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The illustration on the cover shows a man in a suit sitting on the floor, looking distressed, with a broken pipe and other debris around him. To the right, a woman in a hat and a young boy are looking on.

COKER'S LATEST!



THE VANISHING CAKE TRICK!

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COKER'S LATEST!

By FRANK RICHARDS.

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



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Alarming!

"GURRRGH!"

That strange and mysterious sound proceeded from Horace Coker's study in the Fifth Form passage at Greyfriars.

Five juniors, who were advancing towards the study on tiptoe, halted suddenly, startled, and a little alarmed.

The five were Harry Wharton, Bob Cherry, Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Singh, the Famous Five of the Remove. From the fact that they carried rulers or cricket-stumps in their hands, and were approaching Coker's study on tiptoe, it might have been guessed that the heroes of the Remove were on the war-path.

So they were, as a matter of fact.

Coker, who prided himself on having a short way with fags, as he called it, had "whopped" Nugent minor, of the Second Form, in his high-handed way. He had done it for Nugent minor's own good, of course. Coker's intentions were always of the very best. But the fag had not been grateful, far from it, and his major in the Remove was distinctly wrathful. Hence the visit of the Famous Five to the Fifth Form study with weapons in their hands. Coker of the Fifth, also, was to be "whopped" for his own good.

"Gurrrgh!"

"Yoooooch!"

"Grooooch!"

The five stopped outside Coker's door, astounded. Their wrathful and hostile thoughts vanished at once. Those weird sounds from the study indicated that Coker was ill; or, at least, that there was something seriously wrong with him.

"What on earth's the matter with him?" murmured Harry Wharton. "It sounds like suffocation."

"Better see," said Bob Cherry.

The door was thrown open at once.

Horace Coker was there. He was alone in the study. Potter and Greene were at footer practice.

Coker was standing by the study table, with his rugged face twisted into an extraordinary expression.

His mouth was open, and as the juniors entered he was emitting a repetition of the weird sounds that had startled them.

"Gurrrgh! Yooooorgh!"

"Coker!" exclaimed Wharton.

Coker did not speak. He waved his hand impatiently at the juniors as a sign to be gone.

"Yurrrrgh!" came from his open mouth.

"Mad as a hatter!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, in utter astonishment. "He's not ill, he's potty!"

"The pottiffulness is terrific!" murmured Hurree Singh.

"Grooooooch!"

"It must be apoplexy!" said Harry Wharton. "Are you ill, Coker?"

"You silly fags!" exclaimed Coker suddenly, finding his speaking voice.

"What are you bothering here for? Get out of my study! You're interrupting me."

"What's the matter with you?" roared Bob.

"Eh? Nothing! Get out! Hold on, though!" exclaimed Coker. "Just listen to this!"

"Listen to what?"

"Gurrrrrrrgh!"

The Famous Five simply blinked at him. Coker was not supposed to be very bright in the intellectual line, and it really looked as if he had slipped at last over the border between fat-headedness and sheer idiocy—a border he often approached, in the opinion of most Greyfriars fellows.

"You heard that?" asked Coker.

"Eh? Yes. What—"

"Where did it seem to you to come from?" asked Coker.

"Eh? From your grub-trap!" said Bob Cherry.

Coker frowned.

"You don't think it seemed to come from under the table?" he asked.

"Under the—the table?" stuttered Bob.

"Yes. Listen again. Gurrrrrgh!"

Coker squeezed out that weird sound with an expression of intense agony upon his face, and then looked inquiringly at the juniors.

They blinked at him.

"What about that?" he inquired.

"Wha-a-at about it?" said Wharton dazedly. "It sounds as if you're trying to burst your crop. What are you doing it for? Got something in your neck?"

"You don't think it sounded as if it came from under the table?" asked Coker anxiously.

"No. Why should it?"

"Well, my impression is that it did," said Coker. "After all, you're only a stupid fag, Wharton! I say, Potter!"

The Removites backed away from Coker. He spoke to Potter just as if Potter was in the study, and Potter certainly wasn't in the study. Harry Wharton & Co. had ascertained that Potter and Greene were both on the footer-ground before coming to the Fifth Form quarters. It was quite clear to their minds that it had come at last, and that the next step was to take Coker quietly away from Greyfriars and put him in a padded cell.

"Potter!" repeated Coker, just as if Potter was there.

Then, to the further amazement of the juniors, he squeezed up his throat and replied to himself in an expiring voice:

"Ere I am!"

"Good heavens!" murmured Wharton. "I—I say, you chaps, something ought to be done about this. We'd better tell Potter and Greene!"

"You heard that?" exclaimed Coker triumphantly.

"Yes, old chap," said Harry soothingly; "we heard it."

"Potter's voice, wasn't it?" asked Coker.

"Eh? What?"

"Humour him," whispered Bob Cherry. "Yes, Coker, that was Potter's voice. Certainly. No doubt about that, old scout!"

"It came from behind that armchair—what?" asked Coker.

"The—the armchair? Certainly! Oh, yes!"

"Listen again!" said Coker.

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Greene!" rapped out Coker.

The juniors looked at him in silence. After his previous performance they were not surprised to hear him reply to himself:

"Yes, old man?"

"You'd think Greene was standing by the fireplace there, now, wouldn't you?" said Coker affably.

"Greene—standing by the fireplace?" said Wharton faintly. "No—I—I mean yes! Oh, yes! Certainly!"

"You're not such a young idiot as I thought, Wharton! Now, listen to this. Yurrrrggh! Where did you think that came from?"

"Oh, crikey!" said Bob Cherry, aghast. "We—we'd better fetch somebody. Mind he doesn't get near that poker!"

"What's that?" shouted Coker.

"N-no-nothing, old chap!" stammered Bob. "I—I—"

"If you're being cheeky, Cherry—"

"N-n-not at all—oh, no! I—I—I know you can't help being potty, poor old chap! I—"

"You cheeky young sweep!" roared Coker, making a stride round the table towards the juniors.

"Hook it!" yelled Bob, in alarm.

With one accord the Famous Five rushed out of the study. Coker followed them as far as the door in surprise. It was not usual for the Famous Five of the Remove to take to their heels in that way. He was in time to see them vanish down the passage.

"Cheeky monkeys!" growled Coker.

He slammed the study door. And a minute later the weird sounds from that study were resumed.

"Gurrrgh! Yoooooch! Grooooooch! Gug-gug-gug!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Coker's Latest!

"HES at it!"

"Listen!"

"Poor old Coker!"

"Fetch Prout, somebody!"

Outside Coker's study, in the Fifth Form passage, a crowd was gathering. Harry Wharton & Co., much alarmed for the unfortunate Coker, had told the startling news to Potter and Greene, and they had come in. Potter and Greene were listening outside the door now, with scared faces. Potter had gently tried the handle, but the door was locked inside.

Fitzgerald and Blundell and Bland, Hilton and Tomlinson, and several other Fifth-Formers, were with Coker's chums,

and all looked alarmed. Harry Wharton & Co. were there, ready to lend aid if it was required, with some more of the Remove. The startling news had spread, bringing fellows from all sides. Temple and Dabney and Fry of the Fourth had arrived, with Hobson and Hoskins of the Shell. Nugent minor of the Second came, with half a dozen more fags, fully forgiving Horace Coker for that "whopping," now that he heard the unhappy Fifth-Former was bereft of his senses. Billy Bunter, of the Remove, was hovering on the edge of the crowd, keenly interested, but ready to flee if Coker's door showed a sign of opening.

The crowd thickened every minute, till the Fifth Form passage was almost swarming. There was a subdued buzz of alarmed voice; but through the buzz there came clearly the sounds from the locked study.

"Gurrrrg!"

"Groooch!"

"Gug-gug-gug!"

"Where are you?"

"'Ere I am!"

"Yurrrgh!"

To hear Coker uttering those horrible sounds, and asking himself questions and answering them, was not merely startling—it was unnerving. Potter and Greene looked at one another with pale faces.

"I've seen this coming on, I think, for some time!" whispered Potter. "He was always a little—a little—"

"Loose in the tiles," said Greene—just a little—from the time we first knew him! I never liked to say so; but there it was!"

"The way he plays footer, f'rinstance!" said Hilton. "We ought to have foreseen this, really, from the way he plays footer!"

"The Head ought to be told!"

"Poor old Coker!"

"Listen!" breathed Bob Cherry. "There he goes again!"

Coker's voice came clearly through the locked door, alternately in loud tones and in expiring squeaks:

"Where are you?" "On the roof!"

"Is that you behind the chair, Potter?"

"Yes, 'ere I am!"

"Somebody fetch Prout!" exclaimed Blundell. "He's got to be seen to!"

"Hold on!" said Potter resolutely. "After all, he's our chum. We may be able to calm him!" He tapped softly at the study door. "Coker!"

"Hullo?"

"Let us in, Coker, old chap!"

"Keep back if he opens the door, bedad!" exclaimed Fitzgerald. "He may have the poker in his hand!"

There was a quick crowding back as Coker's key was heard to turn in the lock. The door opened.

Horace Coker looked out, evidently astonished to see so large a crowd in the passage.

"Hullo! What's up?" he asked, staring.

"Up?" repeated Potter feebly. He tried to speak calmly, but he was watching Coker like a cat, ready to dodge if Coker sprang at him.

"Yes! Anything on?" asked Coker.

"On?" faltered Greene.

"Blessed if you don't look as if you were all potty!" said the amazed Coker.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I—I—"

"We—we—"

"Poor old chap!" said Fitzgerald feelingly. "Try to be calm, Coker! Sure, we know it's not your fault!"

"Eh? What's not my fault?"

"Ahem!"

"Are you all mad?" shouted Coker.

The crowd in the passage looked at one another eloquently. This put the lid on, so to speak. It is well known that



For Coker's sake! (See Chapter 2.)

an insane person is very apt to think everyone else insane.

"Poor old chap!" said Potter almost with tears in his eyes. "Be calm, Coker!"

"Calm?"

"Yes! As—as quiet as you can, you know!"

"Ain't I calm?" howled Coker. "What do you mean? What are you all blinking at me for, like a set of moulting owls? Do you want me to come out to you?"

There was a hurried surge back. Undoubtedly the fellows in the passage did not want Coker to come out to them. The boldest there would have taken to his heels if Coker had come out to him.

"You two can come in," went on Coker. "It's time for tea! What are you hanging back for? Why don't you come in?"

Potter and Greene hesitated.

"You chaps come in with us!" whispered Greene.

"Bedad, I'm staying here!"

"So am I!"

"Same here!"

"Are you coming in or not?" roared Coker.

"We—we—we—"

"We'll come in with you, Potter!" said Harry Wharton. "We'll handle him all right if he gets violent!"

"Yes, rather!" said Bob Cherry. "We'll back you up!"

"Better collar him at once and hold him down!" said Johnny Bull.

"There's no telling what he may do. He may get hold of a knife!"

Coker, with a furious face, strode out into the passage. To his amazement, the whole crowd rushed away towards the staircase. Coker was looking so excited by this time that the suspicion in regard to his sanity really seemed to be borne out by appearances.

"You silly idiots!" roared Coker. "Are you all mad? Potter! Greene!"

But they did not stop.

Coker, with an angry exclamation, went back into the study and slammed the door. In a few minutes the crowd began to stream back, cautiously, and treading lightly. In awe-struck silence

they listened to the renewed sounds of insanity within the study.

"Groooch! Yurrrgh! Are you there? Yes, 'ere I am! Yurrrgh!"

"Better fetch Mr. Prout," said Potter at last. "He's got to be put under restraint. He may do himself some mischief! I'll fetch Prouty!"

Potter hurried downstairs, and the crowd waited with bated breath for him to return, listening meanwhile to the extraordinary sounds from Coker's study. In a few minutes Potter came back, accompanied by the master of the Fifth Form. Mr. Prout whisked along the passage with rustling gown, an impatient and annoyed expression on his face.

The Greyfriars fellows made way for the Form-master, and he whisked up to Coker's door.

"Yurrrgh! Are you up the chimney? Grooh! 'Ere I am!"

Mr. Prout's expression changed as he heard that, and his look was now one of alarm and concern.

"The unfortunate boy!" he exclaimed.

"It's horrid, sir, isn't it?" said Potter.

"He's—he's a bit excited, sir—better take care—"

"Keep near me!" said Mr. Prout. "In—in case he becomes violent, seize him at once—take great care that he does not get hold of any dangerous weapon! Potter, Greene, Fitzgerald, Hilton, enter the study with me!"

"Ye-e-es, sir!"

Mr. Prout cautiously opened the door. Coker was standing by the table, just as Harry Wharton & Co. had first seen him, with his mouth wide open, and his face queerly twisted. From his open mouth proceeded weird and woeful sounds.

"Gurrrg! Yurrrgh! Yooooch!"

He stopped suddenly at the sight of his Form-master. Mr. Prout stepped in very gingerly, making a soothing gesture with his hand.

"My dear, dear boy!" said Mr. Prout.

Coker jumped. His Form-master had never addressed him like that before.

"Mr. Prout!" he ejaculated.

"Calm yourself, Coker!"

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"Wha-a-at?"

"Calm yourself! You are among friends, Coker, who will take the best of care of you!" said Mr. Prout soothingly.

Potter & Co. had followed Mr. Prout in, and they were edging cautiously towards Coker, who stood as if petrified.

Mr. Prout made a sign, and they suddenly seized Coker, pinioning his arms to his sides.

Coker struggled.

"Let me go!" he roared.

"It's all right, Coker—"

"Leggo!" roared Coker, struggling furiously. "Wharrer at? Leggo at once!"

"Calm yourself, Coker!" stuttered Mr. Prout. "My poor boy, no harm will be done you. You are simply being restrained for your own good. Secure him, please—mind that he does not get loose! He may seize some dangerous weapon. Calm yourself, my unfortunate boy!"

The Fifth-Formers saw that Coker did not get loose. They pinioned him on all sides, and even the burly Horace was powerless in the grasp of many hands.

"Perhaps his hands should be tied!" said Mr. Prout thoughtfully.

"Tut-tut-tied!" stutted Coker.

"My poor boy, do not be frightened—it is for your own good! A doctor shall be sent for at once!" said Mr. Prout soothingly.

"A dud dud-doctor!"

"Yes, yes! Calm yourself!"

"Has everybody gone mad?" yelled Coker. "What's the matter? What are you holding me for? Can't a chap practise ventriloquism in his own study without all this fuss? What do you mean? That's what I want to know!"

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Not Insane!

"VENTRILLOQUISM!"

"What!"

"Great pip!"

It was a buzz of amazement—and enlightenment!

Coker was not insane!

Certainly he was somewhere near it, if he imagined that the weird and woeful sounds he had been producing were anything like ventriloquism.

And evidently he did!

"Ventriloquism!" murmured Bob Cherry, fanning himself. "Oh, my only hat! Coker—ventriloquist! Ye gods!"

"He, he, he!" came from Billy Bunter.

Billy Bunter possessed the queer gift of ventriloquism, and doubtless it was that circumstance that had put the idea into Coker's head; but Bunter had not recognised Coker's efforts as ventriloquism—not at all.

Nobody had—excepting Coker!

