover major came along with Bulstrode and Tom Brown and Hazeldene. Ogilvy and Russell came out next, with Kipps and Glenn and Elliott. Morgan and Rake, Wibley and Ellick Desmond, sauntered after them a few minutes later. Then came Penfold and Monty Newland and Snoop and Stott, and Mark Linley and Squiff and Fisher T. Fish. Even Lord Maulverer, the slacker of the Remove, found energy enough to come along, with his study-mates, Delarey, the South African junior, and Jimmy Vivian.

In fact, very nearly all the Remove sooner or later strolled out of the gates and took devious paths to the old spinney in Friardale Lane.

The Famous Five left last.

They were in good time, for it was only ten minutes' walk to the spinney. They arrived there at five minutes to four.

There was a crowd already on the spot. "Here they come!" sang out Bolsover major.

"Smithy's not here yet," said Squiff. "Plenty of time," said Harry Wharton. "It's not four yet."

"Queer!" said Bob Cherry. "I thought he was starting nearly an hour ago. He went out of gates."

"I saw him!" chimed in Billy Bunter. "He went towards Courtfield with Skinner. Going to Highcliffe, perhaps."

"How could he go to Highcliffe when he's coming here, you fat duffer?" said Peter Todd.

Four o'clock arrived, but the Bouncer did not. The juniors were looking about for him, watching the paths through the trees. But Vernon-Smith did not put in an appearance.

"Dashed queer!" growled Johnny Bull. "I suppose this doesn't mean the white feather?"

"What rot!" exclaimed Wharton sharply.

"Well, why isn't he here?" grinned Hazeldene.

"May have forgotten the time."

"Oh, rats!" said Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows, Smithy's funking it!" chorled Billy Bunter. "He was going to Highcliffe, right enough! I know he had a letter from Ponsonby this morning—I happened to see it. He, he, he!"

"Shut up, you fat oyster!" growled Bob Cherry.

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Squiff at a quarter past four.

"We didn't come out here to hold a merry meeting!"

"We shall have to wait, I suppose," said Harry.

"The waitfulness is terrific! I thinkfully consider I will sit down and wait for the esteemed fatheaded Smithy!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

And the ducky Nabob of Bhanipar selected a log.

The Remove fellows were exchanging very queer glances now. Why did not Vernon-Smith come?

Half-past four was heard to chime from the village. Harry Wharton stood leaning against a tree, his brow clouded, silent. But the other fellows were not silent. Why was Vernon-Smith so late? Was he coming at all?

Nobody was pleased at being brought out to the spinney on a fool's errand. And as the minutes passed, and the Bouncer did not come, there was one word that passed from lip to lip in angry and contemptuous tones. And the word was:

"Funk!"

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THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Spilling the Egyptians!

"HALLO, Smithy!"

Frank Courtenay, of the Fourth Form at Highcliffe, greeted Vernon-Smith cheerily as the latter came into the quad at Highcliffe with Skinner.

Courtenay's chum, the Caterpillar, bestowed an amiable nod upon him.

"Awful good of you to give us a look in, dear boy!" said the Caterpillar. "You have just come in time to rescue me. Help me persuade Franky to give up cricket for this afternoon, an' come for a lounge along the river."

"You're going to play cricket!" said Courtenay firmly.

"Ponsonby about?" asked Skinner.

"He's in his study, I think," said Frank Courtenay shortly.

He did not like Skinner, and he was surprised to see Vernon-Smith in his company.

The Bouncer coloured a little.

He had come there to see Ponsonby, the blackguard of Highcliffe. Courtenay knew nothing of the recent ructions in the Greyfriars Remove.

"You fellows playing cricket?" he asked, a little awkwardly.

"Only practice this afternoon," said Courtenay. "Getting ready for our match with Greyfriars, you know. We're coming over on Saturday week."

"Yes, I know."

The Bouncer's colour deepened. He would not be in the team that was to meet the Highcliffians.

"You're playing, of course?" added Courtenay.

"Oh, no!"

"By gad!" said the Caterpillar. "Lackin' in energy, what—like little me? I really thought you Greyfriars chaps never got fed-up with cricket. Never saw such an energetic set!"

"It isn't that," said the Bouncer drily. "I'm not in the eleven any longer."

"Oh!" said the Caterpillar.

"A little disagreement with my cricket captain," said Vernon-Smith, with a sarcastic smile. "I'm sorry; I'd have liked to played against you. Ponsonby in his study, did you say?"

Courtenay nodded, and the Bouncer passed on with Skinner into the School House.

The Highcliffe chums looked at one another.

"A merry storm in a tea-cup!" yawned the Caterpillar. "Where do they get the energy from to row with one another? I wouldn't row with a chap for his weight in gold!"

"I'm sorry," said Courtenay, his brow clouding a little. "I know there used to be trouble between them, but I thought they were pulling well together. Well, it's not our business. Come down to the cricket, Rupert!"

"What about the river?" urged the Caterpillar. "Let's have a boat out."

"Rats!"

"You can row, you know. I'll let you row all the time."

Courtenay smiled, and linked his arm in De Courcy's, and marched him off to the cricket-ground. And the slacker of Highcliffe groaned and submitted.

Vernon-Smith tapped at Ponsonby's study door.

"Hallo!" came Ponsonby's voice from within. "What's wanted?"

"It's I—Vernon Smith."

"Good!"

The door was unlocked and opened.

The reason why it had been locked was apparent. There was a haze of cigarette-smoke in the study, and Monson, at the table, had a pack of cards in his hand.

Ponsonby locked the door again after

his visitors were within. He did not want any surprise visits while the little game was going on.

"Glad you've been able to come!" he said. "Quite like old times to see you here, Smithy."

"The merry old times!" grinned Gadsby.

"The cheery old times!" smiled Monson, shuffling the cards. "We began without you, Smithy. You're late."

"Better late than never," said Ponsonby affably.

The nuts of Highcliffe were evidently pleased to see Vernon-Smith. They had not been pleased when the Bouncer had thrown them over at the period of his reform.

There had been bitter blood for some time. But they were very glad to welcome the millionaire's son back into the select fold.

"How did you get on with Wharton?" asked Monson, as he shuffled the cards, and the Greyfriars juniors drew chairs to the table.

"With Wharton?" repeated the Bouncer.

"Yes. I heard from Snoop that you had a fight on with him to-day, owing to some cricket trouble or other."

"Smithy must have come off best," remarked Ponsonby. "He doesn't show a sign of the merry combat."

Skinner grinned. Vernon-Smith gave his comrade a fierce look. He knew that Skinner attributed his avoidance of the fight to funk. Skinner could not think of any other possible motive.

"Did you lick the cad?" asked Gadsby, with keen interest.

"What cad?" growled Vernon-Smith.

"I mean Wharton, of course."

"Wharton isn't a cad."

"Oh! Ahem! Well, did you lick him?"

"No."

"My hat! He must have let you off pretty lightly, if he licked you," said Gadsby, staring at the Bouncer's face.

"I haven't fought him!" said Vernon-Smith morosely.

"Not come off yet?"

"No."

"Oh, I see! Well, cut for deal!"

Skinner's grin grew more pronounced, and the three Highcliffians were exchanging glances. They were puzzled. But Vernon-Smith had no inclination to explain, and Skinner did not venture to do so, and the subject dropped.

The five young rascals were soon deep in their game.

The Bouncer was not playing with his old keenness, however. As a matter of fact, he would rather have joined Courtenay on the cricket-pitch. He played carelessly and moodily, and lost almost constantly.

Ponsonby & Co. smiled with satisfaction.

The young rascals of Highcliffe had various ways of aiding fortune when luck was against them; but they did not venture upon any tricks with the keen, sagacious Bouncer. It would not have been a success. And as Smithy was cooler and more clear-headed, and had more brains than Ponsonby & Co. put together, he generally had the best of a game. It was a pleasant experience to be winning his money like this.

Vernon-Smith hardly seemed to note that he was handing out money nearly all the time.

Probably his thoughts were with the crowd of Remove fellows who, he knew, would be waiting at the old spinney to witness the fight that was not to come off.

He professed himself to Skinner absolutely indifferent as to what they thought of his failure to keep that appointment.

As a matter of fact, it was scarcely possible for him to be indifferent. He could not help wondering how the Remove fellows would greet him when he returned to Greyfriars.

Ponsonby & Co. noted that his thoughts were wandering, and they did not fail to take advantage of it.

The Bounder had already changed one five-pound note to pay up, and in doing so revealed the fact that there were several others in his pocket-book.

The nuts of Highcliffe glanced greedily at the crisp notes. With the Bounder in his present frame of mind, there was no reason why those notes should not remain in Ponsonby's study when Vernon-Smith took his departure.

Skinner was having good luck, too, and he was feeling quite satisfied. Ponsonby exchanged a glance with his chums.

"A bit slow, dawdlin' about with shillin' points," he remarked, as he lighted a fresh cigarette. "Feel inclined to put them up?"

"Good idea!" said Gadsby at once.

"Five bob a time—what?"

"Make it ten!" said Monson.

"What do you say, Smithy?"

"Eh?"

"Do you say ten?"

"Ten what?" asked Vernon-Smith, coming out of a brown study.

Ponsonby laughed good-humouredly.

"Your wits are goin' wool-gatherin', old scout. Feel like buckin' up the game with somethin' substantial—say ten bob points?"

"Anything you like."

"You're always game, Smithy," said Ponsonby admiringly. "If you're feelin' inclined to go the whole hog, we'll make it quids, and chance it."

"You can leave me out of that," said Skinner promptly.

"Well, just for a round or two," said Ponsonby airily. "What do you say, Smithy?"

"I don't care either way."

"Quid a time on this round, then," said Ponsonby.

"Yes, if you like."

"Done!"

"Your deal, Smithy."

"Oh, all right."

Vernon-Smith shuffled the cards, and Ponsonby cut them, and the Bounder dealt. Skinner rose from the table to smoke a cigarette and look on. He did not intend to sit in a game for quid points.

The Bounder's eyes had a peculiar glimmer in them.

He was no fool; and he quite easily spotted Ponsonby's little plan of taking advantage of his absent-mindedness.

He did not look any more alert than before; but, as a matter of fact, he was very wary now, and as keen as a razor.

He gave his cards a careless glance, and drawled:

"Nap!"

He had called nap a dozen times before in the same careless way, and lost.

The Highcliffians exchanged a greedy glance. If Smith lost this time, as seemed likely enough, it meant a small fortune to the nuts.

"Get it!" said Ponsonby, with a smile. Vernon-Smith proceeded to get it.

And the satisfied smiles faded off the faces of the nuts, and those faces began to lengthen considerably, as the Bounder got it!

"By gad!" murmured Ponsonby at last.

"My win, I think," drawled the Bounder.

"Ye-es."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Gadsby. He looked daggers at his study-leader. It was Ponsonby's suggestion, dictated

by greed, that had landed the Highcliffe party into this heavy loss.

The three nuts paid up, looking quite green. Ponsonby had just enough cash. Gadsby and Monson had to eke it out with I O U's. Vernon-Smith gathered up his winnings with a careless hand.

The merry game was over. The nuts of Highcliffe were stony—worse than stony. Vernon-Smith glanced at them with a smile, and rose from the table.

"Any time you like for your revenge," he remarked.

"See you again soon!" muttered Ponsonby.

And Vernon-Smith and Skinner lounged out. They left the three nuts of Highcliffe making angry remarks to one another. Once more Ponsonby & Co. had gone out for wool and returned shorn!

Vernon-Smith paused in the quadrangle to glance towards the cricket-ground, where Courtenay and the rest were at practice. Then he sauntered on to the gates. Skinner burst into a chuckle as they came out into the road.

"You are a deep beggar, and no mistake!" he remarked. "Pon was going to skin you down to the bones at a quid a time."

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

"Coming back?" asked Skinner.

"No. I'm going for a stroll."

Harold Skinner smiled. He could guess that the Bounder was not particularly anxious to face the Remove fellows.

"Then I'll see you later," said Skinner. And he walked away towards Greyfriars.

The Bounder cast a moody look after him, and strolled away by himself. The dusk was falling when he turned his steps at last in the direction of the school.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Bounder Sports His Oak!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! Here's Skinner!"

"I say, Skinner, where's Smithy?"

"Where is he hiding?"

Quite a number of Remove fellows greeted Skinner as he came into the quad at Greyfriars. The Remove had come back from the spinney long before. They had waited till five o'clock, and then given it up.

Skinner was surrounded at once. All the fellows were curious to know what had become of Vernon-Smith that afternoon.

"Where is he?" demanded Bolsover major. He went out with you. Bunter says he saw you start together."

"Where have you been?" asked Ogilvy.

"Highcliffe," yawned Skinner.

"Smithy with you?"

"Yes."

"But why hasn't Smithy come back?" exclaimed Bolsover major. "Why didn't he turn up in the spinney?"

"Better ask him!" said Skinner.

"Did he go to Highcliffe to get out of the fight?" exclaimed Bolsover.

Skinner shrugged his shoulders.

"I know I'll talk to him jolly plainly when he comes in," growled Bolsover major. "We don't want funks in the Remove!"

"Oh, that's all rot," said Bob Cherry. "Smithy isn't a funk!"

"Why didn't he come to the spinney, then?"

"Blessed if I know!" confessed Bob.

"I jolly well know!" snorted Bolsover. "It's a case of cold feet! We'll give him cold feet when he comes in!"

