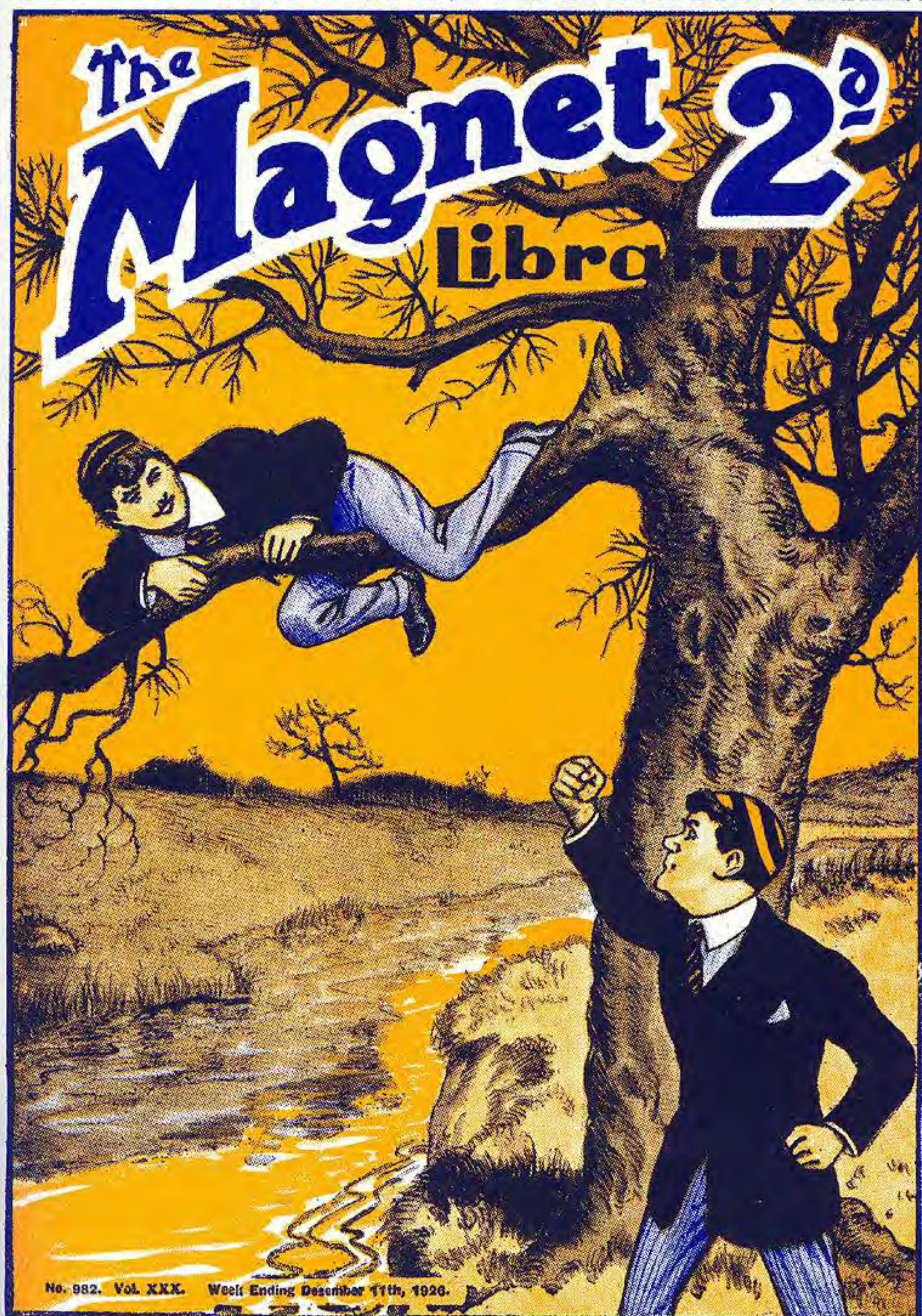


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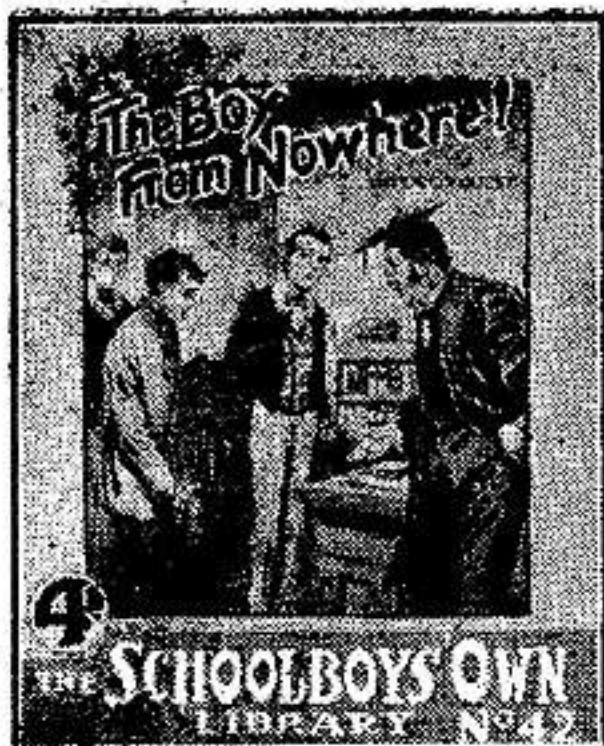
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"WHAT ABOUT IT?"

SO conclude a jolly letter from a reader chum in Manchester. "What about it?" refers to Christmas Numbers. And my correspondent desires to know if the MAGNET is going to celebrate Christmas in the usual way with a special seasonable number. I reply in the words of Bob Cherry: "It is! It are!" And next week will see our special Christmas Number on the market. How's that? You will be well advised to order your copy early, as there's bound to be a rush to secure the good things you will find mentioned in the programme below.

THE "GEM'S" CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

Talking of Christmas Numbers brings me to mention that our grand companion paper, the "Gem," celebrates Christmas in the right spirit. In this week's grand issue appears an extra long story of Tom Merry & Co., the chums of St. Jim's, dealing with their holiday experiences at Drere Manor. The name of this place arouses your curiosity, I'll wager, and atop of that is the news that this old house, perched on a lofty cliff, is said to be haunted by the ghost of a dead and gone buccaner. A Christmassy combination you will admit. You'd enjoy reading "The Ghost of Drere Manor!" which is the title of this special Christmas story, believe me. The "Gem" is on sale Wednesday—don't forget!

GIFT BOOKS!

This is the time of year when mothers, fathers, aunts, uncles, etc., begin to look worried. They don't know what to get their boy or girl for Christmas. You can help them here, chums, should you be approached. What about the "Holiday Annual"? Doesn't that constitute the ideal gift-book for the boy or girl with a liking for school, sporting, and adventure yarns? In it you'll find stories dealing with your old favourites, Tom Merry & Co., Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars, Jimmy Silver & Co. of Rookwood, and hosts of other yarns by the leading authors of the day. Don't forget the "H. A."! It's a stunning bargain at the modest price of six shillings. And it's on sale now at all newsagents. For the boy who is extra keen on hobbies, the boy who spends a great deal of his time in the home workshop, no gift-book could be more acceptable than "Every Boy's Hobby Annual." The price? Six shillings, chum, and it's worth double. Get your newsagent to show you a copy. He'll do it like a shot!

NEXT WEEK'S GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER:

"THE PRISONER OF THE BUNGALOW!"

By Frank Richards.

This is the third story in the excellent series featuring Horace Coker and Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars, and it's a winner all the way. Mind you read it!

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These are two special Christmassy articles which will, I feel sure, be well received. Order your copy of this grand Christmas Number in good time, chums! Cheerio!

YOUR EDITOR.

WHERE IS COKER?—Horace Coker's a champion duffer and a conceited ass, with weird and wonderful ideas of reforming the cheeky fags of the Lower Fourth, but he's a good chap for all his lofty "Cokerish" ideas, and as plucky as they make 'em! Thus, even the Lower Fourth feel a certain amount of anxiety when it is discovered that Horace Coker is—

Missing from School!



BY
FRANK RICHARDS.

A Magnificent New Long Complete Story of Harry Wharton & Co. and Horace Coker of Greyfriars.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Fixed Up!

"DON'T fix up anything for this afternoon, you two."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"I shall want you," explained Coker.

Potter and Greene, of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars, regarded Horace Coker quite curiously.

They were surprised; and yet they felt that they really had no reason to be surprised. For it was just like Coker.

Coker of the Fifth spoke in a tone of finality, as he usually did. He wanted his two chums, Potter and Greene, that afternoon. He was kind enough to tell them so, quite early after dinner, so that they could keep the afternoon free. That was unusually thoughtful and considerate of Coker. That Potter and Greene might possibly have made arrangements already for that Wednesday afternoon, might or might not have occurred to Coker. If it had occurred to him, he regarded it as a trivial matter not worth considering.

The three Fifth-Formers were disposing of baked chestnuts in Coker's study. Potter and Greene were really filling in the time before a football match on Big Side in which they were both concerned. Coker was standing the chestnuts, and the chestnuts were good. Potter and Greene had been talking football, but Coker, evidently, had not been heeding them. He was busy with his own great thoughts.

"This afternoon?" murmured Potter.

"Yes. You see—"

"There's a Form match this afternoon," said Potter mildly. "The Fifth are playing the Sixth, you know."

"Is there?" said Coker indifferently. "I'm not taking much notice of the matches, you men, as Blundell hasn't sense enough to play me in them. He prefers to throw away matches; and as the Fifth are asses enough to let him captain the Form, I have to give him his head. Now, as I was saying—"

"We're taking some notice of the

matches, though," smiled Potter. "You see, I'm playing for the Fifth."

"Same here," said Greene.

Coker looked at them.

"You can cut that out," he said. "I shall want you this afternoon. Didn't I say so?"

"Hem!"

Potter and Greene regarded Coker of the Fifth still more curiously. They knew, of course, that from Coker's point of view, no affairs could be of any imaginable importance excepting Coker's affairs. But it seemed rather thick, even for Coker, to expect them to cut a football match on a half-holiday—at almost the last minute, too. They could picture the face of Blundell, the captain of the Fifth, if they went to him just before the match, to tell him that they were standing out—because Coker wanted them. They smiled at the idea.

There was a limit, though Horace Coker was unaware of it. He was now going to become aware of it.

"It's the matter of those Remove kids," went on Coker, the trivial item of his comrades' engagement for the afternoon being dismissed. "Wharton and his mob, you know. I'm dealing with them."

Potter grinned, and Greene chuckled. They could not quite see themselves cutting a football match, in which their Form captain had selected them to play, in order to back up Coker in his rows and rags with the Remove juniors.

Not quite!

But Coker ran on regardless:

"You know how cheeky those fags have been lately. We shall be breaking up for the Christmas holidays soon. Before that, I'm going to give them the lesson they want. It's up to me."

"But—" said Potter.

"Don't interrupt me, old chap. You talk too much, you know," said Coker chidingly.

"But—" said Greene.

"Shut up, old chap! You're like a sheep's head, you know, nearly all jaw," said Coker.

"Oh!"

"I've had a lot of trouble with those Remove fags," said Coker. "But if there's one thing I never could stand, it's cheek—especially from fags. You know I collared Wharton the other day to give him a licking, and a mob of the little beasts piled on me. Instead of giving Wharton six, you know, they gave me six—me!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker glared at his study-mates as they burst into that involuntary laugh. Coker, certainly, did not see anything to laugh at in the fact that he had been the thrashee, so to speak, instead of the thrasher. Coker regarded it as a serious matter—an awfully serious matter.

"What are you cackling at?" he demanded.

"Oh! Hem!"

"You silly, cackling asses——"

"Hem!"

"I'm going to bring those fags into order," said Coker. "I'll have them feeding out of my hand, in the long run. I've a short way with fags. Now, this afternoon, I am going to deal with them. I shall want you fellows to back me up. They've got the cheek to put up a fight when I thrash them. They're cheeky enough for anything. Of course, I can handle the whole gang of them. But it's a bit undignified for a Fifth Form man to scrap with a mob of fags. You see that?"

"Oh, yes! Why not let them rip?" suggested Potter. "You're not a prefect, you know. Let 'em rip!"

"It's not my fault, Potter, if the Head hasn't sense enough to appoint prefects from the Fifth Form," said Coker. "As for letting them rip, I can only think you're an absolute idiot for suggesting it."

"Oh!"

"They've cheeked me," said Coker.

"Oh!" said Potter, with deep sarcasm. "That does it, of course."

"Of course!" Coker was blind and deaf to sarcasm. "So I want you two fellows this afternoon to back me up in dealing with them."

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"Coker, old man—" murmured Greene.

It was necessary to be tactful—as tactful as possible—with Coker. He was a good chap, and a good chum, in his own way. He received so many whacking remittances from his Aunt Judith and his Uncle Henry that his study was generally a land flowing with milk and honey. Potter and Greene shared freely in the milk and honey. Moreover, Coker had asked them home for Christmas; and break-up was near at hand. They did not want to quarrel with Coker if they could help it. Only it began to look now as if they couldn't help it. Form matches were trifles light as air to Coker, as he did not play in them. Fellows who did play in them naturally regarded them as more than trifles.

"We're both playing football this afternoon, Coker," explained Potter. "We can't very well let down Blundell at the last minute."

"That's all right," said Coker. "Blundell doesn't matter."

"Well, you see, we want to play for the Fifth."

"Don't be an ass!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"Don't argue so much!" said Coker. "Blessed if I ever saw such fellows for arguing!"

Potter looked at the study clock, and rose.

"Time we got changed, Greeney," he remarked.

"Right-ho!" assented Greene.

"You don't want to change," said Coker, staring. "What is there to change for?"

"Football, old bean."

"But you're not playing football."

"Your mistake, old bean—we are!"

Potter and Greene moved towards the study door. They were finished with the chestnuts, and finished with Coker. Wrath gathered in Horace Coker's brow as he stared after them.

"Do you mean to say that you're letting me down, for the sake of your silly fumbling footer?" he asked sulphurously.

"My dear chap—"

"Come back!" commanded Coker.

"You—you see—" murmured Greene.

"I've told you I want you this afternoon," said Coker. "I've made my plans, and I need you. That's enough."

"Quite!" assented Potter. And he walked out of the study, followed by Greene.

Coker jumped up, and jumped to the door. He could scarcely believe that he, Horace Coker of the Fifth Form, was thus set at naught in his own study.

"Where are you going?" he bawled down the passage after the two Fifth-Formers.

"We're going down to change."

"Then you're letting me down?" gasped Coker. "Why, you—you—you—cheeky rotters! Call yourselves pals? I've a jolly good mind to kick you along the passage, by Jove!"

"Oh, can it!" said Potter, quite rudely. "Don't be an ass, Coker. Think we're cutting a football match to join you in ragging with a gang of fags? Don't be a silly chump!"

Coker stared at him. This was the last straw. His lofty determination to put the fags in their place, and keep them there, was described as ragging with a gang of fags. From Coker's estimation of his proceedings, to Potter's estimation thereof, was a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous. It was too

much for Horace Coker. He rushed from the study in breathless wrath, with the intention of carrying out his threat and kicking his rebellious followers along the passage to the stairs.

Just then Blundell's study door opened and the captain of the Fifth came out with Bland.

Crash! Bump!

Coker crashed into the captain of the Fifth before he even saw him. There was a roar from Blundell as he staggered along the passage.

"Ow! Oh! What the thump—"

"Oooop!" gasped Coker, reeling back from the shock.

"You silly owl!" roared Blundell.

"Ow! You shut up!" stuttered Coker. "Wharrer you get in the way for, you blinking ass?"

Blundell did not answer that. He turned on Coker and grasped him, and Bland of the Fifth added another sinewy grasp. Coker, hefty fellow as he was, was swept off his feet, and bumped on the floor. There was a wild yell from Coker as he smote the hard, unsympathetic oak.

"Yoop!"

"Give him another!" gasped Blundell. "I'm fed-up with his dashed impudence! Give him another—hard!"

Bump!

"Ow, ow! Whoop! Rescue! Potter—Greene, lend a hand!" yelled Coker frantically.

Potter and Greene vanished down the stairs. For reasons known only to themselves—inexplicable to Horace Coker—Potter and Greene did not intend to handle their Form captain, under whose lead they were about to play football with the Sixth. They disappeared, leaving Coker struggling and gasping in the hands of Blundell and Bland.

Bump!

For a third time Horace Coker smote the floor of the Fifth Form passage.

Then Blundell and Bland walked away, laughing, and followed Potter and Greene to the changing-room, leaving Coker to gasp and splutter and struggle for his second wind.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Bunter's Treat!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

"Don't bother, Bunter!"

"Scat!" granted Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton & Co., of the Remove, were not looking as sunny-tempered as usual that afternoon.

It was a half-holiday, a fine, cold afternoon, and the Famous Five were booked for tea with Marjorie & Co. at Cliff House School—so really they might have been expected to look merry and bright. But one member of the Co. was under detention, as it happened, and that quite spoiled the prospect. The vials of the Remove master's wrath had been poured upon the devoted head of Robert Cherry.

Slinging an ink-ball at Lord Mauleverer in class was not really a serious matter; at all events, Bob did not regard it as serious. Mr. Quelch seemed to take quite another view.

Certainly, it had happened, unfortunately, that Lord Mauleverer had moved his head at the wrong moment, and the ink-ball, passing him, had landed on Mr. Quelch instead of Mauly.

Accidents will happen, as Bob told his chums afterwards, and they agreed. But such accidents were not supposed to happen in the Form-room during class. Detention for the afternoon had rewarded Bob, and he had the happy

prospect of sitting in the Form-room from two-thirty till four-thirty, while the rest of Greyfriars enjoyed the half-holiday.

Mr. Quelch—always a thoughtful gentleman—was providing him with a special task in Latin irregular verbs, so that he should not waste his time. Bob could easily have dispensed with that. He would have preferred to take the "Holiday Annual" into the Form-room with him. He liked it better than Latin verbs, regular or irregular.

"It's rotten!" said Bob ruefully. "Beastly! That howling ass Mauly was bound to move his silly head, of course!"

"The rottenfulness is terrific," agreed Hurrce Jamset Ram Singh. "But the chuckfulness of the esteemed ink-ball in class is really not the proper caper! The ludicrous Quelch was infuriated!"

"You fellows may as well get off," said Bob. "I'll follow on when I get out."

"We'll wait, if you like," said Harry Wharton. "There'd be time to get over to Cliff House for tea after you're finished."

"No good hanging about," said Bob, shaking his head. "Hang on till I go to the Form-room. That's all right."

"I say, you fellows!"

"Oh, buzz off, Bunter!" granted Johnny Bull.

"Roll away, old fat bean!" said Frank Nugent.

"But, I say, you fellows!" persisted Bunter. "That ass Cherry being detained this afternoon—"

"Cheese it!"

"I'll come over to Cliff House with you instead, if you like," said Bunter. "What do you say?"

"Rats!" said the chums of the Remove, in unison.

"Oh, really, you fellows—"

"Scat!"

"But I say, you fellows, Marjorie will be glad to see me, you know," urged Bunter. "It will be a pleasure to her, you know. And she doesn't want to see Bob."

"Doesn't she?" said Bob, with a glare.

