

BUMPER CHRISTMAS WEEK NUMBER!

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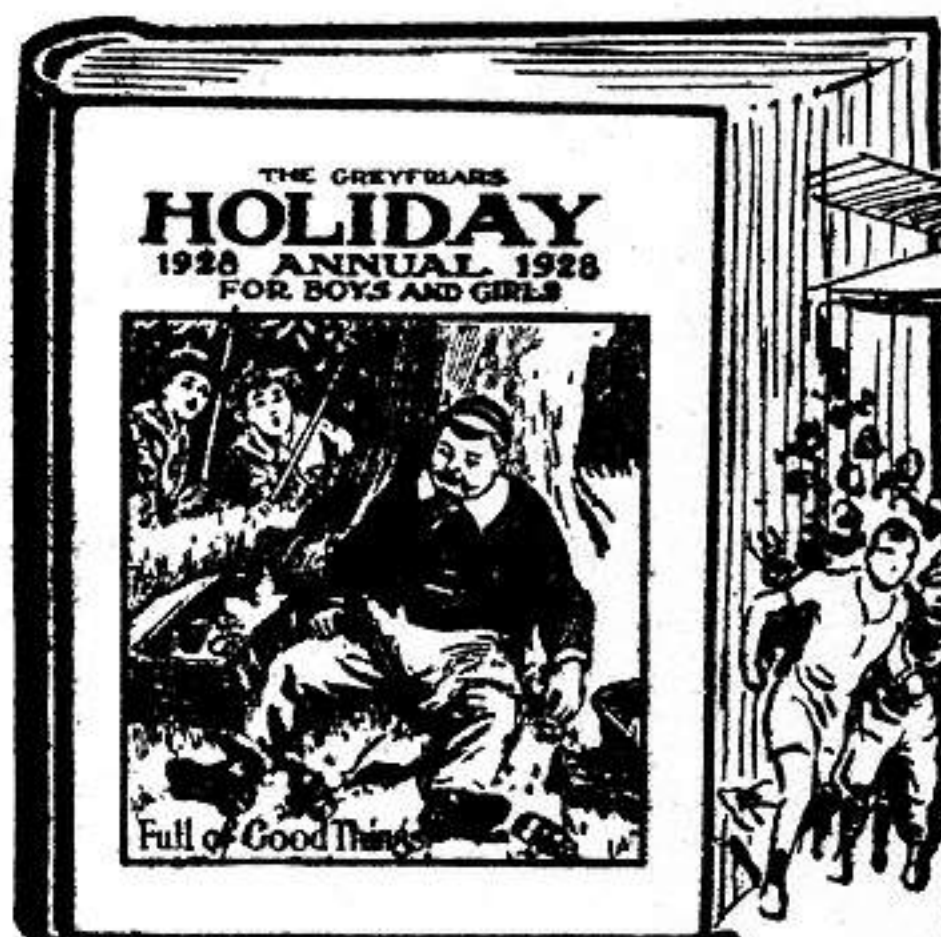
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BUNTER, THE PHILANTHROPIST!

(An Amazing Incident from the Grand Long Story of Harry Wharton & Co., inside.)

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WHO SAID THE AGE OF MIRACLES WAS PAST? Can you imagine Billy Bunter distributing money to the poor and needy? Can you picture him giving his own clothes away to a ragged youngster in the East End of London? Hard, isn't it? Yet these amazing changes in the character of William George Bunter actually take place during the Christmas Holidays!

Bunter the Benevolent!

A Magnificent New Long Complete Story of Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars, featuring Billy Bunter, the fattest and funniest schoolboy in the world.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Bessie Bunter Looks In!

"THE esteemed Bessie——"
"Which?"
"The beauteous and bounciful Bessie Bunter," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.
"Oh!"

Greyfriars was breaking up for Christmas. Many fellows had already gone, and many more were going. Among the former was Billy Bunter. Among the latter were Harry Wharton & Co. of the Remove.

Bunter had departed in unusual and astonishing circumstances. The Famous Five had been rather delayed, seeing him off. Now they were rather keen to get to the station. It was like a member of the Bunter tribe to butt in at such a busy moment. In many matters the Bunters were unreliable. But they could always be relied upon to butt in at awkward moments.

"Bunter's gone," said Bob Cherry. "I suppose Bessie wants him. Can't want us, anyway."