Mr. Prout's face was a study.

He blinked at Coker over his spectacles as if he would eat him.

"Coker!" he stuttered. "Coker, you—you inexpressibly stupid boy! Do you mean to say that—that—that you have only been pretending to be insane—"

"Insane?" gasped Coker. "I've been practising ventriloquism! I find that I've got the gift."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" exclaimed Mr. Prout wrathfully. "Potter, how dared you call me here for such an absurd reason? Take five hundred lines!"

"Oh!" gasped Potter.

"As for you, Coker, I really do not know how to deal with you!" snapped Mr. Prout. "You have always been the stupidest boy at Greyfriars, and it appears that your stupidity is beyond all

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limits. Boy, is it possible that you suppose that the ridiculous noises you have been producing— Pah!"

Mr. Prout flung out of the study in great wrath.

The Fifth-Formers released Coker.

All alarm was banished now; merriment had taken its place. The Fifth-Formers were grinning, and an army of grinning faces looked in at the door.

"Coker the ventriloquist!" said Harry Wharton. "What next?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The Cokerfulness is terrific!" chortled Hurree Singh.

"Oh, dear!" groaned Bob Cherry. "Coker, old scout, you'll be the death of us; I know you will!"

Horace Coker glared at the merry crowd. He could see nothing comic in the circumstances; he was exasperated.

"Of all the silly idiots!" said Coker in measured tones. "Of all the crass asses—of all the dummies—"

"Are ye sure ye're not mad, Coker darling?" asked Fitzgerald.

"You cheeky ass!" roared Coker.

"Didn't you know I was practising ventriloquism! What did you think it was, then?"

"You chump, we thought you were potty!" growled Blundell. "And we weren't far wrong, either, if you come to that!"

And Blundell snorted and strode away. The crowd broke up, chortling, to carry the news all over Greyfriars. Once more Coker of the Fifth was furnishing relief from war-worry.

Potter and Greene remained in the study with their chum. Coker was so exasperated that they tried to be serious; but they couldn't! It was not always possible to be serious with Coker; and in the present circumstances it was quite impossible.

"You grinning idiots!" said Coker.

"So—so—so you were practising ventriloquism?" said Potter.

"Yes, ass! Yes, chump! Yes, dummy! Not that I need much practice," went on Coker. "Ventriloquism is really a gift! Some fellows have it, and some haven't! I have!"

"Oh! You—you have?" murmured Greene.

"Exactly! I never thought of it before," said Coker, calming a little. "A fellow never knows what he can do till he tries. But I've always maintained that a chap who's really intellectual can turn his hand to anything. For instance, a chap who's a dab at Greek can learn maths on his head—same gift turned in a different direction—see?"

"I see!"

"Chap who's good at cricket can play footer top-notch, if he tries—like me!"

"Like you?" murmured Potter.

"Like me!" roared Coker.

"Yes, yes; quite so! What about tea?" asked Potter hastily.

"Never mind tea! As I was saying, intellect can be turned in any direction, just like an electric current," said Coker.

"Man who can do one thing can do another! Take soldiering, for instance! Why are British soldiers the best in the world? Simply because the British are a people who can do things—and if they can do one thing well they can do another well. Now, that young ass Bunter of the Remove can ventriloquise, after a fashion."

"Oh!"

"I heard him the other day," continued Coker. "It struck me then that if that young ass could do it a fellow of my mental powers could do it with one hand."

"You ventriloquise with your hands?" asked Potter.

"No!" roared Coker. "Of course not!"

"But you said—"

"I was speaking figuratively, of course. I mean, I could do it easily. A fellow who can play cricket and footer as I do, a fellow whose intellectual powers rise up equal to any emergency, can turn his mental powers on anything—and succeed in it! That's what I said to myself. That's why I've taken up ventriloquism—with the result you see."

"The result that you've been supposed to be potty—"

"If you persist in making silly jokes, George Potter, there will be trouble in this study!" said Coker darkly. "Mind, I don't say that mere tricks like ventriloquism are worthy of my powers. I just take it up in passing, as it were—just as I might take up mathematics, and make old Prout open his eyes, if I had the time."

"Nothing but time lacking?" asked Potter blandly.

"Nothing! Mathematics are hardly worthy of my powers, though—lot of rot, I call it! Now, ventriloquism can be made useful. Suppose, for instance, we want an extra half-holiday. Well, I make the Head's voice—"

"The—the Head's voice—"

"I make the Head's voice proceed from the passage, say, ordering Prout to let me off for the afternoon. Prout doesn't suspect that it's me ventriloquising, and he does it. See?"

"He—he—he does it!" said Greene faintly. "Does he, though?"

"Naturally! Another instance. When I'm in form I mean to trot down to the hospital in Courtfield and give the wounded soldiers a ventriloquial entertainment—free of charge, of course. It would cheer them up."

"No doubt about that!" said Potter with conviction. "If they had any sense of humour at all it would cheer them up no end!"

"I'm glad you agree with me, Potter," said Coker, who never could see when his egregious leg was being pulled. "There are lots of things, in fact, that a ventriloquist can do. I can help the school win footer matches—"

"C-c-can you?"

"Yes. Suppose I speak in the Head's voice, ordering Wingate to put me into the First Eleven. See?"

"And—and that would win matches? For which side?"

"You silly ass!" roared Coker. "Your great fault, Potter, is that you think you're funny. You're not!"

"Well, you're funny enough for one study!" said Potter. "What about tea?"

"Blow tea! Now, I don't say I'm perfect yet," said Coker. "Even I need a little practice in taking up an entirely new thing. But I'm getting on fairly well—in fact, quite well! Now, listen to me while I make your voice come from behind the armchair, Potter."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Are you there?" called out Coker, staring at the armchair, while Potter and Greene stared at Coker.

Then Coker screwed up his face into an extraordinary expression, and squeaked:

"Ere I am!"

Evidently that reply was supposed to proceed from behind the armchair, and Coker was satisfied that it did. Potter and Greene stared at him open-mouthed. His delusion was really marvellous to them. For if there was one thing that was quite obvious it was that that agonised squeak proceeded from the extensive mouth of Horace Coker.

Coker turned triumphantly to his study-mates.

"There!" he said.

"Well," said Potter, "go it! You were going to make my voice come from behind the armchair."

"Haven't I done it?"

"Eh? Have you?"

"Didn't you hear me?" roared Coker. "Meantersay that that didn't sound like your voice coming from behind the armchair, Potter?"

"Not a bit, old chap! Not in the least! If that was anything like my voice I'd go and get my voice amputated!"

"To my mind, it was exact."

"What a mind! Besides, you said it was going to sound as if it came from behind that chair."

"Well, it did, didn't it?"

"Of course it didn't! Did you think it did?"

"I don't think it did—I know it did!" answered Coker. "I'm surprised at you, George Potter! I can understand your making rotten jokes, because you think you're funny, but to descend to deliberate untruths—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Deliberate untruths," said Coker, more in sorrow than in anger. "I'm surprised at you, Potter—surprised and shocked!"

Potter looked dazed.

"What do you think about it, Greene?" asked Coker.

"My dear man, it came from behind the armchair, or behind the chimney, or behind the Hindenburg Line, or anywhere you like," answered Greene. "I can't say fairer than that."

"You silly chump—"

"What about tea?"

"Bother tea! You can gorge, if you like, while I'm getting on with my ventriloquial practice. Don't talk to me! I can't stand your utterly asinine talk! There's a limit to what a brainy chap can stand in the way of silly chatter."

Coker turned to the glass, and began.

"Groogh! Ooooooh! Are you there? Yurragh! 'Ere I am! On the roof! Grooooooh!"

"You have to study to keep your face in a natural expression, you see," said Coker, looking round. "That's what I'm doing."

"Oh! You're not practising to look like a gargoyle?" gasped Potter.

Potter left the study hurriedly after asking that question. Coker was looking dangerous. Greene followed him out, and the two Fifth-Formers went to tea with Fitzgerald, leaving Horace Coker to practise ventriloquism at his own sweet will. And for quite a long time fellows chuckled when they passed Coker's door, and heard proceeding from within, in every variety of anguished squeak:

"Groogh! Are you there? Yoooooh! On the roof! Yurrrgh!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Trying It On!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. smiled when they came across Coker of the Fifth the next day. Coker's latest stunt had a cheering effect upon them. The things Coker couldn't do, and the things he imagined he could do, were innumerable; but that he should imagine he could ventriloquise, they agreed, took the cake.

All the juniors were eager to see Coker "at it." When they came on him that morning the great Horace was at it; he was ventriloquising under the elms. He had told Potter and Greene that he found he could throw his voice better in the open air, and they had heartily concurred that it was very likely, being quite fed up with Coker's extraordinary attempt to throw it in the study. Indeed, Potter had suggested that while he was throwing his voice he had better

throw it away, for it really wasn't worth keeping—a suggestion that very nearly caused assault and battery in the Fifth Form passage.

The Famous Five stopped to look on when they found Coker throwing his voice under the elms. The throwing certainly existed only in Coker's own fervid imagination, but it was very entertaining to watch.

Coker paused to glare at the juniors, but before he could address them Bob Cherry exclaimed:

"Fine!"

"Splendid!" said Frank Nugent heartily.

"Splendiferous, my esteemed Coker!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Horace Coker condescended to be mollified.

"Oh, you can see that?" he said. "That silly fool Potter thinks I can't throw my voice at all. I mean, he pretends to."

"Must be spoofing," said Bob solemnly. "If he heard you now he'd sing a different tune. How do you do it, Coker?"

"You see, it's partly a gift," said Coker, quite good-humoured now. "Partly that, and partly brains—sheer brains, you know! Anybody with sufficient brains could become a ventriloquist."

DOES YOUR SOLDIER PAL WRITE TO YOU?

Notepaper is "some" price these days, but none of us would grudge Tommy all the paper he needs on which to write those cheery letters of his if paper were treble the price it is to-day. Still, it's no use simply "gassing" about it; it's up to each one to do his bit to pay the piper.

It costs the Y.M.C.A., who supply Tommy with free stationery, no less than £80,000 a year. Sixpence will supply your own or somebody else's pal with enough notepaper to write one letter each week for a year. Going to let him have it? Of course you are!

So send sixpence along to-day to Y.M.C.A. (Stationery Fund), Tottenham Court Road, London, W.C., mentioning that it comes from a reader of this paper.

"Then perhaps we could try?" murmured Bob.

"I said anybody with brains!"

"Oh!"

"It's simply a question of concentrating the mental powers on the problem," said Coker. "That's how I've managed it. Very few fellows could pick it up as quickly as I've done. Now, just listen to me making old Prout's voice come from behind that tree."

Coker cleared his throat.

"Are you there, Mr. Prout?"

"'Ere I am!"

"You heard that?" said Coker. "Of course, with the ventriloquial voice you have to drop the 'h.' That can't be helped. But you heard how exactly like that was to old Prout's voice, didn't you, and you noticed that it seemed to come from behind that tree?"

"Oh, my hat! I—I mean, it's—it's wonderful!"

"Well, I dare say it would seem wonderful to you kids, but it's nothing to me. That's nothing to what I can do already," said Coker.

With manful efforts the chums of the Remove kept their faces serious.

"I—I suppose you could imitate Mr. Quelch's voice quite as well as Mr. Prout's?" asked Bob.

"Quite as easily. Listen to this. Hem, hem! Boys, kindly be quiet!" rapped out Coker, in what he fondly

imagined was an exact imitation of the sharp voice of the Remove-master.

"Wonderful!"

"The wonderfulness is terrific!"

"It comes with practice," explained Coker. "Brains, too, of course. No good you kids trying it."

"Ahem! I say, Coker, now you're such a splendid ventriloquist, you ought to use that gift," urged Bob Cherry. "Suppose you talked to Loder of the Sixth, for instance, in Mr. Quelch's voice. Could you?"

"Of course!"

"Loder's given me lines," said Bob. "Suppose you order him to let me off as—"

Coker shook his head.

"Can't back up fags in slacking," he said decidedly. "I dare say you deserved it."

"I—I was thinking of the paper shortage, you know," said Bob.

"Oh, that alters the case!" said Coker.

"Well, I don't mind. Of course, it would have to be arranged for Loder not to see me speaking. That would spoil the deception. I could call to him in his study from the passage."

"In Mr. Quelch's voice?"

"Exactly!"

"Loder's in his study now," said Bob eagerly. "Come on, Coker!"

"I don't mind," said Coker graciously.

He started for the School House with the juniors. It was as much as Harry Wharton & Co. could do to keep their faces serious. How Coker could imagine that his imitation of Mr. Quelch's voice was anything like the original was a mystery that passed their comprehension. But he did. And Coker, elated with his new powers, was not at all averse from showing them off before the heroes of the Remove. The unaccustomed respect he was receiving from those young rascals had a gratifying effect upon him, too.

"You kids keep your distance," said Coker, as they came into the Sixth Form passage. "I'll just stroll into Loder's study to speak to him. While I'm there I'll throw my voice into the passage, and speak as Mr. Quelch."

Coker walked on, and, fortunately, his back was to the juniors, for his last remark had been too much for their gravity.

"He—he—he's going to throw his voice into the passage!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Well, let's get along to pick it up when it drops. I shouldn't be surprised if Loder throws Coker into the passage after it."

There was a chuckle, and Coker glanced round. But he found five faces of owl-like seriousness looking at him.

The Fifth-Former tapped at Gerald Loder's door, and entered. Harry Wharton & Co. trod lightly down the passage after him. It was amazing that even Horace Coker's leg could be pulled to this extent, and they did not mean to miss the entertainment.

Loder of the Sixth was studying a pink paper by the window when Coker came in, and he hurriedly shoved the paper into his pocket as the door opened, and gave the Fifth-Former an irritated look.

"What do you want?" he demanded.

"Just looked in to pass the time of day, old scout," answered Coker cheerily.

"Nice morning—eh?"

Loder stared at him.

"You looked in to say it's a nice morning?" he repeated. "Well, you silly chump, go and talk rot to somebody else! I'm busy!"

"Loder!"

Coker rapped out the name sharply, under the extraordinary belief that it sounded like Mr. Quelch's voice coming from the passage outside. He was

throwing his voice. Unfortunately, Loder remained blissfully ignorant of the fact that Coker was throwing his voice; to Loder it seemed that the word came in Coker's voice from Coker's own lips.

"Well?" snapped Loder.

"I understand that you have given lines to Cherry of the Remove!" pursued Coker, still under the impression that he was throwing his remarkable voice.

"What's that got to do with you, you idiot?" snapped Loder.

"Loder! How dare you address a Form-master in such a manner!"

Loder jumped.

If that voice had been Mr. Quelch's, from the passage, the remark would have seemed natural enough. But from Coker it was startling.

"Wha-a-t?" ejaculated Loder.

"You are to inform Cherry that he need not do the lines, Loder!"

"Wha-a-at?"

Coker smiled.

"Hallo! Mr. Quelch seems to be rather ratty with you, Loder!" he remarked.

"Mr. Quelch?" repeated Loder.

"Yes. You heard him calling in from the passage, didn't you?"

"What?"

