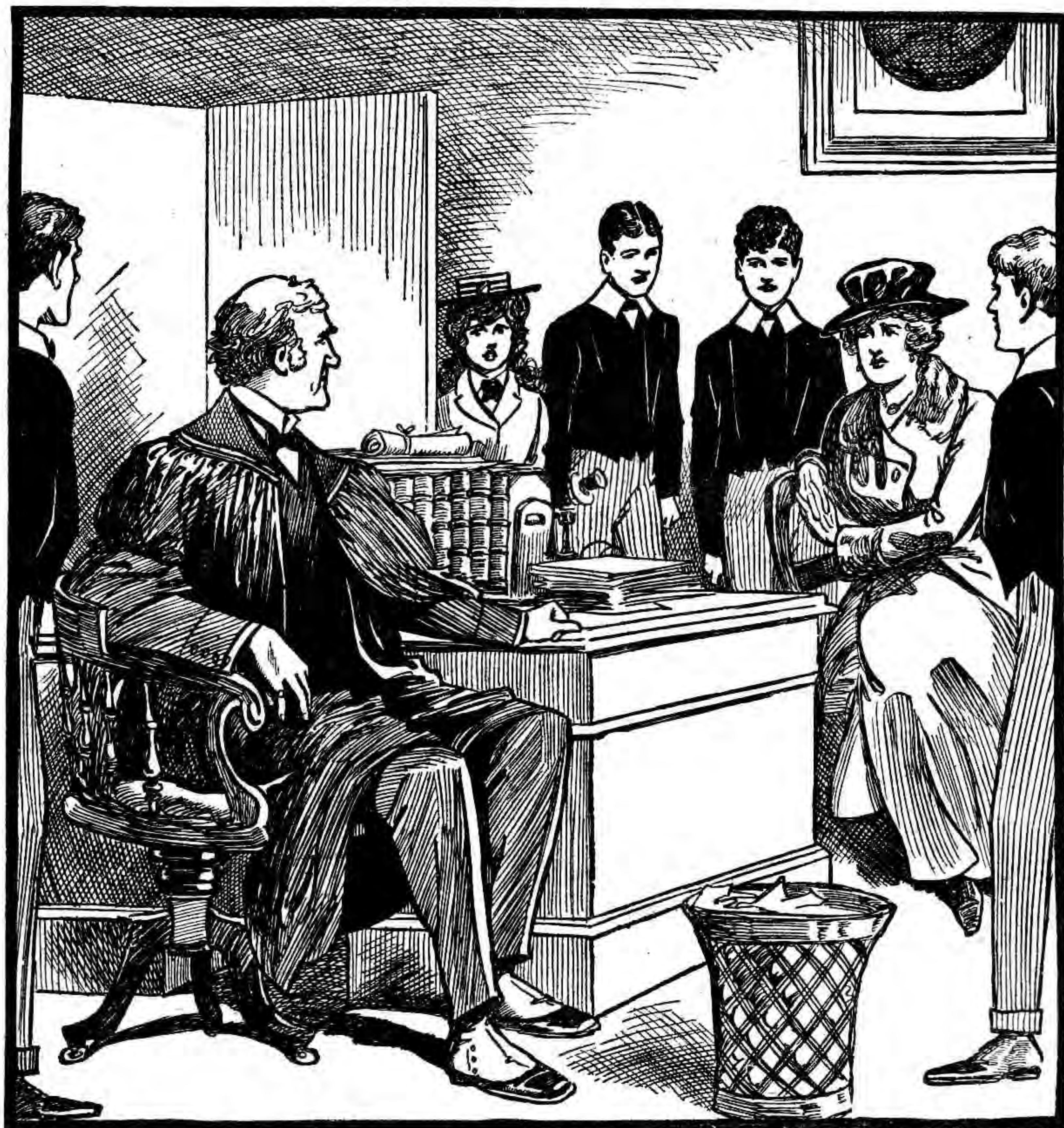




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SACKED!



SPRING'S MOTHER!

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SACKED!

By FRANK RICHARDS.

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



THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Called In to Help!

"**W**HERE did you get this?" asked Harry Wharton, turning over a note he held in his hands.

It was during the hour of prep, and Wharton and Frank Nugent were busy together in Study No. 1 on the Remove passage. But Greek construe was put by for the time being as Harry questioned Trotter, the page.

"From Gosling," said Trotter. "I'd been over to Pegg on an errand for Dr. Locke, an' jest as I come up to the gates I see a boy about your size, Master Wharton, goin' away. Looked to me as if he'd a Highcliffe cap on, but I couldn't swear to that. An' Gosling, he wouldn't tell me nothin'—only to give this to you. An' to look to you for anythin' there might be for deliverin' of it, Master Wharton," added Trotter delicately.

"Here you are, Trotter!"

Harry tossed the page a shilling, which was deftly caught, and Trotter made exit, grinning and satisfied.

"Some more trouble, I guess," remarked Harry, still turning over the note, as if loth to open it.

"Well, we may as well know what, anyway," answered Frank, a trifle impatiently.

Harry tore open the envelope, and laid the sheet he took from it on the table. Frank drew up his chair, and they read it together.

"Dear Wharton,—Fresh news in the Spring case! You fellows had hardly gone this afternoon when Bunter rolled in, to tell us that your rotter Spring was coming over here to-night with that sweet creature Angel, for a little flutter with Pon and his sportive crew.

"I think it's O.K., though we are a bit puzzled where Bunter comes in, and still more as to where Skinner does. It was Skinner who brought young Conrad over here, yesterday, so Bunter says; and I think it's true, though Bunter does say it. But what's Skinner doing in the game? It's mixed-up enough without him.

"Perhaps you can find out something. And perhaps—though we don't make a point of that, and it may not be too easy—some of you may like to follow up the Angel and his attendant cherub to-night. We are going to try a bold stroke—no less than producing Spring minor to Spring major, with ghostly effects, as a pleasant surprise. It may not do much, but I think it can be counted upon to send Spring major out of here in a hurry, and if some of you nabbed him as he came out there might possibly be disclosures in the agitation of the moment.

"The kid's not in first-class fettle, and we are all a bit worried about him. We can face the music if he is caught out hiding here, and not mind very much, though, of course, it will mean a row.

But it will be a pretty big shock to him if he's caught.

"Shall bring this to Greyfriars myself, and bribe the worthy Gosling to get it through to you. No chance of seeing you this time of day, I know. By the way, if you like to let any of the other fellows into the secret—Vernon-Smith, Todd, Field, or any of the other old reliables—we don't mind. They might help.

"Yours ever,

"PHILIP DERWENT."

"He's jolly serious about it," said Frank. "And yet the fun in him crops up here and there. If you ask me, Flip Derwent's no end of a good chap!"

"All three of them are," replied Harry. "But it's Derwent who is most sure that we are ready to do all we can, and I like him for that."

"I don't think the other two doubt it," Frank said. "It's only that he just naturally takes the lead. Rather a hefty notion about the Bounder and the rest of them—the Bounder especially. He's just the shrewd, cool sort of beggar to see farther into this than we do."

"Cut along and ask him to come here, Frank, will you? Never mind prep for once: I can't get my mind on to prep with this hanging about."

"I'll go. Shall I fetch Bob and Johnny and Inky, too? As for prep, hang prep! We don't often seamp it, so Quelch ought not to be too much down on us."

"No, only the Bounder. Oh, yes, one other chap—Toddy. We can tell them all about it better than if the others were here. Five all talking at once doesn't help much."

Within three minutes Herbert Vernon-Smith lounged in, and Peter Todd followed briskly with Frank.

"What's the trouble, Wharton?" asked the Bounder.

"Whatever it may be, you've sought the right counsellors," remarked Peter. "If there's a chap in the Remove who is my superior as a sheet-anchor in times of storm, it's Smithy; and if—"

"Well, we do want your advice," admitted Wharton, as Peter paused, seeing no need to round off his sentence. "We may not take it, but we want it."

"Tell us all about it," said Vernon-Smith.

"You know that yarn about young Spring of the Second being here in the name of a younger brother, having dirtied his ticket in his own name so completely that no headmaster who was at all particular would take him in?"

The two new-comers nodded.

"Well, it's true," said Harry. "Merton of Highcliffe knew them both, and he's told us all about it. This rotter here is Herbert Spring, and Herbert Spring was a thief—and worse! But he's down on the roll as Conrad Arthur Spring."

"I'm not surprised," said Smithy.

"Same here," Toddy chimed in. "Nasty young sweep, Spring!"

"But there's more than that to it. Conrad Spring is at Highcliffe!"

"What? I say, Wharton, they would never dare to send him there!"

"He hasn't been sent! The poor kid's run away from the school he was at—somewhere in the Midlands—and come here pretty nearly heartbroken, with a notion of getting the wrong done to him put right somehow."

"But you say he's at Highcliffe! How's that?"

"Skinner took him there, Toddy!"

"Skinner? But where does Skinner come in?" asked the Bounder wonderingly.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know," he said. "You never can tell with Skinner. He found the kid in the road, and knew that Merton had known him in the past, so he took him along there. It may have been good nature."

"Hardly poss, as it was Skinner," replied the Bounder cynically.

"Well, he couldn't have meant any harm," said Frank.

"Not to the kid," Peter Todd said. "But Skinney doesn't quite love our Spring."

"Then there's Bunter," went on Harry.

"Half a jiffy!" said the Bounder. "Let's leave Bunter for a bit. I should like to know in what capacity the victim is at Highcliffe."

"Oh, didn't I tell you? Derwent and Merton and Tunstall are hiding him. They don't quite know what to do to help him, so they sent for us this afternoon to ask our counsel. Now Derwent suggests that we should get to know what some of you other chaps think, too."

"They can't keep him hidden there long," said Smithy. "It's a mad game, I think. But decent of them, all the same."

"Here's a note I've just had from Derwent," Harry said. "You two had better read it."

Peter Todd and Herbert Vernon-Smith read the note together, and as Harry and Frank sat watching them it occurred to both that two of the keenest brains at Greyfriars were now enlisted in Conrad Spring's cause.

The Bounder's lean, rather hard face looked clever. Toddy, with his long nose and long forelock, did not appear specially keen; his likeness to his simple Cousin Alonzo was apt to make people who knew Alonzo underrate Peter. But, in their different ways, there was little to choose between Toddy and the Bounder; and in such a matter as that now in hand both had a more grown-up way of looking at things than any of the Famous Five.

"Those fellows seem game to do anything poss," remarked the Bounder, looking up.

"Yes; they're good chaps," said Harry.

Smithy darted at him a keen, quizzical glance. It did not appear to strike Wharton that what Derwent and his

chums were willing to do was nothing bigger than he himself had done for others scores of times. But it struck the Bounder, who had a very real admiration for Harry Wharton.

"I don't know that I see a lot in this ghost dodge," said Peter Todd. "It seems to me quite outside the legal aspect of the case, which is what really matters most."

"You'd be sure to think of the law, Toddy," said Vernon-Smith, with ever so slight a grin.

"Well, this is a matter for the law. It's complicated by the fact that the wronged party is an infant."

"He's not!" said Frank Nugent. "Conrad Spring's thirteen or thereabouts."

"An infant in the eye of the law, old top!" said Peter. "You're another—that's all right. I'm one, and Smithy's one—that does seem middling silly, but it's so. An infant can only bring suit through his next friend—usually father, mother, or guardian. This poor kid doesn't seem to have any next friend. His mother must be about his worst enemy."

"But he doesn't want a law-suit," said Harry. "All he wants is to get his own name back, and have things put straight."

"And when he's done it—if he can do it—where is he?"

"Blessed if I know! I see what you mean, Toddy; he will have set his mother against him once for all, and—"

"That's no odds!" put in the Bounder. "I don't know a lot about mothers—I can't remember mine. But one of that sort must be rather worse than none at all, I should say."

"H'm—yes!" agreed Peter Todd.

"The thing now is about to-night," said Harry.

"You're goin'?"

"Oh, yes, Smithy! All five of us, I guess! The other three won't be left out."

"Well, I'm comin'—and so is Toddy."

"How do you know that, Smithy?"

"Saw it in your eloquent eye, old scout! There are one or two more who might like to be in, and if there are to be seven of us, one or two more won't matter."

"Do you mean Redwing?" asked Frank.

"No. I'd rather he should be left out, on the whole. He is not so strait-laced that he'd shy at breakin' bounds, but he has other things to think about. For the same reason I'd say nothin' to Linley. But there's Squiff."

"Squiff means Browney and Delarey, too," Harry said.

"Well, what's the matter with that? The Rebel's interested in Spring, on young Sylvester's account, and in that cad Angel, on Vivian's. I'll speak to them if you like, Wharton."

"Right-ho, Smithy! I'll be glad if you will!"

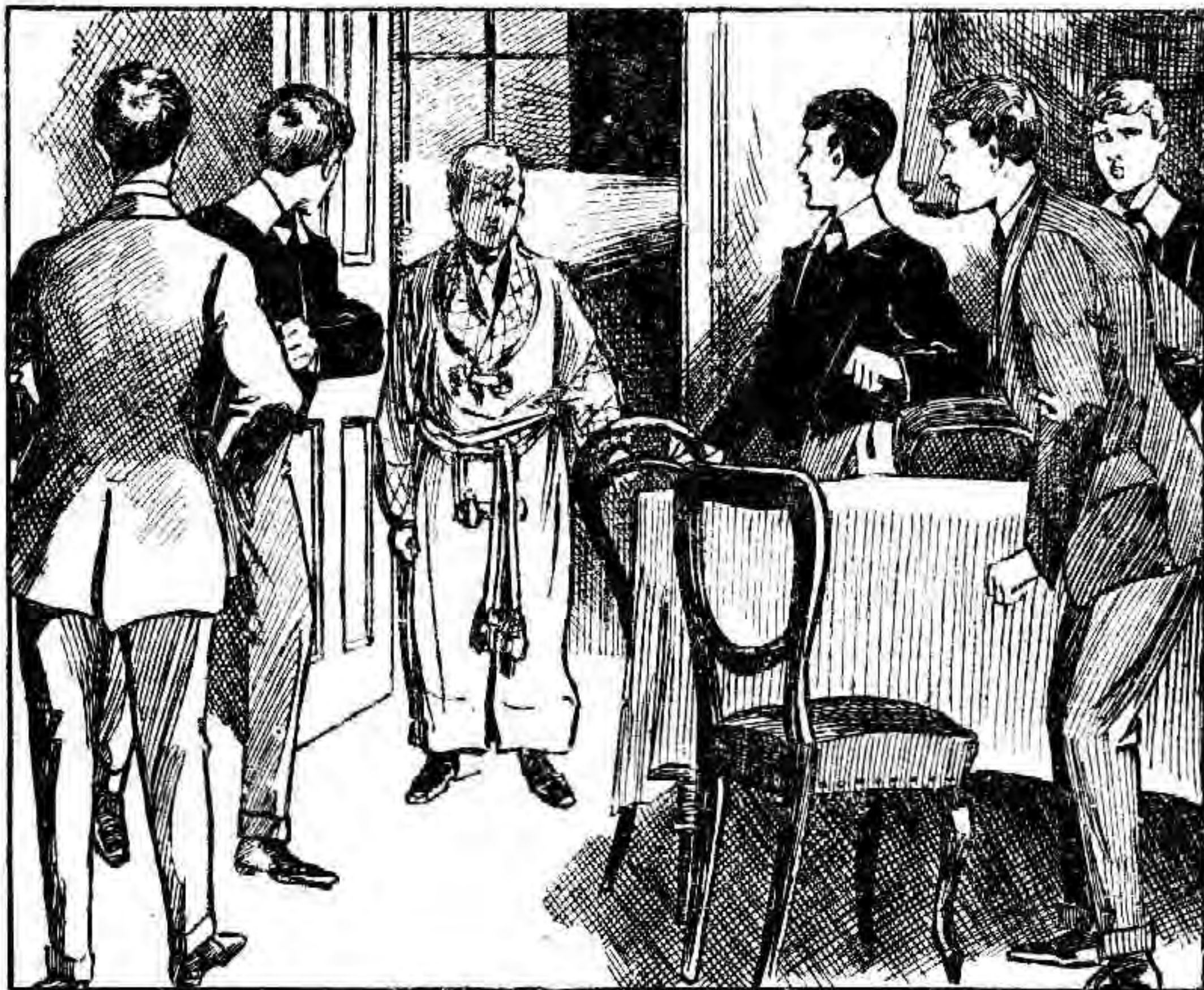
THE SECOND CHAPTER.