"Let's get off," said Johnny Bull.

"The bus will be full up in another minute," remarked Frank Nugent. "We don't want to lose the train."

"We don't," agreed Harry Wharton. "But——"

He paused.

Cliff House School broke up on the same day as Greyfriars, and if Bessie Bunter had come over from Cliff House to Greyfriars, obviously it must have been with the intention of going home with her brothers—Billy of the Remove, and Sammy of the Second.

Both of them were gone, apparently forgetful of the existence of the fascinating Bessie.

"The esteemed politeness is the proper caper, my ridiculous friends," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Let us explicate explainfully to the beautiful and absurd Bessie."

"We shall lose our train," said Johnny Bull.

"The losefulness of the train is not so serious as the loss of esteemed and shining politeness to esteemed feminine gender."

Johnny Bull grunted.

"Bless the train!" said Harry Wharton. "Let's speak to Bessie."

"Oh, all right!"

The ample if not graceful figure of Miss Elizabeth Bunter was in the offing, bearing down, in fact, on the chums of the Remove. The Famous Five went to greet Bessie, leaving their places in the school omnibus to a swarm of other fellows.

"Where's Billy?" asked Bessie Bunter.

"Sorry, he's gone," said Wharton.

"Brute!"

"Eh?"

"I mean Billy."

"Oh!"

For the moment Wharton had supposed that Miss Bunter was applying that complimentary expression to himself.

"Where's Sammy?"

"Gone with Billy."

"Little beast!"

"Oh!"

"When did they go?" demanded Miss Bunter, glaring at the Famous Five through the big round spectacles that gave her so striking a resemblance to her brothers.

From Miss Bunter's manner it might have been supposed that she held Harry Wharton & Co. responsible for the departure of Billy and Sammy.

"About half an hour ago," answered Harry.

"Gammon!"

"Eh?"

"There wasn't a train," sniffed Miss Bunter.

"They didn't go by train."

"Then how did they go?" demanded Bessie Bunter.

"By car."

"Bosh!"

Harry Wharton & Co. regarded Miss Elizabeth Bunter dubiously. They were losing their train for the sake of politeness to this damsel. But Miss Bunter seemed to have no politeness to waste upon them—none whatever.

"You shouldn't tell stories, Wharton," said Bessie Bunter, wagging a fat forefinger at the captain of the Remove in a severe and admonishing manner.

"But they really went by car!" gasped Harry.

"Rubbish!"

"They did, you know," asseverated Bob Cherry.

"They didn't," answered Bessie Bunter calmly. "I know father wouldn't send the Ford to fetch them home."

The Famous Five grinned.

The Remove fellows at Greyfriars had heard of—though they certainly had not seen—the magnificent Rolls-Royce car that belonged—or did not belong—to Mr. Bunter. Billy Bunter had described it many a time and oft. Evidently William George Bunter had allowed his fat imagination to spread over that car. According to Bessie, it was a Ford.

"They went by car, all the same, Miss Bunter," said Johnny Bull, "and it was a topping, whacking car."

"Rats!" said Miss Bunter.

"Hem!"

"My esteemed and beauteous miss—" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Piffle!"

"Hem!"

Miss Bunter seemed to be getting a little angry.

"Look here, has Billy really gone?" she demanded. "Has he put you up to spinning me this yarn because he doesn't want to see me? I'm going home with Billy, and he's going to pay the fare. He owes me the money. See? That's why I walked over from Cliff House."

"Oh!" said Harry. Really, he might have guessed that it was not from yearning family affection that Miss Bunter had conveyed her considerable weight from Cliff House to Greyfriars. Family affection was not highly developed in the Bunter clan.

"Really and truly they did go by car," asserted Nugent. "The car belonged to a millionaire named Skelton."

"Sempronius Skelton," amplified Bob Cherry.

"Nonsense!"

"Honest Injun!" pleaded Wharton.

"I've never heard of a Mr. Skelton. Who is he?" demanded Miss Bunter.

"It's a queer thing," said Harry. "It surprised us all. Your brother seems to have changed a good deal in the past few days. I don't know why."

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,037.

About a week ago he was out for a walk, and he dropped on an old gentleman in the rain, a poor-looking old fellow, and lent him his umbrella."

"Stuff!"