But the Bounder did not seem to be in a hurry to come in. When the Remove attended call-over, Vernon-Smith did not answer to his name, and was marked down as absent by Mr. Quelch.

Most of the fellows were in the Common-room when Billy Bunter rolled in at last with news.

"Smithy's come in."

"Oh, he's come in, has he?" grunted Bolsover major. "Where is he?"

"Gone into Quelch's study."

The Remove fellows, were in a state of expectancy for Vernon-Smith's appearance in the Common-room, when he had been duly wiggled by the Remove-master for missing call-over.

But he did not appear.

"He's not coming!" said Bolsover major at last. "Sneaked up to his study, I suppose. He doesn't dare face us."

"We'll have him out," said Billy Bunter, with a fat chuckle. "I say, you fellows, let's go and have him out!"

"Well, he jolly well ought to explain himself, anyway," remarked Russell.

Bolsover major was already striding to the door. Half the Remove followed him to Vernon-Smith's study in the Remove passage. Bolsover major thumped at the door and turned the handle.

The door was locked.

The bully of the Remove thumped again angrily.

"You there, Smithy?"

"I'm here," came the Bounder's quiet voice from within.

"Let us in."

"I don't want you in."

"Why didn't you come to the spinney?"

"Find out!"

"Yah! Funk!"

A contemptuous laugh was the only response. And the door did not open.

Bolsover major gave several savage thumps, without eliciting any response at all.

"Open the door, Smithy!" called out Skinner. "I want to come in!"

"You can wait!"

"Look here, you can't keep a chap out of his own study!"

"I think I can."

"I say, Smithy, Wharton isn't here," cackled Billy Bunter. "You needn't be afraid to open the door, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was no reply from within. It was pretty clear that the Bounder did not intend to interview the Remove if he could help it.

Bolsover major strode along to No. 1 Study, with the juniors at his heels. The famous Five were there, discussing baked chestnuts by way of supper. They looked round as the door was thrown open and the doorway filled with excited faces.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Is that a deputation?" asked Bob Cherry genially. "What is it—a testimonial or an award of merit?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" growled Bolsover major. "Look here, Wharton!"

"I'm looking," said Harry quietly.

"Smithy's come in."

"I know."

"Oh, you know that, do you?"

"Yes; I saw him go to his study."

"You saw him, and didn't collat him?" shouted Bolsover major.

"Yes."

"Have you forgotten that you've got a fight on with him?" asked the bully of the Remove, with crushing sarcasm.

"No."

"Oh, good! Thought you had an attack of cold feet, same as Smithy!" sneered Bolsover. "Smithy's locked himself in his study, and won't let us in."

"Well, I don't see why he should let

you in. You're not what a fellow would call agreeable company."

"Look here, I didn't come here to listen to rotten jokes!" roared Bolsover major.

"Blest if I know what you came here at all for! Why not buzz off?"

"I've come for you. You can come along to Smithy's study and rout him out."

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"You won't?" shouted Bolsover.

"No, I won't."

Bolsover major gave him a glare. Bolsover had been looking forward to the fight in the spinney, and he had been disappointed. His idea was that the shirker should be run down and made to fight. Wharton did not seem to share his opinion.

"Look here, is Smithy going to get off scot-free, after the trick he played on the Form Eleven?" he demanded.

Wharton was silent.

"He had his choice between a fight and a Form ragging," continued Bolsover major. "If he doesn't take on the fight he's going to get the ragging."

"That's for the Remove to settle at a Form meeting," said Wharton. "Give us a rest, Bolsover. Clear out!"

Bolsover major snorted, and cleared out with his flock. Bob Cherry kicked the door shut after them, and returned to the chestnuts.

"It's a dashed queer bizney!" said Bob. "Why on earth didn't Smithy turn up in the spinney this afternoon, Harry?"

Wharton shook his head.

"I don't know," he said. "He's not a funk. We all know that."

"If he wasn't a funk, he would have turned up," growled Johnny Bull. "Look here, Wharton, Bolsover's in the right for once! The rotter stuck us on a barge and stole our cricket-match. He's not going to get off scot-free after that. He's got to fight or be ragged. Why, he may play another rotten trick on us next time if he gets off for this!"

"You'll have to do something or other, Harry," said Nugent, hesitating.

And Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh nodded. He had not forgotten the day on the barge.

Wharton knitted his brows.

"I can't understand Smithy," he said at last. "But it's quite right; he can't be allowed to play a trick like that without answering for it. He will have to show up in the dorm to-night, and then I shall speak to him. It can be settled in the dorm."

"And suppose he doesn't come up to the scratch in the dorm?" grunted Johnny Bull.

Wharton paused before he replied.

"Then I shall have to let it drop," he said, at length.

"Look here," began Johnny Bull warmly.

"I can't run down a fellow who doesn't want to fight!" exclaimed Wharton irritably. "I suppose you don't want me to start in as a bully of Bolsover's kind."

"That's all very well; but he kidnapped us on a barge and stole the St. Jim's match, and he might play another trick like that if he doesn't have a lesson," said Johnny Bull. "If he doesn't fight he's got to be ragged!"

"Well, I've nothing to say against that. Only I shan't take a hand in it." And that was all Harry Wharton would say on the subject.

Wharton was puzzled, as a matter of fact.

Why Vernon-Smith had failed to keep the appointment in the spinney was a mystery to him. That the Bounder lacked courage he did not believe for a

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moment. Though he could not pardon the trick that had been played on the Remove Eleven, Wharton was not anxious now for the fight to take place. Somehow or other, he could not feel bitter towards the Bounder.

There was an air of great expectancy about the Remove when they went up to their dormitory that night.

Vernon-Smith had to go up with the rest. There was no more hiding behind a locked door for him, as Bolsover major described it.

All eyes were on the Bounder when he came into the dormitory.

He went to his bed, and began to undress, without a glance to right or left.

Wingate came into the dormitory to see lights-out, and nothing was said till the Remove had turned in and the prefect was gone.

But hardly had Wingate's steps died away down the passage than Bolsover major was out of bed and striking a match. He lighted a candle-end.

"Turn out!" he said.

And the Remove turned out, almost to a man.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Fight in the Dormitory!

VERNON-SMITH did not move.

"The Famous Five had turned out of bed, and nearly all the Form with them. Half a dozen candles shed a glimmering light through the long, lofty room.

There was a general call to the Bounder.

"Up with you, Smithy!"

Vernon-Smith did not seem to hear.

"For goodness' sake, turn out, Smithy!" whispered Skinner. "They'll yank you out of bed if you don't."

The Bounder did not reply.

Harry Wharton came towards his bed. The captain of the Remove was looking reluctant. That was visible to every eye. But he felt that he was called upon to act.

"Will you get up, Smithy?" he asked quietly.

The Bounder sat up in bed.

"Turn out, you funk!" roared Bolsover major.

"He, he, he!" chortled Billy Bunter.

"Are your feet cold, Smithy?"

"Smithy's turned into a conscientious objector!" suggested Snoop.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Bounder's face flushed.

"Why don't you get out, Smithy?" said Wharton. "We expected you in the spinney this afternoon. The fight was arranged—you agreed. Will you get up and settle it now?"

"No," said the Bounder.

"Why not?"

"Because I don't choose."

"Yank him out!" roared Bolsover.

"Give him the coward's blow!" sniggered Bunter.

Vernon-Smith's face became crimson. He had not thought of that. But Harry Wharton was not likely to take Bunter's advice.

Wharton gave the Bounder a long, curious look, and stepped back. There was a buzz from the juniors.

"Have him out!"

"Get up, Smithy!"

"Funk!"

Vernon-Smith gave the Removites a bitter look.

"Have you done?" he asked icily. "If you have, you may as well shut up, and let me go to sleep."

"Who says a ragging?" demanded Bolsover major, looking round. "Do we want sneaking funks in the Remove?"

"Oh, dry up!" said Wharton sharply.

"What's the good of calling Smithy a

funk? You know he's nothing of the kind!"

"Thank you, Wharton!" said the Bounder quietly.

"Rats! He's a funk!" snorted Bolsover major. "And to think I've palled with a fellow like that—a sneaking funk! Pah!"

"Well, I call him a funk!" said Johnny Bull, in his slow, deliberate way; "and if you won't fight him, Wharton, I will! He played a dirty trick on us, and he may do it again."

"Quite likely," said the Bounder calmly.

"You hear him?" growled Johnny Bull. "Get out of bed, Smithy!"

"Certainly!"

To the surprise of the Removites the Bounder turned out of bed with prompt alacrity.

"Oh! You're not so funky, after all!" said Johnny Bull, in surprise.

"If you're yearning for a licking, I'll do my best to give you one," said the Bounder coolly.

"Look here!" exclaimed Bolsover major. "This isn't Bull's fight—it's Wharton's! You're not going to leave it to Bull, Wharton?"

"Mind your own business!" said Harry. And he went back to bed.

"A ring!" exclaimed Bulstrode. "Stand back, you fellows! Now then, you cripples, come on!"

Johnny Bull was ready at once. The Bounder came up with equal promptness. There were no gloves to be had, and the fight had to take place with the bare knuckles. The juniors crowded round in a thick ring, looking on eagerly.

Johnny Bull was not so formidable an adversary as Wharton. He was, perhaps, stronger physically, but in science he was not the equal of the captain of the Remove. But he was a dangerous customer, and even Bolsover major did not care about quarrelling with him. It was odd enough that if the Bounder funkled a fight with Wharton he should be ready to stand up to Johnny; but he certainly showed no white feather now.

Squiff sorted his watch out from under his pillow to keep time.

"Ready?" he asked. "Go it! Time!"

Wharton sat in bed watching the conflict.

The fight was hard from the start, both the juniors giving and getting severe punishment. In the first round it became clear that the Bounder knew more about boxing, and that he was quicker and more agile. But Johnny Bull was unusually strong, and he was cool, steady, and determined. When one of his blows landed it had terrific force behind it. But it was Johnny who went down first, with a heavy bump.

"Time!"

Johnny Bull came up cheerily enough, however, after the one-minute rest. At the call of time he was in the ring.

In the second round the Bounder had the worst of it, and he was twice down; but each time he was up again like a jack-in-the-box.

Third and fourth round were hard and fast, both the combatants getting severely handled.

In the fifth round Johnny Bull was breathing very hard. The Bounder was as game as ever. It was difficult to say which was to be the victor; but fortune favoured the Bounder.

A heavy drive catching Johnny Bull on the point of the chin, flung him on his back with a crash.

He lay gasping, and Sampson Quincey Ifley Field began to count.

"One, two, three, four, five, six, seven"—Johnny made a desperate effort

to get on his feet, but sank back dazedly—"eight, nine—out!"

Johnny Bull was still gasping on the floor. Squiff might as well have counted a hundred.

Nugent and Hurree Singh picked up the defeated champion and helped him to his bed. Johnny Bull blinked at them dizzily with half-closed eyes.

"Oh, crumbs!" he mumbled.

The Bounder was looking very limp. But it was the Bounder's win, there was no denying that.

"Good man!" said Skinner, patting him on the shoulder. Skinner would have preferred the victim to be Wharton; but it was very agreeable to him to see any member of the Famous Five knocked out.

Vernon-Smith gave him a sour look, and stepped back to his bed. He turned in without a word.

Bolsover major growled discontentedly. "You'll have to fight Wharton tomorrow, all the same, Smithy!" he called out.

The Bounder did not answer.

"Nothing of the kind," said Wharton quietly. "The matter's ended now."

"I don't call that a fight!" sneered Bolsover major. "Smithy's picked out a fellow he can lick. I call him a funk!"

"Do you think I'm easy to lick, you cheeky rotter?" growled Johnny Bull. "I'll give you a chance to try tomorrow!"

"Smithy's not going to crawl out of it like that," said Bolsover major obstinately. "If he doesn't fight Wharton I'll make him fight me!"

Vernon-Smith, who was already in bed, raised his head.

"That's a go!" he said.

"Oh! You're not afraid of that?" said sneered Bolsover major.

"You'll see to-morrow whether I am or not!" said the Bounder contemptuously. "Behind the gym after lessons on Monday, Bolsover, if you're as warlike with your hands as you are with your mouth!"

"You'll find me there—if you come!" sneered Bolsover. "I fancy you'll have another engagement at Highcliffe, though."

Vernon-Smith laid his head upon the pillow without replying. The juniors blew out the candle-ends, and the Remove settled down to sleep. But there were two who did not sleep very easily. Johnny Bull and the Bounder were both feeling the effects of the scrap too severely.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Whole Hog!

MR. QUELCH fixed his eyes sharply upon Johnny Bull at the Remove breakfast-table the next morning.

"What is the matter with your face, Bull?" he inquired, in icy tones.

"Knocked it against something, sir," said Johnny Bull.

"Indeed! What did you knock it against, Bull?"

"Something in the dormitory, sir."

"And what was it?"

"Ahem! A—a fellow's fists, sir," stammered Johnny, compelled to own up at last.

"I thought so, Bull," said Mr. Quelch. "Vernon-Smith, your face is in almost as disgraceful a state as Bull's. You two have been fighting, I presume?"

"Yes, sir," said the Bounder.

"You will take two hundred lines each, and stay in after lessons to write them out to-morrow," said Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Quelch frowned, but he let the matter drop there.

After morning service—it being Sunday—the juniors were free. The Famous Five went out together, but when they turned their steps in the direction of Cliff House School, Johnny Bull left his comrades. He did not want Marjorie and her friends to see his features in their present state.