At Highcliffe!

"YOU haven't said anythin' to young Conrad about the ghost bizney, Flip, have you?" asked Tunstall.

Tunstall and Philip Derwent were together in Study No. 6 on the Fourth passage at Highcliffe. Merton was not present; he was with the youngster whom they were hiding.

They had made a snug retreat for him in a remote box-room, and so far detection had been eluded. But all three saw that this game could not go on very long, and they all realised that they were taking a big responsibility of which they had never thought at first.



Spring sees a ghost! (See Chapter 5.)

For that long tramp in damp and cold had told severely upon Conrad Spring. He was haggard and weak. They did not suspect anything definite in the way of illness, but they felt that a doctor ought to see him. No doctor could be brought in, however, under present conditions.

It was of no use to appeal to Highcliffe's Head. Dr. Voysey was the last man likely to mix himself up in an affair like this, altogether outside his jurisdiction. There was difficulty enough at times in getting him to stir when the matter was one in which Highcliffe was vitally interested.

"No. I'm not sure he'd be on," replied Flip. "It's a nice kid, but too merciful. He can't love that rotter of a brother of his, but he ain't half as much down on him as he ought to be."

"Then how are you goin' to manage it?"

"By stratagem. I'll think it out if you'll stop gassin', Tun!"

The reproach was scarcely deserved. Fred Tunstall was the least talkative of the three.

"Dry up, Tun!" remarked Cocky, Flip's cockatoo.

Tunstall shook his fist at him.

"You can get on to the thinkin' gadget in a minute or two, Flippy," he said. "Though I'm hanged if I believe you can think without talkin'—you mostly think aloud. But I've somethin' to say first, by Jupiter!"

"Well, what is it, Tun?"

"That kid—he isn't fit to be about as he is. I wish he'd gone to Greyfriars instead of comin' here!"

Flip Derwent stared.

"You're not——" he began.

"Wantin' to chuck it?" put in Tunstall quickly. "No, I'm not, old bean! I'm as keen as you are, or as Algy is—an' Algy's keener than I've often seen him on anythin'. It's a likeable young beggar."

"Then why——"

"Because old Locke's one of the right sort! A bit softer than most, perhaps; but that doesn't matter. He'd have taken the kid in while his case was bein' investigated—put him in sanny, if necessary.

An' I fancy one way or another he'd have seen it through to the finish."

"We've got Skinner to thank that he didn't go there," Flip said thoughtfully.

"Not much to thank him for, either!"

"No, old boy. Skinner was playing a game of his own, I suppose. I say, I wonder whether those Greyfriars chaps will come?"

"What, Angel an' Spring?"

"No; Wharton and the rest."

"I think you can count on them, Flip, if they see any use in comin'. Have you said anythin' to Courtenay an' the Caterpillar?"

"I haven't. It seemed fairer to leave them out, though I know they'd be willing."

But at that moment Rupert De Courcy—whom all Highcliffe called the Caterpillar—came in with Merton.

"I've told him," said Merton. "He'd smell a rat, the crafty bounder! He'll tell Courtenay. An' he has a dodge for gettin' at Pon an' his crowd."

"Good man, Caterpillar!" cried Flip.

"Never say die!" crooned Cocky.

"What is it?" asked Tunstall.

"There are two keys to the empty study, dear boys," said De Courcy. "Pon doesn't know that. Pon is also unaware that I possess one of them. Knowin' dog, the dear Pon; but there are limits to his information."

"That makes it heaps easier," Flip said. "Of course, I've got to swizzle young Conrad a bit, and I don't half like it."

"You men seem all rather gone on the excellent youth!" remarked the Caterpillar.

"He's a nice kid—straight an' grateful!" said Merton warmly.

"An' he's been treated cruelly!" added Tunstall.

"I should like him anyway," Flip said. "He's the sort I like."

"I am prepared also to take him to my heart!" the Caterpillar answered. "I don't know much about young Tichborne——"

"Eh?"

"The claimant, I mean, Flip—the wrong Spring!"

"Oh! I didn't twig! He's a rotter!"
 "So I should say. A rotter, but interestin'. Not so interestin' as his mother, however. I should like to meet that dear lady!"

The three stared at him.
 "Hanged if I would!" said Flip.

"It would interest me no end, by gad!" said the Caterpillar. "As complete a wrong 'un as the dear Pon, I should say! Can't say much more than that! By the way, is Pon in the secret of the Spring substitution?"

"My hat, no!"
 "I wouldn't be too sure, Merton. It sounds quite in Pon's line. Still, probably not. No profit in it for him. Same way with Angel. Pon an' his lie-men an' Angel will be merely spectators to-night, then?"

"Unless Spring makes row enough to bring someone who matters upon the scene," replied Flip, grinning.

"That doesn't strike me as likely to be funny, Flip!" said Merton sharply.

"Mobby doesn't matter," said the Caterpillar. "Mobby would be shocked at us for playin' ghosts, an' would overlook the fact that Pon & Co. were playin' cards, by gad! I don't know that there's anybody here who matters much. Slackest place I ever struck. High-life!"

But Highcliffe was not really quite so slack that the plans made for the night were without an element of real danger for those who were to carry them out.

Even Mr. Mobbs, the Fourth Form master, snobbish little slacker though he was, could hardly pass over a card-party in a supposedly empty study after lights out, with visitors from Greyfriars, without taking some action. And, if he would be reluctant to act where Pon & Co. were concerned, he would be glad of a chance of getting home on Flip Derwent & Co.

"Well, Franky an' I are in this," said the Caterpillar. And he lounged out.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Night-birds!

A HAND was laid upon the shoulder of Aubrey Angel as he lay half-dozing in bed in the Upper Fourth dormitory.

"Are you awake, Angel?" came a whispered query.

"Yaas. That you, Spring?"

"Shush! You'll have someone hear you!"

"That's all right. You wait for me in the passage. I won't be more than five minutes. No use waking Kenney, I take it—what?"

"We don't want him," said Spring snkily.

"Skinner might come, though. Sporty chap, Skinner!" said Angel, as he got out of bed.

"If Skinner comes I don't!" said Spring.

"Ah! Well, never mind. Cut now. I'll soon be with you."

It was cold in the passage, but if Spring shivered as he waited it was only with cold, not with fright.

He might be—and was—a funk in some ways. He hated being hurt. But he had more hardihood than most in matters like to-night's expedition. There had always been boldness as well as craft in his wickedness; and he knew that Angel, Skinner, Loder of the Sixth, his chum Carne, and others often went out at night. If they could do it safely, he did not see why he could not.

In the dormitory he had left someone else got out of bed, and padded silently through the passage to the Remove

dormitory. Spring was with Angel when Hop Hi passed the door.

The little Chinese stole to Wharton's bed, and shook the captain of the Remove lightly by the shoulder.

"Who's there?" asked Harry at once.

"Hop Hi. Springee gettee upce and dlessee!"

"It's all right. At least, we know what he's after. We'll look after him. But thanks all the same, kid!"

Hop Hi must have been surprised, but he said nothing to show it.

In the summer term Spring had known that Hop Hi was watching him; but lately he had come to believe that the watch had been relaxed.

That was not the case, however. Not for a day had the vigilance of the little Chinese slumbered. If Spring had only suspected how much Hop Hi knew about his doings he would have felt less easy in mind.

"Me come?" asked Hop Hi, as Wharton got out of bed.

"No, kid! You're not wanted. There's a crowd of us going."

"Springee havee telleglam to-day. Hop Hi gettee telleglam. Help it is."

A crumpled paper was thrust into Wharton's hand.

It almost shocked him. This sort of thing was all right, according to Hop Hi's very Oriental views, but it was not at all in accordance with Wharton's code.

"I say, Hop Hi—"

But the little Chinese seemed to have vanished into space. He was no longer there.

"Don't be too scrupulous, Wharton," spoke the voice of the Bounder.

"What, did you hear, Smithy?"

"I did. If you feel uneasy in your mind about that wire, just give it to me. I sha'n't be troubled that way."

"I'm not sure that we ought—"

"Better give it to me!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" spoke the sleepy voice of Bob Cherry.

"Shin out, Bob!" said Harry. "Here you are, Smithy! I dare say you know best; but—"

"I regard Spring as the enemy, an' anythin' that can be used against him an' for that poor kid at Highcliffe as fair play!" said the Bounder grimly, as he took the telegram.

And Harry could not feel sure that he was not right. At least, his view was a plausible one.

There was no chance of looking at the wire then. Smithy put it in one of his trouser-pockets.

Then he and Harry woke the rest of the fellows who had agreed to go on that night expedition to Highcliffe.

No one quite knew what to expect from it. There was no certainty that they could do anything to help the three at Highcliffe who had Conrad Spring's interests at heart. Nevertheless they were all keen—Squiff and Tom Brown and Delarey, as well as the Famous Five and the Bounder and Peter Todd.

Two or three of them had not quite finished dressing when a fat figure rolled up to Wharton in the gloom, and the voice of Billy Bunter said:

"I say, Wharton, I'm coming along, you know!"

"I don't know anything of the sort! I know jolly well you're not!" Harry answered in an angry whisper.

"Oh, ain't I, though? Do you suppose I can't guess what you fellows are after?"

"What are we after, then?"

Bunter curved a fat hand round his mouth, and whispered mysteriously and thrillingly:

"A feed!"

"Ready, Wharton?" asked the Bounder.

"Yes. But this fat fool—"

"Bunty—Bunty, get thee back to thy innocent bed!" said Peter Todd.

"Likely, ain't it? And you fellows going out to—"

Bunter was raising his voice more than was at all safe, all things considered.

"Let the silly fat ass come!" said Squiff.

"You can't stop me! He, he, he!" cackled Bunter.

Bob Cherry, who had been out of the dormitory, came back at this moment.

"What's that idiotic porpoise up to?" he demanded. "He can be heard at the other end of the passage!"

"Wants to come with us!" growled Harry.

"Well, let him. He'll wish he hadn't. I'll bet! They've started, Harry."

"Who've started?" asked Bunter inquisitively.

"That's no affair of yours!" snapped Wharton. "I tell you once for all, Bunter, there's no question of a feed—not a giddy mouthful! I don't want you, and I can't make out why these fellows should—"

"Safer to take him, I fancy," whispered the Bounder in the ear of the Remove skipper. "He knows somethin', I understand, and there's no certainty what the fat rotter will do if we refuse to let him go."

"Oh, all right! Are you ready to go out, Bunter?"

"I shall be in a minute, Harry, old pal. I say, where is the feed? You might tell a chap!"

Bob Cherry had been out on scout, and had come back to say that Angel and Spring had gone. There was really no special hurry to follow them; it was better to give them a start. Bunter knew about their projected visit. It was he who had carried news of it to Highcliffe, though he had only obtained that news by taking from his minor a note to Merton entrusted to Sammy by Skinner.

But even now Bunter had not guessed that Angel and Spring had anything to do with this night expedition from the Remove dormitory.

It was soon to learn that, however.

Getting out presented no special difficulty, though, of course, there was some risk, made bigger by the size of the party and the clumsiness of its weightiest member.

Nobody but Bunter thought it tragic when Bunter flopped down full length on being helped—somewhat vigorously—over the wall; but the rest failed to get out of it the amusement they would have got at an ordinary time. They were all very much in earnest.

Squiff and Harry Wharton were talking together when Bunter ranged up alongside in the dark. He listened for a minute or two. Then his voice was heard, raised in querulous protest.

"Are we going to Highcliffe, then?" he demanded.

"Yes!" snapped Harry.

"But what for? We sha'n't get any grub there!"

"You silly fat idiot, didn't I tell you we weren't going grub-hunting?"

"No good getting your wool off, old top," said Squiff coolly. "Bunter thinks with his tummy, so far as he can ever be said to think at all."

"But—but it's a swindle!" burred Bunter. "I—I've been had! If there ain't any grub I'm going back!"

"Go back, then!" Wharton replied sharply.

"I—I daren't go back alone; it's so beastly dark! Besides, I couldn't get over the wall without help."

"Stop that row!" came the Bounder's

voice, raised authoritatively, from ahead.

"Oh, look here, you fellows, someone will have to go back with me! Who's coming? Are you, Squiff?"

"I am not Bunter—not in these trousers, as Shakespeare observed!"

"If you go back, you'll go alone," Harry said.

"We can't let him go back!" growled Jonny Bull. "Why, the silly oyster might go giving the whole show away!"

"You're right, Bull," said Tom Brown. "Bunter sinks or swims with us now."

"I—I— Oh, see here, 'tain't fair! I thought it was grub—"

"We know. Squiff's explained that. Comes of doing your thinking in the wrong place," said Delaney. "Catch hold of one of his fat fins, Brown. I'll take the other. Gee-up, tubby!"

Bunter resigned himself to his fate.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Pon's Guests!

"THIS way, dear boy!" said Aubrey Angel. "Pon showed me the place last week. Queer thing, dashed queer, that people should build walls round schools an' prisons, an' so on, to keep the inmates in, an' then leave such gaps as they do for them to get out at!"

"There's a lot of difference between a school and a prison," said Spring.

"Think so? I don't see much myself, by gad! Still, Greyfriars an' Highcliffe do provide a few amusements that Holloway or Maidstone wouldn't, it's true. That's the dear Pon's whistle."

A long, low whistle on two notes had come from over the wall. Next moment a head appeared above it—the head of Cecil Ponsonby of the Highcliffe Fourth.

Something dropped.

"Rope ladder," said Pon. "We don't ask our visitors to take bits out of their dashed clobber climbin' walls, y'know."

"You first, Spring," said Angel.

Spring mounted the rope ladder, and the Fourth-Former followed.

"I'll leave it there," Pon said. "No one will notice it. Easy enough to get up this side—three movable bricks does the dashed trick! Go slow with the chin-music now. I could hear you talkin' away as you came up to the wall."

Two minutes later they were inside the walls of Highcliffe. Their way was up by a back staircase that properly belonged to the kitchen regions. Pon knew where palm-oil was useful, and there was little danger of his encountering anyone who mattered in taking his visitors up by that way.

Caution was needed on the study floor, for the Fifth and Sixth were not yet at rest. But Pon took Angel by the wrist, and Angel took Spring, and in that manner they made their way along the dark passage to the study around the corner, supposed to be empty and unoccupied.

There, with the window, which faced a wall, and was thus fairly well screened in any case, and the door so covered that not the least ray of light could escape, they found Gadsby and Vavasour.

Monson minor had refused to join the party. He detested Angel, and said Spring made him feel ill. Possibly Monson's was a slightly healthier mind than that of any of his three chums. But that is saying little for it.

There were new packs of cards. There was a box of a hundred gold-tipped cigarettes, and there were bottles—sherry, Pon said, apologising to Angel for being unable to offer him whisky.

"Come well-heeled, young Spring—what?" said Gadsby.

"I've more on me than you're likely to win from me to-night, anyway," replied Spring, rather surlily.

Spring had taken to Ponsonby, but was very much disposed to be on his guard against the other two.

He had not, however, grown so fond of Pon that he had any hesitation about rooking him, should the chance offer. He and Angel had discussed the possibility of that in a most businesslike manner on the way. But as Angel had already fixed up with Ponsonby to rook Spring—if not this time, later—Spring was not quite so thoroughly on velvet as he fancied himself.

