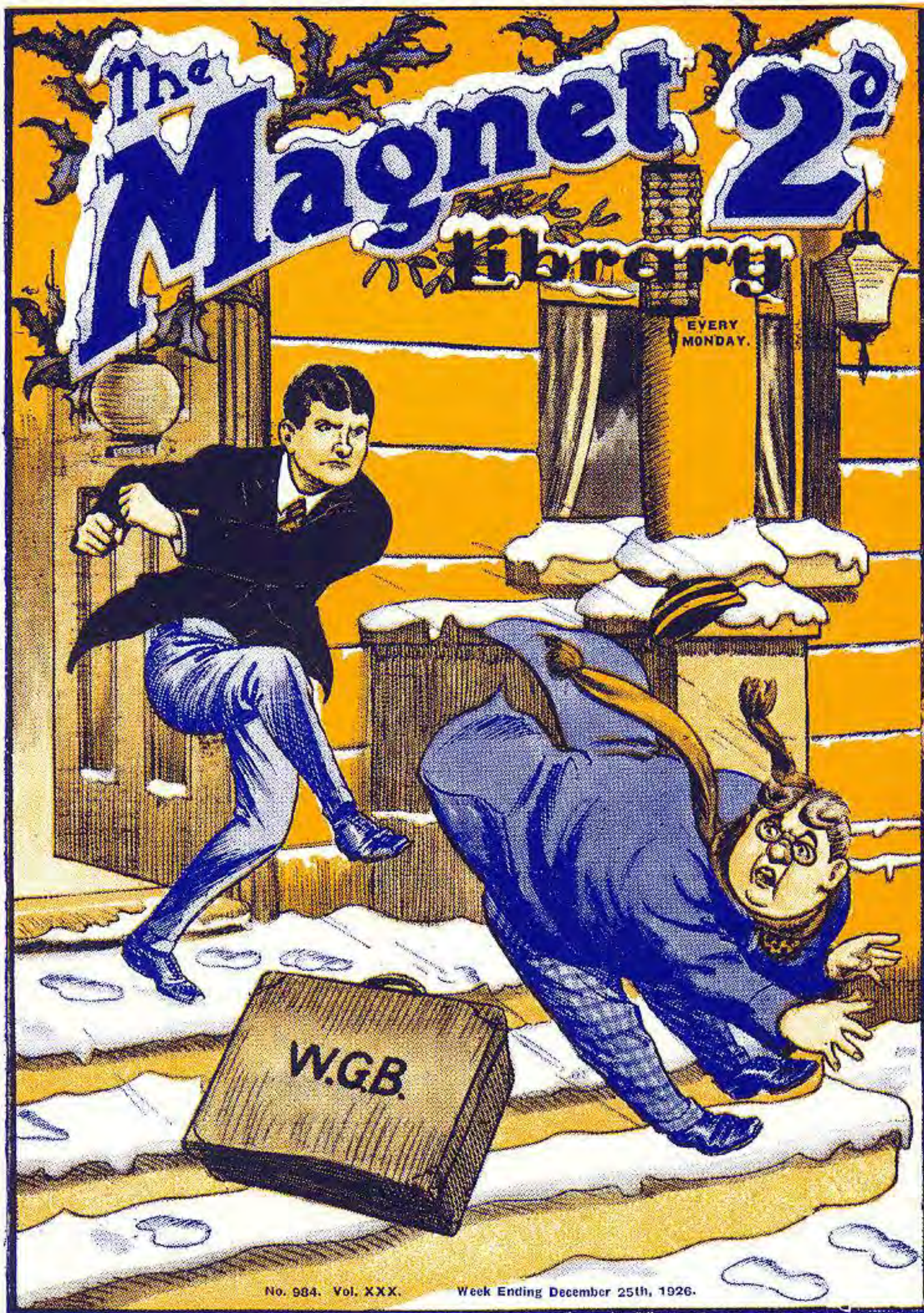


GRAND CHRISTMAS WEEK NUMBER!



No. 984. Vol. XXX.

Week Ending December 25th, 1926.

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Ye Olde Merrie Christmas!

THE YODELLING WAITS!

WHEN the waits go yodelling down the midnight streets, or stand shivering but hopeful outside a house-door, whence they expect a tip to emerge, we get a real touch of the genuine, old-fashioned Christmas—much more old than that conveyed by Christmas cards, for example.

Christmas cards have only been known some eighty years, and even so, the inventor had only about a thousand of them printed. But the waits are different. They go back well into the fourteenth century, when moated grange, lonely castle, and footpad-infested towns had to pay night-watchmen to do the job now performed by police.

"ALL'S WELL!"

Every hour these old watchmen called out the time, and the sort of weather they were enjoying, so that folks tucked up snug in bed should be able to snuggle down in peace of mind on hearing the cry without: "Twelve o'clock, and a frosty night!" The cry would tell them all was well, that robbers and other pests of the night were conspicuous by their absence.

As regular police became more numerous, the night-watchmen found themselves out of a job. They found other work, and took to practising their night cries only at Christmas—when people were inclined to be a bit more generous when it came to loosening purse-strings.

And as the said purse-strings were likely to be more easily loosened for a carol than for a mere "time-and-weather" cry, carols won the day—or, rather, the night! And now lots of us go carolling, either for the sheer fun of it or to raise a bit of money for some good purpose.

CHRISTMAS TIPS!

Then Christmas Boxes. They take us back into the joyful old Roman days, though the idea had not extended at that time to cover all sorts and conditions of receivers of Christmas tips.

The custom was started by the priests hanging up boxes in the churches, the money dropped in being shared out to all the local hard-up cases on the day following Christmas Day. And so December 26th came to be known as Boxing Day—the day when the boxes were "raided."

The gay caps and bonnets which we fish from the Christmas crackers and perch joyfully on our heads are a survival of the very far distant Christmases when the slaves of ancient Rome were granted the especial privilege of wearing caps like their masters, just for the day only.

CRACKER HATS!

Those caps were rather long and pointed—something like the fools' caps in the crackers, and were the distinctive badge of freemen. At no other time of the year dare any slave wear that sort of hat. They were allowed to do so, just at Christmas, by way of a concession on the part of their masters.

We get our fancy dress and Christmas-trees from the jollifications of the same good old days. So, you see, the Christmas gaieties are very much older than is the holiday of Christmas itself! The idea of hanging little gifts and so on on to the branches of Christmas-trees commenced originally as an offering to the Roman god of wine.

Little clay or earthen images of that mythical personage were stuck on to the branches of small fir-trees, by way of pleasing him. We have gone one better, supplanting the clay images with useful gifts.

WHEN CHRISTMAS DAY WAS NOT!

But Christmas has not always been jolly. The Roundhead Parliament gave it ever such a nasty knock. They abolished Christmas altogether, and for twelve long years the long-faced, kill-joys—who said Christmas was nothing but a heathen festival, when people ran riot and generally kicked over the traces—were happy when December 25th came round, because the law ordained that folks should not make merry then.

When King Charles the Second came to the throne he speedily altered that. The kill-joys were chased away, and Ye Olde Merrie Christmas came into its gladsome own again!

THE ORDER OF THE BOOT! For a long time a certain individual in the Coker household has been having things all his own way! Indeed, he comes near to spoiling a jolly Christmas party! But once this individual is shown the door of Holly House it would be hard to find a merrier crowd of schoolboys than—



A Fine Long Complete Christmas Story, featuring Harry Wharton & Co. and Horace Coker of Greyfriars.
By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Gone!

"BLOW!"

William Gosling, the ancient porter at Greyfriars School, made that remark.

He seemed cross.

Although it was Christmastide, the jovial spirit of the season did not seem to have influenced Gosling to any great extent.

The bell had jingled in Gosling's lodge; and the jingle of the bell was not a welcome sound to his ears.

In term time it couldn't be helped; but in vacation Gosling felt that he was entitled to a rest from what he described variously as a dratted and a blinking bell.

Being comfortably ensconced in an armchair, before a crackling log fire, with a pipe in his ancient mouth, and a steaming glass at his equally ancient elbow, Gosling did not feel disposed to move.

So he merely uttered an ejaculation, and allowed the jingle of the bell to pass him by like the idle wind which he regarded not.

Jingle, jingle!

"Bother!" growled Gosling.

Clang, clang!

Someone, evidently, was at the gate, and that someone seemed to be growing impatient.

Gosling put down his pipe, and breathed hard.

He was very warm and comfortable in his lodge; and outside there was a grey clinging mist from the sea, which wrapped Greyfriars as in a pall. Gosling did not want to emerge into that damp mist. There was snow on his doorstep; and he could not trudge through it in his warm slippers; it was necessary to put on his boots.

"Blow!" grunted Gosling.

Jingle, jingle!

Gosling was angry; and if anyone had said to Gosling, as to the prophet of

old, "Doest thou well to be angry?" certainly he would have replied like the prophet, "I do well to be angry!" In term Gosling kept the gate like brave Horatius of old; but on Christmas Eve merely an ancient gentleman was entitled to take his ease. But there was no ease for Gosling while that bell was jingling; and he drew on his boots and sallied forth, with an expression on his gnarled face which gave no sign whatever of feelings of peace and good will.

Outside the gate a fat figure stood, muffled in coat and scarf. Gosling blinked at that unexpected figure through the bars.

"Master Bunter!" he ejaculated.

Billy Bunter, of the Greyfriars Remove, blinked at him through his big spectacles, with a wrathful blink.

"What the thump are you keeping me waiting like this for, Gosling?" he demanded hotly. "Open this gate, you ass!"

Gosling did not seem in a hurry to open the gate. He only stared at Bunter through the bars.

In all Gosling's experience as a school porter—a very long experience—no fellow had ever come butting in on Christmas Eve. When the school broke up for the holidays, Gosling felt fairly entitled to consider himself clear of the Greyfriars fellows till the new term began. This unexpected visit from Bunter of the Remove was quite a new thing, and it was not a welcome novelty to William Gosling.

"And what may you want, Master Bunter?" demanded Gosling surlily.

"Where's Wharton?" demanded Bunter, in his turn.

"Eh?"

"Where's Bob Cherry?"

Gosling stared.

"Where's Johnny Bull, and Lucky, and Nugent?"

"My eye!" said Gosling.

"Ain't they about?" demanded Bunter crossly. "I suppose they haven't gone out on a day like this! Let me in, you

old ass! I've come back to stay with my pals for Christmas!"

"Ho!" said Gosling. "Look 'ere, Master Bunter! Wot I says is this 'ere, you—"

"Let me in, fathead!" said Bunter. "It's jolly cold 'ere!"

"But I tell you—"

"If you don't open this gate at once I'll report you to the Head when he comes back!" hooted Bunter.

"Ho!" said Gosling again.

He unlocked the gate, and Billy Bunter rolled in.

The Owl of the Remove gave Gosling an angry blink, and rolled on towards the School House.

Gosling stared after him, his crusty face breaking into a grin.

Evidently Bunter had returned under the impression that the Famous Five of the Remove were still there.

Gosling left him to make the discovery for himself that Harry Wharton & Co. were no longer at the school.

He stumped back into his lodge, grinning.

Gosling had felt that he was being rather imposed upon when the Head gave the Famous Five leave to stay at the school over the vacation, to continue the search for the missing Horace Coker. Gosling saw enough of those cheery juniors in the term; enough, and a little over. But the juniors had found Coker of the Fifth, and they had gone; a circumstance which was still unknown to Billy Bunter.

The delights of Bunter Court, and the fascinating society of Sammy and Bessie, had apparently palled on the Owl of the Remove. He had arranged, that Christmas, to "stay with Wharton," and Wharton had assented—as he had arranged to stay at the school to search for the missing Fifth-Former. Bunter's wrath had been great when he discovered what sort of a vacation he had been let in for. He had departed in

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 231.

wrath. But now he had turned up again like a bad penny.

As a matter of fact, there was rather a thin time at the home of the Bunters. Mr. Bunter's recent experiences among the bulls and bears of the Stock Exchange had been disastrous. He had "bulled" shares which persisted in falling; he had "beared" shares which persisted in rising; and between the two fearsome beasts Mr. Bunter had found trouble. Hence Billy Bunter's resolve to chance it, after all, with his old pals.

If there was anything to be had, Bunter was there to have it. If there was nothing to be had, he was no worse off; there was a train home if he wanted to take it.

Bunter rang and knocked at the door of the House; and again he had to wait. But the door was opened at last by Mrs. Kebble, the House-dame.

She stared at Bunter.

"Master Bunter!" she ejaculated.

"I've come back, Mrs. Kebble," said Bunter brightly.

"Bless me! Why ever have you come back, Master Bunter?" asked the astonished House-dame.

"I'm going to stick to my pals over Christmas," said Bunter. "Couldn't leave them in the lurch, you know. Where are they?"

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Kebble.

"Not gone out, are they?" asked Bunter anxiously. "I know they're playing the giddy ox, searching for that fathead Coker of the Fifth. But they wouldn't be dummies enough to go out in this weather to play the goat."

"They are not here, Master Bunter."

"Oh, the silly owls!" said Bunter. "Never mind—I shall see them when they come in. Know when they're coming back?"

"Not till next term, Master Bunter."

"Wha-a-t?"

"They've gone—"

"Gone!" howled Bunter.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Kebble. "Master Wharton and his friends only stayed at the school to search for Master Coker of the Fifth Form, who was missing, you know. After they found him—"

"Found him?"

"Yes—after they found him, they left—"

"They found that idiot, Coker?"

Mrs. Kebble smiled.

"Yes; they found him, Master Bunter. He had been kidnapped, and kept a prisoner in a lonely bungalow on the cliffs. They found him, and brought him back here, and they all left together."

"Oh, crumbs!" ejaculated Bunter.

He blinked at the house-dame in utter dismay.

Not for a moment had Bunter supposed that the Famous Five would succeed in finding Horace Coker, whose amazing disappearance had excited all Greyfriars at the end of the term.

"But—but—" stuttered Bunter. "Wharton can't have gone home—Wharton Lodge is shut up over Christmas, I know that. He told his uncle he was staying on here, and the old dodger's gone to Bournemouth. I heard that before I went. Where have they gone?"

"Master Wharton and his friends went home with Mr. Coker."

"Oh, my hat! Christmas with Coker."

"Yes."

"That swanking ass, Coker of the Fifth, taking Lower Fourth fellows home for Christmas!" ejaculated Bunter. "Well, that beats it! Where have they gone with Coker?"

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 984.

"To Holly House—the residence of Mr. Coker's uncle."

"Oh!"

Bunter's fat face was so full of dismay that Mrs. Kebble took compassion on him.

"If you care to step in, Master Bunter, I can give you some lunch before you catch your train," she said.

Bunter did not need asking twice.

"Yes, rather," he said.

And he rolled in.

The Famous Five were gone; Greyfriars was drawn blank! But lunch was lunch, and Billy Bunter could always find comfort in a meal.

And as he sat in the House-dame's room, doing full justice to a quite substantial lunch, a fat grin irradiated the features of the Owl of the Remove.

The arrangement had been that he should stay with Wharton over Christmas. Wharton had assented, to pull his fat leg. Certainly, Bunter hadn't wanted to pass his holiday at the deserted school. He had turned down the arrangement, when he discovered the facts, and departed. But now—now there was a change. Christmas with Coker might be quite a good thing. The Coker people were wealthy—Horace was the darling of Aunt Judith and Uncle Henry. It was probable that Holly House resembled a land flowing with milk and honey. Certainly, Coker had not asked Bunter there—and would be greatly surprised to see him there. Bunter couldn't help that! He decided that the arrangement to "stay with Wharton" still held good. As Wharton was staying with Coker, Bunter had to stay with Coker if he was to stay with Wharton.

Wharton would have to fix it somehow. It was up to him!

After disposing of lunch, Billy Bunter rolled away to the telephone. Quite an unexpected call was to be received by the guests at Holly House that Christmas Eve.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Mystery of Holly House!

"POOR old Coker!"

Bob Cherry made that remark.

Breakfast was over at Holly House; and the Famous Five of the Remove were standing by a big window, looking out into the gardens. There had been a fall of snow, and the grass and the paths were hidden by a mantle of white. Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars, was tramping along one of the paths under the leafless trees, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, and his chin sunk in the collar of his coat; his rugged face dark with troubled thought.

Thinking was not much in Horace Coker's line. His powerful intellect moved slowly, when it moved at all; generally it did not stir very much. But in this Christmas vacation, Coker of the Fifth was putting in a very unaccustomed amount of thinking. He was up against a problem at Holly House, and the more he thought it over, the more it beat him. There was trouble at Holly House; it hung over the place like a shadow. Coker of the Fifth had had no doubt that when he arrived there, trouble would roll away like a mist before the sunshine; like Caesar of old, he would come, and see, and conquer. Coker had not doubted it.

But it had not happened.

Coker was up against a problem that

was beyond his weight. That was a very disturbing reflection to Horace Coker. Hitherto, he had hardly believed that there was anything in the wide world beyond his weight. But how to deal with the strange state of affairs at Holly House was a puzzle to which Horace Coker could find no answer.

Harry Wharton & Co. watched him, from the window, and they could not help smiling a little.

Coker, in the throes of a mental struggle, was rather a new Coker to them. But, in many ways, Horace was unlike the Coker they had known at Greyfriars.

Coker, whom they had regarded chiefly as a swanking Fifth Form ass, and a heavy-handed fathead, was showing up in quite a new light. Undoubtedly, he was grateful to the Famous Five for having rescued him from his imprisonment in the lonely bungalow. The juniors had not expected Coker to think much about it; but he did.

Harry Wharton & Co. did not think that they had done a very great achievement. No doubt it derived its importance, in Coker's eyes, from the fact that it was Coker whom they had rescued. The rescue of any ordinary mortal would not have been so important a matter.

Coker's manners and customs at Greyfriars School were not wholly pleasant, especially to Lower Fourth fellows. Coker prided himself on having a short way with fags. But, as host, at Holly House, he was almost nice.

Coker, certainly, was in an unusually subdued mood these days, owing to the trouble that he was up against. He even condescended to believe that the Remove fellows might be of some use in this emergency. That was an immense concession from Coker of the Fifth.

"Poor old Coker!" repeated Bob.

"The esteemed and ridiculous Coker does not look happy," remarked Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

"He's not a bad sort, really," observed Johnny Bull. "We don't see him at his best at Greyfriars, and that's a fact."

"There's that man Poynings!" murmured Frank Nugent.

A slightly-built man with a hooked nose, dressed in black, came along the path towards Coker. Mr. Poynings, the secretary to Coker's uncle, was taking a little stroll after breakfast.

Harry Wharton & Co., at the window, watched him curiously.

He paused to say "good-morning!" to Horace Coker as he passed him; and Coker of the Fifth gave him a glare in response. His hands came out of his pockets for a moment; but he shoved them back again. Quite plainly the Remove fellows could see that Coker of the Fifth longed to knock the smooth-faced secretary spinning along the path into the snow. Mr. Poynings certainly was not ignorant of it. He smiled ironically, and passed on his way, Coker, standing in the path and staring after him, with a black brow and glinting eyes.

Then the Fifth-Former of Greyfriars resumed his pacing, his brows knitted, and his eyes on the ground.

"Blessed if I didn't expect to see Coker hit out!" remarked Bob Cherry. "But I suppose even old Horace understands that it wouldn't do."

"Fancy Coker understanding anything!" murmured Nugent.

"Poor old Coker!"