"He sounded rather ratty—didn't you think so?"

Loder stared at Coker, and backed away a pace or two. He was so astounded that he could not find his voice at once.

"What do you mean?" he stuttered, at last. "Are you off your rocker, Coker? What do you mean by telling me to let Cherry off his lines?"

It was Coker's turn to jump.

"I?" he ejaculated.

"Yes, you, you cheeky idiot!" shouted Loder. "How dare you come into a prefect's study and play this fool game! What do you mean by calling yourself a Form-master? Are you mad?"

Coker blinked at him. Apparently there was something wrong with the throwing of his voice, after all.

"Are you potty?" repeated Loder angrily. "What are you up to, you lunatic?"

"Look here, Loder!" gasped Coker. "Meantersay that you didn't hear Mr. Quelch's voice from the passage just now?"

"If this is a joke," said Loder, "I don't see the point! I don't take cheek from the Fifth! Get out!"

"Look here—"

"Outside!"

The prefect took Coker by the shoulders and hustled him to the door.

"Hands off!" roared Coker. "I—"

"Outside!"

Coker was not a fellow to be pushed out of a study even by a prefect. He rallied in the doorway, and charged, and Loder of the Sixth found himself sitting on his carpet with a nasty jar. There was a howl of laughter in the passage.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Coker!"

"What's this thumping row about?" exclaimed Wingate, coming up the passage. "You young rascals—Hallo!"

The Famous Five vanished along the passage. Wingate looked into Loder's study in surprise. Horace Coker was displaying a formidable set of knuckles to Loder, who was sitting on the floor and gasping.

"What the dickens—" exclaimed the captain of Greyfriars.

"Wingate!" gasped Loder, scrambling up. Lend me a hand—"

"What's the row?"

"That—that—that," Loder gasped—

"that howling idiot came into my study and ordered me—ordered me, you know, a prefect—to let Cherry off the lines I've given him! He's mad, I suppose!"

"Coker, you ass—"

"None of your cheek, Wingate," said Coker truculently. "Loder knows exactly what happened. 'I don't take any cheek from the Sixth, I can tell you; and if Loder thinks he can push me out of a study—Yaroooooh!'"

The two Sixth-Formers grasped Coker before he could get any further, and the great Horace went through the doorway as if propelled from a cannon. He landed in the passage with a bump.

"Now clear off," said Wingate sternly, "or you'll be kicked along the passage!"

"Yaroooooh!"

"I'll get my ashplant!" gasped Loder. "I'll lay into him! I'll larrup him like a fag! I'll—I'll—Keep him there till I get my ashplant!"

Coker did not wait for the ashplant.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Serious State of Affairs.

"I SAY, you fellows—"

It was tea-time, and the Famous Five were gathered in Study No. 1 when Billy Bunter rolled in.

The Co. were looking a little damaged. After due reflection, it had dawned upon Horace Coker that his ventriloquism could not be up to the mark of perfection he had supposed; and it had further dawned upon him that the Famous Five had been pulling his leg in taking him to Loder's study to ventriloquise. When his powerful brain had assimilated that knowledge, Coker looked for the Co., to give them a tremendous whopping. He had found them after lessons, and the whopping had duly taken place—with the trifling difference that it was Coker who got it.

But the Co. had received some damages, and Bob Cherry was dabbing his nose, while Nugent was rather concerned for his ear. However, they were in a satisfied mood; Coker was, as Johnny Bull expressed it, laid up for repairs.

"You fellows having tea?" said Bunter. "I don't mind if I join you—"

"But we do!" said Bob. "Buzz! Go and eat coke!"

"If you think I want any of your measly sardines, Bob Cherry, you're mistaken! I say, you fellows, I'm in rather a fix."

"Hasn't your postal-order come?" asked Johnny Bull, with withering sarcasm.

"Exactly! I've been disappointed about a postal-order," said Bunter. "But that isn't all. My cousin Wally—you know my cousin Wally—"

"I remember him," said Wharton.

"What about him?"

"Not a bad chap," remarked Bob. "Blessed if I know how he came to have a cousin like you, Bunter!"

"Oh, really, Cherry! Well, you remember Wally—a chap a good deal like me to look at, only not so distinguished looking—"

"Exactly like you to look at, only he looked as if he washed himself," said Johnny Bull.

"Look here, you ass—" Bunter checked himself. "He, he, he! I know you'll have your little joke! He, he, he!"

"Have you got an alarm-clock in your pocket, Bunter?" asked Bob Cherry, in surprise.

"Eh? No."

"Then where is that weird row coming from?"

"Oh, really, Cherry! Now, I say, you

fellows, I've had a letter from my cousin Wally," said Bunter.

"Any news of him?" asked Wharton, with some interest.

The Co. all looked interested, and Bunter snorted. William George Bunter never could understand how it was that his poor relation, Walter Bunter, had won regard and respect from the Greyfriars fellows, who never had any regard or respect for William George himself.

"Is he still at the office in Canterbury?" asked Bob.

"Well, no. From what he says, there's been a bit of a change in his prospects," said Bunter. "He says he's coming to see me next week, to tell me all about it. He thinks I'm interested, for some reason."

"Well, so you ought to be, you fat boulder!" snapped Johnny Bull.

"Of course, I take notice of Wally," said Bunter condescendingly. "I'm not the chap to cut a poor relation, so long as he's civil and keeps his place, and all that, and doesn't put on airs of equality. But as you fellows seemed rather to like Wally, I thought you'd rally round, under the—the cires. I've been disappointed about a postal-order I was expecting. One of my titled relations—"

"Chuck it!"

"That's just like you, Bull; you think a chap hasn't any titled relations, because all your own people are commonplace! You're a very commonplace fellow, Bull, if you don't mind my mentioning it. I'm not like that. The Bunters have never done any work."

"Well, a man who doesn't live by working must live by stealing, or else on charity," said Bull. "I don't envy the Bunters, in that case."

"That's how a commonplace fellow like you would look at it, Bull. But, as I was saying, one of my titled relations is—"

"Bow-wow!"

"One of my titled relations is sending me a handsome remittance, but it has been delayed in the post, or something, and—"

"Or something!" grinned Bob Cherry. "Most likely something!"

"And as the matter stands, I'm stony!" said Bunter, blinking at the Famous Five through his big spectacles. "With a handsome remittance on the way, I'm stumped for cash. That's how the matter stands. Considering that my cousin Wally is coming, I think you fellows might lend me a quid or two. I want to do him decently while he's here."

"You can bring him to tea in this study if you like," said Wharton.

"When is he coming?"

"Next Wednesday."

"That's the day of the St. Jim's match," said Bob Cherry. "Leave him to us, Bunter; we'll look after him."

Billy Bunter snorted. That was not what he wanted at all.

"I say, you fellows, if you could make it a quid I'd—"

"You'd go round on a grub crawl, trying to get shopkeepers to sell you things over the rations!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Don't tell us you'd spend it on entertaining your cousin! You see, we know you!"

"Oh, really, Bull! The fact is, Uncle Clegg at Friardale has got some new tarts in—"

"And you're going to lay 'em in for Wally, and keep them for a week till he comes?" grinned Nugent. "They won't be new tarts by then."

"Ahem! The—the fact is, I—I mean to say—Look here, considering that you were so friendly with Wally, you might lend a chap a quid."

"My dear porpoise, we'll take Wally

right off your hands if you like!" said Harry Wharton. "There'll be a tea of sorts for the St. Jim's crowd, and Wally's welcome to his whack. But you can't stick this study for cash to blow on Uncle Clegg's jam-tarts for your unearthly inside. Buzz off!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Watch me, you chaps!" said Bob Cherry. "I'll lay you two to one that I catch Bunter fairly on the nose with this war-loaf. If it hits him anywhere else it doesn't count. Now—Hollo, hallo, hallo! He's gone!"

"Beasts!"

That was Bunter's parting remark as he vanished. The chums of the Remove chuckled, and went to their tea, quite unmoved by Bunter's opinion.

The Owl of the Remove drifted discontentedly down the passage.

Uncle Clegg's new supply of tarts haunted his imagination, and he had a dreadful fear that those tarts might be sold out if they were not bagged at once. And he was in the unpleasant state known as stony, which was not a new state for him, but extremely exasperating under the circumstances.

In Bunter's opinion, the war had lasted too long. When a fellow couldn't get jam-tarts it was time for the Pacifists to be given a chance.

It might be weeks before Uncle Clegg had a new lot of tarts, and here were the present lot, as it were, eating their heads off because Bunter was short of cash. Never had Bunter so fully shared Brutus' contempt for those who "look such rascal counters from their friends."

He had played cousin Wally as a trump card in Study No. 1, but the result was nil, and there was really no prospect of the long-expected postal-order arriving that day. Bunter's titled relations were remarkably remiss in such matters.

"Hollo, Billy!"

Bunter grunted as his minor, who belonged to the Second Form, came up from the stairs.

"Hollo, Sammy! Had anything from home?"

"No. Have you?"

"No."

Grunt from Sammy Bunter.

"I say, the pater's getting jolly close!" he said disconsolately. "Undutiful, I call it! I've tried him for a new Latin grammar, making out I'd lost mine, and he only wrote to ask me whether it was the same Latin grammar I'd lost a fortnight ago. I forgot I'd used the wheeze that time. Look here, Billy, you try it, and make it a dictionary."

"No go!" grunted Billy Bunter. "I've worked it dry. Looks as if I'm going to be stony till Wally comes. I can get five bob from him, I dare say. Look here, don't you get wedging in when Wally comes, Sammy!"

"Not if you go halves!" said Sammy.

"You're a greedy little beast, Sammy, and you're not brotherly! Wally's a rotten poor relation, and both of us can't stick him for a loan. Be decent!"

"You begin!" suggested Sammy.

"If you've come here for a thick car—"

—said William George darkly. "I've come to tell you Coker of the Fifth wants to speak to you," grunted Sammy. "Look here, if he's going to ask you to tea, Billy, you can take me."

Bunter swelled at once.

"I'm afraid I can't take fags with me when I call on my friends in the Upper Forms," he answered loftily. And he rolled away towards the staircase, leaving Sammy quite speechless.

To be asked to tea by a Fifth-former was an honour.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

A Lesson for Coker, and One for Bunter.

"BUNTER? Come in!" said Coker of the Fifth genially.

The Owl of the Remove was blinking rather doubtfully in at the door.

What Coker wanted him for was a mystery to Bunter, and he half suspected that it was a licking. He couldn't imagine any other reason why Horace James Coker should want to see him. But Coker's study was a land flowing with milk and honey, and the impecunious Owl had come in the faint hope of picking up some of the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.

Coker was alone in the study, and his genial manner reassured Bunter. After all, he reflected, Coker was a howling ass, but he had sense enough to see what an engaging fellow Bunter really was—more sense than the Remove fellows, who never could see it.

Why shouldn't the Fifth-Former ask him to tea, if only for the sake of his cheerful, bright, and witty conversation? There was really nothing to be surprised at in it, and Bunter rolled into the study quite briskly.

There was no sign of tea about, however. Bunter stood blinking at Coker, who was reclining more or less gracefully in the armchair.

"Squat down!" said Coker.

The fat junior squatted down.

"Like me to help getting tea?" he asked.

"Eh? We've had tea!"

"Oh!" said Bunter. "I thought—"

"If you thought I'd asked you to tea, Bunter, that only shows that you're a bigger cheeky chump than I thought you! I'm not likely to ask Remove fags to tea in my study!" said Coker, frowning.

"I—I say, Coker—"

"Well?"

"My cousin Wally's coming next Wednesday. Could you lend me—"

"I've got something to say to you," said Coker, apparently deaf. "You go in for some rot that you call ventriloquism, Bunter."

"I'm a jolly good ventriloquist!" said Bunter warmly.

"I believe you can do something in that line, after a fashion," said Coker disparagingly. "Don't brag here, Bunter! Well, I'm rather interested in ventriloquism. Let's see you do it."

"Eh?"

"As a bit of a ventriloquist myself, I'm curious to see the way you produce your rather poor effects," explained Coker.

Bunter blinked at him in great wrath. He understood now.

Coker had tried ventriloquism, and made a hopeless failure of it. Now he was going to watch how Bunter did it, and learn from him; and he was going to do that in a lofty, patronising way, without acknowledging the obligation in the least, or allowing the junior to think there was any obligation at all. That was Horace Coker all over.

"Go ahead!" said Coker, half encouragingly and half scornfully. "Let's see your queer little tricks, kid."

Bunter rose to his feet.

"Sorry I can't stop!" he remarked. "Rather important engagement. So long!"

Coker sat up.

"Hold on, Bunter!"

"Sorry! Rather pressed for time!"

"You cheeky young sweep!" roared Coker. "I'll—I'll—I—I mean, there's a cake in the cupboard, Bunter, if you'd care to sample it."

Billy Bunter winked at the passage wall, and turned back.

"Well, as you're so pressing, Coker, I

don't mind if I stay a few minutes," he said negligently. "Can't spare you much time, I'm afraid, old chap. Fellows expect to take up so much of a chap's time, and I have to ration them, as it were. Can't call on everybody at once."

Coker appeared to be choking for a moment. With feelings that could not really have been expressed in any language but German, Coker took out the cake and set it on the table.

Bunter sat down to it cheerfully.

He was master of the situation, and he knew it. Coker had failed in his new stunt, but he could not admit failure. When Horace Coker admitted failure it was time for the skies to fall.

But the fact of the matter was that Coker wanted instruction from Bunter, though nothing would have induced him to confess it; and Bunter could afford to be independent. He could even venture to call Coker "old chap" without being kicked out of the study.

"Now, let's see what you can do, kid," said Coker, when he had controlled his feelings.

"Certainly," said Bunter. "A cake this size isn't much to me. I can polish off the lot, Coker."

"I don't mean in the eating line, you fat idiot! Let's hear some of your ventriloquism."

"Oh, that wouldn't interest you!" said Bunter, with his mouth full.

It was hard for Coker to admit that he could be interested in anything done by a fag of the Remove; but he made the effort.

"The fact is, it does interest me," he said.

"All right—when I've finished this."

Coker controlled himself again, and watched Billy Bunter travel through the cake, which was a special gift from Aunt Judy. At least a dozen times, whilst Bunter was engaged on the cake, Coker came near jumping up and slinging him out of the study. But he exercised self-restraint, and refrained. The cake was finished at last to the uttermost crumb, and, considering the size of it, Bunter had made quick work. He was an expert in such matters.

"Not bad for a war-time cake, Coker," he remarked.

"Glad you liked it!" gasped Coker.

"Well, it's not like the cakes I get from home," said Bunter calmly. "I dare say your aunt doesn't keep such a good cook, Coker. Really good cooks only go to really good establishments, I believe."

"I—I—I—"

Coker seemed to be seized with a fit of stuttering.

"Still, thanks all the same!" said Bunter generously. "I'll remember you next time I have a cake, old fellow. Ta-ta!"

"Sit down, kid!" gasped Coker. "You—you—you were going to show me some—some of your ventriloquism—"

"Oh, I'll give you a sample with pleasure!" said Bunter. "I'll turn my back to you, and—"

"I'm rather curious to see how you hold your mouth when you do it."