On the other hand, it is by no means certain that Angel and Pon would have come over the Shylock of the Greyfriars Second with such ease as they fancied they were going to do.

The little three-cornered game of diamond cut diamond, however, was destined not to be played out. Master Herbert Spring's first and last visit to Highcliffe was fated to be a short one.

"Not so sure," said Gadsby. "I feel in winnin' vein, by gad! But we shall see. Anyway, it's all to the good that you're provided. The only paper we play for here has John Bradbury's name on it."

"Absolutely!" chimed in Vavasour.

"Have a glass of sherry, Spring, old top?" inquired Pon affably.

"No, thanks!" answered Spring in haste.

He spoke rather as if Pon were asking him to step into a trap. Perhaps he felt that way. And perhaps he was justified. Pon was certainly not above the dodge of plying with drink a fellow whose money he wanted to win.

But Angel took sherry, and so did all three of the Highcliffe nuts.

The Remove were content to drink ginger-beer out of the native bottle, so to speak, and currant-wine out of tooth-glasses. But Pon had provided wine-glasses of the correct shape for sherry. Pon believed in doing things in style.

The glasses were put away before the gambling started, though.

Spring touched Angel's foot under the table. Angel gave him the very slightest wink in sign of understanding. But as the wastrel of the Upper Fourth winked openly at Pon a moment later, when Spring's eyes were upon his cards, it might be guessed that nothing Angel had promised Spring was at all likely to stand in the way of the working of his unholy alliance with Ponsonby.

Aubrey Angel was quite capable of betraying them both, as they were of cheating him, if they saw the chance. And neither Gadsby nor Vavasour was much better than these three. They might have hesitated at swindling Pon, but they regarded both the visitors as fair game.

All five smoked, though Spring was very careful not to let his cigarette get in the way of his attention to the game.

Soon the study was wreathed with smoke. But no one coughed. They were all more or less seasoned vessels.

The game was on the level at the outset. It is generally regarded by card-sharpers as a mistake to begin too early to play tricks. Let the intended victim get thoroughly interested and excited first, then rook him. That is the way. There were not many card-sharpers who could have taught the aristocratic Pon, or the well-connected and wealthy Angel, much.

It soon became clear to them both that Spring was not easily to be worked into such a state of excitement as would best have suited their purpose.

He had the gambling spirit in him, in

spite of his closeness; but he had also an old, cool head, and he had been used to handling considerable sums of money—not always his own.

He was in high spirits, for him; but even that did not render him excited.

That wire from his mother—the wire which the Bouncer now carried in his pocket—had relieved him immensely.

To him it seemed that the death of his brother did away with all danger. While there was someone living who had a right to the name he bore trouble was always possible.

But, once Conrad was dead, who was going to make trouble?

No one else would care enough. Merton might talk. There might be more gossip at Greyfriars. But nothing would come of it all. And if Greyfriars got too warm for him he could move on to another school with a fair record from Dr. Locke, since, as he believed, Greyfriars had not yet found him out.

There was not in him the least trace of sorrow for the brother he had so bitterly wronged.

The pile of silver in front of him grew pretty steadily as the game of banker pursued its various course.

Pon was losing a little, and Vavasour, who had had a remittance that morning, a good deal. Angel was neither up nor down to any extent worth mentioning. Spring and Gadsby were the winners thus far.

But everyone supposed that there was plenty of time for a change of luck.

That, however, was where they were wrong.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Spring Sees a Ghost!

"IS that you, De Courcy?"

"The identical, Wharton, dear boy!"

"I thought it was your voice; but I didn't expect to see you. We had no idea you were in this."

"At half-past the eleventh hour, old bean, the accents of wisdom made themselves heard by our mutual pals, Merton, Tunstall, an' Derwent, an' they called the Caterpillar into their counsels. He, as in duty bound, immediately reported to Franky, who consented to give the whole deplorable affair the tone it so sadly needed by also comin'. Consequently, I am here."

The Caterpillar was outside the walls of Highcliffe when he thus addressed Harry Wharton and the band of Removees who had come with him.

It was eminently characteristic of the Caterpillar that when he did break bounds in this way—which was not very often—he did it, as he did other things, as though it were the natural and inevitable course.

The appearance of Mr. Mobbs, or even that of Dr. Voysey, would not have flurried the Caterpillar. Right or wrong, he was almost always calm and cool.

"Is Courtenay about, then?" inquired Peter Todd.

"He is within. The rest are also within. I elected myself a deputation of one to meet you fellows an' concert measures with you."

"Spring and Angel are there, I suppose?" said Vernon-Smith.

"That you, Smithy? You suppose rightly, as usual."

"Well, I don't see quite what we are to do," said Harry, in rather a puzzled tone. "Everyone was willing to come along; but we're in the dark as to Derwent's game. He says something about a ghost—"

"That's the gadget, dear boy! The very capable Flip needs no help. I shall not be amazed with any great amazement

if the result of his scheme is to send Spring over the wall howlin' murder. An', if it wasn't for Flippy's sake, by gad, I'd not be sorry if it frightened the sweet creature into a fit that would carry him off!"

"Same here!" said Piet Delarey.

"Is that you, Delarey? So an' no otherwise should I have expected you to feel. All very well for Wharton an' Nugent to pity even the criminal when his crime is brought home to him, but it's lucky that some of us are harder."

"I don't know that either Harry or I waste much pity on criminals," said Nugent, a trifle aggrieved.

But they all knew what the Caterpillar meant. He had it in him to be far harder than Wharton or the gentle Frank. And so, in their various ways, had the Bounder and Delarey and Peter Todd, and perhaps Johnny Bull and Squiff, too.

"Who make up the goodly company?" asked De Courcy lightly.

"We five—Brown, Field, and Delarey—Smithy, Todd, and Bunter," replied Harry.

"Excuse my askin'—I have not the eyes of a cat. By gad, you don't mean to say the jovial Gunter is there, though?"

"Yes, I'm here, Caterpillar, old pal!" said Bunter ingratiatingly. "I knew you'd expect me. I told these fellows so. What did they expect to do without a chap of my ability to lead them, I'd like to know?"

"You surprise me, Grunter!" said the Caterpillar urbanely. "May I ask, with all deference, what your instinct for leadership prompts you to order at this moment?"

"Well, Caterpillar, I——"

"Dry up, porpoise!" snapped Peter Todd. "What do you think we'd better do, De Courcy? I don't quite see myself how we are helping by staying out here. Everything will be over by the time Angel and Spring come out, and their visit isn't our affair. But certainly a crowd like this can't go inside to share in the proceedings."

"That's so," admitted the Caterpillar. "I can stay here an' entertain you with cheery converse until the proceedin's have terminated, when we can all hear what has happened from our colleagues inside—unless the result is such a mix-up that they don't get a chance of comin' out to inform us."

De Courcy spoke of the possible mix-up—and all knew that there was danger of something big in that line—as coolly as he spoke of everything else. And he spoke as if he were prepared to stay out for the night if necessary—as no doubt he was.

But he had an alternative.

"Or," he went on languidly, "I could extend the hospitality of Highcliffe to two or three of you—not more than three. I think—if the rest will wait. It would perhaps be as well that there should be some Greyfriars witnesses—besides the esteemed Angel—of Spring's demeanour under the ghostly visitation. Sorry I can't ask you all in; but you won't blame me, I'm sure. An' those who go will understand that they take their lives in their hands, by gad! I cannot pretend to protect them from the ire of Mobby, should Mobby butt in on the proceedin's—I thank thee, Todd, for teachin' me that word!"

"I'll come along, Caterpillar!" said Bunter eagerly.

Bunter was too obtuse to realise at once the risk involved, or he would not have made that offer. There was no fear of his being held to it, however.

"You jolly well won't!" snapped Bob Cherry.

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"Shut up, you fat idiot!" growled Johnny Bull.

"You don't make quite a first-class witness, you know, Bunt," said Peter Todd mildly. "You suffer from a variegated imagination."

"Will you come, Wharton?" asked De Courcy.

"Yes," answered Harry readily.

He saw the danger as clearly as anyone; but it was not for him to shirk it.

"Who else?"

"We'll leave it to you, Caterpillar," said Bob. "But, if he doesn't mind, I think Smithy for one."

"Oh, I'm on, all serene!" the Bounder said.

"The includefulness of the esteemed and wily Smithy seems to me the proper caperfulness," murmured Inky.

"Thanks, Cherry! Todd, do you——"

"I rather think I do," said Peter.

"Might make it four, perhaps," the Caterpillar said. "It will be rather a crowd in any case. One more——"

"Me!" said Bob quickly.

"You're too heavy-footed, Bob," growled Johnny. "It had better be——"

"Me!" burred Bunter. "I know the Caterpillar wants——"

"Delarey, will you come?" asked De Courcy, ruthlessly cutting short the Owl. "Or Field, perhaps?"

"Are you on, Piet?" asked Squiff. "Yours is the first refusal."

"Rather!" said the Rebel.

"Follow me, then!" spoke the Caterpillar. "Don't be shocked at the rope ladder, though. It is the dear Pon's, not mine. Since Franky plucked me like a brand from the burnin' an' set my feet in the strait way such conveniences are as naught to me. Pon left it; we will use it—that is all."

"Heavy-footed be hanged, Johnny!" grumbled Bob, as the seven who were to stay outside followed the five to the place where the rope ladder hung. "I'm no more——"

"Oh, really, Cherry, you would be a most unfit person to go!" said Bunter peevishly. "But the Caterpillar wanted me, and I think that I ought——"

"Do you know what would happen to you if you were caught in there, tabby?" asked Tom Brown sharply.

"Why, what should——"

"You'd be sacked, you fat idiot!"

"What about those fellows, then?" demanded Bunter, with evident incredulity. The Caterpillar's warning had gone past him.

"Well, they'll be sacked if they're caught," answered Tom Brown grimly. "They're taking a risk."

"But, having better characters than the Owl's, they may get off with a swishin'," added Squiff, grinning in the gloom.

"Oh!" said Bunter. Then he lapsed into silence. If there was all that risk, Bunter, in spite of his inquisitiveness and his craze for forcing his company upon De Courcy, had no wish to be one of the four.

Any of the rest would have gone willingly and cheerfully. They would have preferred to face the full risk with their chums in any case. But they all saw the risk; and they all saw that four was really as many as the Caterpillar could well take in.

The Caterpillar led the way up the rope ladder and over the wall, and Wharton, Vernon-Smith, Todd, and Delarey followed. The rest waited.

"Come on, dear boys!" said De Courcy.

His way in was not the same which Pon & Co. used. It is likely that Pon & Co. did not know of the Caterpillar's way. There was no back staircase in it, which

made it riskier. But the five got through unseen.

In Study No. 6, with a very dim light, they found Frank Courtenay, Flip Derwent, Merton, and Tunstall.

A cloth covered Cocky's cage, but that remarkable bird did not seem to be asleep. From under the cloth came a murmur of: "Here's another jolly row!"

"Cocky may be right!" remarked Courtenay, as he shook hands with the Greyfriars quartet. "It's good of you fellows to take the risk, but I hope you all understand that it isn't a small one."

"Franky's a gloomy old specimen!" said the Caterpillar. "Fact of the matter is, he doesn't like using young Spring—our Spring, that is—in the role of spook!"

"It's true; I don't!" confessed Courtenay. "Some way or another this bizney's got to be cleared up; but I don't see how the ghost trick is going to help much."

"Can't do any harm, anyway!" Derwent said. "What do you think, Wharton?"

"I rather agree with Courtenay," Harry answered.

Flip looked at the rest. None of them spoke. But, on the whole, he felt pretty sure that they did not agree with Wharton.

"Better fetch the kid, Algy!" he said.

"That's the only thing about it I don't like," said Merton unexpectedly. "I don't care a scrap if it frightens that young rotter, Herbert Spring, into nineteen different kinds of fits! But Conrad's different. I don't want that kid hurt, Flip."

"Do you think I do?" snapped Flip.

"Of course I don't, old chap! But then——"

"Do any of you fellows see how it can hurt him?" asked Flip.

"He wouldn't take it on if he knew, I fancy," said Frank Courtenay slowly.

"That's altogether another matter. He may be a bit soft about his blackguard of a brother still; that's no reason why we should be!"

"I'm goin'," said Merton. "But the only way I can see for it is to bring Conrad along without explainin' anythin' to him. An' that makes me feel a bit mean. He'd do almost anythin' for any of us three; but I doubt whether he'd do this."

"Ghostly effects will have to be given up, Derwent!" remarked the Bounder.

"Not altogether," answered Flip.

"I've an electric-torch here. They think the door can't be opened from outside. If we can get it open without their twiggin', an' switch off the light inside—the switch is close to the door—an' then the kid shows up, with the light of my torch full on him an' everything else dark—well, I fancy the effect will be a bit ghostly to Spring major!"

Merton had gone. The rest now passed out of No. 6. They saw Merton come along with Conrad Spring, who was only half awake. He had been fetched from his bed in the box-room that was his hiding-place, and he wore only a light-coloured dressing-gown, the property of Merton, over his pyjamas.

He did not understand why he had been aroused; but he had come without a question. He did not see the others.

It was Flip who stole forward, with the key provided by the Caterpillar in his hand. The only light in the passage had now been switched off.

Very carefully and quite silently Flip inserted the key. Luckily, Pon had removed that which he had used after locking the door.

The door was pushed open. Merton stood in front of Conrad, while Flip thrust in his hand to the switch inside.

He had a view of the interior as he did

that, of course. But none of the five gamblers saw him, or knew that the door had opened. They were all intent upon the cards in their hands.

Flip switched off the light.

"Oh! What the merry dickens——"

"By gad!"

The nuts and their visitors were taken completely by surprise, and their alarm was great.

But even yet Conrad Spring did not understand at all. It was not until Merton's hand on his shoulder pushed him gently forward that he saw the interior of the study.

At the same instant Flip flashed on his electric-torch, and its ray showed up the face of the youthful fugitive, making him look ghastly pale.

They saw his lips move, but no sound came from them.

It was from Herbert Spring that words came—wild, frantic words.

The tidings of his brother's death had caused him no grief. But the sight of what he naturally took to be his brother's ghost sent him almost out of his senses.

He was on his feet, swaying unsteadily, before he spoke; and when he did speak his voice was hoarse and strained.

"Oh, oh, oh!" he cried. "It's my brother—it's his ghost! Oh, keep him off! Oh, Conrad! Oh, oh, oh!"

"Observe the name he spoke!" whispered the Bounder, cool as ever, to Rupert De Courcy, no less cool.

"Oh, by gad, Spring! Oh, I say!"

"You idiot, Spring!" snapped Angel. "It's a trick! Don't get funky, Pon, you fool!"

But Herbert Spring, with a horrible scream, had fallen forward on the table, fainting; and his brother reeled back into the ready arms of Merton. He also had fainted.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

In Danger!

IT was Aubrey Angel who switched on the light again. Then the crowd poured into the study—all but Merton and Harry Wharton, who were kneeling beside Conrad Spring in the passage.

Cecil Ponsonby was shivering with alarm; but his hardihood began to return to him as he saw the faces of his enemies. Derwent, Tunstall, Courtenay, De Courcy, Vernon-Smith, Todd, Delarey—he knew well that every one among those seven detested him; but he knew—he saw in a flash—that the presence of the Greyfriars fellows was a shield to him and those with him.

For they as well as he would have to face the music if anyone in authority came upon the scene; and, therefore, the hushing-up of the whole affair was as much their interest as his.

Neither Gadsby nor Vavasour saw that. Gadsby was twittering with fright, and Vavasour was almost stunned. He believed that he had seen a ghost; and the sight of all those well-known faces could not at once reassure him.

"I don't know what dashed silly game you rotters call this!" said Pon viciously. "But it seems to me that you're dashed well up to your necks in the soup if anythin' comes of it—as fairly in it as we are!"