"Well, she couldn't could she?" said Bunter, blinking at Bob Cherry through his big spectacles. "Why should she, you know?"

"You silly owl!"

"I'll come instead," said Bunter cheerfully. "I'll have Bob's bike, as he won't be wanting it."

"We're not biking; the roads are too jolly thick," said Nugent.

"Look here! I'm not going to walk all the way to Cliff House," said Bunter warmly. "What about telephoning for a taxi?"

"So that we can have the pleasure of your company?" chuckled Nugent.

"Exactly!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" said Billy Bunter peevishly. "I can jolly well tell you that I'm not going to hoof it two or three miles through the mud to please you! Besides, I'll stand the taxi."

"Bow-wow!"

"Man will do it for ten bob," said Bunter. "I'll pay—don't you worry! I'm expecting a postal-order this afternoon!"

"Will you pay the taxi-man with your expectations?" asked Johnny Bull sarcastically.

"Well, I suppose one of you fellows could advance me the ten bob and take the postal-order when it comes?" said Bob. "Is it settled?"

"Not quite. But you will be settled



Horace Coker stared at the letter, and then stared at Mr. Poynings. "You see, sir——" began Mr. Poynings. Bang! Coker's clenched fist descended on the table with a concussion that made the study echo and Mr. Poynings jump. "I see," said Coker wrathfully, "I see that you are an interfering ass, Mr. Poynings, and that you have got over my Uncle Henry somehow to stop me spending the Christmas holidays at Holly House!" (See Chapter 3.)

if you don't roll away! Kick him, somebody!" said Wharton.

"You fellows ready?" asked Hazeldene of the Remove, coming out of the House and joining the Famous Five.

"I say, Hazel!" Billy Bunter turned to the newcomer. "I say, it's a jolly long walk to Cliff House—filthy muddy roads!"

"We're taking the short cut through the wood, fathead!"

"Well, that's jolly wet and muddy, too! Look here! If I come with you, I'll stand a taxi."

"Oh!" said Hazel.

"Marjorie doesn't want to see that fat bounder!" said Bob Cherry.

"You shut up, Cherry!" said Bunter severely. "I suppose Hazel can take me to tea at his sister's school if he likes."

"Br-r-r-r!" grunted Bob.

"After all, it's a jolly long walk," said Hazeldene, glancing at the other juniors. "If Bunter really means business, I don't see why he shouldn't come."

"Gammon!" said Johnny Bull.

"He's expecting a postal-order!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Better ask the taxi-man if he's prepared to wait till Bunter's postal-order comes for his fare. He might object!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh! You spoofing fat bounder!" began Hazel, frowning.

"Oh, really, Hazel——"

"Buzz off!"

"I tell you I'll stand the taxi!"

howled Bunter. "I'm in funds to-day, I can tell you!"

And Bunter jingled his cash in his trousers-pocket. There was quite a loud, metallic jingle, and Hazel's brow cleared again.

"Well, if you mean it, you can come," he said. Hazeldene, of the Remove, was a good deal of a slacker, and he was not looking forward to the long tramp to Cliff House, through wet woods and muddy lanes.

"Look here, Hazel! Marjorie doesn't like that fat bounder," said Bob.

"Oh, rats! She's stood him before, and can stand him again!" said Hazel cheerfully. "I know I don't want the walk if I can get out of it. Why shouldn't Bunter stand us a taxi if he likes?"

"I'll jolly well go and telephone for it now!" said Bunter, with a scornful blink at the Famous Five. "Wait for me, Hazel, old chap! I can use the telephone in the prefects' room, as the Sixth are all at the footer now."

"Buck up, then," said Hazel.

Billy Bunter rolled into the House. Hazel gave the Famous Five a rather sarcastic look.

"I don't see why Bunter shouldn't come," he said. "You fellows don't seem keen on shelling out for a taxi, anyhow!"

"Waste of money!" said Wharton. "What's the matter with walking on a clear afternoon like this?"

"Well, I prefer a taxi!"

"I don't!" said Wharton. "I'd

rather walk. Still, I suppose we'd better all go together."

"The betterfulness is terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob Cherry suddenly.

"What——"

"There's that giddy merchant Poynings!" Bob Cherry made a gesture towards the school gates. "The man who wouldn't let us in out of the rain the other night!"

"Coker's uncle's secretary!" said Nugent.

The Famous Five looked rather curiously at the man who had come in at the school gates, and was walking up the drive to the School House.

He was a slightly-built man, dressed in black, with a hooked nose, and very sharp eyes of a greenish hue.

The juniors had seen him before, when he had come down to Greyfriars to see Horace Coker; Mr. Poynings being secretary to Coker's Uncle Henry. They had seen him a second time under very strange circumstances, when they had sought shelter from the rain at a lonely bungalow on the cliffs, and had found that the solitary occupant of the bungalow was this same Mr. Poynings.

The juniors had almost forgotten that incident; but the sight of the man with the hooked nose recalled it to their minds, and they regarded him with some curiosity as he came up to the House.

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Mr. Poynings glanced at them as he came up indifferently. They wondered whether he knew they were the fellows who had asked him for shelter on that rainy evening on the cliffs. If he had seen them, it was only a glimpse in the wintry dusk, and it was unlikely that he knew them. He passed them and went up the steps of the House without a sign of recognition. Billy Bunter was coming out as he reached the big doorway, and Mr. Poynings stopped in the doorway to speak to the fat junior.

"Excuse me! Is Master Coker in the school?" he asked.

Bunter blinked at him.

"I dare say he is," he answered.

"Ring the bell, and Trotter will come."

And Bunter rolled on, apparently having no more time to waste on the stranger within the gates.

He rejoined the group of Removites in the quadrangle.

"All serene," he said. "The taxi's coming up from Courtfield—it won't be long. Better than tramping through the mud, Hazel, what?"

"Much better," agreed Hazeldene.

"Time you were in the Form-room, Cherry!" grinned Bunter.

"Br-r-r-r!"

"You'll have Quelch after you!" chuckled the Owl of the Remove.

"Bless Quelch!"

"Here he comes!" grinned Hazel.

Mr. Quelch looked out of the doorway of the House. He glanced round, and his eyes fixed on Bob Cherry.

"Cherry!"

"Yes, sir?" groaned Bob.

"You will go into the Form-room now."

"Oh, dear! Yes, sir."

Bob Cherry gave his comrades a dismal nod, and went into the House.

"Rotten for poor old Bob," said Nugent.

"The rottenfulness is terrific."

"Well, fellows shouldn't lark in the Form-room," said Hazel, shrugging his shoulders. "What did he expect?"

"Oh, rats!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows, we may as well get down to the gates," said Billy Bunter. "The taxi won't be long now."

"Let's!" assented Hazel. And he started with the Owl of the Remove.

Harry Wharton & Co. followed more slowly. They were unwilling to impose the fat and fatuous Bunter on the Cliff House girls for tea; but that matter was not in their hands now. Hazel was master of the ceremonies, as it was his sister Marjorie whom the Remove were tea-ing with. Neither were the charms of the Remove willing to accept favours at Bunter's hands; but they could not very well refuse to share the taxi with Marjorie's brother. So they followed Bunter and Hazel down to the gates.

The taxi came buzzing along the Courtfield road, and the six juniors packed themselves into it. Bunter was first in.

"Tell him where to go, Hazel," he said.

As it was Bunter's taxi, it was up to the fat Owl of the Remove to give the driver instructions. But no doubt Billy Bunter had his own reasons for leaving that task to Hazel.

"Cliff House School, near Pegg," said Hazel.

"Right, sir!"

And the taxi rolled away with the visitors for Cliff House, what time Bob Cherry was beginning his detention

task in the Remove Form-room, and on Big Side the Form match between Fifth and Sixth was starting—even Potter and Greene in the ranks of the Fifth, absolutely oblivious of the wrath of Horace Coker, and even of his existence!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Mr. Poynings is Persistent!

"MASTER COKER—"

MASTER COKER—Coker looked round crossly. Coker was not in a good temper. The desertion of Potter and Greene had left him on his lonesome own for the afternoon, and his great plans—whatever they were—for the downfall and punishment of the Famous Five—had to be left over. Deserted by Potter and Greene, bumped in the Fifth Form passage by Blundell and Bland, Coker was feeling extremely ill-used, wrathful, and vengeful. So he looked at Trotter far from amiably as the House page presented himself in the study doorway.

"Gentlemen to see you, sir," said Trotter.

"Oh!" said Coker. "Not my pater, I suppose?"

"No, sir—"

"Can't be Uncle Henry," said Coker.

"He's seedy, and wouldn't be travelling in this weather."

"In the visitors' room, sir," said Trotter. "Mr. Poynings, sir—that's the name he give, sir."

Horace Coker gave a snort.

"Poynings! That fellow!"

"Same genelman who called to see you last week, sir," said Trotter. And the page turned away.

"Hold on!" said Coker.

"Yessir!"

"Go and tell the man I won't see him."

"Eh?"

"Deaf?" snorted Coker.

Trotter, the page, blinked at Coker.

Having seen a good deal of Coker, of the Fifth, Trotter was, of course, aware that the great Horace did not rival the late Lord Chesterfield in polish of manner. But a message like this was surprising, even from Coker, who prided himself on speaking very plain English, and saying what he meant without beating about the bush.

"But, sir—" stammered Trotter.

He had never taken such a message to a visitor at Greyfriars before.

"Tell him I won't see him!" snapped Coker. "And tell him he can go and eat coke!"

"Oh, sir!" gasped Trotter.

"And tell him I'm fed up with him, and he's a cheeky outsider," added Coker.

"Oh, lor'!" said Trotter.

And Trotter departed, grinning, to convey Coker's polite message to the gentleman in the visitors' room downstairs.

Coker dismissed the matter from his mind. He had more important things to think about. His feud with the heroes of the Remove occupied his mind. Somehow or other, matters had not gone well in that direction. Instead of being crushed and withered by the great Coker's wrath, the Famous Five seemed only to be entertained by it. Instead of taking lickings tamely from the great man of the Fifth, they had the unparalleled impertinence to turn on Coker and smite him hip and thigh.

Such things were—to Coker—plain proof that Greyfriars was going to the

dogs. Coker felt that it was his duty to arrest the good old school on its dog-ward career. The scamps of the Lower Fourth had to be put in their place, and kept there with a firm hand. Coker was going to do it. He was resolved on that. And his pals had refused to back him up—preferring football. His own familiar friends had failed him. No wonder Coker was in a state of exasperation.

There was a step in the Fifth Form passage and a knock at Coker's study door. Horace gave a snort.

"Oh, come in, fathead!" he snapped.

The door opened, and a man dressed in black, with a hooked nose, entered the study. Coker stared at him blankly. Mr. Poynings had not taken his departure on receipt of Coker's polite message. He had come up to Coker's study. The cheek of it quite took Coker's breath away.

Mr. Poynings closed the study door and turned to Coker, with a deprecating smile on his rather hard face.

"Pray excuse me, Mr. Coker!" he said.

"Well, of all the neck!" ejaculated Coker. "Look here, I don't want to see you—see?"

"I am very sorry, Master Coker. But I have come a considerable distance to call upon you this afternoon," said Mr. Poynings smoothly.

"You shouldn't have taken the trouble."

"My dear young gentleman—"

"Oh, can it!" said Coker gruffly.

"You can't come over me with the soft sawder, you know!"

Mr. Poynings compressed his lips.

"I trust, Master Coker, that you will hear me, now that I am here," he said.

Coker snorted.

"You can run on, if you like," he snapped.

Mr. Poynings placed his trilby hat on the table, and as Coker did not ask him to be seated, he sat down unasked. Coker watched him grimly. He did not like his uncle's secretary and did not approve of him; and Coker never was a fellow to conceal his thoughts.

"Last week, Master Coker, I called on you with reference to your Christmas vacation," said Mr. Poynings. "I suggested that, in the present state of your Uncle Henry's health, you should not spend the vacation at Holly House with your schoolboy friends."

"I know you did," grunted Coker.

"I told you it was like your cheek to suggest anything of the sort; and I tell you so again now."

"Mr. Henry Coker is in somewhat poor health, and the presence of a crowd of noisy schoolboys—"

"No bizney of yours."

"In the circumstances, Master Coker, it would be much more advisable for you to go home with some of your school friends, or to spend Christmas with your parents," said Mr. Poynings.

"That's all you know," said Coker.

"I'm spending Christmas with my Uncle Henry and my Aunt Judy. My brother Reggie is going home to the pater and the mater—not that it matters to you, Mr. Poynings. Now that I know that Uncle Henry is off his feed I'm more keen than ever on going to Holly House for the vac. I shall cheer him up. I'm not sure now that I shall take my friends with me—they've treated me with rotten cheek to-day. In fact, I sha'n't take them. But I'm going myself."

"Your Uncle Henry is of opinion that it would be more advisable for you to go to your own home, sir."

"He hasn't said so," jeered Coker.

"I have a note written by him to show you."

Coker started a little.

"Hand it out," he said.

Mr. Poynings took a letter from his pocket-book and passed it to Coker. The Fifth-Former read it with a knitted brow.

"Dear Horace,—I am very far from well at the present time, and, on further consideration, I fear that you would not be likely to enjoy your holidays with me this Christmas. I think, my dear boy, that perhaps you had better arrange to spend the vacation with your parents.

"Your affectionate uncle,
"HENRY COKER."

Horace Coker stared at that letter, and then stared at Mr. Poynings. He was puzzled and angry.

"You see, sir—" said Mr. Poynings. Bang!

Coker's clenched fist descended on the study table with a concussion that made the study echo. Mr. Poynings gave quite a jump.

"I see," said Coker wrathfully—"I see that you are an interfering ass, Mr. Poynings, and that you have got over Uncle Henry somehow. There's nothing here from Aunt Judy. What does she say?"

"Of course, her views are those of her brother," said Mr. Poynings.

"I don't believe it!"

"Master Coker!"

"Not a word of it!" snorted Coker. "You take much too much on yourself, Mr. Poynings. You've got Uncle Henry to write this, somehow. You don't want me at Holly House over Christmas. I can see that. Like your confounded cheek—a dashed paid secretary. You'd better clear. Last time I saw you I heard you swearing like a bargee. You're a blackguard. I'm going to advise my uncle to discharge you. Now out!"

Mr. Poynings breathed hard. Probably he had never before had to deal with a fellow like Horace Coker, of the Greyfriars Fifth. No doubt he was unaccustomed to hearing such excessively plain English. Certainly there was no mistaking Coker's meaning.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do," went on Coker. "I'm going to telephone to my Aunt Judith at Holly House. I'm going to ask her. You can wait here if you like while I phone."

"Master Coker—"

"That's enough!"

Coker swung out of the study, leaving Mr. Poynings staring blankly after him. The secretary's hard face set like iron, and his greenish eyes burned. For whatever reason—and the reason was certainly mysterious—Mr. Poynings did not want Coker of the Fifth home at Holly House for Christmas. Probably he had expected to influence a school-boy easily enough. But Coker of the Fifth was a little out of the common run of schoolboys. There was only one Coker, and he often came as a surprise to persons who made his acquaintance. Mr. Poynings set his thin lips in a hard, tight line. Had Coker seen his hard, cruel, ruthless face at that moment, he might have divined that there was danger for him if he set himself in opposition to the man with the hooked nose. Not that Coker would have cared.

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THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Dear Horace!

MR. PROUT, the master of the Greyfriars Fifth, lifted his eyes from his newspaper as there was a knock at his study door.

"Come in!" said Mr. Prout.

Horace Coker presented himself.

"Excuse me, sir—may I use the telephone?" said Coker.

Mr. Prout raised his eyebrows.

"No, Coker, you may not use the telephone," he answered icily. "Close the door after you."

"It's important, sir—"

"Close the door! There is a draught!" snapped Mr. Prout.

"But, sir—"

"Take a hundred lines, Coker!"

"Oh crumbs!"

Coker of the Fifth closed the door at that. He paused in the passage and shook his fist at the closed door. Then he walked on to Mr. Quelch's study. From that study could be heard the clicking of a typewriter. Mr. Quelch was spending a happy afternoon on the umpteenth chapter of his celebrated "History of Greyfriars."

Coker knocked at the door.

"Come in!" snapped Mr. Quelch; and the clicking of the typewriter keys ceased.

Coker stepped into the study.

"May I use the telephone, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Quelch glared. The Fifth-Former had interrupted his literary work to ask whether he might use the Form master's telephone! Nobody was allowed to use Mr. Quelch's telephone. Fellows who wanted to use it had to select times when Mr. Quelch was out of doors; which often led Mr. Quelch to make sarcastic remarks about overcharges when his bill came in from the exchange. Mr. Quelch often felt absolutely convinced that he had never had

all the calls for which he was charged. And he was generally right—he hadn't! Remove fellows could have told him who had had them. But the most venturesome Removeite never came to the study to use the phone when Mr. Quelch was at home. That was reserved for Coker; a case of fools rushing in where angels feared to tread.

Coker, as if taking Mr. Quelch's consent for granted, was already crossing to the telephone. The Remove master's voice stopped him.

"Coker!" he thundered.

"Oh! Yes, sir."

"Leave my study!"

"I haven't telephoned yet, sir."

"Leave my study!" thundered Mr. Quelch; and he half rose from his chair.

Coker rather hastily left the study. He did not like the expression on Mr. Quelch's face at all.

In the passage, Coker gave a snort of disgust. Coker quite admitted that Form masters could not, as a general practice, be bothered by fellows wanting to use their telephones. But they ought to have been pleased to let Coker of the Fifth telephone. Really, they were treating Coker just as if they regarded him as a common-or-garden Greyfriars fellow. They seemed quite unaware of the special importance of Coker of the Fifth.

With a knitted brow, Coker tramped away to the prefects' room. There was a telephone there, but he knew that it would be just like the cheek of Sixth Form prefects to tell him that he couldn't use it. Rather to his relief, he found only one Sixth Form man in the room. He remembered that a senior match was going on on Big Side. Only Walker of the Sixth was in the prefects' room, and he raised his eyebrows and stared at Coker.

"Want anything?" he asked.

"Telephone!" said Coker.

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"Not allowed! Cut!" said Walker of the Sixth.

Coker looked him up and down truculently, and coolly walked across to the telephone. Walker coloured, and half-rose. But he sat down again. He was a Sixth Form man and a prefect, and Coker was only in the Fifth. But Coker was a very hefty fellow, with a terrific punch. Certainly he would have been flogged for hitting a prefect of the Sixth. That, however, would not have mended Walker's nose if Coker had flattened it. Walker decided to treat him with the contempt he deserved.

Heedless of Walker, the Fifth-Former lifted the receiver from the hook, and asked the exchange for his trunk call to Holly House. While he waited for the call to come through, he stood at the window and looked out into the quad, taking no notice of Walker. Far in the distance he could see a patch of the football ground, and discerned Potter and Greene among the footballers there. He frowned as he spotted them. There they were, playing football just as if Coker did not exist—just as if he had not told them that he wanted them that afternoon! Potter and Greene were going to learn that they could not treat Horace Coker like that.

The bell rang, and Coker took up the receiver again.

"Holly House?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Coker speaking—Horace Coker, Greyfriars. Ask Miss Judith Coker to come to the phone."

"Yes, sir."

A few moments later the voice of Aunt Judy was heard.

