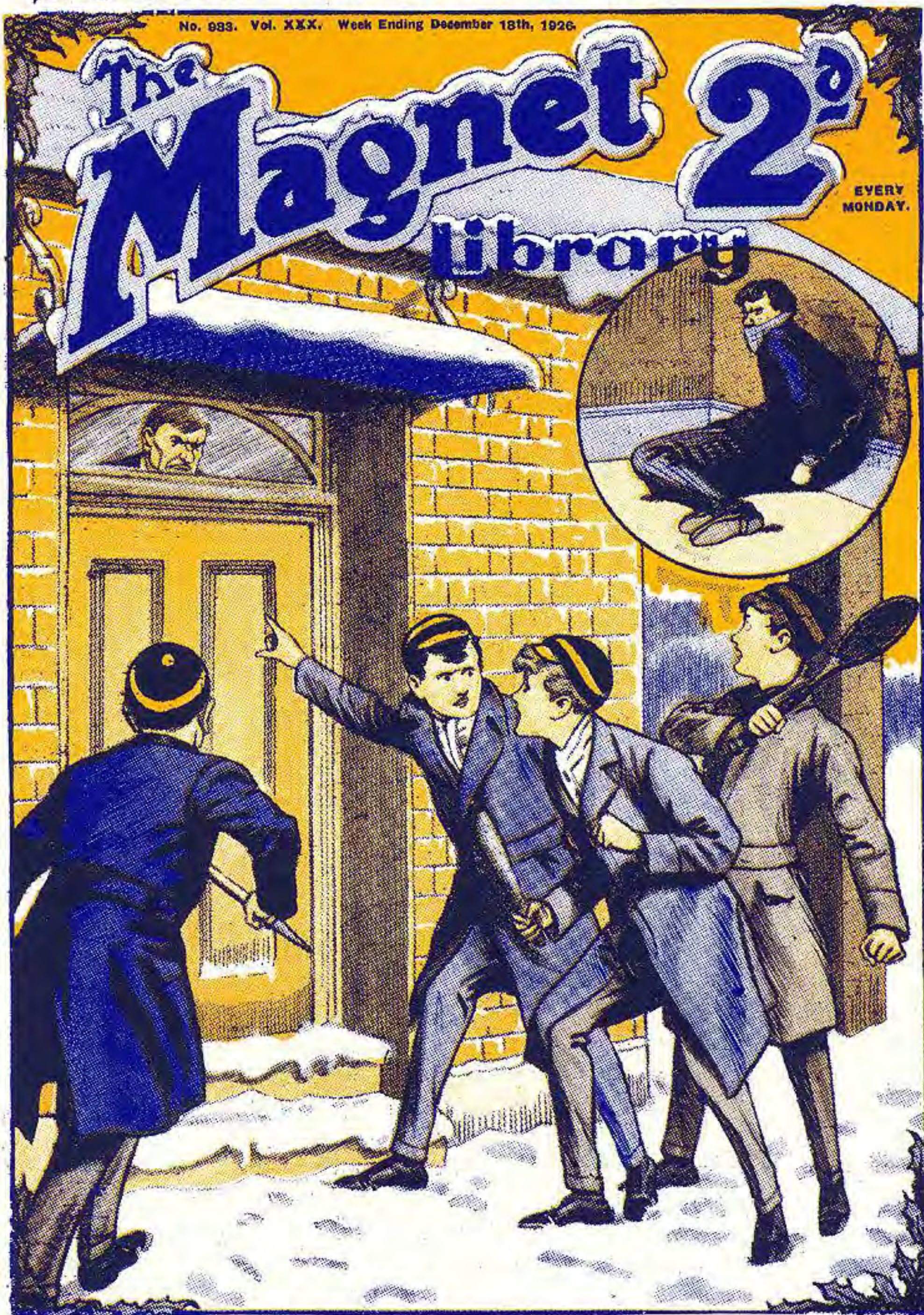


GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

No. 993. Vol. XXX. Week Ending December 18th, 1926.



THE FACE AT THE FANLIGHT!

(A dramatic incident from this week's grand Christmas story, entitled: "THE PRISONER OF THE BUNGALOW!"—inside.)

THE SPIRIT OF GOODWILL! Vehicle after vehicle loaded with light-hearted schoolboys rolls away from Greyfriars until the old school is almost deserted. Yet, although Christmas is near at hand, Harry Wharton & Co. choose to stay on at the school to seek Horace Coker, their old enemy, who has been unaccountably missing for more than a week!



A powerful long complete story of Harry Wharton & Co., the Chums of Greyfriars, dealing with their adventures during the Christmas vacation.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Bunter Does Not See the Joke!

"**P**ACKED yet?"
 "No."
 "Not yet?" demanded Billy Bunter.
 "Not yet," assented Harry Wharton. Billy Bunter blinked at the captain of the Remove through his big spectacles. "I suppose you haven't forgotten that it's break-up to-day?" he asked.
 "No."
 "Then why haven't you packed?"
 "Lots of time yet."
 "Rot!" said Bunter emphatically. "Think so?" asked the captain of the Greyfriars Remove, with a cheery smile.
 "Yes, I jolly well do," said Bunter. "I suppose you don't want to hang on here after all the other fellows have gone, do you?"
 "I don't know that I exactly want to."
 "It's a long step to Wharton Lodge," said Bunter. "We don't want to catch a late train. Look here, you buck up and pack, and let's get the first bus to the station."

And Billy Bunter, having bestowed an admonitory frown upon the captain of the Remove, rolled away.

Billy Bunter, at least, was ready to start.

It was a frosty December day, and Greyfriars School was breaking up for the Christmas holidays. Some of the fellows had already gone. But there were still crowds in the quad and the passages, and stacks of waiting baggage. All the Remove, with the exception of Harry Wharton & Co., had made their preparations for departure.

The Famous Five seemed to have made none—which was rather surprising, and rather irritating to William George Bunter. Bunter wanted to catch an early train; he did not see any use in hanging on. Bunter had arranged to spend

the Christmas vacation with Harry Wharton, and Wharton, a little unexpectedly, had agreed. In Bunter's opinion it was high time to get off to Wharton Lodge. Yet in the general hurry and flurry of packing and departing, Harry Wharton & Co. seemed neither hurried nor hurried—in fact, they strolled about carelessly, saying good-bye to the other fellows, as if they were not thinking of departing at all.

"I say, you fellows!" hooted Bunter, as he came on Frank Nugent and Bob Cherry chatting by the doorway. "Are you ready to start?"

Bob Cherry and Nugent chuckled. "Not quite, old fat bean," said Bob. "How long are you going to be?" demanded Bunter.

"That depends," said Nugent gravely. "It may be for years and it may be for ever, as the song says."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
 "Oh, don't be a silly ass, you know," said Bunter. "I'm ready."

"Why not start, then?"
 "How can I start, fathead, when I'm going home with Wharton and you fellows, and you're not ready?" said Bunter snappishly.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the two juniors. Apparently they saw something humorous in Bunter's remarks. Bunter could not see anything humorous in the matter, and he blinked at them wrathfully.

"Look here, you fellows, jolly well get ready!" he exclaimed. "I'm not hanging about here all day, I can tell you."

And Bunter rolled on his way, looking very cross indeed, leaving Bob and Nugent chuckling.

He was looking for Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, and he found them in the quad. There was no sign of preparing for departure about those two members of the famous Co.

"Aren't you ready to go, Bull?" demanded Bunter.

Johnny Bull shook his head. He was a fellow of few words; and apparently he had none at all to waste on William George Bunter.

"You, Inky!"
 "The readiness is not terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Do you want to catch the last bus, fathead?"

Hurree Singh shook his head. "Well, get a move on, then," snapped Bunter.

"Certainly!"
 The two juniors got a move on—walking away from Bunter. But they did not move towards the House.

Bunter blinked after them, quite puzzled.

While everybody else was getting ready to go, and thinking, and almost breathing, Christmas, the Famous Five of the Remove seemed to have forgotten that it was breaking-up day at all.

Really, it was inexplicable to Bunter.

A big motor-bus, which was to carry the juniors to the station, was crammed with fellows. Temple, Dabney & Co., of the Fourth, had swarmed aboard, and a number of Removites were scrambling for seats. The Famous Five might have been expected to join up in the scramble, but they did not. They did not seem to mind whether they caught the early train or the late train, or any train at all.

"Good-bye, fatty!" called out Peter Todd, slapping Bunter on the back as he passed him.

"Ow! Good-bye, and good riddance!" said Bunter politely.

"Why, you fat boulder—"
 "Sorry I couldn't come with you, Toddy," said Bunter loftily. "Sorry, but it couldn't be done!"

"Did I ask you?" inquired Peter.

"Quite impossible!" said Bunter, deaf to that question. "I'm staying with Wharton over Christmas, you know."

Why, what are you cackling at, you image?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Peter.

"What's the joke, you silly ass?" howled Bunter.

"You are, old fat man!" chuckled Peter. "You'll see it later. Ta-ta! I hope you'll have a merry Christmas—staying with Wharton. Ha, ha, ha!"

And Peter Todd chortled as he went on his way.

Bunter blinked after him.

Vernon Smith and Tom Redwing came along. Smith gave Bunter a cheery grin.

"I hear you're staying with Wharton?" he remarked.

"Yes," snapped Bunter. "I really couldn't come with you, Smithy—a chap has to be a bit particular, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Bounder. "You'll enjoy yourself staying with Wharton."

Tom Redwing chuckled.

"Look here, what do you mean?" demanded Bunter. "Every silly ass in the Remove breaks out into cackling when I mention that I'm staying with Wharton."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Smithy and Redwing went on their way, laughing, but without explaining. Hazeldene of the Remove tapped Bunter on the shoulder.

"Staying with Wharton—what?" he asked.

"Yes," snorted Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Hazel.

"Hallo, what's the joke, Hazel?" called out Tom Brown.

"Bunter's staying with Wharton this vac," chirruped Hazel.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom Brown.

Bunter blinked at the hilarious juniors in astonishment, mingled with uneasiness.

"What do you mean?" he hooted.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Nobody seemed disposed to explain to Billy Bunter what the joke was. But he could see that there was a joke. Staying with Wharton for Christmas seemed to set the Remove in a roar. It was a deep mystery. Bunter had stayed with the captain of the Remove for Christmas before at Wharton Lodge, and, so far as he could see, there was nothing to excite merriment in the fact that he was staying with Wharton for Christmas again. But the Remove fellows evidently thought it funny, for the mere mention of it made them yell.

Bunter had not received what could be called a pressing invitation for Christmas at Wharton Lodge. Having failed to "plant" himself on Lord Mauleverer for the vacation, and having failed a second time with Vernon-Smith, Bunter had calmly added himself to Wharton's party. He had been both relieved and surprised when the captain of the Remove raised no objection. Bunter was not a sensitive fellow—he really did not require to be pressed. So long as he was not kicked, he was satisfied. So it was settled that he was staying with Wharton for Christmas. Bunter had settled it, and Wharton had assented. But where the joke came in was a mystery to Bunter. Why all the fellows cackled at it was beyond his fat comprehension.

Bunter rolled into the House again to seek the captain of the Remove. He found Wharton saying good-bye to Squiff of the Remove.

"Look here, Wharton!" Bunter

jerked at his sleeve. "You don't seem to be getting ready yet."

"Not yet," assented Harry.

"The fellows seem to think there's some joke in my staying with you for Christmas," said Bunter, blinking at him.

Wharton grinned.

"Do they?" he asked.

"Yes. I don't see the joke."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Squiff.

"Why, there's another silly ass cackling!" hooted Bunter. "Look here, Field, what are you cackling at, you dummy?"

"Bunter really staying with you over Christmas, Wharton?" asked Squiff.

"Yes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He wanted to, and I don't mind," said Wharton blandly. "Why should I mind—in the circumstances?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, Wharton—" howled Bunter.

But Wharton went out with Squiff to see him off, and Bunter was left blinking wrathfully.

"What on earth does it mean?" grunted the Owl of the Remove.

It really was a mystery.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Potter and Greene are Not Taking Any!

MR. PROUT, the master of the Fifth, turned round from his fire as a tap came at his study door.

"Come in!" he said.

Potter and Greene of the Greyfriars Fifth entered the study.

The two Fifth-Formers had their coats on, and were evidently prepared for their journey. A slight impatience was visible in their manner, too, as if they would really have preferred to get off without a final interview with their respected Form master.

"Ah! Potter and Greene," said Mr. Prout. "Come in!"

"You sent for us, sir," said Potter.

"Quite so."

Mr. Prout eyed the two seniors.

"Very kind of you to send for us to say good-bye, sir," said Greene.

Mr. Prout coughed.

"Hem! That was not precisely my object in sending for you, Greene," he said. "I understand that you two boys were the closest friends of Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Potter. "Coker's in our study, you know—or was, before he disappeared."

"No news of old Coker, sir?" asked Greene.

"None. I am sorry to say."

"It's very sad, sir," said Greene, feeling called upon to say something. "His people will miss him this Christmas—his Aunt Judy and his Uncle Henry. It's very sad."

"Very!" agreed Potter.

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Prout. "The mysterious disappearance of Coker will cause great dismay and grief in his household this Christmas. Whether the unfortunate boy has been kidnapped, as the police appear to think, or whether he has met with some terrible accident, no one can tell. His aunt, Miss Coker, appears to fear that an accident explains his absence, and that he may be found in some remote recess among the cliffs or the chalk-pits."

"That would be awful, sir."

"I don't think it's likely, sir," said Potter. "He's been away a week, and something would have been seen of him by now, with such a search going on."

"No doubt," said the Fifth Form master.

"More likely wandered away, don't you think, sir?" said Potter. "Mental failure, or something, would account for it. Coker never was very bright, sir."

Mr. Prout coughed again.

"I do not pretend to explain Coker's extraordinary disappearance, which has puzzled the police," he said. "I hope and trust that he may be found yet, safe and sound."

"Oh, certainly, sir. We all hope so."

Potter glanced at the door.

He was not at all indifferent to the fate of Horace Coker of the Fifth Form, who had disappeared from Greyfriars so mysteriously a week before. He was sorry for old Coker, and sincerely hoped that he would be found undamaged. Nevertheless, he had his train to catch. Time and tide wait for no man; and the same applies to trains.

"You are doubtless aware," continued Mr. Prout, "that, at the request of Miss Judith Coker, the Head gave permission for Greyfriars boys to join in the search for her missing nephew. By the Head's permission, any boy who so desires may remain at Greyfriars, instead of going home for the vacation, to continue this search."

"Hem!"

"Um!"

"I understand that certain boys in the Lower Fourth Form have decided to do so," said Mr. Prout.

"Oh!"

"Five boys—Wharton, Cherry, Nugent, Bull, and the Indian boy," said the master of the Fifth.

"My hat!" ejaculated Potter. "I—I mean I don't catch on. Those kids were always rowing with Coker. Why, the day he disappeared he had gone after Bob Cherry into Friardale Wood to wallop him!"

"Then the resolve of these juniors displays a spirit of goodwill and forgiveness very appropriate at this season of the year," said Mr. Prout.

"Oh! Yes! Of—of course!"

"Very decent of them, sir."

"I sent for you," went on Mr. Prout, "to inform you that you have the Head's permission, and my permission, to stay on at the school if you so desire, in order to search further for the Fifth Form boy who was your particular friend."





"Oh!"

"I scarcely think that any useful purpose would be served by your doing so," said Mr. Prout. "But if you should so desire, I would not place any obstacle in your way. Certain arrangements would have to be made, of course, and for that reason I wish to know your decision."

Potter and Greene looked at one another.

They were sorry for old Coker; they missed him—or, at least, they missed the royal spreads they had been accustomed to in the study. They even tried not to feel how pleasant and peaceful it was in the study without the loud voice and heavy feet of Horace Coker.

Of course, they were deeply concerned for Coker. He had their best wishes. But putting in a Christmas vacation at a deserted school was quite another matter.

"Of course, it's really up to those Remove kids, in a way," remarked Potter casually. "I hear that Coker risked his life to pull young Cherry out of the water the day he disappeared."

"But I'm afraid we shouldn't be any use, sir," said Greene. "In fact, as the police have failed to find Coker, it seems to me that it would appear rather a check on our part—"

"Quite impertinent, I'm afraid," said Potter, shaking his head. "I should not like Inspector Grimes to think me impertinent. I respect him very much."

"And as you think, sir, that no useful purpose would be served—" went on Greene.

"We feel bound to give in to your opinion, sir," added Potter.

Mr. Prout coughed once more.

"I merely desired to know your decision," he remarked rather dryly.

"Oh, quite so, sir! We were going home for Christmas with Coker; but as he's disappeared, of course, that's off. So Greene is coming home with me, sir."

"I mean your decision with regard to staying on at the school and keeping up the search for Coker," said Mr. Prout. "Apparently you have decided to go."

"We—we feel that it would be cheeky on our part to butt in, sir, the police having the matter in hand—"

"And—and, you see, sir—"

"I see—quite!" said Mr. Prout. "Good-bye, my boys!" And the Fifth Form master turned to his fire again.

Potter and Greene left the study rather hastily.

In the corridor they looked at one another. It was an expressive look, indicative of their opinion of the intellect of a Form master who had supposed, for one moment, that they would decide to hang on at the school over the Christmas vacation. Then they walked out to the vehicle that was to convey them to the station.

Harry Wharton met them at the doorway.

"You fellows going?" he asked.

"Eh? Naturally!" said Potter, with a stare. "Fellows generally go home at Christmas, don't they?"

"But old Coker—"

"We've had that from Prouty, thanks," said Potter quite rudely.

"We don't want any more from the Lower Fourth."

"Thanks all the same!" said Greene. "Come on, Potter!"

And the two Fifth-Formers departed.

Harry Wharton smiled slightly. The crowd was clearing off now; already

silence and solitude was beginning to descend on the old school. Horace Coker of the Fifth had always been on terms of warfare with the Famous Five of the Remove; but evidently no one outside the ranks of the Famous Five intended to take advantage of the Head's kind permission to stay on at Greyfriars and continue the search for the missing Fifth-Former. If Potter and Greene, Coker's particular chums, felt a deep concern for the missing Horace, that concern was apparently compatible with passing a cheery Christmas at home.

Vehicle after vehicle rolled away, and Greyfriars was left almost deserted.

The Famous Five saw the last crowd off, and walked back to the House with rather serious faces.

"Bit quiet, isn't it?" said Bob Cherry.

"Yes, rather."

"The ratherfulness is terrific," murmured Hurreo Jamset Ram Singh.

"We may find Coker in time to get off before Christmas, all the same," said Harry Wharton hopefully. "It's up to us to find him if he can be found, after what he did for you, Bob."

"If!" murmured Johnny Bull.

"Well, we're for it, anyhow," said the captain of the Remove.

"Anyhow, we shall have Bunter to cheer us up, as jolly old Bunter is staying with Wharton for Christmas," remarked Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the merry laugh of the chums of the Remove awoke the echoes of the silent old quadrangle.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Not Staying with Wharton!

"O H, here you are!"

"Here we are, old fat man!"

"The herefulness is terrific."

Billy Bunter planted himself in the way of the Famous Five as they came into the House out of the frosty air. Billy Bunter's fat face was wrathful and uneasy. He blinked at the chums of the Remove with a blink that ought to have withered them on the spot—but did not.

"You silly idiots!" he said.

"Thanks!"

"You frabjous fatheads!"

"The thankfulness is great!"

"You footling chumps!"

"Go it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What do you mean by it?" roared Bunter. "All the fellows gone—I've been looking for you everywhere—"

"We've been to see the last lot off at the gates," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "And here we are again, Bunter."

"As large as life, and twice as natural," grinned Bob.

"What do you mean by it?" hooted Bunter. "Why haven't we started with the rest?"

"Is that a conundrum?"

"You howling ass, it isn't! I want to know what you mean! We sha'n't get to Wharton Lodge till after dark!"

"Make it after Christmas," suggested Bob Cherry. "That's really more likely."

"What?" howled Bunter.

"Dear man, what are you getting excited about? You're staying with Wharton over Christmas, aren't you?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I heard you tell him so yesterday," went on Bob. "As you said so yourself, I suppose it's so. You ought to know."

Well, here's Wharton. Stay with him."

"We're all staying," chuckled Nugent. "The more the merrier."

"The stayfulness is terrific."

"I'm staying with Wharton at his home, you blinking asses!" gasped Bunter. "What are you driving at?"

"No jolly fear!" said the captain of the Remove. "You said you were staying with me, and I said you could if you liked. I never said anything about going home."

"But you're going home, of course?" hooted Bunter.

"Not in the least!"

Bunter almost fell down.

"Not going home for Christmas?" he stuttered.

"No," grinned Wharton.

"You mean you're going with one of these chaps, instead of going to Wharton Lodge?" asked Bunter. "Well, I think it's rather rotten to alter arrangements like that at the last moment. Never mind; I'll come."

"But I'm not going home with one of these chaps!" chuckled the captain of the Remove.

"You're not staying at the school over the vac?" shrieked Bunter, the dreadful truth forcing itself into his fat mind at last.

"Ha, ha, ha! Just that!"

"But—but you can't!" gasped Bunter. "The Head won't let you."

"Special leave!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"But there won't be anything on here," stuttered Bunter. "No Christmas grub, no turkey, not a blinking mince-pie, no Christmas-pudding—no anything! The Head goes away for Christmas; so do all the masters—even old Gosling goes off! What do you want to stay here for?"

"We don't want to!"

"You—you—you ass! You're not staying here without wanting to, I suppose?"