"I know it sounds thick," agreed Wharton. "Thinking the old man was very poor, and not having any money, Bunter gave him his watch and chain—"

"Rubbish!"

"And instead of bragging about it, as any fellow would have expected, Billy never said a word—"

"Rot!"

"And we never knew, till his watch and chain came back by registered post. It seems that the old gent was only gammoning about being hard up, because he wanted to find some really generous and charitable chap to help him in charitable works among the poor this Christmas. He found Bunter."

Snort!

Bessie Bunter evidently did not believe a word of it. But that really was not surprising, for the Famous Five themselves found it difficult to believe a word of it, though they knew it was true.

"Well, to-day the old gent turned up here," said Harry. "He's a giddy millionaire, and he came in a whacking car, and he took Bunter away with him for Christmas, and Bunter took Sammy along. His name's Skelton, and he had asked your father's permission to take Billy for Christmas. So it's all right. And that's where Bunter's gone. See?"

Miss Bunter had an umbrella slung on her plump wrist.

While Wharton was speaking she had been unhooking it, and taking a grip on it with her plump right hand.

As the captain of the Remove finished Bessie Bunter suddenly lifted her umbrella.

"Look out!" yelled Bob Cherry.

But the warning came too late.

Crash!

Miss Bunter, under the fixed impression that these fellows were spinning her an absurd yarn, and justly indignant and angry, seemed to have lost her temper.

The umbrella descended with a crash on the handsome silk hat that Harry Wharton had donned for the journey home.

Crunch!

"Yaroooh!"

"There!" gasped Bessie Bunter. "Now stop telling me fibs, you bad boy!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Genuine Goods!

HARRY WHARTON jumped back. His comrades jumped back at the same moment, with very wary eyes on Miss Bunter's umbrella.

"Oh!" gasped Harry.

His handsome silk hat—no longer handsome, but rather resembling a concertina—was crushed down over his ears. He dragged it off, and stared at it in dismay.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from a score of fellows who beheld the startling incident.

"Give him another, Miss Bunter!" yelled Skinner of the Remove, from the distance.

"Swipe him, Bessie!" howled Snoop.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here!" roared Wharton. "You've ruined my hat! That was my best topper! Look here—"

"Serve you right!" snapped Miss Bunter.

"Oh dear! I wish you were my brother!" gasped Wharton. "I'd jolly well punch your nose if you were!"

"Brute!"

"The punchfulness of an esteemed feminine nose is not the proper caper," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But the hasty departfulness is allowable. Let us beat it, my esteemed chums!"

"Hear, hear!" grinned Johnny Bull.

"Stop!" exclaimed Miss Bunter warmly. "I've come over here for my brother. Where is he? Where are your manners?"

"Manners! My hat!" murmured Bob.

He could not help feeling that Miss Bunter's own manners left something to be desired. Smashing a fellow's hat with an umbrella was not exactly in the style of Vere de Vere.

"I've told you where Billy is!" exclaimed Wharton, exasperated. "If you don't believe it, I can't help it. It all happened just as I said. Now we're going after our train."

"Stop, I tell you!" rapped out Bessie Bunter. "I've never seen such bad-mannered boys in all my life. I suppose your Form master doesn't cane you enough. That must be it. It's shocking for you to tell me such dreadful stories."

"But it's the truth—the frozen truth—the solid truth!"

"You mean to say that Billy gave his watch and chain to a poor man?"

"Yes, he did."

"And the poor man turned out to be a rich man," said Bob.

"Oh!" said Bessie. "Perhaps Billy knew that all along. In that case, of course, it may have happened."

"Oh!" said the juniors.

Miss Bunter seemed convinced at last; perhaps because she had thought of that reasonable explanation of Billy Bunter's generosity.

"You say he went home with a man named Skelton?" she demanded.

"Yes; Sempronius Skelton."

"What a name! Where does he live?"

"Blessed if I know."

"He must live somewhere," argued Miss Bunter.

Apparently Miss Bunter regarded the smashing of Wharton's hat as a mere trifling incident that might be dismissed from mind. Wharton, trying to punch the topper into something like the shape of a hat, did not agree with Miss Bunter on that point.

"Perhaps Mr. Quelch knows," suggested Bob Cherry. "The old gent was talking a lot to Mr. Quelch."

"Yes, you'd better go and ask Quelch," said Frank Nugent.