"Somethin' is bound to come of it!" said Angel coolly. "I must ask you, Pon, dear boy, to lead me out at once! I don't exactly propose to wait here to be trapped, by gad!"

"Get him away!" gasped Gadsby, pointing to Spring. "We can't have him left here!"

"I? What on earth has he to do with me?" demanded Angel.

"You brought the young cad here, and

it's up to you to get him out, I should say!" said Piet Delarey warmly.

"Thanks, Delarey; but I don't quite see it in that light! There are enough of you to escort Spring home—if you're anxious about him. I'm not—I don't mind admittin' that! My one anxiety now is to clear out of this before anyone comes on the scene. That shriek is sure to bring someone. I should say—what?"

They wondered at Angel's cynical coolness. Perhaps he was not quite as cool as he seemed. Undoubtedly he was in a hurry to clear out. But his cynicism was not exaggerated. He did not care a scrap what became of Spring, or, for that matter, of Pon and Gaddy and Vav, if only he got clear away.

Pon did not seem disposed, for the moment, to fall in with his views.

"No particular reason why you should crawl out if the rest of us are to be nabbed," he replied. "You can clear out with our dear friends here. Best thing we can do now is to look on this room with that chap inside it, an' come back to him when we're sure no one is goin' to inquire into the bizney. I fancy that if anyone had heard him singin' out they would have been on the spot before this—what, Smithy?"

Vernon-Smith did not answer. He was not without some admiration for Ponsonby's quickly-regained coolness. There was something in it that spoke to his own nature. But he had never disliked Pon more intensely than in that moment.

It did indeed seem that no one who mattered could have heard that cry. But it was not safe to take that for granted.

"Cut back to No. 6, you chaps," said Flip. "Don't put the light on, and don't make a sound. That chap isn't a deader, is he, Todd?"

Flip was cool enough, too, though he was already wishin' that he had never thought of the ghost trick, and though he knew that it would be a very serious thing for him if by any chance the fright had killed Herbert Spring. Not only he would have to suffer, but others whom he had led into it—two, at least, of them—Courtenay and Wharton—against their own better judgment.

It would be a thing none of them could ever forget as long as he lived. But, somehow, Flip did not feel any great fear. And now Peter Todd, who had crossed over to Herbert Spring, spoke words that bucked him up at once.

"Not likely, Derwent! He's only fainted from sheer funk! He'll come to in a minute. But he mustn't be left alone, or he'll yell out. I'll stay with him."

"Really, dear boys," drawled Angel, "I think I must be goin'."

Angel had no notion of staying with anyone at any risk to himself. But he did not object to Toddy's staying.

"You're a brick, Todd!" said Flip warmly. "Clear off, you fellows! See here, Ponsonby, we've got to brazen this out some way if Mobby turns up."

It was the first time that term—or for long before—that Flip Derwent had spoken to Cecil Ponsonby. But Pon did not allow that fact to influence him.

"Right-ho, Derwent!" he said. "Keep your mouth shut, an' I'll talk to the worm if he appears. But unless these Greyfriars bounders are out of the way before——"

The Caterpillar, who had not said a word all this time, turned the key in the lock of the study which was supposed to be empty, locking Peter Todd and Herbert Spring inside it. Delarey and Vernon-Smith hurried off to No. 6.

"I miss my dear pal Wharton!" sneered Pon.

"I'm off!" said Angel. "Your fault if I'm trapped en route, Pon, dear boy!"

I don't know the way very well, but I'm dashed if I don't try it alone, as you won't come with me!"

"Oh, do as you like, hang you!" snapped Pon.

Angel disappeared.

"Wharton's gone off with Merton to get that poor kid away," said Tunstall.

"Oh, I thought he must be here, by gad!" said Pon. "I didn't see him, but I guessed he wouldn't be out of it when the rest of you took on the kind task of doin' me in, once for all, here!"

"It wasn't you we thought of, Ponsonby," said Frank Courtenay, with a touch of contempt.

But it would have been strange if Ponsonby, knowing as little as he did of the Spring affair—practically nothing until a few minutes before—had believed that.

"Tell that to the Marines!" he said. "You're all my very dear pals, an', of course, I know that none of you would think of playin' it low down on me, but——"

"Shut up, Pon! Here's Mobby!" sounded the frightened whisper of Gadsby.

Mr. Mobbs had taken some time to put in an appearance; but it was easy to see that he must have heard that shriek.

His face showed that by its ashen pallor, and the fact that he carried a poker in his hand was a further sign of his having heard. He was really showing rather more courage than anyone could have expected of him in turning up at all.

"I—I— Oh, dear me, what is the matter?" he said. "I heard the most terrible cry from somewhere. It seemed to me to come from this part of the building. What is it? Have you seen anything, Ponsonby, my dear boy?"

They left Pon to answer, even as he had suggested.

The situation was a distinctly ticklish one, with all sorts of risks.

Of the six Greyfriars juniors within the walls of Highcliffe, Peter Todd and Spring were locked up together in the study just round the corner. Angel was trying to find his way out by the back stairs, the Bounder and Delarey were waiting in the darkness of No. 6, and Harry Wharton was somewhere along the passage with Merton.

It was hardly likely that Mr. Mobbs would think of looking into Study No. 9, but he might look into No. 6. Angel might be caught on his way out. Wharton was by no means safe.

The Highcliffe men present were all fully dressed; but possibly Mr. Mobbs failed to notice that. He did not speak to, or even look towards, Courtenay, the captain of the Form, of whom explanations might most properly have been asked; he only glanced at the Caterpillar and Flip and Tunstall; he did not even glance at Gadsby and Vavasour, which was just as well, for neither of those two was in a state to keep up his end under questioning.

He spoke to Pon, as if Pon were the person there of most account—as in Mobby's eyes he was.

And nothing could have been cooler than the reply of Pon, who had no objection at any time to telling all the lies that seemed to him needful.

"We heard it, sir, an' rather thought it came from somewhere down here," he said. "So some of us hurried down to investigate. But we can't find any evidence at all that anythin's happened."

"You showed the courage and presence of mind that I should have expected of you, Ponsonby," replied Mr. Mobbs.

The Caterpillar chuckled softly. It amused him to hear Mobby complimenting Pon, who would most certainly have

stayed in bed if that shriek had really awakened him from sleep. The snobbish little master seemed to consider that Pon deserved all the credit going.

But there really was no credit due to anyone, so that the rest did not grudge Pon his buttering.

"Perhaps we had better look into all the studies," said Mr. Mobbs.

The ashen hue had left his face. Company made him bold. He knew that in a search of the studies there would be no need for him to lead the way.

But such a search did not suit the book of the juniors. The rest left it to Pon to dissuade Mobby.

"Do you think so, sir?" asked Pon. "If you'll excuse me, I don't. It seems impossible that it should come from any of these studies. But the seniors haven't gone to bed yet."

"Quite right, Ponsonby—quite right! Will you accompany me to the Sixth quarters? The rest of you can return to bed. You will not be needed."

Pon went off with Mr. Mobbs quite resignedly, congratulating himself on leading the master away from the corner study, in which were other things needing concealment besides the two Greyfriars juniors. Gadsby and Vavasour were quite resigned to retiring. Anyone might clear up the mess for anything that they cared.

But the rest could not make off and leave their comrades from Greyfriars still in danger of discovery.

Flip and the Caterpillar opened the door of the study round the corner and passed inside. Frank Courtenay and Tunstall went to join Vernon-Smith and Delarey in No. 6, and to await the return of Merton and Wharton.

"Hallo! He's come round, then?" said Flip.

Spring was sitting up, staring sulkily at Peter Todd.

"Yes. On the whole, I consider it's rather a pity," said Toddy. "I wasn't keen on him when he was insensible. Now he's come to he strikes me as particularly loathsome!"

"Isn't he pleased with the ghost, by gad?" inquired the Caterpillar.

"Seems to prefer it as a ghost, though it did nearly drive him silly to see it. Persists that his brother's dead, and seems glad of it. You fellows can talk to the rotter if you want to. I don't want to have anything more to do with him!"

Peter Todd spoke quite hotly.

"He is dead," said Spring, with a queer, nervous grin. "I know he's dead. I heard from my mother to-day."

"And came here to-night for this sort of thing!" said Peter, with a wave of his hand towards the card-strewn table.

"Spring is certainly not a very feelin' person!" murmured the Caterpillar, looking curiously at young Shylock.

"It's nothing at all to do with any of you rotters whether I cared twopence about my brother or not, is it?" snarled Spring. "I don't know how you faked up someone to look like him, and I don't know why you did it; but I know jolly well it wasn't my brother, for he's dead. And I know jolly well it wasn't a ghost, for there aren't any such things."

"Well, I fancy you'll understand all right within a day or two, you young ead, if you don't now!" said Flip.

"Queer that you called your brother's ghost Conrad, though, wasn't it? Merton said that was your brother's name; but you make out it's yours!"

"So it is! Merton's a beastly liar! Look here, I want to get out of this! Where's Ponsonby?"

"Gone off with Mr. Mobbs," answered Flip.

"Those other two, then? They—"

"Oh, the dear Gaddy an' the amiable

Vav have retired to rest!" said the Caterpillar. "They didn't even leave word what was to be done with you!"

"Well, Angel—"

"Angel has discreetly nizzled!" the Caterpillar said pleasantly.

"Look here, that leaves me in a beastly hole, you know! I shall have to go back with the other chaps, I suppose, though."

"Not with me, you won't!" snapped Peter Todd.

"Like to see your brother before you go?" inquired Flip sardonically.

"Don't you talk about my brother! He's dead, I tell you! But I—I must go, and I can't go back alone. I couldn't face the dark after that!"

"What shall we do, Todd?" Flip asked.

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"Lock the young rotter in here till we are ready to go, I suppose!" Peter replied. "Wharton won't agree to his being left to shift for himself, I know!"

"Right-ho!" said Flip. "Here, I say, I won't be locked in!" protested Spring.

But he was locked in, for all his protests.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER. Getting Out!

"MOBBY'S gone!" said Tunstall, as he and Courtenay entered No. 6. "Pon's gone with him. Gaddy an' Vav have bunked, too. Flip an' De Courcy have joined Todd. As soon as Wharton an' Algy come back you chaps had better

clear, I should say, shouldst you, Courtenay?"

"I'm not sure that they had not better wait until later, when all's quiet," answered the Fourth skipper. "Mobby may not have been the only person who heard Spring's yell; and the passages, here or downstairs, won't be over and above safe till things have settled down."

"We don't mind waiting, do we, Smithy?" said Delarey. "The fellows outside may get fed up, but they can cut back if they do."

"They won't cut back," the Bounder said. "They will be too keen to know what's happened. Wonder what they'll do with that sweep Angel?"

"By Jupiter! He'll run straight into their arms!" chuckled Tunstall.

"Doesn't matter much what they do," Piet said. "If they cut him into little pieces I'd think twice before I blamed them. The rotter! But even so he isn't worse than Spring. What do you fellows make of the bizney?"

"We haven't any doubt," Tunstall answered quietly. "Algy was dead sure that this young ead wasn't Conrad, an' so was little Molly Gray. Now it's proved to you fellows, an' what's got to be done after this is to get things straight."

"By Jove, though, I've forgotten something!" said the Bounder. "Here's a wire Hop Hi collared from that young brute. Wharton wouldn't take it; but I wasn't so scrupulous."

He took the crumpled flimsy from his pocket and spread it out. As his eyes fell upon it he gave a start of surprise.

"Look here, you fellows!" he gasped.

They knew it must be something out of the ordinary to make the iron-nerved Bounder gasp like that. But none of them was prepared for what he saw.

"Your brother is dead."

That was how the wire ran.

"Oh, by Jupiter!" said Tunstall. "Flip would never have dared to play that trick if he'd known this! It was a bit risky anyway—I see that now—but with Spring believing this— Oh, by Jupiter!"

"Did he believe it?" said Delarey doubtfully.

"Don't see how he could have been off it!" replied Tunstall.

"It's from his mother," the Bounder said. "Yes; he must have believed it all right. He doesn't seem to have gone in for overmuch grievin' about it, though."

Just then the three who had been with Spring came in, and were at once shown the wire. Flip Derwent's eyes widened, and he shrugged his shoulders meaningly. No doubt he felt, as Tunstall did, that his trick had been decidedly risky. But he said nothing.

"The question isn't so much whether Spring believed it—there was no reason why he shouldn't, after getting that wire—but whether his mother was telling the truth, as far as she knew it," said Courtenay quietly.

"We can't answer any of these questions, seems to me, so they don't amount to much," the Bounder said. "The thing is what to do. Can this poor kid stay here after the upset to-night? And, if not, what's to be done with him?"

"Hallo, here's Merton!" said Flip.

Merton looked pale and worried.

"This is gettin' hot, you fellows!" he said. "I've had to hide Wharton in the bath-room, an' lock up the box-room with young Conrad inside. That rotter Mobby's prowlin' around still, an' he's got Langley an' Beauchamp an' Roper on the job. They ain't takin' it very seriously; but Mobby is, an' I can't think why, unless Pon's given us away."

"What's Pon know, dear boy?" asked the Caterpillar.

"Not a lot, perhaps; but he may suspect a good deal, by Jupiter! An' he knows he's safe—we can't give him away now; that little bizney in No. 9 may be considered as dead an' done for!"

"Spring's there still. We locked him in," said Peter Todd.

The crowd in No. 6 looked at one another, none of them quite knowing what to do next.

"Here's a rotten mess!" crooned Cocky.

"Oh, you shut up!" said Flip irritably. Cocky's random remark was altogether too much to the purpose.

It really was a good deal of a mess. Mr. Mobbs might go to the Fourth dormitory. He, or one of the seniors, might look into No. 6 at any moment. If anyone did that he would find three Greyfriars juniors, whose presence there would mean a row, and five Highcliffe juniors who had been ordered back to bed a quarter of an hour earlier.

Worse than that, Wharton was cut off for the time being from his comrades. They could not start without him; and, unless discovered, he would not move from the bath-room until he was told it was safe. It was certainly not yet safe; it was not safe even for one of the eight to leave No. 6.

Spring did not matter so much. They had not brought Spring along. But they felt some responsibility for him, nevertheless.

And outside Bob Cherry and the rest were still waiting, while Conrad Spring lay in the box-room, behind a locked door, but not in any condition to be safely left alone for long. Merton reported him in a queer state; and Flip Derwent breathed hard and flushed when he heard that.

Suddenly the Caterpillar without a word switched off the light. Next moment footsteps halted before the door.

"Anyone there?" drawled Langley, the skipper of Highcliffe.

No one answered, of course. They waited, expecting the door to be opened. But Langley passed on. He was not keen on the search; he rather resented Mr. Mobbs' calling upon him.

For another ten minutes or so they waited; but no one else came near.

"We'd better make a break for it, I fancy," said the Bounder.

"I'll go an' fetch Wharton," volunteered Tunstall. And he went at once.

"Look here," said Delarey. "I've been thinking. Isn't there any way of getting that Spring kid—the Conrad one, I mean—out of this, and to some place where he could be nursed and taken care of? The box-room isn't any kind of show for him, and it's too late now to think of owning up that he's here. It would be better to take him to Greyfriars, and chance trouble there than for these fellows to do that."

"I know!" said Peter Todd. "Penfold's!"