"We are!" chuckled Johnny Bull.

"Exactly! The call of jolly old duty!"

"When duty calls, you know," smiled Frank Nugent.

"When duty calls, to brazen walls, how base the bloke who howls and bawls!" said Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter glared at the hilarious juniors with a glare that almost cracked his spectacles.

The Famous Five had been a little downhearted when the last brake rolled away and they found themselves left on their lonesome own in the deserted school. But Bunter had succeeded—unintentionally—in cheering them up. Bunter's fat face was worth at the present moment a guinea a box, or more. His expression was really exhilarating.

"I—I—I suppose you're pulling my leg, you beasts!" he spluttered, at last. "Is that it?"

"Sober as a jolly old judge," said Bob Cherry. "Didn't you know that the Head had given leave for any fellow to stay on here for the vac, and go on searching for Coker?"

"What rot!"

"Rot or not, that's what we're doing," said Harry Wharton. "You're welcome to stay with us, old fat bean."

Bunter fairly spluttered with wrath. He had decided to stay with Wharton for Christmas, without bothering about the idle formality of an invitation. But he did not want to stay with him in a deserted school, and spend his Christmas vacation tramping about frozen woods



"You're not staying at the school over the vac?" shrieked Bunter, the dreadful truth forcing itself into his fat mind at last. "Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Harry Wharton. "Just that!" "But there won't be anything on here!" stuttered Bunter. "No Christmas grub—no turkey—not a blinking mince pie—no nothing!" The Famous Five roared at the expression on the fat junior's face. "Well, you awful beasts!" hooted Bunter. "Think I'm going to hang on here with you?—Not likely!" (See Chapter 3.)

searching for Coker of the Fifth, or loafing dismally about silent passages and studies while the Famous Five were out. Certainly he did not want that.

"Well, you awful beasts," he said, "think I'm going to hang on here with you? Not likely!"

"The sadness will be terrific if the esteemed Bunter takes his honourable and welcome departure."

"I—I say, you fellows, you can't be such awful clumps, you know," urged Bunter. "What does Coker matter, anyhow?"

"Lots—to his Aunt Judy," said Bob.

"Blow his Aunt Judy!"

"Shush!"

"Blow Coker!" roared Bunter.

"Can it, old man. You're staying with me for Christmas," said Wharton. "We're going to have an uproarious time—tramping the woods from early morn till dewy eve, hunting for Coker—"

"Beast!"

"Think what an appetite you'll get, putting in twelve hours a day on the tramp in the open air!" said Nugent.

Bunter shuddered at the idea.

"Mrs. Kebble will be staying, and she will provide us with grub," went on Frank. "Of course, there won't be any giddy festivities, or turkeys, or things. But we may get a slice of the house-dame's Christmas pudding if we're good."

"Beast!"

"And think of Coker's gratitude if we find him," said Bob.

"Beast!"

"You're repeating yourself, old man," said Bob Cherry. "Put on a new record."

"Beast!" howled Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm not staying, I can tell you that!" hooted the Owl of the Remove. "I'm going! Yah!"

"Going home to Bunter Court?" asked Bob. "Remember me to the butler and the groom of the chambers and the powdered footmen. Think of poor little me when you're entertaining the nobility and gentry in the palatial halls of Bunter Court!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I say, you fellows, don't play the goat!" urged Bunter. "Your uncle will be expecting you home, Wharton."

"Not now I've written to him not to expect me."

"Beast!"

"So jolly kind of you to offer to stay with me, Bunter," said the captain of the Remove. "You're the only fellow who's offered to keep us company here over Christmas."

"Catch me staying!" said Bunter, gasping with wrath. "You've let me down, and it's too late for me to fix it up with Mauly now, or Smithy. I've turned down a dozen invitations."

"Don't turn down mine!" implored Wharton. "Stay with us, old fat bean. Do stay!"

"Do!" beseeched Bob Cherry. "Think of your people, you know. Think how nice it will be for them if you stay with us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

And he rolled away.

Five minutes later William George Bunter was gone. He understood now why all the Remove fellows had roared when they heard that he was staying with Wharton for Christmas. He saw the joke at last. But it did not make him smile. His fat face wore anything but a smiling expression as he shook the dust of Greyfriars from his feet.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Tea in Study No. 1!

"NOT so bad!" said Bob Cherry. "Good, in fact!" said Nugent.

"Topping!" said Wharton. The Famous Five were resolutely cheerful.

Study No. 1, in the Remove passage, presented quite a festive appearance as the winter dusk closed in on Greyfriars.

Holly and mistletoe decorated the walls, giving the study a very Christ-massy look. A big fire blazed in the grate; school books had been put out of sight, extra armchairs borrowed from other studies. Tea was ready, and it was quite a handsome spread. Every member of the famous Co. was determined to keep in high spirits suitable to the season. And they succeeded pretty well. Outside, the quad was dark.



and deserted; and within the house, studies and passages were lonely, untenanted, and echoed eerily to a footstep or a voice. But in Study No. 1, at least, all was merry and bright. If the Famous Five had to stay over Christmas in the deserted school, at least they were going to make the very best of a bad job.

Neither did they regret what they had decided upon. It was not exactly agreeable; but they felt that it was up to them.

Coker of the Fifth had been anything but a friend of theirs. But Coker had plunged recklessly into the woodland stream to rescue Bob Cherry; and one good turn deserved another. And if they had faltered, the remembrance of Aunt Judith's troubled, tear-stained face would have confirmed them in their resolution. Potter and Greene, Coker's chums in the Fifth, had described him as a fellow whose absence might make any home happy. But to Aunt Judy and Uncle Henry, at least, he was inestimable—he was their dear Horace, and the apple of their eye. What they saw in Horace Coker was, perhaps, rather a mystery to fellows who knew Coker. But undoubtedly they saw much in him.

The disappearance of Coker was still an unsolved mystery. Not a word had been heard from him, or about him, for a week, since he had vanished as if the earth had opened and swallowed him up. And he had disappeared on the very day that he had rescued Bob Cherry from the torrent; Bob was the last Greyfriars fellow who had seen him. If there was any chance of finding Coker, the Famous Five meant to find him.

Wharton had a letter in his hand as his comrades spread the table for tea. He smiled rather ruefully as he read it.

"From your uncle?" asked Nugent.

"Yes. He thinks it's all right, though he's rather disappointed not to see me—us, I mean," said Harry. "Listen."

He read out a part of the letter from Colonel Wharton.

"I am sorry that you are not coming home for Christmas, my dear boy. But I think you are doing right. If Miss Coker is correct in supposing that some accident has befallen her nephew, and that he may have fallen from a cliff, or into one of the old chalk-pits, it is quite probable that you and your friends, with your training as Boy Scouts, may be able to learn what has become of the unfortunate lad. At all events, I am glad to know that you are all kind and generous enough to sacrifice your Christmas holiday for the sake of another. As you will not be coming home, your aunt and myself will be going to Bournemouth, and the lodge will be shut up over the holidays."

Wharton put the letter in his pocket.

"And he gives me the address to write to," he said. "We're fairly for it now, you chaps. If—if we find Coker—"

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"If——" murmured Johnny Bull.

"Well, if we do, and if it happens before Christmas, a holiday at the lodge is off, of course," said Harry. "We shall be able to fix up something else—if we find Coker before Christmas Day."

"Don't worry," said Johnny Bull. "We sha'n't find him."

"That's hopeful, at all events," remarked Bob.

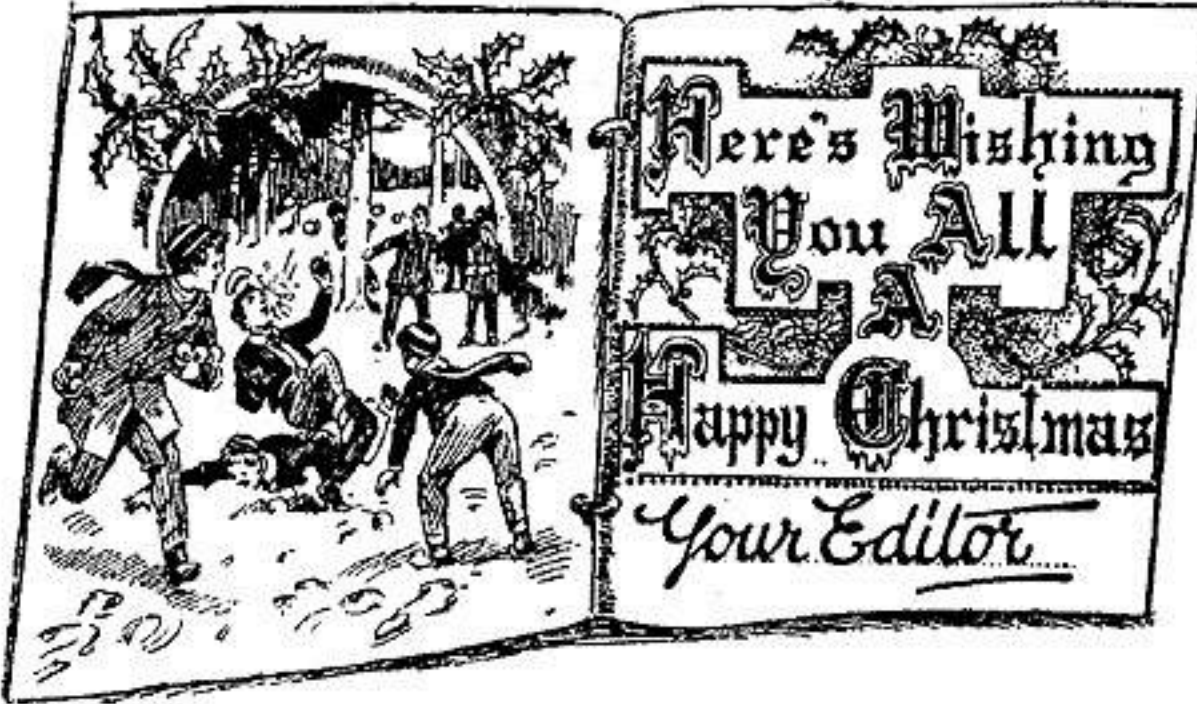
"Well, we're going to do our level best, of course," said Johnny. "But the police and half the local inhabitants have been hunting for him for a week, and there's a reward of a hundred pounds offered for news. Nothing has turned up so far. It's not likely that we shall be able to turn anything up. But it's up to us to stick it out and try, after what the silly ass did for Bob."

"Hear, hear!"

"We'll begin to-morrow and carry on till we find him," said Bob Cherry cheerily. "And now for tea."

There was a knock at the door of the study.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Is that Bunter come back? Trot in!"



The study door opened, and Reggie Coker of the Sixth Form presented himself. Coker minor was looking very pale and distressed.

"Come in, Coker minor!" said Wharton.

"Tea's just ready, old son," said Nugent.

"I—I say——" stammered Reggie.

"Come in!"

Coker minor came in.

Reggie Coker was as unlike his burly brother Horace as a fellow's brother well could be. He was slight and youthful and clever, and he was in the Sixth Form, whereas his elder brother Horace was in the Fifth, and ought to have been only in the Shell. Coker minor never found it possible to keep up the dignity of a Sixth Form man. On his attainments, which were really weird and wonderful, he was entitled to his place in the Sixth Form; but physically there were fellows in the Shell who could have handled him with ease. Indeed, Coker minor often thought that he would have found life in the Sixth not worth living, but for the fact that he had a burly big brother in the Fifth always ready—in fact, more than ready—to fight his battles for him. If a Fifth Form man or a Shell fellow checked Coker of the Sixth, Coker of the Fifth was on the warpath at once; and though Coker minor might be despised as a fellow who could not use his hands, it was impossible to despise

Coker major, who had a punch like the kick of a mule. Reggie had the brains of the family, and Horace had the muscle, and each of them was satisfied with that division.

Harry Wharton & Co. had quite kindly feelings towards Coker minor. Poor Reggie had been looking almost like a ghost ever since the mysterious disappearance of his major; it was even said that he had made blunders in his Greek under his stress of mind. And the swot of the Sixth was supposed to know Greek better than most fellows knew English. Undoubtedly Reggie Coker took the matter very much to heart.

He sat down rather shyly in the chair Wharton placed for him.

"So you haven't gone?" asked Harry.

"I'm going," said Reggie Coker dismally. "I've asked my pater to let me stay on at school till Horace is found, but he thinks I'd better go home."

"Here you are—sosses and chips!" said Bob Cherry. "Pile in, old bean, and forget that you're a member of the high and mighty Sixth."

Reggie grinned faintly.

"I say, it's awfully decent of you chaps to hang on as you're doing, to search for my brother!" he said.

"Not at all," said Bob. "You know what your brother did for me."

"Yes. He's a splendid chap," said Reggie. "When I think of what may have happened to him, it makes me feel——"

His voice trembled. "Well, you understand. But the pater thinks I'd better go home. You see, I always go home to the pater and mater

for Christmas, and Horace always goes to Aunt Judy. Aunt Judy and Uncle Henry are no end fond of him, as of course he deserves, the dear old chap!"

"Of—of course," said Bob.

"I'd like to stay on and try to find him," said Reggie. "But the pater thinks it wouldn't be any good."

"Well, it wouldn't, you know," said Johnny Bull. "You're not up to it. A day in the woods in winter would put you on your beam-ends."

"I—I suppose you're right, and the pater's right," said Coker minor, with a doleful nod. "It's awfully decent of you fellows to give up your Christmas vac like this. I know I should be no use helping you, though I'm in the Sixth and you're only Remove kids. I say, I'm awfully grateful. I—I thought I'd tell you so before I went."

"That's all right," said Harry. "We're going over the whole countryside, and we'll find Horace if he's to be found. I suppose you haven't any idea on the subject?"

Reggie shook his head.

"Can't make it out," he said. "If there'd been any accident, Horace ought to have been found by this time. But if he's been kidnapped, who would be villain enough to do it? Horace hadn't any enemies—as if he could have, such a splendid chap, you know!"

"Hem! Yes."

"Aunt Judy and Uncle Henry are awfully cut up about it," went on Reggie. "Uncle Henry isn't well, you know, and it has knocked poor old auntie quite over. Uncle's secretary, that man Poynings, suggests that Horace may have gone off on a holiday without getting leave from the Head—just cleared off because he wanted to, you know. But that's all rot, of course."

"Poynings?" repeated Wharton.

"I don't know if you saw the man," said Reggie. "He came here twice to see Horace lately. He had the cheek to advise him not to go to auntie's for Christmas, on account of Uncle Henry being seedy. Frightful cheek, you know. Horace talked to him jolly plainly."

The juniors grinned.

All Greyfriars had heard of Horace Coker's indignation at what he regarded—rather justly—as sheer cheek on the part of his uncle's secretary. Coker had told Potter and Greene, and most of the Fifth, and, in fact, everybody who would listen. The matter had been driven out of fellows' minds by what had happened since, but the chums of the Remove remembered it now.

"Horace was going to advise Uncle Henry to sack the fellow," went on Reggie. "Cheek, you know, to try to keep old Horace away from Holly House for the Christmas vacation!"

"The cheekfulness was terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a husky smile.

"As if Uncle Henry wouldn't be bucked, you know, by having old Horace with him!" said Coker minor.

"Hem! Quite so!"

The juniors suppressed their smiles.

Undoubtedly it was cheeky enough for Mr. Henry Coker's secretary to have intervened in the matter without instructions from his employer. But the Famous Five could not help thinking that Mr. Poynings was probably right in supposing that an invalid's condition would not be improved by the presence of a noisy fellow with big feet and a loud voice. Still, it was certainly no business of Mr. Poynings'.

Coker minor cheered up a good deal under the kindly influence of Study No. 1's hospitality. He left the Famous Five on the best of terms, and they promised to let him know at once if they had any news of Horace. The chums of the Remove walked down to the door with him, and saw him into his taxi for the station—the last of the Greyfriars crowd to depart.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Left On Their Own!

THE next two or three days were strange enough to the Famous Five of the Remove.

Greyfriars in vacation-time was a new Greyfriars to them.

There were no classes, to begin with, and it was rather new to be at school without classes. And there were no fellows but themselves.

Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, departed. Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth, followed his example. Then Mr. Capper and Mr. Twigg went together. The Head went next.

Certainly, the chums of the Remove were not likely to miss the masters very much. But their departure accentuated the silence and desolation of the deserted school.

As a rule, the Famous Five were sufficient unto themselves. But they would have liked to see a few other faces about now. Even the fat visage of Billy Bunter would not have been unwelcome.

Mrs. Kebble, the House-dame, looked after them well. They wanted for nothing. But they did not like silence and solitude, and the Remove dormitory seemed very desolate with only five beds occupied in it.

Mrs. Kebble was a fixture, so to speak; and Mr. Mumble, the gardener, and Mrs. Mumble, at the school shop, were also fixtures. But even Gosling, the porter, was going away for Christmas Day. Perhaps the chums of the Remove felt that they had made rather a mistake in staying on. But, having set their hand to the plough, as it were, they did not look back.

Every day they went out early, generally taking lunch with them, and put in the whole of the short December day in the fruitless search for Coker.

Once or twice they saw Inspector Grimes at Courtfield. Mr. Grimes was still active in the matter. The search for the missing Greyfriars fellow was officially in his hands.

But it was obvious that the inspector was hopelessly perplexed.

The theory of an accident to Coker of the Fifth had to be eliminated, for the search had been so long and so thorough that the hapless Fifth-Former must have been discovered by this time, dead or alive.

The theory of kidnapping seemed improbable, for it was difficult to imagine any motive on the part of the kidnappers, save that of extorting ransom from Coker's rich relatives. And Coker's rich relatives had not been approached.

The juniors guessed that Inspector Grimes favoured the theory that Coker had had some sort of a mental breakdown, and had wandered away, having perhaps lost his memory. Such things had happened, and it was possible. Yet it was strange that no news had been received of him, in such a case.

The mystery was, in fact, insoluble; and, though Harry Wharton & Co. put in day after day searching, they could not help feeling that it was all trouble taken for nothing.

"The only explanation seems to be," Harry Wharton remarked one day, "that somebody kidnapped Coker for no reason at all except to shove him out of sight somewhere, and that doesn't seem possible."

"Not quite," said Bob Cherry.

"It looks like kidnapping," went on the captain of the Remove. "There's precious little to go upon, but what little there is looks like it. You left Coker safe and sound that afternoon after he helped you in the stream in the wood, Bob? No sign of anything the matter with him—mental breakdown, or loss of memory, or anything?"

Bob shook his head.

"Same silly ass as ever," he said. "Just the same fathead as usual."

"You passed two men on the footpath coming back, and Coker must have passed them, if he was coming back to the school to get into dry clothes, as he must have been. One a slight man in horn-rimmed glasses and a beard, the other a big, burly, rough fellow?"

"That's it."

"The same afternoon Billy Bunter saw a covered cart hidden in a lonely lane on the edge of the wood, half a mile from where you left Coker. Two men came to it from the wood; he saw only one of them, and heard the other, but the one he saw answered to your description of the big, burly man Coker must have passed on the footpath?"

"Right!" said Bob.

"Both men have vanished from all knowledge. The police can't get on their track anyhow."

"That's so."

"Well, that looks like kidnapping," said Harry. "Two strangers in this locality certainly met Coker on that lonely path. They had a covered cart stuck away in a lonely spot. They disappeared from the vicinity the same day as Coker. What was their business here? Kidnapping Coker, it looks like. Only—"

"Why?" said Johnny Bull.

"That's what beats me. They couldn't have done it without a motive."

(Continued overleaf.)

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**Decide on one for
Christmas**

**"The Prisoner of the Bungalow!"**

(Continued from previous page.)

unless they were potty. It's rather too thick to suppose that two lunatics did the trick."

"Just a little too thick!" grinned Bob.

"There's just one thing," went on Harry. "If it's all as it looks, they got Coker away in a cart. Horse and cart may mean that they didn't take him a great distance. From Bunter's description it was just an ordinary farmer's cart—dozens of them about here. The horse wouldn't be able to do a big distance. That would look as if they had somewhere to shove Coker out of sight, within a reasonable distance."

"Yes. But—"

"But—"

"The butfulness is terrific."

Harry Wharton laughed ruefully.

"If a fellow could imagine a motive for it," he said. "But nobody would take the trouble and risk without a motive. Coker can't be supposed to have had a personal enemy who would play such a trick on him. Lots of fellows would have liked to punch his head, lots of times. But we can't suppose that there was anybody who wanted to do him harm."

"Only he's gone!" said Nugent.

"It beats me hollow," confessed the captain of the Remove. "We were rather asses, I'm afraid, to take this job on at all. Only—only poor old Miss Coker seems to feel better, knowing that we're searching for Coker."

"And it's up to me, and up to you fellows, because you're my pals," said Bob. "Stick it out!"

"Oh, yes, we'll stick it out!"

And another day's tramping and scouting and searching ended, once more, in a tired tramp back to Greyfriars, a late tea in the study, and a sound sleep in the Remove dormitory.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.**Light at Last!****"POYNINGS!"**

The name came into Harry Wharton's mind, and it came like an illuminating flash.

It was morning, and the Famous Five had breakfasted, and were making their preparations for another day's tramp in the frozen woods. Harry Wharton was thinking hard, turning over in his mind once more the strange mystery of Horace Coker's disappearance. It was natural enough that the recollection of the man Poynings should recur along with the thought of Coker of the Fifth. But now, as the name came into Harry's thoughts, it came with a new and startling significance.

"My only hat!" he suddenly ejaculated.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's bitten you, old bean?" inquired Bob Cherry.