"It's a rotten position," said Harry Wharton. "I'm glad we're here, on



"If you give me another word of impertinence," roared Mr. Poynings, "I will box your ears!" "Why, you—you—" gasped Bob Cherry. "You cheeky cad—you kidnapping rotter—" Poynings raised his hands. But before he could strike, Bob Cherry's clenched fist landed on his hooked nose, and the secretary went spinning along the path. Crash!

(See Chapter 3.)

Coker's account; he needs somebody to stand by him, now. But—"

"But—" murmured Bob.

"That man Poynings wants us out of the house," said Harry. "He wants Coker out of it, for that matter. We know that it was Poynings who kidnapped Coker, to keep him away from here over the holidays; Coker knows it—Poynings knows that we know it. The proof isn't clear enough for the police to arrest him, but they've got their eye on him—and it's pretty certain that they will keep an eye on him. And yet—"

"And yet he's stuffed Coker's uncle, and nunky won't let Coker kick him out," said Nugent.

"Has he stuffed him?" said Wharton abruptly. "Old Mr. Coker knows it all as well as we do, I believe. That secretary chap has some hold over him—goodness knows what. And it must be a pretty powerful hold to make Uncle Henry keep the man in his service, knowing that the rotter kidnapped his nephew."

"Looks awfully shady," said Johnny Bull.

"It does."

"Not the kind of things to get mixed up in, really," added Johnny.

"No; but—"

"But we're standing by old Coker," said Bob. "He thinks he will be able to down that secretary chap somehow, and get shut of him. He doesn't look like succeeding, so far."

"Anybody but Coker could see that Uncle Henry has some giddy secret or other, and that Poynings knows it and is making use of it," said Nugent. "It's plain enough for anybody but Coker to see. And if that's the state of the case what can Coker do?"

"Nothing," said Bob.

"It must be something shady or the

man couldn't have a hold over his employer," said Frank. "And in that case the less Coker does the better. His uncle wouldn't thank him for bringing some shady secret out into the daylight."

"And in the circumstances, the old gentleman can't want us here," said Johnny Bull.

"It's rather rotten all round," said Harry Wharton. "But we're standing by poor old Coker."

"Yes, rather!"

"And there's one point," went on the captain of the Remove. "Poynings has some strong hold here, that's certain. But there's a weakness in his position somewhere. He took a lot of risk in getting Coker kidnapped to keep him away from Holly House over the Christmas holidays. He's liable to imprisonment if it's proved—and it may be proved. He wouldn't have done that if he'd felt safe. There's risk for him in Coker being here—and in us being here. Old Mr. Coker is ill, and not in a state of health or nerves to deal with an unscrupulous rascal like Poynings. Poynings may have deceived him somehow—made him believe he has something to fear, by some treachery or other. It's plain that he would go any length to get rid of Coker and us. And why should he care if he felt safe?"

"That's so," assented Bob.

"There's a giddy flaw in his armour somewhere," said Frank Nugent, with a nod. "That's what we ought to spot, if we can."

"If!" murmured Johnny Bull.

"Well, let's get out," said Bob; and the juniors went into the hall for their coats and hats.

Coker's Aunt Judith met them there. She was coming out of Mr. Henry Coker's study. Her face was very

troubled, though she immediately tried to smile as she saw the Greyfriars juniors.

"How is Mr. Coker this morning?" asked Harry.

"I am afraid my brother is no better," said Miss Coker, with a sigh. "I—I am afraid he is a little worse. The doctor is coming again this morning; but I cannot help thinking that Dr. Wallis is quite puzzled." She paused a moment. "I fear that you boys will have but a dull Christmas with us."

"Not at all, ma'am," said Bob.

"The not-at-allfulness is terrific, esteemed madam," said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

Miss Coker smiled; the nabob's remarkable English seemed to have a slightly enlivening effect upon her.

"I am very glad that you are here," she said. "Horace needs you, I am sure. If—if anyone should make an attempt to induce you to go, I hope you will take no heed."

And, with a nod and a smile, Miss Judith passed on. It was evident that her remark referred to Mr. Poynings. Harry Wharton & Co. went out into the keen, frosty air.

They glanced at the windows of Mr. Henry Coker's room as they went into the gardens. From that room french windows opened upon a little balcony, with steps down to the garden path.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's Coker's uncle!" murmured Bob.

A face was visible at the window—a pale, troubled face, looking out into the frosty sunshine.

It was the face of Coker's uncle, the master of Holly House.

The juniors raised their hats as they passed the window, and Mr. Coker gave them a nod and a faint smile.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 984.

They walked on, in a thoughtful mood, haunted by the recollection of that white, saddened face at the window. The mystery of Holly House weighed upon their spirits that fine, frosty, winter morning.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Asking for Trouble!

"MASTER WHARTON?"

"Oh! You!" said Harry. It was Mr. Poynings.

Harry Wharton & Co. had walked across the paddock, and were going out by the gate into the road when they came on the secretary.

They realised at once that the man had been watching them from a distance, and was waiting for them there. Mr. Poynings had something to say to the Remove fellows, which he preferred not to say in the house.

The Famous Five stopped and eyed the secretary grimly.

In the peculiar circumstances they were under the necessity of being civil to the man, rascal and kidnapper as they knew him to be. Under Mr. Henry Coker's roof they could not treat Mr. Henry Coker's secretary as they would have wished. They avoided the man; and they had found it easy to avoid him, so far. Now he had sought them out.

"What do you want?" asked Harry abruptly.

"Only a few words," said the secretary smoothly. "I am afraid that you young gentlemen have not a very high opinion of me."

"What do you expect us to think of a sneaking kidnapper?" demanded Johnny Bull.

"I have explained that I had no concern—"

"You've told lies, you mean," said Johnny.

"My employer, Mr. Coker, is satisfied, and that is all I need to concern myself about," said Mr. Poynings. "He has told you, I think, that he is satisfied."

"He has said so, certainly," said Harry.

"Do you venture to doubt his word, Master Wharton?"

"I don't intend to discuss the matter with you, Mr. Poynings," answered the captain of the Remove. "The less I have to say to you the better I like it. If you've got anything to say, get it off your chest!"

"And the sooner the better," said Bob.

"Quite so!" The secretary's manner was still smooth, though there was an unpleasant glint in his greenish-grey eyes. "It was quite unexpected for Master Horace to bring a mob of Lower School boys home with him for Christmas—very unexpected indeed. A holiday in a house of sickness cannot be very agreeable to you."

"That is our business."

"It is my business, also, as I am very much concerned for my employer, to whom I am devoted," said Mr. Poynings. "I suggest that you boys would do well to pass your Christmas elsewhere. Your own homes—"

Wharton's eyes gleamed.

"You suggest that we should leave Holly House?"

"Precisely."

"What are you afraid of?"

Poynings started.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 934.

"Afraid! I have nothing to be afraid of, so far as I am aware. What do you mean, Master Wharton?"

"I mean what I say," answered the captain of the Remove coolly. "You may or may not be able to stuff Mr. Henry Coker, but you can't stuff us. We know that you kidnapped Coker to keep him away from his uncle's house. It spoils your game, somehow, to have fellows here over the holidays. You had better take care, Mr. Poynings. You've failed to get rid of Coker—and you won't get rid of us very easily."

"The easiness will not be terrific, my esteemed and rascally Poynings," said Hurree Singh.

"I shall not bandy words with you," said the secretary icily. "I suggest that you should leave."

"Go and eat coke!" said Johnny Bull.

"You refuse?"

"Certainly we refuse!" said Wharton contemptuously.

"I will, if you desire, order a car to take you to the station after lunch," said the secretary. "There is an express from Waddon at half-past two. I advise you to catch that train."

"Keep your advice till it's asked for," said Bob Cherry.

"I should prefer this matter to be settled pleasantly and amicably. But if you decline to take my advice—"

"We do!"

"You will not be able to decline similar advice from Mr. Coker," said the secretary. "It is, in fact, Mr. Coker's desire that you should go, but, from motives of politeness, he has refrained from saying so."

"Rats!"

"Very good! You refuse? No doubt Mr. Coker will speak to you!" said Poynings grimly.

"You mean, you—you can somehow induce Coker's uncle to send Coker's friends away from the house?" said Harry, eyeing the man. "You are showing your hand pretty plainly, Mr. Poynings."

The secretary shrugged his shoulders.

"I have no more words to waste on an impertinent schoolboy," he said. "If you persist in forcing your undesired presence on a sick man, who only desires to be free of you—"

"You cheeky rotter!" roared Bob Cherry.

"You will be turned out of the house," said Mr. Poynings. "If necessary, you will be kicked out. Is that plain enough for you? And if you give me another word of impertinence I will box your ears!"

"Why, you—you—" gasped Bob Cherry. "You cheeky cad! You kidnapping rotter—"

Poynings raised his hand.

The next moment Bob Cherry's clenched fist landed on his hooked nose, and the secretary went spinning along the path.

Crash!

"Oh!" gasped Poynings.

He sprawled in the snow, panting with rage.

"Now, if you want some more, you've only got to say so, you sneaking cad!" roared Bob Cherry, glaring at the sprawling man.

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Johnny Bull.

Poynings leaped to his feet.

He made a rush at the juniors, his eyes gleaming with rage. In a moment he was seized in five pairs of hands and swept off the ground.

Bump!

Poynings yelled as he smote the ground. Probably it was his first experience of a Greyfriars bumping.

"Give him another!" exclaimed Nugent.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bump!

"Yow-ow! Oooop!" roared Poynings.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"One more for luck!" chortled Bob Cherry.

Bump!

"Come on!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. "That will do. Keep a civil tongue in your cheeky head after this, Mr. Poynings."

The Famous Five walked out at the gate, leaving the secretary sprawling in the snow, his hard face convulsed with rage.

The juniors chuckled as they walked away. It had been hard enough to treat a man whom they knew to be a scoundrel with civility, and now that Poynings had fairly asked for trouble, there had been great satisfaction in giving him a little of what he deserved.

But Harry Wharton's face became grave as the juniors walked on towards Waddon.

"I'm rather afraid we've put our foot in it, you chaps," he said.

"I'm jolly glad we bumped that cheeky rotter!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Yes; but—"

"He asked for it," said Bob Cherry.

"That's the trouble," said the captain of the Remove rather ruefully. "He asked for it, and I'm afraid that he wanted it, as an excuse to tell Coker's uncle for getting shut of us. I fancy he will make out that we've attacked him. He wants us to go, and he must invent some excuse. He can't very well tell his employer that he's afraid of us being here."

"Ha, ha! No!"

"I rather think we've played into his hands," said Harry. "Coker wants us to stay—and we want to stay on Coker's account. But if Mr. Coker asks us to go—"

"Pshaw!"

"That will put the lid on!" said Bob. "We couldn't stay if Mr. Coker makes it plain that he doesn't want us. Looks to me as if the secretary beast is going to score, after all."

"Well, we couldn't help it," said Harry. "If he was determined on trouble, he would have contrived it sooner or later. But I fancy it means a hint to clear, for us."

"I wish we'd bumped him harder!" growled Johnny Bull.

It was a pleasant enough ramble in the frosty December morning; but Harry Wharton & Co. could not help wondering what their greeting was likely to be when they came back to Holly House for lunch. One thing was certain, and that was, that if Mr. Secretary Poynings could contrive it, there would be a sudden termination of their Christmas with Coker. And it looked as if he would be able to contrive it.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Bunter on the Phone!

HORACE COKER met the juniors at lunch.

Coker was trying hard to be cheery and genial, but he was not succeeding very well.

He had asked the chums of the Remove to Holly House, intending to give them a rousing holiday there. Christmas, with Coker, was generally very jovial, not to say uproarious. Uncle Henry and Aunt Judith always gave him carte blanche. Coker was accustomed to filling the house with jolly

company; hospitality and hilarity were unlimited. There was plenty of hospitality now, but hilarity was conspicuous by its absence. The mystery that hung over the house, the shadow of suspicion and trouble, quite dashed Coker's usually exuberant spirits.

Coker had intended to telephone a message to Potter and Greene of the Greyfriars Fifth to come along, but he had not done so. Neither had he asked anyone else excepting the Famous Five. In the circumstances, he felt that he couldn't, and it was rather on his conscience that he had "landed" Harry Wharton & Co. with a Christmas of shadow and gloom.

Certainly, they were keeping up their spirits remarkably well. But Coker had not been able to carry out his hospitable intentions, and it worried him a little. At the same time, he was very anxious for them to remain with him. The problem he had to deal with was too much for him, and he had hopes that the juniors might be able to help him out. That in itself showed that Coker of the Fifth was in a very chastened mood.

At Greyfriars, his chief concern with the cheery chums of the Lower Fourth had been to keep them in their place—what Coker, in his high mightiness, considered their place. But that was all changed now. Coker was willing to accept help if they could give it—willing to admit that they might be able to help. That was a remarkable change in the great man of the Fifth.

The juniors enjoyed an ample lunch after their ramble in the keen, frosty air. The fare at Holly House was of the very best; Aunt Judith saw to that. Billy Bunter would have enjoyed that lunch. Even William George Bunter would have had to cry, "Hold, enough!" while there were still plenty of good things on the table.

Coker made a good lunch—the trouble on his mind had not affected his appetite. Aunt Judith ate very little, and although she strove to keep a smiling face to her nephew's guests, the clouds would continually chase away the smiles. Uncle Henry lunched in his own room with his secretary, and it was a relief to the Greyfriars fellows not to have to sit at the same table with Mr. Poynings. Feeling towards him as they did, it would have been extremely unpleasant to be forced to break bread with the rascally secretary.

Coker of the Fifth uttered hardly a word during the meal; his rugged face was clouded. After lunch he joined the juniors by the crackling log fire in the hall, frowning portentously as the door of his uncle's study opened and Mr. Poynings came out and crossed the hall. He turned his back on the secretary, who disappeared, with his silent tread, without taking any heed of the Greyfriars fellows.

"I hear that you kids handled that cad this morning," said Coker.

"We really couldn't help it, Coker," said Harry. "He fairly asked for it."

"Begged for it!" said Bob.

Coker nodded.

"That's all right. I'm glad you handled him. I'd handle him fast enough if it wasn't for Uncle Henry."

Coker knitted his rugged brow.

"I can't understand it," he muttered. "Why Uncle Henry lets that rotter hang on here is a mystery to me. It beats me hollow! He knows jolly well that Poynings had a hand in kidnapping me. I've told him so. He lets that scoundrel lead him by the nose. I can't imagine why."

The juniors were silent.

"Anybody might suspect that he had a hold over Uncle Henry," went on Coker.

"But he couldn't have, of course! That's impossible. Only, why does uncle let him hang on?"

"Hem!" murmured Bob.

It was so plain that Mr. Poynings had some mysterious hold over Coker's uncle that it was really remarkable that even Horace Coker could not understand that that was the state of affairs. Nevertheless, the juniors liked him all the better for his unshakable faith in Uncle Henry.

There was a buzz on the telephone bell.

Coker went to the telephone cabinet in the hall. A moment later he called to the captain of the Remove.

"It's for you, Wharton!"

"For me?"

"Yes, it sounds like Bunter's voice."

"Bunter!" repeated the captain of the Remove in astonishment.

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He went to the telephone. A fat voice came through as he put the receiver to his ear.

"I say, Wharton! Are you there, Harry, old chap?"

"Wharton speaking."

"Oh, all right! I'm Bunter."

"What do you want, Bunter?"

There was a fat chuckle over the wires.

"I'm speaking from Greyfriars."

"From Greyfriars?" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes, old chap!"

"What on earth are you doing at Greyfriars?"

"Looked in for my old pals," chuckled Bunter. "You remember, I was going to stay with you for Christmas, Wharton."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Yes; and you cleared off when you found that we were staying at the school, you fat bounder!"

"I've changed my mind," said Bunter.

"Changed my mind, old chap, and come back here for you."

"Better change it again, then."

"The fact is, I had to go," said Bunter. "Full up with engagements, you know—couldn't turn down all the people who wanted me for the hols. Quite impossible, you know! Still, I found that I could give you a few days, and I knew you'd miss me awfully."

"Rats!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Is that all?"

"Mrs. Kebble's told me that you've gone home with Coker."

"That's correct!"

"Well, I'm coming along."

"What?"

"Staying with you for Christmas, you know, as arranged," said Bunter. "The arrangement's still good, of course! Don't think I'd turn you down, old chap—especially at Christmas-time. I wouldn't."

"I'm afraid you'll have to," said Harry curtly. "We're with Coker, and you're not in the picture at all. I can't ask you to another fellow's house, even if I wanted to, and I don't."

"Oh, really, Harry—"

"Good-bye, Bunter!"

"Hold on!" squeaked the Owl of the Remove. "I don't mind your little jokes, Harry, old chap—"

"I'm not joking."

"I'm coming, all the same. Tell Coker to have a car at the station for me, will you?"

"No."

"Look here, Wharton—"

"Go and eat coke!" said Wharton testily. "You can't land yourself on Coker for Christmas, you fat duffer."

"I hope I'm not the fellow to land myself on anybody," said Bunter. "Lord Mauleverer has asked me to the Towers, and—"

"Better go, then!"

"D'Arcy, of St. Jim's, has simply begged me to come to Eastwood House."

"Let him have it, then, if he's asked for it."

"Beast! I'm sticking to my arrangement with you, of course!"

"Rats!"

"I'm catching the next train, and shall get to Waddon soon after dark. Is it a long walk to Holly House?"

"Yes."

"Then I shall want a car sent to the station."

"You can want."

"Of course, I expect you to fix it up with Coker."

"You can expect."

"If you don't want me for Christmas, Wharton—"

"I don't!"

"Beast!"

"Anything more?" inquired the captain of the Remove.

"The fact is, Wharton, I'm depending on you. I've turned down a lot of other invitations, owing to your pressing me to stay with you over the hols."

"Gammon!"

"Why, you cheeky rotter—"

"Good-bye, Bunter!"

"Look here, you cheeky ass, what do you think I'm going to do?" howled Bunter.

"Better go back to Bunter Court," said Harry, laughing. "Telephone for the Rolls-Royce from home, you know. If Bunter Court is crammed with royalties and there's no room for you, try your relation the duke, or your other relation the marquis."

"Yah!"

Wharton chuckled and hung up the receiver.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 924.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Order of the Boot!

"MR. COKER wishes to speak to you, sir!"

A servant gave Harry Wharton that message as he came away from the telephone cabinet.

"Very well," said Harry.

The captain of the Remove rejoined his chums by the log fire before going to Uncle Henry's room. They had heard the message given, and all the juniors looked serious. They could guess what it meant.

"That means that Poynings has put a spoke in the wheel," said Bob Cherry, in a low voice.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Yes; I suppose it's the finish here."

"Rotten!"

"What did Bunter want on the phone?" asked Nugent.

Wharton smiled.

"He went back to the school, thinking we were still there, and he wants to join us here."

"Cheeky ass!"

"The cheekfulness of the esteemed Bunter is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Is he coming?"

"Well, I suppose not; I've told the fat duffer off."

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Shouldn't wonder if he comes after all—and finds us gone again. We won't leave an address behind next time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Quite a merry Christmas for Bunter, tracking us from one place to another," chuckled Johnny Bull.

The juniors chortled. It was quite probable that William George Bunter would come along; Bunter was a stickler, and he was accustomed to taking chances in such matters. From the way affairs were moving now, however, it looked as if the Owl of the Remove would miss the party once more, when he arrived. Wharton's summons to Uncle Henry's room showed pretty plainly that Poynings had put his foot down; and there was little doubt that Mr. Poynings was the real master at Holly House.