"Oh, that wouldn't interest you at all!"

"The—the fact is, it would. Stand there, and let me watch you," said Coker, coming out into the light at last, as it were.

Billy Bunter grinned. If Coker was going to get anything out of him, Coker was not going to get it in a patronising way for nothing—not if William George Bunter knew it.

"Well, go ahead, you young jackanapes!" snapped Horace.

"It's really too bad," said Bunter meditatively.



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"Eh? What's too bad?"

"I find I'm quite off my form. Couldn't ventriloquise just now to save my life," said Bunter affably.

To judge from Coker's look at that moment Bunter was rather likely to be under the necessity of doing something to save his life. But once more Coker exercised heroic self-restraint.

"Try!" he gasped.

Bunter shook his head.

"Sorry; it can't be done! I find I ventriloquise better after eating tarts," he remarked. "If you've got any tarts about—"

"I haven't!" growled Coker.

"Well, ta-ta, old sport!"

"Hold on, Bunter! There's some chocolates in that box.

"Very thoughtful of you, Coker. I'll try the chocolates, if you insist on it, old son, though I couldn't answer for the result."

Bunter tried the chocolates—till the last one had vanished from the box.

"Now, get on!" hissed Coker.

"By the way," remarked Bunter casually, "I was thinking of asking your advice, old fellow. I'm a jolly good ventriloquist, when I'm in the mood. I've been thinking of giving lessons—"

"Lessons!"

"Yes," said Bunter calmly. "Fellows think they'd like to pick up ventriloquism, you know, and I'm a very clever teacher, though I say it myself. I gave some lessons once to a chap named D'Arcy, at St. Jim's. He was highly satisfied. You can ask him about it, if you like, when the St. Jim's chaps come over here on Wednesday. If I took this up, Coker, do you think people would pay me half-a-crown a lesson?"

Coker did not reply for a moment. But he realised that the Owl of the Remove was quite up to his secret intentions in asking him to the study, and that it was not much use to try camouflage with the wary Owl.

To confess that there was anything a fag could teach him was a bitter pill for

the great Horace to swallow. But there seemed no help for it.

"I don't mind standing you half-a-crown, Bunter!" Coker articulated at last.

"Now you're talking!" said Bunter genially. "Quite pleased to give you lessons, old fellow!"

Coker writhed.

The expression on his face made Bunter cast a hasty glance towards the door; but Coker contrived to turn his terrific frown into a ghastly smile.

"All right!" he stuttered. "We—we'll call it a lesson, Bunter, if you like—quite a joke! Ha, ha!"

"I don't see the joke," said Bunter, unmoved. "You said half-a-crown, I think? Now, what's the lesson you want?"

The Owl had not the slightest intention of sparing Coker's lofty dignity. If it was going to be a lesson, it was going to be understood to be a lesson, and no nonsense about it. Bunter was quite as self-important as Coker, in his own way, if it came to that.

"Well, let's see how you do it," said Coker. "Mind, I don't think much of your tricks, and I don't suppose you can do it properly; but I'm just curious."

"If you don't think I can do it properly, Coker, it's not much use my giving you a lesson. You'll be wasting your money and my time!"

"Get on, I tell you!"

"I'm afraid I shouldn't be justified in taking your money, Coker, unless you had confidence in me as a teacher," answered Bunter, with a shake of the head.

Coker choked.

"Well, perhaps you're not so bad, Bunter, come to think of it," he managed to say, at last. "In fact, I've heard fellows say you're clever at it. Look here, here's your money. Now, get on!"

Billy Bunter slipped the half-crown into his pocket. But the payment of the fee did not lessen the swelling importance he had assumed. On the contrary; now the fee was safe in his pocket, it was safe to be as assuming as he chose, only taking care to dodge Coker's boot, if necessary, at the psychological moment.

"I'm afraid you won't make much of a ventriloquist, Coker," he remarked. "It wants a lot of sense. It's really a gift, too, and a fellow with a bull neck like yours isn't likely to make much of it. Still, I'll do the best I can for you. Now, don't talk so much, and listen carefully to what I tell you."

"If anybody had told Coker the previous day that he would allow himself to be talked to like that by a Lower Fourth fag Coker would probably have punched his nose. But he was in for it now. He had started as a ventriloquist, and had over-rated his powers, and to admit failure was impossible. Bunter's cheek had to be swallowed, if Bunter's assistance was to be obtained.

"Go on! I'm listening," said Coker in a suffocated voice.

"Stand up!" rapped out Bunter.

Coker stood up.

"Assume an ordinary expression. Don't look more like an idiot than you can help!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"And don't stutter!" commanded Bunter.

Coker's fingers worked feverishly.

"Now, first of all, you've got to learn to produce the ventriloquial voice," said Bunter. "Open your mouth slightly, and produce the vowel Ah."

"Aa-a-a-ah!" came in a gasp from Coker.

"Don't try to understudy a pair of

worn-out bellows; that's not ventriloquism. Say 'ah,' as I do."

"Ah!" spluttered Coker.

"Rotten!" commented Bunter. "But you'll improve with practice. After about a hundred lessons—"

"What?"

"Say a hundred and fifty, you'll be able to get on further; but till then I shall have to keep you on vowels," said Bunter. "You're not very bright, Coker, but I'll do my best for you. Now say— Yaroooooop!"

Bunter did not really mean that Coker was to utter that remarkable ejaculation. He uttered it on his own as Horace jumped at him. The Owl of the Remove had overdone it, and Coker's long-pent-up wrath overflowed. It came out with the suddenness of a volcanic eruption.

"Yaroo! Help! Leggo! Murder! Yooop!" roared Bunter, as one of Horace's big hands grasped his collar, and the other smote him in a succession of terrific spansks.

Spank, spank, spank!

"Yow-ow-ow-woooooop!"

Coker's hand was aching at last, and he used his boot instead. The Owl of the Remove travelled at express speed into the passage.

He did not linger there.

Before Coker could follow him Bunter rolled out of reach, and fled for his life. He did not stop till he sank down, breathless and almost apoplectic, in the armchair of Study No. 7 in the Remove.

And when, having gained his second wind, and feeling equal to a walk down to Uncle Clegg's, Bunter felt in his pocket for the half-crown, and discovered that it had fallen out of his pocket when he rolled out of Coker's study—then William George Bunter's feelings were too deep for words!

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Success at Last!

HARRY WHARTON & Co. inquired politely next day how Coker was getting on with his ventriloquism. Coker's reply was the reverse of polite; and as he

LOOK!



introduced a cricket-stump into the discussion the Famous Five beat a strategic retreat, according to plan. Coker's temper seemed very short; perhaps because he was getting so many kind inquiries from the juniors and so much chipping from seniors.

Coker's fame had spread. Loder of the Sixth was now aware of the true inwardness of the amazing incident in his study, and Loder told all the Sixth, and all the Sixth roared. The Fifth, Coker's own Form, fairly howled.

The Fifth-Formers got into the habit of looking into Coker's study and asking him where he was throwing his voice, and whether he had thrown it away, and whether he didn't think he had better.

Coker was no hand at throwing his voice, but he was rather a good shot at throwing cushions, war-loaves, and sardine-tins, as the merry visitors found, and some of them looked out of the study more quickly than they looked in.

Potter and Greene were very diplomatic with their study-mate. When Coker's temper was restive he had to be given his head, or there was trouble. So when Coker fixed them with a challenging and menacing eye, and demanded whether his voice didn't seem to come from behind the armchair or up the chimney, Potter and Greene agreed that it did, for the sake of a quiet life.

This pleased Coker for a little while, and made him feel that he was succeeding handsomely. till one afternoon he heard Potter make this remark to Hilton of the Fifth:

"And the silly ass actually thought we really thought that his voice came from up the chimney, you know! Actually!"

That chance remark, which was not intended for Coker's ears, enlightened him as to the real opinion of his study-mates.

Coker made bitter allusions in the study to false friends, hypocrites, and pals that a pal couldn't rely on to tell the truth. He said that he could understand a fellow humbugging an unreasonable or hot-headed chap; but he himself expected to be treated with frankness, being level-headed and reasonable and patient. His patience, he pointed out, was exemplified by the way he stood the twaddle of Potter and Greene. A coolness in the study resulted.

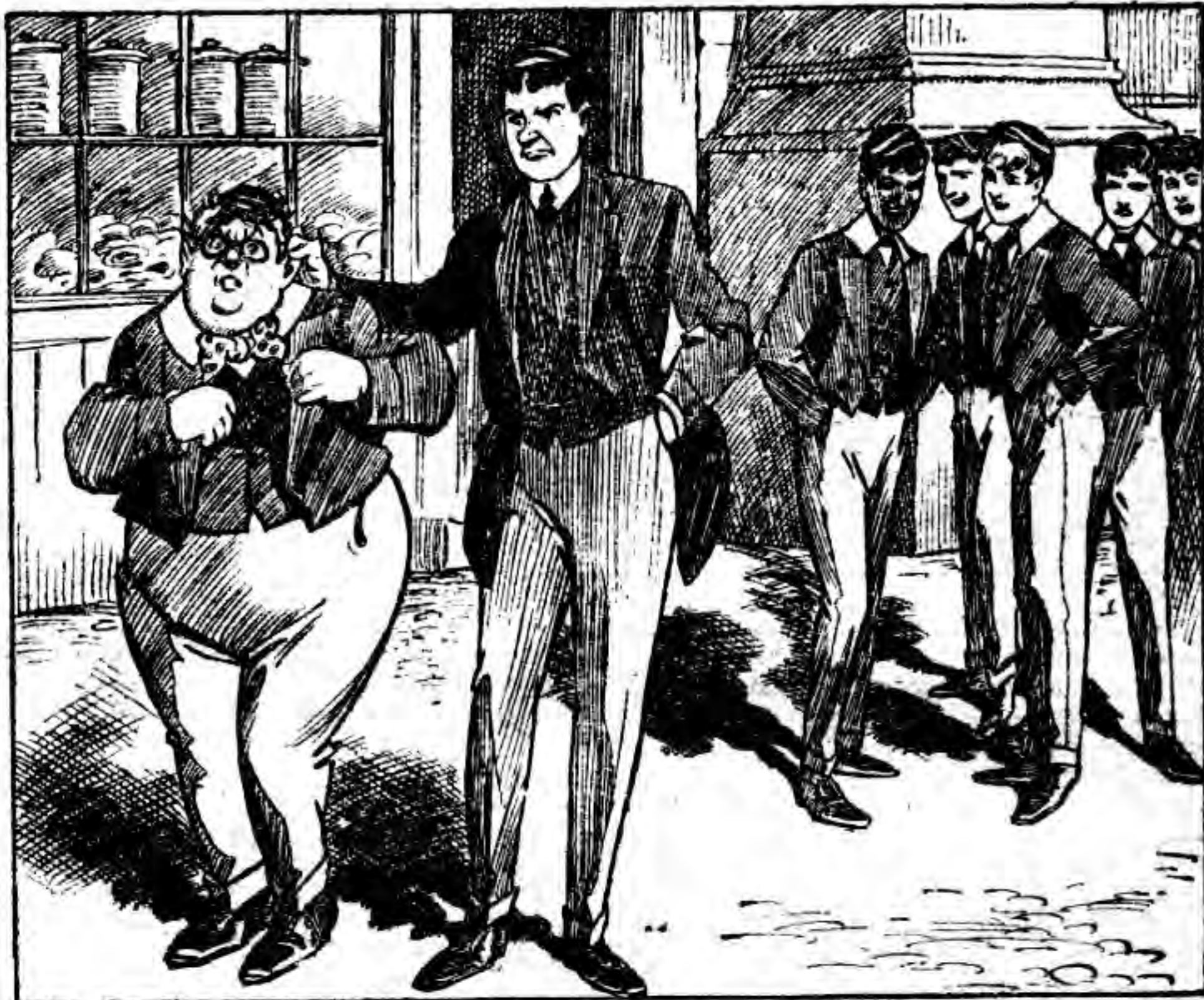
Meanwhile, Coker went on assiduously with his ventriloquial practice, and gugged and yugged at a great rate.

On one occasion Coker fondly imagined that he had succeeded in throwing his voice behind the door, and was very excited when he discovered Bob Cherry was outside, speaking through the keyhole; and there was a hot chase down the Fifth Form passage, which Bob won by a neck.

Coker was growing morose.

Failure with Coker was impossible; or, at the very least, it was impossible to admit it. He had started out to be a ventriloquist, and a ventriloquist he was going to be. He found the job a little harder than he had anticipated, but that only spurred him on. Coker prided himself on being efficient—one of those strong, silent characters who say little and do much. He had not yet learned by wider experience that those characters are extremely liable to do a great deal of talking and little else.

Gugging and yugging in the study did not seem to materialise in throwing the voice, however, and Coker thought of Bunter again. There was no doubt that Billy Bunter could ventriloquise, and still less doubt that it must be a gift, for if it had required brains Bunter would not even have been an also ran. To put up with Bunter's cheek, for the sake of getting instruction from him,



Coker's way of obtaining a candid opinion! (See Chapter 9.)

was a bitter pill, and Coker's patience had failed him once. But after two or three days of yugging and gugging he made up his mind to it.

He went along to the Remove staircase to look in on Bunter. Unfortunately, his intentions were misunderstood; Coker had often come to the Remove quarters with hostile intent. The staircase was crammed with merry Removites as soon as Coker was spotted, and he was greeted with volleys of missiles; and when he charged up in a fury he was collared and rolled down. Even Billy Bunter had a shove at him as he went.

Coker returned to his study in a breathless state; and later he looked round for Bunter in the quadrangle. He found the fat junior there at last, with his fat nose glued to the window of Mrs. Mimble's little shop in the corner of the quad, feasting his eyes upon the good things within, which were now so near and yet so far.

"Oh, I've caught you!" growled Coker, as he dropped a heavy hand on the Owl's shoulder.

Bunter spun round.

"Look here, Bolsover—"

"You blind owl!"

"Oh, it's you, Coker! Leggo! I'll yell!" howled Bunter. "I say, you fellows! Help! Yaroooh! Fire! Help!"

"You fat idiot!" roared Coker. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

"Yow-ow! Woop! Help!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" shouted Bob Cherry. "Coker on the war-path again! Rescue!"

A dozen of the Remove rushed up.

"You cheeky young sweeps!" roared Coker, as he was hustled on all sides.

"Hands off! I'll spifficate you!"

"Bump him!" yelled Bunter. "Collar him! Rag him! Mop him up! Yaroooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha! Roll him over!" yelled Ogilvy.

"Hands off!" raved Coker. "I was only going to ask Bunter to tea—"

"Eh?"

"What?"

Billy Bunter's expression changed. He realised that he had been rather hasty, and jumped to a conclusion too soon.

"Did you say 't-t-tea,' Coker?" he gasped.

"Yes. I've got a new cake—sultana, and—"

"I say, you fellows, I wish you wouldn't crowd round my friend Coker like that and shove him about!" said Bunter reprovingly. "Can't a chap speak to a friend in the Fifth without all you fags rushing up like a gang of hooligans? I'm really surprised at you, Wharton!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"More like a gang of Second Form fags than the Remove!" said Bunter. "I really wish you'd keep your distance when I'm chatting with a friend in an upper Form!"