"Poynings!" exclaimed Wharton.

His comrades stared at him.

"Poynings has bitten you?" ejaculated Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fathead! Poynings!" exclaimed Wharton breathlessly. "Don't you see?"

"Don't we see what?"

"The motive!" shouted the captain of the Remove.

"Eh?"

"What?"

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Wharton's face was flushed with excitement. His eyes gleamed as he looked at his astonished chums.

"Poynings," he repeated, "Coker's uncle's secretary! Fathead not to think of him before."

"What the merry thump—"

"Poynings what?" demanded Bob. "Poynings which? Poynings how? Wandering in your little mind, old chap?"

"Listen to me, you fellows," said the captain of the Remove. "On my word, I believe I've got it. You remember that man Poynings came to Greyfriars to see Coker—"

"What about it?"

"You remember why he came?"

"He thought that Coker's four-point-seven voice and thundering big hoofs wouldn't make the invalid at Holly House feel any better."

"That was no business of his," said Harry. "He interfered without orders. Coker told all Greyfriars about his impudence in chipping in. Poynings wanted to keep him away from Holly House for Christmas. Well, don't you see—Coker's kept away!"

"Phew!"

The Co. stared at the captain of the Remove blankly.

"Coker's kept away!" repeated Wharton, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "Poynings came a second time, as you know, and his second call was on the day Coker disappeared. He saw Coker at Greyfriars before old Horace went out on your trail in the wood, Bob. We saw him come in."

"That's so."

"That shows that he was in the neighbourhood when Coker disappeared. A coincidence, at least, when we know that he wanted to keep Coker away from Holly House for Christmas."

"My dear chap," said Johnny Bull, "draw it mild! Mean to say you suspect Coker's uncle's secretary of kidnapping Coker simply to keep Coker's big feet out of the house while his governor is ill?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Fathead!" said Wharton. "Poynings may have some other reason for wanting to keep Coker away. He put it down to Uncle Henry being seedy, but it may have been something else. But I haven't come to the chief point yet, and—"

"Go it!" said Bob, with a grin.

"You remember that day when we were caught in the rainstorm on the cliffs, and tried to get shelter in the Hillcrest Bungalow?" Wharton's voice was almost trembling with excitement. "You know that bung is always untenanted in the winter, but we found it tenanted by an inhospitable beast who wouldn't let us in out of the rain."

"I remember how jolly wet we got. But—"

"We thought it was some tramp who had taken possession of the bung, as it's so lonely, and we said we'd call at the police-station on our way home about it, and the man heard us and opened the door. You remember who the man was?"

"Poynings!"

"Coker's uncle's secretary!"

"My hat! I'd forgotten that!" said Nugent. "But—"

"You remember how queer we thought it—Coker's uncle's secretary living all alone in that lonely bung in the winter, when he's got a job at Holly House, and is supposed to live there."

"I remember."

"We thought at the time that it looked like a man in hiding, you remember," said Harry. "But that wasn't possible, of course, as Mr. Coker's secretary couldn't be in hiding. Now I guess what he was there for."

"And what?"

"He's taken that bung under a false name, most likely—and that's where Coker has been put."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Rot, old chap!" said Johnny Bull.

"The rotfulness seems to my honourable self terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"My dear man," said Bob argumentatively, "Poynings may be awfully concerned about his employer, for all I know, but he wouldn't kidnap his employer's nephew just to give the old gent a quiet Christmas."

The juniors chuckled at the idea.

"You fellows have seen Mr. Poynings," said Wharton quietly. "Did he look the kind of man to be concerned much about his employer's health?"

"No jolly fear! He looked a hard nut!"

"Looked as if he had about as much of the milk of human kindness as a hippopotamus!" said Nugent.

"Exactly! Yet he went outside his duties, took the trouble to come down to Greyfriars, risked getting his employer's nephew up against him, and all on account of his concern for his employer's health!" said Wharton. "My idea is that his concern for Uncle Henry was all humbug, and that he had some other reason—some personal reason—for keeping Coker away from Holly House. I don't pretend to know what it was—"

"Pinching the old gent's cash, perhaps?" grinned Bob.

"Or letting in burglars?" said Johnny Bull.

"Cheese it!" said Wharton. "I'm convinced that he had a personal motive for keeping Coker away from his uncle's house. I don't pretend to know what it was. He tried to persuade Coker to go to his father's home for the vacation, or with a Greyfriars friend. And, incidentally, he got to know Coker by sight by coming here. He hasn't been long with Mr. Henry Coker, and he had never seen Horace, as we know. If he was thinking of getting rid of him somehow, he would have to know him by sight. He risked getting the sack by butting into Coker's personal affairs; he wanted to keep Coker away from his uncle's house, he was in this neighbourhood when Coker disappeared, and we know that he has hired the loneliest house in this part of Kent—far enough from the school, and yet near enough to be reached by a horse and cart."

"My only hat!" said Bob, with a whistle. "Putting it like that, it sounds as if there might be something in it."

"It does!" said Nugent.

"I believe there is something in it," said Harry quietly. "But it's easily put to the test. We don't search the woods this morning—we search that lonely bungalow on the cliffs."

"Oh!" said Bob.

"Hold on, though!" said Johnny Bull. "We know from what Reggie Coker told us that Poynings is at Holly House now. If he's at Holly House, he can't be at the bung on the Pegg cliffs."

"I don't suppose he is," said Harry. "I suspect very strongly that Coker is a prisoner there, but Poynings could



The door of the bungalow suddenly flew open, and a burly man, with a heavy stick in his hand, rushed out. Bob Cherry gave a yell. "That's the man! That's one of the men I passed in the wood! Look out!" The burly Smiley rushed at the chums of the Remove, swiping with the stick, and the juniors scattered out of the porch before the fierce attack. (See Chapter 8.)

not stay there long. But there were two men in the affair, and if there is a prisoner guarded at the bungalow, he is guarded by Poynings' accomplice."

"Couldn't be left there alone," said Bob. "He would have to be fed, for one thing, as well as watched. If you're right, Harry, that big man I saw on the footpath is there, and—"

"And we may have to tackle him," said the captain of the Remove. "I don't suppose he's big enough to handle five of us."

Bob Cherry grinned.

"He looks a hefty chap, and jolly bad-tempered," he said. "If we're going to wake him up and ask him for trouble, I'm going to take a lives bat with me!"

"It's too thick," said Johnny Bull. "Nothing in it, old man. I don't account for all the circumstances, but it sounds too jolly steep for me. Still, we'll go."

"No harm in putting it to the test," said Nugent. "We can find out fast enough whether anybody is shut up at the bung. Let's!"

"Oh, let's, by all means!" said Johnny Bull.

And when the Famous Five left the school that morning their footsteps led them to the lonely bungalow.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Prisoner!

"YOU rotter!"
"Look 'ere—"
"You scoundrel!"
"I tell you—"

"You blackguard!"

Horace Coker was going strong.

Imprisonment for more than a week

had not improved the temper of Coker of the Fifth—rather the reverse. Neither had it softened the powerful tones of Coker's voice.

Ever since the day when he had been seized in Friardale Wood, and carried off, gagged and bound, in the covered cart, Coker of the Fifth had been in a state of mingled astonishment and rage.

At first astonishment predominated, but later on rage predominated very much indeed.

Every day, in fact, added to Coker's just wrath and fanned the flame of his fury.

Where he was, and why he was there, Coker had not the faintest idea, and he was tired of asking himself the question, to which he could find no answer.

He was a prisoner, guarded by a man he had never seen before the day of the kidnapping; that was all he knew. And his chief feeling was a desire to get his hands on that man and hammer him black and blue. But Coker's captors did not give him a chance. A handcuff had been locked on Coker's left wrist, and a steel chain ran from it to a staple high up in the wall of his room. Coker had exerted his utmost strength many times on that handcuff and chain, but he had exerted it without avail.

Apart from his incarceration, Coker had not been ill-used. He was well fed, and the burly ruffian who guarded him allowed him to "slang" as long and loudly as he liked. The man brought him regular meals, and even books and papers; and at every visit Coker called him all the names he could think of—and Coker found that he had quite an extensive vocabulary. The man Smiley did not seem to mind—indeed, he often seemed amused. Probably he found

his own enforced residence in the lonely bungalow irksome, and was glad of even Coker's loud and angry voice to break the silence and solitude.

It was a bright, cold winter's morning, and Smiley had brought in Coker's breakfast—an ample breakfast of eggs, and rashers, and coffee. Coker had not lost his appetite, and he was glad to see his breakfast. But, as usual, he told Smiley what he thought of him.

"You villain!" went on Coker. "If I could get loose do you know what I'd do? I'd smash you!"

"I dessay!" assented Smiley.

"I'd knock your features through the back of your head!" roared Coker.

"Thank you kindly, sir!" said Smiley.

"You rotter! You worm! You scum!" howled Coker.

"Go it, sir!" said Smiley cheerily.

"If it relieves your feelings, sir, you go it. It doesn't hurt me."

"Oh, you scum!" gasped Coker.

"What are you doing this for? What have I ever done to you, you villain?"

"Nothing, sir. Like the coffee?"

"Blow the coffee! Who's paying you to keep me here?"

"That's telling, sir," said Smiley.

"You bet your boots I'm being paid for the job, or I wouldn't be 'ere. 'Tain't so blinking pleasant sticking 'ere, I can tell you."

"I'll make it worth your while to let me go," said Coker, for about the hundredth time. "I tell you my people will stump up—my Aunt Judith and my Uncle Henry, especially. They'll be frightfully alarmed about me. I simply must get to Holly House for Christmas."

Smiley grinned.

"You're going to 'ave a quiet, social"

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Christmas with me 'ere, sir," he answered.

"Oh, you scoundrel!" "Never knowed a young gentleman with such a flow of langwidge," said Smiley. "Keep it up."

"What am I being kept here for?" roared Coker. "Tell me that!"

"Now you're asking questions, sir," said Smiley imperturbably.

"You'll go to prison for this!" "If I'm lagged," assented Smiley. "I ain't lagged yet. Nor it wouldn't be the first time if I was. I'm chancing it."

"How long are you going to keep me here?"

"That's telling." Coker clenched his hands frantically.

"Oh, what wouldn't I give to get loose and give you just one!" he gasped.

"All the better for you that you can't, sir," said Smiley. "I should 'ave to 'urt you if you did. Keep cool!"

"You rotter!"

"Some blokes would lam you with a stick for talking like that," said Smiley. "I'm a good-tempered bloke, I am. Keep it up as long as you like, bless your 'eart!"

And Smiley loafed out of the room, and closed the door and locked it on the outside.

Coker sat down to his breakfast. He made an excellent breakfast, in spite of his wrath.

Then he tramped about the room for exercise, so far as the length of the rattling chain would allow him.

There was one window in the room, and it was closed by thick wooden shutters. Daylight penetrated by crannies in the shutters; but the chain did not allow the imprisoned Fifth Former of Greyfriars to reach the window.

Coker tramped to and fro like a tiger in a cage.

In the first days of his imprisonment he had shouted again and again for help. But he had given that up. The fact that he was allowed to shout was a proof that no one was likely to come within range of his voice. He knew that the building must be a very lonely one, for that reason. It was clear that the building had been prepared for his reception—the handcuff and the chain had been all ready for his arrival. Someone, for some reason, desired to keep him away from his relations and friends, but Coker had given up asking himself what the reason might be. The man Smiley evidently had no personal interest in the matter; he was doing what he was hired to do, and, from his looks, had probably done much worse things in his time. How long his imprisonment was to last was another perplexing puzzle to Coker of the Fifth. The kidnappers could not intend to keep him a prisoner permanently—that was unthinkable. Sooner or later they must let him go. Some unknown purpose was being served by keeping him a prisoner for a time—perhaps for weeks, possibly for months. But what that purpose was was a mystery that almost made Coker's brain reel as he tried to think it out.

The door of the room suddenly opened. Smiley hurried in.

"Sorry, sir!" he said. "I shall 'ave to shove this 'ere into your mouth—I 'ope not for long."

The ruffian had a gag in his hand. Coker's eyes gleamed.

This was a new thing in his experience. THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 983.

once as a prisoner in the lonely house. Coker knew what it must mean—that for once someone had approached near the lonely building—someone who might hear him if he shouted.

"Hands off!" he said, between his teeth.

Smiley did not answer. He closed on Horace Coker and grasped him. Coker struggled with all his strength.

In his desperation he held his own for a few moments. But Coker, powerful as he was, was almost an infant in the grasp of the burly Smiley. He was forced down, and the ruffian's knee was planted on his chest.

Coker opened his mouth for a desperate yell, and the gag was thrust in as he opened it and made secure. The yell died away in a splutter.

Quietly and coolly the ruffian dragged his hands together and bound them, and then bound his ankles. He was taking no chances with his prisoner.

Coker of the Fifth lay helpless on the floor in a few minutes, only his eyes burning at the ruffian.

"Can't be 'elped, sir," said Smiley genially. "Can't run any risks with you, sir. I'll let you loose as soon as I can, once the coast is clear."

And Smiley left the room again, and turned the key in the lock.

Coker squirmed and wriggled desperately in his bonds. If only he could have uttered a shout for help! But the ruffian had been too careful for that. Not a sound passed his lips; and his struggles did not loosen his bonds a fraction. He gave it up at last, spent and exhausted, and lay listening. He could hear faint sounds of his goaler moving about the house, but for a long time there was no other sound. And then, with a thrill at his heart, Coker heard a sudden knocking.

Knock! Obviously it was a knock at the front door of the lonely house. Someone had come—and it was not Smiley's confederate. Was it the police? Had they found him? Coker's heart thumped and thumped.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

On the Track!

"WELL, here we are!" grinned Bob Cherry.

Four faces among the five were smiling, and Harry Wharton was feeling doubtful.

The Co. had willingly agreed that Wharton's surmise regarding the lonely bungalow on the cliffs should be put to the test. But they had only the very remotest hope that anything would come of it. Wharton was more hopeful than the others, but the general scepticism of his chums had made him doubt. But the fact remained that Mr. Poynings had hired the lonely bungalow. The juniors knew that; they had seen him there. It was an impossible residence in the winter, exposed to all the stormy blasts of the North Sea—an abode that only a confirmed misanthrope could have thought of in the grim, wintry weather. Why had Poynings taken it? Not to live in, for he lived at Holly House, far enough away. Yet he had taken it, and that circumstance, added to his desire to keep Coker of the Fifth away from Holly House, and many other little circumstances, gave colour to the theory that Wharton had formed.

It was, as Bob Cherry said, "steep,"

for if Wharton was right, it had to be supposed that Mr. Henry Coker's secretary had some extremely powerful motive for wishing to keep his employer's nephew away from the house at Christmas. Such a motive was difficult to guess or to account for. It was possible, of course, that the secretary was deceiving or swindling his employer in some way, and, consequently, did not want any of the sick man's relations on the scene. In that case, no doubt Coker had been kidnapped to keep him safe till the new term began at Greyfriars, when, of course, he would be at school again. But—

Wharton wondered. Taking so much for granted, it had to be concluded that Mr. Poynings was playing some deep game at Holly House—that he was guilty of some serious dereliction of duty, and was afraid of being found out.

That was a great deal to suppose, knowing as little of the man as Wharton did.

So, by the time the lonely bungalow came in sight, Harry Wharton was feeling much more dubious than he had felt when the juniors left Greyfriars. But he was resolved to go through with it. If nothing was discovered at Hillcrest, the juniors were no worse off than before. And even Johnny Bull admitted that they might as well search at Hillcrest as at any other spot, the search for the missing Fifth-Former having become palpably hopeless anywhere.

"Somebody's there!" said Wharton, with a gesture towards the thin column of smoke that rose from the chimney of the bungalow.

"Chap must be fond of his own company to live there," said Nugent, with a shiver, as he glanced round.

The surroundings of the lonely bungalow were absolutely desolate. Great cliffs, the grey-rolling sea, trees flecked with snow, that creaked and groaned in the bitter December wind. The path to the building was covered with snow and slush. The whole aspect of the place was grim and dreary. In the summer the estate agents at Lantham described Hillcrest as a "desirable holiday residence," with justice; but in the depth of winter there was no doubt that whoever chose to dwell there had very remarkable tastes. In rough weather the place was unapproachable; and it was likely to be cut off from all communication with the outer world for days at a time, even for weeks.

"What's the programme?" asked Johnny Bull. "I suppose we're not making a frontal attack on the giddy bung? Better make sure that we've got something up against the chap before we burgle his house and biff him."

"Oh, rot!" said Harry. "Let's walk up to the place and knock at the door. Then we shall see who's there, and we can act according to circumstances."

"That is the proper caper," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Let us proceed, and act according to the esteemed and ludicrous circumstances."

And the juniors opened the crazy gate of the bungalow garden, and went up the snowy path to the building. They stopped in the porch—where two or three weeks before they had sheltered from the rain, and had been refused admission by Mr. Poynings. Harry Wharton raised his hand to the knocker, and knocked loudly.

The sound rang and echoed through the little building. There was no answer from within.

Knock, knock, knock!
Not a sound was heard save the echo of the knocking.
"Nobody at home!" remarked Johnny Bull.
"The chimney's smoking," answered Wharton. "There must be somebody there."
"Chap may have gone for a walk."
"He hasn't!" said the captain of the Remove.
"How the thump do you know?" demanded Johnny Bull, rather testily.
"Look at the path, ass!"
"Oh!" said Johnny.

On the snowy path up the garden, the tracks of the juniors were very plain. But there was no footprints in the snow to be seen leading away from the house. Certainly no one could have walked away that morning from the door to the gate without leaving "sign."

"Might have gone out the back way!" said Johnny, after a pause.

"Why should he? But let's see."

The juniors walked round the bungalow, through the uncared-for garden. The back door was closed, and the ground was covered in snow and slush right up to the concrete slab on which the building stood. Footprints could be seen in the snow there, but they went only as far as a shed close at hand, evidently a coal and wood shed. Whoever was in the lonely bungalow had not taken a walk abroad that morning. Obviously, he was within the building, and did not choose to answer the summons at the door.

Harry Wharton & Co. returned to the front porch. Wharton's suspicions were stronger now, and his comrades were more serious. Why did not the occupant of the lonely bungalow come to the door?

The captain of the Remove started with the knocker again. He knocked hard and incessantly.

Knock, knock, knock!

The crashing of the knocker rang and echoed among the cliffs. The door shook under it.

There was a movement in the house at last. Whoever was there had evidently realised that the juniors did not intend to go away unanswered. The door did not open, but they heard footsteps approach it from within. A harsh voice called out sharply:

"Who is there? Go away at once!"

"That's not Poyning's voice!" murmured Bob.

"We know he's not here—he's at Coker's uncle's house, a hundred miles away," said Harry. "We're jolly well going to see who is here, though!"

"Yes, rather!"

"What do you want?" shouted the harsh voice within.

"Open the door!" answered Wharton.

"Get out!"

"Why can't you open the door?"

"Because I don't choose, hang you! Get out of it!"

For a moment there was a glimpse of a face at the glass fanlight over the door. It vanished at once.

Knock, knock!

Wharton plied the knocker again.

"Will you sheer off?" roared the man within.

"No!"

"What do you want?"

"We want a friend of ours, who is kept a prisoner in this bungalow!" called back Wharton.

A loud and startled oath was the answer.

The juniors looked at one another. They wondered what the mysterious occupant of the bungalow would have to say in reply to that.

"Are you mad?" came back the harsh voice at last. "There's nobody but me 'ere!"

"And who are you?"

"No business of yours. But my name's Johnson."

"Well, Mr. Johnson, you can let us in," said Harry Wharton coolly. "You've just looked at us from the fanlight, and you've seen that we are schoolboys, and not likely to do any harm."

"If you don't clear off, I'll come out with a stick!"

"Come out, by all means!"

There was a muttered oath, and footsteps retreated from the door. The man did not intend to carry out his threat.

"My hat!" murmured Bob Cherry. "It does look jolly fishy, and no mistake. He doesn't want to be seen."

"Doesn't want to be bothered, perhaps!" suggested Johnny Bull. Johnny was rather a hard youth to convince.

"Well, he's going to be bothered," said Harry, and he thundered at the knocker with untiring arm.

Footsteps came back to the door.

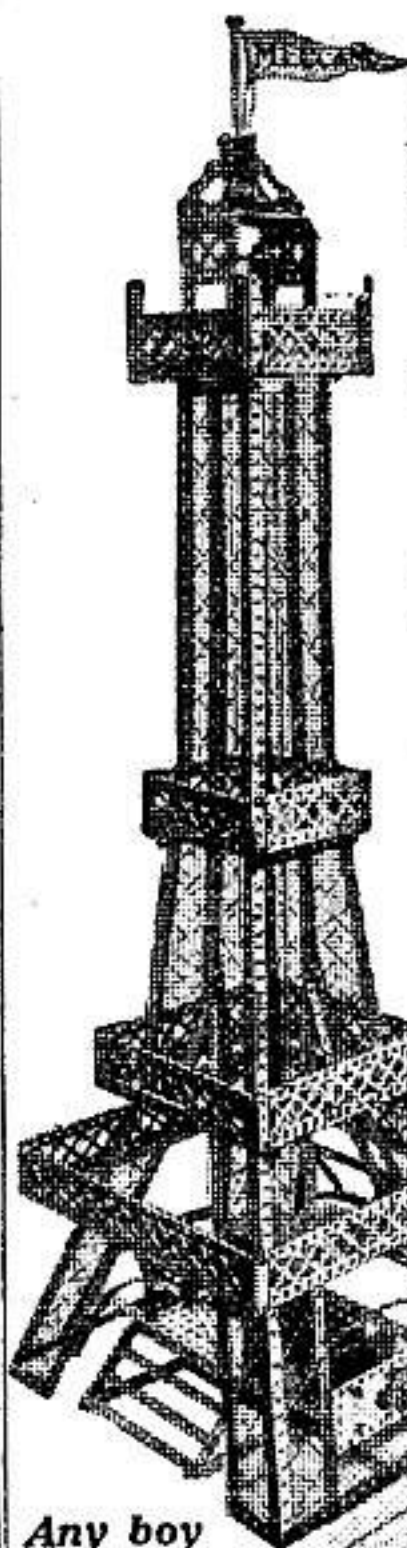
"Will you sheer off?" came the man's voice from within, in tones of concentrated rage.