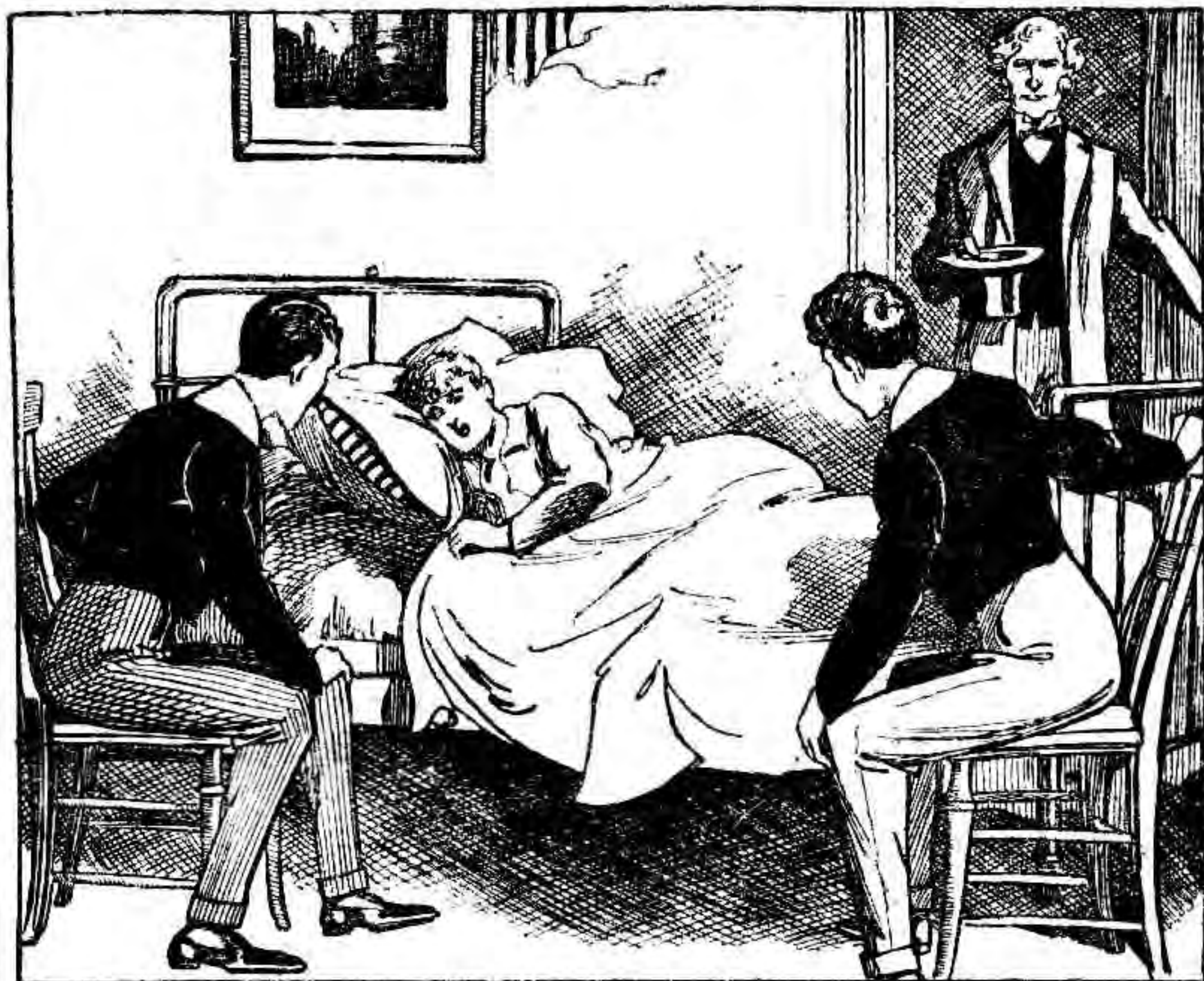
"Good egg!" the Bounder replied. "Pen's people are no end decent and kind. It's a bit late to take him there to-night; but I don't think they'll mind that. And it can't very well be left till to-morrow."

"Well, it would be a load off my mind, I'll own," said Merton. "I've a kind of feelin' that I'm more particularly the kid's uncle, as he came here lookin' for me; an' I'm hanged if I could rest to-night with him alone in the box-room."

"It's a good notion," Frank Courtenay said. "But I think the best plan will be for you fellows to clear out first. Two or three of you can wait outside until we bring the youngster to you, properly wrapped up and all that."

Bump! Thwack!

"Oh, dear me! What are you doing, you exceedingly clumsy fellow?"



In safe haven! (See Chapter 12.)

The sounds came from the passage, and the voice which had followed closely upon the noise of a fall was the voice of Mr. Albert Hicks Mobbs.

"Mobby in the wars!" said the Caterpillar, grinning in the darkness. He had promptly switched off the light again.

The door opened quickly, someone slipped into the study, and it closed again.

"Who's that?" asked Flip, in a tense whisper.

"Me—Wharton!" replied Harry breathlessly.

"What's happened?"

"We sighted Mobby just as we came round the corner, and there was someone else coming up behind in the dark. Mobby had his head turned, as if he were listening. Tunstall switched off the light, whispered to me to get in here, and barged right into him!"

"Good old Tun!" said Flip admiringly.

"Shush!" hissed the Caterpillar.

They all stood and listened. It was plain that the light in the passage had been switched on again now, and that Tunstall had not tried to escape.

"You abominably clumsy and impertinent fellow! I am convinced that your collision with me was no accident!" snarled Mr. Mobbs.

"Sorry, sir, I'm sure!" replied Tunstall.

"What made you switch off the light—eh? Tell me that!"

"Well, I rather preferred that you shouldn't see me, sir."

"I had ordered you to bed!"

"I didn't feel quite easy after that scream," Tunstall said.

"You will go at once!"

"Your nose is bleeding, sir," said Tunstall meekly.

"So it is! Oh, really, there seems no end to the troubles of this night! Go to bed, Tunstall!"

Those who heard were disposed to agree with Mr. Mobbs on one score at least. The troubles of the night had not ended for them.

A few seconds later Tunstall slipped into the dark study.

"We can have a light," he said. "The worm's gone. But he'll be comin' back,

dash him! You Greyfriars chaps had better bunk while you've the chance."

"You worked that dashed well, Tunstall!" said the Bounder.

"Glad you approve, old top! Of course, it was an accident makin' Mobby's conk run ruby, but it was quite a lucky one. We'd have been nabbed if Wharton hadn't been jolly spry, too."

"Well, it was the sort of time when a chap wouldn't wait to be told twice," said Harry, smiling.

"They can go," said Courtenay. "It's best they should—safer outside. But we haven't finished for to-night, Tunstall."

"What else is there to do? Oh, Spring, of course! I'll go along and let the young rotter out."

"There's more than that. Conrad's to be got out, too. These fellows have thought of a place to take him to—Penfold's, the shoemaker, at Friardale."

"Oh, good!" said Tunstall.

"Jolly good!" chimed in Wharton heartily.

Tunstall departed. He was back again well inside a minute.

"Did you fellows lock the door?" he asked. "Are you sure you locked it?"

"Rather!" replied Flip. "I can swear to it!"

"Then Pen must have left his key behind. The young sweep's gone!"

For a moment those who heard looked blank.

Then the Bounder grinned.

"What's the odds?" he said. "We've no use for the little brute. If he chooses to go back alone, let him!"

"You're right, Smithy!" said Harry Wharton. "Come along, you fellows! Time to go. Mustn't wait to say good-night, either."

"Will you allow me to escort you, dear boys?" drawled the Caterpillar.

"No, Rupert. I'll—"

"My dear Franky, you'll do nothing of the sort! The quad at night is no place for a fellow of your shining virtue. For me it matters not."

"Fathead!" snapped Courtenay. But he knew it was no good to argue with the Caterpillar.

And De Courcy did not speak entirely

in joke. Frank Courtenay was captain of the form, and Mr. Mobbs hated him, and would be only too glad of a chance to suggest his deposition from that place of honour.

Because of that not only the Caterpillar, but Derwent and Merton and Tunstall also, felt that when Courtenay ran the same risk as they did he was really running a heavier one. And that they did not choose he should.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

In Safe Haven!

"MY only aunt! We thought you chaps were never coming!" declared Bob Cherry.

"Might as well have made it all night while you were about it!" growled Johnny Bull.

The four had just descended by Pen's rope ladder, and De Courcy was slipping back in to Highcliffe.

"We haven't finished yet," answered the Bounder grimly.

"Well, we're not grumbling," said Squiff. "What else is there to do, old top?"

"What has been done, you mean, don't you?" put in Frank Nugent.

"No, I don't, old chap. That can wait for telling till we get back."

"There's a lot to tell," said Wharton.

"But the thing that matters most is that some of us have got to wait here for a bit till those chaps bring out young Spring to us—Conrad, I mean. We're going to take him to Penfold's."

"What for?" asked Tom Brown.

"Well, the kid must be somewhere. Brownie, and hiding in Highcliffe ain't exactly the best thing for him, even if he'd any chance of hiding there much longer," replied Piet Delarey somewhat sharply.

"Sounds to me as if you chaps had rather mucked up the bizney, on the whole," remarked Johnny Bull.

"I don't think so," said Wharton quietly. "No need for all of us to wait, Johnny. You can get along back if you like."

"Rats!" growled Johnny. "I haven't done my bit yet!"

"By the way, anybody seen anything of Angel?" inquired Vernon-Smith.

"Yes, rather!" answered Squiff. "He's fairly dodged us. Wouldn't wait to have any questions asked of him; just did an exit in quick time."

"You haven't seen anything of that young cad Spring, I suppose?"

"No. Has he come out?" said Frank Nugent.

"That's just what we don't know. We had him locked up, as we thought, but he went."

"And where's Bunter?" demanded Wharton, missing the Owl at that moment.

"Isn't he here?" returned Bob Cherry. "It doesn't matter much anyway, does it?"

Bunter was not there, and Harry was inclined to think that it did matter.

"He'll very likely rouse the place trying to get in," he said. "The fat idiot oughtn't to have been allowed to come."

"If he hadn't he'd probably have roused it by bellowing after us, by gad!" said the Bounder.

"Well, that's likely enough, Smithy. Pity he woke up. But we've got to chance what he does now. He may have followed Angel."

"It occurs to me that the extreme likeness is that the ludicrous and disgusting Bunter was suffering from the freezeful coldfulness," said Inky, shivering.

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"Sorry, Inky, old fellow!" Wharton said remorsefully. "I know you've found it parky waiting. Look here, will you and two or three more go along to Friardale and prepare the Penfolds for what's coming? Toddy knows all about it, and he's the chap to talk them round, if they need any talking round. But I don't think they will."

Within two minutes Peter Todd, Johnny Bull, Inky, and Tom Brown were on their way to Friardale, Toddy explaining to the rest as they went.

Then Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent left the rest, to look round for Bunter.

"He may have roled into a ditch," said Bob. "I'll kick him out if he has! You needn't pity him too much. I've Franky coming along to see that I don't kick too hard."

"We'll wait for you chaps outside," said Frank. "But don't wait for us if we're not there."

Wharton, Vernon-Smith, Delarey, and Squiff were left. A few words made the situation clear enough for Squiff.

"Poor kid!" he said. "I'm game to do all I can for him. When you come to think of it, it's as least as much up to us as to the Highcliffe chaps. What a young rotter that Shylock is!"

Herbert Spring, crouching in the darkness by the wall less than a dozen yards away, heard that, as he had heard Wharton's explanation. But he had come up just too late to hear where his brother was to be taken.

He wanted to know that, and he waited, hoping to hear.

There was another reason for his waiting. He did not quite know where to go or what to do. He had not made up his mind yet to return to Greyfriars. He had a vague idea of sheltering elsewhere and not reappearing till his mother, to whom he meant to wire in the morning, had turned up.

"Hallo, there!"

It was Flip Derwent's voice from over the wall.

"Here we are!" said Harry.

Flip was over next moment.

"The kid's a bit rocky," he said. "I'm not sure that he's fit to walk. I don't feel very happy about that bizney inside; it upset him more than it did his rotter of a brother. Wish I hadn't now!"

"Nobody blames you, old fellow," said the Bounder, with more sympathy than he was wont to show. "And there's no need for him to walk. There are four of us here, all capable of giving him a piggy-back ride, you know."

"Yes, I thought of that, Smithy. I say, you haven't seen the young cad?"

"No. He's probably found another way out, and got to Greyfriars by this time," replied Wharton.

"When we get young Conrad there I guess we'll call in a doctor," said Delarey.

There was something in the cruel position of Conrad Spring which had aroused strong feeling in fellows like the Caterpillar, Smithy, and the Rebel, who, though their natures did not lack kindness, were not so ready to yield to the call of sympathy for anyone down on his luck as were Harry Wharton, gentle Frank Nugent, and some of the rest.

Herbert Spring pricked up his ears. Where was "there"? Somewhere at Friardale, he guessed; they could hardly be taking his brother to Greyfriars. But he very much wanted to know exactly where. His mother must see Conrad before the trouble that he perceived to be inevitable began.

"Ready?" called the Caterpillar softly.

"Ay, ay!" replied Flip.

In a few seconds Conrad Spring, helped by De Courcy and Merton, came over the wall.

He was well wrapped up, and nothing

could have been more kindly or gentle than the manner in which the older fellows treated him. One and all, they had the feeling that this youngster, whom they could like for himself, apart from his troubles, had been through it to almost the uttermost limit; and Flip was not the only one among them who had a feeling of remorse for the ghost trick.

Herbert Spring breathed hard in the gloom as the Bounder took up Conrad on his back. The youngster protested but feebly. He really was not fit to walk, and he knew it.

"You'll be all right with these chaps and the people they'll take you to, young 'un," said Merton, in rather a choky voice.

"Of course I shall!" answered Conrad, with quite a plucky attempt at cheeriness. "It's good to have so many friends. But I shall never know how to thank you all."

"No need," Flip Derwent said. "I say, kid, you forgive me, don't you? I oughtn't—"

"There's nothing to forgive, Flip, really! Give my love to old Cocky."

And with that message on his lips the youngster was borne off.

The Caterpillar laid a hand on Flip's arm.

"Hist! I thought I heard something," he said. "Move to the left, Derwent—towards the wall. Merton, look out an' see that no one breaks away!"

De Courcy himself moved to the right. Spring saw him coming, and tried to make a bolt. But Merton clutched him.

"Leggo! I'll yell out if you don't, and get you all into a beastly row!" panted young Shylock.

"Yell out an' be dashed to you, you young fiend!" retorted the Caterpillar, with unusual heat. "Or try—you won't get much farther than trivin'. I'll kick very hard against the notion of chokin' you once for all!"

"Lemme go!" whined Spring. "Haven't I had enough done to me to-night?"

"Not half!" replied Flip Derwent fervently.

"I'm doing no harm. I've got to get back to Greyfriars, I suppose?"

"I shouldn't trouble if I were you, by gad!" said the Caterpillar, speaking once more in his usual languid, indifferent way. "You're safe for the kick-out within twenty-four hours, I should say, an' it hardly seems worth while."

"He was goin' to follow those chaps," said Merton. "Best not to let him, I think."

"Possibly we had better convoy him home, though it seems a dashed lot of trouble for such a rat, by gad! You get back, Merton, an' let Franky an' Tun know what we are doin'. Flip an' I will put this merchant on the right road—it will be a new way for him, though, dashed if it won't!"

Merton went back over the wall. He was tired out. The Caterpillar and Flip marched the sulky Shylock off between them.

Meanwhile, Dick Penfold's people had been told by Peter Todd of their coming guest. Their sympathies were stirred at once by what Toddy narrated of Conrad Spring's troubles; and they had no hesitation in agreeing to take the youngster in.

When Conrad arrived, on the back of Harry Wharton—after Squiff and the Rebel had each taken his turn at the transport job—a warm bed was ready for him; and his champions were glad enough to leave him in the kind charge of motherly Mrs. Penfold.

"He's in safe haven, anyway," said Harry, as they made their way back to Greyfriars.

"For the present," answered Johnny Bull. "But we've got to think what's to be done about him later on. The kid hasn't a dog's chance with that mother of his."

"Just what I was thinkin', Bull," said Vernon-Smith. "Somethin' will certainly have to be done."

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

All Through Bunter!

"O II, dear! Oh, dear!"

It was Billy Bunter who thus made moan outside the walls of Greyfriars, forlorn as a fat Peri outside the gates of Paradise.