"Is that you, Horace, my dear boy?"

"Yes, auntie."

Coker's gruff voice softened very much in speaking to Aunt Judy. To Aunt Judy, Horace was the beginning and end of all things admirable. Coker fully agreed with her. Aunt Judith admired Horace immensely, and so did Horace! And Coker was very fond of his aunt.

"My dear boy!" came Aunt Judy's affectionate murmur.

"How's Uncle Henry?"

"How kind and sweet of you to ring up and ask, my dear! I am afraid he is rather poorly at present."

"That fellow Poynings has called here, auntie. I phoned to you about him last week, and told you he'd tried to keep me away for Christmas. Now he's called again, and brought a note from Uncle Henry."

"My dear, dear Horace, surely you will come for Christmas! I should be dreadfully disappointed!"

"Of course I shall come," said Coker. "That's settled. But if Uncle Henry really would rather I didn't—"

"He would be dreadfully disappointed, too, if you did not come, Horace."

"But his note says—"

"I did not know he had written; it is the work of that man Poynings," said Miss Coker. "He seems to have a very great influence over your uncle, Horace. I cannot understand it, but I dislike him very much. I wish your uncle would send him away; but he will not, though he has never disregarded my wishes before. It seems to me sometimes that he fears Mr. Poynings. Horace, my dear, you must come. Promise me that you will not disappoint me."

"What-ho!" said Coker. "Rely on me, auntie! I'm coming all right!"

"I am so glad, Horace!"

Coker bade his aunt farewell, and put

up the receiver. He crossed to the door of the prefects' room, giving Walker of the Sixth a look as he went. He was ready for trouble with Walker of the Sixth—Coker was always ready for trouble with anybody. But Walker affected to be deep in his book, and Coker walked out.

He returned to his study in the Fifth Form passage, and found Mr. Poynings waiting for him there. Mr. Poynings' eyes glinted at him as he strode in.

"You have telephoned, Master Coker?" he asked.

"I have."

"And—"

"And I'm going home for Christmas to Holly House, as I told you," said Coker contemptuously. "It seems to me, Mr. Poynings, that you're the sort of man that will bear watching, from what Miss Coker tells me. She doesn't trust you, and I don't trust you! My opinion is that you are a bad egg!"

"Master Coker!"

"That's all!" said Coker. "Good-afternoon!"

"Then you are determined?"

"I've told you so. Get out!"

Mr. Poynings got out. Coker gave a sniff of contempt as he went, and dismissed the secretary from his mind. He little dreamed what was to be the result of his answer to the man with the hooked nose.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Bunter Begs For It!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing!"

Billy Bunter seemed a little uneasy.

The taxi had ploughed its way by muddy roads to Cliff House, and the school presided over by Miss Penelope Primrose was in view in the distance, with the rolling sea beyond.

Harry Wharton & Co. were looking forward to a pleasant ramble with their friends at Cliff House, to be followed by tea in the school-room. They were only concerned by the fact that Bob Cherry was under detention at Greyfriars, and could not share the pleasure with them.

Billy Bunter, most certainly, was not bothering his head about Bob Cherry. He never bothered it about anybody but William George Bunter. But he seemed uneasy and worried as the taxi drew nearer and nearer to Cliff House School.

"I—I say—" he began again, as the vehicle rattled up to the gates of Cliff House.

"What's biting you, fatty?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Oh, nothing!"

The taxi stopped, and the chauffeur descended and opened the door. The Greyfriars juniors stepped out one after another. Five of them started towards the gates, leaving Billy Bunter to settle with the taxi-man.

"Hold on a minute, you fellows!" called out Bunter anxiously.

The juniors stopped.

"Seven-and-six, sir!" said the chauffeur.

Bunter rattled his cash in his pocket. The juniors stood and looked at him inquiringly.

"Well, why don't you pay the man and let him get off?" asked Hazeldene.

"The—the fact is—"

"My only hat!" ejaculated Nugent. "Has the fat bounder been spoofing, after all?"

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

Hazel started. He had heard the chink of cash in Bunter's pocket, and it

had sounded like a great deal of cash. It dawned upon him now that perhaps the Owl of the Remove had been pulling his leg.

"Look here, Bunter—" he began.

"We may as well go in," remarked Johnny Bull.

"Yes, rather!"

"The ratherfulness is terrific!"

"I—I say, you fellows, hold on a minute!" stammered Bunter. "I—I think I've left my money in the study at Greyfriars!"

"Why, I heard you rattling it in your pocket!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Yes; but—but I—I think—"

"Seven-and-six, please!" said the taxi-driver grimly.

He was beginning to feel suspicious.

"You fat villain!" said Harry Wharton, in measured tones. "How much have you got?"

Bunter drew his fat hand from his pocket. It held a pencil-case and a bunch of keys, two halfpennies, and a penny. Evidently it was the pencil-case and the keys which had furnished most of the clinking when Bunter had rattled his cash in his pocket.

"Twopence!" said Nugent.

"Oh, my hat!"

"It—it's all right, you fellows," stammered Bunter. "My—my postal-order will be there by the time we get back."

"Your what?" roared Johnny Bull.

"My postal-order, you know. Didn't I mention to you fellows that I was expecting a postal-order?"

"Why, you—you—" gasped Wharton.

"I'm waiting, gentlemen," said the chauffeur, with quite an unpleasant look. "Who's paying the fare?"

"That fat rotter is!" exclaimed Hazel indignantly. "I've got nothing to do with it."

"It's all right, my man," said Bunter. "I—I'll give you the twopence now, and—send the rest on."

"Will you?" said the chauffeur, with such an expression on his face that Bunter jumped back.

The taxi-driver turned to Hazeldene.

"You engaged the cab, sir?" he said.

"I jolly well didn't!"

"You told me where to drive. I look to you for my fare."

"Nothing of the sort!" howled Hazel.

"That fat rascal phoned for the taxi!"

"I don't know who phoned for it, but you told me to drive to Cliff House, and I know I've driven you to Cliff House," said the chauffeur. "Seven-and-six, please."

"You're for it, Hazel!" grinned Johnny Bull. "You would bring that fat spoofer, and you would come in a taxi. We wanted to walk."

"The walkfulness was the proper caper, my esteemed Hazel," said Hurreo Jamset Ram Singh.

"I—I tell you—" stuttered Hazel.

"Seven-and-six, please!"

"I—I can't—"

"Blooming bilks, what?" said the taxi-driver unpleasantly. "Orlright! I'll see your headmaster about it. That's what I'm going to do!"

"Hold on!" said Harry Wharton quietly. "We didn't engage the taxi, you chaps, and we didn't want it; but we've driven in it. It's up to us."

"Shell out!" said Frank Nugent, with a faint grin.

The chums of the Remove went through their pockets. Lower Fourth fellows, as a rule, did not take taxicabs; Bunter could afford such luxuries apparently.

"It's all right, you fellows," he said



Three pairs of hands grasped Bunter, and he descended into the road with a bump. Then Hazeldene grasped him by the back of the collar, and rolled him over. There was a wild splutter from the fat junior, as his face was buried in a muddy puddle. "Grooooh!" he gasped. "Ooooooh!" "Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Harry Wharton & Co. (See Chapter 5.)

cheerily. "I'll settle up out of my postal-order, you know."

"Shut up!" roared Johnny Bull ferociously.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

The sum of seven shillings and sixpence was raised by various contributions. Hazel put in sixpence, and grumbled loudly at doing so. The rest was found by the Co. The taxi-man was paid, and he grunted and drove away. Bunter blinked at the juniors a little uneasily through his big spectacles.

"Don't you worry, you fellows," he said. "It's all right. Now let's get in—I can see Marjorie at the gate."

Harry Wharton & Co. looked fixedly at William George Bunter. They did not answer him in words. Four pairs of hands were laid on the Owl of the Remove, and he descended into the road with a bump.

"Yaroooh!" roared Bunter.

"Let me get at him!" shouted Hazel.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

Hazel grasped Bunter by the back of his collar and rolled him over. There was a wild splutter from the fat junior as his face was buried in a muddy puddle.

"Grooooh! Oooooooch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow-ow-ow! Ugh! Grooooh! Gug-gug-gug!" spluttered Bunter, sitting up dazedly. "Oooooooch!"

"There, you, fat rotter!" gasped Hazeldene.

"Yarooooch!"

"I say, chuck it! There's Marjorie and Clara," said Frank Nugent hastily.

Harry Wharton & Co. walked in at the gates. Hazel stayed to give Bunter's head another plunge into the muddy puddle, and then he followed. Bunter sat up and roared.

"Here we are, Marjorie, old girl," said Hazel, with a rather red face.

"What's that out in the road?" asked Miss Clara.

"That? Oh! Nothing!"

"It looks like a porpoise," said Miss Clara demurely.

"Oh, Clara!" murmured Marjorie.

The schoolgirls and their schoolboy chums went in at the gate; and Johnny Bull dropped behind. Johnny had a suspicion that the Owl of the Remove might roll in after the Greyfriars party, when he had recovered his breath a little. Johnny decided to deal with him, if he did—drastically. The incident of the taxi had quite exhausted the patience of Johnny Bull.

He was right. Marjorie and her friends had disappeared into the school, when Bunter came puffing and blowing up to the gates again. He was damp and he was muddy—and even Bunter did not quite like presenting himself at Cliff House in such a state. But there was no alternative—unless he was to miss his tea. That, of course, was not to be thought of—by Bunter at least.

Johnny Bull did not waste words on Bunter. He gripped him by the collar and ran him out into the road again. He ran him onward, heedless of loud protests and objurgations from William George. He stopped out of sight of Cliff House, and proceeded to bang Bunter's head on a tree. Then he kicked him hard, thus starting him in the direction of Greyfriars.

All this Johnny did without speaking. He was a fellow of few words at any time; and on this occasion he felt that he could let his actions speak for him. Certainly his actions were unmistakable.

Johnny Bull turned back to Cliff House, leaving Bunter gasping.

The fat junior leaned on a tree, and gasped, and spluttered, and spluttered and gasped. When he felt a little better, he made a step in the direction of Cliff House. But he made only one step. He stopped again, grunting. He realised that it was not good enough. In some matters, Bunter never knew when he had had enough. But on the present occasion he knew.

"Ow! Beasts!" he groaned.

From the bottom of his fat heart Bunter wished that he had not so generously stood that taxi from Greyfriars. Certainly, it had not cost him anything; but he was no better off than he was before—unless a bumping and a thumping were to be counted as gains. And he had a long walk back to Greyfriars before him—a long, long walk. Unless some charitable person gave him a lift, there were muddy miles for Bunter to tramp.

"Beasts!" groaned Bunter.

And he started—blinking round wearily through his big spectacles, in search of some passing vehicle upon which he could beg, borrow, or steal a lift on the way to Greyfriars.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Coker Means Business!

BOB CHERRY groaned dismally. It was four o'clock, and his detention had yet a half-hour to run.

Outside, the air was keen and frosty, and the winter sun gleamed on the old quadrangle and the leafless trees. Occasionally, from far in the distance, a yell

could be heard from the football ground, where Fifth and Sixth were at Soccer. Never had the Form-room seemed so dim and dreary to poor Bob, as it seemed that bright afternoon. Only by a great effort did Bob concentrate on the task set him so thoughtfully by his Form master. In fact, the task would have lain neglected on his desk, but for the certainty that if it was not done, the detention would be extended when Mr. Quelch looked in at half-past four. So Bob Cherry laboured at Latin conjugations, dealing dismally with irregular verbs—which were more irregular than ever when they had passed through his hands.

Two or three fellows had looked in to give him a cheering word—strictly against the rules of detention. Vernon-Smith and Tom Redwing had dropped in, then Squiff had come in for a few minutes, and then Peter Todd. These kindly visits broke the monotony a little, though they certainly did not speed Bob with his task.

"Another blinking half-hour!" murmured Bob, as four chimed out from the Greyfriars clock-tower. "Oh dear!"

There was only one solace. Once he was free of the Form-room a quick walk through the wintry woods, and tea at Cliff House, would follow. But it seemed as if half-past four would never come.

There was a footstep in the passage again, and Bob looked up brightly. In the lonely Form-room he was beginning to feel like Robinson Crusoe on his island, and he would have been glad of a word with even Bunter, or Skinner, or Snoop.

But it was Coker of the Fifth who looked in. Bob Cherry gave him a genial grin. He was glad even to see the rugged features of Horace Coker.

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

"So you're here, you young rascal!" said Coker grimly.

"Here I am, you old rascal!" assented Bob.

"Cheeky as ever?" said Coker.

"More!" said Bob.

"I'm going to take all that out of you!" said Coker, frowning. "I'm going to have you young scoundrels in order before we break up for Christmas!"

Bob Cherry chuckled.

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"Dear man!" he said.

"The other young rascals have gone out, I think," said Coker.

"You think?" repeated Bob. "Gammon! You can't think, Coker!"

Horace Coker breathed hard.

Coker of the Fifth had been going in for strategy that day. He had learned that Harry Wharton & Co. were going out for the afternoon, and he had planned to trail them down with Potter and Greene, and deal with them, as they deserved, far from the help of the rest of the Remove. That strategic plan had been knocked on the head by Potter and Greene most inexplicably preferring to play football rather than to back up the great Coker.

Left on his lonely own, Coker realised that if he was to deal with the Famous Five at all he would have to take them in detail, not in bulk. And the discovery that Bob Cherry was detained looked, to Coker, like a stroke of good fortune. He did not mind which member of the cheery Co. he started on, so long as he got started.

He came into the Form-room, grim and vengeful. Bob Cherry rose from his desk and picked up the inkpot.

"Come on, old bean!" he said.

"Put down that inkpot!" roared Coker.

"Dear man!" grinned Bob.

Coker came striding round the desk and reached out at Bob.

Swoosh!

The ink flew from the inkpot, and splashed upon the rugged features of Horace Coker.

"Groooch!"

Horace Coker was turned, all of a sudden, into an imitation of a Christy minstrel.

But he came on more vengefully than ever. He grasped Bob, and whirled him out from the desks.

"Now, you young rascal!"

Bob Cherry returned grasp for grasp. Sturdy fellow as he was, he was, of course, no match for a big Fifth-Former. But Bob was not a fellow to be licked while he had a punch left.

For several minutes there was a wild and whirling scrap in the Form-room. Coker had not come there to scrap with a junior, of course. It was miles beneath his dignity to do anything of the kind. But as this cheeky junior persisted in putting up a fight, it was difficult to see how he was to be licked, without a scrap as a preliminary.

Coker was going to bend him over a desk and give him a dozen with the Form master's cane. But bending Bob over a desk did not seem an easy task.

"What—what is this?"

Mr. Quelch appeared in the doorway of the Remove-room.

The uproar had brought him there. Mr. Quelch had come along with the suspicion that friendly fellows in the Remove had dropped in to cheer Bob Cherry up in his detention, and that a rag was going on. He was almost petrified at the sight of a Fifth-Former struggling in the Form-room with the detained Removeite.

"Bless my soul!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch. "What—what—what is—is this, Coker? Coker, how dare you! Cease this at once!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Coker.

He released Bob Cherry, and stood blinking at Mr. Quelch, a breathless and inky blink. Bob staggered to a desk and leaned on it, gasping.

Mr. Quelch strode into the Form-room.

"Coker!" he thundered. "How dare you come here? How dare you interfere with a boy in my Form—a boy under detention, too? Coker, I shall

report this to your Form master, and demand severe punishment for your outrageous conduct. Leave this room at once!"

"Look here, sir!" gasped Coker.

Mr. Quelch's hand rose to point to the door.

"Leave this room instantly, Coker!"

And Coker left.

Mr. Quelch turned to Bob Cherry.

"I trust you are not hurt, Cherry," he said kindly. "This is a—most unprecedented occurrence! I shall complain very seriously to Mr. Prout. Cherry, you are excused the remainder of your detention; you may leave the Form-room, my boy!"

"Thank you, sir!" gasped Bob.

Mr. Quelch left him, and Bob gladly put his books away and followed. He was feeling quite grateful to Coker. That great man's intervention had cut Bob's detention short by a quarter of an hour. And Bob hurried away cheerily, to get his cap and coat and start for Cliff House. In the corridor he passed Coker of the Fifth, and gave him a cheery grin.

"Thanks, old bean!" he said affably.

Coker glared.

"You've got me off detention!" chuckled Bob. "I shall be early at Cliff House. No end obliged, Coker!"

And he walked away in great spirits. Coker stalked out of the House, with a grim and frowning brow. Matters did not seem to be going well for the great Coker that afternoon.

There was trouble coming with Mr. Prout when the Remove master reported his outrageous conduct to that gentleman. Mr. Prout might even have the cheek to cane him. Coker was wrathful and ratty as he stalked in the quad, and he looked still more wrathful and ratty as he saw the footballers coming back to the House. Potter and Greene stopped to speak to Coker, with friendly smiles. Now that the Form match was over Potter and Greene were thinking of tea, and tea in the study largely depended on Coker. But their friendly smiles received only a steely stare in return.

"Hallo, Coker, old man?" said Potter affably.

"Waiting for us?" said Greene. "That's really kind!"

Coker snorted.

"Don't speak to me!" he snapped.

"Coker, old chap——"

"Cut it out!" sneered Coker. "I'm done with you. Go and chop chips!"

"We didn't beat the Sixth," said Potter. "Wingate kicked the winning goal for them. I—I rather think Blundell made a mistake in not playing you for the Fifth, Coker."

"A rather serious mistake," said Greene, taking his cue from Potter. "It's cost us the match!"

Potter and Greene considered that this was laying it on thick enough, even for Coker. But Coker was not to be placated; he declined to listen to the voice of the charmer. Soft answers are said to turn away wrath; but Horace Coker's wrath was not to be turned away so easily. He rewarded Potter and Greene for their soft answers with a grim stare.

"Coming in to tea, old fellow?" asked Potter affectionately.

"No."

"Coker, old chap——" murmured Greene.

"I'm going out!"

"I—I say——"

"And I don't want you fellows to speak to me when I come in, either!" said Coker crushingly.

And Horace Coker turned his back on his faithless followers, and walked away

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death; and Bob was able to help himself now.

"Hold on!" he panted.

Coker was holding on; it was all that he could do. Bob grasped him, and Coker had both hands free to hold on to the branch. Then Bob reached up to the branch and held.

"All right now," he panted; "I can hold on, Coker! You first."

"I'm getting you out!" gasped Coker. "I'm all right, I tell you! You get out first."

"Don't be cheeky!" Even at this moment Coker was still Coker. "I'll help you up—Now, then, sharp!"

There was no time for argument; the icy water was numbing the limbs of the junior and the Fifth-Former. Bob gave up the point, and, with a helping shove from Coker below, he dragged himself on the trailing branch, and then clambered along it to the tree, and dropped safely on the bank. There, dripping with water, he turned anxiously to Coker.

"Buck up!"

Coker pulled himself clumsily on the branch, and came squattering along it with the grace and activity of a rhinoceros. But he succeeded in reaching the bank, and rolled in the frosty grass at Bob Cherry's feet.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Mysterious!

BILLY BUNTER stopped and blinked at an object that had dawned upon his short range of vision and blinked again.