The Bounder went out by himself, shaking off Skinner, who would have joined him. But as he went out of gates Hazeldene of the Remove joined him.

Vernon-Smith's look was not very welcoming, but he did not repulse Hazel. There had been a time, in the Bounder's reckless days, when he had led Marjorie's brother into more than one shady scrape; but since his reform the Bounder had done a good deal to keep the weak and wayward fellow in the right path. And since his fall from grace he had avoided Hazel. Thorough black sheep as he had become, it was noticeable that the Bounder showed no desire to draw any other fellow on the dark and dangerous path he had marked out for himself.

The two juniors walked along in silence for some time, the Bounder noting, with a covert smile, that Hazeldene opened his lips several times to speak, but without doing so.

"Coming Cliff House way?" Hazel asked at last.

"No."

"Marjorie expects to see me this morning."

"Well, don't disappoint her."

Hazel coloured.

"You used to be glad enough to come over!" he said tartly. "I can remember the time when you offered to lend me money if I'd take you over to Cliff House."

"You've got a good memory. I'll lend you money now, if you want it, but I don't want your sister to see my face like this."

"Oh, I see! It's not so bad as Bull's," said Hazel.

"No, not quite."

"Blessed if I thought you'd lick Bull last night!" said Hazeldene. "He's jolly nearly as tough as Wharton. Why didn't you tackle Wharton in the spinney?"

"I didn't choose to."

"You're a queer beggar, Smithy! Everybody was calling you a funk; but that will have to stop if you fight Bolsover major to-morrow. He's a big handful even for Wharton or Bob Cherry. Johnny Bull licked him once, too. Are you going to fight him?"

"I've arranged to."

"Well, you arranged to fight Wharton," said Hazel, with a laugh.

The Bounder paused, and looked grimly at his companion. He did not intend to endure any taunts from Hazeldene.

"Didn't you say your sister was expecting you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes!"

"Then it's time you went."

"Oh, I'll stick to you!" said Hazel. He was thick-skinned at times. "I've got something to say to you, Smithy."

Vernon-Smith gave a grunt, and walked on across the fields, Hazel keeping by his side.

"You've been going it lately," went on Hazel. "I heard you getting out of the dorm on Friday night."

"Did you?"

"What was it like at the Cross Keys?" asked Hazel.

The Bounder laughed sardonically. Hazel was supposed to have given up the shady ways which had often landed him in serious trouble. But it was evident that his reform was only skin-deep, and that he was already sighing for the flesh-pots of Egypt.

"Same as usual," said Vernon-Smith.

"A smoky parlour, with boozy blackguards in it, trying to win one another's money."

"That doesn't sound very attractive."

"It isn't attractive."

"Why do you go, then?"

"Because I'm an ass, I suppose!"

"You like it, or you wouldn't go," said Hazel. "It's a long time since I've had a flutter, Smith. I'm frightfully hard up!"

"You'll be harder up if you have another flutter."

"I might have some luck. I used to have luck on the gee-gees, sometimes."

"Did you win as much as you lost?"

"You know I didn't!" growled Hazel irritably. "Still, a fellow might have some luck. When are you going to the Cross Keys again?"

"Monday, I think."

"Like a chap to come with you?"

"No."

"Look here, Smithy, don't play the giddy ox! Why shouldn't a chap have a flutter now and then? If I lose money, I can afford it."

"You've just said you're hard up."

"Ye-es. But I have some tin—I can raise some, anyway. You've just said you'd lend me money, too."

"Not to gamble with," said Vernon-Smith quietly.

"Why, confound your cheek," broke out Hazeldene angrily, "you gamble!"

"Admitted."

"Why shouldn't I, then?"

"Suit yourself," said the Bounder, with a shrug of the shoulders. "But I'm not going to help you play the fool!"

Hazel walked on in silence, with a moody brow. The hankering after the old shady doings was strong in his breast, and he had expected the Bounder to welcome him as a companion. He was angry and disappointed.

"Well, I don't want your dashed money," he said, after a pause. "Keep it!"

"I mean to," said the Bounder, unmoved.

"But I shall do as I like, all the same. Jerry Hawke will be glad enough to see me, if I choose to go, and so will Cobb."

"Very likely—as long as your money lasts. If you've any sense, you won't go."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it," sneered Hazel. "Precious cheek, I call it, setting up to give a chap good advice when you're going to the dogs yourself!"

"If I'm going to the dogs, you don't want to come with me," said the Bounder, with a smile. "Not a pleasant destination, is it?"

"Oh, rot! Look here, why shouldn't we be pals, as we used to be?" said Hazeldene. "I'm getting fed-up with—everything. Wharton is so jolly starchy that a chap can't really get on with him. I shouldn't chum with him, only Marjorie makes such a point of it. He always seems to be trying to lead a fellow for his own good, and so forth. A chap gets fed-up with that in the long run. He's keeping me in the cricket team, I believe, because he thinks it's good for me."

"Well, isn't it good for you?"

"Oh, rats! You've chuckled it, anyway; and I'm getting fed-up, just as you did. Marjorie asked me the other day about your being on bad terms with that crowd."

The Bounder's face clouded.

"Marjorie thinks a lot of you, Smithy," went on Hazel, without noticing the sarcastic sneer that grew on the Bounder's face. "She wants us to be friends—in fact, she's said so. Why shouldn't we be?"

"I don't think she'd like us to be

friends in the way of breaking bounds together, to go down to the Cross Keys and play banker with Cobb & Co."

"Well, she wouldn't know that."

The Bouncer did not answer.

"Look here, Smithy, shall I come with you on Monday?" asked Hazel.

"No."

"Then you can go and eat coke, hang you!" growled Hazeldene. "You needn't take the trouble to speak to me again. And you can keep clear of Cliff House, too!"

Hazel left his companion, and strode away towards the road.

The Bouncer looked after him with a curious smile.

He had lost the friendship of the Famous Five because he had taken up his shady old ways; he had lost Hazel's, and doubtless Marjorie's, because he would not take Hazel with him in the way he was going.

"You're a fool!" he said to himself, as he walked on slowly, his hands driven deep into his pockets. "You're a dashed fool! The whole hog or none. What does it matter to you if that weak idiot goes to the bow-wows? Not a rap—if it wasn't for—for Marjorie. And he will turn Marjorie against me, if she isn't so already. I shall get the marble eye there in future." He shrugged his shoulders. "And if I let the ass have his way he would land himself in a scrape, and I should get the credit of it!"

"Hallo, Smithy!"

The Bouncer came upon three juniors sprawling in the grass as he passed through a clump of trees. Ponsonby & Co. greeted him.

"Lucky meetin'," said Gadsby. "Sit down and join us, Smithy."

It was Sunday morning, but the three nuts of Highcliffe had cards on the grass, and were playing banker.

"Come on, Smithy," said Ponsonby. "You owe us our revenge, you know."

The Bouncer looked down at them moodily.

"Not to-day," he said.

"Eh? Why not to-day?"

"It happens to be Sunday," said Vernon-Smith savagely.

There was a howl of merriment from the Highcliffe nuts.

"My hat, that's good, from Smithy!" chorried Monson. "Dashed if I knew you were such a toppin' humorist, Smithy! Let's hear another one like that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on, Smithy!" said Ponsonby. "Don't be so funny, you know. Not afraid of bein' spotted in this retired spot—what!"

"You know I'm not!" snapped the Bouncer.

"Well, sit down and take a hand. You haven't joined the goody-goody brigade since yesterday afternoon, surely?"

"There's a limit!" growled Vernon-Smith.

"If you mean you don't want to give us our revenge, after winnin' all our money yesterday—" sneered Ponsonby.

The Bouncer was about to stride on, but he paused.

"The whole hog or none!" he said, with a sardonic laugh. "I'll join you, Pon. I dare say you'll be sorry I did."

And the Bouncer dropped into the grass, and joined in the game. His prediction was verified, for when he left the Highcliffians an hour later he carried most of their loose cash with him. The Bouncer was going the whole hog. There was no mistake about that.

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THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Game!

THE next day after lessons Johnny Bull and Vernon-Smith had the pleasure—or otherwise—of staying in the Form-room after lessons to write out their impositions.

After the Form-master had left them to their task, Bolsover major looked in at the door.

"I'll be ready for you behind the gym, Smithy!" he called out.

"All right."

"Not suffering from cold feet?" grinned Bolsover.

"Go and eat coke!"

Bolsover major came a few steps into the Form-room.

"Look here, Smithy, I'm not keen on licking you," he said. "We've been pals. If you like to tackle Wharton, as arranged, I'll stand out."

"Better get out!"

"Then I'll wait for you!" snorted Bolsover major, and he tramped out of the Remove-room.

Johnny Bull looked curiously out of his swollen eyes at Vernon-Smith.

"You won't have much chance against Bolsover," he remarked.

The Bouncer did not reply. His pen was driving rapidly through the lines.

"Do you feel fit after that scrap the night before last?" asked Johnny Bull. "I feel a bit seedy still."

"So do I."

"Why didn't you fight Wharton?"

"Find out!"

Johnny Bull grunted, and went on with his work. He was a slower worker than the Bouncer, and he still had a good many lines to do when Vernon-Smith finished his task and left the Form-room.

A little crowd of fellows had gathered behind the gym. That was usually a secure spot for a scrap. Vernon-Smith found half the Remove there when he arrived.

Harry Wharton came towards him at once.

"I've got a word to say before you begin, Smithy," he said. "About that affair of the St. Jim's match, that's settled and over. That was done with on Saturday night. There's no reason why you should fight Bolsover over the same business, and if you don't choose to you needn't."

"What about me?" sneered Bolsover major. "Ain't I going to be consulted?"

"No. You'll be jolly well ragged if you don't keep quiet, that's all! There's been enough of your rotten bullying!"

"Hear, hear!" said Squiff.

"All serene!" said the Bouncer. "If Bolsover is spoiling for a fight, I'm quite ready to oblige him."

"You don't look very fit," said Harry uneasily.

"What does that matter to you?" demanded Bolsover major. "You're no pal of Smithy's, are you? Mind your own bizny!"

The Bouncer gave Wharton a rather curious look, and, without answering him, handed his jacket to Skinner.

Bob Cherry had brought the gloves.

Bolsover threw off his jacket, looking very grim. The bully of the Remove had been on more or less intimate terms with the Bouncer, but he was always ready to quarrel with friend or foe. He had made up his mind now that he was going to lick Smithy; all the more determined was he because the captain of the Remove evidently did not approve of it.

Nobody expected the Bouncer to come off victorious, especially as he must still be feeling the effects of the hard struggle with Johnny Bull on Saturday. But he was so determined, and so skilled a boxer, that it was certain to be a good mill, and all the juniors were keenly interested.

As for Smithy's funk, there could hardly be a question of that now.

Bolsover major was a decidedly big handful for Wharton at his best, and Smithy was ready to tackle Bolsover, it was absurd to suppose that he was afraid of the captain of the Remove. Why he had dodged the fight with Wharton was a mystery to the Remove.

Hazeldene had taken out his watch to keep time.

For three rounds the Bouncer stood up coolly and grimly to his bulky opponent. It was in the fourth round that Bolsover major began to get the upper hand. In the fifth round the Bouncer went down.

Skinner was his second, but it was Harry Wharton who picked him up and made a knee for him.

"Better chuck it," whispered Harry. "No good going on."

"I'm going on as long as I can stand!" said the Bouncer stubbornly.

"Time!" said Hazel.

The Bouncer came up—not smiling, certainly, but determined. Bolsover major swaggered forward to finish, but he was a little too confident. Vernon-Smith was fatigued, but he was alert. A feint drew the burly Remove, and Smithy's right came in unexpectedly and caught him full upon his nose, and as he reeled back the Bouncer's left followed it up on the point of the chin. Bolsover major went down like an ox.

"Bravo, Smithy!" chirruped Skinner.

"Well hit!" said Bob Cherry. "Right on the wicked, by George!"

Elliott picked up Bolsover major, and the bully of the Remove blinked dazedly and viciously.

"Oh crumbs!" he murmured.

Hazel's eye was on his watch.

"Time!"

Bolsover major was looking groggy as he stepped up, but he put all his beef into the sixth round. Vernon-Smith was at the end of his resources, and he was knocked right and left by Bolsover's heavy fists. But for the gloves his punishment would have been very severe. As it was, it was severe enough.

He did not go down, but when time was called he staggered out of the ring, and Skinner caught him.

When "Time!" was called for the seventh round the Bouncer made an effort to rise from Skinner's knee. His head was swimming, but he rose with great difficulty, and toed the line.

Bolsover major grinned at him.

"Better chuck it!" he said.

"Come on!" said Vernon-Smith between his teeth.

"By gad, he's game!" said Lord Mauleverer admiringly. "What a pug Smithy would make! Go it, Smithy!"

"Stop this at once!"

It was Mr. Quelch's voice. The Remove-master came on the scene with quick strides and an angry brow.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry.

Mr. Quelch surveyed the crowd of juniors sternly, and then his eyes fixed upon the two gasping combatants.

"You are fighting again, Vernon-Smith?"

"Yes, sir."

"I punished you the day before yesterday for fighting," said the Remove-master. "I shall have to deal with you more severely, I see."

"It wasn't Smithy's fault, sir," said Bolsover major, speaking up at once. "I called him a funk."

"Oh!" said Mr. Quelch, somewhat taken aback. "In that case, Bolsover, I shall punish you."

"Very well, sir."