"No!"

"You cheeky young rascal!"

(Continued overleaf.)

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"THE PRISONER OF THE BUNGALOW"

(Continued from page 11.)

"Listen to me," said Wharton icily. "One of us is going to the police-station at Courtfield to bring a constable here. Four of us will stay to see that you don't clear off till the policeman comes. You won't get a chance of shifting Coker to some other place."

"Coker?" repeated the voice, in startled tones.

"Yes."

"I tell you there's no one 'ere but me!"

"You can tell that to the constable when he arrives! Nugent, old chap, you cut off to the police-station as fast as you can, while we stay here and keep watch."

"Right-ho!" said Frank.

A savage oath came from within.

"Will you, by gum!"

And the door flew open and a burly man, with a heavy stick in his hand, strode out. Bob Cherry gave a yell.

"That's the man! That's one of the men I passed in the wood—I know him! That's the man Bunter saw with the covered cart! Look out!"

The chums of the Remove needed to look out, for the burly Smiley was rushing savagely at them, swiping with the stick, and the juniors scattered out of the porch before the fierce attack.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Rescued!

"BACK up!" shouted Wharton.

The juniors scattered down the snowy path under the rush of the burly ruffian and the blows of the stick. But they rallied again almost at once. Even for five sturdy juniors Smiley was not an easy proposition; but the Famous Five were ready for war. He followed them up, slashing recklessly with the big stick, his eyes blazing with rage.

There was not much further doubt now. Indeed, the Greyfriars juniors knew as well as if the ruffian had told them that he intended to drive them off, and make some attempt to escape with his prisoner before they could return with the police. It was scarcely possible to explain his savage action otherwise.

"Back up!"

"Yaroo!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Bob Cherry went sprawling in the snow under a fierce blow that half stunned him. Nugent reeled under another savage slash of the stick.

But Wharton had a stick in his hand, and as Nugent went down he rushed in and struck with all the strength of his arm, and Smiley lurched over under a crashing blow on the side of his bullet head.

"Back up!" panted Harry.

The ruffian turned on him, pouring out a stream of oaths. Probably Smiley had deemed it an easy task to drive off the schoolboys; but the Famous Five were not easy to handle. As he turned on Wharton a jagged fragment of rock whizzed through the air from the dusky hand of Hurree Jamset Ram Singh and struck him fair and square in his harsh, stubbly face. Smiley went over backwards as if he had been shot.

Johnny Bull landed on him with a

jump the next moment. Wharton was grasping him the next second, and tearing the stick from his hand. Hurree Singh rushed in and seized his arms, and hung on to them desperately. Under the three juniors, the ruffian struggled furiously.

Bob Cherry and Nugent, dazed as they were, scrambled up and joined in. Under the five of them, Smiley collapsed.

"Got the rotter!" panted Johnny Bull.

"The gotfulness is terrific!"

"Keep the brute down!" gasped Wharton.

Johnny Bull caught up Smiley's heavy stick. He lifted it in the air with a grim look as the ruffian began to struggle again.

"Quiet, you rotter," he said, "or—"

Smiley blinked up at the bludgeon and ceased to resist.

"Ow!" he gasped. "You let a bloke alone! Ow!"

"Keep quiet, then, you scoundrel!"

"Not much doubt now," said Wharton breathlessly. "Coker's in the bung right enough. We shall have to get this villain to the police-station when we've got Coker out."

"Yes, rather!"

"Go easy with a bloke!" gasped Smiley. "I ain't 'urt the young gent—he'll tell you I've treated him well. I ain't giving you any more trouble, you young 'ounds—I mean you young gents! Go easy!"

"So Coker's there!" said Johnny Bull. "Blessed if I'd have believed it!"

"It is time for the esteemed Wharton to say, 'I told you so'!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton laughed breathlessly. "Never mind that! We— Look out!"

Smiley had, apparently, surrendered, lying unresisting in the grasp of the juniors. But all of a sudden he made a terrific effort, exerting all his strength, and tore himself loose. He scrambled to his feet, the swipe of Johnny Bull's bludgeon just missing him, and leaped away. Bob Cherry and Nugent grasped at him as he went, and were dragged after him two or three yards before he shook them off. Then, with desperate speed, the ruffian tore out of the garden, and went panting along the cliff path.

"After him!" gasped Bob.

"Hold on—never mind him! Let's look after Coker!" said Wharton. "The police can deal with him later."

Smiley was running like a deer among the rocks, and it would not have been an easy task to run him down. Evidently the ruffianly kidnapper was thinking now only of escape; so far as Coker was concerned, his game was up.

"Come on!" said Harry.

The Famous Five, leaving Smiley to his own devices, entered the bungalow. All of them were breathless and a little damaged from the struggle with the ruffian. Nugent had a cut head and Bob a tremendous bruise. But they forgot everything else as they spread through the bungalow in search of the prisoner.

"Here!" shouted Wharton, as he stopped at a locked door with the key in the lock.

He unlocked the door and threw it open.

"Coker!"

"Hurrah!"

The juniors swarmed into the room.

On the floor lay Horace Coker, bound and gagged, his eyes almost starting from his head at the sight of the Removees.

They surrounded him at once; the gag was jerked from his mouth, and two or three penknives sawed through his bonds at once. Coker sat up dizzily, with the rattle of the chain.

"Ow!" was his first remark.

"Found you, old bean!" said Harry Wharton.

"The foundfulness is terrific!"

"Hurrah!"

"Grooogh!" gasped Coker. "How on earth did you kids get here? Where's the villain?"

"He's got away."

"Oh, you young asses!" gasped Coker.

"What?"

"What did you let him get away for?" spluttered Coker. "I was going to smash him! You young duffers!"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. The Famous Five had found Horace Coker of the Fifth; and evidently they had found Horace unchanged.

"Is this the grateful expression of the thankfulness, my esteemed Coker?" inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, don't be a young ass!" said Coker. "Get this chain off me somehow. I've been chained up here like a blinking bulldog. I'll find that chap and smash him—and the other villain, too! Just like you young idiots to let him get clear!"

The juniors chuckled. They had not known exactly how Horace Coker would express his gratitude for his rescue; but they might have expected that he would express it Cokerishly, so to speak.

"My hat! They've been taking care of you, Coker," said Bob, as he tested the steel chain with his fingers. "I suppose they knew you were dangerous and might bite!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't give me any Remove cheek!" said Coker. "Just get that chain off somehow!"

"How?" asked Bob genially. "Just tell us how, Coker, and we'll do it like a shot!"

"Can't get the handcuff off at all," said Wharton. "You'll have to wear it as a bracelet for the present, Coker. But we'll get through that chain somehow. May be some tools in the house. Let's look."

"And buck up," growled Coker. "I'm fed-up with this place. I can tell you, and I want to get out."

The juniors hunted through the bungalow, and found tools. They could not deal with the handcuff; but a link of the steel chain was forced open with a chisel, and Coker was free.

"Look for my coat, some of you," said Coker.

"Eh?"

"I had a coat when I was brought here—it must be in the house. Find it."

The juniors exchanged glances. Then they smiled.

"We're finished here, I think," said Harry Wharton. "And we've got to send a telegram to Coker minor, and another to Miss Coker. Let's cut."

"You haven't got my coat yet."

"Dear me!" said Wharton.

And the juniors walked out of the bungalow.

"Do you want me to lick you all round?" roared Coker.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Harry Wharton & Co. started off

cheerily. They were greatly pleased and satisfied with the result of their long quest. They had not, after all, wasted their Christmas vacation—their holiday had not been given up for nothing. Coker was rescued, and they were successful, so they were pleased and satisfied with the state of affairs. But they were neither pleased nor satisfied with Horace Coker.

There were heavy footsteps behind them a few minutes later. Coker had found his coat himself, apparently; he was wearing it as he came sprinting after the Famous Five. He eyed them rather wrathfully as he came up.

"I—I suppose I ought to thank you kids for getting me out of that," he said dubiously.

"Don't trouble," said Wharton, laughing. "We didn't do it to get your thanks, Coker."

"Well, I'm obliged to you," said Coker, after a pause.

"Not really?" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"Yes, really."

"O day worthy to be marked with a white stone!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Harry Wharton & Co. walked away towards Greyfriars in cheery mood; and Horace Coker tramped after them, rejoicing in his freedom, and no doubt feeling greatly obliged to the cheery Removites, but at the same time rather doubtful whether he ought not to "lick" them for their lack of respect to so great a man.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

A Surprise for Mr. Grimes!

GOSLING, the porter, almost fell down at the sight of Coker of the Fifth marching in at the gates of Greyfriars. Gosling stared at him, and rubbed his ancient eyes and stared again, as if he could scarcely believe the evidence of the optical organs which had served him faithfully for sixty-five years.

"Master Coker!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, I've got back, Gosling," said Coker of the Fifth cheerily. "Glad to see you again, old bean. Is the Head still here?"

"Which the 'Ead's gone away for Christmas, with Mrs. Locke," said Gosling; "and all the masters 'ave gone, too, and all the young gentlemen excepting Master Wharton and his friends. But where 'ave you been, Master Coker? Wot I says, sir, is this 'ere—a young feller in the Fifth Form shouldn't play these 'ere tricks. 'Tain't as if you was a junior, sir. You being a senior boy, sir, you shouldn't do it."

Harry Wharton & Co. grinned as they walked on towards the House. Horace Coker gave the old porter a glare.

"Think I've stayed away of my own accord, Gosling, you old ass?" he demanded.

"I s'pose so, sir," said Gosling; "and wot I says is this 'ere, you shouldn't do it, sir."

"I've been kidnapped!" roared Coker.

"Really, sir?" said Gosling, blinking at him.

"Yes, really, you old donkey!"

"Then you shouldn't go for to do it," said Gosling. "It's disrespectful to the 'Ead, sir."

"You silly chump!" said Coker. "You're an ass, Gosling! I suppose all the fellows are gone, as the school's broken up for Christmas."

"All except them juniors, sir."

"Potter and Greene—"

"All the Fifth 'ave gone, sir."

Coker grunted. Perhaps he had half expected to learn that Potter and Greene had stayed on. It was only natural to suppose that, in their deep grief for the loss of Coker they had felt that they could not face such trivial things as Yuletide festivities. Apparently, however, their grief for Coker had not kept them at the school in vacation time.

"I s'pose you'll be going, sir?" said Gosling.

"Yes; by the afternoon train," said Coker. "I suppose those young sweeps are detained over the holidays. Rather hard on them; though I dare say they deserve it. In fact, I'm sure they do."

And Coker left Gosling blinking, and walked on to the House.

Harry Wharton & Co. had gone in, and they astonished Mrs. Kebble with the news that Coker of the Fifth had come back. Mrs. Kebble prepared dinner for six instead of five as usual.

The juniors had their dinner in Hall—at one end of the Remove table. On this occasion there was one solitary occupant of a corner of the Fifth Form table.

(Continued on page 17.)



"BREAKING UP" IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS!

A peep into the past, when the stage coach and the lurking highwaymen were familiar features on our highways.

GOING home for the Christmas holidays, when you were at school many miles from home, and the journey had to be done by stage-coach, with deep snowdrifts to face, and always the prospect of making the acquaintance of a knight of the road, was exciting enough in the good old times.

Most of the stage-coaches that carried the boys from school to the town nearest their homes had their nicknames, which stuck to them year after year. Though the coachman might call his coach the "Regulator," the "young gen'l'm'n at school," as Tom Brown's coachman said, "calls her the 'Pig and Whistle'!"

The inns at which horses were changed—the Coach and Six, the Telegraph, or the Golden Lion, were scenes of immense bustle when, warned by a merry and piercing fanfare on the guard's horn, and the clippity-clop of the horses' hoofs ringing over the cobbles of the sleepy old town, the ostlers dashed out and prepared to hitch up the fresh horses.

For it was the boast of the ostlers at each "stage" that they could get the coach off again in so many seconds—even though the entire journey took days where now the miles are eaten up in as many hours!

THE COACHMAN'S PRIDE!

The journey by coach from Oxford to London occupied two whole days—sixty miles! That was the record speed for many years, and even then was only accomplished provided the coach did not run into a snowdrift, or get mired in the deep mud, or get turned over in the darkness.

That journey home of the Oxford boys—sixty miles in two days—first used to be done in long stage-wagons. Then came the coaches, with a great wicker-work basket slung to the back wherein the outside passengers sat freezing.

"THRILLS!"

Then came the coaches with seats atop. That was a little better, for the outside passengers could always stamp their feet when they felt the blood curdling in their toes! The boys outside the coach, though, got most of the fun—whether it was from plastering the faces of the boys in rival coaches with peas from pea-shooters, gazing down the barrel of some Dick Turpin's blunderbuss, or being flung headfirst into snowdrift or slush-heap.

Even if one did not come across a live highwayman, there was always the chance of coming across one hanging in chains. The boys from the Yorkshire schools might see such a one, swinging

at Knavesmire. The Oxford boys were almost certain to do so as their coach entered on the last lap to London.

This would be at Tyburn Tree, near the Tyburn turnpike, as the coach—the coachman having duly paid the toll at the "pike"—turned down the Oxford Road, now known as Oxford Street. The old Bristol merchants, as well as the Oxford scholars, used that famous western road, as those to and from the North used the Great North Road, which took travellers past a certain great old oak, still standing at Barnet, behind which many a highwayman lurked.

"STAND AND DELIVER!"

That old oak is simply riddled with bullets—fired by coachman and guard as a precaution as the coach approached it, a thing that was done as a matter of course.

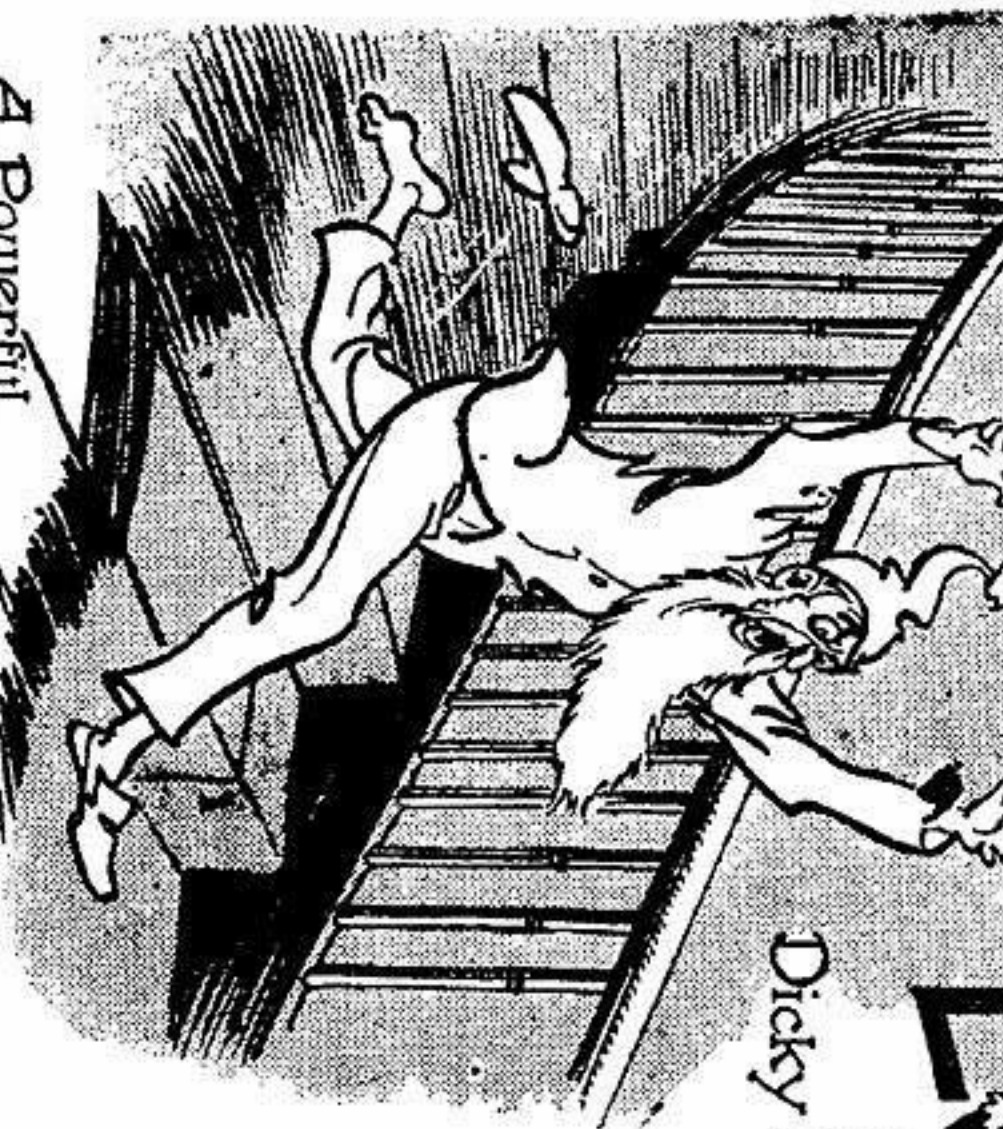
Not that the knights of the road, at Barnet or anywhere else, hoped to get much from the pockets of the boys going home for Christmas—they would be empty enough, as a rule!—but nearly always the guard and coachman between them had undertaken to convey someone's valuables in safety to London.

These were just incidental adventures on the way home. It was when the snow had been falling steadily for days, and immense banks of it were piled in the country roads that the real, big adventure "came off." It meant the coach could go no farther. And that meant that until the thaw came and made the roads again passable, the boys had to postpone the continuance of their journey home and spend a few days in the nearest inn, listening to tall yarns from the coachee and guard, who did not at all mind sharing the Christmas comforts provided—at a price!—by mine host of the Flying Coach or the Peacock inn!

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 983.



A Thrilling Christmas Eve!



Dicky Nugent.

Featuring the weird and wonderful adventures that fall to the lot of Jack Jolly & Co., during their stay at Merry Manner.

A Powerful Pulsating Story.

IT was Christmas Eve in the morning. At Merry Manner, where Jack Jolly and his chum Merry, there was frost and thyme on the window-pans; and in the wooded park the snow lay deep and crisp and even, just as it did in the days when Good King Wences's lass looked out.

It was a seasonable Christmas whether, with an icy nip in the air which reminded you of a July day in England.

Jack Jolly & Co. came clattering down to breakfast in cheery spirits. They were having the time of their lives at the quaint old Tudor mansion, which was the country seat of Merry's father.

The Manner house was supposed to be haunted by the ghost of a Wicked Baron, who clanked around the corridors in armor at dead of night, carrying a gleaming sword in one hand and a brace of revolvers in the other.

Major Merry had said that the ghost had been exercised by the village parson, and would not be able to walk again. But the exercise couldn't have been violent enough, for the apparition had again made its appearance. Nobody had seen it; but strange and mysterious noises had been heard in the silent hours of the night. And it was believed that the Wicked Baron had come back—as ghosts do—to sally into Christmas.

Jack Jolly & Co. were not afraid of ghosts, and they were prepared to give the Wicked Baron a jolly handling if they got hold of him. The fact that the Manner house was haunted added a dash of piquancy to their Christmas holiday.

There was only one fly in the ointment. This was Doctor Birchmell, the headmaster of St. Sam's, who had turned up at Merry Manner overnight without so much as "By your leave!" He had

calmly invited himself to Merry's place for Christmas; and the hoag-headed Major had not liked to boot him out, at that season of peace on earth and goodwill towards schoolmasters.

Jack Jolly & Co. trooped into the breakfast-room, eggspelling to find that the Head had fowlsailed them, and scoffed at all the blasters. They knew the Head's little ways.

From Blinkinsop, the butler, however, they learned that the Head was not yet down—or rather, up.

"Good!" said Jack Jolly. "I hope the old bluffer lies in bed all day. Then he'll be out of our way, and won't interfere with our pleasures."

"Here, here!" said Merry. "It was awfully nerve of the bald-headed old blitherer to invite himself down here."

"Hush! Hush!" came a reproving voice from the doorway. "You must

not speak of our guest in that manner, my boy. I agree with you that the Head's an old scamp, and that he's got a thumping cheek to butt in like this; but our opinions of other people should never be voiced allowed."

It was Major Merry who spoke, and his jolly red face beamed at the juniors as he came into the breakfast-room.

"I perceive that Doctor Birchmell is not yet down," he said, as he devoured his correspondence and a couple of blasters. "He said that he wouldn't get up until lunch-time, but that was only his hippansy. I cannot imagine the Head going without his breakfast."

"No fear, sir!" said Bright. "For sheer greed and gluttony, the Head would be hard to beat. You ought to see him in the dining-hall at St. Sam's! He thinks nothing of taking six helpings of pudding. Blessed if I know where he finds room for it all!"