Bunter was surprised; but he was pleased. It was a small covered cart at which the Owl of the Remove was blinking, drawn up in a narrow, muddy lane that wound round the edge of Friardale Wood, with thick trees on one side, and a field of stubble on the other. Billy Bunter had tramped a long and weary tramp from Cliff House, and his fat little legs ached as he drew nearer to Greyfriars. Bunter did not like walking; but so far he had had no chance of a lift. He was in a hurry to get back to the school. Having missed tea at Cliff House, he did not want to miss tea at Greyfriars also; that would have been too catastrophic. So he was both pleased and surprised by the sight of the cart.

He was surprised because that steep and muddy lane was seldom used by any vehicles, and it seemed odd enough that the cart should be tied up there some miles from any habitation. But he was pleased, because there was a chance of a lift at last. For a sufficient "tip" he did not doubt that the carter would give him a lift to the school. His total financial resources were limited to twopence, a pencil-case, and a bunch of keys. But it was not necessary to tell the carter all that; the man would not expect to be paid in advance. Difficulties might arise when Bunter was landed at Greyfriars; but Bunter was not a fellow to meet trouble half way. Some fellow might lend him the necessary tip—at all events, he would have reached Greyfriars without walking the last mile, and that was the important point.

So the Owl of the Remove, having spotted the covered cart, stopped, and blinked round in search of the carter.

The horse was tied to a tree at the edge of the muddy lane, the thick canvas cover of the cart brushing against the boughs overhead.

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Bunter blinked round for the carter; but he blinked in vain. The man was not to be seen.

Had the cart been tied up anywhere near the Cross Keys or the Peal of Bells, Bunter could have guessed where the carter had probably gone. But even the unreflecting Owl thought that it was a little odd for the vehicle to be tied up and left in that remote and solitary spot.

He plodded on till he reached the cart, blinking round him, but still there was nothing to be seen of the driver in the lane or in the field adjoining. Thinking that possibly the man had gone to sleep in the cart, Bunter lifted a corner of the canvas cover, and blinked in. But the cart was empty, save for a few sacks and a coil of rope.

Bunter gave a discontented grunt.

Where the carter was he could not imagine; but the man evidently was not on the spot, and there was no lift for Bunter. The fat junior sat down on the low fence beside the lane, to rest his weary fat limbs, and wait for the carter to return. He had tramped from Cliff House by wet footpath and miry lane, and he was fatigued. He did not mean to lose the chance of a lift if he could help it. The beast—as Bunter mentally termed the missing carter—would be bound to turn up sooner or later. Anyhow, the fat Owl was getting a much-needed rest while he waited.

But minute followed minute, and there was still no sound or sign of the returning carter.

It was getting near tea-time at Greyfriars; and Bunter was growing seriously alarmed on that subject.

He had barely time to get in for tea, if he sprinted all the way; and never had the fat junior felt less disposed to sprint.

"Where on earth is the beast?" he murmured.

Really, it seemed as if the carter must have forgotten where he had tied up his horse; it was quite extraordinary that the vehicle should be deserted in that lonely spot for such a length of time. There was no building anywhere near at which the man might be supposed to have any business. Billy Bunter was puzzled and deeply annoyed.

But there was a sound at last—from the direction of the wood on the other side of the little lane.

Bunter was sitting on the fence by the field. On the other side there was no fence, the trees bordering the lane, with paths running up here and there into the wood. The dusk was beginning to fall; and it was by one of those dusky paths from the deep wood that someone was coming.

"That beast at last!" murmured Bunter.

The cart was between him and the new arrival; he could not see the man yet. He slipped down from the fence, to move round the cart. As he did so a voice fell on his ears—a harsh, whispering voice.

"See that's all clear, Smiley."

"It's all clear, Nosey—not a soul."

Evidently two men had arrived by the path from the wood, though Bunter could not see either of them yet.

The first voice spoke again, savagely and snappishly.

"Look, you fool! Can we afford to take risks now?"

"Oh, all right!"

Heavy tramping feet came round the cart.

A burly, powerfully-built man

emerged into Bunter's view—a roughly-dressed man, with a stick under his arm. He gave quite a jump at the sight of Billy Bunter.

"Oh!" he ejaculated.

"What is it, Smiley?" came from the other man, still unseen by Bunter.

"A school kid."

Bunter heard a savage exclamation.

The big man, Smiley, came quickly towards the fat junior. His heavy, harsh face was dark and threatening.

"Who are you? What do you want here?" he growled.

Bunter blinked at him.

The Owl of the Remove was not an observant fellow; he was, in fact, remarkable for his obtuseness. But even Bunter had an inkling that there was something wrong here. He backed away from the burly Smiley, blinking at him uneasily.

"I—I was going to ask you for a lift!" he stammered.

"What?"

"I'm tired," explained Bunter. "I'll stand you a shilling for a lift for about a mile."

"You young idiot!"

"Oh, I say—"

"Clear off!" snapped Smiley, and he slipped his stick into his hand, and made a threatening motion towards the fat junior.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He spun round and ran for it. This fellow, whoever he was, was not an ordinary carter; he looked more like a dangerous tramp. Billy Bunter's fat heart throbbed with apprehension as he ran. But there was no sound of footsteps in pursuit, and Bunter stopped at the first turning of the lane. That there was something strange and surreptitious going on he felt certain, though he could not imagine what it was. But Bunter was inquisitive to his fat finger-tips, and he meant to find out if he could. He was extremely curious to see the second man, "Nosey," whose harsh voice he had heard, but who had remained hidden from his sight by the horse and cart.

He stopped and listened. And from the distance he could hear the sound of the cart getting into motion.

Bunter crept back to the bend of the narrow lane. He peered back through the gathering dusk, and had a glimpse of the back of the cart, in motion now. Apparently, the two men were in it; for he could see neither of them. The cart rumbled on up the muddy lane and disappeared from his view.

"Well, my hat!" murmured Bunter. "They're up to something—poaching, perhaps! No, that ain't likely—stealing, more likely—only there ain't anything to steal about here! Beasts!"

Whatever might be the mysterious business of Nosey and Smiley, it was clear, at least, that there was no lift for Bunter.

The covered cart was gone; in the opposite direction from Greyfriars. From the direction it had taken, Nosey and Smiley were apparently heading for the road to the cliffs.

Bunter grunted discontentedly, and set out on the weary tramp to Greyfriars. He had had a rest; but what he wanted was a lift, and there was no lift for him. He was tired and morose as he tramped onward, and came out into Friardale Lane at last.

Bicycle lamps gleamed through the gathering dusk, and Bunter caught the sound of familiar voices. Vernon-Smith and Tom Redwing were returning from a ride.

"I say, you fellows!" yelled Bunter.



"Come on, old bean!" cried Bob Cherry, poisoning the inkpot. The infuriated Coker strode forward and reached out at the Removite. Swoosh! The ink flew from the inkpot, and splashed upon the rugged features of Horace Coker. "Groooch!" The great Horace was turned, all of a sudden, into an imitation of a Christy minstrel! (See Chapter 6.)

"Hallo, fatty!" called back the Bouncer.

"Give me a lift, Smithy!"

"What?"

"I'll stand behind your bike and hold on."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Vernon-Smith.

And the two cyclists rode on towards Greyfriars, laughing. Apparently, neither of them was disposed to carry Bunter's weight as far as the school.

"Beasts!" groaned Bunter.

He tramped dismally on. Deeply did the Owl of the Remove repent him that he had "stood" that taxi to Cliff House.

Greyfriars came in sight at last. Bunter rolled in wearily at the school gates. He was much too late for tea in Hall; he knew that. His only hope was that Peter Todd might not yet have finished tea in Study No. 7 in the Remove. Bunter rolled into the House and laboured up the stairs, and limped wearily along the Remove passage to Study No. 7.

"Had your tea, Toddy?" he asked as he rolled in.

Peter Todd nodded.

"Yes, thanks, old fat bean!"

"I—I say, is there any left for me?"

"Fraid not!" said Peter cheerfully. "But if you were going to stand your whack, old man, there's nothing to prevent you now; the tuckshop isn't closed yet."

"I've been disappointed about a postal-order."

"Too bad!" said Peter sympathetically. "Is it the same postal-order you were disappointed about last week, or the one you were disappointed about the week before?"

"Beast! I—I say, is there anything in the cupboard?"

"Oh, yes!"

Bunter brightened.

"That's all right, then. I suppose I can have it?"

"Certainly."

"What is it, Peter, old chap?"

"The pie-dish."

"Eh?"

"There isn't any pie left in it!"

"Beast!" howled Bunter. "Look here! I haven't had my tea, Peter. Those rotters let me down at Cliff House—after I'd stood them a taxi, too! I was nearly attacked by a dangerous tramp coming back! I—I might have been murdered, Peter!"

"You might, really?" asked Peter.

"Yes, really!"

"Dear me!" said Peter. "That reminds me of a poem!"

"Eh?"

"Of all sad words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these, it might have been!" said Peter Todd blandly.

"Why, you—you—you awful rotter!" gasped Bunter. "Look here, you beast! What am I going to do for my tea?"

"You mean, whom are you going to do for it, don't you?" inquired Peter humorously.

"Yah!"

Bunter rolled out of Study No. 7 and closed the door with a bang that ran the length of the Remove passage. After which he prowled up and down the Remove studies like a lion seeking what he might devour.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Kidnapped!

"COKER, old chap!"

Coker gasped.

"Shut it!" he said.

"Eh?"

"Not so much of your 'old chap'!" said Coker.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

Horace Coker had done a very plucky thing, and he had done Bob a very great service. But he was still Coker.

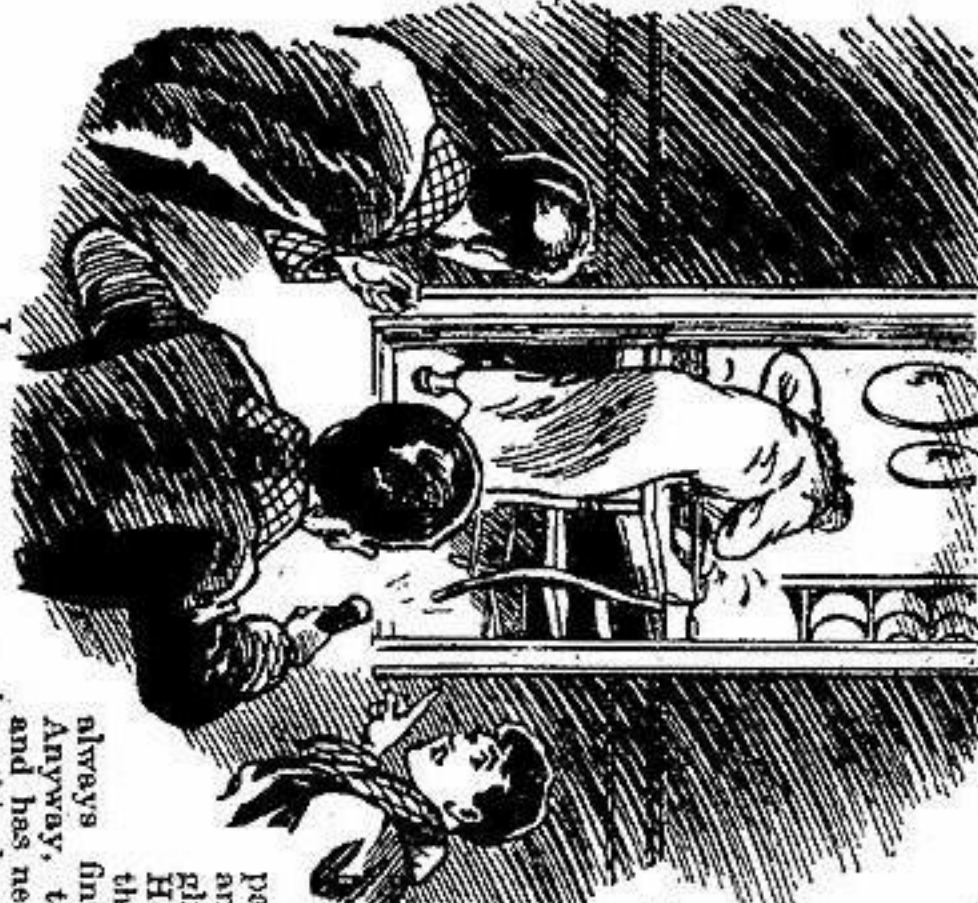
Certainly it was the hot-headed and obstreperous Horace who had caused Bob to fall into danger in the first place. Nevertheless, it was plucky of him to rescue the junior whom he had endangered: Bob hardly liked to think of what might have happened had not Coker plunged in and caught him.

(Continued on page 17.)

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The Ghost of Merry Manner

A Powerful and Dramatic Story of Jack Jolly & Co.



Dicky Nugent.

He became a nervous wreck. But he got rid of the ghost, in the long run.

"How?" asked Jack Jolly and Merry Manner.

"By exercising it." "Taking it for a run in the grounds, do you mean?" asked Jack Jolly.

"No, you duffer! My parson called in the village parson, and the parson exercised the ghost with a bell and a book. He rang the bell, and read something out of the book; and that always finishes a spook on the spot. Anyway, the Wicked Baron vanished, and has never been heard of seen again to this day."

"Then we shan't have a ghost to brighten our Christmas holiday?" said Bright, looking disappointed.

"No, and I'm jolly glad!" said Merry. "I'm not in love with spooks, if you fellows are. They are all right to read about in books, but when it comes to meeting them in the flesh—groo! Any-thing scoopenacheral always sends cold shivers down my spine."

Jack Jolly laughed. He did not seem to share his chums' dread of ghosts.

"Any secret passages at the manner?" he asked. "Lots of them," said Merry. "There's one leading from the kitchen, and another from the coal-seller; and the house is full of secret passages and mysterious hiding-places. The parson finds it jolly convenient, for dodging creditors and income-tax collectors. Whenever he has an unwelcome visitor, he simply opens a sliding panel, and disappears until the coast is clear."

"Jolly cute of him!" said Bright, with a grin.

By this time the three chums had reached Merry Manner. A powdered flunky came dashing down the front steps, and delivered them of their luggage. Then Major Merry came on, the seem-beaming all over his face.

"Welcome home, my dear boy!" he said, giving Merry a paternal hug. Then he shook hands cordially with Jack Jolly and Bright. "Chained to see you—what? Any pals of my son's are pals of mine. Let me inform you that this is Liberty Hall."

"Have you changed the name of the place, then, sir?" asked Jack Jolly. "I always thought it was Merry Manner!"

"Tut-tut!" said the major, in his merry manner. "Come inside, my boys! Sorry I couldn't send my Ford car to the station to meet you. Owing to a misunderstanding, the old-iron man collected it this morning by mistake."

"That's all right, parson," said Merry. "Is dinner ready? We're simply famished!"

The major led the way into the old-fashioned dining-room, where the table groaned beneath the wait of the goodly viands.

Jack Jolly & Co. enjoyed their dinner, and they enjoyed the experience of being waited on by butlers, footmen, pages, and serving-wenches. At St. Sam's, there were no lackies to fetch and carry for them. A

study feed had to be cooked, laid, and eaten by the juniors themselves.

Major Merry had already dined; but he said he would eat another beef-steak with his guests, just to be matley.

"I've been telling these fellows about the Ghost of the Wicked Baron, parson," said Merry. "Do you remember how it used to go clanking round the house on windy nights, giving everybody the creeps?"

The major nodded.

"The nights weren't the only things that were windy," he said. "I confess I felt a bit windy myself. I'm not afraid of anything of flesh and blood; but beggars, for instance, have no terrors for me. I simply draw the bedclothes over my head, and hope for the best. But when it comes to meeting a specter, why, my hare stands on end, and I tremble like a frightened rabbit!"

Jack Jolly and Bright stared at the Major in scornful surprise. Was this the gallant hero who had fought under Cromwell at Waterloo, and captured the single-handed a duzen of the enemy's tanks? Was this the man who had been awarded the V.C. so many times that there was not room on his breast to accommodate all the medals?

The Major's purple face had turned pale



"Rats!" said the Major scornfully. "Have you ever heard of rats?"

"Glad to hear you say so!" said Jack Jolly.

at the mere mention of ghosts. With a shaking hand, he poured himself out a stiff bumper of gingerale, and drained it at a gulp. Then he looked gravely at his guests.

"After the Ghost of the Wicked Baron had been exercised," he said, "I fondly hoped that this house would never again be troubled by spooks. The parson assured me that the Wicked Baron would never return; he must have exercised him so violently that the Baron dropped dead with heart-failure. Yet, in spite of the parson's assurance, I have lately been hearing mysterious noises in the night!"

Merry looked quite startled. But Jack Jolly and Bright, seating an adventure, were all agog with egg-sitting.

"What sort of noises, sir?" asked Jack Jolly.

"Queer sounds of scuttling in the wainscoting."

"Rats!"

"How dare you say 'Rats!' to your host, Jolly?" he thundered.

"I don't mean to be disrespectful, sir," said Jack Jolly hastily to explain. "What I mean is, the sounds you heard must have been made by rats."

The Major snorted. "Rats!" he said scornfully. "Have

you ever heard rats whispering to each other in the night? Have you ever heard of rats throwing furniture about—making a chest of drawers spin round, and lifting a bed clean off the floor?"

"Grate Scott!" gasped Jack Jolly.

"This place is haunted!" said the Major, with conviction. "Either the Wicked Baron has come back—Christmas was his favorite time—or else some other spook has selected this manner-house as his happy haunting ground. At all events, I can't sleep a wink at night, and I keep a loaded revolver under my pillow, and a couple of life-preservers gripped in my hands. Not that revolvers or life-preservers are any use against spooks. When I shot the Wicked Baron through the heart, he never turned a hare. He just kept on walking, like Felix. I am glad you have come, my boys; it gives me a feeling of security. Hark! What was that?"

The Major had risen to his feet. His eyes were starting out of their sockets; he was in a state of abject terror. "It was only the wind, whispering in the trees," said Jack Jolly, his lip curling in content at the Major's cowardice.

"No, no!" panted the Major. "I distinctly heard the sound of ghostly foot-steps! Listen! They are coming this way!"



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Jack Jolly & Co. set thunderbound and spell-struck.

"Are you really Doctor Birchenhall, sir—or his ghost?" faltered Jack Jolly.

"I am myself—not my shadow," was the reply. "Good-evening, Major Merry! Very seasonable whether for the time of year?"

The major nodded, and shook hands with the Head. He was mildly relieved to find that it was a real, live, yewman being that had entered, and not a grizzly fantom.

"I have decided to come and spend Christmas with you," said the Head. "I trusted I shall be given a cordial welcome."

"Certainly—certainly!" murmured the major, uncorking the lime-juice.

"These young rascals," said the Head, pointing an accusing forefinger to Jack Jolly & Co., "very nearly put the kybosh on my Christmas holiday. By a cunning and crafty ruse, they endeavored to rid themselves of my company. They decoyed me on to a train which was a non-stop to Glasgow!"

"Egad!" muttered the major. "It didn't take me long to tumble to the fact that I had been spoofed, went galloping to the North instead of to the West, so I promptly pulled the communication chord, and stopped the train."

"Are you aware, sir, that there's a penalty of five pounds for doing that?" "Quite!" said the Head calmly. "But I gave your name and address to the railway officials, so I'm afraid you will have to fork out the five. It is the price you must pay for your son's rascality."

"Well, of all the dashed cheek——!" muttered the major, sotto voce.