"Follow me to my study, Bolsover. If there is any renewal of this, however, I shall report you both to Dr. Locke!"

Mr. Quelch rustled away, Bolsover major following him—for a caning. It



Vernon-Smith raised his cap. (See Chapter 6.)

had been decent of the bully of the Remove to own up; Bolsover major was not without his good qualities.

Vernon-Smith put on his jacket with Skinner's assistance.

"Come on, my sons! The circus is over!" said Bob Cherry, as the crowd of juniors dispersed. "Come on, Harry! What are you staying for?"

Wharton had lingered a moment or two, his eyes on the Bounder. But he nodded, and walked away with Bob Cherry. The Bounder walked away by himself.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Good Angel!

"O H, my hat! This is ripping!" The Bounder muttered the words dismally.

He was lying in the grass under the trees by the bank of the Sark. He had bathed his heated face in the river, and was resting. The Bounder was hard as nails, but he was feeling very queer now. The fight with Bolsover major had tested his iron endurance to the limit.

His head was aching, his eyes were heavy, and his whole body ached. He lay limply in the grass, hoping to feel better by-and-by. The sun was sinking over the trees, but it was still bright and warm. The shining river flowed within a dozen feet of him, with a musical murmur among the rushes. The Bounder, stretched in the grass, with his head pillowed on a big root, looked dully at glistening river and blue sky.

There was a light step on the river-path, and he moved his head and looked round. A deep crimson glowed in his cheeks at the sight of the graceful form that came down the path. It was Marjorie Hazeldene.

Marjorie saw him at the same moment, and stopped.

She coloured, too.

Marjorie had heard of the difference that had arisen between the Famous Five and the Bounder. As he was on bad terms with her best friends, it was a little difficult to be as frankly cordial as of old. She had learned some of the circumstances from her brother, but she did not

know all. But she had a very clear idea that the blame was on Vernon-Smith's side.

She could see that the Bounder was hurt, and she stopped. Vernon-Smith dragged himself to his feet, and raised his cap. His face was burning.

"You are not well?" said Marjorie, with a swift glance at his face.

"Yes, thanks; quite well," said Vernon-Smith. "Only—only a little bit hipped. I suppose you see what's the matter with my face?"

"You have been fighting?"

"Yes."

Marjorie's brow clouded.

"Not with a friend of yours," said the Bounder, with a smile.

"I—I heard from Hazel that—that—" she stammered.

"That I was booked for mortal combat with Wharton," said the Bounder, laughing.

"Yes."

"Well, it hasn't come off."

"I hope it will not," said Marjorie.

"Right! It won't!" said Vernon-Smith. He leaned against a tree. "That's why I'm looking like this."

Marjorie's blue eyes opened.

"You'll hear about it," said Vernon-Smith. "If Hazel doesn't tell you somebody else will. It was fixed for Saturday, in the old spinney, and I kept away. I dodged it."

"Oh!" said Marjorie.

"And was, naturally, called a funk for doing so," said Vernon-Smith lightly. "So I've had two fights, instead of one, to get myself right. Now I've scrapped with Bull and Bolsover major the fellows condescend to admit that I am not a funk. I may have to fight a few more, though. I'm sorry to let you see me with a face like this, Miss Hazeldene. But a chap can't let himself be called a funk, you know. His life wouldn't be worth living afterwards."

Marjorie nodded.

"I'm glad you did not fight with Harry," she said. "I wish you could be friends again, as you used to be."

"That's not likely. And—and"—the Bounder hesitated—"perhaps you'd rather not speak to me now. Don't mind saying so!"

"Not at all," said Marjorie quietly. Her colour deepened. "I—I wonder whether you—whether you would mind if I spoke to you as—as a friend—"

"I wish you would."

"I have heard some things," said Marjorie, crimson now. "You have acted foolishly, and it has caused this trouble. Why not—"

The Bounder's face hardened.

"I've dropped into my old ways," he said coolly. "Yes, it's true. You used to dislike me then; and now I'm the same chap again, or worse. It's true!"

"Is it worth while?" said Marjorie quietly.

"No; it never is. But a fellow often will do things that are not worth while. And I wasn't so much to blame this time, either. If you'll let me tell you—"

"Please!"

"A rotten book-making fellow that I used to know spoke to me one day in the fields, and my Form-master saw us together. He was suspicious, and came to my study to jaw me about it, and found some cigarettes there—belonging to another chap. I was trying to keep them out of sight, to keep the other chap from a wigging. He spotted them. I couldn't betray Skinner. Quelch put two and two together, and made five or six of it!" The Bounder sneered bitterly. "I was gated—to keep me out of mischief. I'd been playing the game as straight as a fellow could, and that was what it led to. So I said to myself that if I was going to have the name I'd have the game, too!"

Marjorie was silent.

"But I don't want to whitewash my self, even to you," went on the Bounder before she could speak. "It's in my blood. Some fellows are born with a taint in them, and I'm one. I was getting fed-up with going straight—that's honest! I was going to stick it out,—meant that. But I found it a horrible bore sometimes. I—I was more than half glad when Quelch dropped on me, and showed me it was no good."

"But it was some good," said Marjorie. "Mr. Quelch did not mean to be unjust—he was mistaken. And he would have changed his opinion if—"

"He has changed it," smiled the Bounder. "Since then I've earned the sack half a dozen times; but I've been careful—so jolly careful, that I'm rising in his estimation."

Marjorie bit her lip.

"If you'd try again—" she said, after a pause.

"It's no good," said the Bounder moodily. "I've tried, and I fed-up—I'm not a fellow like Wharton or Bob Cherry. I—I'm not fit for you to speak to, Miss Hazeldene!" He made a gesture as if dismissing the matter. "But there's one thing I'd like to tell you—you needn't be afraid that your brother has anything to do with me now. I know you used to think that I led him into scrapes, and I own I did—though I've got him out of a good many, too—but whatever I may do myself, I shall see that Hazel keeps clear of it, so far as I can."

"Thank you!" said Marjorie.

They were walking along the towing-path now, and little more was said before they parted at the bridge.

Marjorie gave the Bounder her hand frankly when they parted, and she went on towards Cliff House with a little pucker of thought in her brow.

The Bounder lounged along the towing-path back to Greyfriars. His brow, too, was thoughtful.

Marjorie had been kind—she had some interest in him. But he knew that, if he kept on as he had begun, he must

lose her friendship, as well as that of her schoolboy friends.

Was the game worth the candle?

In the Bounder's wayward breast there was a real regard for Harry Wharton, his old rival. He had not fully realised its strength till the time came for him to stand up in conflict with the fellow he liked and respected. Then, careless of misunderstanding, of misinterpretation, he had refused the challenge. They had been friends, though not exactly chums; and Wharton would probably have been ready to resume the old footing—on conditions. But friendship was impossible between a fellow like Harry Wharton and a fellow who smoked and gambled and broke bounds for dingy pub-haunting—who risked, with every reckless escapade, sully the good name of his school. They were as far as the poles asunder. But Vernon-Smith had strength of character enough to go back to the straight path again, if he chose. Was the game worth the candle?

The Bounder was in a deeply thoughtful mood as he walked back to Greyfriars.

The meeting with Marjorie had changed the current of his thoughts. His dingy pursuits seemed dingier, more degrading, when he thought of that fresh, frank face and those clear eyes.

In his study, from force of habit, he took out a cigarette and struck a match, and then, with an angry exclamation, threw it to the floor and crushed it under his heel.

Skinner was in the study, and he watched that proceeding with amazement.

"Not going to have a fag?" he asked.

"No!" growled the Bounder.

"Well, pass me your case; I will!"

"Oh, rats!"

But the Bounder passed the case, and Skinner smoked.

"What about to-night, Smitty?" he asked. "Is it coming off—are we going down to see Cobb & Co.?"

"I'm not."

"Don't feel fit after that scrap, I suppose?"

"No—and other reasons."

"Hazel's been numbing to me about it," grinned Skinner. "He wants to come. The dear boy is tired of reform—he's been reformed several weeks now. It doesn't generally last so long."

Vernon-Smith grinned faintly. Hazel's alternate fallings from grace and earnest reformations were a sort of joke.

"Make it another night, then," said Skinner. And he finished his cigarette and lounged out of the study.

The Bounder moved restlessly about the room. He was feeling sore in body and mind, and in no mood for work.

There was a tap at the door, and Hazeldene looked in.

He gave the Bounder a half-defiant glance.

"What about that little run to-night?" he asked.

"I've told you."

"Are you going?" asked Hazel, unheeding.

"No."

"Then it won't bother you if I do," sneered Hazel.

"Hazel, old chap," said the Bounder, with some earnestness, "don't play the giddy ox! If you get into the hands of that gawd again you'll be sorry for it!"

"I suppose I'm old enough to take care of myself!"

The Bounder did not utter the words that rose to his lips in reply to that. Hazel took a cigarette from the case on the table and lighted it. The Bounder watched moodily.

This was Marjorie's brother, and the

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girl was fond of him in spite of his faults and weaknesses—or perhaps because of them. Feminine affection is often bestowed more where it is needed than where it is deserved.

For Hazel Smithy felt little but contempt, but for Marjorie's sake he would have been glad to keep the weak, viciously-inclined lad from going the way he was going himself. But Hazel, as Skinner had said, had been reformed for weeks now, and had got over the fear induced by his last scrape, and was ready to fall into another.

The Bounder knew that he could not influence him—unless it was for evil. In that direction, if he chose, his influence would be unlimited.

"Shut the door if you are going to smoke!" growled the Bounder at last. "A prefect might pass, you see!"

Hazel, with a cigarette between his lips, turned to the door to close it. Harry Wharton came along the passage at the same moment.

Wharton paused.

The sight of Hazel, smoking in the Bounder's study reminded him of old scenes. Hazel met his startled glance, and laughed. Wharton, with darkening brows, passed along without a word.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Missed in the End!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent came out of No. 1 Study after prep, and headed for Wibley's quarters. A new play was being got up by the Remove Dramatic Society, and Wibley was to assign the parts. Billy Bunter was lying in wait in the passage.

"I say, you fellows, an awful thing's happened!" said Bunter, fixing a lugubrious stare upon the two juniors through his big glasses.

"What's the matter?" asked Wharton, pausing good-naturedly.

"You know I told you I was expecting a postal-order this morning? Well, it hasn't come!"

"You fat duffer!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Is that it?"

"That's it," said Bunter. "It hasn't come. I'm stony!"

Wharton laughed in spite of himself.

"Stony!" repeated Bunter. "Of course, it's only due to the delay in war-time. A chap mustn't grumble. I'm patriotic, you know. We're going to beat the Germans, even if I'm kept waiting for my remittances. Considering what the chaps are facing in the trenches, I can stand it. But the awkward thing is that I'm short of money, and I particularly want a quid to-night!"

"Tuckshop's closed," said Nugent.

"I hope you don't think I'd waste a quid on food in war-time, Nugent!" said the Owl of the Remove, with dignity.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at! I say, you fellows, I dare say you could manage ten bob each. I'll let you have it back first thing in the morning!"

The two Removites walked on, but the fat junior rushed in pursuit. He caught Wharton's sleeve with a fat hand.

"I say, Harry, old chap, I simply must have a quid to-night!" pleaded Bunter.

"I'll settle up at rising-bell if you like!"

"What's the good of a quid to you if you're going to hand it back to me at seven o'clock in the morning?" demanded Wharton.

"Not the same quid, you know!" smiled Bunter. "I expect to have a good many—perhaps five or six! Lots, very likely!"

"And where on earth are you going to get them from?" exclaimed Wharton, in astonishment.

Bunter winked a fat wink.

"That's telling," he replied. "A chap may be able to raise a lot of money, and he may not. He may be a brainy chap, and jolly good at nap and banker, and he may not. I'm not going to say anything. Besides, you're so jolly goody-goody!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Nugent.

"So you want a quid to play nap and banker?" exclaimed Wharton.

"That's telling," said Bunter, with another wink. "I don't want to shock you, dear boy. Just lend me the quid!"

"You fat duffer! Buzz off, or I'll lend you my boot!"

"Oh, really, Wharton!" Bunter caught at Wharton's jacket as he jerked himself away, and made him a prisoner again. "Look here, I'll tell you the whole bizny if you like. I'm going to spoil the Egyptians!"

"Which Egyptians?" asked Wharton, staring at the fat junior.

"The seedy sporting gang at the Cross Keys, you know," said Bunter cautiously, lowering his voice. "I'm going down there to-night with Hazel and Smitty!"

"Hazel and Smitty!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Just so. Keep it dark, you know!"

"You're going to break bounds to-night to play nap and banker!" exclaimed Frank Nugent.

Another wink from Bunter.

"Not in your line—what?" he grinned.

"I'm a bit of a dog, you know! He, he!"

Nugent burst into a chuckle. The idea of Bunter skinning the seedy sportsmen of the Cross Keys was comic. If Bunter went to that delectable resort with a pound in his pocket, it was certain that he would be twenty shillings poorer when he came away.

"Only I'm hung up for capital," said Bunter pathetically. "If you fellows care to lend me ten bob each, I'll let you have fifteen back to-morrow!"

Wharton took hold of Bunter's collar.

"I won't lend you a pound," said Harry; "but I'll give you a jolly good shaking, you shady oyster!"

"Yaroooh!"

Billy Bunter shook like a lump of jelly in the powerful grasp of the captain of the Remove.

"Yow-ow! Leggo! If you make my glasses fall off—Yoooop!"