"Shush!" muttered Jack Jolly, nudging his chum in the ribs. "Hear he comes!"

The door opened, and the Head tottered slowly into the breakfast-room. His face was a pale yellowish-green, and his hands were pressed in the region of his lower westit button.

"Good-morning, sir!" chanted the juniors, in chorus.

And Major Merry, remembering the cursey due to a guest, jerked his thumb towards a chair.

"Squatty-vo, sir!" he said effably. "I trusted you had a good night?"

The Head sank into the chair, groaning dismally.

"Ow! Yow! Groo! I have had a most terrible night! The fact is, Major, I am poisoned!"

"What!" cried the Major, leaping to his feet.

"I am suffering severe eternal pangs," moaned the Head. "Undoubtedly I am poisoned!"

"Good gaud!" said Jack Jolly.

"Give me an anecdote—quick!"

"Certainly!" said the Major. "I don't quite see how an anecdote will help you, but I will give you one, with pleasure. Once upon a time, in the day of jante and fiery dragons, there lived a bewitching princess—"

"Man! Man! What are you saying?" gasped the Head.

The Major stared.

"You asked me for an anecdote, and I'm giving you one," he said.

With an impatient sweep of his arm, the Head knocked the coffee-pot off the table.

"I want an anecdote for this poison!" he shouted.

Suddenly the Head's meaning dawned upon Jack Jolly.

"Ha, ha! He means an anecdote, Major!"

"That's it!" growled the Head.

"But, my dear sir," said the Major, "how can I possibly give you an anecdote unless I know the nature of the poison? What have you been eating that has disagreed with you?"

"Cock-pie," said the Head. "I woke up in the night, Major, feeling fearfully peckish. The supper you gave me overnight was eggcellent as to quality, but sadly lacking in quantity. Feeling conscious of an aching void, and not wishing to disturb any of the servants, I went down to the kitchen and helped myself."

"Sliver my timbers!" said the Major, lapsing into military lingo. "That game pie has been there for over a month!



I was keeping it to give to the tax-collector the next time he called. And you have eaten it? Begad! I don't wonder you feel ill!"

The Head's paler grew paler.

"D-do you—think I shall recover, Major?" he faltered.

"There's just a faint chance that you may," said the Major reassuringly. "Game-pie generally proves fatal, when it is a month old at the time of consumption. However, a robust constitution, together with a draught of fizzy which I will give you, may just pull you through. Meanwhile, your life hangs upon a thread—"

"Yaroooo!" bellowed the Head. "I don't want to die! I don't want to be 'out off like a tender blossom, in the spring-time of my youth! Do your best for me, Major!"

The Major did his best—or rather, his worst. He crossed to the sideboard, and poured out a stiff glass of fizzy from a bottle labelled "Old Tom." This seemed to revive the Head, though it left him rather unsteady on his feet.

The Head was then assisted to his room, where he remained for the best part of the day—much to the relief of Jack Jolly & Co.

Those cheery youths spent an awfully enjoyable day. First they organised a snowfight in the park, and the Major, being a real sporty boy, joined in. But when a volley of snowballs crashed into his face, and handfuls of snow were crammed and rammed down the back of his neck, the Major thought it was time to call a truce.

The juniors then paid a visit to the fashmonger's in the village, and bought a pair of skates each. Then they went skating on the lake, which was frozen hard. The Major joined in the skating also; but the ice was not guaranteed to bear a wait exceeding half a ton, and nobody was surprised to see the Major suddenly disappear through a whacking grate hole in the ice. Jack Jolly & Co. hauled him out by the bare of his head, and the drenched and dripping warrior squeaked away savagely to the House, saying things softly under his breath. He had had enough!

After lunch, the juniors went tobogganing. It was a high altitude at brakenneck speed. The hill which they chose for their operations was as steep as the side of a house, so it was hardly surprising that there were a few casualties. Jack Jolly broke his arm, and Merry had a couple of ribs stove in, and Bright fractured his thigh. Being of true British mold, however, our heroes didn't make a fuss over a few scratches; and they sprinted home to lie in high spirits.

"Christmas Eve!" said Jack Jolly. "Wonder if the Ghost of the Wicked Baron will walk to-night?"

"I wonder!" said Merry. "If he does, I hope he walks into the Head's bed-room, and puts the wind up him in a grate guest. The Head pretends that he's not afraid of ghosts; but I believe the old bluffer would shiver blue murder if he saw one!"

"Yes, rather!" said Bright. "I say, you chaps! I think we ought to make sure that the Wicked Baron does pay the Head a visit to-night."

"How?" asked Jack Jolly.

"Hanging in the hall," he said, "is a coat of armor, worn by some Baron in the Merry family, hundreds and hundreds of years ago. I suggest that you put it on to-night, Jack, and arm yourself

with a sword and a brace of revolvers, and go clunking into the Head's bed-room. Then we'll see whether he's afraid of ghosts or not."

"A ripping wheeze!" said Merry. "Are you game, Jack?"

"Rather!"

When the juniors got back to the Manner,

they found that there was no tea for them. Blinkinsop, the butler, with his wooden, inscrutable face, eggspelled that he had laid tea for five, and that the Head had come down and wolfed the lot—the Major's included.

This put Jack Jolly & Co. in an awful rage, and made them all the more determined to put their plans into execution, and make the Head sit up.

"We'll give the greedy old ghutton such a Christmas Eve that he will remember it from the cradle to the grave!" declared Jack Jolly.

And Merry and Bright, gazing rooffully at their empty plates, said: "Here, here!" with grate gusto.

MIDNIGHT!

The solium chimnes boomed early from the little cuckoo-clock on the mantelpiece in the Head's bed-room.

Outside, the wind moaned and groaned around the old turrets and towers of Merry Manner.



It was the witching hour, when churchyards yawn, and when millions of ghostly creatures walk the earth.

Doctor Birchmell struggled and kicked on his bed, in the throws of a nightmare. He dreamt that he was being chased towards the edge of a steep precipice by the Ghost of the Wicked Baron, who brandished his sword, and flourished his revolvers, and uttered peering, terrifying shrieks, vowing that he would have the Head's bliv!

Just as he reached the edge of the precipice, and was between two fires, so to speak, the Head miserably awoke. His nightheaded head popped up from beneath the bedcloso, and he peered around him into the shades.

Boom!

It was the last stroke of midnight, thundering solunly from the cuckoo-clock.

The Head shivered. It was a wild, weird night, and the moaning and groaning of the wind, and the ghostly patter of the snow on the window-pans, would have scared a bolder man than Doctor Birchmell.

Huk! What was that?

The Head clutched at his heart, which was pounding his ribs like a sledgehammer. Above the wailing of the wind, and the snoring of the rats in the wainscoting, another sound became audible—a mysterious clank-clank from the corridors.

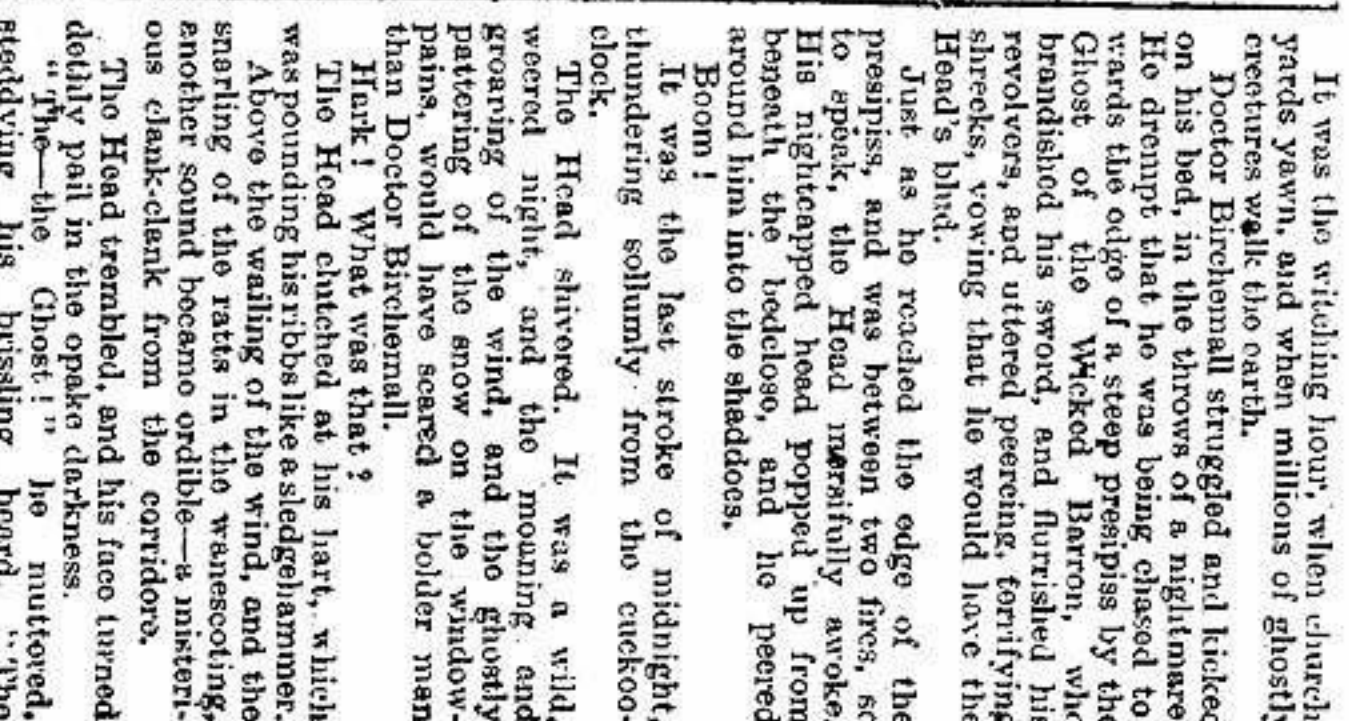
The Head trembled, and his face turned deadly pale in the opaque darkness.

"The—the Ghost!" he muttered, shuddering his bristling beard. "The Ghost of the Wicked Baron!"

Clank, clank, clank!

The sound drew nearer, clearer. It caused the inspiration to brako out in beads on the Head's forehead. He eggspelled a queer sort of helplessness.

(Continued overleaf.)





A THRILLING CHRISTMAS EVE!

(Continued from previous page.)

as if he was at the mercy of a grim yet invisible foe!

"Oh dear!" gasped the Head, buttoning the jacket of his pijamers with trembling fingers. "I am undone!"

Suddenly the clanking footmarks ceased; and the Head, who had thoughtfully brought a scroo-driver to bed with him, took it out from under his pillow and scrooded up his curridge.

"Be brave, Birchmall!" he muttered to himself. "Pull yourself together, man! There is nothing to fear! Ghosts can't hurt you. If it was a berglar, he might dot you on the napper with a jemmy, and send you to sleep; but ghosts don't carry jemmies!"

The Head realised, however, that they carried something more formidable than jemmies. The Wicked Barron was said to be armed with a glissening blade and a brace of pistles!

In order to keep his pecker up—and possibly in the hope of scaring away the Ghost—the Head burst into song. He warbled the first ditty that came into his head.

"Gone are the days when my hart was young and gay,
Gone are my frends, to the cotton-feelds away;
Gone are they now, to a better land I know,
I here those jentle voices calling, 'Poor Old Joe!'"

"I'M COMING! I'M COMING!"

The chorus of the song was suddenly chanted in ghostly tones, from outside the door of the Head's bed-room. And the words were sung in such a sinnister way that they formed a direct thrett.

"I'm coming! I'm coming! And my head is bending low.
I am the Ghost of Merry Manner—Yo-ho-ho!"

Gone was the Head's curridge in a flash. It oozed out at his finger-tips, and he could feel it trickling over the counterpain. The scroodriver was useless now. A mop would have been more sootable!

The Head, parralised with fear, tried to call out; but his roof seemed to cleave to the mouth of his tung, and he couldn't artikulate.

Slowly—inch by inch—little by little—jot by jot—iota by iota—the door of the Head's bed-room was pushed open by invisible hands!

But for the fact that he was stone-bald, the Head's hare would have stood up on end. As it was, his long beard waggled and swayed like a thistle in a gale.

Clank, clank, clank!

The ghostly introoder was marching into the room, and approaching the Head's bed!

"Ha, ha!" A sinnister, mocking larf floated through the darkness. "Doctor Birchmall—tremble! Your hour has come!"

"Yaroooo!" roared the Head, finding his voice at last. "Who—who are you?"

"I am the Ghost of the Wicked Barron—the bold, bad Barron who lived hear

in the days of the Konkeror, and who, in this very room, did his enemies to deth!"

"Wow!" yelped the Head.

"Canst see me, Birchmall?" inquired the ghostly introoder.

"Nunno!" gasped the Head. "And I don't want to! Pip-pip-please go away! If you must haunt somebody, go and haunt Jack Jolly and his friends. I should love to see the young raskals get a real good scare!"

"My hat—I mean, gadzooks!" cried the Ghost of the Wicked Barron. "By my halibut, thou shalt suffer for those uncharitable words! With my trusty sword, I will cleave thee to the chine!"

The Head didn't know eggsactly what that meant, but he knew it meant something dredful. He gave a loud, penny-trating shriek, which must have awakened everybody in the Manner House.

"Help! Ghosts! Reskew!"

"Odds boddikins! Thou art in sooth a cowerdly poltroon!" said the Wicked Barron. "Methinks I had better put thee out of thy mizzery!"

Something cold and clammy rested for an instant upon the Head's cheek. He did not need telling that it was the sword-blade of the Wicked Barron.

If anything was needed to galvernize the Head into action, that did it! He was out of bed in a twinkling, with a leap that Granpa Krooshen would have envied.

Suddenly a shaft of moonlight gleamed through the winder, lighting up the room; and for the first time the Head caught sight of his knockturnal vizzitant.

It was, indeed, the Ghost of the Wicked Barron! He was attired in a soot of armer, several sizes too big for him, and a pair of flashing eyes gleamed through the vizer. In one mailed fist a sword glissened; in the other, a cupple of revolvers were cocked at a perilus angle.

DO YOU KNOW THAT—

Interesting Tit-bits for the Footer enthusiast.

Manchester City would not now have been in the Second Division if they had scored from a penalty kick in the last match of last season, and Cardiff City would have won the First Division championship in 1923-4 if they had scored from a penalty kick in the last game of the season.

The ball is not out of play, and that a goal should not be allowed to count until the whole of the ball has passed over the line.

A referee is only allowed to extend the ordinary time of a match to permit of a penalty kick being taken.

If a ball hits the referee, and then goes into the net a goal must be allowed.

Wolverhampton Wanderers have had most ups and downs since the War. They have been in a Cup Final, have been relegated from the Second Division to the Third, have won their way back. Noel George, who kept goal in the Cup Final of 1921, is the only survivor of the side that played that day.

The Head gave one terrified blink at the appyrition; then he darted wildly to the door, hurled himself into the corridore, heaved himself to the landing, and threw himself down the stares. Weather or not he was being pursued by the Wicked Barron he could not tell for certain; but that terrifying clank-clank still rang in his ears.

The Head fairly pelted down the stares, just as Major Merry, with a staff of servants—all armed with pokers—were coming up to see what all the rumpus was about.

When the Major caught sight of the Head, in his white pijamers, he natcherally took him for a ghost.

"It's a spook!" cried the Major, horsely. "Collar him!"

Blenkinsop, the butler, with the assistance of Filkins, the footman, and Boldtype, the page, promptly laid violent hands on the Head. It was fortunitt for the latter thet they didn't lay violent pokers on him!

"Hellup!" gasped the Head, as he went down in a sprawling heap. "I'm not a ghost—I'm a guest! I am Doctor Birchmall, and you shall pay dearly for this outrage! You will find the ghost up in my bed-room!"

"Come on, boys!" cried Blenkinsop, without stopping to apologise to the Head, who was left for dead on the stares. "I've never caught a ghost yet, and I'm looking forward to the eggsperience!"

And the butler, with the footman and the page hard at his heels, scrambled over the Head's incumbent form, and rushed up to his bed-room.

Blenkinsop switched on the electrick-light, and held his poker in reddiness. Then he darted a swift glance round the room.

It was empty!

"What a beestly sell!" said Boldtype, the page. "There isn't a ghost at all! If you ask me, old Birchmall has been having nightmare!"

Suddenly the Major's voice came up from below.

"Have you captured the spook, boys?"

"There ain't no spook at all, sir," replied Blenkinsop, "eggscept in Doctor Birchmall's imagination!"

On hearing these reassuring words, the gallent Major came bounding up the stares three at a time.

"Why—what's this?" he roared angrily. "D'you mean to say we've been awakened for nothing?"

Blenkinsop nodded.

"Look for yourself, sir," he said. "There's not a sign or a shuddo of a ghost!"

The Major peered under the bed, and into the wardrobe, and in all the nooks and corners. He discovered nothing—not even a ghostly footstep.

"This is skandalus!" hooted the Major. "Doctor Birchmall has had nightmare through over-eating, and he has brought us here on a wild-goose chase! I won't half tick him off, by George!"

What the Major said to the Head will not bare repetitshun in cold print. He stormed and raved at him for half an hour without stopping; and the Head had no chance to state his case, and to assure his host that he had indeed encountered the Ghost of the Wicked Barron.

And, meanwhile, Jack Jolly & Co., snuggled up in their warm beds, were chuckling themselves to sleep!

THE END.

(Look out for the further exciting adventures of Jack Jolly & Co. in: "Christmas At Merry Manner," next week's amusing yarn of St. Sam's.)



(Continued from page 13.)

It was Horace Coker.

The dignity of a senior of the Fifth Form, of course, prevented Horace Coker from sitting at the same table with the juniors. He sat by himself in lofty state, and did not heed the smiling glances that the Famous Five sometimes cast in his direction.

After dinner, Inspector Grimes from Courtfield was announced; he had come along to see Coker and take down his statement. Harry Wharton & Co. went up to the Remove passage.

They were finished at Greyfriars now; and it was necessary to make plans for the remainder of the vacation. On the way back to Greyfriars from the cliffs they had stopped at Friardale post-office to send telegrams to Reggie Coker and to Miss Judith Coker at Holly House, and to telephone to Mr. Grimes at Courtfield. They left it to Mr. Grimes to apprise any others whom it might concern that Horace Coker had been found.

They gathered in Study No. 1 to discuss the situation.

Christmas at Wharton Lodge was, of course, "off." Colonel Wharton and Miss Wharton were at Bournemouth now, and the lodge was shut up.

Had the juniors been able to foresee how the quest for Horace Coker would turn out it would have been a different matter; but at the time the probability had been that they would put in the whole period of the holidays at the school, pursuing the search for the missing Fifth-Former.

The quest had ended sooner than expected, and with a very unexpected success. Coker was done with, and now the chums of the Remove were rather at a loose end.

The Famous Five were deep in discussion, when there was a knock at the study door and Inspector Grimes presented himself.

"Come in, Mr. Grimes," said Wharton cheerily, and Nugent placed a chair for the portly official gentleman.

Mr. Grimes sat down and looked very curiously at the chums of the Remove. There was no doubt that he was deeply astonished by their success in finding and rescuing the missing Fifth-Former.

"I want a statement from you young gentlemen," said Mr. Grimes. "I am bound to congratulate you on what you have done. I want to know how you did it—whether you happened on that lonely bungalow by sheer chance and found Master Coker there—"

"No fear," said Bob.

"Then you had a clue of some kind?" said the puzzled inspector.

"Not exactly a clue," said Wharton. "Something more like a suspicion. But it turned up trumps."

"You had better make a complete statement," said Mr. Grimes.

Harry Wharton proceeded to do so.

Mr. Grimes looked more and more surprised as he proceeded.

He made lengthy notes of Wharton's statement, and chewed the end of his pencil meditatively.

"This is really extraordinary," he said at last.

"The extraordinariness is terrific," said Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "But the proof of the pudding is the stitch in time that goes longest to the well, as the English proverb says."

Inspector Grimes blinked at the nabob.

"Oh, yes! Exactly!" he gasped.

He wrinkled his brows over his notes.

"I shall ascertain in whose name the Hillcrest Bungalow was hired," he said. "Doubtless in a false name. You boys are absolutely certain that you saw Mr. Poynings there at one time?"

"Quite!"

"And for that reason you guessed that he had had a hand in Master Coker's disappearance?"

"Wharton did," said Johnny Bail. "I thought it was all rot."

The inspector smiled.

"Further investigation, of course, will be made," he said. "I have never seen this Mr. Poynings. Can you describe him to me?"

"Easily!" said Harry. "A hard-faced man, clean-shaven, with a hooked nose, greenish-grey eyes, and gold-rimmed glasses."

"A hooked nose?" said the inspector. "A prominent feature?"

"Very."

"It appears that Master Coker was seized by two men—one the ruffian with whom you had a struggle at the bungalow; the other a man seen only once, on the woodland footpath, by Master Cherry. Describe him to me, Master Cherry, once more."

"A johnnie with a beard and horn-rimmed glasses," said Bob. "That's all I can say."

"Did he resemble Mr. Poynings at all?"

Bob started.

"Oh, no! Poynings is clean-shaven, and—"

"Beards are easily adopted," said the inspector. "He wore glasses, at least. So does Mr. Poynings. He would naturally adopt a different kind of spectacles if in disguise. Did you notice his nose?"

"I noticed it was a fairly big boko," said Bob.

"Quite so. Now, Master Bunter came on these two men by the wood the same day—apparently at the time when they were about to place Coker in the covered cart they had ready for him. He saw only the ruffian you found at the bungalow, and heard the voice of the other man. But he stated that the man Smiley addressed the other by the nickname of 'Nosey.'"