"I came on to Cornwall by the next train," said the Head, "and here we are—as large as life and twice as natural!"

He darted another look of malicious triumph at Jack Jolly & Co. "Can I trouble you, major, to lend me your hunting-cropper?"

"For why?" asked the major.

"I wish to wallop your son and his confederates for playing a practicable joke on their headmaster."

And the Head looked fierce to the point of ferocity.

"Come—come!" said the major. He drew a small oil-can from his pocket, and proceeded to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Don't be hard on the young rascals, sir. Remember that this is the season of peace on earth and goodwill towards juvenile offenders. Forgive these young scoundrels, sir, and let me order you some dinner."

"Al!" said the Head. "Now you're talking! I'm so hungry I could eat a donkey's hind leg off. Little boys," he added, patting the heads of the three juniors like a henmo grandmother, "I forgive you from my heart, and will gladly postpone your punishment until we assemble at the

"The bullet went clean through the spook and buried itself in the wall."



St. Sam's for the next term. Then I will bray you black and blue!"

The Head dropped into a chair. While he was waiting for his dinner to arrive, Major Merry regaled him with the story of the ghost. He told him all about the Wicked Baron, and the mysterious noises in the night.

"I am afraid, sir," concurred the major, "that if you remain at Merry Manner you will have a most nerve-racking Christmas!"

"Bah! I'm not afraid of ghosts, my dear major. In the first place, I don't believe in them. Even if they egg-sit in fact, and I were to meet one on a dark night, I should not turn pale and flee. I should stand my ground and challenge it boldly. I should give the Wicked Baron such a scare that he would never cross my path again. I am as bold as a lion, major; I fear nothing or nobody in this world, whether natcheral, or scooper-natcheral. I—Hollup! What was that?"

Suddenly the Head gave a violent start and clutched at the tablecloth in a panic. His face was as white as the cloth he clutched.

Steadily footmarks were approaching the dining-room. They halted outside the door, and slowly—inched by inch—milly-meeter by milly-meeter—the massive oak door flew open.

By this time, the terrified Head had slithered down under the table, dragging the tablecloth with him. There was a deafening clatter as plates and dishes crashed to the floor.

"Help!" came in muffled tones from beneath the table. "This place is haunted! Drive the beasty spook away, my dear boys! Go for it baldheaded!"

"It's all right, sir," said the major, peeping under the table where the Head crouched and whimpered like a whipped cur. "It's only Blonkingsp, the butler, bringing in your dinner!"

The Head bobbed up again as if by magic. He smiled faintly at the major, and at Jack Jolly & Co.

"I—I was only having a lark," he explained. "I was giving you a demonstration of how a timid man behaves when he sees a ghost. Sorry if I scared you at all! But you can now see for

(Continued overleaf.)



"THE GHOST OF MERRY MANNER!"

(Continued from previous page.)

yourselves how ridiculous a cove looks when he gets the breeze up over nothing. I knew, of course, that it was merely the butler coming in."

The major accepted this explanation; but Jack Jolly & Co. took it with a grain of salt. They knew the Head of old!

Doctor Birchmell devoured his dinner ravenously. Ever and anon he paused with his knife and fork halfway to his mouth, and his eyebrows—for he had no hair—stood up on end, while his long beard bristled with fright.

Outside the wind whistled and shrieked around the old turrets and towers of Merry Manner; and it was these sounds that kept startling the Head.

A stiff glass of ginger-ale, however, steadied the Head's nerves. He finished his dinner, and looked wolfishly round for more; but there was nothing doing.

Major Merry rose to his feet.

"And so to bed!" he said, quoting Mr. Samuel Peeps, the diarist. "Your room, sir, is up in the atticks. Filkins the footman will show you the way. Goodnight—or 'slovenly wall,' as the Germans would say."

"One minnit!" said the Head. "Is—is my bed-room haunted?"

"Only by rats and mice," said the Major, comfortingly. "You need not fear the Wicked Barron will disturb your slumbers. Chin-chin! Your shaving-water will be sent up to you at five o'clock."

"I don't shave," said the Head, stroking his long beard, which was his pride and joy. "And I should not dream of turning out at six. Send my breakfast up to me at mid-day."

Filkins the footman lighted the Head up to his rooms with a guttering candle. And shortly afterwards Jack Jolly & Co. turned in, for they felt fagged after their long day.

The juniors all slept together in the best

bed-room. It took them some time to get off to sleep, for their minds were full of ghostly fourbodings. They remembered what the Major had said about the mysterious noises in the night; and their slumbers, in consequence, were light and fitful.

At the witching hour of midnight, Jack Jolly awoke with a start. He sat up in bed, his teeth chattering, his heart pounding against his ribs.

Hark! What was that?

It was a more sinister sound than the wailing of the wind; more uncanny than the scuttling of a ratt over the bed-room floor. It was a sound that sent cold shivers down Jack Jolly's spine, and froze him to the pumpkin—or rather, marrow.

It was the sound of a creaking stare!

Creek! Creek! Creek!

In the silent clocks of the night, that sound was most disconcerting. It was as if the shade of the Wicked Barron was prowling about on the stares.

Jack Jolly left out of bed, and aroused his chums.

"Quick, you fellows! Tumble out! I've heard a ghost!"

The three chums donned dressing-gowns over their pijamers, and put on their slippers, and rushed out on to the landing. Individually, they would have been scared stiff; but now that all three of them were there, banded together against an invincible foe, they were as brave as lions.

"Lissen!" whispered Jack Jolly.

Creek! Creek! Creek!

Down below, the stares were creaking ordibly. And the sound gradually grew fainter and fainter.

"The Ghost!" gasped Merry. "Come on, chaps! Let's see if we can catch him!"

They dived down the dark staircase. Jack Jolly led the way. He carried an electric torch.

On the hall floor they paused, and lissened. Still they could hear the mysterious creaking.

"It's down below—in the domestick regions!" panted Merry. "The Ghost seems to be bound for the kitchen. What's he want there, I wonder? Spooks don't indulge in midnite feasts."

"We'll jolly soon see what his game is!" said Jack Jolly. "Come on!"

The juniors dashed Pall-Mall down the stone stares which led to the kitchen.

From within the kitchen came a clatter of pie-dishes. Despite Merry's remark that spooks didn't indulge in midnite feasts, this particular spook was undoubtedly after the grub!

Jack Jolly made a signal to his chums. Then he threw open the door of the kitchen without ceremony, at the same time flashing his electric torch into the cavernous gloom.

A startling sight met the juniors' gaze.

A ghostly figger, clad in a long white nightshirt, was standing with his back to Jack Jolly & Co. Clutching a knife and fork in his bony fingers, he was pitching into a large game-pie with evident relish.

The introoder spun round suddenly, as the beams from Jack Jolly's torch fludded the kitchen. In turning, he caught his long beard in the gravy of the pie, and the juniors were treated to a shower-bath of cold gravy. In their surprise, however, they scarcely noticed the swamping. Their eyes were glued to the white, ghostly figger.

It was the Head!

Doctor Birchmell clutched at his heart. "Ow! You gave me quite a turn, bursting in so suddenly!" he gasped. "I was just—er—partaking of a little refreshment, having been indifferently fed at supper. I trusted your father will not mind, Merry? All the same if he does!" added the Head, under his breath.

Jack Jolly chuckled.

"It isn't the Ghost after all, you fellows!" he said. "Let's get back to bed, and leave the Head to finish his game-pie. Sorry to have disturbed you, sir!"

The juniors went back to bed after their weird adventure. They had not yet met the Ghost of Merry Manner; but that was a little treat that Christmas Eve held in store for them!

(Look out for the further exciting adventures of Jack Jolly & Co., at Merry Manner, next week.)

THE END.

Do You Know That?



Interesting Tit-Bits

for the Footer Fan!



A PLAYER must have been signed for fourteen days before he can assist his club in an F.A. Cup tie. There is no such restriction regarding the League, a man being free to play for his club the minute he is signed.

The offices of the Football Association in Russell Square, London, belong to the trustees of the British Museum.

After the last International match between Scotland and Wales, Fowler, the Swansea Town centre-forward, captured the ball, but he handed it over to the referee—a friendly act which was much appreciated.

In the First and Second Divisions of the League the captaincy is held by the centre-half of the team. There is no goalkeeper in the First Division who captains his side.

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Hugh Gallacher has played in the centre-forward position for Scotland in her last eight International matches, and in those games has scored nine goals—remarkable consistency. Incidentally, Scotland has not once been defeated in those matches.

Years ago a goalkeeper was allowed to advance six yards from his goal when the other side were taking a penalty kick. Nowadays, of course, he must not move off his goal-line.

Joseph Smith, the captain of Bolton Wanderers, recently scored his 250th goal in League matches, and every one of those goals has been scored for Bolton Wanderers—his only first-class club.

Captain Prince-Cox, who is one of the leading football referees, also referees boxing matches. What a life!

No fewer than ten clubs in the First Division were originally known by other than their present names.

Sheffield United have three pairs of brothers on their books—Sampy, Green, and Mercer.

Queen's Park Rangers have a half-back named Salt, and a forward named Mustard. This team should really be a hot combination.

There are forty-eight players named Smith on the books of the football League clubs. This fact has often led to the suggestion that a team of Smiths could be chosen which would hold its own against another side that could be picked, but nobody would envy the reporter his task if such a match were played.

Sam Chedgoy, the former Everton and English International wing player, now plays for a club in Massachusetts, and in the same team are six other British players.

In the last two years Aberdeen have disposed of players to English clubs who have brought into the coffers of the Aberdeen club £16,000. No wonder the Scottish club has been able to wipe off the cost of a new stand recently erected on their ground.



(Continued from page 13)

Had the Remove fellow been swept out into the wide waters of the Sark, it was doubtful whether he would ever have reached the bank alive. If Coker had not actually saved the junior's life, he had done something very like it, and Bob was feeling grateful and very kindly towards Horace of the Fifth. But Coker was always Coker!

The Fifth-Former picked himself up and shook water from his clothes. He was drenched and very cold.

"Awfully decent of you to come in for me, Coker!" murmured Bob, discreetly dropping the "old chap."

"Rot!" said Coker.

"Oh!"

"I suppose I wasn't going to see you drowned, you young idiot!" growled Coker. "Don't be an ass!"

"Still, it was ripping, especially as you can hardly swim!" said Bob. "Lots of good swimmers wouldn't have liked that plunge!"

"Don't be a cheeky little idiot!" said Coker. "If you don't know that I'm the best swimmer at Greyfriars, it's because you don't know anything about swimming!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob.

Coker eyed him grimly.

"You'd better cut off and get into dry clothes!" he said. "Run all the way, and you may not catch cold. Keep moving! I'm not letting you off that thrashing; but it will keep. Cut off!"

"But—"

"Shut up, and get off!"

Certainly, Coker was not a fellow whom it was easy to regard with gratitude and kind feelings. But Bob only smiled cheerily.

"I was going to Cliff House to tea," he said. "I can't go like this, I suppose! I'll get back and get changed. You'd better run, too, Coker; you're shivering!"

"When I want a Lower Fourth fag to give me advice, I'll mention the fact to him!" snapped Coker.

"But, I say—"

"I think I've told you to shut up and cut off?"

Bob Cherry breathed hard and deep.

He was powerfully tempted to plant his knuckles on Horace Coker's nose. But that was scarcely a suitable proceeding, after Horace had plunged into the icy stream for him. Bob resisted the temptation manfully.

"Well, I'm off!" he said. "It's jolly cold."

"Hook it!" said Coker.

And Bob hooked it.

He started along the footpath through the wood, in the direction of Greyfriars, at a run, and he soon trotted himself into a warm glow. He kept up the speed and the glow all the way. As he came sprinting round a winding turn in the footpath he very nearly crashed into two men who were coming along, and he stopped just in time.

"Look where you're going!" growled one of them, a big, burly fellow with harsh, rugged features.

"Bow-wow!" said Bob cheerily.

The man made a threatening movement, and the other man—a smaller man with a large beard and horn-rimmed spectacles—snapped out quickly: "Come on! Don't waste time!"

Bob Cherry passed them, and ran on again, and forgot the encounter in less than a minute, as he sped on towards Greyfriars.

He was not even aware that the two men stopped in the path, and stood watching him till he was out of sight.

"He's gone," said the bearded man in a low voice. "Only a schoolboy. Come on!"

And they pursued their path again.

"But the bloke we want—"

"He followed this path," muttered the man in the horn-rimmed glasses. "I watched him leave the school, and he followed this path. I am certain of that."

A minute later he uttered an exclamation:

"There he is!"

Coker of the Fifth came tramping towards them, squelching out water as he tramped.

The two men halted in the path.

Both of them glanced round quickly, furtively. Bob Cherry had vanished from sight, and there was no one else to be seen on the lonely woodland path, save Coker of the Fifth.

Coker glanced carelessly at the two strangers as he passed them. The early dusk was falling on the woodland path, the shadows deepening among the leafless trees.

"Skuse me, sir," said the burly man civilly, as Coker came abreast. "P'r'aps you can tell me if this 'ere path is right for Friardale, sir?"

Coker stopped.

"Wrong," he answered. "You'll have to go the way I'm going, and then turn to the right on the main road, and— Oh!"

Coker broke off with a howl of astonishment, as the burly man leaped on him and bore him backwards.

Bump!

Coker of the Fifth went down on his back in the footpath, taken utterly by surprise by that sudden and unexpected attack.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Ow!"

"Quiet, you young fool!" breathed the man, as Coker began to struggle.

"You scoundrel!" gasped Coker.

Coker's impression was that he had fallen in with a couple of footpads, and that he was to be robbed. He was absolutely astounded by what happened next. Hefty fellow as he was, Coker was little more than an infant in the sinewy grasp of the big ruffian. The man held him helpless, while the other fellow bent over him, dragged his hands together, and drew a looped cord round his wrists and knotted it. Then, almost in the twinkling of an eye, a thick wad of cloth was stuffed into Coker's mouth, effectually gagging him. The astonished Fifth-Former of Greyfriars struggled and wriggled spasmodically. A minute more, and his feet were tied together, and a large bag, drawn from under the big ruffian's coat, was drawn over Coker's head and face, and tied round his neck.

"Quick!" breathed the man with the horn-rimmed glasses.

Coker, wondering whether he was awake or dreaming, felt himself lifted

from the ground and carried off the footpath into the wood.

He brushed against branches and brambles, as the two men hurried him on, evidently anxious to get out of sight of any passer-by with their prisoner.

The big man bore most of his weight with ease, but Coker could hear the other man gasping.

Once or twice Coker tried to struggle, but, with his hands and feet bound, he was quite helpless. In a dazed state, from sheer amazement, he was borne into the wood.

The kidnappers did not stop.

Once clear of the footpath, they slackened their speed, and proceeded at a more leisurely pace; but they kept on without a pause.

Coker could not resist; he could not speak, he could not even see where he was going. And he was so bewildered that he was hardly able to think. If the two rascals had robbed him he could have understood it. But they did not seem to have any intention of going through his pockets. It was not his watch and his money, but Coker himself that they wanted. He was being kidnapped; and why anybody should take the trouble to kidnap him was a bewildering mystery to Horace Coker.

By the fact that branches and brambles brushed by him all the way he knew that the kidnappers were carefully avoiding footpaths, and keeping to the untrodden wood. But he emerged from the thickets at last, and then, faintly through the bag that closed in his head, he heard a sound of voices. The sound was faint and muffled, but it seemed to Coker that one of the voices was that of a Greyfriars fellow—the fat voice of Bunter of the Remove. Silence followed, and Coker felt himself lifted into a vehicle of some sort.

He was laid in the bottom of the cart, and several smelly sacks were thrown over him. He could hear and feel the two men near him in the cart, and hear faintly a jingle of harness. Then he felt himself in motion. The cart was being driven away.

Under the sacks, gagged and bound, Horace Coker lay helpless, in a state of astonishment that amounted almost to idiocy.

He was kidnapped—he was being driven away hidden in the bottom of a cart—by two men unknown to him. It was beyond comprehension.

Coker lay in bewilderment while the cart rattled on, by a rough lane at first, and then by a more level road.

He had no idea of the direction in which he was being taken; he knew by the motion that he was now on a turnpike road, out of the rough lanes; but it might be the Courtfield road, or the Redclyffe road, or the Pegg road, or Friardale Lane—he could not guess.

But after a time the cart turned into a rough route again, and bumped and jolted on its onward way, slowly, as if going uphill.

It stopped at last.

Coker was lifted out. Thickly covered by the sacks in the cart, he had hardly noticed the cold, but now a keen, biting wind struck him, and he shivered. He knew that it was the wind from the sea, and he could guess that he had been taken up one of the rough paths that led to the high cliffs. He felt himself carried along and heard a door close. Then he was bumped down on a hard floor.

Where was he?

He could not form the faintest conjecture. He was kidnapped, and he was dumped down in some building.

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ANSWERS
Every Saturday — PRICE 2:

prisoner. But where he was, and why he had been taken there, and what was to happen now, were deep mysteries to Coker of the Fifth.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

The Disappearance of Coker!

"SO sorry that Bob couldn't come," said Marjorie Hazeldene, as she said good-bye to Harry Wharton & Co. at the gate of Cliff House.

"Poor old Bob!" said Miss Clara.

"Blessed if I know why he didn't come, though," said Nugent. "His detention was up at half-past four, and that gave him time. Perhaps Quelch wasn't satisfied with the way he handled the irregular verbs."

"Very likely," said Harry Wharton.

"The irregularity of the esteemed Cherry's verbs was probably terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Let's get off," said Hazel. "It's jolly cold."

And the chums of the Remove started on their homeward walk.

They were a little worried about Bob Cherry. It was understood that he should follow them to Cliff House when his detention was over; but he had not arrived. It was very probable that his detention task had not been done to the Remove master's satisfaction, and that they would find him still in the Form-room grinding out irregular verbs. Which was really one of the least agreeable ways in which he could have passed a half-holiday.

As the juniors tramped down the road towards Friardale Wood, a covered cart passed them at a trot, going towards the cliffs.

The juniors stepped out of the way to let it pass, and it drove on and disappeared.

They hardly glanced at it as it passed, little dreaming of what that covered cart contained. There was nothing in its aspect to draw special attention; such carts were common enough in the vicinity. They forgot it as soon as it had passed.

A quick walk through the woods and they came out on the Friardale road, and tramped on cheerily to Greyfriars. The school gates were closed, and Gosling came down grumbling to let them in.

"Which I'll report yer," remarked Gosling, as the juniors tramped in at the gates.

"Dear man!" said Johnny Bull.

"Names?" said Gosling.

"So sorry to disappoint you, old bean!" said Wharton politely. "But we had special leave to go out to tea. So sorry! I know how you must feel it, Gosling!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gosling grunted.

"Wot I says is this 'ere—" he began.

But the juniors walked on without waiting for Gosling to finish. They came in at the lighted House, and a fat junior rolled up as they entered, and blinked at them reproachfully.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh! You got back alive, Bunter?" grinned Johnny Bull. "Tired?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I haven't had my tea!" said Bunter. "I was late for tea in Hall, and that beast Toddy was frightfully mean. I say, you fellows, my postal-order hasn't come."

"Go hon!"

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"I suppose you can lend me—"

"My boot?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

"Has Bob Cherry got out of the Form-room yet?" asked Wharton; Bunter grinned.