And Billy Bunter rolled away with Coker, leaving the Removites simply speechless.

The Owl of the Remove trotted after Coker into his study. Potter and Greene were there, ready for tea, and Coker's new cake was on the table. Potter and Greene gave the Owl glances expressive of great disfavour.

"What's that tub rolled in for?" asked Potter pointedly.

"Oh, really, Potter—"

"Bunter's come to tea!" said Coker gruffly.

"I didn't know this study was a home for fags in search of a free meal!" said Greene, with deep sarcasm. "Hadh't we better put a notice over the door: 'Lockhart's—New Branch'?"

"This isn't a communal kitchen," remarked Potter casually.

"Sit down, Bunter," said Coker, unheeding. "If these fellows don't like your company, there's a door to the study, and they know it!"

Potter and Greene looked at Coker. "I don't usually have fags to tea," said Coker. "But fags are better than friends who say one thing to a chap's face and another thing behind his back."

"You silly cuckoo!" spluttered Potter. "What did you do when I told you the truth about your silly rot? Told me it was deliberate untruths! Ass!"

"Didn't you brandish a cricket-stump at me when I said your silly howl didn't come from the roof?" roared

Greene. "If you want to be stuffed up, it's your own look-out! If you want the truth, and here it is: You're a silly, conceited ass, and you can't ventriloquise, or play footer, or do anything else except make a thundering idiot of yourself!"

With that Potter and Greene strode out of the study; and really it was time, for Coker was making a jump for his bat.

Unheeding the trouble in the family circle, Billy Bunter was tucking into the ham and eggs. Coker joined him, but Bunter was an easy first at the finish. Then he commenced a frontal attack on the cake. Coker was wondering so much where Bunter put it that he almost forgot to help himself.

When the table was cleared—and not till then—Billy Bunter gave a fat sigh of contentment, and leaned back in his chair.

"Now, about those lessons," said Coker.

Bunter smiled genially, apparently having forgotten his mode of exit from that study on the occasion of his last visit.

"You want some more lesson, old fellow?" he asked.

The "old fellow" made Horace Coker cast a glance towards his bat.

"I don't mind," continued Bunter. "The fact is, Coker, thinking the matter over, I fancy you're the very fellow to learn ventriloquism!"

Coker's brow cleared.

"You think so?" he asked genially.

"Seems certain to me," said Bunter, with an air of thoughtfulness. "You see, it needs a fellow with brains a bit above the average."

"That's me, all over!" assented Coker, thinking that Bunter's own brains seemed to have improved a little since his last visit.

As a matter of fact, the Owl had been thinking while he was eating, and he was quite assured that he did not want to leave the study as he had left it last time, and he did want to annex as much as possible of Horace Coker's spare cash. And as both ends could be secured by pulling Coker's leg, Bunter had sagely decided to pull it.

"Only, as it happens, I have a lot of calls on my time," said Bunter. "I'd be jolly glad to tell you what I know about it, Coker, but I'm afraid I should have to ask war-time fees. If five bob a time would be agreeable to you, I'm your man!"

Coker began to glare again.

"Not that you'd need many lessons—with your brains and your quickness of perception, and all that!" said Bunter glibly. "Besides, you've made a lot of progress already. I heard you the other day, and I was astonished—simply astonished!"

The glare disappeared.

"You remember—in the Rag yesterday," said Bunter—"you were imitating the—the Head's voice——"

"Mr. Prout's voice, you mean."

"Yes, of—of course! I meant to say Prout's! I wonder what made me say the Head, now! You made it come from out of the window——"

"From up the chimney."

"I meant to say the chimney. And it was amazing! I was quite startled for a moment, really thinking that the Head—I mean, Prout—was up the window—I mean, the chimney. It was—was quite startling!" said Bunter.

"Well, you should be a good judge, as you can ventriloquise yourself, in a way," said Coker, quite graciously.

"Only in a way," said Bunter solemnly. "I don't think I can do it as

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you'll do it after a little practice and a lesson or two, Coker!"

It looked as if Bunter had learned a lesson, whether Coker could or not. He had learned how heavy Coker's boot was, and he was not risking the boot again.

"Just what I think!" agreed Coker. "You're a much more sensible kid than I thought, Bunter! Have some choes?"

"Thanks; I don't care much for sweets; but I'll have some, as you're so pressing, Coker!"

There was a pause while the chocolate-box was emptied.

"Now, about that lesson!" said Bunter. "In fact, it isn't exactly a lesson—you don't need that; say a few hints."

"Well, that's really more like!" assented Coker, his opinion of Bunter rising still higher.

"Five bob being nothing to you——"

"I don't know about that."

"No, don't say ten, Coker! I should refuse it! Fair's fair!" said Bunter calmly. "Make it five bob, and five bob only, and I'll do my best; and I'll tell you what, we'll judge by results. If you don't succeed in throwing your voice while I'm here, you don't pay the five!"

"I'll make it five!"

"That's settled, then," said Bunter. "Now, just you begin, and I'll point out if you do it wrong—not that it's likely!"

Coker began, and gugged and yugged away heartily, Billy Bunter watching him and nodding approval with owl-like gravity.

"I say, Coker, I never really thought you'd get on like this!" said Bunter enthusiastically. "Blessed if I don't begin to believe you've been pulling my leg, and you're a born ventriloquist all the time!"

"No, really?" said Coker, flushed and flattered.

"Well, it's jolly odd, to say the least, a fellow making such progress in such a short time," said Bunter. "Now throw your voice behind the bookcase. Do it just as you were doing it then—you had your mouth exactly right! But I needn't tell you that; you really seem to know it better than I do!"

Coker threw his voice behind the bookcase. At all events, he fancied he did, and he looked at Bunter for confirmation.

"Splendid!"

"All right—what?" asked Coker.

"I say, there isn't anybody hidden behind that bookcase, is there?" asked Bunter with a suspicious air. "You're not taking me in?"

"No, really!" exclaimed the delighted Coker. "Look for yourself, my boy!"

Billy Bunter made it a point to blink behind the bookcase, and was satisfied that there was nobody there.

"Well, my hat!" he said, as if that was all he could say.

"Looks like success—what?" smiled Coker.

"Simply amazing, Coker! It beats me how you do it in such a short time!"

"Brains!" explained Coker.

Bunter nodded.

"I suppose that's it! Well, if you're satisfied, Coker— Thanks! I really feel as if I'm robbing you; you're so jolly clever at it yourself you really didn't need me! Thanks! Ta-ta, old chap!"

Billy Bunter rolled out of the study with five shillings jingling in his pocket, and not assisted by Coker's boot this time. He did not even grin till he had turned the corner. But his fat face was wreathed in grins as he came up to the Remove passage.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Whom have you been diddling?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Coker!" answered Bunter cheerfully.

"The crass idiot kicked me out of his study last time because I told him the facts; now he's patted me on the

shoulder because I haven't! Queer, ain't it? He thinks he can chuck his silly voice behind the bookcase! He, he, he!"

"And can he?" asked Bob.

"Not that I know of. It didn't sound to me like it. I say, Bob, will you sell me your sugar this week? I'll give you fourpence——"

"I won't sell you my sugar for fourpence, but I'll give you a thick ear for nothing——"

Billy Bunter hurried on without waiting for the gift.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Coker is Satisfied!

POTTER and Greene could see that there was something up when they came back to the study for prep.

The calm and superior smile on Horace Coker's face indicated complete success and satisfaction, if anything could.

"Hallo! Come in, you fellows!" said Coker good-humouredly. "You'll be glad to hear that I've been successful at last!"

Grunt from Potter.

"Now, I want you chaps to tell me the truth," said Coker. "The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Don't be afraid; just tell me the facts. Mind, I know I can throw my voice now; I've done it, and received the opinion of a chap who can do it himself!"

"Eh?"

"Young Bunter of the Remove! He's a bit of a ventriloquist, you know—not in my style, of course; but he can do it so-so," said Coker. "Well, he was so astonished when I threw my voice behind the bookcase that he went to see if anybody was hidden there. What do you think of that?"

"Pulling your leg, I should say!" remarked Greene in a thoughtful way.

Coker fixed his eyes upon Greene as the fabled Gorgon might have fixed them on Perseus.

"What did you say, William Greene?" he asked, with almost painful politeness.

"Pulling your leg!"

"You think I am the kind of fellow to have my leg pulled?" asked Coker, with the same deadly calm.

"Born for it!" answered Greene recklessly.

"You think a fat-headed fag of the Lower Fourth could pull my leg?"

"Anybody could, old sport!"

"Look here, Coker——" began Potter.

"Perhaps you agree with Greene?" remarked Coker. "All right; I'll attend to you when I'm finished with Greene! Upon the whole, we needn't bother about gloves! Ready?"

Coker made a step forward, and Greene made a step backward.

Coker's study-mates had come there to do their prep, not for a battle-royal with Horace. Fighting Coker was a tough proposition, and there really wasn't time to fight Coker two or three times a day. It was simpler to give him his head.

"Can't you see that Greene was only joking, old chap?" said Potter, closing one eye at Greene. "For goodness' sake, don't rag now! We've got to do prep!"

"If it was a joke, I don't see the point," said Coker coldly. "I've stated a fact! I've thrown my voice behind the bookcase, and a fellow who knows was surprised at the masterly way I did it! If Greene chooses to throw doubt on my statement——"

"Not for worlds!" said Greene, debating mentally whether he should humour Coker or take the tongs to him, and deciding on the humouring as less strenuous. "What I really meant to say was,

Let's hear you do it, Coker. Having a gift of this kind, it's up to you to show a fellow what you can do—your own pal, too!"

"That's it!" said Potter. "Let's hear you, Coker! You want a free, full, unbiased opinion?"

"Exactly. You hear me do it, and tell me what you think. And for goodness' sake don't pretend that I can't do it, out of jealousy or stupidity!" explained Coker.

"I understand. Go ahead!"

Coker coughed, and went ahead.

"Are you there?" he called out.

"Splendid!" exclaimed Potter and Greene together.

"What?" ejaculated Coker.

"Wonderful! Right from behind the bookcase!" said Greene.

"You silly ass, Greene; use your ears! I was only calling, then, to someone supposed to be behind the bookcase. I wasn't ventriloquising."

"Oh!" gasped Greene.

"Now listen, and don't jaw. Use your ears, and not your chin, for once! You always did talk too much, Greene."

Greene suppressed his feelings, though his thoughts wandered to the tongs again.

"Are you there?" repeated Coker.

This time the chums remained silent and serious. Coker screwed up his neck to produce his ventriloquial voice, and in tones resembling the last notes of an expiring frog, squeaked:

"Ere I am!"

If anything ever was certain and obvious, it was that that expiring squeak came from Coker's own tormented neck. But it was equally certain and equally obvious that if Potter and Green said so there would be a shindy. And they had their prep to do.

"Well, my hat!" said Potter, with an expression of amazement worthy of the highest traditions of the Fifth Form Stage Club. "Was that you—really you, Coker?"

"Not really you, old chap?" echoed Greene.

"I thought I'd surprise you a bit," said the gratified Coker. "Now that you really take the trouble to hear me do it, you see that it comes quite naturally."

"That's all very well; but if you've got Bunter hidden behind the bookcase, answering for you—"

"Look for yourself."

Potter looked.

"Nobody there!" he announced.

"Now, what do you think?" asked Coker triumphantly.

"I think it's extraordinary!" said Potter. He was stating a fact. He did think it was extraordinary that any fellow could be such an ass as Coker was. But the great Horace supposed that he was alluding to the ventriloquism, and he smiled benignantly.

"Extraordinary isn't the word!" said Greene. "Astounding—that's it! Almost unnerving!"

"You fellows will remember that I told you, right at the start, that a fellow with brains could do practically anything he liked," remarked Coker. "It's simply a question of turning your brain-power in a new direction, and concentrating it. That's what I've done. Bunter gave me a few hints, but, as he said himself, I hardly needed them. It was really a question of brains."

"That's where you score, old fellow," said Potter gravely.

"Yes, I flatter myself that it is," agreed Coker. "Some fellows are brainy, and some ain't. Now, you fellows ain't."

"Oh!"

"Don't mind my saying so," said Coker

kindly. "I don't blame you for it; it just happens like that. That's where you fellows will find me rather a valuable pal—I've got brains enough for the whole study. I don't brag of it; it just happens. Now, you listen while I make my voice come down the chimney."

Potter and Greene listened, and Potter said it was wonderful, and Green averred that it was marvellous, if marvellous was a strong enough word. Then they got on with their prep at last.

During prep Coker playfully surprised them by making his voice come from under the table and behind the chairs, as he fondly supposed; but he did not startle them very much. He was in high good-humour that evening, and he told Potter and Green that they were really sensible chaps, now that they had got over a slight tendency to jealousy and disparagement.

"And I'm going to try this game on Prout in the morning!" Coker added.

That startled his study-mates at last.

"On Prout?" repeated Potter.

Coker nodded, with a smile.

"Yes; in class to-morrow morning."

"In—in class to-morrow morning?" said Greene faintly.

"That's the idea! I'm going to make him give us a morning off—the Head's voice from the passage, you know," chuckled Coker. "Rather a neat idea—what? Dr. Locke's voice comes rapping

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in, and Prout thinks he's there, telling him to let us off, and there you are!"

"Oh, crumbs!"

Coker strolled jauntily out of the study in great good-humour. Potter and Greene looked at one another in silence for a moment.

"My hat!" said Potter at last.

"My word!" murmured Greene.

"On Prout—"

"In class—"

"The Head's voice—"

"From the passage—"

"Oh, crikey!"

And Potter and Greene went on with their prep. Horace Coker had to be given his head.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Candid Opinions!

"W HARTON!"

"Hallo?" said the captain of the Remove, glancing round as Coker rapped out his name the following morning in the quad.

"Where's Bunter?"

Wharton grinned.

Coker never could get rid of the delusion that he could treat fags as he liked—in fact, often as it had led to trouble, Coker still prided himself upon having a short way with fags.

"Do you hear me?" demanded Coker,

as Wharton did not answer. "Speak up! Where's Bunter?"

"Is that a conundrum?" asked Harry sweetly.

Horace Coker stared at him.

"Eh? No! Of course not! You seem to be little better than a born idiot, Wharton! I asked you where Bunter was."

"He was in the Form-room yesterday."

"I mean, I want to know where he is, you young imbecile!"

"You're sure you've got the tense right this time?" asked Wharton, with an air of anxiety.

"Will you tell me where Bunter is?" roared Coker.

"Certainly, if you will ask civilly!" answered Wharton cheerfully. "Not otherwise."

"The notfulness is terrific, my esteemed Hunnish Coker!" remarked the Nabob of Bhanipur.

Coker breathed hard. But it was nearly time for morning classes, and he had no time to waste "whopping" the chums of the Remove, which was perhaps fortunate for him.

"I want Bunter," he said. "If you know where he is I'll be obliged if you'll tell me, Wharton."