Bunter sat suddenly on the floor as Wharton released him. He sat and roared.

"Now jump on him!" grinned Nugent.

Billy Bunter was up in a twinkling, and fleeing along the passage. He bolted into No. 7, and slammed the door.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Nugent. "Come on, Harry! Wib's waiting!"

"I'll follow you," said Harry.

And as Frank Nugent went on to Wibley's room, Wharton tapped at the door of the study of Herbert Vernon-Smith.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

A Difficult Matter!

"COME in!"

The Bounder was at home. He had struggled through his prep somehow, feeling anything but fit, and was resting in the armchair. Skinner was smoking a cigarette and talking gee-gees, the Bounder answering hardly a word.

That talk with Marjorie Hazeldene had had its effect upon Vernon-Smith. He could still see in his mind's eye the fresh, sweet, grave face of the girl whose opinion he valued more than that of anyone else in the wide world. More and more it was borne in upon his mind that the game was not worth the candle. He hardly heard Skinner's talk.

He smiled a little as he looked up and saw Wharton. He was in a mood to meet the captain of the Remove in a more friendly spirit. But Wharton's brow was sombre; and as the Bounder saw it his own face hardened again. If Wharton had come there to call him over the coals, he would not find the Bounder of Greyfriars in a repentant humour.

"I hope I'm not interrupting you," said Harry, with an unconsciously scornful note in his voice as he glanced at Skinner's pink paper.

"You are, as a matter of fact," said Skinner coolly.

"You can fire away," said the Bounder. "There's a chair there!"

Wharton did not sit down.

"Only a few words, Smithy," he said. "I've just heard some tattle from Bunter. I hope it isn't true, but I thought I'd speak to you. What you do is no concern of mine, of course. You can't suppose that I'd start preaching to you. But is it true that Marjorie's brother is joining you—that you're going to break bounds together to-night?"

"Listeners shouldn't be believed, you know," said the Bounder coolly.

"Quite so. But Bunter must have heard something."

"Wonderful gift he has for hearing things!" said the Bounder. "But if you're in search of information, why not ask Hazel?"

"I'd rather not ask Hazel, Smithy," said Wharton, after an awkward pause. "I dare say you know why."

"The flabby fool would think you were looking after him, and would fly out at you!" smiled the Bounder.

And Skinner chuckled.

"Will you tell me whether it's true, Smithy?" said Wharton quietly. "You used not to be a bad-hearted chap. You know Marjorie's had a lot of worry over her brother playing the fool. He always gets into scrapes when he kicks over the traces, and he generally goes to her for help. Isn't it a bit too bad to lead him into that kind of rot again?"

"Mea culpa!" Vernon-Smith said. "Of course, it's I who am leading that weak-kneed fool into a scrape again."

"He was smoking in your study this evening," said Harry. "I must say it looks like it. If you can't go straight, and it seems that you can't, you might leave Hazel out of it. He can't be much of an amusing companion for you in that kind of adventure—rather a drag than anything else, I should think."

"How well you know him!"

"And suppose Hazel is going in for one of his little flutters again?" sneered Skinner; "I don't quite see how it concerns you, Wharton. Has Miss Hazeldene asked you to look after him, and has Hazel consented?"

Wharton paid no heed to the cad of the Remove. His eyes remained fixed on Vernon-Smith's face.

"Will you answer me, Smithy?"

"Suppose I say it's true?" drawled the Bounder. "What then?"

Wharton's brow darkened.

"It is true, then?" he asked.

"No. As it happens, it isn't. Bunter's got it wrong—as usual," said the Bounder calmly. "Hazel's yearning to distinguish himself as a pub-haunter, and I've been giving him good, grandfatherly advice."

Wharton looked doubtfully at the Bounder. At one time he would have taken Vernon-Smith's word without hesitation. Now, he did not quite know how to take him.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the Bounder, with a sneer. "Not that it's any bizney of yours so far as I can see."

"I take your word," said Harry.

He left the study with that.

Skinner looked curiously at his study-mate.

"You said you'd given it up for this evening, Smithy?" he remarked.

"So I have."

"Then Hazel isn't going out with you?"

"Haven't I said so?"

"Shush! Don't get ratty, dear boy!"

We don't always talk as Georgie Wash-

ington talked to his pa," said Skinner.

"I fancy Wharton means to keep an eye

open. He's taken that nincompoop

Hazel under his noble wing. Blessed

cheek, I call it! If you lead Hazel into

wicked ways that fight may come off

after all. He came here to bully you."

"Oh, shut up!" growled the Bounder

savagely.

"You're nice and pleasant this evening," yawned Skinner, and he sauntered out of the study.

The Bounder remained in dark and angry thought. He knew that Skinner was seeking to pour oil on fire—that he wanted to widen the breach between him and his former friends. Yet Skinner's suggestion was not without its effect upon him. Wharton had come there to dictate to him—to tell him what he must do and what he must not do. If he went to the dogs himself, he could go—if he sought to take Marjorie's brother with him on that attractive route, Harry Wharton would interfere. How would he interfere? The Bounder's eyes glinted. If Hazel had come in at that moment probably the Bounder would have agreed to the expedition. Fortunately he did not come.

Skinner sauntered along to Hazel's study. Half an hour later, when Wharton and Nugent came away from Wibley's study, Hazeldene met them in the passage, with a sullen brow.

"Hold on a minute, Wharton!" he rapped out.

"Certainly," said Harry, taking no notice of Hazel's unpleasant tone.

"You've been talking about me in Smithy's study."

"That's so," said Harry, his brow knitting. He guessed at once that the amiable Skinner had been at work.

"Can't you mind your own business?" asked Hazel. "What does it matter to you what I do? Suppose I come a cropper? Do you think I shall come to you for help?"

"I think it's very likely," Wharton replied candidly. "You've done so before when you've been playing the fool."

"It's like you to remind me of it," said Hazel bitterly. "I sha'n't trouble you again. I want you to let me alone. And if you don't—"

He paused for a moment, and then added between his teeth: "I'm not a fellow to be ordered about and fathered, I can tell you! If you interfere with me you'll get stopped—sharp! You won't find me finking coming to the spinney like Smithy."

"Is that all?" asked Wharton quietly.

"That's all."

"Quite enough!"

Wharton went on to the stairs. Nugent had not spoken. But fellows who knew Wharton's hasty temper would have wondered why he did not mop up the passage with Peter Hazeldene. Even Nugent, who knew him better than the other fellows, wondered a little.

"Better let him alone, Harry," said Frank, as they went downstairs. "He's ripe for trouble, and he won't be happy till he gets it. You don't want to be driven into a scrap with Marjorie's brother."

Wharton nodded without replying. It looked as if there was nothing further he could do—except wait till Hazel had landed himself into some sore trouble, and then help him out of it, and listen to his usual tale of repentance! Wharton could not help wondering whether the Bounder was at the bottom of this.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

A Night Out!

VERNON-SMITH could not sleep. The Remove dormitory was dark and silent. Only the steady breathing of the sleeping juniors and the dull snore of Billy Bunter broke the silence of the night.

But the Bounder was not sleeping.

His own reckless excursion for that night had been given up owing to the seedy and depressed state he was in after the encounter with Bolsover major behind the gym. He was thinking of Hazel and of what he intended.

He knew that the foolish, reckless junior had money in his possession—Hazel had shown him several pound notes. It was a tip from a relation—and Hazel had told him there was more to come. Hazel's reforms were generally due more to want of money than to remorse. Now he had money. Certainly the seedy and needy sportsmen at the Cross Keys would soon relieve him of it, if that was all. But if a watchful master or prefect discovered him out of bounds at night it would be serious enough for the scape-grace. And the Bounder bitterly reflected that it would be put down to him. Wharton thought so already. Marjorie would think he had lied to her that day on the towing-path. And Hazel was exactly the fellow to run into trouble—he had not the nerve and coolness to play the game the Bounder played.

Vernon-Smith tried to disguise the matter from his mind. Was it his business after all? Let the fool go—straight into the arms of a prefect, perhaps. If he wanted the sack, let him have it!

And then Marjorie's face came into his mind, and he thought of the clear eyes filled with tears—and his mood changed. Somehow, he was going to prevent Hazel from making a fool of himself on that night at least. Probably in a few days this wayward fellow would forget all about it—he was changeable as the wind. Vernon-Smith lay awake, listening.

It was about half-past ten when he heard a sound of stirring in the dormitory. His lip curled. He knew that it was Hazel getting up. The Bounder sat up in bed.

"Is that you, Hazel?" he whispered.

There was a sudden breath in the darkness.

"Yes. You startled me, Smithy."

"You're going?"

"Yes, I am."

"Hazel, old chap—I"

"Oh, ring off!" muttered Hazel. "I get enough of that from Wharton. Don't wake all the fellows. Why don't you come, too?"

The Bounder laughed softly.

"I'm coming if you do, Hazel."

"Good man!" There was real satisfaction in Hazeldene's whispering voice.

"Good man, Smithy! I've spoken to Hawke, and told him I was coming; but I'd rather not go alone. Break up!"

The Bounder slipped out of bed and dressed.

There was a sarcastic grin on his face, which Hazel could not see in the darkness.

They tiptoed silently out of the dormitory.

A faint glimmer of light came from the bottom of the big staircase, but the upper passages were as dark as pitch.

In five minutes they were on the ground, by way of the leads under the lower box-room window.

It was a dark night, but clear and calm. Hazel drew in a deep breath of the fresh air.

"Come on, Smithy!"

"Still feel inclined to go on?" murmured the Bounder.

"Yes, of course. We haven't got out for nothing, I suppose?"

"Oh, come on, then!"

They scuttled across the quadrangle. Vernon-Smith suddenly caught his companion's arm and drew him to a halt.

"Did you hear something?" he whispered.

"Only the wind."

"Hush!"

Hazeldene stood in the shadow of a tree, his heart thumping. He did not possess the Bounder's iron nerve. The bare thought of being caught out of bounds at that hour was enough to throw him into a flutter.

Vernon-Smith's grasp tightened on his arm again.

"Come!" he whispered.

"I—I can't hear anything—"

"Don't talk—we've got to dodge," whispered the Bounder. "Do you want to be run in by a dashed prefect?"

Hazel panted.

"Did you hear?" He could see nothing in the darkness, but it seemed that the Bounder had taken the alarm.

Hazel yielded to his guidance without question. Still keeping hold of his companion's arm, the Bounder led the way rapidly, Hazel hardly knew whither.

They stopped at last outside the wood-shed, behind the school buildings. Hazel panted for breath.

"Was it Quelch, Smithy?" he breathed.

"Quiet! Get inside!"

Vernon-Smith had opened the shed door. Hazel stumbled in. The wood-shed was as safe a refuge as they could have found, in which to lie low till the coast was clear.

Hazel stumbled in, against the faggots. The door closed, and he was in pitchy darkness. He heard a key turn.

"Where are you, Smithy?" he muttered, groping for his companion.

There was no reply.

"Smithy!"

Still no answer.

With a vague sense of alarm, Hazel groped anxiously round for his comrade. But his hands met only empty space or piles of faggots.

A sudden savage suspicion flashed into his mind. He groped to the door, and tried it. It was fast!

He understood then.

Vernon-Smith was not in the shed with him. It was on the outside that the door had been locked, and the Bounder was still outside. Vernon-Smith had locked him in!

All Hazel's fear changed to rage, with the passionate suddenness of a weak nature. He beat furiously on the door with his fists.

"Smithy! Vernon-Smith, you cad! What have you played this trick for? Let me out—do you hear?—let me out!"

His voice rose almost to an hysterical shriek.

"Keep cool!" came a quiet voice through the keyhole. "Do you want to wake the school, you silly ass?"

"What are you doing?"

"Sentry-go!" was the cool reply.

"What do you mean? What have you locked me in for?"

"To keep you out of mischief," said Vernon-Smith quietly and grimly.

"You're going to stay there till midnight, Hazel. Better than a jaunt to the Cross Keys, if you only knew it."

"You rotter! You meddling bound!" shouted Hazel, beside himself with rage.

"Open the door, or I'll hammer it down with a faggot!"

"Go ahead!"

"I mean it, Smithy! I—I—" Hazel choked.

"You can make a row if you like, and bring a master out," said Vernon-Smith

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cooly. "I shall clear off when I hear him coming, and he'll find you here. You can explain to him what you left the dormitory for."

"You bound! You—you—" Hazel was shrieking now.

"By gdd! You've done it!" said Vernon-Smith, through the keyhole.

"Give my kind regards to Quelch when he comes, Hazel. I'm off!"

"Smithy, don't go! Is it—is it really Quelch? Let me out!"

"No, it isn't!" the Bounder chuckled.

"But it will be, if you go on making a row. I'll stay here if you keep quiet."

"Let me out!"

"Rats! I'm going to let you out at midnight," said the Bounder coolly.

"Any more shouting, and I'm off."

Hazel did not shout again. He was in the Bounder's hands; but remaining a prisoner in the wood-shed was better than falling into the hands of an angry Form-master.

His voice was pleading when he spoke again through the keyhole.

"Smithy, don't be a cad! Let me out."

"Can't be did."

"Oh, you rotter! You cad! You came with me on purpose to play this rotten trick on me!" groaned Hazel.

"Quite so."

"What business is it of yours, you bound? Can't I do as I like without you interfering?" Hazel hissed passionately.

"Not in this instance."

"I'll smash you when I get out!"

"You're welcome to try."