"He came in soaking—"

"Eh? Has he been out, then?"

"Yes, and fell into the river or something, and came in drenched and dripping," grinned Bunter. "I think he's got a bad cold, and it looks to me as if it's going to turn to pneumonia." And Bunter rolled away.

"What on earth's happened to Bob?" exclaimed Harry Wharton in surprise.

"Hallo, Toddy! Seen Bob Cherry?"

"In his study. I think."

"Come on, you chaps."

The juniors went up to the Remove passage. There Hazel went to his own study, but Harry Wharton & Co. went on to Study No. 13. There they found Bob Cherry with Mark Linley and Wun Lung. Bob was looking his usual cheery self and did not seem to have a cold; and evidently Bunter had exaggerated about the pneumonia.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob cheerily. "Sorry I couldn't get over to tea. I started."

"Bunter says you came in soaking and—"

"So I did!" grinned Bob.

"What happened, then?" asked Harry.

"Coker of the Fifth!"

"Eh?"

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Coker of the Fifth happened," he explained. "The howling idiot followed me with a big stick—"

"The cheeky ass!" exclaimed Wharton indignantly.

"Let's go and rag him!" suggested Johnny Bull. "We've got time before calling-over."

"Let's!" assented Nugent.

"No fear!" said Bob Cherry. "No more rags on old Coker this term."

"Eh? Why not?"

"The ragfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed Bob!"

"I haven't explained yet," said Bob. "I shinned up a tree to get clear of Coker, and the branch broke, and I dropped into the water—you know the place—where my pater had a tumble a few weeks ago. I knocked my napper on something—look at that bump—"

"Great Scott!"

The juniors were grave enough now. Bob was speaking lightly, but they knew the danger he must have been through.

"That fathead Coker—" said Johnny Bull.

"Mustn't slang old Coker," said Bob. "He came in for me. I was being fairly washed away—and goodness knows what would have happened if I'd been swept out into the Sark. Man was drowned there last term, when the water wasn't nearly so deep. Coker came in for me and grabbed me and held on to a branch—no end plucky, you know. I'm not going to rag Coker again till next term."

"Well, my hat!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Well, it was decent of him," said Nugent. "He's the biggest ass that ever was, but he's got pluck."

"Yes, rather!" said Bob. "After that, I think we ought to keep the peace with Coker till Christmas—if he'll let us!"

"If!" said Harry, laughing. "It's Coker who hunts for the trouble, you know. But we'll keep clear of him if we can. It was jolly plucky of him, especially as he swims like a lump of lead."

"Blessed if I know how he wasn't drowned, swimming as he does," said Nugent. "I suppose he didn't stop to think."

"Ha, ha! He thinks he can swim," chuckled Bob. "He told me he was the best swimmer at Greyfriars."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lucky there wasn't much swimming to do," said Bob. "If Coker hadn't got hold of that branch I don't know where we should both be now. I hope the fathead won't catch a cold. I ran hard all the way back to the school—but, of course, Coker's too dignified to scud along with a Lower Fourth flag. I expect we shall hear him sneezing at call-over."

The juniors chuckled.

When the Greyfriars fellows went into Big Hall for calling-over, the Famous Five looked across to the ranks of the Fifth. But Coker was not to be seen among his Form-fellows. Potter of the Fifth called out to Bob Cherry.

"Have you seen Coker, young Cherry?"

"Yes; in the wood this afternoon," answered Bob. "Hasn't he come in yet?"

"He doesn't seem to have. I thought he went out after you," said Potter.

"He did!" chuckled Bob.

"Well, where on earth is he, then?" said Greene.

"Waiting for tea in the study till Coker comes in, what?" asked Peter Todd.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Fifth-Formers did not answer Todd's question. There was silence in Hall as Mr. Prout came in to take the roll.

When the name of Coker was called there was no reply. Mr. Prout blinked up over his glasses, and called out again, crossly:

"Coker!"

But there was no voice to answer "adsum." Coker of the Fifth was not there.

Mr. Prout gave a grunt, and marked down Coker as absent. Calling-over finished, the Greyfriars fellows crowded out of Hall.

Harry Wharton & Co. went to their studies for prep. After prep, they came down to the Rag. It was near bedtime when Wingate of the Sixth came into the Rag, looked round, and beckoned to Bob Cherry.

"I hear that you saw Coker out of gates this afternoon," he said.

"Yes," said Bob, in surprise. "I suppose he's come in, hasn't he?"

"No!"

"Not come in yet?" exclaimed Bob.

"No. Goodness knows why," said Wingate. "You'd better come and tell his Form master what you know about him. Mr. Prout's asked me to inquire."

"Well, my hat!"

Bob Cherry came back to the Rag ten minutes later.

"Something or other's happened to Coker," he said. "He hasn't come in, and it's close on nine. Old Prouty's waxy. Coker was all right when I left him—only wet. I thought he was following me on the path. Even Coker would have sense enough to come in and change his clothes after getting soaked. I should think. But he hasn't come in."

"Bound to come in for dorm," said Johnny Bull.

But Johnny was wrong. At bed-time, Coker of the Fifth had not returned. The Remove fellows went to their dormitory, wondering what had become of their old enemy of the Fifth.

"Something's happened to him," said Bob, very soberly. "Some accident, I

suppose. He couldn't be staying out of his own accord. Poor old Coker!"

"But what on earth could have happened?" said Nugent.

"Goodness knows!"

The following morning Bob Cherry turned out at the first clang of the rising-bell and hurried downstairs, anxious for news of Coker. But there was no news.

Coker had not returned; no message had been received from him or from anyone else concerning him. He had passed the night outside the school—where, and why, it was impossible to guess. That morning there were grave faces among the Greyfriars fellows. It was known that the Head was in communication with the police on the subject of the missing Fifth-Former. In morning break the juniors saw Inspector Grimes crossing the quad. The inspector had come up from Courtfield to see the Head, obviously on the subject of Coker of the Fifth. But he brought no news.

Coker of the Fifth had disappeared, and it seemed as if he had vanished into thin air, leaving no trace behind.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

What Bunter Knew!

WHERE was Horace Coker? That question was asked up and down Greyfriars.

What had become of Coker of the Fifth?

Fellows asked one another that question, without being able to find an answer to it; in the passages, in the studies, even in whispers in the Form-rooms.

Coker of the Fifth had disappeared. It was amazing; it was incredible; but there it was. Coker had vanished.

Telegraph and telephone had been busily at work, but there was no news. Coker had not gone home; his father and mother knew nothing of him, though they were alarmed to hear that he was missing. His Aunt Judith, at Holly House, had not seen him—he had not been there. He was due there when Greyfriars broke up for the Christmas holidays; but he had had no intention of going there sooner, and certainly he had not gone. Once Aunt Judith knew that he was missing, her alarm knew no bounds. The Head's telephone performed a series of solos all through the day; the untiring voice of Miss Judith Coker always wanted to know. Dr. Locke was very concerned about Horace, but he grew to dread the sound of the telephone-bell and the inquiring voice of Miss Coker. Almost he wished that he had not inquired after the missing Fifth-Former in that direction.

In Courtfield and Friardale nobody seemed to know anything about Coker. Farther afield, it could not be learned that he had been seen in Redclyffe or Pegg or Lantham. So far as could be ascertained, Bob Cherry was the last person who had seen him; and Bob had seen him quite safe and sound in the wood, presumably on his way back to the school after his ducking. Somehow or other, Coker had vanished on his way back after Bob Cherry; as if the ancient woodland footpath had opened and swallowed him up—which certainly it had not done.

Coker was a lover of the limelight, of which he never received so much as he considered his due. Now he was getting the limelight with a vengeance—when he was not there to enjoy it, which was rather hard!

Everyone was concerned about Coker. Even fags whom he had ruthlessly cuffed—in his well-known short way with fags—said that they were sorry if anything had happened to the fathead. The chums of the Remove, who had been at war with Coker, were deeply concerned. Coker's having helped Bob in the woodland stream, and possibly saved his life, made them feel the very kindest feelings towards the missing senior. That he was an ass, and a very obstreperous ass, his best friend could not have denied. But fellows recalled his good qualities, of which he had plenty. He was plucky, he was loyal, he was generous to friend or foe, and his bark, after all, was worse than his bite. There were, a good many remarked, worse fellows than Coker at Greyfriars.

Bob's story of the rescue in the woodland stream was talked of up and down Greyfriars, and fellows said it was just like Coker. He was really one of the best—only, perhaps, his manner was against him. There was little that Bob and his comrades would not have done to help Coker in his present situation, if they had known what it was and where he was. But nothing was known.

The woods were sedulously searched. Inspector Grimes interviewed Bob

Cherry, asking him whether he had seen any doubtful-looking characters hanging about the woodland paths that afternoon. Bob remembered the two men he had nearly run into after leaving Coker, and described them as well as he could—a big, burly man with rough features, and a smaller man with a thick beard and horn-rimmed glasses. He had not noticed them specially, but he remembered what they looked like to that extent.

The inspector made notes, and pursed his lips; it was little enough to go upon. Possibly the two men were tramps, or footpads; possibly they had seized an opportunity of robbing Coker, who was—and looked—a wealthy fellow. But what had become of Coker? They would have let him go after robbing him. And if Coker had resisted, as was extremely probable—if even a fatal blow had been struck in the struggle—still the question remained: Where was Coker—alive or dead? For in the leafless, wintry woodlands it was easy enough to search—and a search had revealed nothing.

In summer, with the leaves thick upon branch and bough, the task would have been more difficult; but in the winter the woods were clear, and the search



With one hand grasping Bob Cherry, Coker held on to the swaying branch with the other, keeping both heads above water. The thin branch to which he clung was sagging deeper and deeper, and obviously would not hold long. But it never even crossed Coker's mind to let the junior go and save himself. (See Chapter 7.)

was easy. The police, and some scores of other persons, had rambled and rooted through the woods looking for some trace of Coker, and it was obvious that he was not there.

That he had gone out of his mind and wandered away was a theory started by Skinner of the Remove. Skinner pointed out that if he had gone out of his mind, he really hadn't far to go. But the Remove fellows were in no mood for Skinner's humorous gibes, and they bumped Skinner for being funny on such a serious subject. Still, such things had happened as a fellow losing his memory and wandering away; it was extremely improbable, but it might have happened, and the Greyfriars fellows wondered whether that was the explanation.

The theory of kidnapping would have accounted for Coker's amazing disappearance. But why should anyone want to kidnap Coker of the Fifth? Not for the sake of his company, Skinner declared—still humorous. The fellows thought over the theory of kidnapping, and dismissed it. It was really almost unthinkable. And yet, if Coker did not return, it would be impossible to doubt that he was being taken away by force, improbable and inexplicable as it was.

There was quite a cloud over Greyfriars that day. The missing Fifth-Former was alluded to incessantly as "old Coker," or "poor old Coker"; anyone hearing him spoken of would have supposed that Coker was a fellow who hadn't an enemy in the wide world. Certainly, if Coker could have heard the talk at Greyfriars that day he would have been astonished to learn how popular he was.

"No news, you chaps!" said Bob Cherry, when he came into Study No. 1 to tea. "It's rotten, isn't it?"

"The rottenfulness is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"There simply can't have been an accident," said Bob, with a worried look. "What accident could happen to a fellow without us getting news of it? Nearly the whole county knows by this time that Coker is missing. All the police-stations and hospitals have heard of him. If a fellow had been run over by a car, or anything of that kind, we'd have heard before now."

Harry Wharton nodded.

"It beats me," he said.

"Beats me hollow," said Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows—"

Billy Bunter's fat face and big spectacles glimmered in at the study doorway.

"For goodness' sake, don't bother now, Bunter!" said the captain of the Remove crossly.

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Cut off, Bunter! We're worried!" said Frank Nugent.

"Rot!" said Bunter cheerfully. "Never mind Coker! He was rather a beast! If he's got into trouble, I dare say he asked for it!"

"What!" roared the Famous Five, in great wrath.

"Don't yell at a chap!" said Bunter peevishly. "Look here, you fellows, you owe me a tea. You know you do. After pressing me to come to Cliff House to tea yesterday, you know how you treated me, especially that howling cad Hazel! You needn't glare at me, Bob Cherry! Of course, I'm awfully sorry for Coker and all that. But I'm hungry!"

"Oh, scat, you fat bounder!"

"Toddy's getting meaner than ever!" said Bunter plaintively. "There's no

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tea in my study at all! Toddy and Dutton are tea-ing along the passage, and they've left nothing in the study for me, though I've told them that I've been disappointed about a postal-order. You fellows owe me a tea—as you know very well."

"You owe us a taxi-fare!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull, I'm going to settle that out of my postal-order, of course! I say—"

"Go and tea in Hall!" growled Bob.

"I've tea-ed in Hall, fathead! What's tea in Hall to me?" asked Bunter. "I say, you fellows, you might be a bit decent, after diddling me out of tea at Cliff House yesterday! I was jolly nearly murdered coming back, too, and that beast Toddy only sniggered about it! Two fearful tramps—"

"Eh—what?"

"Two frightful ruffians," said Bunter, rather surprised at the general movement of interest in the study—"they jolly nearly got me in the wood! I had to run for it. Not exactly run, you know, but I thought I'd better go—"

"You fat idiot!" said Bob Cherry. "Are you gammoning as usual, or did you really see two tramps in the wood? If you did, they may have had something to do with Coker."

"Oh!" said Bunter.

"What were they like?" asked Wharton.

"Can I try that cake—"

"Yes, you fat villain! Now tell us what the tramps were like."

"If any!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull"—Bunter's mouth was already full of cake—"one of them was a big, hefty fellow—gigantic, in fact—rough as a wild bear, you know, and awfully ferocious!"

"Fathead!"

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Hold on!" said Bob. "That might be one of the men I saw. What was the other one like, Bunter?"

Bunter took a fresh mouthful of cake. "I didn't see the other one—he kept behind the cart."

"The cart?" repeated Wharton.

"Yes; but he had a nasty voice," said Bunter. "They called one another Smiley and Nosey—pair of awful characters, you know! Might have murdered me for my gold watch if I hadn't got away!"

"Footpads don't commit murders for rolled gold watches!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, you checky beast—"

"Tell us all about it, Bunter," said the captain of the Remove quietly.

And Billy Bunter—between bites at the cake—related his alarming experience of the previous afternoon.

Wharton's face was very grave as he listened.

"It's jolly probable that those two men were the two men that passed you, Bob, just after you'd left Coker," said Harry. "The one Bunter saw fits the description. And from what the fat ass says, they had a covered cart waiting in Woodside Lane, practically hidden out of sight, not half a mile from where you left Coker. What could they have been hanging about for with a covered cart? It looks like a case of kidnapping—though goodness knows why anybody should want to kidnap Coker!"

"If he doesn't come back, it will be pretty certain that he has been kidnapped," said Nugent.

"The certainfulness will be terrific! The esteemed and fatheaded Bunter ought to have told the Head about the two estimable rascals. Better go to the ludicrous headmaster now," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Yes, rather!" said Harry. "I'll take you to the Head, Bunter, and he can tell Inspector Grimes if he thinks fit. Come on!"

"Hold on a minute!" said Bunter.

"What for?" asked the captain of the Remove impatiently.

"I haven't finished the cake!"

"You fat idiot!" roared Wharton.

And he grabbed the Owl of the Remove by the collar and ran him out of the study.

"Grooogh!" gasped Bunter. "Leggo! Ooooh! Grooogh!"

The last morsel of cake appeared to be going down the wrong way.

"Come on, you fat duffer! It's important!"

"Ow! I'm coming!" gasped Bunter.

And Wharton hurried him to the Head's study. Certainly, any fellow less obtuse than Bunter would have thought of that encounter in the lonely lane before in connection with the disappearance of Coker. Bunter hadn't thought about that; but now that he realised that he was a fellow with information to give on the subject that was exciting all Greyfriars from end to end, he swelled with importance.

"What is it, Wharton?" asked Dr. Locke.

"It's me, sir!" said Bunter, before the captain of the Remove could speak. "Important information, sir, about Coker!"

"Bless my soul! What can you possibly know about the matter, Bunter?"

"He knows something that may possibly be connected with the matter, sir," said Harry. "I thought you would wish to hear it, so—"

And Bunter proceeded. He was more than willing to tell his story a second time—indeed, he was willing to tell it a score of times. Dr. Locke listened quietly, putting in a question here and there, and his expression showed that he attached importance to what Bunter related.

"Very good," he said at last. "This may let some light in on this very mysterious matter. I shall telephone to Inspector Grimes at once. Thank you, my boys!"

The two juniors left the study.

Billy Bunter rolled away with his fat little nose in the air. He was a person of importance now—in his own estimation, at least. He was the fellow who knew! And that evening, in the studies and in the Rag, Bunter told his story many times—generally with variations and with growing exaggerations at every repetition. And when Mr. Quelch informed Bunter that Inspector Grimes was coming specially from Courtfield to hear his story and question him about it, Bunter swelled so much with importance that he really seemed in danger of sharing the fate of the frog in the fable.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Up to Bob!

"LADY to see you, sir!"

Bob Cherry jumped.

"Which?" he ejaculated.

Trotter, the House page.

grinned.

"Lady, sir—Miss Coker, sir—to see you! In the visitors' room now, sir!"

"Oh!" said Bob.

It was morning break at Greyfriars on Saturday. Nearly three days had elapsed without news of the missing Fifth-Former.

Greyfriars was still in a state of excitement on the subject; it almost transcended in importance the near approach of the Christmas holidays.



"Skuse me, sir," said the burly man civilly, as Coker came abreast. "P'r'aps you can tell me if this 'ere path is right for Friardale, sir?" The Fifth-Former stopped. "Wrong," he answered. "You'll have to go the way I'm going, and then turn to the right on the main road— Oh!" Coker broke off suddenly, with a howl of astonishment, as the burly man leaped on him and bore him backwards. (See Chapter 9.)

The inquiry and the search for Horace Coker had been incessant and extensive, and not the slightest clue had been discovered. It appeared to be certain now that Coker had been taken away by force—that is to say, kidnapped. That was the only conclusion to which Greyfriars could come, and it was an astonishing conclusion. And if Coker had been kidnapped, it was not of much use to search the wintry woods for him; he might very likely be in another county all the time.

Harry Wharton & Co. were discussing Coker in morning break when the House page brought the news to Bob Cherry that Miss Coker had called to see him.

Bob and his chums started for the House at once. They were not surprised to hear that Miss Judith Coker had come down to Greyfriars; but it was rather surprising that she wanted to see a Remove fellow. Miss Coker was supposed to be rather a formidable lady. There was a legend at Greyfriars that Miss Judith had fairly driven the Head to give Coker his remove out of the Shell into the Fifth. Tubb of the Third had a story that the irate dame had actually threatened the Head with her umbrella on that occasion. Tubb had seen the umbrella. No doubt that story was an exaggeration; but there was no doubt that Coker had been a long, long time in the Shell, and had been put up into the Fifth, not on account of his scholastic attainments, for he hadn't any. Fifth Form fellows said that Coker's "con" would have disgraced the Fourth; his spelling was distinguished by originality; in "maths" he was said to cause the mathematics master to tear out his hair in handfuls. Skinner of the

Remove declared that Mr. Prout had been looking years younger since Coker had disappeared.