"Yes," said Harry.

"Nosey is the kind of nickname that might be applied to Mr. Poynings, what, if he has criminal associations?"

"Yes, rather!" said Bob.

The inspector nodded and smiled.

"I think it will turn out that Mr. Smiley's companion in the kidnapping was the man Poynings in disguise," he said.

"Why, of course!" exclaimed Harry. "It's clear enough! I wonder we didn't think of it."

"The clearfulness is terrific."

"The matter is extremely mysterious," said the inspector. "It would appear that Mr. Henry Coker's confidence has been abused by this man Poynings, his secretary. For some reason he desires to keep the sick man's nephew away

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from Holly House. He appears to have taken a lawless and desperate step for that purpose. But the matter is very indefinite; I do not see yet how the law is to lay its hands upon this Mr. Poynings, at least until his accomplice is caught. We may learn more from him. A very strange affair; and, but for you schoolboys, it is plain that Mr. Poynings' connection with the matter could never have been suspected. I, of course, place faith in your statements; but proof of his complicity is quite another matter."

The inspector pursed his lips.

He was evidently perplexed, and it was clear to the juniors that, but for the indisputable fact that Coker had actually been found at the lonely bungalow on the cliffs, Mr. Grimes would have smiled at the suggestion of any connection between Uncle Henry's secretary and the kidnapping of Horace Coker.

Mr. Grimes rose at last.

"The affair is in the hands of the police, and the fullest investigation will be made," he said. "Whatever may be Mr. Poynings' game, he will find the law a little too strong for him, I think. He will undoubtedly deny ever having been near the Hillcrest Bungalow—"

"But the estate agent who let him the house—" said Bob. "Wouldn't he know him again?"

"He would have taken it under a false name, and in disguise—doubtless paying rent in advance in lieu of references," said the inspector. "I shall follow that up; but, unless the man was very careless, there will be nothing in that direction. But"—the inspector pursed his lips—"now that we are on the gentleman's track the rest will follow—the rest will follow. You have told me a very strange story—a very strange story indeed. You are—hem!—absolutely certain that it was Mr. Poynings you saw that rainy evening at the bungalow—"

He blinked at the juniors.

"We can swear to it if necessary," said Harry Wharton quietly.

"A momentary glimpse in the dusk!" murmured the inspector.

"It is quite certain, all the same."

"Well, well, we shall see! I have no doubt; but the man's motive is very hard to guess. We shall see! At all events, you young gentlemen may congratulate yourselves; you have rescued your school-fellow, and you have put the police on the track of a man who, if things turn out as seems probable now, must be a criminal and a dangerous character. I recommend you not to talk too freely about this affair for the present."

"Oh, certainly!"

The inspector took his leave, the juniors seeing quite plainly that he was perplexed, and had lingering doubts.

They smiled at one another when he was gone.

"It beats Mr. Grimes," said Bob. "I must own up that it beats me, too. What on earth can be Poynings' game?"

"Something jolly deep and rascally, but goodness knows what!" said Harry. "I—I suppose the evidence isn't enough to arrest him upon. He's covered up his tracks too jolly carefully for that. Anyhow, Coker's uncle will be on his guard now, and he can turn the man out of the house. Now, what about the rest of the vac—"

Thump!

The door of Study No. 1 opened again, and Coker of the Fifth came in.

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THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Going Home with Coker!

HORACE COKER had a rather extraordinary expression on his rugged face. His manner was very subdued. He came across the room to Harry Wharton, and, to the astonishment of the captain of the Remove, held out his hand.

"Give me your fin, kid!" said Coker. "You're a sportsman, Wharton, and—and I'm sorry for some things that have happened. You're a cheeky Remove kid; but you're a real white man, all the same!"

And he gave the captain of the Remove a grip that made him wriggle.

"Oh!" ejaculated Harry.

The Famous Five stared at Coker. This was rather a new Coker to them.

Horace of the Fifth sat down.

"Old Grimes has been jawing to me," he said; "and I've been on the telephone to my Aunt Judy. I know all about it now."

"Oh!" said Harry again.

"Of course, when I saw you kids I supposed you'd been up to some of your cheeky tricks and had been detained over the vac," said Coker.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Now I know different. Aunt Judy's told me about seeing you here, and—and the rest of it. She made the Head agree to give any fellow who liked leave to stay on and search for me—and you fellows did it. I can't quite make out why Potter and Greene went—but they went. You Remove fags gave up your Christmas vacation on my account."

"On your Aunt Judy's account, too," said Wharton, with a smile.

"Oh, Coker's as well!" said Bob.

"You helped me out of the water, you know, Coker; and one good turn deserves another."

Coker nodded.

Plainly, the discovery of the true state of affairs had produced a considerable effect on Horace Coker. In his present chastened mood Potter and Greene would hardly have known old Horace.

"It was jolly decent of you," said Coker. "I owe you lickings all round. I'm letting you off."

The juniors grinned.

"Oh, don't bother about that!" said Johnny Bull. "Get on with the lickings, old bean, if you feel that way."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cheeky young sweep—"

"That sounds like old Coker again!" chuckled Bob.

Coker controlled his indignation. He had not come there to row with the Famous Five. For once—perhaps the first time on record—Coker of the Fifth was not looking for trouble.

"I've had a long jaw with Aunt Judy on Prouty's telephone," he said.

"Another trunk call for Mr. Prout to rag the exchange about, when the bill comes in!" grinned Nugent.

"She's no end bucked," went on Coker, unheeding. "I'm going to Holly House this afternoon. Aunt Judy wants me to bring you fellows with me."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"I'd like you to come," said Coker. "First time you've ever been asked for the hols by a Fifth Form man—what? Well, I mean it. I think it's up to me. I suppose your vacation has been a bit mucked up, so far. We have a rather jolly Christmas at Holly House. Lots of things going on, and everything well arranged, you know. I see to the arrangements myself."

"Oh!"

The juniors stared.

Coker of the Fifth was asking a crowd of Lower Fourth juniors home for Christmas! It really was a record! Not that the Co. were keen on Christmas with Coker.

"Of course, I shall have business as well as pleasure to think about," went on Coker. "That man Poynings, the scoundrel! I never liked him from the start. First time I saw him he swore like a trooper, because of a little accident. Butted in and tried to keep me away from Holly House for the vacation. That's why he got me kidnapped. Old Grimes seems to have some doubts about it; I haven't any. It was Poynings."

"It was Poynings right enough," said Harry.

"I don't know how it is, but Uncle Henry seems to be under the man's thumb somehow," said Coker. "Aunt Judy is very worried and distressed about it. She loathes Poynings, and she thinks that her brother doesn't like him, yet he lets the man stay in the house for some reason. I suppose that Uncle Henry being sick and seedy—the brute has somehow got an influence over him. I'm jolly well going to put a stop to it!" Coker's brow darkened. "Old Grimes thinks there's not enough to go upon to arrest him. He doesn't know whether he's got on to some jolly serious case, or whether you kids have made a silly mistake and scored by accident. I know well enough! I'm going to kick Poynings out of the house as soon as I get home!"

Coker squared his jaw in a very grim way. It was easy to see that Mr. Poynings' next interview with Coker would not be a pleasant one for Uncle Henry's secretary.

"There's some rotten game going on at Holly House," went on Coker. "That villain is victimising Uncle Henry in some way. I'm going to look into it. If Uncle Henry wants any evidence, you kids can tell him what you know about Poynings. I hope you'll come. I'll be jolly glad if you'll come. Just think it over and let me know; you'll find me packing."

And Coker of the Fifth, with a very friendly nod to the Famous Five, quitted Study No. 1.

The juniors smiled.

"Very kind of Coker," yawned Johnny Bull. "But I don't think I'm keen on a Christmas holiday with him. We've had enough of him at school."

"And a little over," remarked Bob Cherry.

"The kindness is terrific, but the joyfulness of Coker's esteemed society would not be great," observed the nabob of Bhanipur.

"We'll put it nicely, as Coker is so jolly polite, but the answer is in the giddy negative," said Frank Nugent. "What do you say, Harry? You're looking as thoughtful as a boiled owl!"

Harry Wharton smiled faintly.

ANSWERS

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Wharton unlocked the door and threw it open. "Coker!" "Hurrah!" The juniors swarmed into the room. On the floor lay Horace Coker, bound and gagged, his eyes almost starting from his head at the sight of the Removites. "Found you, old bean!" exclaimed Wharton triumphantly. (See Chapter 9.)

"The fact is, you fellows, I think we might accept Coker's invitation," he said slowly.

"Oh crumbs!"

"What rot!" said Bob, staring. "Our plans for Christmas are rather mucked up, but we can fix up something better than that."

"I know. The Lodge is off; but lots of people would be glad to have us, nice chaps as we are!"

"Hear, hear!"

"I don't know what Christmas with Coker would be like," went on Harry. "Coker might behave himself—"

"He might!" said Bob, very dubiously.

"The mightfulness is terrific."

"On the other hand, he may be as Cokerish at home as at Greyfriars, and may forget the honour due to distinguished guests, when they belong to the Lower Fourth."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"All the same, I like the idea—not on our account, but on Coker's," said the captain of the Remove seriously. "Coker is going home to kick that man Poynings out of his uncle's house. His uncle seems to give Coker his head; that's all right. But Poynings is a dangerous customer. He has had Coker kidnapped—taken a hand in the kidnapping himself, from what we've learned—and if it's brought home to him it means penal servitude. We don't know his reason, but it must be an awfully strong one to make him take such risks. Well, now his kidnapping stunt is knocked sky-high, and Coker comes butting in, more roly than ever. What is Poynings likely to do?"

"Blessed if I know," said Bob. "I should recommend him to put some exercise-books in his bags before Coker begins kicking. Horace has a hefty hoof."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Be serious, old chap," said Wharton. "Look at it! Coker is going into a house with an old lady, his aunt, and a sick man, his uncle, and a dangerous, desperate character like Poynings,

According to Coker himself, his uncle is somehow under the man's thumb; and, in fact, that's pretty clear anyhow, or Poynings would never have dared to butt in as he did urging Coker to keep away over Christmas. Somehow or other, it seems that Poynings has some power in the house. Coker's walking right into it, and he's about as fit to take care of himself as a baby of two or three."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "Are you going to put it like that to Coker when you accept his giddy invitation?"

"No," said Harry, laughing; "but that's the fact of the matter. My belief is that Coker will find trouble at Holly House, and it's jolly well on the cards that he may find danger. If he's kidnapped again he mayn't get out of it so easily, or at all."

"Oh!"

"Coker risked his life helping you in the stream, Bob—for he's no swimmer, though he thinks he is. We've paid that debt off, I know; but—but why not see it through? Keep the old duffer under our eye, you know, and see that Poynings doesn't give him a second lot."

"Never thought about that," said Nugent. "But, now you mention it, it seems likely enough. Coker may be running his head right into a trap, and he's got about as much sense as a bunny rabbit. Gentlemen, chaps, and fellows, we've started this vacation as Coker's keepers—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I vote that we play the game to the end," said Frank. "It's not generally considered the duty of the Lower Fourth to take care of the Fifth, but it's up to us. Let's look after Coker."

"I'm game," said Johnny Bull. "After all, if he forgets what is due to a guest, we can forget what's due to a host. No reason why we should have better memories than Coker."

The juniors chuckled.

"Well, if you fellows agree, I'm glad," said Harry. "I'm sure the police will have an eye on Mr. Poynings now, but there's not enough for them to go

upon to arrest him. He may be desperate—in fact, we know he's pretty desperate, to get mixed up in kidnapping. Goodness knows what may be in store for Coker at Holly House! I can't help thinking there may be real danger. What's happened to him already looks like it. Coker's every variety of an ass; but he's a good sort in his way, and we're not going to see him damaged by a scheming rascal."

"Hear, hear!"

"The hear-hearfulness is terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Let us accompany the esteemed and idiotic Coker, and keep the watchful eye open on the disgusting Poynings."

"It's settled, then?" said Harry, glancing round.

"It's a go!"

"Right-ho, then! Let's tell Coker!"

And the Famous Five sought out Horace Coker, whom they found packing and nearly ready for departure. Coker smiled genially when they informed him that they had decided to accept his kind invitation for Christmas.

"Glad you're coming," he said, not at all like Coker of the Fifth, but, as Bob Cherry said afterwards, just like a human being. "I'll phone through that you're coming with me first, we've got time for the train. You'll find my uncle and aunt jolly glad to see you, and I'll do my level best to give you a jolly Christmas."

And so it was settled. And when Horace Coker left Greyfriars School, Harry Wharton & Co. left with him, and they travelled together in great amity, the Co. listening patiently to Coker's somewhat lengthy descriptions what he was going to do to Mr. Poynings, and meanwhile wondering what their Christmas would be like at Holly House. The hatchet was buried now between Coker of the Fifth and his old foes of the Remove—buried deep, not to be dug up again till the next term at Greyfriars.

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THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

At Holly House!

"**D**EAR Horace!" Aunt Judith sobbed as she clasped the burly Fifth-Former of Greyfriars, and kissed him on both cheeks.

Harry Wharton & Co. stood round with polite smiles.

The winter evening had closed in, dark and windy, and there had been a light fall of snow; the juniors' coats were powdered with it. In the square, panelled hall of Holly House the electric light gleamed on their ruddy faces and snowy overcoats.

At the railway-station Coker had expected a car from the house, but there had been no car. The station hack had brought the party and their bags to the house. The juniors, in the windy darkness, had seen little of the building as they approached it, but they had observed that it was a country house of moderate dimensions, standing in its own grounds, with lawn, paddock, and woodland. Certainly there were as yet no signs of Christmas festivity about the place, but perhaps that was due to the cloud that hung over Aunt Judy and Uncle Henry on account of their missing nephew.

Aunt Judith, for the moment, had no eyes or ears for anyone but her dear Horace. And the juniors liked the way Coker met his aunt. Some fellows—especially Fifth Form men—would have been very uncomfortable and awkward at being hugged and kissed and called "Dear Horace!" before a mob of juniors. Not so Coker of the Fifth! Coker had his faults—in fact, their name was legion. But there was no nonsense about him. He was genuinely fond of his Aunt Judy, and he did not care a rap if all the world knew it. He hugged the old lady affectionately.

"Here I am, auntie," said Coker, "safe and sound, not hurt in the least. And jolly glad to see you, old dear!"

"My dear, dear boy!" sobbed Aunt Judith. "What I have suffered while you were missing—"

"I know you have, dear old soul!" said Coker. "I was no end worried about you, you know. I knew you'd be upset. But here I am, none the worse; and I'm jolly well going to make an example of that scoundrel Poynings if he's still here!"

"Oh!" said Aunt Judith.

"He's here?" asked Coker.

"Yes, Horace."

"He's got the check to face me!" exclaimed Coker, in mingled indignation and amusement. "All right! I'll give

him something to cure all that! But here are the fellows who rescued me, auntie!"

Miss Coker turned to the Famous Five. Coker presented them one after another.

"I cannot thank you as I would wish for what you have done, my dear boys!" said Miss Coker. "You have saved an old woman from heartbreaking anxiety; you have saved my dear, dear nephew from the hands of a wicked man! How can I thank you?"

"Don't trouble, ma'am," said Johnny Bull. "Besides, it was all Wharton's doing; we only backed him up."

"We were all jolly glad to do what we could, ma'am," said Harry. "It was little enough, really."

"I was so glad when Horace telephoned that you were coming," said Aunt Judith. "I longed to see you and thank you. We will try to make you happy here over Christmas—"

"Poynings first!" said Coker. "These chaps will lend me a hand if I need one, auntie—not that I'm likely to need it. Where is the scoundrel?"

Miss Coker hesitated.

Her kind old face went red and white by turns.

Coker did not seem to see it, but the juniors could see clearly enough that Coker's proposition of prompt vengeance upon Mr. Poynings distressed and alarmed the old lady.

"Let me take you to your rooms first," said Aunt Judith, "and then you will want your supper. And—"

"Better kick that scoundrel out first, auntie!" said Coker. "Where is he?"

"In the library with your Uncle Henry," said Miss Coker. "Dear, dear, Horace, do not act hastily! I—I—"

"Well, hospitality first, certainly," said Coker. "Poynings will keep; his own fault if he's kicked out too late to catch a train anywhere!"

A manservant relieved the juniors of their coats and hats and bags, and Coker led them up the staircase. They had arrived rather late, and they were quite prepared for the supper to which Miss Coker referred. But—with the exception of the great Horace—all the party could see that there was something amiss at Holly House. The Famous Five had a strong suspicion that the summary ejection of Mr. Poynings would not prove so simple a matter as Coker of the Fifth was taking for granted.

Comfortable rooms had been prepared for the Famous Five, and a log fire was burning cheerily in each. The rooms were very well appointed and comfortable indeed, and looked as if Aunt Judy was accustomed to looking very carefully and hospitably after her beloved nephew's guests in holiday time. Harry Wharton & Co. removed the stains of travel, and came down with Horace Coker to a handsome dining-room, brightly lighted, with a blazing log fire, where a very welcome supper was served.

Miss Coker sat near her dear Horace, seeming unable to keep her eyes off him, as if not yet quite convinced that the inestimable, invaluable youth really had arrived safe and sound.

Coker was very cheerful over supper.

Evidently he was looking forward to dealing with Mr. Poynings. To the chums of the Remove it was quite obvious that matters would not go as Coker anticipated; but Coker was accustomed to seeing no further than

the end of his nose—even if so far as that. He had no doubts.

"Now for Poynings!" said Coker, when supper was over.

"My dear Horace—"

"Yes, auntie?" said Coker affectionately.

"I—I must speak to you first," said Miss Coker.

The juniors exchanged glances.

"Don't you fellows go," said Coker. "I want you to be present when I deal with that scoundrel! What is it, auntie?"

"About Mr. Poynings," faltered Aunt Judith. "He declares that your friends have made a mistake, and that he has never been at the bungalow you mentioned, and has never even heard of it before."

"He would!" said Coker, with a nod.

"A—a police official has already been here to speak to him, and he seems to have given a satisfactory explanation, Horace."

"The police haven't much sense!" agreed Coker.

"Your Uncle Henry believes him, Horace."

"Yes, he seems to be able to stuff Uncle Henry, from what I hear!" said Coker. "He can't stuff me!"

"Uncle Henry has heard the whole story, Horace, and he—he believes in Mr. Poynings' explanation," said Aunt Judith. "He desires the whole matter to be forgotten so far as Mr. Poynings is concerned."

"You don't believe in the villain, do you, auntie?"

"I—I have never trusted him," said Miss Coker. "But it is for your Uncle Henry to decide, Horace."

Coker of the Fifth shook his head.

"It's for me to protect Uncle Henry against that scoundrel," he said. "That's my duty! Why, that's what Poynings must have been afraid of, you see, in trying to keep me away from the house."

"But he denies—"

"He would!" said Coker scornfully. "Let's see if the rascal will keep it up to my face—in the presence of these chaps, too, who saw him at the bung. I'm going to open Uncle Henry's eyes."

"But—but—"

Poor Miss Judith faltered. She was far too fond of dear Horace to think of pointing out that, in Mr. Henry Coker's house, it was for Mr. Henry Coker to give orders. The juniors could discern that though at the back of her mind, as it were, and they wondered that Coker couldn't. But such an idea was not likely to occur to Coker of the Greyfriars Fifth.

"That's all right, auntie!" said Coker soothingly. "You keep out of it. It would upset you. I won't hurt the rotter—not much, anyway. I'm bound to kick him, of course!"

"Dear Horace, your uncle is far from well. Any scene of violence might have a bad effect on him."

"Poor old chap!" said Horace. "I'll be jolly careful, auntie. Dash it all, I won't even kick the rotter if it would upset Uncle Henry. There!"

"But, my dear boy, Uncle Henry does not desire to discharge his secretary. He has said so—"

"That's because the rotter has stuffed him. Wait till I open his eyes," said Coker. "You fellows come along with me. Leave it to me, auntie; it's all right. I'll be jolly careful with uncle."

Coker marched to the door.

Harry Wharton & Co. looked at one

SEEN
THIS WEEK'S
SPECIAL
BUMPER XMAS
NUMBER OF
THE "POPULAR,"
CHUMS?

another and at Miss Judith. They were quite keen to back up Coker in dealing with the rascally secretary. But they realised, if Coker did not, that it was for Mr. Henry Coker to give instructions on that subject.

"Go with him!" breathed Aunt Judith. "My dear boys, stay with Horace. Restrain his resentment, if you can. Go with him, if you will be so kind."

"Certainly, ma'am!" said Bob Cherry.

Coker glanced back from the door of the dining-room.

"Aren't you chaps coming?"

"Yes," said Harry.

And they followed Coker. Coker of the Fifth led the way across the hall to the door of the library, and the juniors followed him, wondering, with a great deal of suppressed excitement, what was going to happen when they found themselves in the presence of Coker's Uncle Henry and the man whom they knew to be Coker's kidnapper.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Mystery of Holly House!

"COME in, my dear Horace!"

Mr. Henry Coker was seated in a deep armchair, by a crackling log fire. Near him was a writing-table, at which sat a man of slight build, with cold, hard face, greenish-grey eyes, and a large hooked nose. The juniors knew Mr. Poynings, the secretary, at once. He rose to his feet as the visitors entered and stood quite still, with an expressionless face. Certainly there was nothing like nervousness to be read in his manner. If he had not a consciousness of innocence, at all events, he had plenty of nerve. Coker's eyes gleamed at the cold, hard, sleek man, but his glance passed on at once to Mr. Henry Coker, and his look became concerned as he hurried across to his uncle.