"That's better!" said Bob Cherry approvingly. "You see, even Coker can be mannerly when he tries. Why don't you try oftener, Coker?"

Coker nearly exploded.

"Where's Bunter?"

Wharton glanced up at the clock-tower.

"It wants ten minutes to classes," he said. "If he's got any money, you'll find him in the tuckshop. If he hasn't, you'll find him outside it."

Coker gave a snort like a war-horse, perhaps by way of thanks for the information, and started for Mrs. Mumble's shop. The Co. grinned at one another.

"He's been having giddy ventriloquial lessons from Bunter," murmured Bob Cherry. "I hear that he's going to spring his new gift on Prouty. Some of the Fifth were chortling over it last evening."

"The potty duffer! Prout will slay him!"

"The slayfulness will be—"

"Terrific!" chuckled Bob. "I'd like to be in the Fifth this morning. But perhaps we shall hear from the Remove-room when Prouty starts in with the pointer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Horace Coker found Bunter outside the tuckshop; apparently the Owl of the Remove had no money. He blinked rather hopefully at Coker. There was still time for a snack before lessons, if the wind could be raised.

"I've been looking for you!" growled Coker, as if it were a grievance that he could not find any fellow he wanted at a moment's notice.

Under other circumstances Bunter would have inquired whether Coker supposed that he—Bunter—was kept hanging on a nail, to be taken down when Coker required him. But at present his fat mind was running on Coker's cash, and he replied in a different strain.

"Sorry, Coker! I'd have come if I'd known you wanted me. It's very kind of you to speak to me, Coker."

"Well, I don't mind being kind to fags when they know their place and keep a civil tongue in their heads," said Coker, more graciously. "Now, I'm going to start my ventriloquism on Prout this morning, Bunter, and get a morning off lessons."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"I'm glad to say I've got on rippingly!"

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with it. Even Potter and Greene are convinced that I can do the trick."

"Are they?" asked Bunter, in astonishment.

"I don't wonder that you're surprised. They're obstinate duffers; but they couldn't hold out against actual evidence, you see."

"I—I see."

"I've tried it on Fitzgerald, too, and it was a great success. I went into his study and did it. I was ready to give him my left if he started any of his rot; but he spotted the voice was coming down the chimney at once."

"D-d-did he?"

"Yes. Still, it's a bit ticklish landing it on a Form-master. Prouty isn't too sweet-tempered in the morning since the rations came in. I want to make assurance doubly sure, as it were," explained Coker. "I never leave anything to chance. I'm efficient, you know. I believe in efficiency; having everything right up to the mark. Now, just hear me throw my voice."

"Another lesson——"

"Lesson!" Coker sniffed. "I'm not likely to be taking lessons from a Remove fag, I hope. Don't call it a lesson! Just a few hints, because you do the thing after a fashion yourself. That's what I mean."

"That's what I mean, Coker, of course," said Billy Bunter blandly. "The fact is, I shall be very pleased. I've been disappointed about a postal-order this morning——"

"Don't talk rot to me, Bunter!"

"And with my Cousin Wally coming next week——"

"Bless your Cousin Wally! Now, listen to me——"

"Did you say five bob?"

"No, I didn't!" roared Coker. "Do you think I'm built of bobs? I'm not going to give you five bob every time I open my mouth, you fat Hun! Listen to me, and tell me if my voice is thrown into the shop here."

"Sorry! I'm in rather a hurry—— Yah! Oh! Leggo my ear!"

"I'm holding on to your ear a bit," answered Coker, compressing the grip of finger and thumb. "I want you, Bunter. Now, listen!"

"Yaroooh!"

"Stop that row, and listen, you fat idiot!"

"Rescue!" yelled Bunter. "Help! Fire! Wharton——"

The Famous Five grinned, but did not approach. Billy Bunter's gratitude for their help the previous day was still in their minds.

"Shut up!" roared Coker. "Now, listen, and give me your candid opinion, Bunter."

"My only hat!" murmured Bob Cherry. "He takes hold of a chap's ear, and asks for his candid opinion!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, you fags!" said Coker, frowning round at the Famous Five. "Now, listen to me, Bunter! Are you there? 'Ere I am! That all right?"

"No; rotten!" gasped Bunter.

"What!"

"Rotten! Simply fat-headed! Yaroooh! Leggo! I—I mean, it was ripping!" wailed Bunter. "Ow! Leggo! Splendid!"

"I don't want any exaggeration either way," said Coker, still holding Bunter's fat ear. "Listen again, and give me your candid opinion—mind, the exact truth. Are you there? 'Ere I am! Now, how's that?"

"Wonderful!" stuttered Bunter. "Marvellous!"

"You really think so?"

"It's astonishing! Leggo!"

"That's all right, then," said Coker,

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releasing Bunter's ear at last. "You might just as well have answered frankly at first, Bunter. I never stand any cheek from fags. Get off!"

Coker stalked away quite satisfied; and Bunter rubbed his ear, and glared after him with a glare that bade fair to crack his spectacles.

"Beast!" he gasped. "I'm jolly glad he's going to try it on Prout! Ow-wow! I hope Prout will skin him! Yow-wow!"

Coker walked away to the School House in great spirits. By the use of his wonderful ventriloquial gift he foresaw a morning off for himself; and he had kindly told Potter and Greene that he would get them off lessons, too.

It was easy enough—simple as A B C, according to Coker. He simply had to imitate the Head's voice, and give directions to Mr. Prout in that voice, and there you were! Easy as falling off a form, Coker told Potter and Greene; and they did not venture to say him nay. As in the case of Fitzgerald, Coker's left was ready if they started any rot. And they really did not see why Coker should not ask for it if he liked, and get it.

"Skinner!" rapped out Coker, as he spotted Skinner, Snoop, and Stott heading for the School House.

"Hallo?" said Skinner, looking round.

"You've heard about my ventriloquism——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you want me to twist your neck, Skinner?"

"Nunno!" said Skinner, becoming grave at once.

"Then don't cackle when I speak to you! Listen to this. Tell me whether it sounds like the Head's voice coming from behind that tree. Mind, I want your candid opinion; and I may say that I don't want any Remove cheek, or I'll mop up the quad with you! Now, listen!"

Coker proceeded to throw his voice.

"Are you there, sir? 'Ere I am!"

Skinner & Co. blinked at him.

"Did that reply sound like the Head's voice?" demanded Coker.

"The Head's voice!" murmured Skinner. "Oh, my hat!"

"I've asked you a question, Skinner!" Coker came a little nearer, his fist doubled. "Kindly answer—candidly!"

Skinner looked at the big fist, and answered—not very candidly.

"Exact!" he said.

"And it seemed to come from behind that tree—what?"

"I could have sworn to it, Coker, if you hadn't told me what you were going to do," said Skinner meekly. "In fact, it quite startled me as it was. Look and see if the Head's there, Snoopey!"

"He's not there, kid," said Coker smiling. "Only my ventriloquism! All serene! It will work all right with Prout—no mistake about that!"

And Coker went cheerily into the House, and joined the Fifth-Formers on their way to the Form-room.

"Only his ventriloquism!" murmured Skinner. "And he's going to try it on his Form-master! I'd give a week's pocket-money to be in the Fifth Form-room when he tries it on!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, Coker! I say, Coker!" called out Bob Cherry, in the passage.

Coker glanced round.

"Well?"

"Make your voice come from the cellars, Coker. Squiff here won't believe that you can do it."

"I'll believe it when I hear it," said Squiff, shaking his head.

"I don't mind," said Coker genially.

"Listen to this!" He fixed his eyes on the floor, and rapped out, "Are you

there?" And went on, in the ventriloquial voice, "I'm 'ere, down below!"

It was an anguished squeak, and it made the Removites jump.

"Hurt your neck, Coker?" asked Squiff, with great solicitude.

"Eh? No. Why?"

"What were you squeaking like that for, then?"

"You utter young ass! That was the ventriloquial voice. I was throwing it below," said Coker, with scornful amusement. "You are a young idiot, Field! Couldn't you hear that it appeared to come from under the floor?"

"Oh! Ah! I see! Wonderful!"

"The wonderfulness is terrific!"

"Amazing!" stuttered Peter Todd.

"It fairly puts the lid on! Who'd have thought that Coker could do these things?"

"Little enough to what I can do!" said Coker loftily. And he walked on, leaving the juniors on the verge of hysterics.

Horace Coker was quite assured now; not that he often lacked assurance.

Having received so many candid opinions on his ventriloquism, there was no further room for doubt; and he was full of confidence as he prepared for the experiment upon Mr. Prout.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Put to the Test!

MR. PROUT was not looking amiable when he came into the Fifth Form-room that morning.

Rations did not agree with Mr. Prout, and he had complained bitterly to his friend, Mr. Capper of the Fourth, that he was losing weight. He certainly looked as if he could afford to lose it, but that appeared to furnish no consolation. The kidneys and bacon, the cutlets and steak of the dear dead days beyond recall, haunted Mr. Prout, and his temper suffered.

In these days the Fifth were very careful with their Form-master, wondering sometimes whether they would be able to stand him until the end of the war. As Mr. Prout came in, with a knitted brow and a scarlet nose, Potter and Greene turned imploring looks upon Coker. They knew the danger-signals; and they would willingly have saved Coker from himself.

But the great Horace did not heed. The fact that Mr. Prout was in a specially tart temper that morning only made him more determined to have a morning off. It would be no end of a relief to be safe outside the Form-room.

Coker did not even see his chums' looks. He was waiting his opportunity. It had to be done before Coker was called upon to construe; for in his sublime confidence he had neglected his prep the previous evening.

He glanced at the door. The Head's voice was to sail in, as it were, as if Dr. Locke had spoken to Mr. Prout hurriedly in passing. But there would be a certain improbability about it if the Head spoke through a closed door; evidently the door had to be open.

"Ahem! Please, sir——" began Coker.

Mr. Prout turned a steely eye upon him.

"Did you speak, Coker?"

"I did, sir! May we have the door open? Rather warm in here, sir."

It was the only dodge Coker could think of; but it was rather unfortunate, for owing to the coal rationing the Form-room was decidedly cold. Mr. Prout's eyes became more steely.

"You are warm here, Coker?"

"Well, sir, I—I'd like the door open."

"The door will remain shut, Coker! The room is cold. Your remark is foolish, Coker; I may say, idiotic! The room certainly is cold. Do you find the room too warm, Blundell?"

"No fear, sir—I mean, no, certainly not!"

"Do you, Hilton?"

"Jolly cold, I think, sir!"

"Perhaps your remark is intended as a joke, Coker!" suggested Mr. Prout.

"Nunno, sir!" stammered Coker.

"Then be silent, and do not be more foolish than is, unfortunately, unavoidable in a boy of your limited intellect."

"Oh!" gasped Coker.

He was crushed; but not for long. Horace Coker never was crushed for long; he had wonderful recuperative powers.

Hilton was construing when Coker started up like a jack-in-the-box.

"Shall I see who's at the door, sir?" he asked.

Without waiting for Mr. Prout to reply, lest his reply should be a command to sit still, Coker darted to the door.

"Coker," rapped out Mr. Prout, turning to stare after him, "take your seat at once! There is no one at the door."

But Coker had the door open.

"Oh, you, sir! Dr. Locke!" exclaimed Coker, pretending to see the Head in the passage. This was really a master-stroke.

"Bless my soul! I certainly did not hear the knock," said Mr. Prout, looking towards the open doorway in surprise.

"Mr. Prout!"

It was Coker speaking, but he was speaking in the ventriloquial voice, fondly imagining that it resembled the Head's tones coming from the passage.

The Fifth-Formers understood, and they sat almost shivering.

Mr. Prout did not understand, and he blinked at Coker.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"Kindly give Potter, Greene, and Coker leave from class this morning, Mr. Prout."

"Wha-a-at?"

Mr. Prout stood rooted to the floor as he gasped out the word.

Why Coker should stand by the doorway and utter those remarkable words was a mystery to his Form-master.

But Coker, in the full belief that Mr. Prout took the voice for the Head's, and supposed that it came from the passage, went on happily:

"I trust I make myself clear, Mr. Prout. The three boys I have named are excused from lessons this morning."

Mr. Prout seemed to breathe with difficulty.

Coker closed the door; another master-stroke, to prevent Mr. Prout looking out and seeing that the Head was not there.

Then he came back cheerily towards the class.

The Fifth-Formers sat petrified, waiting for the thunderstorm to burst.

"May we go now, sir?" asked the happy Coker.

"What?" breathed Mr. Prout.

"You heard what the Head said, sir?"

"The—the Head!"

"Very kind of him to give us a morning off, sir," said Coker, wondering what Mr. Prout was looking so queer for. "I suppose we can go?"

Mr. Prout found his voice at last.

"Coker!" It was like a clap of thunder, and Coker jumped.

"Ye-es, sir?"

"Are you out of your senses?"

"Wha-at?"

"What do you mean, boy, by directing me to give you leave from class, as if you were a person of authority in the school?" thundered Mr. Prout.

"I, sir?" stuttered Coker.

"Yes, you, sir!" roared Mr. Prout.

"If you are not insane, explain yourself at once!"

Coker blinked.

"D-d-didn't you recognise the Head's voice, sir?" he stuttered.

"Boy! What do you mean? Are you hopelessly insane, or— Ah! Oh!" Light dawned upon Mr. Prout, as he remembered the last occasion when the happy Horace had appeared to be bereft of his senses, and it had turned out to be only Coker's ventriloquism. "Is it possible," asked Mr. Prout, in an awful voice, "that you are attempting to play ventriloquial tricks in the Form-room, Coker?"

Coker stood dumb.

Something was wrong somewhere, that was evident; though Horace could not quite see where it was.

Apparently, Mr. Prout didn't believe that the Head had spoken from the passage; though why he didn't was a puzzle to Coker.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Prout. "This almost passes belief! That any boy in my Form should have the audacity to play such tricks in the Form-room, and that any boy at all could be so incredibly stupid as to fancy that he could deceive me by such a transparent trick! Coker! Boy! Dolt! Are you under the impression, sir, that the absurdly suffocated voice you spoke in

bore even the most distant resemblance to Dr. Locke's voice? Are you imbecile enough to imagine for one moment that you could not be detected as speaking? Is it possible, Coker, that you are so incomprehensibly obtuse as you pretend to be, or is this merely a deliberate piece of insolence to your Form-master?"

"Oh!" gasped Coker.

"Whichever may be the right explanation, sir," thundered Mr. Prout, "I shall endeavour to instruct you, Coker, that your Form-master is not the proper person to play such tricks upon! No, Coker, you will not be excused from class this morning! On the contrary, you will be detained this afternoon, and every other half-holiday this month. And I shall endeavour, Coker, by corporal chastisement, to drive some sense of the fitness of things into your dense brain!"

The pointer came into play next.

The Fifth Form looked on as if mesmerised while Coker took his licking.

It was a licking that beat all records; and it nearly doubled up Coker. When it was over—which was not till Mr. Prout was tired—Coker limped back to his seat, feeling that life was not worth living, especially for a ventriloquist. There was no more ventriloquism in the Fifth Form-room that morning.