Wharton's face was grave again as he tapped at the study door and entered.

Mr. Henry Coker was seated in a deep chair by the fire. The room was dusky, and in the dusk his face showed pale and worn.

Poynings was in the room.

He was affecting to busy himself with papers at the writing-table, and did not seem to notice the Greyfriars junior enter; but Wharton knew well enough that he was there to see that his orders, whatever they were, were carried out by his unfortunate employer.

The colour flushed a little into Mr. Henry Coker's pallid face as the captain of the Greyfriars Remove stood before him.

"You wish to speak to me, Mr. Coker?" said Harry.

"Yes, Wharton. I—I—"

Mr. Coker broke off, and turned his glance towards the secretary. Poynings gave him no heed.

The hapless old gentleman coughed, and resumed:

"I—I understand that you had some—some dispute with my secretary, Mr. Poynings, in the grounds this morning."

"Yes," said Harry.

"I—I was very sorry to hear it," said Mr. Coker.

"I am sorry that it occurred," said Harry. "But, really, it was scarcely possible to help it; and surely it was not

worth Mr. Poynings' while to mention such a trifle?"

The secretary glanced round, with a glimmer in his greenish eyes.

"I was brutally assaulted," he said acidly.

"Nothing of the kind," said Harry. "You were treated as you deserved for your insolence."

Poynings gritted his teeth.

"Let us have no dispute here, I beg," said Mr. Coker, in a faint voice.

"In the circumstances, Wharton, you will scarcely care to stay longer in my house, I feel."

Wharton breathed hard.

Much less than that would have been required to cause him to shake the dust of Holly House from his feet in any other circumstances. But the knowledge that he was being turned out by Poynings was sufficient to check Wharton's angry pride. It was the master of Holly House who was speaking, but Poynings was the man who had forced him to speak. The hands were the hands of Esau, but the voice was the voice of Jacob, so to speak.

"If you wish us to go, sir, you have only to say so, of course," said Harry quietly. "But we came here with your nephew, and Coker wishes us to stay. I believe that he may be in some danger from that scoundrel yonder if he is left here without friends."

"Wharton!"

"That man, sir, has kidnapped him once," said Harry. "Coker is no match for such a cunning rascal. I am bound to speak plainly, sir, as, for some reason, you are protecting a man whom we all know to be a criminal—whom the police suspect to be a criminal. I believe that your nephew will not be safe after we are gone."

Mr. Henry Coker's pale face flushed crimson.

"I—I cannot believe it!" he gasped. "And—and besides, I—I think my nephew will decide, after all, to spend Christmas at his father's home, when—I have spoken to him again. I—I hope that you boys, his friends, may accompany him there. A house of sickness is no place for you at this season of the year. In a word, Wharton, I—I am very sorry to say anything that may wound you, but—but—" His voice trailed away.

Wharton compressed his lips.

"But you wish us to go?" he said.

"Yes!" gasped Mr. Coker.

"There is nothing more to be said, then," said the captain of the Remove. "We shall go."

"I—I am sorry—"

"I am sure of that, sir," said Harry, with a compassionate look at the hapless old gentleman. "Please say no more. It is only our concern for your nephew that has kept us here. Good-bye, sir!"

And he left the study, without a look at the secretary, but conscious of the man's triumphant glance.

Coker was with the juniors in the hall when Wharton rejoined them. Coker, apparently, had a hint of what was toward.

"Anything up, Wharton?" he asked. Wharton coloured.

"Your uncle thinks we'd better clear, since that little trouble with Poynings," he said.

"My—my uncle thinks—" Coker crimsoned. "My uncle has turned my guests out? Great Scott!"

"It's that rotter Poynings' doings," said Bob Cherry. "Don't worry, old bean."

Coker was almost stutling with rage.

"I—I asked you fellows here, and—and my uncle is letting that villain turn you out!" he gasped. "By gad, I'm going to chip in here! You're jolly well not going!"

"But—"

"I say you're not going!" roared Coker. "Think I'm going to have my guests kicked out by that scoundrel? By gad, if Uncle Henry sticks to this, I'm going too, and I'll never set foot in the house again, I know that! You leave it to me!"

"But, I say—"

"Rot!"

Coker rushed across the hall to his uncle's door. He hurled it open and tramped in.

"Uncle Henry!" His voice boomed far and wide.

"Horace!"

"You're turning my guests out!" roared Coker.

"My dear boy—"

"Are you turning my guests out?" bawled Coker.

Harry Wharton & Co. looked at one another in great discomfort. The secretary's cool, quiet voice broke in:

"This violence, Master Horace—"

"You shut up, Poynings!" roared Coker.

"This violence will have a very bad effect on your uncle, Master Horace—"

"Mind your own business!"

Coker strode across to his uncle's chair. His rugged face was red with rage.

"This is about the limit!" he hooted. "I've stood all I'm going to stand from that rascal, Uncle Henry! Are my friends going? If they go, I go, and you'll never see me again. I promise you that. Perhaps you don't want me. If that's so, you've only got to say so. You've been a good uncle to me, but I've never asked you for anything, and I'm not the man to hang on where I'm not wanted. Say the word and I'll clear!"

"My dear—dear boy—"

"Am I to go?" roared Coker.

"I—I—"

"If my friends go, we all go together!" boomed Coker. "I tell you I'm fed-up!"

"My secretary has—has been ill-used—"

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"Horace!"

"Rubbish! I'm fed-up!" roared Coker. "So they're going? Well, I'm going, too! Good-bye, Uncle Henry—for the last time!"

And Coker, in a towering rage, swung round towards the door. There was a cry from the armchair by the fire.

"Horace! Stay!"

"Not unless my friends stay."

"Horace! I—I am not my own master in this!" groaned Mr. Coker. "Be patient, my boy. I—I will explain and—"

"Rot! You're master in your own house, I suppose?"

"No!" groaned Mr. Coker.

"Oh, rubbish! You're ill, and that villain is taking advantage of it," said Coker. "It's nerves—that's what it is. But if there's anything to explain, I'm ready to hear it."

"Leave us for a few minutes, Poynings—"

The secretary did not move.

"I think I had better remain while you are speaking to your nephew, Mr. Coker," he said.

"I—I beg you to leave me for a few minutes—"

"I think I had better remain."



Coker turned on Mr. Poynings with blazing eyes. "Your master's told you to get out," he said. "Outside! Sharp, before I lay hands on you!" "I——" "Are you going?" roared Coker. "No!" hissed Poynings. "I am not going! I——" He broke off suddenly as Coker rushed at him like a bull and swung him to the door. (See Chapter 5.)

Coker turned on the secretary with blazing eyes.

"Your master's told you to get out," he said. "Outside! Sharp, before I lay my hands on you!"

"I——" "Are you going?" roared Coker.

"No!" hissed Poynings. "I am not going! I——" Coker of the Fifth came at him with a rush like a bull.

The slight secretary fairly crumpled up in the grasp of the heftiest Fifth-Former at Greyfriars.

Coker swung him to the door, in spite of his savage resistance, and hurled him out into the hall.

"Kick him, you fellows!" panted Coker.

"Hear, hear?" chuckled Bob Cherry. "The kickfulness shall be terrific."

Mr. Poynings sprawled breathlessly on the polished oak. Five juniors gathered round him, and five boots came into collision with Mr. Poynings at the same moment.

"Dribble him!" shouted Johnny Bull. "Ha, ha, ha!"

The secretary scrambled to his feet. For a second he glared at the Greyfriars juniors with malevolent rage in his harsh face. Then he fled as they rushed on him, and five boots helped him to go. Yelling and panting, the black-mailer disappeared.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

The Secret!

HORACE COKER closed the door of the study, and turned back to his uncle. Mr. Henry Coker had sunk back into the depths of his chair, white as a sheet, seeming scarcely to breathe. Coker's heart smote him as he looked at his uncle's face.

Never had the old gentleman looked so ill and worn. Coker's long pent-up wrath had been a little assuaged; but the scene had had a terrible effect upon Mr. Coker.

"Uncle!" muttered the Fifth-Former. Mr. Coker panted.

"I am ill, Horace—I am ill. Calm yourself, my boy."

"I'm calm enough, uncle," said Coker. "You can't expect me to put up with that rotter's cheek. A kidnapper—"

"Where is he now?" breathed Mr. Coker. "He will be angry—"

"Not much doubt about that," agreed Horace. "As savage as a Hun, if you ask me."

Mr. Coker groaned.

"What the thump does it matter?" demanded the Fifth-Former. "I suppose you're not afraid of your own secretary?"

"I am."

"Wha-a-at?"

"You have forced me to speak, Horace," said the old gentleman, in a faint voice. "I shall now have to tell you what I wished you never to know. If only you had not come here this Christmas—for your own sake, my boy—for your own sake. Even now—if you will leave me, without asking questions—without bearing a grudge, Horace—I—"

"I'm not going to leave you in that scoundrel's hands," said Horace Coker determinedly. "If you're fed up with me, uncle, I'll clear, as I've said. But unless you put it like that, I'm not going to leave you, and my friends are not going to leave me."

"You know that I cannot put it like that, Horace. You are my nephew—more like a son to me; a very dear son. It is for your sake that I have borne

with that dastard—that I have allowed him to over-rule me, that I have suffered under his domination; the domination of a blackmailing scoundrel. Horace, that man has only to lift up his finger to ruin me."

"Uncle!"

"You have compelled me to tell you." Coker stared blankly at the shrunken old gentleman in the chair.

"I know that man has you under his thumb, somehow," he said. "But don't you tell me that you've ever done anything wrong to give him a hold over you, uncle. That's all rot."

"Never, Horace; but others will not judge me so charitably as my dear nephew."

"It's some mistake, some trifle that seems a lot to you because you're ill," said Coker.

"It has made me ill," sighed the old gentleman. "I was a robust man, for my age, till that dastard came into my employ. Would that I had never seen him!"

"But what—"

"Need I tell you more, Horace? You know now that I fear that man—that he can ruin me. That is enough."

Coker shook his head.

"It's not enough," he said. "I tell you, the man can't have any real hold over you. He couldn't, unless you committed some crime. No good telling me you've done that—I should know you were wandering in your mind."

Mr. Coker smiled faintly.

"Tell me what it is, uncle, and I'll get you out of it," said Coker, encouragingly. "You've let yourself be worried into an illness, and that makes everything seem worse. If you were well and strong, you'd handle that

sneaking rascal fast enough. 'Tell me the trouble, and I tell you I'll see you through somehow.'

"You would scarcely understand, Horace—"

"Well, I know I ain't so bright as some fellows," said Coker honestly. "I've got brains—there are some things that other chaps can't touch me in. Football, for instance, and cricket. But old Prout doesn't think much of me in Form work. Still, I've got brains. Just spin me the yarn, and I'll see what can be done."

"I am in that man's power."

"You think you are," said Coker. "But that's because you're ill and run down, uncle. You can't be really, because you're a white man, and true blue all through. The man's a black-mailer, and he can be put in chokey for it, as well as kidnapping. I dare say he's been screwing money out of you."

"Yes."

"Then he can be charged with black-mail, and arrested!" exclaimed Coker triumphantly.

"It would be ruin for me."

"Rubbish!" said Coker.

"If he were in dock, Horace, he would tell all he knows."

"And what does he know about you?" said Coker. "All gammon! I know you, Uncle Henry, and Aunt Judith knows you. We know you're one of the best. Think that I don't know that you stood my fees at Greyfriars when the pater was hard hit? Haven't you been a jolly good uncle to me, ever since I was a little nipper? What's the good of telling me you've ever done anything to be ashamed of? Rot!"

The old gentleman's eyes dwelt affectionately upon his burly nephew.

"Men may make mistakes, Horace, without intending wrong. The world does not judge charitably."

"Nothing to be ashamed of in making mistakes," said Coker. "I've made mistakes myself. What's the trouble?"

"Disgrace and ruin, if that man chooses!" said Mr. Coker faintly.

"Bosh!"

"It is true, Horace."

"What can he do?"

The old gentleman breathed painfully.

"Horace! I have told you enough—too much! Let me keep what little respect you may have left for me. My dear boy, leave this house this afternoon—go to your father's, and take your friends with you. It is only for a time—for a time. Some day I shall be free of that man. Leave me to bear this alone."

"Never!"

"My dear boy—"

"Never!" repeated Coker. "I'm going to see you through this, uncle, and get you clear of that rascal."

"You cannot."

"I jolly well can, and will!" said Coker determinedly. "It's up to me. You're a sick man, uncle, and no match for a cunning rascal like that. But I am—and I'll jolly well show him." Coker clenched his hands. "Tell me what you're afraid of."

"He holds a letter," said Mr. Coker in a low voice. "A letter which I should have destroyed—but did not. A letter written some years ago by—by a man whom I helped in a difficulty. He purloined it from a secret drawer in my desk."

"The rotten thief!" said Coker. "He has no right to the letter, whatever it is."

"None; but so long as it is in his hands I am helpless."

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"But I don't understand," said Coker. "How could a letter, written to you by a man you'd helped, do you any harm, if it was published all over the kingdom, and shouted from the giddy house-tops?"

"The man was a man whom—from a legal point of view—I ought never to have helped, Horace. He had broken the law—he was a bankrupt swindler in the City—at least, he was called such. I had known him all his life, and I knew that he was the victim of others—that he was the scapegoat who had to suffer for their sins. But to the law he was responsible. He was down and out—sought by the police with a warrant for his arrest—and I—I—I helped him to escape. I gave him money to get abroad. I helped him to a new life out there. Now he is an honest and respectable man, under a new name, in a distant colony. But—but if it should be known, I am answerable for what I did. I broke the law, Horace, in helping Arthur Statham to escape his penalty."

"Oh!" gasped Coker.

"He wrote to me a letter full of gratitude for what I had done for him—a letter signed by his own name, the name of a man still wanted by the police."

"Oh," said Coker again.

"In his letter enough is mentioned to make known all that I did—my breaking of the law, Horace. That letter is in Poyning's hands. He has stolen it, and he is keeping it. He has only to hand it over to the police, and I am a ruined man. I do not regret what I did, for to my knowledge the poor fellow was a wronged and deceived man. But from the legal point of view, Horace, I am a man who helped a hunted criminal to escape the law. And the letter is proof, and Poyning holds it."

"The awful rotter!"

"Now you know," muttered the old gentleman.

"It was just like you, uncle," said Coker. "I jolly well knew you'd done nothing wrong."

"It would be called wrong—"

"Oh, that's all rot! It's right to stand by a pal who's down and out," said Coker. "Of course, it was a mistake—but what's a mistake? And it happened years ago, too. When Poyning stole that letter and began to blackmail you, you should have tackled him at once. Grasp the nettle, you know."

"It was then that my illness began," muttered Mr. Coker. "Had I been in my usual health, perhaps—" He broke off.

"The man could be charged with stealing the letter," said Coker. "He can't make it public without admitting that."

"He cares little for that. But I—"

"He stands to lose more than you do," argued Coker. "Whatever happened to you, uncle, he would have to stand his trial as a thief and a blackmailer. He wouldn't dare!"

The old gentleman shook his head.

"My advice is kick him out, and defy him to do his worst," said Coker. "I'm sure he won't dare do anything."

For a moment Mr. Henry Coker's face grew grimmer. He sat up in his chair, and a gleam came into his sunken eyes. It seemed, for the moment, as if he derived energy from his energetic nephew.

But the next moment he pressed his hand to his heart and sank back, pale as chalk.

"Uncle!" exclaimed Coker.

The old gentleman made a feeble gesture.

"I am ill, my boy—my heart is weak. I cannot face it. I cannot face anything now. I have lost all my strength—all my courage. Leave me now, my boy. I cannot bear more."

"Uncle—"

"Call Judith!" muttered the old gentleman.

Coker hurried from the room and called to Aunt Judith. The old lady hurried in to her brother. In the hall Coker came on Harry Wharton & Co. The juniors were waiting for him.

"I suppose we'd better see about a train, Coker," said the captain of the Remove, hesitatingly.

Coker shook his head.

His brain was almost in a whirl now that he knew the secret of the power the rascally secretary held over his hapless uncle. To go and leave the field clear for Poyning, was impossible; and yet—what was to be done was a mystery to Coker.

"Hold on," he said. "I—I've got on now to what's the matter, and—and it wants thinking out. Hang on a bit, anyhow, while I think it out."

"Any old thing!" said Bob Cherry.

Coker moved away, his rugged brow knitted. Harry Wharton & Co. exchanged uncertain looks. They, like Coker, hated the idea of clearing off and leaving their enemy in possession of the field. But after receiving dismissal from the master of the house, it was scarcely possible to stay.

"Let's get out for a bit," said Bob.

And the Famous Five put on their coats and hats, and went out into the falling December dusk.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter Butts In!

"I SAY, you fellows!"
"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"
"Bunter!"
"My hat!"

It was William George Bunter. The fat figure of the Owl of the Remove loomed up in the dusk on the country road, near the gate of Holly House, as the Famous Five came out.

They stared at him.

The juniors had forgotten Bunter; but evidently William George had not forgotten them, for here he was.

The fat junior blinked at them through his big spectacles.

"I say, you fellows, here we are again!" he announced.

"You fat duffer!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"What the thump are you doing here?" snapped the captain of the Remove.

"I've come," explained Bunter.

"Well, now you've come, you'd better go!" growled Bob.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"The departfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed and fatheaded Bunter."

"Oh, really, Inky—"

"You silly owl!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, in great exasperation.

"Well, I like that!" exclaimed Bunter indignantly. "After pressing me to stay with you over Christmas—"

"Fathead!"

"I've turned down a crowd of invitations," said Bunter hotly, "just to stick to my old pals."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"I suppose you can fix it with Coker," said Bunter. "He will be glad to see a friend of yours—what?"

"Ass!"

"Well, I'm here," said Bunter. "Let's go in. I suppose Coker will be civil; and I can stand his Aunt Judy and his Uncle Henry. And I can tell you I'm hungry."

"Br-r-r-r!"

"I've walked from the station," said the Owl of the Remove.

"Now walk back again."

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"You silly ass!" said Wharton.

"We're leaving the place ourselves to-day; we're not staying on, after all."

Bunter closed one eye.

"Go it!" he said.

"What?"

"Pile it on!" said Bunter, with a fat grin.

"You frabjous ass, we're going by the next train!" hooted Bob Cherry.

"Gammon!"

Bob raised one foot, and William George Bunter dodged back in alarm.

"Here, no larks!" he exclaimed.

"Chuck it, you know! You're not in the Remove passage at Greyfriars now, Bob Cherry. I think even you might have some manners on a Christmas holiday."

"Oh, kill him, somebody!" said Bob.

"Of course, you can't stuff me!" said Bunter. "You're not going; you're staying. And I'm staying."

Harry Wharton laughed impatiently.

"Well, you can settle that with Coker," he said. "Come on, you chaps!"

"I say, you fellows, you come in with me, you know," said Bunter anxiously. "I—I can't go in without you, you know."

"Go and eat coke!"

"Have you told Coker I'm coming?"

"No, ass!"

"You ought to have told him, Wharton."

"You can tell him yourself," said the captain of the Remove grimly. "My belief is that he will kick you out as soon as he sees you. I know I would in his place!"

"Same here!" agreed Johnny Bull.

"The samefulness is terrific."

"Look here, you fellows, you're bound to see me through!" exclaimed Billy Bunter, in great indignation.