Bunter had got badly fed up with waiting in the darkness and the cold, with no prospect of the feed that he had hoped for at the outset.

In spite of his anxiety to go inside with the Caterpillar, he had none but a very vague notion why Wharton & Co. had come along to Highcliffe. Indeed, if he had understood he would not have wanted to go in. Taking risks for the sake of a strange kid certainly would not have appealed to William George Bunter.

After the departure of the four he had propped himself up against the wall for a time, and listened to the fragments of talk which dropped from those left behind.

These did not tend to make him feel better satisfied with the expedition. It seemed to him utter rot to have come out like this, taking risks innumerable, on account of the wail whom Skinner had conducted to Highcliffe. Even his inquisitiveness was subdued by the cold and the disappointment. He felt that he had heard all that he wanted to hear about the Spring business.

Then, to keep warmth in his fat carcass, he had begun to pace up and down, and by-and-by he had found himself in the road, some forty yards or so from the rest, for the place at which Pon's rope ladder had been dropped over the wall was on the side where the fields ran up to it.

Scarcely realising what he was doing, he began to roll homewards.

And when he did come to realise whither his fat little legs were taking him, he was afraid to turn back. Highcliffe and the fellows with whom he had started out, though only a quarter of a mile or so away, seemed more distant to his imagination than the peaceful dormitory at Greyfriars.

For that he made, running till he was out of breath, and then rolling along in a panting condition.

It was not until he reached the wall of Greyfriars that he remembered a very important fact.

Without help he was quite incapable of scaling it.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" he moaned.

But moaning was useless. Something had to be done.

He gave a desperate leap and a frantic clutch, and rolled over in the mud, groaning.

"Yargoooooh! Oh, dear! My backbone's busted!"

If there had been anyone present to hear him, Bunter would no doubt have gone on proclaiming that his backbone was "busted." But as there was no one, and as he found himself able to get on his feet and stand, Bunter came to the conclusion that the damage he had suffered must have been slighter than that.

He did not try the wall again. Once was enough.

He rolled round to the gates, pondering deeply the problem of how to induce Gosling to accept a bribe in the shape of

either wind or paper—a verbal promise to pay or an I O U.

But when he arrived at the gates he had also arrived at the conclusion that it was not extremely likely Gosling would take either.

Should he ring, and face the music?

He had only himself to think of. He never once thought of any result his decision might have upon the fellows he had left behind at Highcliffe.

While he still hesitated, shivering in the cold wind that had just sprung up, the little gate at the side of the bigger one opened, and the figure of a man appeared at it.

Bunter turned in wild alarm, and tried to flee.

But his foot struck a stone, and he sprawled.

As he rose a hand fell upon his shoulders, and the voice of Mr. Quelch said sternly:

"Bunter, what are you doing here?"

"I—I— Oh, if you please, sir— Oh, really, sir, it wasn't my fault!"

"The Slacker!"



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burbled the Owl. "The other fellows would go. I said all I could to stop them. I told them you wouldn't like it; but—"

"Do not tell me untruths, Bunter! Who are 'the other fellows' to whom you refer? I see no one but you here."

Bunter's fatal habit of saying the thing which was not tripped him up again there. It occurred to him on a sudden that there would be a heavy reckoning to pay if Wharton & Co. were trapped through him.

"I—I— Oh, really, sir, what I meant to say was that there weren't any others fellows. I—I merely came out to—to get a breath of fresh air, sir, and no one at all came with me!"

By this time Gosling had appeared upon the scene with a lantern, and the Remove-master was able to see in what condition Bunter was.

"You may or may not have had all the fresh air you require, Bunter," Mr. Quelch said sarcastically, "but you have

certainly gathered more than enough mud."

"Which it's my opinion as 'e's been a-tryin' to clamber over the wall, an' 'ave fell down," said Gosling. "Which 'e never were a very agile young gent, sir."

"That will do, Gosling. Come with me, Bunter!"

Whatever engagement Mr. Quelch had—and it was unusual for him to go out at night—was evidently given up at once. He led the way to the Remove dormitory, and Bunter followed him, groaning.

The master's brow grew dark as he noted the empty beds.

"Wharton, Cherry, Nugent, Field, Bull, Vernon-Smith, Delarcy, Brown, Hurree Singh, Todd," he said slowly. Then he pursed his lips.

Perhaps it occurred to him that any errand which took out those ten members of the Remove—all fellows whom he knew to be worthy of trust—might not be so very black an affair in itself. But the serious offence of breaking bounds after lights out remained. And perhaps he was puzzled by Bunter's having been of the party.

By this time most of the Remove were awake. The gimlet eyes of Mr. Quelch fixed Mark Linley.

"Linley," he said, "when Wharton and the rest return, you will be good enough to tell them that I require their presence at once in my study. If they show any reluctance to obey, you will inform me of their return without delay."

"Very well, sir," said Mark Linley, flushing as he answered. "But I am sure they will not show any reluctance."

"They had better not, Linley!" snapped the master. "Bunter, before you get into bed you must go to the bath-room. You are in a disgusting state! I will interview you in the morning."

With that he went. "Needn't have got on to you like that, Linley," remarked Bulstrode. "It ain't your funeral, anyway."

"He may have thought I knew something about it," replied Mark.

"Well, don't you?"

"Not a thing."

"Do you, Redwing?" Russell inquired.

"Just as much as Linley does."

"Shows that crowd must have been after somethin' fishy, by gad!" sneered Skinner. "They wouldn't let on to Linley an' Redwing about it. Too good for the ran-dan! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Shut up, you cad!" snapped Wibley. "There's nothing more jolly certain than those those chaps haven't gone out on your sort of blackguardly bizney anyway!"

"Hear, hear!" said Kipps and Ogilvy and Russell and Rake and Penfold in chorus.

"Oh, really, Skinner, if it hadn't been for you I don't know that they would have gone at all!" said Bunter, halting at the door.

Skinner sat up in bed. There were many things on Harold Skinner's conscience, though he was not much in the habit of letting them weigh at all painfully.

"Hadh't been for me, you fat fool!" he snarled. "What on earth do you mean?"

But Bunter had bolted. On second thoughts, it seemed inadvisable to explain that. It would not be easy to make it clear how he knew of the message that Skinner had sent to Highcliffe. Moreover, that message had never been delivered. Bunter had told Derwent & Co. by word of mouth, partly

with a view to finding other employment for his month at the tea-table in No. 6.

"Well, I don't know what they've been up to, and I don't care much," said Bolsover major, yawning. "But one thing's jolly certain—it's all through Bunter they've been caught out, and if I were they I'd jolly well let the fat idiot have it in the neck for it!"

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Telling Mr. Quelch!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! That you, Harry?"

Bob Cherry's voice boomed through the gloom. It boomed rather too loudly, seeing how near they were to Greyfriars.

"Yes, it's us," replied Harry.

"An' everyone will know it in about half a minute!" added Vernon-Smith sardonically.

"Why can't you shout in a whisper, Bob, you ass?" growled Johnny Bull.

"Oh, it's no odds! Fact of the matter is, we may as well go in by the gates," answered Bob.

"What?" demanded half a dozen voices in chorus.

"Oh, I mean it all serene! Bunter's been found—Quelch found him—and he's given us all away!"

"Who told you, Bob?"

"Gossy. The old beast was prowling round with a lantern, waiting for us to turn up—wasn't he, Franky?"

"Grinning like a chimpanzee!" said Frank bitterly. "Tried to march us off at once. But he hadn't any orders to do that, we knew well enough, and we waited for you chaps."

"Not sure that it matters a heap," Squiff said philosophically. "We were bound to go to Quelch or the Head about this bizney within the next twenty-four hours, and we might just as well get it over to-night, and sleep after it, instead of lying awake worrying about it."

"It needn't have come out that we'd broken bounds," growled Johnny.

"It would have done, though," the Bounder said. "I rather agree with Squiff. An', though Quelch's a hard old nut, I think I'd rather talk to him than to the Head."

"We've got to face the music, anyway," said Harry resignedly. "Come along!"

"Hallo! Who's the little stranger?" asked Peter Todd.

Someone had just stolen out of the gloom into their midst, where they now stood in the dim light from the curtained window of Gosling's lodge.

"By gad, it's Spring!" said Smithy.

"I say, I can dodge in with you chaps, can't I?" asked young Shylock, with a sulky attempt at propitiation. "I should think you've put me through it enough to-night, and I can't get over the wall without help."

The Caterpillar and Flip Derwent had left Spring within a hundred yards or so of Greyfriars; and he had not protested against being left, for he had not then made up his mind to return.

But he had made it up since, chiefly because he could think of nowhere else to go for the night.

He had not heard what had been said on the subject of making a clean breast of the whole affair to Mr. Quelch, or he might not have shown himself.

"Shall we keep the young rotter out, Wharton?" asked the Rebel.

"No. Let him come in. After all, his turn's coming," replied Harry meaningly.

The Rebel seized the bell, and gave it a mighty pull.

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"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry pleasantly, as Gosling appeared behind the gates. "Good-evening again, Gossy, old top! Glad to see you looking so fit! We're coming in now."

"Ho! Har you?" growled the porter. "Which you young rips—"

"That's enough, Gosling!" rapped out the Bounder. "We don't want any of your chin-musks! Just open the gates and shut yourself!"

Gosling glowered, but the gates were opened, and the small crowd made its way across the quad to the School House.

It was agreed that to go in by the way they had used in going out was not advisable. Trotter grinned and scratched his head when he let them in; but he had no orders, and he said nothing.

"Shall we go upstairs first?" asked Harry. "If Quelch hasn't been to the dorm, and Bunter hasn't given him a list of names, some of you fellows may escape. I'm going to him anyway, of course."

"We all are!" said Tom Brown. And the rest murmured:

"Hear, hear, Browney!"

But they went upstairs. Some of the fellows had dropped off to sleep; but Mark Linley and Tom Redwing and Dick Penfold were among those who had remained awake. Maudy was also wide-eyed, to the surprise of everyone but Piet Delarey.

"Quelch wants to see you fellows at once!" said Mark.

"I say, Smithy, what have you been up to? I wish you'd told me; I'd have come along!" Tom said.

"It's all right, old bean! No harm in it; but late hours ain't good for fellows who've so much Greek and Latin to swot up as you an' Linley!" replied the Bounder, with a very friendly grin at them both.

"Oh, begad, Piet, what silly mess have you been gettin' into now?" asked Maudy plaintively. "I wish you'd ask my advice before you go doin' things, y'know!"

"Can't catch you awake, old chump!" answered the Rebel half gruffly.

"Pen, old chap, your pater and mater are two of the biggest bricks I know!" said Harry warmly.

"Eh?" returned Dick Penfold, not understanding at all.

"Tell you all about it when we come up. Is Bunter awake?"

"Can't you hear him sleeping, duffer?" asked Dick Rake. "But I'll pull him out of bed if you like!"

"No need!" said Harry.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Where's young Spring got to?" inquired Bob.

"Mizzled, of course!" replied Squiff. "You didn't expect him to come with us to Quelch, did you?"

"Quelch said you were to go at once!" said Mark Linley anxiously.

"Right-ho! We're going!" Frank Nugent answered.

And they went.

Mr. Quelch's brow was very grim when they filed into the study, after Wharton had tapped discreetly at the door.

But somehow they did not look guilty. He felt sure that there was something behind this escapade on the part of juniors whom he knew to be well-conducted, on the whole, that must mitigate the offence.

He was hardly prepared, however, to have Wharton open the attack, so to speak.

"I know we've been breaking rules, sir, and, of course, we expect to be punished for it," said Harry frankly. "But we'd be obliged if you would listen to what we have to tell before you deal with that. It isn't because we want to get off punishment at all; but we all feel sure that you'll see something that matters a heap

more than our breaking bounds in what we have to tell."

"Bless my soul, Wharton! You speak as though you had some dark plot, just discovered, to reveal!" said the astonished master.

"It is a good deal like that, sir," answered Harry quietly.

"Then I must request that only one of you should speak at once. I can question the rest afterwards, if I see cause."

"Smithy, will you?"

"I think you'd better, Wharton!"

"I don't know how to put it, or where to begin. Toddy—"

"If you like, Wharton."

It was a chance for Peter, and he seized it. Peter meant to be a great lawyer some day, and a great judge thereafter; and he had already learned something about summing up a case.

He told the story well, briefly, yet with nothing that mattered greatly left out.

"Dear me!" and "Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch from time to time.

It was plain that he was intensely interested; and when Peter had finished he seemed almost to have forgotten that the ten before him were breakers of bounds.

"This is really a most extraordinary and tangled affair," he said. "But you have told me of it with such clearness, Todd, that I think I understand it. I will see Mr. Twigg, who is Spring's Form-master, and thereafter the Head, who will, I know, be grieved to hear of this wicked imposition. But first I must ask you some few questions. How long have you known anything about this, Wharton?"

"There were whispers last term, sir," replied Harry. "But I don't think it would be right to say that we knew anything till now—that is, till Merton told us about it."

Mr. Quelch nodded.

"Quite a proper distinction," he said. "Mere rumour is not evidence, and cannot be acted upon. But I should like to know what you had proposed to do in the matter had you—er—reached your dormitory to-night unobserved?"

"We should have told either you or the Head to-morrow, sir," said Vernon-Smith, at whom the master had looked as he asked that question. "We saw that this affair was too big for us to handle."

"You say that Merton of Highcliffe and one of the juniors at Cliff House, a Miss Gray, can identify Spring as being the elder of the two brothers, and the one of them who was expelled from his former school?"

"That's so, sir!" replied Peter.

"There will be no difficulty about their evidence, I take it?"

"I am sure of that, sir," said Harry.

"Another query—one which you may not care to answer, but which I must put. I cannot recall any special trouble into which this boy Spring has fallen here. Do any of you know what his character in his own Form is?"

The juniors looked at one another. They certainly did not fancy answering this. There was much against Spring that could be proved, much more that could not; and the worst was what could not be proved. He had lent money at interest, usurious interest; he had swindled in small ways; he had taken to gambling. But that was not the worst, for perhaps not one of all the ten Removites now had any doubt that he had stolen the money which Sammy Bunter had been supposed to have lifted while sleep-walking.

"Nugent, you have a brother in the Second. What is your brother's attitude towards Spring?"

That was easier to answer. Frank said readily:

"Dick won't have anything to do with him if he can help it, sir. In fact, the Form bars him pretty generally."

"Thank you, Nugent! You can all go now!"

Not a word was said about punishment. And, as Squiff remarked, not a question had been asked about Spring's doings at Highcliffe. The cards, the cigarettes, the sherry had all been left out of Peter Todd's story; it was not Toddy's business to tell about them. Probably Mr. Quelch, while guessing something, held that it was no business of his to know about them. It was likely that he had a shrewd idea what sort of young gentlemen Ponsonby & Co. were.

Angel's name had not been mentioned, either. Tom Brown told Peter as they went up to bed that he thought this was a mistake.

"I don't agree!" said the Bounder. "One at a time! Give Angel rope enough, an' he's bound to hang himself sooner or later! You know as well as I do, Browney, that there isn't a man among us who would have reported Spring just for goin' to gamble at Highcliffe!"

"Well, that's so!" said Tom. "Sorry, Toddy! You were right!"

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Spring's Mother!

"THE Head wants you, Harry, and one of the other chaps who were with you last night," said Frank Nugent. "You're to go along in ten minutes or so. That's the order! The Spring rotter is in his study now. Quelch's been there, and Twigg. And I fancy Merton's coming; I heard the Head mention his name, and he said something about having telephoned to Highcliffe."

"Oh, really, Nugent, what were you doing nosing around the Head's study?" asked Bunter shrilly. "When I do things like that—I mean, I never do such things; but if I happen to overhear anything everybody accuses—"

"If you don't shut up I'll smother you, tubby!" snapped Peter Todd.