All the Co. concurred, brightening up wonderfully. They really did not want any more of the fascinating society of Miss Bunter, though they felt diffident about saying so. Landing her on the Remove master seemed an excellent way out of the difficulty.

"Very well," said Bessie Bunter. "You may take me to Mr. Quelch, Harry Wharton."

"Oh!"

"You're wasting time," added Bessie briskly.

"Well, the train's lost, anyhow," said Harry resignedly. "Come on!"

And the captain of the Remove escorted Miss Bunter into the House. His chums remained where they were. They compassionated Wharton, but not to the extent of accompanying him in charge of the charming Bessie.

Wharton led the Cliff House girl into Masters' passage, and arrived at Mr. Quelch's study. The study door was open; and he could see that the Remove master was not there. It was a very

busy day for Mr. Quelch, and he was evidently occupied elsewhere.

"He's not here," said Harry.

"Never mind—come in."

"But—"

"Come in!"

The captain of the Remove obediently followed Bessie Bunter into the study.

"Boys have no brains," remarked Miss Bunter pleasantly.

"Oh!"

"I suppose you didn't think of the telephone."

"The telephone?"

"Yes. There's a telephone here, and a telephone directory. If there really is a Mr. Skelton, a millionaire, his name will be in the book. I suppose millionaires are on the telephone."

"Oh, very likely!"

"Look!" directed Miss Bunter.

She sat down in Mr. Quelch's armchair. Wharton wondered what the Remove master would think if he came back to his study and found it taken possession of like this. However, he proceeded to hunt through the "S" department of the telephone directory. Mr. Quelch kept a London directory as well as the local one.

"Oh, here it is!" exclaimed Harry.

"Read it out."

Wharton read it out.

"Skelton, S. Park Lane, W. Number 4444."

"Park Lane," said Miss Bunter. "If he's a millionaire, he might have a house in Park Lane. Ring him up."

"Eh?"

"Ring him up and ask him."

"But he can't be home," objected Wharton. "It's only a little more than half an hour since he left Greyfriars in his car."

"Somebody will be at home. I suppose a millionaire doesn't live all alone in Park Lane, and black his own boots, and answer his own bells," suggested Miss Bunter sarcastically.

"Nunno; but—"

"There will be a butler or something. Ring him up."

"But Mr. Quelch mayn't like a fellow taking trunk calls on his phone," murmured Wharton feebly. "They cost a bob from here."

"You can leave a shilling on the table to pay for the trunk call."

"Oh!"

It did not occur to Miss Bunter to place a shilling on the table herself. Wharton still hesitated. Mr. Quelch might come back to the study any minute; and what he would think, if he found a Remove man taking trunk calls on his telephone Wharton could hardly imagine.

"What are you waiting for?" snapped Miss Bunter.

"You—you see—"

"For goodness' sake ring up that number, and don't waste any more time. Boys seem to have no sense at all," said Miss Bunter peevishly.

Wharton rang up the exchange and asked for the trunk call—fervently hoping that Henry Samuel Quelch would not return to his study just yet.

Fortunately it did not take long to get through. The bell rang, and Wharton took the receiver off again.

"Is that Mr. Skelton's house, Park Lane?" he inquired.

A full and fruity voice replied.

"Yes, sir! Mr. Skelton's butler speaking."

Miss Bunter rose from Mr. Quelch's arm-chair, and took the receiver from Wharton.

"Miss Bunter speaking!" she said into the transmitter.

"Indeed, madam."

"Billy Bunter's sister."

"Very good, madam."

"Oh! You know the name?"

Miss Bunter, under the impression that the juniors were spinning her an absurd yarn, and justly indignant and angry, seemed to have lost her temper. She brought her umbrella with a crash on Harry Wharton's silk hat. Crunch! "There!" gasped Bessie Bunter. "Now stop telling me fibs, you bad boy!" (See Chapter 1.)



"Certainly, madam."

"I hear that my brother Billy is going to spend Christmas with Mr. Skelton."

"That is correct, madam. Preparations have been made for the young gentleman's reception, and all is ready."

"Oh! Then it's straight!" gasped Bessie.

"I beg your pardon, madam."

"Did Mr. Skelton come to Greyfriars this morning in his car?"

"I believe so, madam. Mr. Skelton acquainted me with his intention of doing so."