"Oh, you cad!" Hazel ground his teeth. "I'll pay you out for this somehow, Vernon-Smith. What are you meddling with me for?"

"Not because you're worth it," said the Bounder icily. "You're not. It's my humour."

"Wait till I get a chance to make you smart for it!" said Hazel, with bitter hatred in his voice. "I'll make you suffer for it, Smithy!"

"I'm not nervous, dear boy."

Hazel whispered again through the keyhole, alternating pleas with threats, but no further reply came. The Bounder was pacing to and fro outside, and he did not trouble to answer.

The trapped junior gave it up at last.

He groped his way to a pile of faggots, and sat down to wait. His excursion for that night was nipped in the bud. The merry circle at the Cross Keys would expect him in vain. They were not likely to miss his company; but undoubtedly they would miss his currency notes. But Hazel did not look at it like that. He was going to the back parlour of the Cross Keys to win money from Cobb & Co.—so he thought. At all events, he was going to have the feverish excitement of gambling, for which his weak nature yearned. And that glorious prospect had been completely knocked on the head by the Bounder's crafty device.

Hazel ground his teeth at the thought. He was being treated like a wayward child. He was far from realising that he had been acting like a wayward child, and asking for such treatment.

As the slow minutes passed his fury grew more intense. His whole longing now was for revenge upon the fellow who had baulked him.

What did it matter to Vernon-Smith what he did? It was pure cheek on Smithy's part to interfere. This was worse than anything Wharton had ever thought of, with all his propensity to meddle, as Hazel regarded it. As the time passed wearily, scheme after scheme of vengeance upon the Bounder flitted through his feverish brain.

But what revenge was there for him? The Bounder could have knocked him

out with one hand! A fight was out of the question. What else was there? How could he make Vernon-Smith suffer for the disappointment he had inflicted upon him?

The wretched junior was almost exhausted with the rage that ran riot in his breast, when the key turned at last in the lock.

The door opened.

"Time!" said the Bounder's mocking voice.

Hazel stumbled out of the shed, white and shaking. He struck out, without a word, at the dim face of the Bounder. His wrist was caught in an iron grip—a grip so hard that he gave a cry of pain.

"None of that!" said Vernon-Smith's quiet voice. "Do you want me to thrash you where you stand, you fool?"

"Let me go!" choked Hazel.

The Bounder released him, and vanished into the darkness. Hazeldene stood irresolute.

At that hour, even the late roysters of the Cross Keys were in bed. There was nothing for it but to return to the dormitory.

He was only a minute or two behind the Bounder as he climbed in at the box-room window. A dim form was there. Vernon-Smith closed the window after him, and fastened the catch. Hazel was too disturbed to remember that. His eyes glittered in the dark as he looked at the Bounder.

"You've done me, Smithy!" he said, in a low, trembling voice. "But I'll make you suffer for it—and I know a way!"

"Pile in!" said the Bounder coolly.

Hazel did not answer. He led the way to the Remove dormitory, and the Bounder followed him. Vernon-Smith closed the door after they were in. As he did so there came the sound of someone stumbling against a bed, and a startled voice:

"What's that?"

It was Harry Wharton's voice.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

The Last Straw!

HARRY WHARTON sprang up in bed.

In the dim dormitory someone had stumbled against the bed, and half fallen on him, effectually rousing him from slumber.

The captain of the Remove stared about him in the gloom.

"Who's that?" he exclaimed.

"Quiet!" came Hazel's voice, quite cool now. "Don't make a row, Wharton!"

"You, Hazel?"

"Exactly. It's all serene, Smithy," went on Hazel.

"You've been out, Hazel?" asked Wharton. "With Vernon-Smith?"

"Yes; I have."

Harry Wharton groped for the jacket on the chair beside his bed. He drew out a matchbox and struck a match.

The flickering light glimmered on Hazeldene and the Bounder, both fully dressed. Evidently they had just come into the dormitory together, at half-past twelve!

Harry Wharton's face was hard and savage.

He had received exactly the impression that Hazel meant him to receive—that the two juniors had broken bounds together for the purpose of pub-haunting—that the Bounder, in spite of his denial, had gone to his old haunts and taken Hazeldene with him. It was not likely that Wharton should guess that Hazel had deliberately awakened him.

The captain of the Remove stepped out

of bed, found a candle-end, and lighted it at a match.

Vernon-Smith had sat down on his bed, and was taking off his boots. Even the cool, clear Bounder did not guess, for the moment, the plan of vengeance that had come into Hazel's bitter mind.

The sound of voices and the light had awakened several of the Remove. Bob Cherry sat up and yawned.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's the merry game?" asked Bob. "Not Lepps?"

"What is the esteemed gamefulness?" inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh sleepily. "What is the whyfulness, my esteemed Wharton?"

"Hazel and Smithy have just come in," said Harry.

"Beastly blackguards!" growled Johnny Bull.

"And Vernon-Smith is going to answer for it!" said Harry Wharton, between his teeth. "Where have you been, Hazel?"

"What's that to you?" snapped Hazel.

Wharton stepped towards him.

"It's this much—that I'm captain of the Remove, and I put my foot down on this kind of thing," he said. "There are other reasons, too. You'll tell me where you've been, or—"

"Or what?" sneered Hazel.

"Or I'll give you such a licking that you won't get over it in a hurry!" said Wharton savagely.

Hazel looked at him curiously. Only that evening he had insulted the captain of the Remove, and the fact that he was Marjorie's brother had saved him from resentment. Apparently that charm had ceased to work. Wharton's temper had the upper hand now.

But it was no part of Hazel's revengeful scheme to refuse information. He only wanted it to appear that he gave it unwillingly.

"I'm a bit too seedy to scrap with you now, Wharton," he drawled. "If you're specially curious, I've been to the Cross Keys with Smithy. Why shouldn't I go with him, if he wanted me to?"

"Liar!" said the Bounder quietly.

"Don't be an ass, Smithy! It's no business of Wharton's. Why should you be afraid to own up?"

"And what have you been doing at the Cross Keys?" asked Harry, his voice ominously quiet.

"What do you think?" yawned Hazel. "Quite a giddy time! Cigarettes, you know, and a drink or two. And I've won some tin at nap. I'm going again!"

"That's enough!" said Wharton.

"Inquisition finished?" grinned Hazel. "Then I'll go to bed. Going to question Smithy about his sins?"

And Hazel proceeded to undress.

Harry Wharton came towards the Bounder, his face hard and set. Vernon-Smith eyed him coolly. He knew what was coming.

"You told me this evening that you weren't taking Hazel out, Vernon-Smith," said Wharton. "You said you weren't leading that weak-minded fool into trouble again!"

"Thanks!" sneered Hazel.

"And you were lying to me," said Harry, his eyes on the Bounder's mocking face.

The Bounder wondered for a moment whether Wharton would believe him if he told what that night excursion had been for. It was doubtful. But whether it was so or not, the Bounder did not intend to explain now. His pride was up in arms, and he would not say a word that looked like excuse.

"Hazel's friends have been trying to keep him straight," went on Wharton. "It's a thankless job, and the vicious fool wants a licking badly!"

"Hear, hear!" came from Bob Cherry.

"It's rotten enough without a thorough-paced cad trying to lead him into making a bigger fool of himself than he would otherwise!" said Wharton, his voice trembling with anger now.

"Hazel's a rascally fool; but you're a rotten blackguard, Vernon-Smith! I'm done with Hazel now; but you've got to answer for what you've done. Put up your hands!"

The Bounder laughed—a low laugh that was full of sardonic mockery.

He understood Hazel's scheme of revenge now—he even admired, in a way, the cunning of it. But he realised the uselessness of denying the truth of Hazel's seeming confession.

Neither was he inclined to justify himself. It seemed inevitable that whenever he played the game straight misunderstanding and condemnation were to be his lot. He was in a mood of black bitterness and self-derision, and at that moment the Bounder was his very worst self again.

He rose quietly from the bedside, and threw his jacket on the bed. The fight he had avoided at the risk of being called a funk was coming off after all. The Remove were all awake now, even to Billy Bunter, and they were all looking on breathlessly in the candle-light.

"You want to fight me—at this hour?" drawled the Bounder.

"I'm going to!"

The Bounder glanced at his late companion. Hazel was sitting in bed, watching, his eyes gleaming vindictively.

"I congratulate you, Hazel!" said the Bounder, with a smile. "There's more in you than I thought. You've surprised me, by gad! Congratulations! I'm ready, Wharton, dear boy! It's a glorious chance for you to reap glory, as I'm out of condition. Come on!"

Wharton hesitated. In his anger—just anger, as he firmly believed—he had forgotten the Bounder's grim encounter with Bolsover major that afternoon.

"I—I forgot!" he said. "Leave it till to-morrow—or the next day—it will keep!"

"Not at all! Come on, I tell you!"

"But—"

"Do you want the coward's blow?" sneered the Bounder.

That was the last word. The next moment the two juniors were fighting.

There were no rounds in that fight. There was little noise. The Removites, sitting up in bed, watched in silence, in the flickering candle-light. Hardly a word was spoken, only the shuffling of feet, the panting of breath, broke the quiet.

It ended at last. The Bounder was on the floor—knocked out more completely than he had ever been in his life before. Wharton staggered to his bed, and sank down upon it. He, too, was very near the end of his strength.

The Bounder, dazed and exhausted, lay motionless. Skinner stepped out, and helped him to bed.

Harry Wharton turned in. Skinner blew out the candle.

The Remove dormitory was plunged into darkness again, and soon into slumber, when the buzz of voices died away. But the Bounder did not sleep. Hazel had had his revenge—for what it was worth. It was a more terrible one than the weak, vindictive junior dreamed. For that last wrong had been the finishing-touch to the Bounder's wavering resolution. It had broken the last tie that held him to the right path.

(Don't miss "THE BOUNDER'S WAY!"—next Monday's grand story of Harry Wharton & Co., by FRANK RICHARDS.)

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Monday:

"THE BOUNDER'S WAY!"

By Frank Richards.

Vernon-Smith in the limelight again! But I don't think you are at all likely to get tired of him. He shows at his worst and at his best in this strong and stirring yarn—the old-time Bounder, with that something added which makes so much difference. He has steered clear of fighting Wharton as long as he could; but at length Hazeldene has brought about a fight between them, as is told in "The Last Straw." But even yet, for Marjorie's sake, Vernon-Smith, in his own seemingly cynical way, stands by Hazel; and, though all bonds between him and Wharton seem to have snapped, yet, after all, he cannot quite forget the past!

A CADET CORPS.

Many boys don't take very kindly to discipline. They regard it as meaning the being ordered about, and they think that there is enough of that at school, or the office, or the works.

Well, it does mean being ordered about, of course—no use denying that. But it means it in a different way.

Who minds taking orders when he is one of a score or a hundred good fellows, all taking orders like him?

That's what such discipline as Cadet Corps and the Boy Scouts afford—discipline plus esprit de corps.

A keen reader asks me to make an appeal on behalf of the Queen's Cadets (Southwark Companies), and I comply with pleasure. I have the firmest belief in this esprit de corps. You get it in a school of the right sort. Its golden thread runs through all the stories of Greyfriars and of St. Jim's. You get it in a regiment, and for how much it counts there most of you have some idea. You get it in the many county associations which flourish in London and other big towns.

Shoulder to shoulder! That's its motto. It helps you in lots of ways. Perhaps you don't think enough of yourself for self-respect alone to keep you from doing the things you shouldn't do. It may seem to you that you are not important enough for it to matter whether you do them or not.

But you can't let the regiment, or the school, or the corps, or the troop down! The strength of the other fellows, your comrades, helps yours.

And you can't be lonely if you have all those good comrades. Among them are sure to be some with tastes like your own—fellows you can chum with.

The Queen's Cadets, judging by the handbills sent to me, offers lots of inducements to lads in the S.E. districts. Khaki uniform, with equipment and use of rifle, free, Easter and summer camps, company club, with billiard-table, gymnasium, miniature rifle-range, boxing, and so on. Entrance-fee, only 2s. 6d., payable by instalments. It is not a chance to be let slip, I think.

You can apply any evening after eight o'clock at Queen's House, 31, Union Street, Southwark, S.E. And if you don't live in that district, there are other corps, and if you desire to join one I will do what I can to give you any information possible on receipt of a letter.

THE FUTURE.

"In a Land of Peril," though it will not end for some weeks yet, is drawing to its close. I shall be glad to hear from any of you who have ideas as to the best thing to follow it. Mind, there are bound to be divided opinions, and I don't guarantee that asking is having. You understand that!

Your Editor

THE GREYFRIARS GALLERY.

No. 25.—Mr. QUELCH.

AS the master in charge of the Remove, the Form most prominent in the stories of Greyfriars, Mr. Quelch is naturally the master of whom we hear most. The Head, Dr. Locke, and Mr. Prout, who has the Fifth in charge, Herr Gans, the German master, Monsieur Charpentier, the French master, Mr. Capper, of the Fourth, and others come upon the scene at times—some of them frequently, but none so frequently as Mr. Quelch.

That gentleman is emphatically the right sort. Not the ideal master, perhaps; for that one would want a man with Mr. Quelch's strong sense of justice, and his very real, though often hidden, sympathy, combined with such athletic distinction as only a younger man than the Remove-master could be expected to possess. It is not on record that Mr. Quelch ever was much of an athlete. But he is most unmistakably a gentleman, and a man of strong character.