Harry Wharton & Co. had seen Aunt Judith before, and they rather liked the good lady—but rather dreaded her. They could feel for her concern and anxiety in the present circumstances; all Greyfriars knew she was devotedly attached to Horace Coker, and wondered why. There was, as Skinner had said, no accounting for tastes.

The Co. walked with Bob as far as the door of the visitors' room, and Bob left them there and went in. Miss Coker rose from her chair, and Bob, as he looked at her, was quite shocked to see the trouble and grief in her face. Evidently the mishap to Horace had hit the old lady hard.

"Good-morning, Miss Coker!" said Bob diffidently.

"You are Robert Cherry?" asked Miss Coker.

"Yes, ma'am."

"The Head has told me how dear Horace risked his life to save you from drowning," said Aunt Judith.

"Oh!" said Bob.

"It was exactly like my dear Horace," said Miss Coker fondly.

"So it was, ma'am," agreed Bob. "Coker's no end plucky. He's as brave as a lion, Miss Coker."

Bob could say that much with truth, and he was glad to say it. Coker undoubtedly had the courage of a lion, allied to the intellect of an ass. The latter circumstance Bob was not called upon to mention.

Miss Coker gave the junior an approving smile. Praising dear Horace was a royal road to her esteem. To Miss Coker Greyfriars School was not a

scholastic establishment of two or three hundred fellows where Coker was one among the rest. It was simply the environment of dear Horace. Horace, in fact, was Greyfriars to Aunt Judith; the other fellows, and the staff, and even the Head, simply came in as "also rans." What importance they possessed was derived from the circumstance that they were there with Horace.

"I wished to speak to you because you are the little boy whom dear Horace rescued," said Aunt Judith.

"Oh, exactly!" murmured Bob. A Remove fellow, and a mighty half-back in the Form eleven, was not precisely a little boy. But Coker's aunt had to be given her head.

"There is no news of my dear boy," went on Miss Coker. "I came down to-day especially to see the Head, and he tells me that no stone is being left unturned, but there is no news. My brother Henry is very anxious—this bad news is very bad for him in his present state of health. Mr. Poynings is of the opinion that Horace has gone off somewhere of his own accord, on some holiday without leave, but I cannot think so. He would never cause me this anxiety if he could help it."

"I'm sure he wouldn't, Miss Coker," said Bob.

Bob was also sure that Coker of the Fifth would not have ventured to incur the Head's wrath by taking French leave from school. But Aunt Judith was not thinking of that slight detail.

"I am so very, very anxious," said Miss Coker. "Some dreadful accident has happened—I am sure of it! I cannot think that anyone has intentionally harmed my dear Horace. He could

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not possibly have had an enemy in the world. A dear, kind, gentle, generous lad, loved by all who saw him—"

Miss Coker's voice trembled.

Greyfriars would not have recognised Coker of the Fifth from Miss Judith's description.

"We—we all think a lot of him, ma'am," said Bob. "We'd give anything to see old Coker back safe and sound. I—I think he'll turn up all right, ma'am. Coker's the fellow to be able to take care of himself anywhere."

"Yes; he is so strong, and brave, and sensible," said Miss Coker, with a nod. "But I am sure there has been some accident. If my poor boy should be lying, at this moment, at the bottom of some dreadful cliff—" Miss Coker wiped her eyes. "And there are dangerous chalk pits, I believe, in this vicinity. You are very fond of Horace, I think?"

"Oh! Hem! Yes; we—we all like him, of course!" said Bob. "Coker's one of the best."

"That is why I am going to make a suggestion," said Aunt Judith. "You little boys play a game you call scouting, I believe?"

Bob Cherry coloured a little. The Greyfriars Boy Scouts were really not little boys; and Greyfriars scouting was really quite a serious matter—hardly a game, like marbles or "conquerors," as Miss Coker evidently supposed.

"We do a lot of scouting sometimes, on half-holidays," said Bob.

"The police have failed to find Horace," said Miss Coker. "But he must be found. That all the other boys are devoted to him I am assured. Horace inspired affection and attachment everywhere."

"Oh, yes. Just so!" stammered Bob.

"I have suggested to the Head that all lessons at the school should be put off, while all the boys turned out to search for Horace," went on Miss Coker. "Dr. Locke seems to think that there would be some difficulties in the way of carrying out my suggestion."

"Oh, does he?" gasped Bob. "I—I wonder why."

"But when there are no lessons why should not all the boys who are fond of my dear Horace spend all their leisure time in the search?" said Miss Coker. "I suggested this to the Head, and he approves. All the boys are at liberty to spend their half-holidays and other leisure time in the task, if they so desire—as I am sure they do. The Greyfriars Boy Scouts may be able to find Horace, or to learn what has become of him."

"Jolly good idea!" said Bob.

"The Christmas holidays are close at hand now," continued Miss Coker. "I am well aware that Horace's friends will not be willing to go home for the holidays while his fate is still uncertain."

"Oh!"

"You and your other little friends will be allowed to remain and continue the search for Horace instead of going home for the Christmas holidays," said Miss Coker, with a beaming smile. "I have obtained the consent of the Head after some little argument."

Bob looked blankly at Miss Coker.

Certainly, he was concerned about poor old Coker, as everybody else was. But he had not envisaged the possibility of putting in the Christmas vacation at Greyfriars carrying on the search for the missing Fifth-Former. He wondered what the other fellows would think of the "wheeze."

But as he looked at Miss Coker's troubled face and the lines of care written plainly there, and the tears trembling on her old lashes, Bob

manfully made up his mind to play up. After all, Coker had helped him in the hour of need.

"We'll jolly well do it, Miss Coker!" said Bob. "At least, I will, and I—I think some of my friends will stick to me. If there's any chance of finding Coker we'll find him!"

"That is a good little boy!" said Miss Coker.

"Hem!"

And Bob Cherry left the visitors' room wondering how his comrades were going to receive the news he had for them.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter, Too!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. were going into the Remove Form-room for third lesson when Bob Cherry joined them. During third lesson Bob was not thinking wholly of geography, as he should have been. He was thinking a good deal of the promise he had made to Aunt Judith, and there was a wrinkle of deep cogitation on his youthful brow.

When the Remove were dismissed his comrades gathered round him at once as they left the Form-room.

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"Well, what is it?" asked Johnny Bull, with a grin. "What did Coker's aunt have to say? You look worried, old son."

Bob Cherry grinned ruefully.

"She's been at the Head," he answered. "She's got leave for the Greyfriars Boy Scouts to search for old Coker."

"Jolly sensible old lady!" said Nugent.

"Hem! Yes. And she's got leave for any fellow who likes to—to—to—"

"To what?"

"Hang on at Greyfriars over the vac searching for Coker."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Potter and Greene will jump at the chance," said Johnny Bull sarcastically. "I can see them jumping—with both feet!"

"The jumpfulness will not be terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Well, it's really up to them," said Harry Wharton. "They're Coker's pals, and they were going home with Coker for Christmas. I—I hardly think they'll do it, all the same."

"We're going to do it," said Bob.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"My esteemed Bob—"

"At least, I am!" said Bob hastily. "Old Coker did come into the water for

me, you know, though it was all his fault I tumbled in. And—and the old lady is frightfully anxious and cut up. She thinks all Greyfriars is devoted to Coker—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And—and, after all, if anybody could find Coker, the Greyfriars Scouts could do it!" said Bob. "Her idea is that all the school will jump at the chance. I agree with Inky that the jumpfulness won't be terrific—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But I'm going to play up, for that dear old soul's sake," said Bob. "Of course, you fellows will please yourselves."

"But we've made all our arrangements for the vac," said Wharton, in dismay, "and—and—"

"Oh dear!"

"I know," said Bob glumly. "But if you'd seen her poor old chivvy—"

"But what's the use of looking for Coker round about here?" said Nugent. "It's as plain as anything that he's been kidnapped, though goodness knows why. He may be a hundred miles away."

"I know. But—"

"It beats me hollow what's become of him!" said Wharton. "If he's been kidnapped, I suppose there's only one possible reason—to stick his people for money to let him go. But it seems that Miss Coker hasn't heard anything from the kidnappers. There's been plenty of time."

"But if he hasn't been kidnapped, what's become of him?" said Nugent.

"Goodness knows!"

"Miss Coker is thinking about the cliffs and the old chalk pits," said Bob. "You know, once there was a man fell into the old chalk-pits, and stayed there for days and days with a gammy leg, and was nearly starved to death when they found him. It would be pretty awful if that was the explanation."

"But the police have searched the chalk-pits."

"I know; but there are lots of places. I—I'm going to play up as the old lady wants," said Bob. "You fellows—"

"Oh, we shall play-up, too!" said Harry. "This Co. is never divided—except when we have a row on!"

Bob chuckled.

"It's some days to break-up," he said. "We may find old Coker, or he may be found; but if he isn't—"

"We stay on," said Harry. "I'll write to my uncle at once and explain; he won't mind. We're all game!"

"Ye-e-es, rather!" murmured Johnny Bull.

"The gamefulness is terrific!"

"And as it's a half-holiday to-day—"

"The last of the term!" murmured Nugent.

"Never mind that; we'll put it in searching for Coker."

"What about the football? The weather's all right—"

"Only a match with the Fourth—we can leave that to the other fellows," said Harry. "After all, you know what might have happened to Bob if old Coker hadn't gone in for him—"

"It's a go!" said Johnny Bull resolutely.

Aunt Judith, on her way back to Holly House, was doubtless comforted by the idea that all Greyfriars—from the head of the Sixth to the smallest fag in the Second—would jump at the chance of putting in the Christmas vacation searching for her dear Horace.

As a matter of fact, it was extremely unlikely that more than five fellows would make that sacrifice, though to the dear old lady's mind it was not, of

(Continued on page 28.)

LIVING WITH DEATH!—Where every man is suspicious of his neighbour, where every man's hand rests lightly on a gun, where every dark shadow may conceal a would-be assassin—that's the sort of primitive country Ferrers Locke has decided to make his home until he has solved—

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Silas Caister!

AND it was mighty lucky for yuh that I did!" continued the newcomer. "I warned the hombre what was shore comin' to him if he pulled his gun agen in Wolf Point! My name is Mat Duke, an' I'm sheriff round this here part. I been trailin' this feller since thet lil' turn up this arternoon!"

Before Locke could reply there came the thud of horses' hoofs, and a party of six cowboys swept up the street. Riding slightly in advance of the other five was a tall man with a small grey goatee beard. He rode as though born to the saddle, and as he reached the crowd gathered round the body of the gunman he reined in his horse so quickly that it slithered almost to its haunches. Holding up a hand to the rest of his party as a signal to halt, he snapped:

"What's the howdo, Mat?"

"A feller pulled a gun on these here strangers, Silas, an' I plugged him, after warnin' him this arternoon," explained the sheriff.

The man addressed as Silas looked at Locke and Jack with kindly eyes.

"Wolf Point's sure unhealthy nowadays!" he said, with a smile. "You did plumb right, Mat!"

A low growl rose from one or two of the men standing near.

"Yes, growl, you seum!" cried the man on the horse. "There was a time when Wolf Point was sure a plumb respectable lil' township! But I reckon the coyotes is gathered in it now, and, by gosh, glad I am to hear that one of 'em has cashed in his checks to-night! Say, us ranchers are behind the sheriff to a man! Get that, you weevils! Our guns, our horses, and our men is standing on th' side of th' law! The shadder of that cursed Wolf lies heavy on this district to-day, and there's some of you here who're sure running with his blamed pack! But we'll get him, and we'll get the stragglers fust! That's

you, you white-livered, back-alley, fire-from-cover, make-believe gunmen!"

Ignoring the mutters and scowls cast in his direction, he turned to Locke and Jack.

"I'm not asking how this happened, misters," he declared. "Mat don't plug a man 'less there's a good cause! My name's Caister, of Caister ranch. Where are you heading?"

Locke started. So this was Silas Caister, this grim-visaged man, who was not afraid to speak his mind.

"I'm heading for the Flying V," he replied. "We're trying to get a couple of horses to take us out there!"

Caister looked at him closely, then at Jack.

"Say," he drawled, "I reckon we're ridin' that way, mister! If you care to come along with us, you're sure welcome!"

"We'd like to, thanks!" replied Locke quietly.

"That's fine, then! Joe—Red, you let these fellows have your cayuses! You'll get a couple off Crib Smithers. Tell him we'll return 'em when next in town. You can sure catch us up!"

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

FERRERS LOCKE, the famous Baker Street detective, and his clever young assistant, JACK DRAKE, take up quarters in Texas to investigate the mysterious raids made upon the cattle ranches in the neighbourhood of Wolf Point. Hundreds of head of cattle have been stolen or killed, and this wanton savagery is followed up sometimes by the murder in cold blood of foremen and cowboys—their throats being torn as though by a wolf. Invariably a card, bearing a wolf's head, with bared fangs, is left at the scene of each outrage. The detective is hardly at Wolf Point five minutes, however, before an attempt is made on his life. But at the critical moment the would-be assassin is himself fatally shot at by someone in the crowd.

"Reckon I did that, mister," drawls a grizzled, bearded man, elbowing his way to Locke's side and looking down at the dead gunman.

(Now read on.)

Two of the cowboys slid from their mounts without domur. The detective protested against the men giving up their horses, but Caister waved his protestations aside.

Five minutes later Caister, with Locke and Jack on each side of him and the other three cowboys bringing up the rear, rode out of Wolf Point, and the party turned their horses towards the Caister Ranch and the Flying V country.

"The Wolf is Out!"

FOR some time they rode in silence, then Caister said quietly:

"I didn't gey your name, mister!"

"My name is Henderson," replied Ferrers Locke.

Caister squinted at him from the corner of his eye, then drawled:

"Aimin' to meet Hank at the Flying V?"

"No; I left him in London."

Caister nodded, as though satisfied, and for some time they rode on in silence. The three cowboys had dropped some distance behind, and, after a cautious backward glance, Caister drawled:

"You'll sure have a letter for me from Hank?"

"Yes," answered the detective readily; "and also for Jefferson and Peters. Has there been any further trouble with the Wolf lately?"

"Ay," replied Caister grimly; "things is getting worse! The mail was held up t'other day, and the driver and guards killed! Lucky there warn't no passengers! Rustlin' and murder is sure on the upgrade, and I'm real glad you've come, Mister Locke!"

"You suspect no 'one at all? You know of no one who could possibly be this Wolf?"

Caister shook his head.

"Nary a soul!" he answered. "It's a blamed mystery! But there's some
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Red threw himself from his horse, and his breath came in great sobbing gulps. "There's—bin—a shootin'!" he gasped. "Th' Wolf—is out!" Ferrers Locke stiffened in his saddle. (See this page.)

tough fellers driftin' into Wolf Point lately! I been herdin' cattle to th' railroad, that's how I come to be ridin' through so late! I wouldn't stay overnight in Wolf Point! No, sir; some guy would plug me, sure! They knows me and what I stand for, and they're a lawless crowd!"

Ferrers Locke was silent. He was turning over in his mind the words of the dying gunman. "Just the law of the Wolf!" What did he mean by that? Was the gunman, after all, an enemy of the Wolf, and had he thought that the sheriff's bullet had come from the Wolf? Still, Locke was certain that the gunman had been determined to bring about a shooting somehow—a shooting which would prove fatal to the detective and his assistant.

"How is Hank?" broke in Caister. "He comin' back soon?"

Locke told him of the affair in London, resulting in Hank's being in hospital, and Caister nodded solemnly.

"Th' Wolf, sure!" he drawled. "Say, you gotta find that guy quick, mister! That shootin' bis'ness to-night, now! I reckon that feller tried a frame-up on you!"

"You mean, acting on behalf of the Wolf?"

"Yep, I reckon so!"

"Then, if that is the case the Wolf knows my identity! I am inclined to agree with you, though!"

"Mister," replied Caister seriously, "there's no one knows how that feller gets his information, but he gets it, sure! If you had come here in the most wunnerful disguise it wouldn't hev made no difference! He just knows things what us ranchers reckon nobody but us knows!"

He broke off sharply and reined in his horse.

From somewhere behind in the darkness sounded the rapid, incessant drumming of flying hoofs.

"Say, some guys burnin' the wind!" snapped Caister. "Close up, lads!"

The three cowboys closed up with Locke, Jack, and Caister. The drumming coming rapidly nearer, and Caister snapped

"Get your guns!"

The next moment there loomed up in the darkness the flying figures of two horses, their riders bent low in the saddles.

"It's Red and Joe!" said Caister anxiously. "What in blazes is wrong?"

The horses slithered to a halt almost upon their haunches.

"What's wrong, Red?" snapped Caister. "What's the trouble?"

Red threw himself from his horse. His breath came in great sobbing gulps.

"There's bin a shootin'!" he gasped. "Th' Wolf is out!"

Locke stiffened in his saddle, and Jack Drake's hands tightened on his reins. Then, before the cowboy could continue, there came, from somewhere out in the darkness, a long-drawn, eerie wail! It rose with hideous distinctness, then slowly died away. It was the hunting cry of a wolf!

Red's Story!

THE party listened in tense silence, and once again the long drawn call rose quaveringly on the night air. There was something evil, something menacing in the cry that caused more than one of the cowboys to shudder perceptibly and edge their horses closer together.

"Can you locate that?" snapped Locke grimly.

"Nope!" replied Caister slowly.

"We've heard that hunting cry afore, mister! It may be here, there, or anywhere! There's no telling in this blamed darkness!"

"I'm pretty certain it came from over there!" cut in Jack, pointing towards the west.

"And to me it seemed like as if 'twas over there!" growled Caister, jerking a hand towards the north. Then, turning to Locke, he added: "It ain't a bit of good trying to find the origin of that noise, mister! It's a fair bogey, like what they calls a will-o-the-wisp! Here, there, and everywhere, and never where you'd expect to find it!"

Slipping his gun back into its holster, he turned to Red.

"What's this you were saying about a shootin'?" he demanded.

"It's Mat, th' sheriff!" replied Red. "Say, when yuh rode out of town, me and Joe danders off towards Crib Smithers' place. Mat, he walks with us far as his office. Then he says 'Good-night, boys!' and we says 'Good-night!' and last we see'd of him was that he was lettin' hisself into his office. Waal, we gets a couple o' cayuses from Crib, and was jest clip-cloppin' up th' street agen when we a'most rides over a feller lyin' in th' dust in the middle of th' street!"

"Git up, yuh drunken hog!" I ses; but thet hombre never moves. 'Looks kinda like he's cashed in his checks!' ses Joe, here, so I drops off th' cayuse to investigate. Say, I guess I got a fair wind punch when I rolls thet feller over and sees pore ol' Mat staring up at me, dead as a shot dog! They musta got him mighty quick and silent like. And say, this here cyard was pinned to Mat's shirt jest un'er his sheriff's badge! Like a blamed mockery, it was!"

He handed Caister a small piece of pasteboard. The rancher struck a match and held the card so that Ferrers Locke and Jack could see it. On one side was the replica of a wolf's head, with bared fangs, and on the other side was scrawled in pencil:

"This is for Bud! There's another bullet for Caister!"

Caister laughed grimly.

"So that gunman did run with the wolf pack after all!" he growled. "Pore ol' Mat!"