"We'll see you through the doorway when Coker gets going with his boot!" said Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

"Come on!" said Harry.

"Look here, what am I going to do?" roared Bunter.

"Any jolly old thing you like!" grinned Bob. "It's a free country. Good-bye, Bunter!"

The Famous Five walked on towards Waddon. William George Bunter stood in the road and glared after them with a glare that almost cracked his spectacles.

Bunter had not, perhaps, expected a warm welcome at Holly House. Warm welcomes were not necessary to Bunter; he was satisfied so long as he was not kicked out. But on the present occasion it seemed probable that he would be kicked out. Even William George Bunter did not quite know how to deal with a drastic reception like that.

Obviously there was no help to be expected from the Famous Five. They were in no mood to be bothered by the Owl of the Remove.

"Beasts!" groaned Bunter.

He stood irresolute for some minutes, and then rolled on into the gateway of Holly House. Bunter was, in fact, in a rather difficult position. He had expended his last ready cash on the railway fare to Waddon. Bunter had often taken chances like that; and now it

looked as if he had taken chances once too often. Unless he could, somehow or other, butt into Holly House, it seemed that Bunter would be seriously in want of a lodging for the night. Camping-out on Christmas Eve was really not to be thought of. Holly House was the only alternative.

Bunter rolled on rather dismally towards the house. The lighted windows gleamed hospitably through the December gloom. Under the trees, on the path, a sound of tramping footsteps came to Bunter's ears, and he discerned a burly figure tramping to and fro with bent head.

"Coker!" murmured the Owl of the Remove.

It was Coker of the Fifth—tramping there, thinking out his problem. Billy

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Bunter blinked at him dubiously. Coker of the Fifth at Greyfriars had a short way with fags. His way was likely to be even shorter with an uninvited guest who butted in at a moment of deep trouble and anxiety. Bunter watched him for some minutes, and then rolled on, screwing up his fat face into an ingratiating grin.

"I say, Coker—"

Coker of the Fifth started and stared round.

"Hallo! Who's that?"

"It's me!"

Coker stared at him.

"Bunter!" he ejaculated.

"Yes, old chap!" said Bunter affectionately. "I—I suppose Wharton mentioned that I was coming?"

"He didn't!"

"Forgot, I suppose," said Bunter. "You see, it was arranged for me to come here with my friends—"

"It wasn't!"

"Hem! You see—"

"They're not your friends," said Coker. "And I'm certainly not. What the thump are you butting in here for?"

"Hem! I—I—"

"Get out!"

"The—the fact is, Coker—"

"Get out!"

"Oh, really, Coker—"

"Buzz off, you fat idiot!"

"Oh dear!"

"Are you waiting to be kicked?" growled Coker.

Bunter backed away a little.

"I—I say, Coker, I—I've come, you know," he stuttered. "Wharton urged me to come here, you know—"

"Rats!"

"Of course, if I'm not welcome—"

began Bunter, with an air of dignity.

"Exactly! You're not!"

Bunter coughed.

"The—the fact is, Coker, old chap, I—"

"The fact is that if you call me old chap I'll bang your silly, cheeky head on a tree!" said Coker. "I've asked Wharton and his friends here for a special reason; but I'm not filling my uncle's house with a mob of fags! Get out!"

"But—"

gasped Bunter.

"Are you going?" snapped Coker.

"You—you see—I say— Yaroooh!" roared Bunter, as the Fifth-Former grasped him by the collar and spun him round.

Crash!

Coker had a heavy boot. It seemed to Billy Bunter that Coker's foot weighed about a ton. The Owl of the Remove fairly flew.

"Yooooop!"

Bunter disappeared into the shadows roaring.

"There's another for you if I see you again!" snorted Coker.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

Bunter vanished, and Horace Coker shoved his hands in his pockets and resumed his tramping to and fro on the snowy path. Billy Bunter trailed away in the shadows dismally. He had rather wondered what his reception would be like at Holly House.

Now he knew!

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

What Bunter Saw!

"O H DEAR!"
Thus William George Bunter.

Coker of the Fifth probably supposed that Bunter was gone, if he remembered the Owl's unimportant existence at all. But Billy Bunter was not gone.

In point of fact, Bunter couldn't go. In expending his last cash on the railway ticket to Holly House, Bunter had burned his boats behind him, so to speak. The hospitality of Holly House was absolutely necessary to him, for the night at least. The alternative was to spend a snowy night tramping on windy roads, or curled up under a frozen hedge. Bunter realised that he had taken chances once too often. But it was too late to think of that now. He had to get into Holly House—welcome or unwelcome. Once he was

installed within the walls of the building, those beasts—Harry Wharton & Co.—would at least have to let him stay the night; they couldn't turn him out in the snow. They would square it with Coker somehow. But Bunter did not venture anywhere near the door. One application of Coker's heavy boot was enough for him.

His idea now was to get into the house somehow, and instal himself in Wharton's room as soon as he could find it. Once there, he was prepared to lock himself in if necessary. Bunter felt that this was not a time to be too particular. Not that he ever had been particular in such matters.

One thing was quite certain, he couldn't stay out in the December wind and the falling snow. Another thing was certain, that he couldn't enter the house with Coker's heavy boot like a lion in the path. But there were other ways and means; and any ways and means were welcome to the hapless Owl of the Remove in this extremity.

He had scouted cautiously about the house and found the steps to the balcony outside Mr. Coker's room. He mounted the steps, and stopped on the balcony and blinked in through the french windows. The room inside was dark, save for the glow of the log fire on the open hearth. If the room was unoccupied, this was Bunter's chance; and it looked unoccupied. He turned the handle of the french windows cautiously, pushed the glass door open a few inches, and listened.

There was no sound from the dusky room save the crackling of the glowing logs.

Bunter's fat heart beat fast.

He was feeling a good deal like a burglar. But he had decided that this was the only way, and he did not hesitate.

Softly and cautiously he trod into the room and closed the french window behind him.

Then he crept across to the log fire and warmed his fat hands at it. And then he gave a jump.

Near the fire, in a deep chair, an old gentleman lay fast asleep, his feet on a hassock, his head on a cushion. The firelight played on his face, and Bunter recognised Coker's Uncle Henry, whom he had seen several times at Greyfriars on visits to Coker of the Fifth.

Mr. Coker was fast asleep, quite unaware that Bunter had crept surreptitiously into the room. Bunter blinked at him through his big spectacles, and drew back behind the chair to keep out of sight if the old gentleman should awake.

"Oh dear!" murmured Bunter.

He was in the house; that was so much to the good. But it was only too probable that if he was discovered there he would receive short shrift. That was quite certain if it was Horace Coker who discovered him. Bunter had gained an entry; but his last state was not much better than his first, as he dimly realised.

There was a glimmer of light under the door of the room; the hall was lighted. That was Bunter's way to the quarters of the Famous Five; and it was a way he could scarcely take without discovery.

As he stood hesitating, there was a step in the hall outside Mr. Henry Coker's study door.

Bunter's heart jumped.

If it was Coker coming in to see his uncle—The fat junior glared round wildly for a place of concealment.

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Fortunately, that was a simple matter. Two or three large screens stood about the room to shelter the invalid from possible draughts. Billy Bunter dodged behind the nearest, which stood across a corner of the room near the fireplace.

He was scarcely out of sight when the door opened and the footsteps came into the room. Then there was a sudden flood of light as the electric light was turned on.

Bunter scarcely breathed behind the screen.

Was it Coker? The footsteps did not sound like Horace Coker's heavy tread.

Bunter heard the steps cross the room—softly, almost stealthily. The newcomer stopped, and stood looking down at the sleeping man in the chair. The hidden Owl of the Remove ventured to peer round a corner of the screen. A slightly built man, dressed in black, with a hooked nose, stood with his profile turned to Bunter, and the Owl of the Remove knew then who he was. He had seen Mr. Poynings at Greyfriars.

Bunter's head backed again out of view. The hard, cold face of the secretary, his glinting, greenish eyes, had a very unpleasant effect on the Owl of the Remove. He would almost rather have run into Coker of the Fifth than into Mr. Poynings.

There was a stir in the deep arm-chair; the sleeper's eyes opened. Bunter heard the voice of Mr. Coker.

"You, Poynings?"

"Yes, sir."

"I—I have been asleep." Mr. Coker's voice was feeble. "I am feeling very low to-day, Poynings, very low indeed."

"No doubt on account of the disturbance caused by your nephew and his friends, Mr. Coker."

"No, no."

"I think so, sir," said the secretary smoothly. "I am sure so. I am sure you are worse since Master Horace came home."

"No, no! Not at all, Poynings."

"After what has happened to-day, sir, I cannot consent to remain in the house if Master Horace remains."

The old gentleman made a movement. "Speak plainly, Poynings, now that we are alone! There are no ears to hear if you use plain English."

The secretary's eyes glittered.

"Very well, sir; I will speak plainly since you desire it. I insist upon your nephew leaving the house this very day, and taking his friends with him."

"I—I have asked him—advised him—"

"You must do more than ask and advise," said the secretary coldly. "He has laid hands on me. That finishes it. You must order him to go, and see that your order is carried out."

Behind the screen, Billy Bunter's little round eyes grew rounder and wider. The fat junior listened to that extraordinary conversation in utter wonder.

Obviously there was something going on at Holly House of which Bunter had never dreamed. This was remarkable language for a secretary to be using to his employer.

"Is that what you have come in to tell me, Poynings?" asked Mr. Henry Coker, in a bitter tone.

"You have forgotten, sir, that it is

time for you to take your medicine," said Poynings.

"I had not forgotten, but it is of little use," sighed the old gentleman. "It does me no good. Dr. Wallis is very kind; but I am sure that he does not know what is the matter with me. Indeed, more than once I have felt my heart attacks come on more severely after taking the medicine."

"Imagination, my dear sir. Dr. Wallis has attended you for twenty years, I understand; he should surely know your constitution. Certainly he seems a kind and devoted man."

"It is true—quite true; I should certainly trust his judgment," said Mr. Coker. "But I feel low—very low indeed. Poynings, I am going to make an appeal to you."

"Indeed, sir?" said the secretary, with a sneer.

"You have a certain power over me," said Mr. Coker. "You hold the letter written me by Arthur Statham; I know well the harm it would do me if you placed it in a certain quarter. But you have done very well in my employ, Poynings—you have had five hundred pounds from me already—cannot you be satisfied? Leave me in peace—leave my nephew with me—cease this wicked persecution of a man who has never harmed you. Even you must have a rag of conscience."

"Have you finished, sir?"

"Yes," sighed Mr. Coker.

"I am glad of that. I have heard all this before, and have no desire whatever to hear it all over again."

The old gentleman sat upright in his chair. The callous, contemptuous tone of the secretary seemed to sting him, for once, into angry resentment.

"You scoundrel!" he panted.

"Measure your words, sir."

"By gad!" panted Mr. Coker. "I am disposed to take my nephew's advice, and have you thrown from my doors—turned out like a dog. After all, what can you do? Disgrace me, if you choose, and go to prison yourself as a thief and a blackmailer. Horace advised me to take the risk. By gad! I have a mind to call him in now, and beg him to deal with you as you deserve, you unscrupulous rascal!"

The secretary stepped back a pace, his colour changing. The man was a craven at heart.

"Mr. Coker—"

"Silence!" rapped out the old gentleman. "Listen to me. My nephew shall not go—his friends shall not go! Provoke me further, and I will take the chance. I will take the risk of breaking with you, and defy you to do your worst! You hear me? You at least will go to prison, as the rascal you are—rascal and blackmailer and kidnapper—whatever may happen to me. One word more of insolence, and I call in my nephew to throw you from the house!"

The secretary breathed hard.

"Calm yourself, sir," he said in a low, smooth voice. "If I have angered you I beg your pardon. I will say nothing more of Master Horace. You are master in your own house, sir, and I am at your orders. You are disturbed now, sir; you will be better when you have taken your medicine."

"Remember what I have said," answered Mr. Coker, and he sank back in his chair, as if exhausted by his effort.

"I will remember, sir."

"Now give me my medicine and leave me."

"Very good, sir."

The secretary crossed to a little table

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Billy Bunter peered round a corner of the screen, and his eyes almost started from his head, as Mr. Poynings drew a small phial from his waistcoat pocket and added a number of drops to the medicine in the wineglass. (See Chapter 8.)

on which stood a bottle and glasses on a tray. The movement brought him into the view of the fat, scared junior crouching behind the screen in the corner. Bunter crouched lower, but his eyes were still fastened on the secretary's back as Poynings stood at the table.

He saw the man measure out a dose of medicine from the bottle into a wineglass. And then Bunter's eyes almost started from his head as the secretary drew a small phial from his waistcoat-pocket and added a number of drops to the medicine in the wineglass. He could see only a part of Poynings' face, as it was turned away from him, but he could see the hard, evil, ruthless expression there. Billy Bunter's heart almost died within him as he watched in frozen horror.

The phial disappeared into Poynings' pocket again. The old gentleman, shrunk back in the deep chair, had seen nothing. The secretary carried the glass to his master.

"Here is your medicine, sir."

"Thank you!"

Mr. Coker took the wineglass with a shaking hand. Bunter, behind the screen, crouched in a trance of horror.

He knew what the secretary had done. Either a drug or actual poison had been added to Mr. Coker's medicine, and the old gentleman was about to swallow it. Poynings' stealthy manner, and the evil in his face, left no doubt as to what he was doing. Even the obtuse Owl of the Remove had not the slightest doubt. The Owl of the Remove dared not betray his presence—all the more since he had seen Poynings' action. But at that terrible moment even Billy Bunter, for once, forgot personal considerations.

Crash!

The screen toppled over, falling with a crash on the floor. Another crash followed as the wineglass dropped from Mr. Coker's startled hand and was

smashed into a hundred pieces. And Poynings, with amazement and rage and terror in his face, swung round towards the Owl of the Remove. The look on his face was more than enough for Bunter. He made a wild rush across to the door to escape, and the secretary made a fierce clutch at him and grabbed him by the collar.

"What—what—what—" Mr. Coker was stammering helplessly.

"Yaroooh! Leggo!"

Bunter, scared almost out of his fat wits, struggled frantically in the grasp of the secretary.

Crash went a chair, and crash went the little table on which the medicine bottle stood. Crash, crash! Bunter, in his terror, seemed to have the strength of two or three fellows, and he tore himself away at last from the grasp of the gasping secretary. Poynings grasped at him again, and Bunter, in utter desperation, lowered his head and butted at the secretary, landing fair and square on Poynings' waistcoat. The man in black went over as if a battering-ram had struck him.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter.

There was a fiendish howl from Poynings as he sprawled on the floor. He was sprawling on the broken fragments of the medicine bottle!

He was on his feet again in a few seconds. But those few seconds were more than enough for Bunter. He charged across to the door, tore it open, and rushed out into the hall.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Outside!

"BUNTER!"

Horace Coker fairly glared at the fat junior.

Coker of the Fifth had come in, and he was standing by the log-fire in the hall when the sudden uproar in

his uncle's room drew his attention. He jumped as the door of Mr. Coker's room flew open and Billy Bunter flew out.

"Bunter!" he stuttered.

"Ow! Help!"

"You fat rascal! What—"

Coker of the Fifth bore down on Bunter. He seized the Owl of the Remove by the collar and shook him like a dog shaking a rat. Bunter howled and spluttered.

"Yaroooh! Leggo! Whoop!"

"How did you get in here?" roared Coker.

"Yooooop!"

"You fat rascal! You—"

"Yow-ow! Leggo! I—"

Shake, shake, shake!

"Gr-r-r! Gug-gug! Yoop! Leggo! Help!"

"Out you go!" snapped Coker.

"James, open the front door—sharp!"

The startled manservant threw open the big door. Outside was darkness and powdering snow. With a swing of his powerful arm Coker of the Fifth whirled Bunter away. His grip was a good deal more powerful than that of the secretary, and Bunter was like an infant in his hands. The Owl of the Remove spluttered and stuttered wildly as he went.

In the doorway of Mr. Coker's room the pale, enraged face of the secretary appeared, staring out. But Mr. Poynings calmed himself as he saw Bunter struggling in the grasp of Horace Coker.

"Who—who is it, Master Horace?" he panted. "He—he was hidden in your uncle's room—doubtless a thief!"

"Rubbish!" snapped Coker. "It's a Greyfriars kid—a cheeky young rotter who's butted in where he's not wanted. He's going."

"I—I say, Coker— Yaroooh!"

"Out you go!"

Bunter went.

(Continued on page 17.)

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 934.

"CHRISTMAS AT MERRY MANNER!"

(Continued from previous page.)

breathlessly. "There's a ghost-hunt on the programme! The Wicked Barron is hear!"

"Sure it isn't the Head, playing a return jape on us?" said Merry. "It's just the sort of thing he would do."

"My hat!" said Jack Jolly. "I never thought of that. But we'll soon find out if it was the Head, or a genuine spook."

The juniors scrambled into their clothes, and Jack Jolly ran up to the atticks, where the Head slept, and peeped into his bed-room.

Doctor Birchmell was curled up in bed, groaning and moaning in the throws of a nightmare. It was quite clear that he was not responsible for the shindy in the junior's bed-room.

Jack Jolly rejoined his chums on the landing below.

"It wasn't the Head," he said. "The old buffer's soundo. It must have been a real ghost!"

"We heard it go clanking down the stairs," said Bright.

"Did you, by Jove? After it, then!"

The juniors dived down the dark staircase. The Major bawled to them to come back, saying that he simply dare not remain alone in a haunted room. Heedless of his cries of terror, Jack Jolly & Co. rushed on.

A queer sort of instinct led them to the old oke-panelled dining-room. To their astonishment, they saw on entering that the candlestix were lighted in their sconces; and seated at the table, enjoying a harty repast by candlelight, was a weird figger in armer. He seemed to have stepped straight out of the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth. His vizer was thrown back, and he was gobbling away as if for a wager.

The juniors stood spellbound on the threshold, scarcely able to beleave their eyes.

"My only aunt!" ejaculated Jack Jolly. "First time I knew that ghosts were in the habbit of feeding at table!"

At the sound of Jack's voice, the figger in armer sprang to his feet with a start. He carried a sword at his side, and the juniors feared, for one pannicky moment, that he would draw it, and cleave them to the chine.

Instead of drawing his sword, however, the armed night gave a yelp of alarm, and darted towards the wall.

There was a sudden click, and, hay presto! the night had vanished into the night.

"Quick!" shouted Merry. "He's opened one of the pannels, and scooted into the secret passidge! After him!"

The fewgitive had closed the pannel behind him, but Merry knew just where it was. He clicked it open, and the juniors clambered through, and disappeared into the cavernous gloom of the secret passidge.

Luckily, Jack Jolly carried an electrick-torch. He switched it on, and the juniors could see their quarry, bolting in frantick haste along the passidge.

Handycapped by his heavy armer, the night found it difficult to make progress. He tripped over his spurs, and went sprawling; and his pursuers hurled themselves upon him like a pack of ravvening wolves.

"Gadzooks! Methinks my Rain of Terror is over!" groaned the armed night. "It's a fair cop!" he added, in modern English.

Jack Jolly & Co. dragged their captive back through the secret passidge, and into the dining-room. Then they bound him, hand and foot, to a chair; and Merry shouted for his father.

"Come down, pop! We've captured the giddy ghost!"

"Have—have you disarmed him, my boy?" came in tremmulus tones from above.

"Yes, rather! And bound him hand and foot into the bargain!"