Mr. Henry Coker looked anything but well. He was a man of rather stout and portly build, but he had a shrunken look, as if his clothes were now too large for him. His face—a rather rugged, kindly face, was pale, and had a wan expression. His eyes were bright and very restless.

"Uncle!" exclaimed Coker, forgetting all about the secretary, as he saw how ill his uncle looked.

"I am glad to see you, my dear boy," said the old gentleman, with a kind and affectionate smile. It was clear at a glance that Uncle Henry shared his sister Judith's affection for the burly Horace. "More than I can say, my boy. I have been very anxious."

"You're ill, uncle!" exclaimed Coker.

"I am not well, my boy," said Mr. Henry Coker, "but I am getting better. It is nothing—really, only a chill—nothing serious."

"You're having the doctor, uncle?"

"Yes, yes; but the doctor finds nothing wrong. Only—in fact, I am merely a little indisposed," said Uncle Henry. "Never mind that, Horace! You must not let this—this indisposition cast a cloud over your Christmas holidays, my dear boy. Are these your friends?"

"Lower Fourth chaps," said Coker. "They helped me out of the scrape, you know. Potter and Greene ain't coming."

Harry Wharton & Co. were introduced to Uncle Henry. He shook hands with the juniors and bade them a kind welcome. The juniors' faces were very grave. They had little knowledge of



"Mr. Poynings is also very glad to see you, my dear Horace!" said Mr. Coker. "Certainly!" said Poynings, in a smooth voice. Horace Coker started. "Poynings! I've got to speak to you about him, uncle. He is the scoundrel who kidnapped me!" "My dear boy—" began Poynings. "Shut up!" snapped Horace Coker ruthlessly. Harry Wharton & Co. looked on with interest. (See Chapter 13.)

medical matters, but they could see plainly enough that it was something more than a slight indisposition that was the matter with Mr. Henry Coker.

There was a suppressed uneasiness in the old gentleman's manner, which indicated to the juniors that he was fearing a scene between his nephew and his secretary. But that was lost on Coker.

"Mr. Poynings is also glad to see you, my dear Horace," added the old gentleman, with a smile that was almost ghastly.

"Certainly!" said Mr. Poynings, in a smooth voice.

Coker started.

"Poynings! I've got to speak to you about Poynings, uncle. Poynings is the scoundrel who kidnapped me!"

"My dear boy—" began Mr. Poynings.

"Shut up!" said Coker ruthlessly.

The secretary's sallow face reddened. For a moment his greenish eyes glittered at Coker almost like emeralds. Harry Wharton & Co. were watching the secretary, and they did not fail to see the signs of the bitter rage that he barely suppressed.

"You hold your tongue, you rascal!" went on Coker. "It's not for you to speak here. Your place is in the dock, as a kidnapper."

"Horace!" said Mr. Henry Coker

faintly. "No scenes, I beg! Mr. Poynings assures me that it is all a mistake—"

"An absurd mistake, from beginning to end," said Mr. Poynings smoothly. "I admit freely that I called at Greyfriars and advised Master Coker to spend his Christmas vacation elsewhere. Perhaps I exceeded my duty—"

"No perhaps about it," said Coker. "You did!"

"If I exceeded my duty I regret it," said the secretary. "My object was to save my employer from disturbance, which he is in no state to bear. My opinion, also, was that Master Horace would spend a happier holiday in some other place than a house of sickness. His parents would be glad to have him at home—"

"No business of yours!" snapped Coker.

"Horace!" murmured Mr. Henry Coker.

He raised a feeble hand, as if to ward off the wrath of his energetic nephew.

"My motives were good, I trust," continued Mr. Poynings calmly. "But Master Horace did not choose to follow my well-meant advice, and there the matter ended. Of anything further I have no knowledge."

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"That's a lie!" said Coker.

The secretary breathed hard.

"Horace!" repeated Uncle Henry.

"That man was one of the two who bagged me, uncle," said Coker. "I didn't know him then; he was got up in a false beard and horn glasses, though even then I noticed something familiar about his boko. I was kept a prisoner at a lonely bungalow, where these chaps had seen Poynings. Poynings was getting it all ready for me."

"That is incorrect," said the secretary. "I know nothing whatever of any bungalow."

"I—I am bound to believe Mr. Poynings' statement that a mistake has been made, Horace," said Mr. Henry Coker in a gasping voice.

His eyes were on the secretary as he spoke. It was obvious that he was deprecating the man's anger. Anyone but Horace Coker could have seen that Uncle Henry had some powerful motive for desiring not to quarrel with his secretary. It was plain enough to Harry Wharton & Co. In some mysterious way the old gentleman was under the thumb of the sleek, hard, smooth-faced rascal, and was afraid of him.

"No mistake has been made," rapped Coker. "Why, these kids only found me at the bungalow because they remembered having seen Poynings there and remembered his trying to keep me away from you for the vacation. Isn't that clear enough?"

"These boys were mistaken if they fancy that they saw me at any bungalow near the school," said Mr. Poynings.

"I—I am sure that your young friends will admit that a mistake has been made, Horace," faltered Uncle Henry.

"What do you say, Wharton," demanded Coker.

Mr. Henry Coker's eyes rested on Wharton's grave face. His look was almost imploring, as if he were silently begging the junior to get him out of this strange difficulty.

Wharton was deeply troubled. He had no choice but to back up Coker and tell the truth.

"I am quite certain, Mr. Coker, that it was Poynings who was at the bungalow," he said quietly. "There is no possibility of a mistake in the matter. We saw him."

And the other fellows nodded silent confirmation.

"Quite a mistake," said Mr. Poynings. "I may mention that I have received a visit from a police officer, who questioned me very closely, and I have satisfied him completely that an absurd mistake was made."

"You can pull the leg of a bobby who doesn't know you," said Coker scornfully. "You can't pull mine. You're a rascal and a rotter all through!"

"This language, Master Horace—"

"You'd get something stronger, but for my uncle being ill! I can jolly well hardly keep my hands off you as it is!" boomed Coker.

"Horace! As the police officer was satisfied—"

"I fancy he's going to keep an eye on Poynings, all the same," said Coker. "They haven't enough to arrest him on; but they'll watch him—you can depend on that. In fact, Inspector Grimes said as much. Look here, Uncle Henry, I was kept a prisoner, and had a handcuff on, by Jove—I had to keep it on after these kids found me, till Mr. Grimes got it off for me. Handcuffed

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like a blinking convict! He's the man that did it!"

Mr. Henry Coker shook his head feebly.

"The second time he called at Greyfriars," went on Coker, "he brought me a letter from you, telling me not to come here for Christmas. Now, I know he was at the bottom of that. That scoundrel is influencing you somehow, uncle, and he doesn't want your nephew on the scene to bowl him out. That's how the matter stands. He's up to something!"

"My dear boy—"

"Of course," went on Coker—and he looked extremely dignified—"if you've changed towards me, Uncle Henry, and don't want me, it's a different matter—"

"My dear, dear boy! Never!"

"I'm not the fellow to butt in where I'm not wanted, I hope," said Coker. "If it's that, say the word."

"No, no, no! You distress me very greatly by suggesting such a thing, Horace."

"Well, then," said Horace, relenting, "that's all right. I'm going to look after you, uncle. I'm going to take care of you. I'm going to rid you of that scoundrel who's taking advantage

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CHRISTMAS
PARTY!"**

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HARRY WHARTON
& Co.**

of your good-nature. Sack him on the spot, and I'll turn him out of the house!"

"I—I cannot—I mean I—I—"

"Let me speak, sir," said the secretary smoothly. "I have, I hope, been a faithful servant to you, sir. You know best. If you desire to discharge me from your service, I have no objection to raise. I am prepared to leave Holly House at once—this very night if you direct me to do so. You have only to give me your instructions, sir."

"There you are, uncle!" said Coker.

Mr. Henry Coker's face was ghastly pale, and beads of perspiration gathered on his brow.

"Nothing of the kind, Poynings," he said. "You will not go. I—I am bound to accept your word that you were not concerned in the dastardly attack on my nephew. I—I cannot believe so. You will stay."

"After what your nephew has said, sir, I doubt whether I can remain," said Mr. Poynings. "If you ask me to do so—"

"I do ask you, Poynings. I—I ask you to overlook my nephew's hasty words."

Coker of the Fifth stood dumb.

He stared alternately at his uncle and at the smooth-faced secretary like a fellow in a trance.

Harry Wharton & Co. stood in uncomfortable silence. That the unhappy old gentleman was somehow in the power of a ruthless, designing rascal

was as clear as daylight. That fact was even beginning to dawn upon the obtuse brain of Horace Coker. There was no mistaking the fear which the mere glance of the smooth-faced rascal inspired in Coker's uncle.

"If I am to stay, sir," said Mr. Poynings calmly, "I must make it a condition that there is no repetition of such a scene as this. I am sorry that Master Horace does not like me personally; but I cannot tolerate abusive language and threatening behaviour. You have been a good master to me, sir, and I trust I am devoted to you—too devoted ever to leave you if I can help it. But there is a limit to what I can tolerate."

"Do not take offence, Poynings," faltered Mr. Henry Coker. "I—I am sure that my nephew will not offend you again. I am sure that he will accede to my request to show civility to a man whom I—I trust and—esteem."

"Very good, sir," said the secretary.

"Uncle!" gasped Coker, finding his voice at last.

"Leave me now, Horace," said the old gentleman. "I—I am not well—I—I cannot bear any more."

Coker looked at him in silence, nodded, and tramped away to the door. The Remove fellows followed him into the hall. At the door, Harry Wharton glanced back. Mr. Henry Coker had sunk back into his chair, old and shrunken; and on the smooth, hard face of the secretary there was an ironical smile. The door closed.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

Standing by Coker!

THE Famous Five gathered in Harry Wharton's room for a talk before going to bed. All the juniors were very grave. It seemed to them that there was an atmosphere of hidden tragedy at Holly House. The stricken look on Mr. Coker's face haunted them.

"We've come to a house of trouble," said Wharton, in a low voice. "I—I hardly know whether we ought to stay on."

"I think we ought," said Johnny Bull. "If there's not much in the way of a jolly Christmas, we needn't mind that. There's a dashed scoundrel in this house, playing some dirty game, and we may be able to help Coker in dealing with him."

"That's why we came," said Bob Cherry. "But—"

"The butfulness is great," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The awkwardness of the esteemed situation is terrific!"

"I'd like to have the gloves on with that smooth-faced rascal!" muttered Bob, clenching his hands. "He's got some sort of a hold over that poor old gentleman—"

"That's plain enough. Blessed if I know whether we ought to stay or go," said Harry. "We can't butt into family troubles; but if there's anything we could do to down that villain—"

There was a knock at the door, and Coker of the Fifth came in. He joined the circle round Wharton's fire.

Coker looked very changed.

His rugged face was pale and troubled and full of distress. He looked quite unlike the lofty, dictatorial Coker of the Greyfriars Fifth. Potter and Greene would hardly have known him.

(Continued on page 27.)

SOME JOB! The post of Sheriff of Wolf Point is not sought after in Texas, for sudden death lurks at the heels of all who don the badge of office. But for all that the ranchers ask Ferrers Locke, the British detective, to take on this dangerous job!

The MYSTERY of FLYING VRANCH!



A Powerful New Story of Wild West and Detective Adventure.

The Grey Shadow!

“WE’LL let it go!” Spud called to Jack. “Th’ onery brute’s th’ kind tho’t’ll set th’ herd stampedin’ jest when we get ‘em fixed all fine and dandy.”

The sun was dropping towards the horizon, when Locke rode up to Spud and Jack.

“I’ll be getting back now,” he said, “but will join you to-morrow, all being well! You’ll stay on with the wagon, Jack?”

“Yes,” assented Jack. For a moment his eyes met Ferrers Locke’s, and a look of understanding passed between them.

Then, with a brief “See you later, then,” the detective turned his horse and cantered away in the direction of the ranch.

For an hour or more he rode, turning over in his mind the events which had transpired since Hank Herman first walked into his office. If he could only get a connecting link between the shootings and a motive for the shootings, apart from that of robbery!

The shades of night were creeping slowly in over the range as Locke rode steadily onwards. Not a sound disturbed the intense silence which brooded over all. He felt strangely alone.

Then suddenly he felt a quiver run through his horse’s frame. It threw up its head and sniffed at the night air in a manner which held in it more than a suggestion of panic.

“Steady, boy!” murmured Locke, and unconsciously his hand strayed to his gun holster.

With ears laid back, and trembling violently in every limb, the horse stopped of its own accord. It half turned its head, and Locke saw that the whites of the eyes were showing oddly—a sure sign of fear.

Then there grew faintly in his ears an almost imperceptible pounding, as though a horse were galloping a great distance away. He listened with straining ears. The noise was too faint to be made by any horse, and Locke realised, with a peculiar thrill, it was close to him.

With a quick turn in the saddle he looked back again along the trail. For a moment he sat peering into the semi-darkness of the Texan night. The drumming noise sounded closer. Then, with an exclamation, his left hand tightened on the rein, and his right hand whipped to his gun.

For from out of the darkness behind was coming a lean, shadowy shape. With long, effortless strides the shadow approached. Two vivid green, malevolent eyes were fixed on Locke. Straight as an arrow it came towards him, and, in spite of himself, he could not repress a shudder. There was something evil, something uncanny, about that lean grey shape. A thought flashed into his brain, and involuntarily his lips formed the words:

“The Wolf!”

Whipping his gun from his holster he aimed as steadily as he could right between those two green eyes which glowed like points of fire. His finger pressed on the trigger. At that instant, the horse, which had been fighting

wildly for its head, whinnied shrilly with fright and bolted.

The sudden jerk almost brought Ferrers Locke from the saddle. His gun barked viciously, but the bullet went feet wide. It was impossible to stop the flying horse, which was almost frenzied with terror, so Locke let him have his own way. Crouched low in the saddle he looked round. The grey shape of the huge wolf was following steadily, running in a long, untiring stride, with belly close to the ground.

Ferrers Locke tried another shot, but accurate shooting was impossible. The bullet again went wide and slowly the distance between pursuer and pursued was lessened. Locke’s mount had been out all day. It was tiring rapidly, and only sheer, stark panic kept it going.

The grey shadow was now but a few yards away. Again the detective fired, but at the crucial moment his mount stumbled. Then the wolf leapt. Locke had a vision of wicked, salivaring jaws and gleaming fangs. A hot, foul breath fanned his face and an agonising pain shot through his arm as the drooping jaws snapped.

He hung on grimly to his revolver, and with a supreme effort pressed again on the trigger. It barked viciously right in the brute’s face, although the grip on his arm prevented Locke from registering a hit. Snarling, the wolf dropped back to the turf, then sprang again. The detective had no time to aim, and his right hand seemed numb and dead. He kicked out savagely, and his boot took the gaunt brute full in the throat. It recoiled, then, snarling, leapt in again.

Ferrers Locke kicked out savagely, trying desperately to make his numbed hand control his gun whilst his left held the plunging, terrified horse. He felt sick with pain. The slashing jaws snapped savagely at his leg, and only his leather chaps saved him.

Risking everything on one wild chance, Locke released his grip on the reins, and, with a lightning movement,

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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 MAT DUKE, the sheriff. Almost immediately following Mat’s name is added to the list of the Wolf’s victims. Later, Locke and Drake are accompanying SPUD, foreman of the Flying V Ranch, on a “round-up” expedition, when a mad steer comes charging down upon Drake. At the crucial moment Spud drops his lariat over the brute’s horns and brings it, kicking and struggling, to its haunches.

(Now read on.)



transferred his gun to his left hand. The brute had dropped again to the turf and had recoiled on its haunches preparatory to springing again. Locke bent down, his left hand extended. At the same instant the wolf leapt upwards.

The detective had a jumbled impression of savage, slashing jaws, gleaming, wicked-looking teeth, then a sharp explosion. Next instant he hurtled from the saddle on the far side of his horse, the warm, foul-smelling body of the wolf on top of him. Dimly, from somewhere far out across the range he heard a thin, faint, prolonged whistle. Then darkness and complete oblivion descended upon him.

Out On the Range!

FERRERS LOCKE came to, with a feeling of deathly sickness and suffocation. For fully a minute he lay looking up at the star-studded sky, striving to collect his thoughts. Then he became aware that, sprawled across him, was the still warm body of the huge wolf.

Painfully, slowly, he half-pushed it from him and half-wriggled out from underneath. Then, shakily regaining his feet, he stood drawing into his tortured lungs long breaths of the pure, sweet air of the range.

There seemed little doubt that this attack was but a second attempt, by the man behind the scenes, on the detective's life. It was not certain, but Locke was of the opinion that the great gaunt brute was trained, and was but the servant of the human Wolf who had brought the trail of murder to the cattle country.

That was the view he intended to adopt. Wolves had been driven out of Texas, and it was extremely unlikely that, even if one remained, it would trail and attack a man on horseback when thousands of steers roamed the range.

No, the brute had been deliberately set on him by someone, and that thin, faint whistle was probably to summon it back.

So, sitting down on the turf, the detective set about bandaging his mauled arm as best he could with his handkerchief. He managed tolerably well in the darkness, then, on hands and knees, he searched the ground for his gun.

Luck was with him, and he found it after a few minutes. Filling the chamber, he moved back to the wolf, and, leaning back against the carcass, he waited.

His horse had bolted. An hour or more dragged by. It was hopeless to attempt to make the ranch on foot, and he did not wish to leave the body till daylight rendered it impossible for any enemy to come in search of it.

The whistle was not repeated. Locke almost cursed himself for a fool for his vigil. He tried to put himself in the other man's place. The man whom, he was assuming, had set the wolf on his trail. Would he, if he were the man, endeavour to find out what exactly had happened? Yes, he would. The brute must necessarily have a certain value, and, apart from that, would not the fellow want to know how Locke had fared? Then, from far away across the range, there broke in on his thoughts a faint, long-drawn, blood-curdling wail.

Locke stiffened; then his lips twisted in a grim smile. Again came the cry.

It was the rallying call of the wolf pack.

"They have another!" he muttered. "If this brute here were alive he'd make for the origin of that call like a streak of lightning!"

He listened with straining ears. What would happen if they unleashed a second wolf? Well, he'd sell his life as dearly as possible. He felt much stronger, and was this time prepared for an attack. His gun was fully loaded, and, with a tingle of anticipation, he waited grimly.

Another sound came faintly to his ears. It was the drumming of hoofs on turf. Placing his ear to the ground he heard it more distinctly. Then came a faint:

"Coo-ee!"

"Well, that's not enemies!" he muttered. "They'd scarcely——"

"Coo-ee, Mr. Henderson!" came the hail, closer this time.

Locke raised his revolver and fired upwards. Ten minutes later a party of cowboys, headed by Caister, rode up and dropped from their mounts.

"Hello! What'n cripes is wrong here, Mr. Henderson?" exclaimed the latter. "What's that there?"

Locke briefly explained what had happened, and Caister nodded.

"We was expectin' you back at the ranch-house," he replied. "We knew you were figurin' on ridin' in to see us, so when you didn't come we kinda got anxious! Then your cayuse come in alone with her flanks ripped an' bleedin'! We hits the trail at once, and here us are! How you feelin'?"

"Arm a bit groggy, that's all."

Caister struck a match and dropped on his knees by the side of the dead wolf. Lifting the head, he peered down at the savage head and glazed, sightless eyes.

"Pore critter!" he said slowly. "It shore warn't his fault!"

He let the lifeless head fall back, and then regained his feet.

"We'll ride back now, Mister Henderson."

"You'd better leave a guard here," replied Locke. "I've heard another one!"

He could not explain all he wished in front of the cowboys; so, taking Caister by the arm, he led him aside.

"I'm certain—and you must be as well—that the brute was set on my trail deliberately. There is a thin chance that someone might come around here before dawn. If so, we might learn something. I suggest that a guard is left!"

"Shore!" agreed Caister; and, turning to three of the cowboys, he said: "Stay around here till dawn, and if any hombrs come snoopin' around, grab 'em! See?"

"And bring the body back to the ranch when you come," added Ferrers Locke.

Caister looked at him sharply, then said, in a surprised voice:

"Why, Mister Henderson, you've seen enough of th' brute, I should say!"

"I want the head as a trophy!" replied Locke, for the benefit of the cowboys.

"Sere, I didn't think of that!" drawled Caister.

He swung himself to the saddle, and Locke mounted one of the cowboys' horses.

"Waal, let's burn th' wind," said Caister. "Reckon Jake Peters and Cal Jefferson'll be getting plump anxious. They blew in, and are staying at the

Flying V. overnight, Mister Henderson."

He turned in the saddle, and, drawing his gun, fired three shots in rapid succession into the wolf's dead body.

"What on earth——" began Locke, in surprise.

But Caister wheeled on him, his eyes blazing.

"I hates th' brute!" he snapped. "Gosh, he can't feel them bullets, but I on'y wishes he could!"

"Reckon that's th' coyote what's been after th' cattle, boss!" drawled one of the Flying V. hands.

"Sure!" snapped Caister. "Blame his dirty hide!"

The Rancher's Proposition!

BACK at the ranch, Ferrers Locke's wounded arm was bathed and dressed; then, entering the living-room, he found Caister seated talking to two other men. They were bronzed, well-built men, with the unmistakable stamp of the "great outdoors" in every line of them.

"This is Mister Henderson!" announced Caister. "Mister Henderson, meet Cal Jefferson of th' Bar 8, and Jake Peters, of th' Double R!"