Classes for the morning were over, and nearly all the Remove, as well as a considerable number of the Upper Fourth, were in the junior Common-room. Rain was pouring down upon the old quad and the leafless elms; and football was quite out of the question.

"Well, I think that what's sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander!" said Bunter defiantly. "If I'm a low, sneaking, prying cad—"

"Did you say 'if'?" asked the Bounder suavely.

"Yes, I did. I was—"

"No need to say 'if.' You are! Well, Wharton, whom do you want to take with you? It seems you've no choice about goin' yourself, so it's only fair you should choose your partner."

"Will you come, Smithy?"

"Wouldn't you rather have Toddy or Squiff?"

"I'd be satisfied with Toddy or Squiff, or any of the others, come to that. We're all in it. But Toddy did his bit last night, and did it jolly well; and I rather fancy everybody thinks you're the best man for the job."

"Hear, hear!" came a chorus of voices.

"Smithy's the man," drawled the lordly Cecil Reginald Temple. "Downy old bird, Smithy. Take Smithy, Wharton, an' keep your own clapper quiet—you'll be safe then. Smithy won't let on too much."

Temple, who knew something of the position of affairs, was only joking,

though some of those who heard thought it was hardly the time for jokes.

But Aubrey Angel, as he crossed the room towards the group around the fireplace, was in deadly earnest. In spite of all his hardihood, his face showed the strain he was feeling.

"May I ask," he said, "how far I'm mixed up in this bizney?"

"As far as we're concerned you're not in it at all," replied Wharton, with cold contempt. "None of us has mentioned your name."

"I thank you," Angel said, though his tone was scarcely thankful.

"You needn't do that," growled Johnny Bull. "There isn't a chap among us who would lift a finger to save you from the sack."

"It contents me if you refrain from liftin' it to get it me, by gad!"

"If anyone gives you away it will be your dear young pal Spring," said Piet Delurey, with ringing scorn. "Spring's no Jimmy Vivian, Angel!"

It was not only Aubrey Angel who flushed at that. Vivian went red to the back of the neck.

"Don't, Piet!" he said huskily.

"It's all right, Jimmy boy. I only wanted to remind this rotter that there are one or two of us who owe him something still. But we don't go to work at paying off our scores by sneaking!"

"Ready, Smithy?" asked Harry Wharton.

"I'm ready," said the Bounder.

As they passed out of the Common-room Rake came in, shaking the rain from his macintosh.

"Merton of Highcliffe has just turned up, with that nice red-headed kid from Cliff House," he announced. "They came over in a cab, and De Courcy and Courtenay and Derwent and Tunstall were all with them. Merton and the girl-kid have gone in to the Head; but the other fellows will be here in a moment."

Even as he spoke Wibley held open the door, and, with the air of a master of the ceremonies, bowed in the four Highcliffians.

"I trust we don't intrude," said the Caterpillar. "It seemed possible we might be wanted, though Dr. Locke omitted to send for us; an', anyway, we had a yearnin' to be on the spot. Hallo, Grunter! You're not lost, then, after all?"

"Oh, no, Caterpillar! I got back all serene. In fact, I may say that it's really due to me that this affair has come to a head so quickly. I saw at a glance that it wasn't the sort of thing you chaps could handle alone, and, as you wouldn't take my advice in the matter, I tipped the wink to Quelch—"

"You did what, Bunter?" demanded a terrible voice from the door.

"I—I— Oh, nothing, sir! I was merely remarking that it was a fine day—er—that is, except for the rain, sir. I— Here are some Highcliffe fellows, sir. If you don't know them you might let me introduce them!"

"I have no need of your good offices in that direction—or in any other, Bunter!" said the master sharply. Then he turned and spoke to the Highcliffe juniors, addressing each by name.

And after that he turned again to Bunter.

"You will come with me, Bunter!" he said sternly.

"Oh, really, sir, I don't consider that after all I've done—"

"You are about to reap a fitting reward for what you have done!" rapped out Mr. Quelch.

And no one who heard had any doubt as to whether that reward would please the Owl of the Remove.

When he came back to the Common-room five minutes later he was pressing

his fat hands under his armpits and saying things about Mr. Quelch which it was just as well for him that gentleman could not hear.

Meanwhile, Wharton and Vernon-Smith had gone along together to the Head's study. There they found Spring, looking pale but dogged, Merton and Molly Gray, the junior from Cliff House.

The Head nodded to them curtly, and then went on with his interrogation of the small girl. He spoke very kindly, and, though Molly was plainly nervous, she answered as clearly as her lip would let her.

"Yeth, thir, I am quite thuro thith ith Herbert Thpring," she said.

"You knew both brothers well?"

"Yeth, thir."

"Can you give me any idea as to the difference between them? I do not mean in appearance; I mean rather in character. And I do not wish you to tell me idle gossip, but only what you know."

"Merton hath told you already, thir. It's all true, every word. Conrad wath dethent, every way; but Herbert wath alwayth a rotter!"

Spring glowered at her fiercely. But Molly returned his angry look with defiant contempt.

"In the face of this evidence, Spring, do you still maintain your statement that you are the younger brother, not the elder one?"

"Yes, I do!" replied Spring sullenly. "I don't know why they're doing this; but it's lies they're telling. My mother would soon set them right about it!"

The Head turned to the two Removeites.

"I have heard from Mr. Quelch the story of last night's escapade," he said. "That is a minor matter, in the face of such a very serious affair as this; and I am not going closely into it with you now. But I must ask you why you went to Highcliffe."

"We knew that Spring was going, sir," answered Wharton.

"How did you know that?"

"From Merton and the other fellows, sir."

The Head nodded. He had already heard from Merton that he and his chums had invoked the aid of the Greyfriars juniors.

"What did you know of this business prior to a day or two ago?"

Harry waited for the Bounder to speak.

"I shouldn't say that we actually knew anything of it, sir," said Smithy coolly. "There had been talk, but no one knew anything for certain. At any rate, there was nothing we could possibly act upon until Conrad Spring came along."

"And where is that unfortunate lad now? Merton tells me he is no longer at Highcliffe—where, by the way, he should never have been concealed—but seems unwilling to say where he is."

It was plain that the Bounder was also unwilling. Harry waited for him to speak, but he remained silent. And Wharton himself felt no inclination to tell.

Perhaps neither knew quite why he felt like that—until something next moment gave them the clue.

A rap at the door was followed by the entry of Trotter, the page, who announced:

"Mrs. Spring to see you, sir!"

Then both juniors understood the feeling that had worked in them. It was an instinct of protection towards the unlucky youngster who lay ill in Dick Penfold's cottage home. That his mother should be able to reach him was not likely to be for young Conrad's advantage.

tege. They had realised this vaguely; now they saw it plainly.

"Ask Mrs. Spring if she will be good enough to wait a few minutes, Trotter," said the Head, with a distinctly worried look. "At present I am—"

"Mrs. Spring will do nothing of the sort!" came from the passage, in a strong, high-pitched voice. "I am surprised that you should expect it, Dr. Locke!"

And with these words a tall, fashionably-dressed woman, with a hard, handsome face, swept into the room.

"My boy! What are they doing to you?" she cried, throwing her arms around young Shylock.

Spring wriggled out of her grasp.

"I say, mater, not so much of that!" he said. "I'm glad you've come, because you can set things right; but it's no use making a silly fuss."

"Your son telegraphed to you, I assume, Mrs. Spring?" said the Head.

"Well, and what if he did?" shrilled the lady, turning upon him fiercely. "Who else should protect him from persecution?"

"While I am here I trust that it will never be necessary for anyone, even a parent, to intervene for the protection of any boy under my care, madam!"

"Stuff and nonsense! My boy is being persecuted now. Miserable lies are being told about him, and you are fool enough to believe them, it seems, Dr. Locke!"

The Head frowned.

"I am not accustomed to being addressed in that manner, and I will not be so addressed," he said sternly. "It is true that a very serious accusation has been made against your son, and, incidentally, against yourself, as if the fraud alleged has been committed you must have been a party to it. I am investigating the charge with a perfectly open mind. I am bound to say, however, that I regard it as all but proven."

"And what is that charge, pray, Dr. Locke?" demanded Mrs. Spring, dragging up a chair, and seating herself in front of the Head.

"Let me ask you one question first, madam. What is the true name of that boy?"

A loud laugh burst from Spring's mother. But it did not ring true.

"So it's that rot, is it?" she shouted. "What is his name? Why, Conrad Arthur Spring, of course!"

There came another tap at the door, and Trotter appeared with a card on a salver.

The Head turned it over in a puzzled manner.

"Mr. Theodore Brown," he said, half to himself. "But I do not know Mr. Brown, even by name, I think, though some chord of memory— You must ask the gentleman to wait, Trotter."

But Harry Wharton and the Bounder had seen Spring's face go pale and his mother's a flaming red, and they were not surprised when Algy Merton spoke up.

"It's Spring's old headmaster, sir. I took the liberty of wirin' to him early this mornin'."

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

One Taken—One Left!

"**D**R. LOCKE?" said the newcomer, a man rather older than the Head of Greyfriars, with a worn, lined face.

"It is good of you to make this journey, Mr. Brown," said the Head.

"Oh, Merton and I are old friends!"

said Mr. Brown, with a smile at the Highcliffe junior. "Moreover, he left me in no doubt as to the importance of my coming. Any aid I can give you, sir, is most freely yours."

"Merton explained—"

"Sufficiently for me to understand why I was required, Dr. Locke, though much remains dark to me. It is a question of identification, I believe?"

The Head of Spring's old school had carefully avoided looking at either his former pupil or that pupil's mother till now, but as he spoke his gaze rested grimly on the wretched Spring.

"That is so. Who is that boy, Mr. Brown?"

"Herbert Spring!"

"Take care!" shrieked Mrs. Spring, rising excitedly to her feet. "It is a lie—a base lie! My boy Herbert is dead. This is Conrad. There is a conspiracy—"

"I cannot bandy words with you, madam," said Mr. Brown wearily. "In the past I have had to bear your insults, which I should have resented hotly had they come from a man. Dr. Locke, there is no possible doubt in this matter. I knew both boys well. There was a family likeness, but it was not marked enough for any such error as would be made in mistaking this boy for his brother."

"I am satisfied, sir!" said the Head of Greyfriars.

"I am willing to answer any other questions you wish to put, Dr. Locke. Mrs. Spring's violence will have no effect upon me."

"What was the character of this boy while with you, then, Mr. Brown? I have already had your views as to Conrad."

"Take care, old Brown! No more of your lies, or you'll find yourself mixed up with the law!" shrieked the virago.

She looked as if about to assault Mr. Brown, and the Bounder whispered to Wharton:

"She means the ten commandments—her dashed finger-nails! Catch hold of one of her arms if she tries to scratch, Wharton. I shall take the other. He's an oldish man, an' not up to her fightin' weight."

But Mr. Brown showed no fear.

"Herbert Spring is, without any exception, the worst boy I ever met!" he said with slow, judicial calmness. "He may have redeeming qualities, but I have not been able to perceive them. He is a cold, callous, dishonest young brute!"

Mrs. Spring flung herself forward; but Smithy and Harry caught her arms at once, and she stopped dead.

"You will be good enough to take your boy away at once, madam!" said the Head sternly. "It is plain that you and he have practised upon me an imposition for which you might be made answerable to the law. I will not promise that legal proceedings against you shall not follow; that is a matter for the governors of the school to decide. But the power of expulsion is mine, and I will not tolerate that young criminal for another night under this roof! As for the other unfortunate lad—"

"My other son is dead! You need not waste your pity upon him, sir!"

"But he ain't, mater! I saw young Conrad last night! I thought it was his ghost at first. But—"

"Herbert, you mean! But you could not have seen him! He is dead, I tell you!"

"Oh, that game's up!" said young Shylock, with a cynical shrug of his shoul-

ders. "I'll get even with this gang some day"—he scowled around him as he spoke—"but the game's up!"

"Your brother is dead, that much at least is certain!" answered his mother. "His body was taken from the Trent within a mile of his school, and recognised by his headmaster. Here is a letter which will prove that."

"Oh, take me away, Algy—take me away!" cried little Molly Gray, breaking down completely. "She sayth he's dead—Conrad's dead—and she doethn't care a bit—not a bit!"

There was a look of horror on the Head's kindly old face, and Mr. Brown's mouth worked. Wharton shuddered; Merton felt as if a chill had struck him; and even the Bounder was moved to a feeling of acute disgust.

For the child was right. This woman showed no trace of pity or of sorrow. It seemd no more to her that her younger son should have been reported drowned than if she had heard that some stray dog had been taken lifeless from the Trent.

"It's—it's all right, kid," said Merton huskily. "There's a mistake somewhere. I saw young Conrad only last night, and I know where he is now."

"There must certainly be some mistake, Mrs. Spring," said the Head coldly. "The body recovered was not that of your son, whosoever it may have been."

Mrs. Spring flashed round upon Merton. It was evident that she felt sure he had spoken truly. Perhaps she had hoped, rather than believed, that the unloved youngster had gone from the cherished son's path for ever.

"Where is he?" she screamed. "I have a right to know! I will know!"

"Not from me, you won't!" snapped Merton. "Don't cry, Molly kid—don't! Young Conrad's all right!"

But the small girl could not help crying.

"Dr. Locke, I demand to know where my son is! You have no right—"

"I am not sure that I should tell you if I knew, madam. But I do not know," said the Head coldly.

"Who is there besides that wicked liar, who always hated my boy—yes, you did, and you know it!" raved the furious woman, pointing at Merton. "Who is there here who knows?"

"I do," said Vernon-Smith. "But I wouldn't tell you if my life hung on it! You aren't fit to have the charge of a decent kid! Be satisfied with the young rotter you've got!"

"Vernon-Smith, really—"

But the Head's protest was unheeded.

"I know, too," said Harry Wharton quietly, "but I shall not tell."

"Chuck it, mater! What do we want with the young beast, anyway?" said Herbert Spring.

"Will you order these boys to tell me, Dr. Locke?"

"Certainly not, madam! I understand that your younger son is badly broken down by all he has gone through, and I am sure that agitation would be dangerous for him. I will let you know when he—"

"You may spare yourself the trouble! Either he goes away with us to-day, or I will never see him again!"

Mr. Brown spoke then, in a shaking voice.

"I am not a wealthy man, Dr. Locke, but sooner than that poor lad should come into the clutches of this—this lady again, I would myself be responsible for his future!" he said.

"And so you may—so may anyone who chooses!" shrilled the mother.

"So be it, madam," said the Head quietly. "May I ask you to take your son from here at the earliest possible moment? I will give orders to have his packing done, and will request you meanwhile to wait elsewhere. Allow me to conduct you out."

She swept out behind him like a tragedy queen, and her hopeful son slunk after her like a whipped cur.

The Head came back in a minute or two.

"Mr. Brown," he said, "I thank you for your most humane and generous offer! It will not be necessary to accept it; but you shall hear from me how the boy goes on. I trust you will stay and lunch with me. Merton, I thank you, too. You did absolutely the right thing in wiring to Mr. Brown."

"It was really Derwent's notion, sir," said Algy frankly.

"Never mind! It was right. My child, don't cry any more!" The Head put his arm round Molly's shoulders as he spoke. "Thank Heaven, there are

not many such mothers as that in the world!"

He turned to Wharton and the Bounder.

"You also I must thank," he said. "You have helped in getting justice done. Your breaking of bounds will be overlooked, in the circumstances."

"Thank you, sir!" said Harry. And he and the Bounder and Merton and Molly went.

By an early train that afternoon the Springs—mother and son—left Friardale; and an hour or two later Harry and Vernon-Smith, who had gone along to the Penfolds' cottage to tell Conrad all about the happenings of the morning, were surprised by the Head's walking into the room.

Conrad had taken the loss of mother and brother lightly at first; and, indeed, it was no heavy loss. But when his first relief was over he felt his utter loneliness, and all that the Head could say to comfort him could not bring back the smiles to his face when once he had realised that.