"Oh! Scissors! Is Mr. Skelton really a millionaire?"

A fruity cough was audible over the wires.

"I regret, madam, that my master has not acquainted me with his financial circumstances."

"Oh, cheese it!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"You know whether your boss is a millionaire or not," snapped Miss Bunter. "Cough it up."

"I believe that Mr. Skelton is a very rich man, madam; but I cannot claim an intimate acquaintance with his financial affairs."

"That will do: you're jolly long-

winded. You're expecting Billy to-day, then?"

"Yes, madam."

"When you see him, give him a message from me," said Bessie Bunter. "Mind you don't forget to tell him that I think he's a nasty fat little beast for dodging me like this."

"Oh, madam."

Miss Bunter slammed the receiver on the hook, and blinked round at Wharton.

"It seems to be straight," she remarked. "Of course, it was rather steep when you told me. Billy has pulled that old donkey's leg somehow, I suppose. That's the only way of accounting for it. I believe you were telling me the truth, now."

"That won't mend my hat."

"Bother your hat!"

Miss Bunter rolled out of the study. Harry Wharton followed, deeply relieved to find that the Remove master was not in sight. Miss Bunter, apparently having no further use for the captain of the Remove, walked away; and Harry rejoined his comrades.

"Is the esteemed and beauteous miss gone?" inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Yes, thank goodness. Now about our train!"

And the Famous Five bent their heads over a time-table, seeking to elucidate its well-hidden secrets: relieved at least, to know that they were now done with the whole tribe of Bunters.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

The Benevolent Old Bean!

BILLY BUNTER beamed. The reward of virtue is always agreeable.

It is especially agreeable when it comes on a large scale to a fellow whose virtues are generally on a small scale.

Thus it was with William George Bunter of the Greyfriars Remove.

For once in his fat career, William George Bunter had been good: and he was bagging a reward out of all proportion to his goodness.

He sat luxuriously on soft cushions in a handsome car—a car that was handsome and expensive; such a car as Bunter had often dreamed about, on the occasions when he had dreamt that he dwelt in marble halls.

Compared with it, his pater's Ford was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine.

His brother Sammy sat opposite him, in a dazed state.

Sammy Bunter of the Second Form had jumped at the chance of joining Billy on this wonderful Christmas holiday with a millionaire; but he did not understand in the least. He did not understand how it had come about, and he did not understand why Billy was taking him along when he could quite easily have left him out.

Beside Bunter sat Mr. Sempronius Skelton.

The little old gentleman, whom Bunter had previously seen in tatters on a rainy day, was now resplendent in fur-lined coat and silk hat. His chubby face beamed with good humour. His eyes, which were of a rather peculiar light colour, with shining, shifting gleams in their depths, were full now of good nature and kindness. He seemed to have a great regard for his young friend Bunter: and Bunter was feeling an almost filial affection for him.

An old gentleman who owned such a car and such a chauffeur, and who was a millionaire with a mansion in Park Lane, was exactly the old gentleman whom Bunter was prepared to admire and honour and attach himself to.

The big car bowled along at a great speed through the keen, frosty winter air. It was a clear, sharp December day. There was a Christmas feeling in the air, Christmas good humour in many faces on the road. Greyfriars was left behind: there were no more lessons till the next term. That alone was enough to make Billy Bunter beam, even if there had been nothing else. And there was much else.

"I am truly glad that you are able to pass the Christmas holidays with me, my dear boy," said Mr. Skelton, as the car, leaving Courtfield behind, buzzed on along a wide country road lined with leafless trees. "I was deeply obliged to Mr. Bunter when he gave his permission. I could realise what a blow it would be to him not to see you at Christmas."

"Oh! Hem! Yes, sir," gasped Bunter.

Sammy only looked dazed.

Bunter minor could not understand how it could be a blow to anybody not to see Billy Bunter, at Christmas or any other time. The blow, in Sammy's opinion, would be in seeing him, not in not seeing him. And Sammy was aware that on the occasions when Billy Bunter passed a holiday away from home, Mr. Bunter bore the loss with the greatest fortitude.

But Mr. Sempronius Skelton, whose amiable nature had been liberally endowed with the milk of human kindness, attributed his own qualities to others, as good men often do.