Ferrers Locke's lips were set grimly. Apart from any other considerations, he had the sheriff's death to avenge. Mat Duke had been killed by the Wolf for having shot one of the gang. And Duke had acted partly in the Englishman's interests.

"Waal, boys, let's push right ahead!" went on Caister. "If the Wolf's laying for me, I'm real eager to meet him!"

He snapped out an order, and within a few moments the horses had dropped into that long, effortless lope which could eat up distance so quickly.

Dawn was just breaking in the eastern sky when the party drew rein at the many, low buildings comprising the Caister ranch.

"Waal, Mister Henderson, I'll figure you'll be ready for a doss down. You and your nephew, hey?" remarked Caister, throwing himself from the saddle.

"No. I think we'll push right on to the Flying V!" replied Locke.

"Waal, but surely you'll have some breakfast with us," urged Caister, "and then one of my fellers will ride on with you as far as the Flying V."

Locke had no doubts as to his ability

to find the Flying V without assistance once the trail was pointed out to him; but in the role of Mr. Henderson he had to remember that his knowledge of ranching, and all that appertained to it, was practically nil. So he accepted the invitation.

Over a breakfast at which only Locke, Jack, and Caister had been present it had been arranged that Caister should get in touch with Jake Peters and Cal Jefferson, and that the three ranchers should ride over to the Flying V the following evening.

Alf, Caister's foreman, rode with Locke and Jack. He was a tall, thin fellow, with a surly, reserved cast of countenance.

Grand Christmas Number NEXT WEEK

"He's gotta see Spud, the Flying V foreman, about some cattle and boundary fixin's," explained Caister, "so he may as well go 'long with you."

Alf rode a few paces ahead, jolting and swaying in his saddle with the rise and fall of the ground. He scarcely ever ventured a remark; but when once or twice he turned in his saddle, as though to scrutinise a stray steer, Jack noted that from the corners of his eyes he also took the opportunity to subject Ferrers Locke to a close scrutiny.

As for Locke and Jack, they retained a discreet silence, or else conversed on topics which had no bearing on their real mission. Both were dog tired, and it was with a sense of relief and pleasure that, about midday, they saw the ranch buildings of the Flying V loom into view.

Spud!

THE Flying V was a typical Texan ranch, with its main, one-storied, many-roomed rancher's house, bunkhouses, outbuildings, and corralls.

"This here is Spud, th' foreman," announced Alf.

As he approached, Locke saw that the severity of his features was belied by a pair of merry, twinkling, blue eyes.

"Howdo, strangers?" he drawled; then, to the Caister ranch foreman: "Howdo, Alf? Been wantin' to see yuh!"

Locke and Jack dismounted, and the former handed Spud the letter of introduction from Hank Herman.

Spud took it, and read it with considerable pains. Then, when he had finished, he shoved it in his pocket and held out his hand.

"I'm sure pleased to meet yuh, Mister Henderson!" he drawled. "An' I'll be real pleased to show yuh around like what the boss ses. Howdo, youngster?"

He shook hands with Jack, and the boy had the sensation that the foreman's blue eyes were carefully weighing him up.

"Yuh both look plumb like as though yuh've bin trailing since las' night!" he remarked; and Ferrers Locke nodded an assent.

"Yes, if you'll show us our rooms we'll turn in for an hour or two."

"Shore thing!" replied Spud.

He turned towards the house and remarked, over his shoulder, to Alf:

"I wanna word with yuh, Alf."

(Continued overleaf.)

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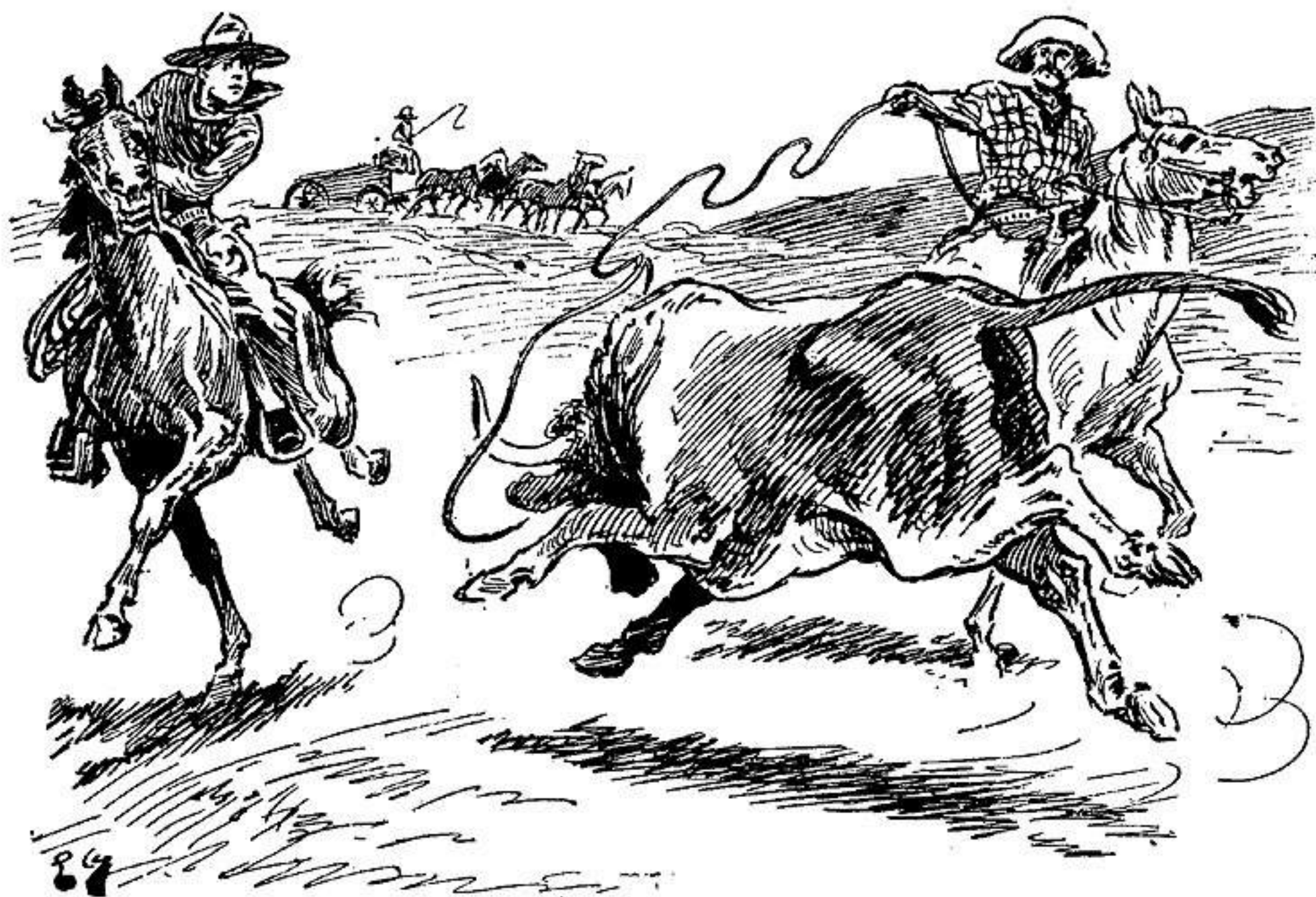


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The enraged steer came at Jack Drake with a rush, but, with a touch of the spur, he shot out of the brute's path just in time. It wheeled and charged again, but Spud dropped a lariat neatly over its horns and brought it kicking and struggling to its haunches. (See Page 27.)

"I'm aimin' to get back!" grunted Alf. "When yuh figurin' on roundin' up?"

"To-morrow," replied Spud. "I wanna know if yuh can lend me a few hands?"

"Yep, maybe!" growled the other. "Us don't start till next week."

"Waal, send a dozen o' th' boys over in th' mornin'!" replied Spud, "an' I'll be real pleased."

"Yep, I'll do jest that," assented Alf, wheeling his cayuse. "It's shore safest."

Two strides took Spud to the man's saddle girths.

"What'n cripes d'yuh mean?" he snapped icily.

"I means that seein' there's no wire 'tween these ranches, steers is shore li'ble to get mixed!"

There was no mistaking the sneer in the words, and for a moment Spud's hand closed on the Caister foreman's leg as though to pull him from the saddle. Then, with a laugh, he released his grip and stepped back.

"Alf," he said, "yuh're shore a sour coyote what would 'cuse his own mother o' robbin' his money-box! Me, I knows yuh jest cain't help it; but"—and here Spud's voice became cold and hard—"one day yuh'll shore go jest a li'l too far! I stand fer it 'cos I knows yuh've gotta mind like a skunk's. But I'm warnin' yuh that next time yuh makes a remark like that I replies with a gun!"

"I'll be ready!" gritted Alf. "I no-ways dislikes that way o' talkin'!"

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 982.

With that, he jerked at the rein and cantered out of the yard. Neither Locke nor Jack commented on the incident as they followed Spud towards the ranch-house.

They found the house was large and spacious, with a big, many-windowed dining and living-room in front. Behind this lay a clean, tiled kitchen, and then came the bed-rooms, of which there were about eight.

Locke and Jack were given two of the largest.

Four hours' refreshing sleep between clean sheets worked wonders, and after a cold bath Locke and Jack sauntered out to have a stroll round the buildings.

"Caister's foreman isn't a particularly amiable fellow; is he?" remarked Jack, after they had walked a few moments in silence.

"No," replied Locke, with a smile; "but there's a lot of perfectly honest men, Jack, who aren't particularly amiable, and vice-versa."

"I know, guv'nor," protested Jack; "but he seemed jolly interested in you, I noticed, although he would never look you straight in the face."

"You're right, my lad," agreed the detective quietly. "I'm watching that fellow. There's one thing, Jack," he continued grimly, "if we are attacked again by the Wolf or one of his agents then this masquerading as Henderson is futile. I will take the mask off and go after him as I am—as Ferrers Locke. It will be a battle of wits, with the advantage on his side in that I don't know his identity."

"And a battle of guns before we're through with it!" added Jack.

"Yes, a battle of guns, if it comes to shooting, and it's a thousand to one that it will," was the reply. "We're both pretty useful shots. But do you know what we're going to do right now?"

"No," replied Jack, with interest.

"We're going to practise quickness on the draw. Out here a man's life can hang on the fraction of a second. It's the man who gets his guns out first that wins."

"There's another thing that has been puzzling me, guv'nor," said Jack. "When Bud was dying he whispered, 'Just the law of the Wolf!' I reckon a dying man's last words are pretty serious ones. But I'm dashed if I can make head or tail of that sentence! It would be easy if Bud had been an enemy of the Wolf's, but he wasn't."

"It might be that he really had no connection with the Wolf, but the latter took his death as an excuse for getting rid of the sheriff," replied Locke.

"Yes, but the Wolf's not the kind of fellow to want an excuse for getting rid of anybody," came back Jack quickly.

Ferrers Locke laughed.

"You've hit the weak spot, my lad," he said. "I'm afraid Bud's words only serve to deepen the mystery rather than help to solve it!"

Further conversation ceased as Spud approached.

"We're takin' the wagon out in th' mornin', Mr. Henderson," he said. "I'm startin' roundin' up. Would yuh like to come with us, or ride out ev'ry day from the ranch?"

"I'd like to come with you, Spud," replied Locke. "But I must be here to-morrow night. One or two of the

ranchers have promised to drop in. I'll ride with you in the morning, but must come back. Jack here will stay out with you."

"Shore, Mr. Henderson!" replied Spud. "Yuh'll find it kinda hard at first, son!" he added, turning to Jack.

"That's all right!" laughed Jack. "I'm a bit saddle sore now, but I'll soon get used to it."

"Shore, that's the idea, son!" replied Spud approvingly.

He turned away, then paused and added:

"Say, yuh gotta gun?"

"Yes."

"Then bring her."

"Why? Do you expect trouble?"

Spud nodded slowly.

"Yessir!" he replied slowly. "We all pack guns hyar now. There's trouble an' plenty in th' cattle country."

"I've heard something about this," remarked Locke, the role of Henderson upon him. "Someone is terrorising this country, isn't he?"

"He figgers he is," replied Spud. "Ol' Jake Peters what owns the Double R is talkin' wild about either sellin' out or goin' plumb ruined. His water courses was found poisoned yesterday. Say, more'n a hun'erd head o' cattle dead through it."

"What trouble do you expect here?"

"I expects," said Spud, his eyes turned dreamily towards the horizon, "thet when we gets rounded up us'll be raided or stampeded. An' yuh shore knows what thet means, mister—or else us'll be plugged with lead from outa th' dark, like some fellers round these hyar parts! I expects trouble—murder, maybe—but in what form I shore cain't say!"

Spud Saves the Situation!

IT was late that night when Ferrers Locke and Jack turned in. Saddle-weary though they were, they had ridden far out across the range with Spud.

"What shore beats us guys is where these hombraes herd out cattle after a rustlin'!" Spud had remarked. "Guess us guys knows this hyar country plumb right through! There ain't a draw, there ain't a canyon, there ain't a blamed valley but what us guys don't know it, but, gosh-snakes, them cattle seems like as though they were shore swallowed up in th' ground! Us watches the railroad and us watches the markets, but, say, there ain't never no cattle freighted but what aro shore legit'mate, and there arn't none of our brands in th' markets 'cept what us fellers sends ourselves!"

"And you can give no explanation as to who does this, and why?" Locke had questioned casually.

"No, sir! We knows nuthin'! Guess it's a blamed mystery!"

Locke had also told Spud about the accident to Hank, the first news of which the foreman had received in the letter Locke had handed to him from Hank. The detective, however, did not mention the fact that he and Hank suspected the Wolf had brought the accident about.

Both Jack and Locke slept with loaded revolvers beneath their pillows, but the night passed uneventfully, and they were up at dawn ready to ride out with the ranch wagon.

"Us is aimin' to tie up at One Tree Creek," said Spud, noting with approval that their baggage having been brought in overnight by Caister's buggy, which had been to Wolf Point, both Locke and Jack wore shorts, chaps, and sombreros.

One Tree Creek lay about twenty miles from the ranch, and as the cattle came there to drink, it was a handy centre.

"I'm wantin' a thousand head o' real good 'uns for shipment," explained Spud, as he, Locke, and Jack rode some distance ahead of the wagon, "and I want 'em pronto. Caister's freightin' a heap next week, and us'll give him a hand. There's half th' work in this hyar round-up business if ranchers'll on'y pull together like us does."

"Has the Caister outfit arrived?" inquired Ferrers Locke.

"Yessir! Eight of 'em! Good hands far's I know; but I've on'y seen threo of 'em workin'. The others is new to me. But Caister gets good fellers. He's a good hombre to work fer. Pays well and feeds 'em well."

From then till late in the afternoon Locke and Jack revelled in hard riding through the clean, warm Texas air. Jack rode with Spud, and soon picked up, how to head off a steer.

The grass on the range was good, and the steers were well conditioned and tractable. Only once did Jack experience any trouble, and that was when a steer, red eyed and angry, essayed to turn on him instead of joining the herd.

It came at him with a rush, but with a touch of the spur he shot out of the brute's path just in time. It wheeled and charged again; but Spud dropped a lariat neatly over its horns and brought it kicking and struggling to its haunches.

(It was a narrow squeak for Jack Drake, but the plucky youngster is to find himself in far tighter corners than this before very long. Be sure you read next week's instalment of this great detective story, chums! It's full of thrills and exciting situations.)

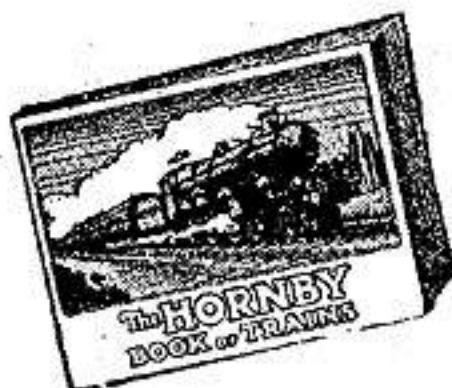


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"MISSING FROM SCHOOL!"

(Continued from page 22.)

course, anything in the nature of a sacrifice at all. Doing anything for dear Horace was a pleasure, a boon, and a blessing, from her point of view.

That afternoon, while the last football match of the term was being played on Little Side, the Famous Five were out scouting. They put in a very strenuous afternoon, and came in late and tired to tea, without any news of the missing senior.

The next day—Sunday—their usual Sunday walk was abandoned in favour of further scouting, which was equally strenuous and equally fruitless.

It was, indeed, scarcely probable that the Boy Scouts would succeed, where it was known that the police were baffled and perplexed. Chance might have favoured them; but it did not.

The search seemed absolutely hopeless; and it still seemed so on the day before break-up. On that day Harry Wharton & Co. were very serious indeed. It looked as if they were booked to stay at the school to continue the search—according to Bob's pledge to Miss Coker.

To remain in the deserted school after all the other fellows had gone was no light matter. And Christmas was Christmas—it came but once a year! The

Famous Five felt that they were "for it."

Bunter came into Study No. 1 to tea that day. Bunter also was feeling serious, though he was not bothering about Coker. Bunter was thinking of his Christmas holidays. For reasons best known to himself, Billy Bunter did not desire to pass the vacation amid the wealthy magnificence of Bunter Court, in the fascinating society of his brother Sammy and his sister Bessie. Very much he did not desire to do so. He had thought of going home with the Bunder, but Smithy had something to say to that, and he said it with what Bunter regarded as unnecessary emphasis.

He considered Lord Mauleverer next; but Mauly was not taking any. He told Peter Todd that he would come home with him, and chance it; but Peter stated that he wouldn't, couldn't, and shouldn't. So the matter was growing serious, and Bunter had quite a thoughtful look when he dropped in to Study No. 1 to tea—without the formality of an invitation.

"I say, you fellows," he remarked, "I suppose you're fixed up for Christmas?"

The Famous Five grinned. They certainly seemed to be fixed up for Christmas—in a rather unexpected way. But Bunter was not aware of all that.

"We are!" assented Wharton.

"These chaps staying with you, I suppose?"

"Just so."

"Well, I'll come," said Bunter.

"Will you?"

"After all, Smithy's rather an out-

sider, and that yawning ass Mauly bores a fellow," said Bunter. "My old pal D'Arcy, at St. Jim's, has forgotten to write, somehow. I've decided to stick to my old pals!"

"Stick to them, by all means," said Bob Cherry. "Don't waste your valuable time on us, old fat man!"

"He, he, he!" Bunter decided to take that remark as a joke. "It's settled then. I'm staying with Wharton."

The Famous Five exchanged a cheery grin. As they were staying on at the deserted school when the other fellows went, there was no objection to Bunter "staying with Wharton," if he felt so disposed. Had the Famous Five been going to Wharton Lodge, as originally arranged, the matter would have been different.

"You really want to stay with me, Bunter?" asked the captain of the Remove.

"Yes, old chap," said Bunter affectionately.

"It's a go, then," said Harry gravely.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" said Bunter.

And so it was settled, though the Famous Five opined that it was likely to become unsettled again, when the Owl of the Remove learned where he was to "stay with Wharton."

THE END.

(Make sure you read "THE PRISONER OF THE BUNGALOW!" By Frank Richards. The next magnificent story in this splendid series, which will appear in next week's BUMPER CHRISTMAS NUMBER of the MAGNET.)

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