After lessons that day, Potter and Greene were not surprised to hear from Coker that he had decided to chuck ventriloquism. It was, as he explained, merely a kid's game, and quite unworthy of his powers, now that he came to think of it. Mr. Prout's pointer had helped him to see that clearly; though Coker did not say so.

Harry Wharton & Co. came along to inquire of Coker how it had worked with Prouty. Coker's reply was not in words; it took the form of a sudden charge, as if he found something irritating in the inquiry; and there was trouble for some minutes.

But a day or two later Billy Bunter, being in want of funds owing to a disappointment about a postal-order, ventured to Coker's study to ascertain whether the great Horace wanted any more lessons in ventriloquism. Bunter was next seen fleeing for his life down the Fifth Form passage, with the great Horace after him brandishing a stump.

Evidently, ventriloquism was off!

(Don't miss "WALKER OF THE SIXTH!"—next Monday's grand complete story of Harry Wharton & Co., by FRANK RICHARDS.)

In this story we see Walker at his best, and the conclusion one reaches is that if he could only make up his mind to break completely with the black sheep of the Sixth he might be as decent a fellow as anyone.

AMATEUR MAGAZINES.

Now and then I receive copies of these with requests for a notice of them in my Chat. Of course, a favourable notice is meant; the senders, naturally, don't want public criticism.

One such paper lies before me now. It is not at all a bad little production as far as appearance goes. In fact, it is very neatly printed and got up; but that is the printer's work. The editors—well, there are difficulties about a first number, and I have no doubt they did their best. But I cannot see how they expect to sell at twopence what really amounts to nothing more than an instalment of under 2,000 words of a story, with a few notes. They will hardly get subscribers willing to shell out in order to give them—the editors—the pleasure of seeing their own stuff in print.

This is the great difficulty with amateur magazines. Practically no one buys them except those who want to write for them. But if they are all to be represented from

time to time, either contributions must be very short indeed, or else the paper must be much bigger than the money available is at all likely to run to. I should recommend my friends at Ashton-under-Lyne to do all that they can to give their subscribers a show in print if they intend to go on. Perhaps I am pessimistic; but I rather doubt whether they can satisfy them even so. I fancy too many of them will want to see their own stuff in every number!

There is no harm in this amateur magazine business; there may be good in it. But there is most certainly no money in it!

NOTICES.

Correspondence Wanted By:

H. W. Western, 28, Prior Street, Greenwich S.E. 10, with readers abroad.

Eric Ockleshaw, 41, Raglan Street, East Kilda, Melbourne, Australia, with readers 14-15—in U.S.A. or Canada.

Fred R. Smith, Latham House, 54, Glassstone Road, Prospect, South Australia, with readers—16—in India and America.

YOUR EDITOR

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 561.

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Monday:

"WALKER OF THE SIXTH!"

By Frank Richards.

It is a change once in a way to have a story which deals chiefly with the seniors, though it would never do to leave the Famous Five and the many other well-known characters of the Remove out entirely. In the fine story which will appear next week James Walker and Gerald Loder play the principal parts; but others come into it—Wingate, Harry Wharton & Co., Sir Jimmy Vivian, and, of course, the egregious Bunter.

Walker is not a fellow who has often played any considerable part in the stories. We know him chiefly as a half-and-half gay dog, friendly with Loder, and for the most part following in Loder's footsteps; but not quite of Loder's type, for all that. Both Loder and Carne will do things that Walker would shy at instinctively, and he is capable of generosity and self-sacrifice that they would never show.

Extracts from "THE GREYFRIARS HERALD" and "TOM MERRY'S WEEKLY."

THE GHOST IN THE WOODSHED!

By HARRY NOBLE.

I TELL you Taggles saw it twice; he's positive!"

Monty Lowther spoke quite excitedly. But the crowd of us in the Common-room were far from convinced.

"Taggles is an old ass!" said Tom Merry.
"Been at the gin again!" said Jack Blake gruffly. "Ghosts are all bosh!"
"Yaas, wathah—uttah bosh!"

Lowther, however, looked really serious. He was the last fellow in the world we would have expected to believe in ghosts.

"If you'd heard him tell his yarn," he said meaningly, "you'd realise that he meant every word of it. The man's positively unstrung! His dial is as pale as parchment, and even his proboscis has lost some of its lustre."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"When did he see the merry apparition?" inquired Cardew curiously. "After dark, I suppose?"

"Yes. At seven o'clock, the evening before last. He thought it was his imagination, for it vanished instantly. But at seven last night it was there again."

"Seven both times?"
"That's it. He goes to tidy the place up a bit at seven," explained Lowther. "But last night he fairly flew—left the door open all night, and didn't go again until this morning, he told me."

"Oh, he was talking out of his hat!" said Tom Merry disbelievingly.

"But seriously, you chaps, I'm inclined to believe there's something in it," said Lowther.

"Rats! Mellish there for a quiet smoke, most likely, and pretending to be a ghost when Taggles came along!" laughed Tom Merry.

Mellish scowled round from the fireplace, where he was hunched over the rationed embers. But it wasn't a guilty scowl.

"Anyway," said Lowther, "it's five to seven now, and I'm going to investigate. And you fellows are coming with me!"

"Are we?" said Herries emphatically.

Monty glanced at his watch as if the matter were settled.

"No time to lose," he said, moving towards the door. "Come on, or we may not be in time for the giddy spectre!"

Arthur Augustus surveyed him through his eyeglass.

"Weally, Lowther, I for one wefuse to be dwagged out on such a night, to wun a wild-goose chase."

And Fourth and Shell, though in opposition usually, joined this time in support of Cussy's sentiment.

Lowther shrugged his shoulders.
"Well, if you're all funky of a measly spectre—"

"Bai Jove!"
"Or afraid of getting its little handies and tootsies cold!" said Lowther, with rather more sarcasm than wisdom. "Did'ums mamm'ums tell'ums—"

"Bump him!"
"Yaas wathah! Bump the wottah!"

Fourth and Shell swooped down upon the humorist.
"Leggo!" shouted Lowther. "You silly asses—"

There was the quick rustle of a gown, and Mr. Linton stood in the doorway.

"Boys, what is all this noise?"

The Form-master was looking irritable and annoyed. We saw at once that something was wrong apart from the row in the Common-room.

"It's only a little argument we were having about a ghost, sir," explained Lowther.

The shade of annoyance deepened considerably upon the master's face.

"Taggles has already told me an absurd

story of a ghost. Let me hear nothing more about it! The whole thing is ridiculous, unless—and he looked at us hard—"unless it is a foolish trick."

"No, sir, I don't think so," said Lowther quickly. "As a matter of fact, I had just suggested that we might investigate the matter now. This is its time for appearing, and if you'd be good enough to accompany us—"

"Pooh! There is nothing—" Mr. Linton paused, and rubbed his chin irritably.

Then he glanced at us.
"If you boys really think there is something in this—this absurd notion of Taggles', then—"

We felt sure now that there was something in it. Taggles would not have carried it to Mr. Linton otherwise.

Besides, a ghost-hunt is always interesting, and our curiosity was aroused.

Mr. Linton saw the look in our faces, and understood.

"Then we will visit the shed," he said. "The clock is striking seven."

We crossed the dark quad, shrouded in a frosty fog that made us shiver, and reached the shed.

When we stopped outside the door—I fancy we were all feeling a trifle jumpy. Seven o'clock, I know, is not the "witching hour of night" which ghosts are reputed to prefer for pedestrian exercise, nevertheless, our nerves were rather tense.

Mr. Linton gripped a cane, and opened the door. We peered into the dark interior.

There was nothing. A square patch in the wall opposite, not quite so dark as the rest, told us where the window was.

Then—
"Oh!"

The cry was a kind of chorus. We all gave tongue.

For we beheld the spectre.

There was no sound. Just a staring face, with grinning jaws and wild, luminous eyes! The thing had no visible body. The face seemed to be suspended about the height of a man from the ground.

Even Mr. Linton stepped back a pace in alarm.

Then the master raised his cane, and struck.

But even as it swished through the air the spectre vanished. It went neither up nor down, nor any other way. It simply vanished, and the cane passed through the empty air.

Mr. Linton struck again, almost frantically. But the blow hit nothing but air.

"Upon my soul! This is extraordinary!"

Matches flared up, and we looked into each other's startled faces.

Apart from ourselves, the shed was quite empty.

II.
"THIS is most annoying!" said the Head of St. Jim's.

Dr. Holmes was in his study, and Mr. Linton was with him.

The Shell master had gone along to report the ghost.

The Head's brows were furrowed over a letter he had received. It ran as follows:

"Reverend Sir,—We understand that a spectral phenomenon has been seen recently at your school by several reliable persons. The matter has interested us greatly, and we have decided to journey down to make a few investigations. We will arrive at 8.30 tomorrow morning, when you will be good enough to grant us an interview."

"We remain,
Yours most respectfully,

"THE UTTERLY INDEPENDENT PSYCHICAL RESEARCH PARTY."

"I resent being pestered in this manner, and I am convinced that the whole thing is merely a foolish trick, Mr. Linton! Are you sure that the window was fastened on the inside?"

The Shell-master nodded positively.

"It—it is probably a trick," he said dubiously. "But how it was perpetrated I am at a loss to imagine. The face was life-size, and there is certainly no aperture large enough to afford its entrance. One or two very small portions of glass are chipped out of the corners of the window, it is true. But the apparition did not recede in the direction of the window. It merely vanished!"

"Could it not have been the effect of something in the nature of a lantern-slide, thrown through the window?"

"Impossible! The vision was in the middle of the room, and there was nothing there for it to be reflected upon."

"Some luminous object suspended from the roof above, perhaps?"

"I have thought of that. But a thick layer of dust has settled upon the floor of the loft, and it is undisturbed save by my own footprints. Besides, the closing of the trap-door in the roof would have made some noise, whereas the spectre vanished in absolute silence. I am at a complete loss!"

"Ahem!" The Head rubbed his chin, and looked at the letter again. "I should be glad, Linton, if you would receive these—er—visitors when they arrive. I shall—ahem!—be engaged."

The news quickly got about that the Utterly Independent Psychical Research Party were to call, and at 8.30 next morning most of the fellows were on the look-out.

We were all curious to see the people who "grub after ghosts," but we weren't expecting the specimens which arrived.

With startling suddenness three stout little old gentlemen marched in at the gates, arm-in-arm.

The one in the middle wore baggy trousers of a sky-blue hue, and the trousers of the other two were patterned after the fashion of a gigantic draught-board.

Each was be-whiskered and be-spectacled, and they all beamed profusely upon each other and the astonished fellows around them.

"M-m-my hat!" gasped Tom Merry.

"Something new from Colney Hatch!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Utterly Independents sailed into the building, and were shown into Mr. Linton's study by Toby, the page.

Not many minutes elapsed before the Terrible Three heard a number of footsteps shuffle along the passage. Three wheezy voices all spoke at once, while Mr. Linton made attempts to get a word in.

Then the door opened, and the face of the Shell-master appeared before the three.

"Merry, you formed one of the party last night, did you not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Would you oblige me by showing these gentlemen the woodshed, and explaining anything that may be necessary?"

And Mr. Linton withdrew, leaving the Utterly Independents with Tom Merry.

They beamed upon him with a unanimous beam, and the Shell captain felt a little dismayed.

"So you saw the ghost, did you, my boy?" inquired he of the sky-blue trousers.

"Y-yes," stammered Tom. "I saw it."

"You are responsible for what you see, I suppose? You don't—er—shall I say, launch forth upon the razzle—and—er—see things—what? He turned to one of the Utterly Independents favouring the draught-board pattern of trousers. "Do you think he is responsible for what he sees, old bean?"

"As a matter of fact, old bean, I don't."

"Not really, old bean?"

"No, old bean."

"If you ask my opinion, old bean," wheezed the third Utterly Independent, "he strikes me as being a little doggy!"

Tom Merry turned red, and Manners and Lowther grinned.

"Nay, nay, old bean!" beamed the first, in mild reproof. "But confess to me, my boys. Didn't you really go to the woodshed for a quiet smoke—eh? A-ah! Naughty, naughty!"

And he wagged a reproving forefinger at them.

The three glared at him. And, if they had no other cause for complaint, the irritating repetition of "old bean" was getting on their nerves.

"Been going the pace—eh? You may well blush!" smiled the old gentleman in sky-blues. "Now, I shouldn't be surprised if there isn't a cigarette hidden under the inkpot! You naughty, naughty boys!"

With which he tilted the pot, and a stream of ink shot out, swamping a newly-written impot of Tom Merry's.

"Dear me! I believe some ink has streamed out of this pot!"

"You—you— My impot's ruined!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Then I will put this inkpot out of the way of further harm," said the old gentleman, with mild determination.

Manners had bought a new hat the previous evening. The old gentleman of the sky-blues raised the lid of the box and put the inkpot in with the topper. And as he put it in upside-down the topper underwent no improvement.

Manners glared at him.

"I—I— You—"

"You had better clean up the ink spilt on the table, old bean," ventured the one in the checks.

"Certainly, old bean!"

The old gentleman addressed pulled a number of papers out of a drawer, and swabbed the table industriously. Then he flung the papers—the impot included—into the fireplace.

"And now, old beans," he remarked in a satisfied tone, "it would perhaps be as well if our young friend directed us to the woodshed."

"Right!" replied Tom Merry with alacrity. "With the greatest of pleasure!"

Lowther gave a gasp of relief when the Utterlies left the study with Tom Merry.

Manners looked almost murderous.

"Of all the—the—"

"Oh, they're potty!" said Lowther. "Still, it was rather funny."

"What was funny?" demanded Manners.

"The way he swamped Tommy's lines. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, perhaps it was a bit. Ha, ha!"

"And the way he swamped your hat—"

"What was there funny about that, you chump?"

"Ha, ha, ha! The hat's ruined, but you must admit it's amusing. Ha, ha!"

Manners glared, and then a faint grin overspread his face.

"I wonder what he used to wipe up the ink with? Lemme see!"

He picked up a few of the inky sheets from the fireplace, and glanced at them. And then he handed them to the Shell humorist.

"Something of yours, Monty, old son!"

Lowther's expression underwent a sudden change.

"Mum-mum-my Comic Column! Why, I'll—I'll— The raving old lunatic! I've a good mind—"

The door opened at that moment, and Tom Merry entered and sank into a seat.

"Phew! I've introduced them to Taggles in the quad—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he's taking them to the woodshed. We can see them from the window."

The Terrible Three stationed themselves at the window and watched.

Taggles was pausing rebelliously in the middle of the quad. His three charges were all speaking volubly, and their lips constantly framed the words "old bean."

Added to this, the gentleman in sky-blues was standing on the porter's foot, and one of those in the checks had just swept off the porter's hat with his stick.

Taggles uttered a few words in a most emphatic manner, and stalked away in high dudgeon.

"Look, they've got hold of Baggy now!" remarked Manners. "Just patted him on the head!"

"And not a very gentle pat, either," murmured Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Baggy dodged to escape another pat, and the three old beans beamed upon him and waddled towards the woodshed.

Trimble glowered after them resentfully. And when the shed had swallowed them he crept on tiptoe towards the door.

"Young beast!" exclaimed Manners. "Listening again!"