"I should not have ventured to ask such a favour of him," resumed Mr. Skelton, "but for the fact that you will be engaged in benevolent and philanthropic work this Christmas, bringing joy and light to many homes. For such a purpose as that I felt entitled to

request Mr. Bunter to submit to the loss of his noble son's company."

"Just so, sir!" gasped Bunter.

Sammy Bunter rubbed his nose hard.

He realised that this little old gentleman discerned qualities in his brother Billy which he, Sammy, had never been able to discern. When he alluded to Billy as Mr. Bunter's noble son, Sammy simply gave it up. The only conclusion to which Sammy could possibly come was that Mr. Sempronius Skelton was a trifle balmy in the crumpet, as Sammy expressed it to himself.

There was a sudden jamming on of brakes, interrupting the conversation in the little old millionaire's car.

"What is it, James?"

"An accident on the road, sir, I think."

"Bless me! Bless me! An accident! I must get down at once."

James opened the door, and Mr. Skelton got out.

On the road ahead was a crowd, and a donkey-cart lay in a state of wreckage. Evidently it had been struck by a passing car, which had vanished. The motorist had not stopped to ask if he had hurt anybody. Perhaps he knew that he had.

A roughly-clad man, who looked like an itinerant merchant, sat in the road beside the wrecked cart, supported by two or three sympathisers. He seemed to be bruised and shaken, but his vocal cords, at least, had not been affected by the accident, for he was using powerful and picturesque language with a deep and enraged voice.

Mr. Skelton bustled into the crowd at once, and disappeared from the sight of Bunter major and minor. Evidently the philanthropic gentleman was deeply concerned by the accident.

"Anything serious?" asked Bunter, addressing the chauffeur.

"I think not, sir," answered James.

"Mr. Skelton seems to think so."

"The old bean is always like that, sir."

"The—the what?"

"Hem—I mean Mr. Skelton, sir!"

James moved away. Bunter blinked after him rather curiously. It occurred to him that James, the chauffeur, did not take his benevolent master with the seriousness with which a well-trained chauffeur should have taken a benevolent master.

"I say, Billy, now that chap's gone, tell me what all this means!" gasped Sammy Bunter. "Who's that old card?"

Billy Bunter frowned at his minor.

"You must speak respectfully of Mr. Skelton, Sammy! He is a philanthropist!"

"I've heard the pater say that a philanthropist is a man who's always on the make somehow!" said Sammy.

"Mr. Skelton is not on the make, you ass! He is a millionaire, and has a big house in Park Lane stacked with servants! That's where he's taking us now!"

"What on earth for?" demanded Sammy.

"It all began with that book that Uncle George sent me for a Christmas present," explained Billy Bunter. "It's called 'A Christmas Carol,' by Dickens. I gave it to you, Sammy. Have you read it?"

"I sold it to Nugent minor for a penny!"

Bunter regarded his brother more in sorrow than in anger.

"You should have read it, Sammy! It might have improved you! It opened my eyes to a lot of things. It's about a miserly old hunk named

Serouge, who turned good and became benevolent and philanthropic."

"What rot!"

"After I read that book," said Bunter, "I saw a lot of things I'd never seen before. I realised that I had been selfish, Sammy."

"You didn't need Dickens to tell you that! I've told you so lots of times!" said Sammy.

"I realised that I had been thoughtless of others, Sammy."

"Time you did!"

"I turned over a new leaf, Sammy."

"Gammon!"

"I found a poor man in the rain and lent him my umbrella, and gave him my watch and chain to buy food."

"He wouldn't have got much for it!"

"Don't be a cynical little beast, Sammy! It turned out that he was a millionaire. He got himself up as a poor man, to go searching for a really kind-hearted and benevolent chap to help him in benevolent works at Christmas."

"Oh, crikey! Is he potty?"

"No!" roared Bunter.

"Perhaps he's been reading Dickens' Christmas books, too, and got them on the brain!" suggested Sammy. "So he takes you to be a kind-hearted and benevolent chap, does he? Oh, my hat!"

"He does, and he's right," said Bunter calmly. "I see many things in a different light now, Sammy. I am going to enjoy this Christmas, doing good to others!"

"Pile it on!" said the sceptical Sammy.

"Don't you believe me, Sammy?"

"Don't be funny!" urged Bunter minor. "But you haven't explained yet why you brought me!"