"Then I will come down!" said the Major, with a fine show of curridge. "Never let it be said that I am afraid of any man, so long as he is helpless and defenceless!"

The servants had been aroused by the hubbub, and so had the Head; and they all came crowding into the dining-room in the Major's wake.

"Who are you, sir?" boomed the Major, striding up to the helpless figger in the chair. "Are you responsible for the ghostly pranks which have been played in my house to-night, and on previous nights?"

"Yes, sir," said the armed man, meekly. "I will tell you my story. I am Mr. Howse-Hunter, of no fixed abode. Long ago, I set curvetus eyes on Merry Manner, and resolved to gain possession of this fine old mansion. I am a poor man, Major, and could not afford to buy you out; so I decided to impersonate the Ghost of the Wicked Barron, and to haunt the house nightly. I hoped that my ghostly anticks would sooner or later drive you from the house. Then, as people will not live in haunted houses, I should have been able to purchass this place for a meer song. All went well with my plans until to-night, when your schoolboy guests pursued and captured me. Nothing can serve me now, save open confession."

"And that shall not serve you, you villane!" roared the Major, shaking his fist in the face of Mr. Howse-Hunter. "You had the brazen ordassity to throw me out of bed—twice! I'll learn you! Tellyfone for the perlice, somebody!"

Mr. Howse-Hunter axcepted his fate with quiet resignation. He had been homeless so long that even a prison sell would be better than having no roof over his head.

"Do your worst!" he said defiantly.

The Major remained with the captive, pending the arrival of the perlice. And Jack Jolly & Co. yawned their way back to bed, feeling that they had deserved well of their country.

They had laid the Ghost of the Wicked Barron once and for all, and had cleared up the dark and sinnister mistery which had cast a shaddo over Merry Manner so long.

What a thrilling tail they would have to tell at St. Sam's, when they returned to that famus seat of learning at the conclousion of their Christmas adventures!

THE END.

Look out for another St. Sam's "shocker" next week, chums, entitled: "THE FORM MASTER'S SECRET!" Its one long scream from beginning to end.)

Do You Know That?



Interesting Tit-Bits

for the Footer Fan!



THERE is no such trophy actually as the English Cup. Although it is invariably referred to as such, the real title is the Football Association Challenge Cup.

A professional footballer may, if he feels so disposed, refuse to turn out for his club on either Christmas Day or Good Friday without incurring any penalty. The authorities insist on this clause being put in every footballers' agreement, but not many of them avail themselves of it.

The Wednesday of Sheffield claim the distinction of being the oldest club in their section, and will this year celebrate their diamond jubilee. Neither Sheffield Wednesday or Sheffield United
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were among the original members of the League, however.

There is a lot of talk about the "W" formation in attack, but West Ham can claim to have an "H" formation in defence, the goalkeeper being Hufton, and the full-backs Hebden and Hodgson.

It is nearly twenty years since an amateur player was in a side which won the Cup. The last amateur who appeared in a Cup-winning team was the Rev. K. R. G. Hunt, who played for the Wolves when they gained the trophy in 1908.

Vivian Gibbins, the West Ham forward, can certainly claim to be a busy footballer. In the course of one fortnight recently he played for West Ham

United in a First Division match, for London in Brussels, for the English amateurs in Ireland, and against the Army at Shorncliffe.

Newcastle United have always shown a fondness for players brought out by the Glasgow Rangers club, and at the present time have three men on their books who were secured from the Rangers—McKay, Low, and McDonald.

Jock Gibson, the Hull City left full-back, is the only prominent London player who was born in America. His birthplace was Philadelphia, but his parents moved to Scotland when he was still quite a lad.

Not so long ago Barnsley signed on a new goalkeeper named Carrigan, and when he played in his first match for his new club he had nine goals scored against him. Something like a baptism of fire—eh?

The wage bill of the Preston North End team which, years ago, won the championship of the First Division without losing a match, and in the same season won the F.A. Cup without losing a goal, was £33 per week.



(Continued from page 13.)

He went flying, and sprawled in the snow in a breathless heap. The heavy door slammed after him.

"That does for Bunter!" growled Coker.

Bunter sat up in the snow.

"Ow, ow! Wow! Yow! Grooogh!" spluttered the hapless Owl. "Oh dear! Beast! Ow, ow, ow!"

Bunter picked himself up and set his spectacles straight on his fat little nose.

He stood for some minutes pumping in breath.

"Oh dear! Ow! Wow!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

It was Bob Cherry's voice. The Famous Five were coming up the drive to the house, and they had seen Billy Bunter's sudden and startling exit. They were grinning as they came up.

Bunter blinked at them breathlessly.

"I—I say, you fellows—"

"Got it in the neck—what?" asked Johnny Bull, with a chuckle.

"Ow! Oh, dear!"

"You asked for it," said Nugent.

"The askfulness was really terrific."

"Yow-ow-ow! I say, you fellows, I've been chucked out!" gasped Bunter.

"We beheld the esteemed chuckfulness," chortled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "It was terrific."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!" howled Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts!"

"Well, are you satisfied now that Coker doesn't yearn for your company over Christmas, Bunter?" asked Harry Wharton, laughing. "He seems to me to have made it pretty clear."

"Clear enough even for Bunter, I should think," grinned Johnny Bull.

"It's time to travel, Bunter."

"Oh, dear!" groaned the Owl of the Remove. "Catch me accepting any more of your invitations, Wharton."

"Why, you silly ass—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's kick him off the premises," suggested Johnny Bull. "We can dribble him down to the gates."

"Hear, hear!"

"Beasts!" howled Bunter. "I'm going! I wouldn't stay here now if you asked me on your bended knees. Not if Coker begged me with tears in his eyes. Yah!"

"I can't quite see Coker doing that," chuckled Nugent.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Somebody will have to lend me my railway fare," said Bunter. "I'm stony. Of course, I shall settle up at Greyfriars next term—I'm expecting some postal-orders—"

"You fat duffer!" said the captain of the Remove. "I suppose we'd better see the silly chump off, you fellows. We'll take him to Waddon station and buy him a ticket, and see him safe in the train."

"Good!" said Bob. "I don't think even Bunter will come back any more. Coker has made his meaning clear."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Get a move on, Bunter!" said Harry.

"Oh, I'm going!" snapped Bunter. "Blow you all, and blow Coker, and blow old Coker, and blow that villain Poynings! You fellows don't want me here!"

"Not in the least."

"All right!" said Bunter, darkly. "Let it go on! I don't care if you don't, and Coker doesn't! I'm going! I dare say I shall have to come back after Christmas for the inquest."

"The—the what?"

"Inquest!" said Bunter.

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Harry Wharton, staring at the fat junior and wondering whether Bunter was wandering in his mind.

Bunter grinned.

He was in possession of information which would have been very valuable to Coker of the Fifth and to the Remove fellows who were backing up Coker. But he was not in a hurry to impart it.

"I suppose there will be an inquest on Coker's uncle," he said.

"You fat ass, Coker's uncle isn't in any danger!" said Bob. "He's ill, but it's not a serious illness."

"Isn't it!" grinned Bunter. "That's all you know! If you'd seen Poynings giving him his medicine, you'd think he was in danger."

"What on earth—"

"No business of mine," said Bunter. "If you want the old man to be poisoned—"

"What?" yelled Bob.

"Poisoned!" ejaculated Wharton.

"Are you dotty, Bunter?"

"The dottfulness is terrific."

"I know what I know," sneered Bunter. "You don't want me here. All right—I'll go. I'll come back for the inquest, and give evidence against Poynings. I shall mention to the coroner that I was turned out of the house, when I was prepared to save life. Good-bye!"

Bunter rolled away into the darkness.

Harry Wharton & Co. stood rooted to the ground, staring after him. Bunter's words had taken their breath away.

"What on earth does the fat idiot mean?" exclaimed Bob.

"Gammon, as usual!" growled Johnny Bull.

Wharton's face was very startled.

"He's been in the house. He may have seen something," he muttered. "Anyhow, he's got to explain. After him!"

And the juniors hurried down the dark drive after William George Bunter.

They caught him easily enough. Bunter was not hurrying. As a matter of fact, he had not the slightest intention of departing. Half-way to the gates the Famous Five surrounded him.

"Now, you fat dummy—" said Bob.

"Leggo!"

"What did you mean?"

"That's telling."

"You've got to explain, you chump!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

Bunter blinked at him loftily.

"I might explain if I'm treated civilly," he answered. "I know what's going on at Holly House. I saved old Coker from a dose of poison. Coker of the Fifth kicked me out for doing it. I shall want an apology."

"Look here—"

Harry Wharton scanned the Owl's fat face in the gloom. It was easy to see that Bunter knew something; that this was not his usual "gammon," as Johnny Bull expressed it.

"You must explain yourself, Bunter," said Harry Wharton quietly. "You've been in the house. Have you been in Mr. Coker's room?"

"I got in by the balcony," said

Bunter. "After your pressing invitation to me I considered that I was entitled—"

"Oh, cut that out!" said the captain of the Remove impatiently. "Get under the trees here, out of the snow, and tell us what's happened."

Bunter jerked a fat thumb towards the distant lighted windows of Holly House.

"I saved old Coker's life when I was there," he announced dramatically.

"Oh, rot!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"If you don't want to hear—"

"But we do," said Wharton quietly. "If you're pulling our leg, we'll jolly well bump you till you burst!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Tell us what's happened, you fat duffer!"

And Bunter told his story at last, the juniors listening in silence—the silence of amazement and horror.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Coker Takes Control!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. fixed their eyes on Bunter's fat face as he related what had happened in Mr. Coker's study. They did not interrupt him, but when he had finished his startling story Wharton put two or three questions. It was clear enough that Bunter was telling the truth, and in fact, the Owl of the Remove rose a little in the estimation of the Famous Five. The fat junior had betrayed his presence in the house in order to save Mr. Coker from the treachery of the secretary, and the reward he had received could not be regarded as either grateful or comforting. Bunter was bristling with indignation, and for once there really seemed some grounds for the indignation of the fat junior.

"Well, of all the awful rotters!" said Bob Cherry, with a deep breath. "Of course it's not poison, as that fat ass supposed. But that villain Poynings is giving the old man some beastly drug to keep him ill. It couldn't mean anything else."

"And this explains," said Harry Wharton. "This makes it clear why Poynings was determined that Coker should not come to Holly House, and bring friends here for Christmas. Coker hasn't tumbled to what's going on, but he might have tumbled to it any minute. You can see that Poynings would have felt safer without anybody staying in the house."

"Clear enough," said Bob. "It's a dangerous game to play, at any time—and, with half a dozen fellows in the house, too jolly dangerous for Poynings. No wonder he wanted to get shut of us."

Wharton set his lips. "The awful rascal! He is keeping the old man ill, with that stuff, whatever it is, to keep him under his thumb. Coker may be right in thinking that if his uncle were well and strong he would deal with the villain as he deserves. This looks like it."

"It does," said Nugent.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Bunter's come in useful for once," said Johnny Bull. "If we'd stayed on through the vacation, I'm sure we should have spotted, sooner or later, that Poynings was playing this rotten trick. That's what he was afraid of, anyhow. But it's lucky, as it turns out, that Bunter butted in."

"Yes, rather."

"The ratherfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 984.

"The esteemed Bunter will never be ornamental, but on rare occasions he is useful."

"Oh, really, Inky—"

"The question is, what's going to be done now?" said Harry. "That villain has got to be stopped at once, of course. He ought to be arrested; but I suppose it's for Coker to say what's to be done. He hasn't much sense, but it's his business."

"Bunter had better tell Coker—"

"I'm prepared to tell Coker, if I'm treated with decent civility and hospitality," said the Owl of the Remove, with dignity. "I shall expect an apology, of course."

"Oh, dry up!"

"If Coker cares to apologise and treat me decently, I may consent to stay on with you fellows over the vacation," said Bunter.

"Cheese it!"

"As a matter of fact, I'm hungry now—"

"That doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?" bawled Bunter indignantly. "I can jolly well tell you that it does matter! It matters a lot!"

"Give us a rest," said Wharton impatiently. "Look here, you chaps, Bunter says that Poynings saw him kicked out, and he will naturally suppose that the fat duffer is gone. He had better not see Bunter again till we've decided what's to be done. We'll get Bunter to our rooms somehow without being seen, and Coker can come there and speak to him."

"We can manage that easily enough," said Bob. "My room opens on a balcony, with steps down."

"Come on, then."

"I say, you fellows, if I come with you it's understood that I stay to dinner," said Bunter. "I've told you I'm hungry."

"You fat duffer—"

"Otherwise, I refuse—"

"Shut up and come on!" growled Johnny Bull. "Can't you see there's something more important to think of than your blessed inside?"

"Rot!" said Bunter emphatically.

"Come on, ass!" said Wharton. "You shall be fed up to the chin, somehow or other. Now, get a move on."

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THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 984.

"Oh, all right!"

And Billy Bunter rolled along with the Famous Five, a fat grin on his face. Bunter was feeling fairly certain, at last, of finding hospitality at Holly House. Bunter was, as he often said, accustomed to ingratitude; but in the present circumstance even Coker of the Fifth was bound to feel grateful.

Bunter was led to the balcony under Bob Cherry's window, where he waited while the Famous Five went into the house.

They went to Bob's room at once and opened the window, and the Owl of the Remove was admitted.

Bunter rolled in with a grunt of satisfaction. There was a log fire burning in the room, and Bunter selected the easiest chair, and sat down before the fire.

"Now about some grub," he said.

"Never mind grub just yet—"

"But I do mind!" howled Bunter. "Don't I keep telling you I'm hungry?"

"Shut up! You go down and get Coker to come here, Bob," said the captain of the Remove.

"Right-ho!"

Bob Cherry went downstairs. The Co. waited; and Bunter grumbled and groused at considerable length. From Bunter's point of view the most important matter to be considered was a meal for William George Bunter. His point of view was not shared by the other fellows.

Bob came back in a few minutes, and Horace Coker entered the room with him.

Coker jumped at the sight of Bunter. "That fat rotter again!" he ejaculated.

Bob Cherry closed the door hastily. Coker was striding across to the Owl of the Remove when Wharton interposed.

"Hold on, Coker—"

"I've kicked that fat rascal out twice!" exclaimed Horace Coker hotly. "Still, if you fellows want him here—"

"Bunter's got something to tell you," said Harry.

"Oh, rot!"

"Unless I'm treated civilly I decline to tell Coker anything!" hooted Bunter, with a glare at the Fifth-Former of Greyfriars. "This sort of manners may do for you, but it won't do for me!"

"Shut up, ass! Sit down, Coker, and listen to what Bunter has to say. Your uncle's health—and perhaps his life—may depend on it," said the captain of the Remove.

"Eh?"

"Go ahead, Bunter."

Once more Bunter's tale was told. The expression on Horace Coker's rugged face as he listened was extraordinary. It grew more and more extraordinary as the Owl of the Remove proceeded.

"By gad!" ejaculated Coker at last. He strode about the room, brandishing his clenched fists. His face was crimson with wrath.

"The awful rotter! The villain! I suspected something of the kind—at least, I should have suspected it if—I had thought of it."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob.

"Why, it was as plain as daylight, if—if a fellow had only thought of it!" said Coker excitedly. "Uncle was never ill till that rogue came into his service, Poynings is giving him stuff to keep him ill, so that he can keep him under his thumb. That's why he wanted to

keep me away—that's why he had me kidnapped. He knew I should spot him if I was here."

"He knew there was danger of it, at least," said Harry. "As it happens, it was Bunter who spotted him."

"I'm obliged to you, Bunter," said Coker. "You're a sneaking little fat scoundrel, and you butt in where you're not wanted; but I'm bound to say that I'm obliged to you."

"Look here—"

"In fact, I thank you," said Coker.

"If you think—"

"I've thanked you, and that's enough," interrupted Coker. "You shut up while I think this out."

"Oh, really, Coker—"

"The thankfulness is terrific!" grinned Hurree Singh, while Billy Bunter glared at Coker of the Fifth, his very spectacles gleaming with indignation.

"The man could be arrested," said Coker. "But for my poor old uncle, I'd telephone for the police at once, But—"

"But—" murmured Wharton.

"I've got it!"

"Good!" said Bob Cherry. "We'll back you up, Coker. Anything you like."

"You fellows get along to my room," said Coker. "Wait for me there. You stay here, Bunter—you're no use!"

"Oh, really, you beast—"

"But what's the game?" asked Harry.

"Never mind that. You kids do exactly as I tell you," said Coker; and his manner was once more that of Coker of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars, who had a short way with fags. "I know best, you know."

"Oh!"

"Do as I tell you, and don't ask questions," said Coker. "Get along to my room—quietly. I'll come there, with Poynings."

"But what—"

"Get a move on!"

Horace Coker left the room, his rugged face set and grim. Evidently Coker of the Fifth had made up his mind how to proceed in dealing with the rascally secretary. The juniors looked at one another, Wharton breathing rather hard.

"Of all the cheeky asses—" he began.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Well, Coker can't help being Coker," he said. "We're backing him up, I suppose. That's what we're here for."

"I suppose so."

And the Famous Five proceeded along the passage to Coker's room, where they waited, not very patiently, for the great man of the Fifth to join them.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Coker's Way!

"POYNINGS!"

The secretary was in the hall, with his coat on, and his hat in his hand. He turned a sour look on Horace Coker.

"Going out?" asked Coker.

"I am going to call on Dr. Wallis, for a new bottle of medicine for your uncle, Master Horace," said Poynings. "The bottle was smashed by that young rascal, whom you turned out."

Coker breathed hard.

"I've got something rather important to say to you, Poynings," he said, speaking calmly with some difficulty. It was not easy for Horace Coker to play

a part; he had got hard work in keeping his hands off the smooth-faced, unscrupulous rascal before him.

"I suppose there is no hurry, Master Horace," said Poynings, eyeing him in some surprise.

"As a matter of fact, there is," said Coker. "Will you step up to my room, Mr. Poynings?"

"I presume that you can speak to me here."

"It's something private—very private," said Coker. "I'd prefer to speak to you in my room."

The secretary hesitated. It was as if he smelt danger in the air.

"Well, will you come?" asked Coker.

"I would prefer you to speak to me here, Master Horace," said Poynings, distrustfully.

"You will come to my room," said Coker.

"I prefer not, thanks!"

Coker placed a sudden grip on the secretary's arm. The secretary started back, breathing hard, his face changing colour.

"This violence, sir—" he muttered.

"If you don't want more violence you'll come quietly," said Coker. "I've said that I've got something to say to you, and I choose to say it in my room. If you don't walk you'll be carried—and you'll be jolly well hammered first. I'm not standing on ceremony with you."

"Release my arm!" said Poynings, between his teeth, his face white with rage.

Coker compressed his grip. With a powerful wrench he dragged the secretary towards the stairs.

"I shall call to Mr. Coker!" panted Poynings.

He was almost powerless in the grasp of the powerful Fifth-Former of Greyfriars.

"Do!" said Coker grimly. "Do—if you want your front teeth knocked through the back of your head. Do!"

"I—I will come!"

"You'd better," said Coker.

He kept his grip on the secretary's arm as he walked the man up the staircase and along to the door of his room. He threw open the door, pushed Poynings in, and followed him in. Poynings started as he found himself in the presence of the five juniors of the Greyfriars Remove. He turned on Coker, who closed the door, locked it, and put his back to it.

"What does this mean?" panted the secretary.