"Let him listen!" growled Tom Merry. "I'm fed up with those old bounders!"

And they left the window, dismissing Baggy and the Utterly Independents from their minds.

But only for a few minutes. Then the door was flung open, and Baggy dashed into the room, panting.

"I—I say, you chaps! Those bounders in the woodshed—"

"Well?"

"Guess who they are?"

"Eh? The Utterly Independent—"

"That be blowed!" exclaimed Baggy. "They're Gordon Gay & Co. of the Grammar School!"

III.

"GREAT pip!"

We stared at Baggy incredulously. But he was undoubtedly telling the truth.

"How on earth did they get wind of the ghost?" demanded Lowther.

"Blessed if I know! But what are you fellows going to do about it?" demanded Baggy.

"Shall we collar them, and promise to say no more about it, on the—er—understanding that they spring us a small loan—what?"

"You fat rotter!"

"Anyway, they're going to wreck all the studies when we go to lessons!" said Baggy warmly. "Something ought to be done!"

The Terrible Three looked at each other in some doubt. Then Lowther's eyes lit up suddenly.

"Baggy, my friend—"

"Eh?"

"My portly friend, we promise you that we'll entertain the visitors in this study."

"All right?" said Baggy suspiciously. "I don't see anything to get excited about in that."

The bell began to clang for morning lessons, and Baggy rolled out of the study with a grunt.

"Remember!" said Lowther. "We promised Baggy—"

"You silly ass!"

"Here are the Utterly Independents, just coming out of the woodshed!" chuckled Lowther, glancing out of the window. "The old bean in the sky-blues is Gordon Gay, I bet!"

"And the other two are the Woottons—sure to be!" remarked Tom Merry. "But we can't be late for lessons. What's to be done?"

"Leave everything to Father Montague!" said Lowther cheerfully. "Come on!"

They went along to the class-room, and Lowther went up to Mr. Linton's desk, while Tom Merry and Manners stood back.

"If you please, sir—"

"Well, Lowther?"

"We've promised to entertain the visitors in our study, sir," said Lowther meekly.

"You had no business to make any such promise, Lowther!" said Mr. Linton with asperity. He was thoroughly fed up with the Utterly Independent Psychological Research Party.

"But they're bent on visiting the study, sir."

"Very well—very well! Merry and Manners, too, I suppose must go."

"Thank you, sir!"

And the three left the Form-room rejoicing.

"No need to mention that it was Baggy we promised," said Lowther easily. "Linton might not have let us off in that case."

"I should think not!" chuckled Tom Merry.

They walked softly when they came to the Shell studies. There came the sound of movements from within No. 10.

"Now then!" breathed Tom Merry.

The three rushed in. The three Utterly Independents spun round with startled exclamations.

But they were bowled over in a twinkling, and the victorious party wrenched off their disguises.

"Baggy was right!" said Tom Merry grimly. "Gordon Gay & Co.!"

The Grammarians ceased to struggle.

"Find the floor hard, old beans?" grinned Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gordon Gay grinned feebly.

"We're bowled out this time," he said ruefully. "Did that fat beast spy on us in the woodshed?"

"Got it first time! I— By Jove!" said Tom Merry suddenly. "A ripping idea has just struck me, if it will only work! I'm afraid we'll have to borrow your disguises, old beans."

"I say, what's the game?" demanded Wootton major.

"You'll learn all in good time, I promise you," replied Tom Merry smoothly. "Do you mind if I undress you, Gordon, old bean?"

"Yes, I jolly well do! I—"

"If I put a cake of soap in your mouth will you let me?"

"You—you—"

"Will you let me?"

"Oh, hang it!" groaned Gordon Gay. "Do anything you like! The clobber's no good to us now, anyway!"

"You promise not to struggle?"

"Yes, you boulder!"

"There's a good boy!"

And Tom Merry proceeded to strip the Grammar School leader of his garments. Cushions explained the stout appearance of the old beans, it was found.

The Woottons submitted also. They dared not yell out, or even struggle very much, for fear of bringing a master to the spot. Matters would have been very serious for the bogus ghost-hunters in that case.

"And now we'll have to gag and bind you," said Tom Merry.

"Oh, I say—"

"No help for it. It wrings our hearts, but it must be did!" said Lowther.

Satisfied that the Grammarians were tied too securely to get free, the three left the study with the disguises under their arms.

When they had changed into the clobber and talked over Tom Merry's counter-wheeze they went back into their own study.

Gordon Gay & Co. glared at them speechlessly. But it was only the gags that made them speechless.

"Don't waken the little dears!" whispered Lowther. "How quiet they are! They—Hullo!"

Lowther suddenly drew his hand out of a trousers-pocket of the baggy checks.

"A packet of visiting-cards! What's this they say? 'Best of love from the Utterly Independent Psychological Research Party, formerly known as Gordon Gay & Co.' I suppose you intended to leave one of these in each of the studies, old bean?"

Gordon Gay admitted with a nod that that had been his intention.

The Terrible Three again left the study, locking the door after them. And then, attired in their weird apparel, they set off for the Grammar School.

Some of the Grammarians greeted them effusively when they entered the gates. Classes had just been dismissed, and they had a few minutes to spare before dinner.

"How have things gone, old chaps?" asked Frank Monk eagerly. "Kyboshed the enemy?"

"I should say so!" wheezed Tom Merry. "Locked three of them in a study, in fact—gagged and bound 'em!"

"Hurrah!"

"Still keeping up the old croak?" grinned Carboy. "What do you call yourselves? The Utterly— Hullo! There goes the bell! Let's get you into a study before dinner! Lucky bounders, to have the day off!"

They were got to the study occupied by Carboy without being spotted by anyone in authority, and left there.

That ordeal passed, they breathed more freely.

"We may as well attend to this study first, as they've been kind enough to show us into it," remarked Tom Merry. "Careful not to break anything, you know. Just put things upside down, and lift the pictures from the walls."

They got to work, and I think the most destructive thing they did was to put the coal rations in the cupboard and the food rations in the scuttle. The main thing was to show that they had taken a rise out of the Grammarians.

"Just a minute before we leave this study," said Tom Merry. "I'll chalk a few words on the mirror."

And what he chalked was as follows:

"MEET US AT THE GATES AFTER DINNER. YOU'LL BE AMUSED WHEN WE EXPLAIN."

And underneath he placed one of the visiting-cards.

"I think that we can see that Gordon Gay and the Woottons are at the gates soon after these bounders have finished gorging," remarked Tom Merry. "But it'll be a bit of a rush, though."

As they turned to leave the study Manners pointed to a long, slender rod standing in the corner.

"Queer sort of a fishing-rod!" he remarked. "I suppose that's what it is?"

Tom Merry looked, and started involuntarily as a thought struck him.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed. "If I'm not very much mistaken, this will explain the mystery of the ghost in the woodshed!"

IV.

A VERY slight examination proved the truth of Tom Merry's remark.

The rod was composed of two pieces, one fitting inside the other, and worked on the principles of a bicycle-pump. When the "handle" end was pushed in a small paper object protruded at the other end, opening out like a fan as it did so.

It was, in fact, nothing more than a fan, and phosphorescent paint accounted for the appearance of a luminous face in the darkness.

"The bounders slid this thing through a small opening in the window. I noticed a piece the size of a ha'penny is chipped out at the bottom," said Tom Merry.

They wasted no more time on the "ghost of the woodshed." He was now a back number.

They treated several studies in the same way as the first, being careful not to damage anything, and being still more careful to leave a card in every one they visited.

After which they left the building, and hurried to St. Jim's as fast as their clobber permitted.

Having changed into their Etons, the Terrible Three returned to the helpless Grammarians and removed their gags.

"We're going to dress you again, old beans," said Tom Merry sweetly, reproducing the gorgeous clobber.

"In those?" exclaimed Gordon Gay.

"In these!"

That Gordon Gay put up a struggle goes without saying. But with his hands tied behind him most of the time he was pretty helpless against three.

The Woottons were served the same way.

The three were then regagged, but the whiskers concealed the fact admirably, for they were specially intended to cover the most part of the old beans' faces.

Thus they left the school looking practically the same as when they had entered it, their hands clasped behind them suggesting that they were deep in meditation.

The Terrible Three escorted them along the road until the gates of the Grammar School hove in sight.

In spite of their hurry dinner had been over some time, and the Grammarians were waiting ominously at the gates.

And they didn't keep on waiting after catching sight of the Utterly Independents!

They sped down the lane like cinder-path champions.

"This is where we make a move," remarked Tom Merry. "Sorry to leave you in such haste, old beans!"

They placed the unfortunate old beans so that they faced each other, and to a casual observer their wriggings gave the impression that they were in animated conversation.

With that the three Shellites retreated.

"You unspeakable chumps!"

Carboy came up and glared at them.

Behind him appeared Monk, Lane, and the rest.

"Are you going to explain, Gay?" demanded Monk. "What on earth will we be amused at? Where's the joke?"

The Utterly Independent Psychological Research Party seemed to nod pleasantly to the Grammarians around them.

"You crack-brained asses!" roared Carboy. "What's the matter with you?"

Gordon Gay bowed low. It was really in a great effort to free his hands.

Carboy glared at him. This new turn of humour on the part of Gordon Gay, as he supposed it to be, did not appeal to him.

"Jolly funny ain't you? I—Hallo! Another beginning!"

Wootton major bowed nearly to the ground, and then Wootton minor followed his example. They were making frantic efforts to free themselves.

"Bump them!" exclaimed Lane.

"Bump the rotters!" came the roar from the rest.

Bump, bump, bump!

"Now then!" roared Carboy furiously. "Explain, you—you—"

His voice trailed off into a falter. The disguises had fallen away from the faces of the three, and revealed the fact that they were gagged.

"Mum-mum-my hat! What the—why—"

No more time was wasted in words, and Gordon Gay and the Woottons were quickly freed.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped the Grammar School leader.

"You ass, Gay!" exclaimed Frank Monk. "What on earth's happened? Why did you wreck the studies?"

"It was Tom Merry & Co.!" groaned Gordon Gay. "They came in these disguises—"

"In—in those disguises!" stuttered Carboy.

"We were twigged somehow—a fat beast spied on us. The Terrible Three stripped us of this clobber, and came over here seemingly to wreck the studies, and—and tied us up like this, and—"

"This—this is unbelievable!" said Carboy dazedly. "You go over to St. Jim's to rag their studies, and they collar the disguises, and come over here in them to rag ours! My only topper!"

And you bumped us because you didn't know the facts!" said Gordon Gay regretfully.

Carboy looked at him grimly.

"Yes; and now we'll bump you because we do know the facts! Harder this time, you fellows! Collar them!"

Bump, bump, bump!

THE END.

THE GREYFRIARS GALLERY.

No. 95.—Sir REGINALD BROOKE, Bart.

SIR REGINALD BROOKE is a very different person from the other representative of the baronetcy of England who has appeared in this series—that very crusty and wrong-headed gentleman Sir Hilton Popper.

We do not know so much about him as we do about Sir Hilton, who has frequently tried to play the tyrant with the Greyfriars boys and been a thorn in the side of the reverend Head of Greyfriars. But from what we do know we can judge that the difference is about as complete as it well could be.

For Sir Reginald is a very easy-going person. That is beyond doubt. He has been Mauly's guardian for years; and, though no doubt waking Mauly up is difficult, and though making Mauly be careful is quite impossible, I fancy Mauly might have been just a trifle less of a slacker if his uncle and guardian had ever tried very hard to buck him up.

Of course, Mauleverer is not so directly under his control as is the case with most wards in relation with most guardians. Probably Sir Reginald, who seems to be a jolly bachelor, with nothing to tie him to any par-

in a scholarship exam if Mauly had not been persuaded that all his money was lost. Nothing short of that would have induced him to enter for a scholarship.

Mauly had practically been found guilty, and was bolting from Greyfriars when Sir Reginald got out of the train into which he was about to get. Of course, his uncle did not believe in his guilt. He passed over that trouble very lightly; but he was quite entertained by the notion of Mauly fancying himself a pauper and swotting away to win a scholarship.

"Oh, Mauleverer, this is doing me a world of good!" he gasped. "Bless my soul! It's the funniest thing I have heard of for years! Ha, ha, ha!"

Now, that was taking it as no man into whose life the dread of poverty, the necessity of having to work hard for a living, and even then not being too sure of it, had ever come would have taken it. Mauly had been up against the stern realities of life for once, anyway. Perhaps Sir Reginald has never been up against them at all. They look differently, seen from a different angle. To regard the funny side of the affair as its chief side was like a man who all his life long has had not only enough, but too much.

But, after all, it is not Sir Reginald's fault that he was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, as the old phrase goes.

That he is good-natured his action in the matter of Penfold's father showed plainly enough. That worthy old chap was in great trouble. He was being turned out of his home by Mr. Snooks—Sir Reginald's agent—because he was in arrears with his rent through no fault of his own. And, naturally, his son was in trouble, too.

Mauly has always liked Dick Penfold; and Mauly was ready to help. So was Peter Todd; and Peter was very strong on the legal side. So were the Famous Five; and their help was useful at the crisis.

Mr. Snooks refused to give up his designs against the old shoemaker for anything Mauly could say. He was not even very polite. He told Mauly that Sir Reginald would think him a young donkey for trying to interfere. If he had known that Mauly was a millionaire his attitude would have been very different, no doubt; for people of the Snooks type worship the golden calf, and cannot understand why everyone else should not worship it. Sir Reginald was abroad; and there seemed little chance that anything could be done. But Mauly cabled to his uncle, and Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry held the fort at the Penfolds' cottage. And back came a reply cable:

"Wire received. Extravagant young rascal. Rely upon me. Have wired Mr. Penfold will protect him. Also wired Snooks to stop all proceedings instantly. Also wired London lawyer make searching inquiry into treatment of tenants by Snooks. Tell your young friend I am very sorry this has happened.—Your affectionate UNCLE REGGIE."

The matter of Sir Jimmy Vivian, found in the slums and given a chance at Greyfriars, probably cost Sir Reginald more trouble and exertion. But most of what was done for Sir Jimmy was done rather through than by the baronet. Still, there remains the fact that many people in his place would not have bothered about it at all; and Sir Jimmy is distinctly in Sir Reginald's debt. A good fellow, Sir Reginald!



ticular place, spends a good deal of time abroad in normal circumstances, though, as he is well above military age, it is unlikely that he has been much abroad lately. When in town he would generally be found at his club or in bachelor chambers. He probably has a country house; but we do not hear of it. It was to the house of another relative of Mauly's—a Mr. Mackenzie—that the uninvited guests went. When Mauly needs money he writes to his solicitors, not to his guardian, which would seem to indicate that Sir Reginald leaves very much to the legal gentlemen the question of how much Mauly should have, while the quantity he gets seems to show that the legal gentlemen have liberal views on the matter. And concerning Sir Reginald, one very much doubts whether he is much more careful and prudent than his nephew. There is certainly no evidence of it.

He was highly amused by the result of the plot engineered by Peter Todd to make Mauly buck up. Now, the result, in one respect, was rather tragic than comic. For no one could ever have suspected Mauly of cheating