Justice is the first quality that a decent fellow asks from a master. It is not, however, a quality that the wrong 'un greatly cares for. Mercy would suit him better; but there are times when mercy is rank injustice. One of the finest tributes ever paid by boy to master was that of an Etonian concerning Dr. Temple. "Temple," said he, "is a beast, but a just beast." Which, being rightly interpreted, meant that Dr. Temple was not a beast at all, but that he was severe when he saw need to be.

Mr. Quelch is not a beast, most certainly, though Skinner and others may persuade themselves that he is!

His justice is tempered with mercy. No boy could have done much more to make a master hate him than Vernon-Smith did when he came into conflict with Mr. Quelch during his early days at Greyfriars. Yet the Bounder was never treated otherwise than justly by his Form-master, and in the long run he owed a good deal to Mr. Quelch's ability to forgive—if not to forget. That Mr. Quelch has not forgotten has been made evident lately, and in dropping so heavily upon Vernon-Smith, after the one-time black sheep had so long left his old ways behind him and gone straight, the master may seem to some readers unfair. But he is not. If the Bounder's past transgressions rise up in witness against him, it is not Mr. Quelch's fault that it should be, in a sense, false witness.

No more than any other keen-sighted man with a good knowledge of human nature is Mr. Quelch infallible. Such knowledge, such keen sight, will not save anyone from occasional mistakes. Reluctantly, but convinced by evidence that seemed to him, as to others, impossible to get over, Mr. Quelch has had before now to give up for a time his faith in fellows who have done far more to earn complete faith than Vernon-Smith has!

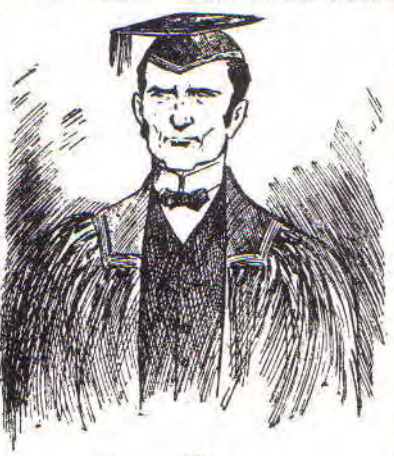
The loyal support given to their master by the best fellows in the Remove is the surest proof possible of his justice. There is not one among them who has not felt the hand of Mr. Quelch heavy upon him; but there is not one who does not recognise that punishment dealt out by their Form-master is dealt out from motives of duty. Note how forgiving Mr. Quelch can be to a junior who has affronted him personally, but has done so without intention of impertinence. Again and again Alonzo has been let off, because it was certain that he did not mean to offend. That is the difference between self-respect and pomposity. The pompous man—Mr. Prout, though he has many good qualities, is one such—finds anything which makes him look absurd, anything which hurts him bodily or in his feelings, almost impossible to forgive until it has been expiated by punishment.

But Mr. Quelch is generally capable of putting behind him the matter of how he feels, and dealing with the offence on its merits. If cheek is intended, the offender gets it hot, and deserves what he gets! For Mr. Quelch insists upon proper respect, and

the master who fails to insist upon that is hopeless. But it is pomposity, not self-respect, which punishes for an unintended affront.

When Tom Brown, on his first day at Greyfriars, kicks a football straight into Mr. Quelch's face, he gets off with a mere verbal rebuke. When Alonzo sweeps the chimney in Mr. Quelch's study—with the usual terrible results of Alonzo's attempts to be obliging—the master does not at once drop on to the poor, willing Lonzy, but feels sure that he has been taken in. He knows that Alonzo is absolutely truthful, even when his statements appear wildest. He can make allowances for Wun Lung's Oriental nature, and for Bunter's stupidity, though he is forced to drop on to Bunter hard and often. He is merciful to that young scamp Dicky Nugent. Maudy worries him, but he sees that Maudy, slacker though he may be, is a good fellow.

And he is keen. Many a time have those



Harry Quelch

gimlet-like eyes of his dropped on to tricks! He can see through Bob Cherry's mischief, and through Skinner's spite, and distinguish one from the other. Now and then he is taken in—as in the matter of the black footballers—but not often. It is he who discovered that Bunter, with his ventriloquism—which, by the way, has given Mr. Quelch more than a little trouble—was responsible for M. Charpentier's thinking himself insulted by Skinner and Snoop, though that Skinner and Snoop should have been guilty was likely enough.

It was he who convicted Bunter of trying to make an April fool of the Head, and Bob Cherry of dealing likewise with Mr. Prout. He saw through the round robin, too, the card which so many fellows signed at Alonzo's request, believing that it was to convey

respectful birthday greetings to their Form-master. But Bulstrode, Skinner, and Stott turned it into a cheeky protest against having so many lines! It was Mr. Quelch who brought in the young detective, Dalton Hawke, to clear up the accusation made—quite honestly—by Coker against Harry Wharton & Co.

Mr. Quelch could not believe them thieves, any more than he could believe Bulstrode guilty of the theft Ponsonby, of Highcliffe, tried to fasten upon him. He has faith in the Famous Five, and in Mark Linley and Tom Brown, and fellows of their type—not as believing them perfect, but because he knows them incapable of mean tricks. And they have more than once backed him up for all they were worth when a section of the Form was trying to make things too hot for him.

Twice at least Mr. Quelch has tendered his resignation. He did so when it became apparent that the Bounder was to be treated with unfair leniency by the Head. But he withdrew it when he learned the reason. Dr. Locke is one of his oldest friends, and Mr. Quelch is the kind of man who stands by his friends. He resigned when the tyrant Lothrop was temporarily in charge of Greyfriars, for he would not stand by and witness injustice. But he came back when Dr. Locke returned, and the tyrant had gone.

That Mr. Quelch has plenty of pluck has been shown so often that there is no excuse for any doubt of that. He is not a fighting-man; but he can shoot out a straight left, or use an umbrella as a weapon at a pinch. And Peter Todd and Harry Wharton can be called upon as evidence that "Quelchy" is not to be terrorised by footpads in a dark lane!

Two of the most unpleasant incidents of Mr. Quelch's career were in connection with the fair sex. It was Alonzo—spoofed by others, of course—who tried to bring together two loving hearts—those of Mr. Quelch and Miss Primrose, of Cliff House. But Mr. Quelch's was not a loving heart. He is a confirmed bachelor, one takes it. And it was simply terrible for him when the Head came upon the scene and found Miss Primrose fainting in his arms! Skinner was the miscreant who inserted a matrimonial advertisement in a local paper in Mr. Quelch's name, and brought to Greyfriars any number of would-be Mrs. Quelches—a low trick, though funny enough in its results.

No; marriage is not for Mr. Quelch. Where would that monumental work, "The History of Greyfriars," upon which all his spare time is spent, be if he had domestic responsibilities?

There is much more that might be told—the episode of Ulick Ferrers, Mr. Quelch's double and cousin, who took his place for a while, and imprisoned him in the crypt—the story of the disreputable Mr. Punter, who tried to blackmail him, and was bribed to fresh activity by the Bounder when he seemed to be giving up the attempt—the lost letter which Skinner found, and the malicious trick by Skinner which set the Bounder hunting mares' nests. But much must inevitably be left untold in so brief a sketch as this.

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To Mr. Newsagent.

Please keep for me each week until further notice a copy of the MAGNET LIBRARY.

(Signed)

IN A LAND OF PERIL!

By BEVERLEY KENT,

Author of "Officer and Trooper," "Cornstalk Bob," "A Son of the Sea," etc., etc.

SYNOPSIS OF PREVIOUS CHAPTERS.

Bob Masters and Ted O'Brien, an Irish boy, escape from the clutches of Faik, a rascally adventurer who is in pursuit of a secret treasure in the African wilds. Faik is working in collusion with Jasper Orme, Bob's cousin, at Cape Town. The two lads are captured by the natives of the Inrobi tribe, who also surround Faik's party. Faik has done the chief of the tribe a bad turn in the old days, and tries to place the guilt on Bob; but, thanks to a Scotchman named MacGregor, and a friendly native—Mendi—he fails in his plot. Bob is acclaimed chief on the death of Kazna, the former leader. The comrades save Faik from the vengeance of the tribe, then push on after the treasure, but are waylaid by Mopo and a strong force. Mopo, who is Bob's deadly rival, is beaten off, with his braves, and Galza, a messenger from the Inrobi, comes to their camp.

He brings tidings of Mopo, who is in pursuit. The companions elude Mopo by diving into the lake, and they find a wonderful underground country, inhabited by a tribe of weird people unlike the human race. These strangers they overcome, secure the gold, and then, after amazing adventures, find themselves back in the world they had quitted. Mopo and Faik, with a strong party, are on their tracks.

(Now read on.)

Days of Doubt.

Stepping to one side, Faik struck at Ted, and caught him on the shoulder. Swinging round, he aimed a blow at Bob, which the latter dodged. But now the black boys were on their feet and rushing into the fray.

They swept Bob off his legs. Ted had pitched forward and had fallen, but at once had got on his feet. Nor had MacGregor stood still. From a distance he dared not fire at the villain for fear of injuring one of the lads, so he had started to run in. Ted caught Faik's rifle, but the scoundrel wrenched it free. He stepped back, and struck at the lad again as he came pluckily for him. Ted ducked, and just saved himself.

And now MacGregor was close up. Faik saw him, and a savage gleam came into his eyes. The old Scot was short of breath after the sharp run. He was trembling a bit, and not fit for a fight, and only now could he use the rifle. He raised it to his shoulder, but Faik was too quick. Rushing at him, the scoundrel dealt him a terrific blow, and he went down.

But Faik had left an opening for Ted. The lad sprang at him, caught him by the back of the coat, tripped him up, and seized the rifle.

Bob fought desperately. He had knocked over two of the black boys, and was surrounded by the others, when Ted fired at Faik. The shot rang out with a sharp report, and the black boys stopped, terror-stricken. Bob knocked down another, and rushed to pick up the rifle MacGregor had dropped.

The black boys, with howls of fear, scattered in all directions. Ted had not hit Faik, but he was keeping him covered.

"Hands up," he shouted, "or you are a dead man!"

"Yes, hands up, you cur!" Bob cried. "We won't spare you if you delay!"

Faik raised his long arms high above his head. His fishy eyes were starting out of his head.

"Mercy!" he gasped.

"Go and sit on that boulder again!" Bob commanded. "Ted, stand a yard in front of him, and keep a bead on him, whilst I look after Mr. MacGregor."

Faik slouched to the boulder, and sank down on it. He shivered as Ted pointed the rifle within a foot of his chest.

"Take your finger from the trigger!" he gasped. "It might go off!"

"No fear!" Ted replied. "You must take

your chance of that. And you don't deserve to live, anyhow."

Meantime, Bob was bending over the old Scotchman. There was an ugly gash on his head, his eyes were closed, and his skin was the colour of marble. Very worn he looked, and a great peace was on his face. Bob's heart seemed to shrink. He feared their great friend and commander was dead.

He felt for the old Scot's heart. To his joy, he found it was beating, though very weakly and fitfully.

"He's still alive, but that cur has almost finished him!" Bob called to Ted. "I must get some water. If he dies, we will demand the penalty!"

Faik's lean neck twitched convulsively as he heard this last statement.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt him. It was he who attacked me," he groaned. "You wouldn't take my life. I can make amends for anything I have done!"

"Liar and thief!" Ted retorted hotly. "This isn't the first time you tried to wipe him out! And you would serve us the same way even now if you got the chance! Ay, if he is dead—"

"Keep calm! Mind the gun! Don't get excited!" Faik wailed. "Put it down! I promise I won't stir! I promise—I promise—"

"You'd promise anything, you old liar!" Ted scoffed. "Do you drop talking, and then perhaps I won't get so worked up. It will be your own fault if you get the dose of lead you deserve!"

Bob had run to a small stream, and had fetched some water. He sprinkled MacGregor's face, and saw that consciousness was slowly returning. The old man opened his eyes after a while, recognized Bob, and smiled.

"I'm no' done for yet," he murmured. "What has happened? Where is Ted?"

Bob told him the result of the fray. "Keep Faik a prisoner," MacGregor murmured again. "It's no' safe to let him gang!"

He closed his eyes, and Bob saw he had fallen asleep. The lad crossed over to Ted.

"We must bind this cur, and take him along with us," he explained. "Some of the black boys are coming back. I'll try and make friends with them. We'll want them to help carry the treasure!"

Three of the natives had returned to within fifty yards, and were standing together. Bob waved his hat to them cheerily, and walked towards them. They seemed inclined to bolt, but the lad's friendly manner held them. When some yards from them he spoke.

"Oh, warriors of the great Inrobi tribe, led astray by Mopo, we seek no quarrel with you," he began. "For now are you without a friend, and far from home. And how do you hope to return, and what greeting will be yours, if you go alone? Is it not the axe you will meet? But if from this on you are loyal, then I will obtain pardon for you, and you will have your kraals and your oxen once again. Have I spoken well?"

Their faces lit up with hope.

"Oh, master, we grieve that we have been led astray!" one replied. "Thine are words of wisdom, and assuredly we will hearken and obey!"

"Then come with me now, and all shall be forgotten," Bob said. "And the days of thy misery shall be at an end!"

They followed him, muttering their thanks, and looked on as he bound Faik's wrists securely behind his back. Then he and Ted had a consultation.

"We'll have to stop here to-day, and perhaps to-morrow," he began. "MacGregor won't be fit for a journey for a good while. He's got it badly, I fear. And my idea is to get these fellows to make a stretcher."