He eyed Coker and the chums of the Remove with glittering eyes.

"You'll jolly well soon see what it means, you cur!" said Coker of the Fifth. "It means that I'm going to deal with you as you deserve."

"Hear, hear!" chirruped Bob Cherry.

"Has Mr. Coker delegated his authority in this house to you?" asked Poynings savagely.

"Not exactly. I'm taking control, all the same," said Coker coolly. "No time to stand on ceremony in dealing with a rascally poisoner."

Poynings staggered.

"What—what?" he panted.

"You don't like that word—what?" said Coker grimly. "What is it you have been putting into my uncle's medicine, you villain?"

"I—I—I don't understand!" gasped Poynings. His face was like chalk, and the perspiration was in thick beads on his brow. "You—you must be dreaming. I—I—"

"Give me the bottle!"

"The—the what?"

"The bottle that's in your waistcoat pocket," said Coker.

Poynings' hand went to his pocket—an instinctive movement that betrayed him. But he controlled himself.

"I—I have no bottle!" he stammered.

"We shall see," said Coker. "You fellows hold him while I go through his pockets."

The secretary sprang away.

"Hands off! I—I—"

But Harry Wharton & Co. grasped him in a moment. Poynings struggled furiously, and came down with a crash on the floor.

There the Famous Five held him, and Coker groped in his pocket and drew out a small phial, half full of an almost colourless fluid. The secretary's eyes dilated with terror as he watched him.

"That's it—what?" said Coker.

"I—I—I—"

"This is what you were putting in my uncle's medicine."

"No, no! I—I—"

"What is it, then?"

"It—it is a medicine that I—I take myself," panted Poynings. "Quite a harmless medicine; a mixture for—the digestion—"

"Good!" said Coker. "If that's so, all right, though I fancy it would give you rather a severe indigestion if you took it. Open your mouth!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"If it's a harmless medicine that you take yourself, let's see you take it," said Coker. "Open your mouth, and I'll pour it in."

"Good egg!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

The secretary shut his teeth hard. His face was grey with terror.

"Force his mouth open," said Coker. "He's going to take the lot, and I'm going to see that he does."

"Stop!" shrieked Poynings. "I—I will not! It—it would be murder! You mad fool! Keep the bottle away!"

"You confess, then?"

The wretched man ground his teeth.

"It—it is not poison, as you fancy,"

"Hallo, You Chaps! Billy Bunter Speaking!"



"Here's wishing you all a Jolly Good Christmas! Plenty of grub, plenty of fun, and plenty of good pals like I have!"

"What's that? How do I get on with Coker?"

"Oh, not too bad, you know! He's rather an ass, and he did grumble a bit when I had six helpings of turkey, and seven measly portions of pudding. Still, I'm not a greedy chap, I hope! Besides, I've squared the cook. He, he, he!"

"Mr. Coker asked me what was my favourite motto, and I said: 'Eat not to live, but live to eat!'"

"Old Coker's uncle grinned and said: 'I thought so!'"

"So he's a sensible chap, too, isn't he?"

"If you'll take a tip from me do as that chap Columbus did in Walter Scott's famous novel, *Oliver Pickwick*—always ask for more, if you've got room for it!"

"What's that? . . . Oh, yes, you'll find me in next week's *MAGNET*. See you there, what? Excuse me, I'm feeling peckish—must get back. Cheerio, old beans, and once again a Jolly Christmas!"

"Yours to a wishbone,

"BILLY BUNTER."

he hissed. "Nothing of the kind. It is a drug—a harmless drug—"

"If it's harmless you can take it," said Coker.

"I—I cannot!"

"Own up, you rotter!" said Harry Wharton roughly. "You were seen giving that stuff to Mr. Coker; there's a witness prepared to swear to it. He stopped you from giving Mr. Coker the doctored medicine, but it's certain that you've done so before, and Dr. Wallis will find it out soon enough when he knows what to look for. The police will know what is in that bottle when it's analysed."

Poynings shuddered.

"It is not poison," he faltered. "It is a—a drug that affects the action of the heart. It is not dangerous unless taken in large quantities."

"You've been using it to keep Mr. Coker ill?"

No answer.

"That accounts for poor old nunky's heart attacks," said Coker. "He never used to have them. That villain has been keeping him in a low state so as to frighten him and keep him under his thumb."

"He will have to be handed over to the police," said Harry. "We'll keep him here till a constable can be fetched."

Poynings' eyes glittered.

"You had better take care," he hissed. "Henry Coker's fate is bound up in mine. If the police take me they take him also."

"I'm coming to that," said Coker quietly. "You've got a letter belong-

ing to my uncle—a letter you stole from among his private papers, and are holding over his head."

"He—he has told you?" panted Poynings.

"He's told me—and I advised him to defy you and chance it," said Coker. "I'm pretty certain he would have done so, too, if he'd been well and strong. You've been able to scare him because you've got him into a state to tremble at a shadow. That was your game. But this matter is in my hands now. I want that letter."

Poynings gritted his teeth.

"Find it if you want it," he snarled.

"You're going to tell me where to find it," said Coker.

The secretary laughed savagely.

"There's a box-robe in the trunk in the corner, you kids," said Coker. "Get it out and fasten him up."

"Right-ho!"

Poynings put up a feeble resistance, but it did not take the Famous Five long to bind him hand and foot. In a few minutes the blackmailer lay helpless on the floor.

Horace Coker knelt by his side, the phial in his hand. Poynings' eyes watched him, glistening with fury and hatred.

"Where's that letter?" asked Coker.

"Find out!"

"You won't tell me?"

"No."

"We shall see. Open your mouth!"

Poynings shut his teeth hard.

Coker of the Fifth grasped his chin with one hefty hand, and forced his mouth open. The phial was lifted.

"I give you one second to tell me where that letter is," said Coker. "Otherwise, you get your own medicine. Sharp!"

Harry Wharton & Co. stared on at the scene, rooted to the floor. They had no pity to waste on the unscrupulous schemer; their only feeling towards him was of horror and loathing. But they were not prepared to see Coker's exceedingly drastic methods carried out. If Coker was in earnest, Harry Wharton was ready to stop him at the last moment.

But the sight of the phial tilted over his mouth was more than enough for the wretched man. His face was white and drawn with dread, his eyes almost started from their sockets.

"Stop!" he breathed.

"Where's the letter?"

"I—I will tell you."

"Sharp's the word!"

"It is sewn up in the lining of my waistcoat," gasped Poynings. "Take it, and a thousand curses—"

"Shut up!"

Coker placed the phial on the floor.

"If I find the letter, well and good," he said. "If not, I'm sorry for you, you scoundrel!"

There was a sound of rending cloth; Coker had not a gentle hand. In a couple of minutes he drew a folded letter from its hiding-place. Poynings watched him with burning eyes.

"Is that the letter, you rascal?"

"Yes; and may you—"

"That's enough!" Horace Coker rose to his feet. "I'm going to take this to my uncle, and let him see if it's the genuine goods. You fellows keep that scoundrel safe."

"You bet!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Don't you fellows fancy that my uncle has done anything wrong, to put him in that scoundrel's power," said Coker. "He helped a man who was down and out, but it was in—circumstances which would cause him to be misjudged if it came out. That's all

the story—my uncle's told me all about it this afternoon. He acted like a jolly old brick, but the—the circumstances were unusual. He did just what I'd have done in his place—at least, I hope I would. Take care of that rotter while I'm gone."

Coker left the room, and Wharton closed the door after him.

The chums of the Remove looked at one another.

"Good old Coker!" murmured Bob Cherry. "He has the manners of a bear, and the intellect of a rhinoceros—but he seems to have got there, all the same."

"Let me loose!" came in a hiss from Poynings.

"You shut up!" said Bob in disgust. "You won't get loose till the bobbies come to put the handcuffs on you."

"A thousand curses—"

"None at all, please," said Bob. "Open your rotten mouth again, and I'll shove a cake of soap into it!"

"I—I—I tell you I— Grooogh! Ooooooh!" spluttered Poynings, as Bob carried out his threat. "Ugh! Gug-gug! Oouch!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the secretary spat out soap furiously, while the chums of the Remove chortled.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

A Merry Christmas, After All!

"MY dear Henry!"

"My dear Judith!"

"If you would trust to Horace, my dear brother, I am sure that all would be well," said Aunt Judy, almost tearfully.

Mr. Coker shook his head feebly.

"You do not understand, my dear Judith. This is not a matter in which Horace can help me."

"If you would send away that wicked Poynings—"

"I cannot!" groaned Mr. Coker.

"Horace advises—"

"Dear Judith, I have as high an opinion of our dear nephew as you can have," said Mr. Coker. "But his advice is useless in the present circumstances. I have told you that I am in Poynings' power."

"But—"

"My dear sister, it is useless to pursue the subject. I will tell you this. Poynings holds a document which would do me great harm if it were made public. Now you see—"

"But I am sure that Horace—"

Aunt Judy's faith in her dear Horace was absolutely unlimited. But her brother only shook his head sadly.

"Horace could do nothing, Judith. You see—"

Knock!

The door of Mr. Coker's study opened and Horace Coker came in. There was a cheery smile on Coker's rugged face, and he had a letter in his hand.

"Feeling better, uncle?" he asked cheerily.

"As a matter of fact, Horace, I am feeling better, although I have not taken my medicine," said Mr. Coker. "It was upset by that extraordinary boy who was found in my room—"

"I've got some news for you, uncle. Look at that letter."

Horace Coker shoved the letter into his uncle's hand. Mr. Coker adjusted his glasses and looked at it.

Then he gave a cry.

"Horace! This letter—"

"The giddy missing document, what?" asked Coker gleefully.

"Yes, yes, yes! This is the letter

A NEW SCHOOL STORY

about a new

SCHOOLBOY CHARACTER!



THE
FREAK
OF
ST.
FREDA'S!

Just starting in this week's
issue of

THE POPULAR

dealing with the comic adventures
of POSHER P. POSH!
ON SALE TUESDAY!



"I will give you one second to tell me where that letter is!" said Coker. "Otherwise you get your own medicine. Sharp!" The sight of the phial tilted over his mouth was more than enough for the wretched Mr. Poynings. "Stop!" he breathed. "The letter's sewn up in the lining of my waistcoat. Take it, and a thousand curses!" (See Chapter 11.)

from Arthur Statham—the letter stolen by that villainous Poynings, which he has been holding over my head all these dreadful months!" gasped Mr. Coker. "Horace! Horace! How did you—"

"Sure it's the right letter, what?"

"Yes, yes! Quite!"

"Then the fire's the best place for it, what?" said Coker. "Make sure it's the goods and then shove it in the fire, uncle. That's my advice."

"Horace's advice is always good," said Miss Coker, with a fond glance at her burly nephew.

"Yes, yes," gasped Mr. Coker.

There was no doubt that Horace's advice, in the present circumstances, was good. Mr. Henry Coker gave the recovered letter one more searching look, and then reached over to the fire and dropped it into the midst of the crackling logs.

It was consumed in a few seconds, and years seemed to roll away from the old gentleman's face as he watched it reduced to ashes. He sat up in his chair, his face flushed, his eyes bright.

"You have saved me, Horace," he said. "Poynings gave you that letter? How did you induce him—"

"He hadn't much choice in the matter," said Coker, with a grin. "I've got a way with me, uncle. All serene now, what?"

"Yes, yes."

"Did I not tell you to trust to Horace, Henry?" asked Aunt Judy.

"You did, Judith—you did!" said Mr. Coker. "And Horace has saved me. I

am no longer in that man's power. He leaves the house to-night!"

"You'd have handled him long ago, if he hadn't kept you in such a state, doctoring your medicine, uncle," said Coker.

"What—what?"

"I've found it all out, and got him by the neck," said Coker, in his great satisfaction, rather forgetting that he had not played the principal part in the detection of the scheming blackmailer. "I've got him in my room now, tied up like a giddy turkey for Christmas, and I've got the bottle of stuff he used to doctor your medicine, and a witness to swear to seeing him at the game."

"Good heavens!" breathed Mr. Coker.

"Now I'm going to telephone to the police-station, and give him in charge," said Coker.

"No, no! Let there be no scandal!" exclaimed Mr. Coker. "The man can do no harm now, Horace. Turn him out of the house, and let him go. I shall try to forgive him; but do not let me see him again."

"Oh, I say!" ejaculated Coker.

"It is Christmastide," said the old gentleman. "Let us set an example of forgiveness, Horace. The wretched man can do no further harm. Let him go in peace."

Coker breathed hard. But he nodded.

"It's for you to say, uncle," he answered. "Perhaps the least said the soonest mended, though it goes against the grain to let the villain get off scot-free. I'll see him off, anyhow."

"My dear boy!"

Coker left the study, leaving two

bright and happy old faces behind him. The cloud that had hung so darkly over Holly House had been lifted at last. Coker's home-coming, after all, worked the oracle, so to speak. The wretched schemer who had held his uncle in thrall was powerless now, and his liberty was at the mercy of the man he had wronged and threatened.

Horace Coker's heart was light as he tramped up the staircase. It was rather like Coker of the Fifth to forget that anyone else had had a hand in the happy outcome of affairs at Holly House. Coker's feeling was that he, like Cæsar of old, had come, and seen, and conquered. For the moment he had forgotten even the existence of William George Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he is!" said Bob Cherry, as Horace Coker came back into the room above.

Poynings' eyes turned on Coker, gleaming like a snake's. The scheming rascal had given up hope now, and he expected nothing but to be handed over to the police, as he richly deserved.

"It's all right," announced Coker.

"Good!" said Wharton.

"All serene now. I knew it would turn out all right if I once got on the spot to handle the matter," said Coker.

"Oh!"

"Veni, vidi, vici, you know," said Coker modestly. "I came, I saw, I conquered, like jolly old Pontius Pilate, you know. What?"

"Oh, my hat! Was it Pontius Pilate?" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 924.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I mean Alcibiades, of course," said Coker hastily.

"Oh crumbs! Was it Alcibiades?" gurgled Johnny Bull.

"Yes, it jolly well was!" said Coker positively.

"I had a sort of idea that it was Julius Caesar," remarked Harry Wharton blandly.

"Rot!" said Coker. "You Remove kids don't know much about history."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If your Form master has given you a holiday task, I don't mind helping you with the history part," said Coker. "I'm rather a whale on it, you know. But never mind that now. Uncle Henry has decided not to have that scoundrel given in charge. I don't agree. But, after all, a fellow must give his uncle his head. He's to be turned out. It's rather rotten to let him off so lightly, I think; but there you are!"

Poynings' face lighted up.

"So we're going to kick him out," said Coker. "I want all you kids to help, and you can fancy yourselves kicking for goal. I take first kick, of course!"

Coker bent over the secretary and untied him.

"I'll have your traps packed and chucked out into the road," he said. "You go first, and I'm helping you, see?"

Poynings did not speak, but his look was apprehensive. He was getting off cheaply, and he knew it. But he was apprehensive of Coker's heavy boot, and with reason.

Coker grasped him by the arm, and Bob Cherry grasped his other arm. He was led from the room, and the rest of the juniors followed. James, the footman, in the hall, gazed at them in surprise.

"Open the door, James," said Coker.

James opened the door.

"This man is a thief and a rascal, and he's going to be kicked out," Coker explained. "You can take a kick, if you like."

"Oh, Master Horace!" gasped James.

"Stick his hat on him!" said Coker.

"Now then! Out you go!"

Poynings was run out of the doorway into the falling snow. On the drive, Coker released him. The next moment Coker's heavy boot crashed on the secretary, and Poynings gave a loud howl and started to run.

"Dribble him!" shouted Coker.

"Hurrah!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a rush after Poynings.

The outcast ran desperately for the gates, but the pursuers were close behind. Bob Cherry's heavy boot landed, and then Wharton's, and then Johnny Bull's. Poynings bounded on desperately, and fairly streaked down the drive. His hat flew off, but he did not stop for it. He ran as if for his life.

He reached the wide gates, with the Greyfriars fellows whooping behind. The gates were closed, and the desperate man made a frantic leap to clear them. Coker's last hefty kick reached him as he leaped, and perhaps helped him on the rise. Poynings fairly flew over the wooden gate and landed headlong in the snow on the road.

He rolled in the snow, gasping and spluttering. But he was on his feet in a few seconds and running again. A panting of breath and a pattering of frantic feet, and the rascal vanished into the December night—never to be seen again at Holly House.

Coker stared after the disappearing fugitive, frowning.

"He hasn't had enough," he said. "But never mind—he's gone! Let's get back."

"What about our train?" asked Frank Nugent demurely.

Coker laughed cheerily.

"That's all washed out, of course. You're jolly well staying; and, dash it all, Bunter shall stay, too! There's still time to make a jolly Christmas of it—now that rascal's done with. Come on."

PLEASE NOTE!

Owing to the Christmas Holidays, Next Week's

MAGNET

will be on Sale at all News-agents

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 24th.

And Coker of the Fifth marched back to the house, with the chums of the Remove, in exuberant spirits.

It had been the most eventful Christmas Eve in the experience of Harry Wharton & Co., and its happy ending gave satisfaction all round. Certainly it was not probable that Mr. Poynings was satisfied; but that could not be helped. The wretched schemer, tramping away in the darkness and the snow, was done with; and the happy party at Holly House were only anxious to forget his existence.

"I say, you fellows——"

Billy Bunter was waiting in the hall when the Greyfriars fellows came cheerily in.

He eyed Horace Coker warily.

"All serene, Bunt," said Bob Cherry, with a chuckle. "It was jolly lucky you came, as it turns out."

"You can hang on if you like, Bunter," said Coker.

"Oh, really, Coker——"

The juniors chuckled. Coker's invitation was not one that most fellows would have cared to accept. But Bunter was a stickler.

"As I arranged to stay with Wharton for Christmas, and as Wharton is staying here——" said Bunter.

"That's all right," said Coker. "I've said that you can hang on. Say no more about it."

"If you put it like that, Coker, I'm afraid that I shall not be able to accept your invitation," said the Owl of the Remove, with dignity.

"Well, I do put it like that?" said Coker.

"He, he, he!"

"What are you cackling at, you fat duffer?" demanded Coker, staring at the Owl of the Remove.

"Your little joke, old chap," said Bunter. "He, he, he! I can take a joke. He, he, he!"

"I'm not joking," said Coker. "Look here, Bunter, if you're staying, I'll ask my Aunt Judy to have a room got ready for you. Yes or no?"

"I wouldn't think of deserting you at Christmas-time, old chap."

"Not so much of your old chap, please."

"Oh, really, old fellow——"

"I've kicked you out once," said Coker. "If you want me to kick you out again, you've only got to call me old chap and old fellow. See?"

"Look here——"

"Oh, chuck it!" said Coker, as he went on to his uncle's room, leaving Billy Bunter glaring and the chums of the Remove laughing.

"I say, you fellows, if you can stand Coker's manners, I'm blessed if I can!" hooted Bunter.

"I wouldn't," chuckled Bob Cherry. "What train are you catching, Bunter?"

"I've a jolly good mind to clear——"

"Good!"

"But I jolly well won't!" said Bunter. "I—I dare say Coker means well. In fact, I'm sure he means well. If you fellows can stand him, I can; and—and—in fact, I think I'll stay on."

And Bunter stayed.

The clouds had rolled by.