And the Head looked very grave when he came out. He told the two juniors,

who had now been joined by five of Highcliffe, that he regarded Conrad's state as critical, mental and bodily.

The Caterpillar said, when he had gone, that he was a dashed old croaker. But the Head proved right. It was weeks before Conrad Spring was up and about again, and even then he was but a shadow of his former self. Pneumonia had set in, and it was touch-and-go at one time for him.

When he was better he never spoke of his mother or brother. The Head took him home; and the fellows could guess that when he was well enough the name of Conrad Arthur Spring would again be called when the Second roll was read over. But that was not yet.

As for the scheming Skinner, he thought it very hard lines that he had to shell out to the Red Cross funds the sovereign he had owed young Shylock. But he did it.

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

BUNTER AGAIN!

By
DONALD OGILVY.

"O H, go away, you fat ass!" snapped Peter Todd impatiently. "Every time I turn round your beastly carcase is in the way!"

It is hardly necessary to state that these uncomplimentary remarks were directed to Bunter, the Owl of the Remove. He was lounging disconsolately in the corridor one Wednesday after dinner, while the rest of the Removites were bustling about in preparations for the afternoon holiday.

"Really, Toddy," remonstrated Bunter, as he recovered himself from the jolt which Peter had dealt out to him, "your manners are not much better than those of a—a pig! It's most impolite to—Ow!"

He finished with a yell, not because he had been touched, but because Peter Todd ran at him as though with that intention. His only intention, as a matter of fact, was to scare him away, as he would have done a worrying little dog; and Bunter was as easily scared.

Peter ran back into the study for his cricket-stump, and as he reappeared at the door he waved it threateningly at Bunter, who was retiring to a safe distance.

"If you don't keep out of my way, you porpoise," exclaimed Todd, "I'll beat you down to about half your ordinary size with this thing!"

"Go and eat coke!" shouted Bunter. Then he turned, quickly and dashed down the stairs as hard as he could go.

As Peter turned back into the study once more, his cousin Alonzo looked at him sorrowfully.

"I am afraid, Peter," he said mournfully, "that you're rather hard on Bunter; you know he is really quite harmless."

"Oh, rats to you!" snapped Peter. "You're too soft for anything! I suppose you would have liked to invite him in, and ask him to eat some of the tuck we've got ready to take out with us!"

"Well, you, know, he's got to live!" argued Alonzo.

"I don't see the necessity!" Peter answered. "Come on! Where are those skates?"

It was a bright, frosty day, and there was a good thickness of ice on the old Priory pool. Accordingly, most of the juniors had voted for skating—indeed, the majority of them had already departed.

The skates were produced, and Peter Todd, Alonzo, and Tom Dutton set off for the pond.

Bunter was loafing about in the quad as the three juniors came out through the school door. With a threatening shout Peter Todd dashed towards him, and the Owl of the Remove seemed to be suddenly electrified, for he pranced around like a high-spirited young pony.

But Peter wasn't really anxious to catch him, as he had no time to waste just then; he merely wanted to put him into a state of anxiety which would keep him out of the way.

After his study-mates had departed Bunter

felt more depressed than ever, for the whole place seemed deserted. Those juniors who hadn't gone to the pond had evidently gone off on other pursuits, for none of them seemed to have preferred hanging around Greyfriars; so Bunter decided that the best thing for him to do was to follow the crowd. Accordingly, he made his way to the Priory pool.

"Hallo, fatty! Coming on the ice?" yelled Harry Wharton as he flew past Bunter at the edge of the pool a quarter of an hour later.

Bunter made no response. For one thing, he wasn't pleased with Wharton because he had refused him a loan, and for another thing the leader of the Remove was twenty yards away before the fat junior had time to decide what to say.

In a minute or two he caught sight of Peter Todd and Alonzo, and he observed, with an inward pang, that their pockets bulged with cakes, etc., which they had brought with them from the hamper which Alonzo had received that morning.

"If I could only get hold of Alonzo by himself," muttered the Owl, "I think I could manage to get a snack out of him."

And as he muttered this he gazed longingly at Alonzo. He was not keen on the ice himself, as being a bit inclined to stoutness, as he always explained carefully to the other juniors, it rather shook him up if he had a fall.

It probably did nothing of the sort; but Bunter was always afraid of getting hurt, and he didn't like to take risks.

Suddenly, however, Alonzo got into collision with someone, and went down with a bump. Peter Todd went skating on, and it was then that Bunter thought he saw a chance. If he could only help Alonzo to his feet again, and give him a little sympathy, he could without doubt get a share of the contents of that worthy's pockets.

Without hesitation Bunter decided on going to Alonzo's assistance, and he gingerly stepped upon the ice. He staggered a bit at first, but quickly recovered his balance, and then made a straight line towards Alonzo, looking neither to the left nor to the right.

"Hi-i-i! Out of the way! Look out, fat-head!"

Bunter suddenly became conscious of furious yelling and shouting, which seemed to rise up all around him. Then he made the fatal movement. He looked round.

"Yarooogh! Ow!"

Bump!

Bunter thought that the pond was turning upside-down, but it was only because his face was a little nearer to it. He had stepped on the end of a slide which some Third-Formers had made, and it was the shouts of warning from these young gentlemen that had disconcerted him and caused him to fall.

But that wasn't the worst. The next instant, before the Owl had even time to

think of getting up, a line of some ten or a dozen Third-Formers came bearing down upon him.

He made a frantic effort to roll out of the way, howling as he did so, but it was too late.

The first one of the line cannoned into him, and fell right across Bunter's prostrate form. Then another, and another, and another, until the whole crowd was writhing and kicking on the ice, with the Owl underneath!

"Oh, dear me! I'm done for!" came in a smothered groan from the fat junior. "My backbone's busted! Ow—yow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Owl of the Remove nearly boiled over with rage at the shrieks of laughter, but he could do nothing.

Bunter's ordeal had increased his hunger, and he felt that he must, at all costs, make another bid for a share of Alonzo's tuck.

So he made ready for another dash across the ice; he selected a course that was free of slides, and just as Alonzo was opposite to him on the other side of the pond, he stepped on to the ice, and staggered and slipped towards the centre of the pond.

He had failed to observe, however, that everyone else was carefully avoiding the centre, and when he had reached it was startled to hear an ominous crack, and feel the ice giving way beneath him.

The next instant, with a dismal scream, he disappeared from sight!

Alonzo had seen him approaching a moment before the disaster, and knew that he was making for him. This fact seemed to smite his conscience, for in pained-stricken cries he called for help for the Owl.

But while he was still calling Harry Wharton & Co. were procuring a rope, with which they rushed back to the pond. And just as they arrived Bunter's head appeared above the ice.

He clutched frantically at the rope, and endeavoured to clamber on to the ice again; but he only succeeded in breaking more of it away.

There was no need to urge Bunter to cling to the rope; the whole party combined could not have dragged it away from him.

At last, after the most terrible five minutes Bunter had ever experienced, he got on to the ice once more.

Alonzo was ready with his own overcoat, which he threw over the Owl's shoulders with almost tearful sympathy, and he was rushed back to Greyfriars.

There Alonzo waited on him hand and foot. He helped him change his clothes, made tea for him, piled tarts and cakes before him, and generally gave him one of the times of his life.

Peter Todd and Tom Dutton declared quite frankly that they thought Alonzo was considerably overdoing it, but Alonzo was not to be put off. He said he considered it was his duty, and Bunter, at any rate, thought he had done his duty right well.

THE GREYFRIARS GALLERY.

No. 99. - GEORGE JOSEPH CARBERRY.

ONLY old readers of the "Magnet" will remember Carberry; and he would not have been included in this series but for the fact that it has been kept going as long as possible to please the thousands of readers who did not want it to stop. An end must come at some time—and that not long hence—but before it comes I really think we shall have had everybody of the least importance, even the back numbers, as one may call them.

Good, bad, and indifferent! Carberry is one of those who fall into the second category. You might class fellows like Elliott and Walker in the third; but there is no possible doubt about Carberry.

A rotter all through, and a particularly vicious and mean rotter at that. Not worse than Loder, perhaps. If Loder has ever shown a gleam of better things, he has very soon relapsed. He has deserved expulsion a score of times. But he has been luckier than Carberry—thought that sweet youth did not get the sack the first time he asked for it.

Carberry was the chief promoter of the swindling sweepstake in which Micky Desmond drew the name of the winning horse, Son o' Mine, but got no profit therefrom. When Wharton and Nugent first heard of the affair they were rather in doubt as to its exact nature; but as Frank, not given to taking uncharitable views, shrewdly said, "It was something rotten, or Carberry wouldn't have been mixed up in it."

It was even rottener than they thought. A sweepstake on a race is not at all the thing in a school; but this was not a straight sweepstake.

Wharton went to see Carberry and to protest. He did not go exactly alone. Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Inky, Mark Linley, and Tom Brown waited outside the senior's study.

Loder and Carne were with Carberry. The latter locked the door, and the three big fellows set upon Wharton. Bob and the rest smashed in the door with a heavy oaken stool. The Removites piled in for all they were worth, and proved too much for the three seniors. They ragged the study most effectively. Wingate came along later, and found Carberry, Loder, and Carne bound up. But it appeared that they did not want to report the matter. Wingate did not understand that; but he insisted that if they were not prepared to report it must mean that they had something to hide, and he would not have them trying to get their own back on Wharton and his chums on their own account. Report them, or leave them alone, he said; and, of course, he was right.

He did not know about the sweep. Wharton was minded to report it to him; but to do so seemed priggish, and the feeling in the Remove generally was strongly against his doing it. As the fellows put it, they had paid their money and wanted a run for it. Most of them were in it—nearly all, in fact. They really had not seen very much against it.

The Sixth-Formers wangled the thing all round. Carne drew a horse which he had heard that day was not running, and he was allowed to have another dip, Carberry putting in a blank, which he explained was just the same as Silver Sand, the non-runner. So it was, in a sense; but Carne had already drawn the blank in drawing Silver Sand, while the inclusion of the blank slip was unfair to someone else.

Carberry drew Bully Boy—second favourite. Snoop drew King John—first favourite. The three seniors bought Snoop's slip of him for a sovereign. Their methods of persuasion savoured somewhat of compulsion; but on the whole Snoop was not dissatisfied.

Scratchings reduced the field, and for a time it looked as though the Sixth-Formers, who held the favourite and second favourite, stood on velvet. No one thought much about Micky Desmond's outsider, Son o' Mine. Until Carberry & Co. got news by wire that the outsider had won. Then they tried to buy the ticket of Desmond—to prevent his feeling dissatisfied! Wharton advised him to hang on, and he hung on, in spite of all their wiles. Then came definite tidings that Son o' Mine was the winner; and Micky was

exultant. He had three pounds fifteen shillings to draw.

But he never drew the money. Carberry & Co., making sure of winning, had had a little flutter in advance with it, and had lost it. And though in the long run Carberry was forced to shell out, it was to charity, not to Micky.

The affair that got Carberry sacked was a particularly black one; yet it was not much blacker than other things Carberry had done, and others played parts in it little better than his.

Dicky Nugent was mixed up in it. Master Dicky, when he first came to Greyfriars, was a very troublesome pup indeed. He wanted to be one of the gay dogs, and he resented hotly the efforts of Frank and Frank's chums to keep him in the straight way.

The three Sixth Form rotters took Dicky up. He had gone out with them one afternoon when Frank, through getting into a row with Bulstrode, was kept in. Harry Wharton agreed to go after him, though he told Frank that he did not think it would be of much use; and Bob Cherry, Mark Linley, and Inky went with Harry.

It was to the Waterside Inn, on the Sark, that the three Sixth-Formers and the fag had gone. Bunter forced himself upon Harry and the rest, and proved unexpectedly useful.



By imitating the Head's voice he gave the seniors the fright of their lives. They did not doubt that the Head had really been there, and all that they thought of was some way of getting out of the trouble.

Carberry thought of a way. They would tell the Head that they had only gone to the inn to fetch Dicky Nugent out of bad company—three big sheepdogs on the track of one small strayed lamb—quite a pathetic picture!

But the Head had known nothing about it till Carberry told him—told the story against himself, more or less, in the vain belief that he was exculpating himself.

Dicky tried to run away. He was brought back, and he and Carberry faced one another and told their differing stories. But Dicky would not have let on about Carberry had he not had it made clear to him that the prefect had tried to make a scapegoat of him.

There were witnesses on both sides. Carberry, who had always been on the worst possible terms with Wharton, insinuated that Wharton's word could not be relied upon in a matter that concerned him. But it was not only Wharton, of course; there were others. And Carberry's witnesses—they were false witnesses—collapsed. They thought only of saving their own bacon.

So it was that Carberry had to go. More came out about him. He had tried to get Bunter in his power in order to keep him from letting out the story of the Waterside Inn, and to do that he had represented the Owl as a thief. No particular injustice was done to Bunter's character in that, but it all told against Carberry. Loder got off, Carne got off, but Carberry had to go—and it was a good riddance!

The Editor's Chat.

For Next Monday :

"THE WILES OF WIBLEY!"

By Frank Richards.

William Wibley, always audacious, fairly outdoes himself in next week's story.

You all know what a very real talent for impersonation Wibley has. That mobile face of his can alter itself so that it does not look in the least like Wib's. He knows all about making-up. He has any amount of cool cheek. And he is whimsical; when he wants anything very much he is apt to forget the dangers of what he does to get it.

I am not going to tell you all about next week's story in advance; it would be easy to spoil it by doing that. But I think you will admit, after reading it, that in it Wibley fairly reaches his top note!

SOMETHING IN STORE!

No, it is not a Christmas Double Number. With regret I have to state that the Huns have robbed us of that for this year. In 1919 we shall get back more or less to the old fashion, I hope; but at present it cannot be done. Paper is very scarce indeed. You would not care about a double number at the expense of four pages off each of the next four after it, I suppose? That would be the only way to work it, as far as I can see, and I don't fancy that way.

The something I have in store is in connection with Bunter.

Do you ever get tired of Bunter? I never do. There always seems something fresh about the fat, silly fellow, with his queer mixture of folly and knavery.

Well, you are going to see Bunter in new surroundings for a time. I am not going to tell you now just how it will happen; you must wait and see. But I will tell you this. The stories in which it happens are great stories—some of the best and most humorous that Mr. Richards has ever written. You will enjoy every one of them.

Don't be afraid that you are going to lose Bunter from Greyfriars, either. If he goes he will return. How could the Remove get on without him?

Keep your eyes open for more about this. And tell your friends what ripping stories are appearing both here and in the "Gem." As I write, the end of the war seems well in sight. Everybody is feeling more cheerful; and this is just the time to rope in more and more of your friends as regular readers. The time will be coming soon when we shall no longer have to worry about paper, and I want our circulations doubled then!

WAR AND PEACE!

The paragraph above was written a few days ago. Now, with the pages in proof before me, I am able to find room for another paragraph about the end of the war and what it means to our papers.

Not all that it means, of course. Peace will make a lot of difference—sooner or later. But at the time of writing the war is supposed to be practically over, for the armistice has been signed, and all of us have been rejoicing over peace.

I can see a lot of trouble ahead yet. The condition of affairs in Germany is such that there may even be farther fighting. But there can be no big, organised, national opposition to our conquering armies. In that sense, at least, the war may be said to be over.

Yet in this number you will find things that belong to war conditions—on page 8, for instance, where you see Bunter and the bomb. It was too late to alter that; and, moreover, as it was new to us all, and a really good piece of artistic work, I might have let it go through even had it not been too late.

And, through our printing so far in advance, there are two or three numbers quite out of my hands, but still unseen by my readers, in which the war is still going on, so to speak.

Never mind! It was inevitable that this should happen sooner or later. It has come sooner than we had dared to expect, and we are all glad. I should like to shake my readers, one and all, by the hands in sign and token of gladness. But wouldn't my arm just ache after it!

YOUR EDITOR.

7-12-18