Locke stepped forward and shook hands with the two ranchers. They each looked steadily and unwaveringly into his eyes, and their hand-grasp was firm.

"Well, us'll have a bite of grub and a lil' chinwag," suggested Caister.

Over the pretence of eating, behind shuttered windows and bolted door, Ferrers Locke came straight to the point.

"Gentlemen," he said, "you all know why I am here. I've come to seek out this Wolf and bring him in. I have been able to do little or nothing up to the moment, but two attacks have been made on me, one by a gunman and another to-night."

"Not forgettin' we can't prove they was directed by the Wolf!" cut in Caister.

"Yes, that is correct," agreed Locke. "There is the possibility that the Wolf directed neither attack, but I prefer to think he did."

Jake and Cal nodded their agreement.

"Well, this is how I figure things out," went on the detective. "I can remain here as Mr. Henderson, and try to pick up some clue which will put me on the track of either the Wolf's identity or motives. But that course is going to hamper me to a great extent."

"What yuh figure on, then?" asked Jake Peters.

"I caadidly think my best plan will be to come out into the open! I am prompted to this conclusion by two facts. The attacks on me, if directed by the Wolf, as I think, show that he is aware of my identity. If that is so, what, I ask you, is the good of further secrecy? Secondly, if I come out into the open and declare myself against the Wolf, my hands will not be tied anything like as much as they are if I remain as Mr. Henderson, a gentleman learning ranching."

"I get you," nodded Caister. "You mean that if the Wolf is attacking you now, you may as well go right after him with the gloves off?"

"Yes; that is what I mean precisely."

"But everyone here knows you as Mister Henderson."

The whole time Locke had been speaking Cal Jefferson had been watching



The grey shape of the wolf was following steadily, running in a long, untiring stride. Locke's gun barked viciously, but the bullet went yards wide as his horse whinnied shrilly with fright and bolted. (See page 23.)

him intently, and now, as Caister finished speaking, he leant forward in his chair, and said:

"Mister Henderson—fer I guess I'll call yuh thet—yuh sure knows now thet this Wolf hombre is a devil?"

"Yes, I realise that."

"Now, us ranchers ain't askin' no man to go to his death fer us! Yuh realise thet if yuh comes out into the open an' declares yuhself against this hyar Wolf, yuh'll sure be temptin' death fer sartain?"

"Yes, I realise that also. But no more so than I am doing as Mr. Henderson."

"I dunno!" grunted Cal. He paused for a moment; then, with a voice that trembled slightly, he continued: "Mister, I've gotta proposition to put to yuh! Say, there's none of us fellers hyar what'll think one lil' bit worse'n of yuh if yuh turns it down."

"Go on!" replied Locke quietly.

"Will yuh, as Mister Henderson, take th' job what pore ol' Mat Duke vacated when he got his 'tother night? Will yuh run as Sheriff o' Wolf Point till yuh hog-ties this blamed Wolf?"

Locke started. He had not expected this.

"Mister," went on Cal earnestly, "us don't want yuh to take this job without knowin' all fair an' square what yuh'll be up against. Say, there's coyotes what'll plug at yuh from cover; there's gunmen what knows no law but thet of th' gun. There's th' Wolf at most ev'ry turn, and yuh've jest got one lil' chance in five hun'erd of ever comin' through alive! But, say, yuh'll sure hev this advantage. Yuh'll have yuh hands plumb free to deal wi' things as yuh

like. You can come and go, an' no feller'll guess yuh're a nosey coyote an' get suspicious of yuh! Yuh can ride the ranges like as if they was your'n. Us'll be beside yuh to a man!"

There was a moment of silence in the room. The three ranchers were watching Locke eagerly.

"Gentlemen," he began, "I—"

He got no further, for there came a sound of running feet in the passageway outside and a frenzied knocking on the door.

Dashing across the room, Locke wrenched it open. The ranchers started to their feet as Jack Drake stumbled into the room. Locke caught him in his arms. The boy's head was bandaged—he was almost spent.

"Boy! Boy!" he said anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"Rustlers!" gasped Jack. "There's—a—fight on—at One Tree Creek! They—they've got us—hemmed in! Spud sent me—for help! There's no ammunition left!"

Ferrers Locke's Decision!

"COME on! We'll talk later!" snapped Ferrers Locke.

"Reckon the lad had better stay right here!" grunted Caister, looking to the fastenings of his gun holster.

"No, I'm—I'm all right," asserted Jack. "I'm going back!"

Jake Peters had dashed from the room to give the alarm, and within a few minutes a dozen cowboys, headed by Locke, Jack, and the three ranchers, were riding grimly at full gallop towards One Tree Creek.

The first faint grey light of dawn was

streaking the eastern sky as they approached, but save for the thunder of their horses' hoofs, not a sound broke the stillness. Caister edged his horse in towards Jack.

"How you come to hev no ammunition left, lad?" he shouted.

"I dunno," replied Jack. "I thought we had plenty. Then Spud told me to go for help as the ammunition was done."

A few minutes later they reached the Flying V. outfit. One glance told them that they were too late. The wagon stood desolate and forlorn, whilst round it, sprawled grotesquely on the grass, lay the bodies of six or seven cow-punchers. Propped against one of the wagon wheels was Spud, the foreman, and as the party threw themselves from their horses, he rose groggily to his feet.

"Reckon—reckon yuh're too late, gents!" he said weakly. "Th' shootin's over!"

"Gosh, snakes, Spud!" said Jake Peters hoarsely. "What happened?"

"Guess it was this way," replied Spud. "Us hed th' cattle guards mounted most 'long 'bout midnight, an' th' cattle were fine an' quiet. Me and four other fellers what was due to relieve th' guards was settin' around th' fire when some hombre fired from out thar in th' darkness. Pore Zeb Hinter keeled right over, shot plumb through th' forehead. Say, us went for our guns and roused th' other fellers. A reg'lar fusillade of lead was comin' into us by thet time, and th' cattle stampeded. Waal, things shore hetted up some, and I crawled inter th' wagon fer two boxes of ammunition what I'd brought along



CHRISTMAS GHOSTS!

Amongst the names of Restless Spirits who are said to return to their old haunts on earth is that of Anne Boleyn—once Queen of England.

THERE are no ghosts!" says the man who has never seen one, or heard one moan or gibber or carry on in the regulation ghostly way. The sceptics explain those eerie sounds—including the clanking of unseen but noisy chains—as the result of heavy suppers. But they haven't yet explained away the ghosts that haunt the Tower of London, or the dreaded "pit people" of the bleak Thetford Heath in Norfolk, or the ghosts that haunt the Old Bailey!

A dark, ominous figure with an axe stands outlined on winter nights against the grey outline of the Tower's ancient Norman Keep. And a sentry on duty at midnight in the grim old prison-fortress was once visited by a phantom figure which he at once recognised as Anne Boleyn.

It was beneath the window of the prison-room, in which that ill-fated woman, centuries ago, had been incarcerated. He challenged the ghost, and as it made no reply, he lunged with his bayonet. No sound came—and nothing happened, except that the sentry fainted. Other soldiers quartered in the Tower have seen Anne Boleyn's phantom, which took no harm from the bayonet thrust and has never yet been "laid"!

VISIBLE PROOF!

They must be particularly hardy ghosts, those "pit people," who haunt the Norfolk heath. In any circumstances, a wind-swept, snow-clad stretch of dreary country must be the sort of place for anyone or anything to keep away from. Yet the heath is peopled with strange, gnome forms, who live in the flint pits that riddle the ground there and at nights, come above ground and sit chattering

and grimacing at their ghostly work of chipping flints into weapons of war.

Folk who have seen these misshapen pit people have afterwards been found, when daylight dawned and others ventured near the haunted heath, wandering wild-eyed—driven mad by the ghosts. At other long-abandoned flint pit mouths, weeping and wailing and wringing her hands in bitter grief, walks a White Woman. Daylight proof of her nightly wanderings is visible in the track made by the shuffling passage of her feet through the long centuries.

THE FATAL BELL!

Vicining with the Tower of London in grimness, the Central Criminal Court, otherwise, the Old Bailey, houses numerous ghosts of bygone criminals. One of the weirdest of these criminal ghosts has a preference for the one spot on earth from which even a ghost might be expected to flee—the death cell.

That is the cell where murderers, sentenced to death, spend their last hours on earth. This particular ghost has never actually been seen, but the chief warder has been notified of this weird ghost's presence by the ringing of the death cell bell when no human occupied those shuddery quarters.

The first time the warder heard the bell—a sharp buzz, made by unearthly fingers pressing the electric button in the death cell—he took no notice. Again the bell tinkled peremptorily, and this time the warder went to investigate. He saw—nothing. A third time, at three in the morning, the bell sent its clamour through the Old Bailey. The only explanation that could be given of this ghostly incident was that the night was the anniver-

sary of some criminal's death on the gallows—as, indeed, it was!

ENERGETIC PHANTOMS!

Coupland Castle, in Northumberland, has a ghostly white figure—a woman in white, who lets off weird cries and scurries about, with pattering footsteps, in her own particular room, making this twelfth century castle a rather exciting place to live in. She dodges about all over the place. She has plenty of scope for her activities, too, for there are thirty-two rooms in the ancient castle!

The ghost of an old monk, carrying a bright light so that his feet shall not stumble, appears each winter in the corridors of a rambling old homestead at Minster, Thanet. His is a particularly dreary job, for he is looking for the ghosts of two people—a nun and a brother monk who, because of him, were bricked up alive in the walls of the house.

It is to ask their forgiveness that the restless monk does his perambulations, and not until he meets the shadows of the twain, will his ghost be "laid"!

WHEN THE GHOST WON!

The "murder of a ghost" led to a lot of excitement a little while ago. It was not a ghost really, though the man who killed it honestly thought it was. It looked like one, and as it appeared to him suddenly, apparently from nowhere, without warning and without noise, the terrified man went for his visitor with a stout stick.

Unlike the Tower ghost, whose transparent body the sentry's bayonet pierced without doing damage, this ghost stood up to the stick solidly. So solidly, that when the man ceased to ply his heavy weapon the ghost was prostrate on the ground. It was no spook, but an unfortunate human, who had wandered that way. The man was tried, but as he had honestly believed he was attacking a ghost, he was not convicted of murder.

Many tragedies have occurred through ghosts. There is the case of the man who scoffed at spirits, and who, to win a wager, visited a churchyard one night with the intention of leaving a dagger stuck in the ground, as proof he had been there. As midnight struck, he crouched to the ground, and plunged the blade deep into the soil—and also through the end of the long cloak he was wearing. He tried to rise, and found himself pinned to the ground. The shock killed him. His "ghost" had caught him after all!

The Mystery of Flying V Ranch!

(Continued from previous page.)

when us left the Flying V. Gents, yuh cu'd shore hev knocked me fer a wall-eyed coyote when I found that th' blamed ammunition warn't thar! Double-crossed, by heck! Some guy hed shore cleared with that ammunition, and, say, it must hev been some guy what rode wi' me! Waal, th' rest's soon told. I sent th' lad fer help, but I guessed it warn't no good. Us fired easy till th' last cartridge had gone, then us clubbed our guns and dashed towards where them hombres was shootin' from, somewhere out thar! Say, a bullet got me 'longside 'th' temple. I shore dropped, an' when I comed round I found I hed th' range all to myself, 'cept fer th' dead an' wounded on our side. Them rustlers hed shore cleared on.

"How many do you think there were?" asked Locke.

"Dunno, Mr. Henderson. I reckon us was well outnumbered."

"You hadn't much chance!" snapped Caister. "You sure gotta dirty deal over that ammunition!"

Spud turned towards him and said slowly,

"Mr. Caister, that warn't th' on'y dirty deal I got over this biz'ness! I'm aimin' to say that when th' shootin' got real hetted up six o' them cowhands o' your'n, what was with me, slung their hooks, pronto!"

"You mean they quit?" demanded Caister harshly.

"Yep, that's what I do mean!"

Caister's hands clenched and unclenched, and he fought visibly to control his overmastering rage. Then, turning to the ranchers, he said in a voice which quivered with passion:

"Gents, I ain't apologise for them skunks! I guess we all of us know jest how we're fixed for labour round these parts since that blamed Wolf came! Hands is sure hard to get, and us is real glad to sign on jest what we can! I'll say I've signed up a low-down onery bunch lately, but, by gosh, I never guessed they'd quit like this here! I'll get 'em, gents, by gosh, I'll get 'em, and if I don't make the skunks pay real good for this here work, then my name ain't Silas Caister!"

"Tain't your fault, Silas!" drawled Cal Jefferson sympathetically. "Us knows jest how th' cattle country's fixed for hands jest now, and us is shore not

holdin' it 'gainst yuh or yu'r ranch that these skunks hev quit! I've hed trouble wi' hands, an' so has Jake. Us knows it ain't no fault o' your'n!"

Jake Peters nodded his agreement, and, whilst the cowboys set about placing the dead in the wagon and aiding the wounded, Ferrers Locke and Caister rode out towards the spot from whence had come the attack. But not an empty cartridge case, nor anything which could possibly be looked upon as a potential clue, could they find.

Ferrers Locke and Jack rode back to the ranch with Caister, Jefferson, and Peters. Reaching it, they made, although by mutual consent, towards the living-room, and, having closed the door, Cal turned to Locke.

"Mr. Henderson," he said, "I was shore askin' yuh a question when us was interrupted. I'm aimin' to ask yuh that same question now. Us all knows that th' Wolf has struck agen this night, an' facin' th' risks fair and square, are yuh gonna take th' job as sheriff of Wolf Point?"

(Will Ferrers Locke take on this dangerous job? See next week's grand instalment, chums. It's packed full of thrills.)

"THE PRISONER OF THE BUNGALOW!"*(Continued from page 22.)*

"I—I'm sorry, you fellows," said Coker, colouring. "I seem to have landed you into a rotten sort of Christmas holiday. Of course, I never dreamed of anything like this. Never had the faintest suspicion!"

The juniors smiled. They had known perfectly well, in advance, that there was something going on behind the scenes at Holly House; but Coker of the Fifth hadn't even surmised that.

"I can't make it out," said Coker. "What do you fellows think? That man Poynings has got my uncle under his thumb somehow, what?"

The juniors were silent.

"Speak out," said Coker. "Tell me what you think. I'm all at sea—fairly flabbergasted. Help a chap if you can!"

"Well, I'm afraid that's plain enough," said Wharton reluctantly. "Either Poynings has some hold over your uncle, or Mr. Coker thinks he has."

"But what hold could he have?" said the mystified Coker. "There's only one way of having a hold over a man—if he's done something wrong, and could be given away."

"I—I suppose so."

"That's the mystery, you see, as Uncle Henry, of course, can never have done anything shady."

"Oh!"

"That's a cert, you see. Yet that man Poynings acts as if he had power over my uncle, and Uncle Henry lets him. It beats me hollow."

Coker looked almost haggard. His intellect was rather solid than powerful, and a problem like this made his head ache. But the juniors liked him better at that moment than ever before.

"I can't understand it," said Coker miserably. "But I'm going to get to the bottom of it somehow, and get Uncle Henry out of that villain's hands. You chaps haven't seen him before—you don't know what a decent man he is—kind and generous to me ever since I was a little kid. I'm going to help him somehow. I—I think I may be able to, because if that villain wasn't afraid of my being here, he wouldn't have taken the risk of kidnapping me to keep me away."

"That's so," assented Harry.

"But, you fellows—" Coker hesitated. "I'm afraid it will be a bit rotten for you. If you like to clear to-morrow, don't mind me."

The juniors exchanged glances.

"The question is, do you want us to stay?" asked Wharton. "Better speak out frankly, in these queer circumstances. That man has your uncle under his thumb. But he's got something to fear, or he wouldn't have tried so hard to keep you away. We want to help you—and we may find a way—"

"That's what I think," said Coker, with a humility positively amazing in Coker of the Fifth. "I shall feel awfully left, if you go; but I've no right to ask you to stand it."

"We'll be jolly glad to stay," said Bob.

"One point you'd better think of, Coker," said Harry. "If we get on to that villain's game, something to your uncle's discredit may come out—"

"Impossible!"

"You must see that it looks like it."

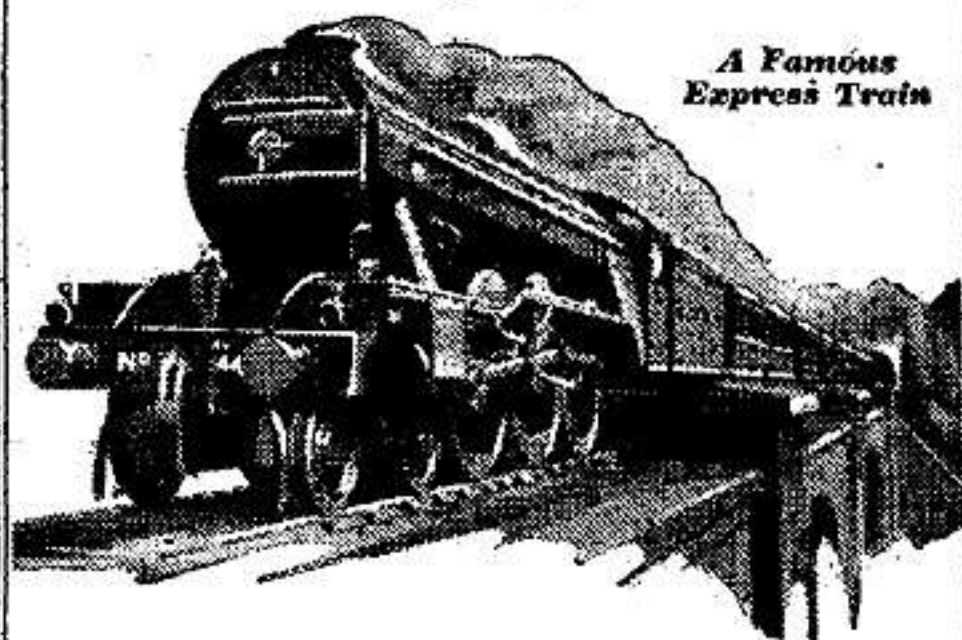
"I know. But it's impossible. There's some sort of trickery in it. I don't know what or how. But that man Poynings is cunning enough for anything. I'm up against him, and I'm going to show him up somehow. He's tried to get shut of me once; he may try again. He'll find me ready next time," said Coker, between his teeth. "I hope I'm a match for him."

On that point the Famous Five had very deep doubts, which they did not express, however. But Coker's words decided them.

"We stay!" said Harry.

"It's jolly good of you," said Coker. "The fact is, Wharton, you're rather a keen fellow, and I—I think you may be able to help. And—and we'll try to give you a decent Christmas."

And Coker bade his guests good-night, and went back to his own room, obviously relieved in his mind to know that the Famous Five were sticking to him in this strange emergency. Harry Wharton & Co. went to bed that night with their minds made up.

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Christmas Greetings from Your Editor!

WE are about to bid farewell to 1926, you and I, but before that comes to pass let me be one of the first to wish you boys and girls the Happiest of Happy Christmases. It has to be voiced early, this wish of mine, for reasons which we need not go into here; but, believe me, it is just as sincere as any you will receive between now and Christmas Day. There never was a man—there never could be a man—with such an army of loyal chums as I have; and there never was a man, nor will there ever exist a man, who could appreciate more than I do that fine, enthusiastic spirit which links a humble Editor with so great an army of pals.

To me Magnetite is not just a happy-go-lucky slang term that merely refers to a reader of the MAGNET; it's a term that stands for loyalty, appreciativeness, willingness, and esprit de corps. That's not bunkum, believe me; it's an honest summing-up which has sprung from

many years' close acquaintance with boys and girls dotted about all over the globe.

In addition to the Chat in each weekly edition of our little paper, the post unites us; indeed, I doubt whether there is another editor of a boys' paper living who receives so many charming, pally letters from his readers as I.

But to return to Christmas. I expect you chaps—and that includes you girls—are fairly thrilled at the prospect of Christmas again. This once-a-year festival is certainly something to which the world looks forward with more than ordinary interest. The things one has to buy; the rush and glamour of shopping; the sight of the turkeys hanging up in the shops; the decorations; the crackers; and that famous plum-pudding. And everywhere reigns the champion spirit of good will. We ask ourselves—will it snow this year? Will young Tommy get scared when big brother Bert begins to tell his ghost

story? Will cook forget to put the puddings in to boil? And so on. - And hundreds of other questions flock to the mind which seldom, or never, receive house room, so to speak, in the ordinary way. Yet it's quite natural to give way to them at this season of the year; without them Christmas would be nearly as bad as Monday without a copy of the MAGNET. And that would be horrible indeed!

It's a pity in many ways that Christmas falls only once a year; for it's good to gaze round upon our neighbours with a friendly smile and a greeting hovering at our lips, as is the case during Christmas week. One feels that life is so much better then than we are apt to think of it at other times of the year. Yet I doubt if it is so different; maybe Christmas really does provide the extra pair of glasses the world requires to view the obvious facts before our noses. Or is it that we have more time at our disposal, and fewer cares, at Christmas to see what the next man is doing? Whatever it is, Christmas is the season of jollity, unselfishness, and good will—and we make the most of it.

Once more, chums, a "Merry Christmas!" is the earnest and sincere wish of your friend and

EDITOR.

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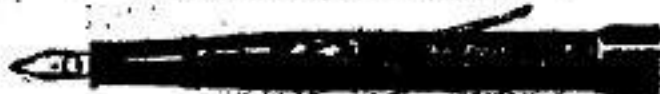


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