It was, after all, a merry Christmas at Holly House. Mr. Henry Coker, with the shadow lifted from his mind, seemed a new man; and Aunt Judy was brimming with happiness and good-temper and hospitality. And Horace Coker—more than ever convinced that he had come, and seen, and conquered, like Caesar—and that, like Coriolanus, alone unaided he had done it—was in high good-humour with himself and everybody else. He was absolutely genial to the Famous Five, and very nearly civil to Bunter. And Harry Wharton & Co., who had wondered very much and very doubtfully what Christmas with Coker would be like, found that they enjoyed the festive season thoroughly; and on all sides it was agreed that it was a Merry Christmas.

THE



END.

THE NEW SHERIFF! Ferrers Locke, in the role of Sheriff of Wolf Point, soon realises why sheriffs don't live long in those parts! It's the man who's quick on the draw that comes out on top every time! And Locke's as "slick" at this game as any gunman!

The MYSTERY of FLYING V RANCH!



(Introduction on page 24.)

A Powerful and Dramatic Story of Wild West and Detective Adventure, featuring Ferrers Locke and Jack Drake.

The New Sheriff!

"GET this!" cut in Jake Peters gruffly, before Locke could answer. "Yuh're sure signing up wif death! Thar's a bullet waitin' fer yuh at most ev'ry corner soon's yuh put on th' sheriff's badge!"

"Gentlemen," replied Locke quietly. "Facing the risks fairly and squarely, I have come to the conclusion that I can best serve you and bring in the Wolf by taking office as sheriff of Wolf Point. I mention the fact that I realize the risks, so that, in the event of my death, it will be distinctly understood that I took office of my own free will and without undue persuasion from any one of you gentlemen."

Caister stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Mr. Henderson," he said, "you're a man, and I wish you luck!"

The other two shook Locke's hand, and Cal said:

"Us ranchers hev the appointin' of sheriff here. Ride inter Wolf Point t-morrow, and us'll swear yuh in an' interduce yuh to them Wolf Point coyotes as their new Sheriff. Say, what name's it to be? Locke or Henderson?"

"Henderson," replied Locke quietly.

Jack's wound was not serious, a bullet having seared his scalp, and the following day he rode with Ferrers Locke towards the township of Wolf Point. The death roll numbered seven as far as the Flying V were concerned in the fight at One Tree Creek.

"Sheer, brutal murder!" commented Locke, as they cantered across the range. "And just added proof as to the mercilessness of the Wolf!"

"You've told me your reasons for taking the job as sheriff, sir," remarked Jack. "But won't these fellows in Wolf Point—the lawless element, I mean—think that an Englishman will be pretty easy to handle. I—I mean—"

"I know exactly what you mean, Jack," cut in Locke, with a smile. "I have not the slightest doubt that the lawless element to whom you refer will welcome my appointment as sheriff. As far as they know, I'm absolutely raw to Western life, and will be, obviously, incompetent to handle them. But, although I've not mentioned it to you before, I spent some years in Arizona when I was a boy, and there was some tough fellows there in those days. I'm not as green to this game as some of them must think!"

Jack was used to these sudden, surprising confidences of the detective, and he listened with interest as Ferrers Locke continued:

"My arm is healing as well as I can expect, Jack, and it is more essential now than ever that we spend every available moment in practising quickness on the draw. As I told you before, a man's life can hang on the very fraction

of a second, and, although we're both pretty useful with a gun, we've got to get speed in drawing it!"

A bend in the trail brought Wolf Point into view, and indicating it with a jerk of his head, Locke said grimly:

"There's going to be shooting, and shooting to kill before we leave that township, Jack! It will require a steady hand, a steady eye, and a steady nerve to see us safely through!"

Jack nodded, and twenty minutes later they clattered up the dusty street and dismounted at the sheriff's office. Pushing his way through a staring, sullen crowd, Locke mounted the rickety wooden platform on which the timber structure which served as the sheriff's office was built, and, pushing open the door, he entered, with Jack at his heels.

Caister, Cal Jefferson, and Jake Peters were waiting for him. There was a fourth man, a little wizened fellow, and Caister introduced him as Jonas Hiram, the lawyer of Wolf Point, who, amongst other duties, was acting as proxy for Hank Herman, of the Flying V.

Without loss of time, Ferrers Locke, in the name of Henderson, was sworn in as sheriff, and Jack took the oath as deputy sheriff. Then, at a signal from Caister, the party stepped on to the platform in front of the office. The whole population of Wolf Point seemed to have collected, and, grimly, Locke surveyed them, as Caister stepped forward and held up his hand.

"Folks," he said, "as you all know by Act of Congress, the appointing of sheriff for the Wolf Point district is in the hands of the ranchers what owns the outlying ranges. Waal, I reckon you all know how pore Mat Duke cashed in his checks t'other night! Us ranchers hev looked round for a new sheriff, and we have unanimously decided to elect Mr. Henderson as sheriff of Wolf Point. He has duly taken the oath, and this here lad, his nephew, has also sworn as his assistant. Folks, meet your new sheriff!"

A tall, well-built man, wearing a black, wide-brimmed squash hat and a dark, tailed coat, dark trousers, and well-polished black shoes, elbowed his way to the front of the crowd.

"Mr. Caister," he said, "I guess we're real pleased to see that Wolf Point has gotten a new sheriff. But I'm wanting to know why a Britisher, new to the cattle country, has been given th' job when there's fellers in Wolf Point what have an equal and even better claim!"

A low growl of approval came from the crowd, and Cal whispered to Locke:

"That's Monty Earl! Blew in hyar 'bout eighteen months ago. Runs a string o' gambling joints and saloons, in Wolf Point. Gotta bodyguard o' gunmen, so folks say!"

Ferrers Locke nodded, and took careful stock of Monty Earl.

"We kinda reckoned some hombre like you would be

"hollerin' 'bout our selection!" said Caister angrily. "Get this, Earl! If you can bring outa that pack o' coyotes standing there, one real, honest-to-goodness he-man, what can stand four-square and look a feller like me, or my pards here, straight in th' eye, then we'll be shore glad to consider his claim! You know blamed well there ain't a man in Wolf Point fit to wear th' sheriff's badge, and if us cares t' appoint a Britisher, then them that don't like it can go elsewhere! Meanin' you, Earl! You blew in here of your own accord, and I reckon it'll be a blessed day for Wolf Point when you blows out and takes your gambling hells with you!"

Monty Earl's eyes flashed, and his hand wavered towards his hip pocket. Caister's hand whipped to his holster, and, covering Earl with a wicked-looking automatic, he drawled:

"Don't try that, you pore fool, else I'll drill you here and now! Say, see this gun? Waal, my pards pack guns as well, and so does their men! At the fust sign o' trouble us comes a-runnin', get that! Us is behind Sheriff Henderson, and you tell your blamed gunmen that!"

Earl nodded, and answered easily:

"It's your call, Caister! Guess I got sense enough to know when I'm at the wrong end of a gun! As for my gunmen, I don't get you! Long as Sheriff Henderson can keep peace in Wolf Point, I ain't complaining! Peace is what I'm aiming for, and no gunman runs wi' me!"

"Blamed hypocrite!" snapped Cal, in an undertone. "Best say sumthin', sheriff! It's usual on occasions like this hyar!"

The Baker Street detective stepped forward, and a hush fell on the muttering crowd. He felt instinctively that every man there was taking stock of him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I appreciate the honour which has been conferred on me by my appointment as sheriff. I've only one thing to say to you. Keep the law! I'm referring to the law as framed by Congress. If you find you cannot keep that law, then I'll make another, and that is the law of the gun!"

With that he turned on his heel and strode into his office.

"Gosh!" chuckled Jake Peters delightedly. "Straight and to th' point, Cal!"

"Yep!" replied Cal. "Reckon them hombres knows jest how they stan' wi' Sheriff Henderson!"

Trouble in Wolf Point!

BEHIND the sheriff's office were two small rooms, and Ferrers Locke decided to use these as living-rooms for himself and Jack. Backing on to the rooms was the gaol, a stone and cement structure about twelve feet square.

The days slipped quietly by without incident, but neither the sleuth nor his assailant were idle. They spent long hours in riding the ranges, and, by assiduous practice, soon became very fast on the draw. Ferrers Locke's arm was healing rapidly, and, working quietly and unostentatiously, he soon had the men in Wolf Point tabulated in his mind according to their various capabilities of lawlessness.

He discovered that Cal Jefferson had not been wrong when he said Monty Earl never moved without a paid gunman with him, ready to draw in Earl's defence should some unfortunate, who had been ruined at the gaming tables, attempt to extract a summary revenge by talking to the saloon proprietor with a gun.

It was about a week after Ferrers Locke's appointment as sheriff that Spud and seven of the Flying V cowpunchers rode into Wolf Point for the mail, stores, and a general mooch round. Leaving the others, Spud rode up to the sheriff's office and, dismounting, tied his horse to the hitching-rail and sauntered in.

"Howdo, sheriff!" he grinned. "Say, yuh're shore alive, still!"

"Yes, still alive, Spud!" replied Ferrers Locke. "How are things out at the Flying V?"

"Aw, jest danderin' along, Mister Henderson!" drawled Spud. "If he had ever experienced any surprise at the detective being made sheriff he never expressed it. 'Guess yuh've heard 'bout Caister?"

"No. What's that?"

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 984.

"Waal, seein' as how it jest happened this afternoon I guess th' news cain't hev gotten this far yet! Say, Caister got them fellers what quit th' night of th' fight at One Tree Creek! They come back fer their pay! Gee!"

"Well, what happened?"

"Caister tied 'em to a hitchin' rail like what he kinda promised, stripped their blamed shirts off an' laid inter 'em wi' a horsewhip! Say, he nigh took th' hide off'n them hombres! When they was most 'bout all in he cut 'em loose! One feller reached fer his gun, but Caister plugged him good and proper!"

"Killed him?"

"Yep, shore!"

"Did they offer any explanation as to why they quit?"

"Waal, they shore blamed th' hombre what was shot! Aimed to say that he was th' ringleader! Said he reckoned it was a fight 'tween th' Flying V and th' rustlers, and thet it war up to th' Flying V to fight their own blamed battles! 'Let's quit, boys!' he said, 'cordin' to them hombres, so they quit! Waal, he's shore quit this earth fer good now!"

"Caister will be ridin' in to tell me about it and report the man's death!" said Ferrers Locke. "I suppose you never got on the track of your missing ammunition?"

"No, sir, I did not!" replied Spud. "Me an' th' boys fair scoured th' range th' next day, but nary a sign nor a track of them rustlers could we find! Say, the ground rises, way past One Tree Creek, and she's shore hard and sparse o' grass! Tracks don't show none! Where thet blamed ammunition went's got me plumb locoed! I hed it in th' wagon thet I know! I guess——"

He got no further, for there came a rush of heavily-shod feet outside and Ted, one of the Flying V cowboys, burst into the room.

"Sheriff! Spud!" he gasped. "Come quick! Kid's bin shot!"

"Who shot him?" rapped the sheriff.

"It was this way!" panted the cowboy. "Us blew inter th' Silver Dollar Saloon fer some grub! Waal, a guy comin' out stood heavy on Kid's foot! On purpose! 'Twern't no accident! Kid ups an' tells him he's a clumsy coyote! Th' feller goes fer his gun an' so does Kid! Kid was second!"

"Is he dead?" snapped Spud.

"Nope, but I reckon he's mighty bad, Spud! It was shore a frame up!"

"Do you know the name of the man who shot him?" inquired Ferrers Locke.

"Yep! I've seen him offen! It's Killer Klauster what runs with thet skunk, Monty Earl!"

The Baker Street detective nodded grimly and, taking his belt from which swung two full-gun holsters, he buckled it on.

"Spud, you stay here with Jack and Ted," he said. "I'll get this fellow!"

"I'm aimin' to come wi' yuh, sheriff!" drawled Spud.

"Spud!" snapped Ferrers Locke coldly. "I'm handling this affair myself! You will stay here!"

"Yuh know his record?" inquired Spud softly.

"Yes, I know his record!" replied the sleuth calmly.

For a moment the two men stared into each other's eyes, then Spud nodded slowly.

"As yuh say, Mister Henderson! I guess I'll stay here!"

Ferrers Locke nodded, and the next moment the door closed upon him.

"Gee!" murmured Spud.

"That feller's got grit!"

"Meanin'?" inquired Jack, wondering at the note in Spud's voice.

"Meanin', son," replied the Flyin' V foreman, "thet Klauster shore carries more'n a dozen notches on his gun bar'l! Ev'ry notch stands fer a kill an' there ain't a sheriff what has ever gone after him what has lived to bring him in!"

Killer Klauster!

MEANWHILE, Ferrers Locke was walking steadily towards the Silver Dollar Saloon.

He knew Kid, the youngest of the Flying V outfit, a fair-haired, laughing boy, but with the impetuosity of youth and lacking the cold calm of the older hands.

THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

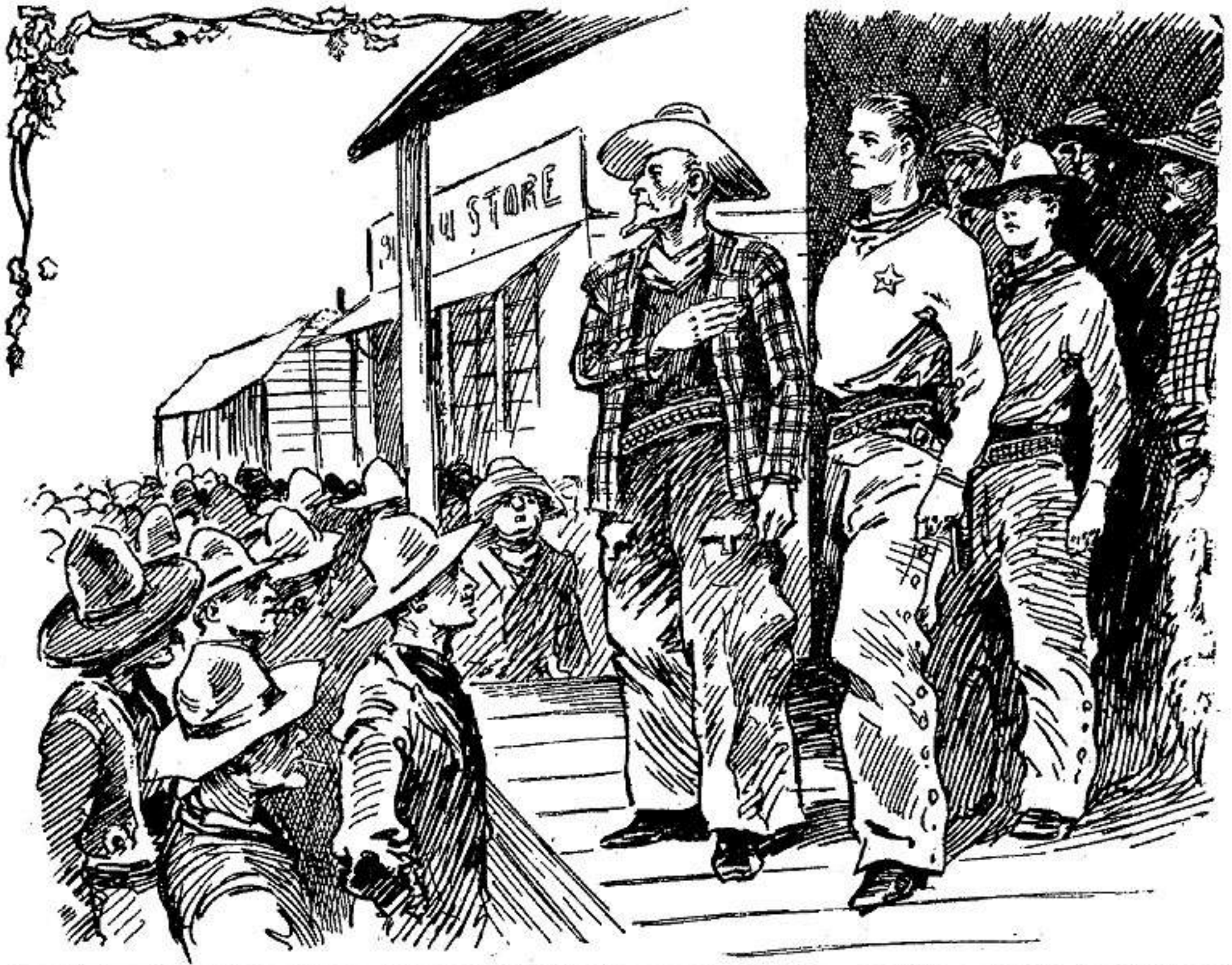
FERRERS LOCKE, the famous Baker Street detective, and his clever young assistant,

JACK DRAKE, take up quarters in Texas to investigate the mysterious raids made upon the cattle ranches in the neighbourhood of Wolf Point. A card bearing a wolf's head, with bared fangs, left at the scene of each outrage is the only clue the detective has to work upon. He has hardly been at Wolf Point five minutes, however, before an attempt is made on his life.

MAT DUKE, the sheriff, saves the situation, but in so doing is himself fatally shot by a person unknown. Following a second attempt on the detective's life, Drake rushes in with the news that the Wolf is raiding the Flying V outfit. Locke and the other ranchers hasten to the scene only to find the Wolf has fled, leaving many casualties. The party are returning to ranch headquarters when

SILAS CAISTER approaches Ferrers Locke and asks him to take on the job of sheriff.

(Now read on.)



"Us ranchers hev looked round for a new sheriff, and we have unanimously decided to select Mister Henderson," said Calster. "He has duly taken the oath, and this here lad, his nephew, has also sworn in as his assistant. Folks, meet your new sheriff!" Ferrers Locke, alias "Mister Henderson," stepped forward. (See page 23.)

Reaching the door of the saloon he pushed it open and entered. The buzz of conversation died away, and every man turned to stare at him curiously. The huge bulk of Monty Earl heaved itself from a table and came towards him, through the smoke-laden atmosphere.

"Howdo, sheriff!" he drawled. "You giving my lil' place the once over?"

"You've said it, Earl!" snapped the Baker Street detective. "Klauster here?"

"You wantin' him, hey?"

"Yes!"

A murmur arose from the inmates of the saloon and Monty Earl laughed softly.

"Sheriff," he said, "there's two ways of leaving this building! One is walking and t' other is being carried feet first! Say, you clear when you can, for it sure ain't healthy to come in here asking for Klauster that way!"

In reply, Ferrers Locke pushed the saloon proprietor to one side and crossed the floor, his eyes, watchful and alert, searching the crowded tables. Men returned his gaze in sullen silence, but he was aware of an atmosphere of tension which pervaded the saloon.

"Well, you satisfied he ain't here?" demanded Earl angrily.

"Looks like it!" snapped the sheriff. "Gone to ground like the dirty rat he is!"

Then his eyes narrowed, and his whole body stiffened. A hand had curled itself round the curtain of an alcove and was slowly drawing the curtain aside. Following his gaze, every eye was turned in that direction. Slowly the curtain moved, then the figure of Klauster stepped into view from behind it.

With head craned forward and hands hanging idly by his side, he glared at Ferrers Locke through little blood-shot eyes. The sleuth noted that he carried but one gun, swung low on the right leg, the holster almost touching his knee.

"Yuh wantin' me, sheriff?" he said harshly.

"Yes!"

"Whaffor?"

"For a shooting matter with one of the Flying V outfit!"

A deathly hush fell on the saloon. Not a man moved. Then, gratingly, came the voice of Klauster, and the words could not disguise the menace which it held.

"Yuh—pore—fool!"