"That's the only way to do it," Ted agreed. "But Mopo and that rascal Orme—"

He stopped, and his face grew long.

"I see that danger, but we must risk it," Bob replied. "It means a loss of two days or so, and that may be serious. On the

other hand, Mopo may keep on drawing Orme further away for longer than that!"

"And Faik?"

"I'm taking him as far as the Inrobi tribe. If we get there we'll be quite safe. They would fight for us to the death!"

"And Mendi?"

"Mendi must be told to come along somehow, but for the present we can't send a message. Our trouble isn't over even now that we have the gold again; but that's a great thing done, isn't it? If it wasn't for that cur Faik having knocked out Mr. MacGregor we would be in clover. Still, there's the bright side to this as well as the dark!"

They crossed over together, and looked down at the old man. He was still sleeping. Bob told the black boys to make the stretcher, and they began on it at once. MacGregor slept until nearly nightfall, and then seemed stronger. They made him as comfortable as possible, and prepared for the night's watch. Both had rifles now, and even at the worst that made them feel more secure.

Next morning the old man was able to take some food, and protested that he was fit for the journey; but the two lads decided against it.

During the day they tried to conceal their anxiety from him, and noticed with joy that he was steadily regaining his strength. That night they took it in turns to keep watch, and early on the following morning they were ready to start. It was with a sense of great relief that they moved off.

To carry the gold as well as the stretcher was the difficulty, but they managed to surmount it. Two of the black boys carried the stretcher, the third took a load of the treasure, they strapped a very large one to Faik, and took two themselves.

But they had to rest often. During the day they were only able to travel eight miles. On the following one they were able to cover ten, the ground being more even. On the third they went eight again, having to ascend a hill, and there they camped for the night.

By this time MacGregor was much better, and he insisted that he could walk. Their anxiety had been much lightened. There had been no sign of their enemies. They had already come twenty-six miles, and from now they hoped to travel much faster. It was a merry party that gathered together for the evening meal.

The two lads and the black boys were awake before dawn, making preparations for the day's journey. As day broke they had everything ready, and they called MacGregor for breakfast. They were sitting down together, when they heard an outburst of lamentations from the black boys some distance away. They were gaping around with every indication of terror.

They sprang to their feet, and for a moment they stood too agast to speak, for they were surrounded! By one side of the hill Mopo and his followers were moving. A quarter of a mile away, on the other side, Orme and his gang were approaching. It was clear an attack was intended.

"Trapped!" Ted gasped. "Well, we can only fight to the death!"

Bob pointed to a small black figure ahead of Orme.

"Mendi!" he gasped. "He has come to share our fate!"

At once MacGregor wheeled round. He stared long and intently. A ring of hope was in his voice as he spoke.

"Get your rifles, lads! Fight on! Fight on!" he cried. "All is not lost yet! For that is not Mendi! It's the man who may save us! Galza has come at last!"

A Flag of Truce.

Plain to be seen on the hill's crest, with Orme and his men approaching on one side and Mopo and his warriors on the other, it had looked as if escape for the adventurers was impossible. But MacGregor's words brought hope to Bob and Ted.

(Continued on page 16.)

IN A LAND OF PERIL.

(Continued from page 15.)

"I'm sure it's Galza," the old Scot said again.

"But how can Galza help us?" Ted asked. "He only makes one more man against a crowd, and he is not armed!"

"When Mopo attacked us at the river, I told Galza to clear out and get assistance if he could," MacGregor replied. "That was some days ago. Dinna forget that he was first sent to us by old Kampa, of the Inrobi! Kampa knew about Mopo and Orme, and was anxious on our account, and he hasna been idle, I'm sure!"

Galza came up the hill almost with the speed of an antelope. He smiled as he ran towards them.

"I come with good news, master!" he panted, addressing Bob. "I have sped night and day to the huts of my people; but I did not reach them, for I met our warriors by the way, marching by Kampa's orders!"

"The Inrobi are coming to our rescue!" shouted Ted.

But Bob's face did not brighten. He looked across the plain to Orme's wagon; he turned his head and saw Mopo's warriors. Of what avail was Kampa's attempt at rescue now? It would surely be too late!

"Thou hast done well, nor will this ever be forgotten to thee whilst we live!" he said, and then he sighed. "And when may we hope to sight the warriors of the Inrobi?"

"They will come with nightfall," Galza answered. "I hastened before to tell ye!"

"At nightfall!" Bob repeated. "Look, Galza! What dost thou see?"

The native's gaze followed the indication of Bob's outstretched hand. He started when he saw Orme's wagon, and a scowl swept over his face when he recognised Mopo's followers.

"They are our enemies," Bob continued, "and they have come here to destroy us!"

Galza did not answer. All he had done and suffered on that swift journey was of no avail, it seemed. His great loyalty had sustained him, had conquered his fatigue. Now, with the shattering of his hopes, physical reaction set in. He sank down in silence.

"We can but fight to the end," Ted said grimly.

"And we have two rifles and a fair share of ammunition," MacGregor added. "They willna get off so lightly!"

Bob nodded. He walked a little apart. For some seconds he stood deep in thought. Like a flash an idea sprang into his mind, and on the moment he turned and hurried back.

"Mr. MacGregor! Ted!" he cried, his face so changed as to astonish them. "Galza has done better than he knew! The news he has brought may, after all, mean our escape!"

"Can't see how!" Ted cried.

"I've just remembered. There's Mopo! How would he relish this?"

MacGregor's eyes began to gleam. He stroked his beard and nodded.

"A verri guid notion," he replied. "It was clever of you to think of it, Bob. Yes, this is bad news for Mopo, Bob; but—"

"I can't yet see what you are both driving at!" Ted protested, in great excitement.

"It means that Mopo is done in," Bob explained. "He went dead against his own people, when he attacked us!"

"That won't stop him now," Ted answered. "They'll pay him out whether he goes for us now or not!"

"But Bob is the great white chief of the Inrobi," MacGregor remarked.

"And I can bargain with Mopo," Bob added.

"You would go down there and argue with him!" Ted cried, aghast. "Walking right into the lion's jaws, I call it!"

"And what chance have we if we stay here?" Bob asked in turn.

"Still, you mustn't go," Ted protested. "We may be able to hold these scoundrels off until Kampa comes. You mustn't take such a risk! No, Bob, I don't agree!"

Ted's warm Irish heart was stified. He clutched his chum as he spoke, and his voice shook.

"Mr. MacGregor agrees with me," Bob said. Ted turned and faced the old Scot, who was also deeply moved.

"You don't—say that you don't!" the lad urged. "You wouldn't have Bob do any-

thing so reckless? You back me up, don't you?"

MacGregor looked at them both in turn. He was not thinking of himself, but of them; and he saw clearly that Bob's suggestion was the one alternative to being wiped out.

"Let us look into this calmly," he said, "and try to weigh up the risk that Bob had run. We all know Mopo. He bullies and blusters when he has odds on his side, but there is no real pluck in the loon. And the cause of all his hatred to us is because Bob has made him chief of his tribe. If it wasn't for that he would never have been our enemy!"

Ted listened more calmly. "So that if Bob lays the case squarely before him—" MacGregor went on.

"And I certainly don't want to be chief!" Bob cut in.

"I was coming to that," MacGregor continued. "If Bob tells him that he means to clear out very soon, and that first he will get the tribe to make terms with Mopo, wadna that be a strong argument?"

"And I'll point out that if he attacks us now there's no hope left for him," Bob said.

"So that he chooses between the chance I offer and being cast out by his own people. Sooner or later they would track him down and wipe him out!"

Still Ted kept silent.

"Come, Ted!" Bob urged. "You must see now that I am not running much of a risk!"

"It is too big a risk," Ted objected, his face flushed. "How can you get this talk with Mopo? They'll swarm round you with their axes, and you'll have never a chance!"

"No, they won't," Bob replied.

"Be reasonable, Ted!" MacGregor urged.

"Do ye think I would be a party to this risk if any loophole was left? And do ye think I fall in with this proposition to save myself?"

"Then if Bob goes, I go, too!" Ted said hotly. "If one of us dies, both dies!"

"And leave MacGregor alone?" Bob protested. "Would that be playing the game?"

Tears of vexation sprang into Ted's eyes. He was dragged both ways. He felt he could not leave the old Scot, nor could he let Bob go and himself stand idle.

"And just look again at Orme," Bob continued, nodding in the direction of the wagon. "While we are talking he's pushed nearer, and every moment is precious. Mopo is not our only enemy. Even if we pacify him, we have to keep Orme off. Can MacGregor do that alone? He couldn't. But you and he together could, for we have two rifles, and, after all, there are only about a dozen of those skunks! When they come within range you could pick them all off before they could get to very close quarters!"

"All right!" Ted gasped. "I give in! But—and he raised one arm and clenched his fist—"but if Mopo does you in, it's not Orme or his lot I'll bother about! I'll wipe out that cur Mopo and as many of his brutes as I can before I go down myself!"

"Then it's settled, and I'd better start," Bob said, much touched by his chum's loyalty, but striving to hide what he felt. "I'll carry my handkerchief on a stick to show I mean a truce!"

"And we'll fire a couple of shots to let them know what to expect if they attack you," MacGregor said.

"Very good! Here's off! I won't be long!"

Before Ted could speak again Bob was descending the hill. He walked leisurely, and, when half-way down he affixed the handkerchief to a stick. Then he went on at an even pace, as if taking a stroll. But his heart was thumping hard. He knew full well what was likely to happen, and that speedily.

He raised his head and glanced at the sun and the cloudless sky. It might be his last look at it all!

Mopo and his crowd were about three hundred yards distant when he reached the plain. They halted, and he saw that they were talking together. Clearly they were amazed. Then they raised their axes and gave a ringing war-cry.

The lad's blood ran cold in his veins, but he went on. Next instant a rifle-shot rang out.

They were about to rush forward, but they halted now. Bob raised the stick, waved the flag of truce, and held steadily on.

MacGregor watched him, his lips compressed, his frame trembling. He could not restrain his admiration.

"He's a brave lad!" he murmured. "In any war a man would get the Victoria Cross for such a deed. What a gallant young heart he has!"

But Ted did not answer. His face had

gone white. His breath was coming in gasps. His eyes were strained and agonised.

The savages began talking again. Nearer and nearer Bob drew. He had passed so far on that an attack upon him meant certain death.

Till then there had been the chance that if Mopo's men rushed he could retreat successfully. Now the chance had gone. But he did not falter, though he felt like a man stepping off the end of a plank in the darkness without knowing whether a gulf yawned under him.

A great coolness came upon him. All now lay with Fate. He was no longer an active agent. His mind began to work with startling clearness. He recalled that animals had been often mastered by cool courage; that the lion or the panther, ready to spring at very close quarters, had been held back solely by the steady, fearless gaze of the human eye. And these savages were much like animals: In his superiority to them he held the last weapon.

They were growing restless again. Mopo leaned upon his axe and stared at the slim, gallant figure approaching him.

Mopo did not move.

Up on the hill Ted was gasping. MacGregor had begun to walk up and down; he could not keep still. His heart was wrung with anxiety for the lad he had come to love as his son. Now and then he muttered words Ted could not distinguish.

Bob walked on. To Ted it seemed as if he was face to face with his foes when he was yet fifty yards from him.

Ted groaned.

"He's not giving himself a chance!" he moaned. "He's right in amongst them. Oh, why did I let him go?"

Bob still advanced. He raised the stick again, and his voice, strong and fearless, was wafted back to the hill.

"Mopo!" Bob cried.

In a Tight Place.

Ted and MacGregor watched, their hearts wrung with dread. The sulky savage did not move.

"Kampa will soon be here! It is truly I speak!" Bob continued. "Kampa and the Inrobi will swarm round thee ere nightfall. What, then, will be thy fate? Is it peace or war between thou and me? Choose once, and for all. For I alone stand between thee and those thou have made thine enemies!"

A few breathless seconds passed. Then Mopo slowly straightened himself and dropped his axe.

As he did so Galza ran to MacGregor, crying:

"Look!"

The old Scot shot a glance over his shoulder. He fairly gasped. Ted swung round. Orme and some of his men were hurrying up, rifles in hand. They were now well within range.

"They heard the shot we sent to warn those scoundrels not to touch Bob," MacGregor said, in some agitation. "Now they'll rush us, for they ken Mopo has come up, and will think he has begun his attack. There's naething for it but to hold them back!"

Ted picked up his rifle. As he did so he looked back at Bob. The lad and Mopo stood together some little distance from Mopo's men.

"Try a thousand yards," the old Scot said. "I wish my eyesight was better. Time was I could ha' picked one off w' every shot."

They fired. Orme's crowd came on. "They're nearer than you thought," Ted remarked. "The bullets went over their heads."

"Then sight for about seven hundred," they fired again, and now with some effect. They dropped to the ground. Ted half rose and looked back. Mopo and Bob were still talking together. He told MacGregor so.

"The lad is winning him round," said the Scot. "Mopo is nae fool, for all he's a rogue. Now that Bob has got a hearing he's safe, I reckon. Orme's rascals mean coming on still. They're crawling up. They wanna stop unless we manage to pink a couple of them."

"Then we'll have a couple more shots," Ted replied.

"I'll leave them to you, and keep on at the gang around the bullock-wagon to prevent them bringing up ammunition," MacGregor said. "Take your time, and stick to them."

(Next week's issue will contain another splendid instalment of this exciting story.)

23-6-17