Ferrers Locke took a step forward. Then another. Slowly he moved towards the gunman. Never for the fraction of a second did his eyes leave those of Klauster. Step by step, deliberately, grimly, he covered the space of flooring which separated him from the gunman. The silence was intense. Klauster's gun-hand twitched spasmodically. Five paces only lay between the men. Then Klauster whipped into action, and his hand streaked upwards from his gun holster.

Bang!

Two reports rang out simultaneously and the odour of burning powder permeated the saloon. As the swirling smoke cleared, the men saw to their amazement that Ferrers Locke was still advancing, slowly, remorselessly, his smoking gun in his hand. Klauster was crouched against the wall, snarlingly clutching at his shattered gun wrist, whilst his automatic lay on the floor by his feet.

Then the detective became concentrated energy. Stepping quickly forward, his hand groped in the gunman's shirt, and he pulled out a gun which Klauster carried slung under his arm. Slipping it into his pocket he bent rapidly forward and retrieved the other gun. He was white to the lips, and a thin trickle of blood was staining the left side of his shirt just below the shoulder.

"Now walk!" he snapped, jamming his gun into Klauster's back.

The gunman snarled out an oath.

"Yuh standin' fer this, Earl?" he shouted.

Monty Earl turned his broad back on Klauster and affected not to hear.

"Yuh're goin' back on me, drat yuh! Is thet what yuh mean, yuh double-crossin' skunk?" screamed Klauster.

"You're raving!" growled Earl, without looking round.

"Am I? Yuh dirty——"

"Stop that!" gritted Ferrers Locke. "You can talk later. Move!"

He prodded Klauster in the back, and slowly, hesitatingly, the gunman shuffled forward towards the door.

The investigator carried Klauster's gun in his free hand, and his eyes, narrowed to pin-points, swept the saloon.

"I shall fire at the first move!" he warned the sullen, silent crowd.

Slowly he and his captive moved towards the door. As they neared it Monty Earl swung round.

"Henderson," he said, "you're a mighty lucky man! I'm telling you not to come a-gunning in none of my places in future! If you must bring in your man, then wait till he's off'n premises what belong to me!"

Ferrers Locke laughed grimly.

"Be careful, Earl," he snapped, "that one day I don't come for you!"

"Then if you do," snarled the other, "bring a blamed posse with you, for you'll sure want it!"

"No," replied Locke evenly. "I'll come alone!"

By this time they had reached the swinging entrance doors, and Klauster turned his head leeringly towards the saloon proprietor.

"Yuh've double-crossed me, yuh hog!" he shouted. "But, by gosh, I'm gonna talk! Get that, yuh blamed skunk! I ain't aimin' to swing fer a crafty, sneakin' weevil like yuh! I reckon I'll——"

"Shut up and open that door!" snapped Ferrers Locke.

Klauster obeyed. With a last, quick glance round the saloon, the detective pushed his way out after the gunman, and the next instant the doors swung to and he had gone.

Earl's Move!

WITH an almost imperceptible jerk of his head Monty Earl beckoned to two men, who were lounging against a table a few feet away. Casually they sauntered in his wake, as he pushed his way through the excited crowd. A few minutes later the three of them were seated over a table in a small room at the rear of the building. Earl carefully locked the door and slipped the key in his pocket before sitting down.

"We've gotta stop Klauster's mouth!" he said harshly.

One of the men nodded and drawled:

"That's shore easy, boss! Say, I'll slip along an' plug him an' that thar sheriff in th' back! Street's shore dark, but I guess I can't miss 'em!"

"You're a fool, Jem!" snapped Earl. "You ain't gotta thought beyond your gun! Lissen! S'pose you shot Klauster and sheriff after what Klauster's just said. Gosh, man, it ain't gonna take a college guy to figger out that Earl's right behind that shooting! Get sense!"

Jem grunted surlily, and the other man snapped:

"Waal, spill what yore plan is, boss! Us fellers is shore ready! Reckon I can't quite see th' objection to plugging Henderson an' Klauster! Yuh're strong in Wolf Point!"

"I reckon I knows that, Slim!" snarled Earl. "But you're like Jem! You can't think a blamed inch further'n your gun! Say, you heard what Caister said t'other day 'bout him and th' ranchers standing right behind Henderson! Waal, what sorta blamed guy am I gonna look if Henderson's plugged in th' back after what's been said to-night! Fine chance I'd stand in a rancher's court when I'm charged with bein' consarned in th' murder of Sheriff Henderson! Caister's laying for me, and, say, I don't want any tellin' that I'd hang! Caister'd see to that, curse him!"

"Waal, what yuh figger on doin'?" drawled Jem.

"I'll tell you what I'm gonna do! I'm real strong in Wolf Point! Say, I gotta pull no other guy has got! That sheriff's a real he-man, and don't you forget it! Gosh, snakes, he handled Klauster like as if that feller didn't know 'nuff to come in outa the wet! Klauster's gonna squeal, that's certain!"

"Waal, git on! Us is shore listenin'!" growled Slim impatiently.

"Waal, I figger the position's like this! Klauster's not aimin' to swing alone. No, sir, you betcha he's not! He's set on a few other fellers swingin' with him! When he sets off his yap 'bout us, to-night, Henderson's gonna come back here with a posse! Get that?"

"Yep!"

"Waal, I'm gonna see Henderson right now! I'm gonna make that guy see sense! He's a man, I tell you, and a mighty useful sheriff if——"

He paused, and Jem snapped:

"If what? Yuh line o' talk takes some followin'!"

"If he'll come in with us," replied Earl, then added quickly: "Yessir, a strong-handed sheriff what shuts his eyes to a few things'd be mighty useful to us!"

"And if he won't?"

Earl laughed softly.

"I'm gonna give him a chance!" he went on. "And if he won't take it, then one of you fellers plugs him good and proper! Say, his answer to me might be the handcuffs and the gaol for what Klauster's aimin' to spill right now! You fellers hang around in the shadders by the door. If I don't come out after a quarter of an hour, you come a-gunnin', see? Plug Henderson, and us'll get Klauster and ride with him to the hills. Us'll hang him for blabbin', then share out, and ride for Arizona! Wolf Point won't be healthy with Caister findin' his pet sheriff dead!"

"Yuh means yuh're aimin' to see Henderson, right now?" drawled Jem. "Us comes along with yuh and jest hangs around. If yuh don't show up, us comes a-gunnin' fer yuh, knowin' that Henderson ain't cottonin' on to runnin' with us, hey?"

"Yes! You've said it, Jem!"

"It kinda seems to me," drawled Slim, "that Klauster maybe keep his blamed mouth shut an' see if us guys'll stage a rescue!"

"Yes, and what feller's gonna get the blame for that rescue?" snarled Earl. "Me, of course! Heaps of fellers heard Klauster say he was aimin' to talk, and they knows Klauster was sure addressing his remarks to me! I tell you the only way is for me to go to Henderson bold and put my cards on the table! If Henderson'll see sense us is fixed fine an' dandy! But if he ups and says, 'Earl, I knows your game, and it's you for a rope with a runnin' noose,' then us drills him and rides for the hills!"

Jem rose lazily to his feet.

"Waal, reckon us best git right along, boss!" he drawled. "Henderson was mighty slick to-night, but I reckon I kin feather a gun jest a li'l bit slicker!"

The Man in the Doorway!

MEANWHILE Ferrers Locke had reached his office with the slouching, cursing, Klauster walking in front of him. Kicking open the door the Baker Street detective ushered the gunman across the threshold.

Jack, Spud, and Ted, the cowboy, jumped to their feet, relief depicted in every line of their features.

"Yuh got th' skunk, then?" drawled Spud, striving in vain to disguise the surprise in his voice, then he added sharply: "But say, yuh're wounded!"

Ferrers Locke reeled and steadied himself against the table with his hand.

"Yes, he got me through the shoulder," he replied quietly.

"Keep th' cur covered!" snapped Spud, thrusting his gun into Jack's hand and indicating Klauster with a jerk of his head. "I'll fix sheriff!"

He stepped forward and wrenched Ferrers Locke's shirt open. With expert fingers he felt an ugly-looking wound on the sleuth's shoulder, just below the bone.

"Looks wors'n what she is, I reckons," he drawled. "Bullet's gone plumb through! Guess you've lost a bit of blood howsumever!"

Within a very few minutes he had the wound bathed and neatly dressed. Then he wheeled on Klauster.

"I ain't aimin' to kick no hombre when he's down, Klauster," he said, "but, by heck, I'm shore glad to see yuh've bin roped in at last! I'm real eager to see yuh swing at the end of a rope, and yuh blamed well will if Kid cashes in!"

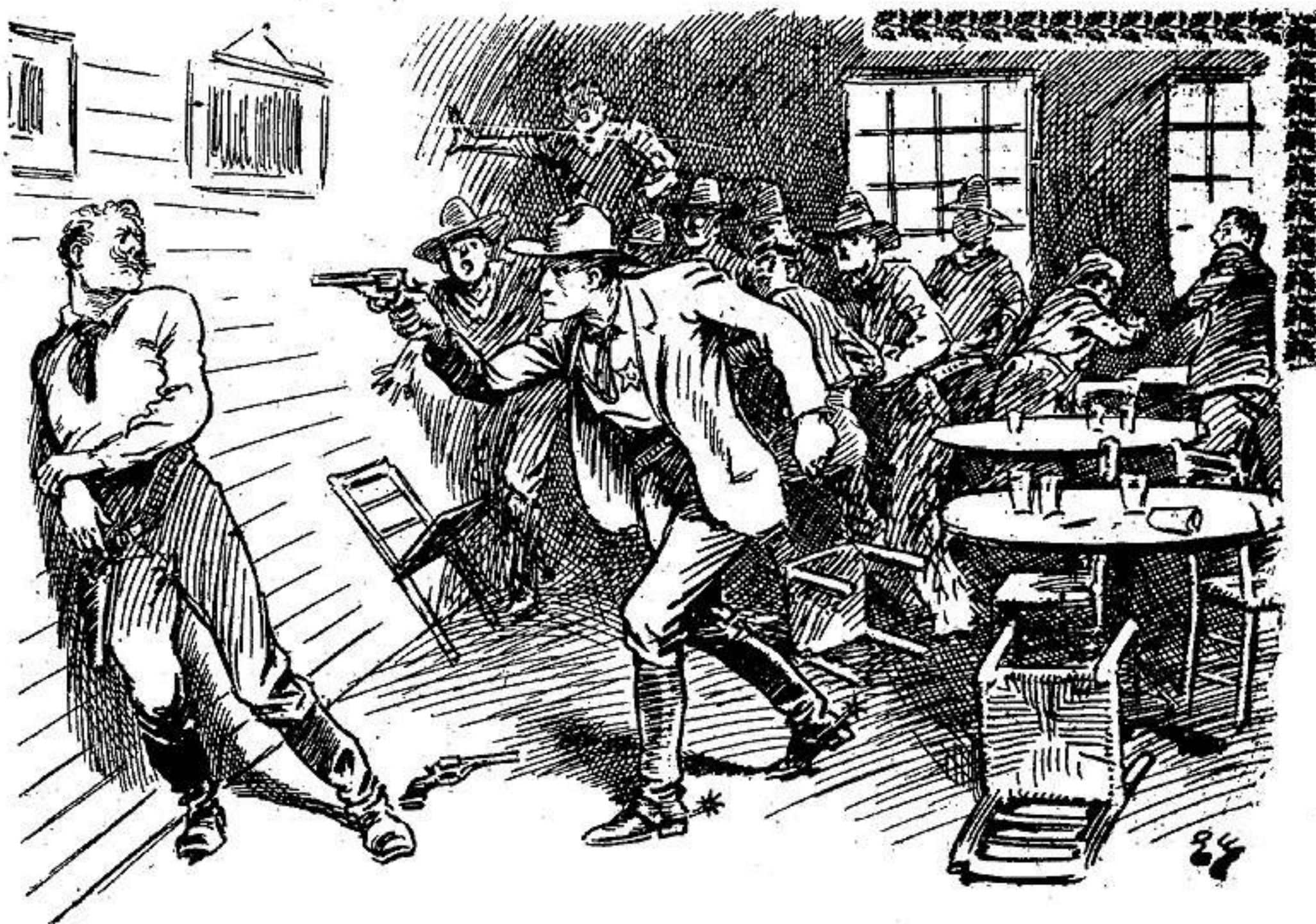
"Where is the boy?" interposed the sheriff.

"He's at Smither's liv'ry stables, Mr. Henderson! Say, guess Ted an' me'll be hikin' along right now! If so be he's dandy 'nuff to move us'll load him in th' wagon an' hit out fer th' Flyin' V. I'm not aimin' to stay in Wolf Point longer'n I can help!"

"Yes, get your men out of Wolf Point as soon as you can, Spud!" said Ferrers Locke earnestly. "That shooting to-night was a frame-up, you can take that from me! Get 'em out quietly. I've got the culprit, and I can handle the situation without your fellows butting in with guns! I know they'll be feeling sore about the affair, but they'll only make matters worse if they start trying to clean up the town!"

Spud grinned.

"Reckon that's what they'll be aimin' to do!" he drawled. "But I'll keep 'em quiet, an' us'll pull out, pronto! Us'll



Slowly, remorselessly, Ferrers Locke advanced upon Klauster, who was crouched against the wall, snarlingly clutching at his shattered gun wrist, whilst his automatic lay on the floor by his feet. (See page 25.)

be real tickled to hear how yuh hog-tied thet skunk, but guess us'll hev to wait!"

As he moved towards the door with Ted, Ferrers Locke turned to Jack.

"You go along with Spud, Jack," he said, "and report to me Kid's condition."

"Right-ho!" agreed the young assistant. Then paused and looked dubiously at Locke's bandaged shoulder.

"It's all right!" laughed the detective. "I can still use my left hand. Klauster won't give any trouble."

Reassured, Jack crossed to the door, and a moment later Ferrers Locke was left alone with Killer Klauster.

"I am going to put you in gaol," he said, addressing the gunman. "You will be tried on a charge of attempted murder! Should Kid die, then you'll hang!"

"I'm aimin' to talk!" snarled Klauster.

"You can talk later! Walk!"

He prodded Klauster in the back with an automatic, and indicated the passageway leading to the gaol.

"Yuh've gotta hear me spout!" screamed Klauster. "Say, I ain't standin' fer a double-crossin' hog like Earl goin' back on me! Say, listen! I warn't th' on'y guy in thet shootin', not by a blamed sight I warn't! Earl reckoned that—"

"I know exactly what Earl reckoned!" cut in Ferrers Locke icily. "He wanted to see just how the new sheriff would shape when trouble started! The shooting was deliberately engineered for that purpose! Well, both you and he have seen how I've acted! Now move!"

The gunman's jaw dropped, and his little rat-like eyes glared at the detective in astonishment.

"How yuh figger thet away?" he snarled. "Say, some guy bin spillin' sumthin'? Any blamed how, thet's not all! Say, listen—"

Ferrers Locke cut him short with a prod in the back from the gun, and, sullenly, Klauster shuffled down the passageway to the jail.

"Mister," he said hoarsely, as they reached the heavy iron door, "jest lemme talk! Say, I kin put yuh wise to this hyar skunk, Earl! I shore ain't aimin' to swing fer him an' his blamed dirty work! If I can't talk hyar I'll talk, by jinks, in th' ranchers' court, and there's a few

coyotes what'll wish they blamed well hadn't given up their guns to th' door checker when they comed in! I—"

The sheriff's only reply was to give him a shove which sent him through the open doorway. The next moment Killer Klauster was safely lodged in Wolf Point gaol.

Double-locking the iron door, Ferrers Locke returned to the outer room. Warily he seated himself at the table, and, with his gun in his hand, sat waiting.

Five minutes ticked by, then, came a knock at the door. Rising to his feet, the Baker Street detective crossed the room and swung the door open. Standing on the threshold was Monty Earl.

"Can I have a li'l talk with you, sheriff?" he drawled.

"Yes; I was expecting you!" replied Locke coldly.

Monty Earl stepped into the room, and Locke banged shut the door and locked it.

"What's that for?" demanded Earl.

"It's because I do not want any of your bodyguard barging in here!" snapped Ferrers Locke.

"I don't get you, sheriff! I comed here alone!"

"You are a liar!" replied the detective quietly. "You go nowhere alone!"

Earl's eyes flashed dangerously.

"I don't know why you talk that way to me, sheriff! I come hero to see what that skunk Klauster's been saying!"

"It is not my intention to discuss with you anything which Klauster may have said," replied Ferrers Locke quietly.

Earl frowned.

"Mr. Henderson," he said, at length, "how'd you like to make pretty near a fortune?"

Ferrers Locke maintained a grim silence, but his eyes never for a moment left Earl's face.

"I don't reckon I care what Klauster's been saying," went on the latter. "I reckon I'm the strongest man around these parts, sheriff, and I've gotta pull what no other fellow's got. Any man what goes against me gets his, sooner or later. Any man what runs with me can clear up a fortune!"

(If Monty Earl takes Ferrers Locke for a greenhorn he's sure going to get a rude awakening! Make no mistake about reading next week's thrilling instalment of this powerful detective series, chums!)

TO AND FROM YOUR EDITOR!

A MERRY Christmas and a Merry New Year! is the sort of greeting that doesn't lose value by repetition. In last week's special Christmas Number I voiced similar greetings to my thousands of chums, but doubtless there are some among you who either failed to see my small corner of "Chat," or else, for some reason or other, failed to get this particular number of your favourite paper. But you are not forgotten; May Christmas be all that you expect it to be; may the New Year bring you in close touch with the things you most desire. And here I would like to thank you chaps who have been kind enough to send me Christmas greetings, early as the day is. They were and still are much appreciated. To every MAGNET chum, girl or boy, wherever he or she may be, I repeat "A Merry Christmas and a Merry New Year!"

GIFT-BOOKS!

I would like to remind you chaps who are on the look-out for the Ideal Christmas Present that the "Holiday Annual" fills the bill in this respect. Some of you know that it abounds in glorious school stories of Harry Wharton & Co., Tom Merry & Co. of St.

Jim's, and Jimmy Silver & Co. of Rookwood, to say nothing of the ripping adventure and sporting tales, articles, poems, and gorgeous coloured plates that are to be found within its pages. A rare book for six shillings, chums.

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"THE GAME KID!"

This is the first story of a ripping series dealing with the return of Harry Wharton & Co. to Greyfriars after the Christmas vacation. I'm not letting on at this stage whom the "Game Kid" is—that'll bear waiting. But make no mistake about it, chums, this yarn is a topper. Mind you read it!

"THE FORM-MASTER'S SECRET!"

Is the title of the next Dicky Nugent story of Jack Jolly & Co. They, too, are back at St. Sam's, that amazing seat of learning over which the equally amazing Dr. Birchmell presides. If you like a good laugh, you'll get it in this "shocker," take it from me.

"THE MYSTERY OF FLYING V-RANCH!"

Out in the wilds of Texas Ferrers Locke and Jack Drake are going strong. As the new sheriff of Wolf Point, Ferrers Locke has his hands full, but he's never happier than when he's up against a tough proposition, and his present case is tough enough in all conscience.

Owing to the Christmas holidays the issue of the MAGNET containing this bumper programme will be on sale everywhere Friday, December 14th. Don't forget!

YOUR EDITOR.

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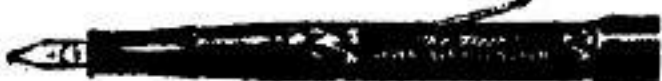
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