"Because I'm going to have a tremendous holiday, and I didn't want to leave my brother out!"

"Oh, jimony!"

Sammy gazed blankly at Billy. If this was true, there undoubtedly was a change in William George Bunter. He had turned over a new leaf with a vengeance if he really was thinking of others as well as himself.

"You will help me in benevolent works, old chap!" said Bunter, beaming. "We shall visit the homes of the poor, and buck them up and make them happy!"

"I don't see much catch in that!" said Sammy. "Will there be Christmas parties?"

"I don't know; but there will be good deeds—"

"Groogh! Will there be plenty of grub?"

"I haven't even thought about that."

"Eh?"

"What does it matter?" asked Bunter.

"Wha-a-at does it matter?" repeated Sammy of the Second, like a fellow in a dream.

"We must not think of ourselves, Sammy."

"Not!" gasped Sammy.

"Certainly not!"

"Oh, crikey!"

"All the same, I fancy there will be a lot of grub, and of the very best," added Bunter. "Stands to reason that a millionaire does himself well, and does his guests well. We shall be all right in that line, depend on it!"

"Oh, good!" said Sammy, taking comfort. "But, look here—"

"Shush! Here's Mr. Skelton!"

The little old gentleman came back to the car. His little chubby face had an expression of deep concern.

"That poor man yonder is badly

shaken," he said. "It is necessary for him to be taken to the hospital at once. I have offered my car."

"Eh?"

"Please step out!" said the philanthropic old gentleman.

"Oh!"

The two Bunters stepped out.

"James!"

"Sir!"

"You will take that poor man to the hospital at Courtfield. You will then fetch any relatives whom he may desire to see. Afterwards bring the car home. I shall proceed by rail."

"Yes, sir!"

"Come, my dear boys!" said Mr. Skelton.

"Oh!"

The dear boys followed Mr. Skelton. Billy Bunter's face was very grave. The effect of the "Christmas Carol" was still strong upon Bunter; his new leaf was still turned. He was still resolved upon a better way of life, on good deeds and good works. Nevertheless, he was grave. It occurred to him that even benevolence and philanthropy might very properly have a limit. As for Sammy, he was undisguisedly scowling.

The great car had been very comfortable. On the open road there was a keen wind, with a touch of the east in it. The change was considerably disconcerting.

"Is it far to the station, sir?" gasped Sammy.

"About three miles, I am told," said Mr. Skelton brightly.

"Oh crumbs!"

"We—we're going to walk three miles, sir?" asked Billy Bunter.

"There is no alternative, my dear boy, since we have given up our car to that unfortunate victim of an accident."

"Oh!"

Mr. Skelton trotted on briskly. Billy Bunter rolled after him, his fat face growing graver and graver. Sammy trailed on behind, with absolutely no trace of Christmas geniality in his visage. The only hint there was of Christmas about Sammy was that his expression was remarkably like that of a demon in a pantomime.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Sammy is Fed-up!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

"What—"

"Bunter!"

"Bunter! My hat!"

Harry Wharton & Co. had not expected to see Billy Bunter again till after Christmas, neither had they specially desired to do so. But what they neither expected nor desired had come to pass.

The chums of the Remove were on the platform at Lantham Junction, landed there by a local train. They were waiting for an express, which was now due. Among the passengers who came on the platform was one who would have been recognised anywhere by his circumference, not to mention his diameter.

With Billy Bunter was the fur-lined gentleman and Sammy of the Second. The fur-lined gentleman's chubby face beamed, as usual, with kindness and benevolence. Billy Bunter's expression was serious. Sammy's was almost demoniac. The old gentleman was tired with a long and windy tramp, but fatigue incurred for the sake of others afforded a benevolent satisfaction to his philanthropic nature. It seemed to

have afforded no satisfaction whatever to Sammy Bunter. Sammy plumped down on a seat and scowled. Billy Bunter plumped down beside him and tried hard to smile. The little gentleman sat down and beamed benevolently on the world in general.

Harry Wharton & Co. regarded them with some interest and a little surprise. They had supposed that the magnificent car was taking the Bunters all the way to London. Yet here they were at Lantham Junction.

The little old gentleman recognised the Famous Five, and gave them a kind nod. The juniors politely raised their hats.

"Going up by train, sir?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Yes, my boy."

"We gave up the car to take an injured man to the hospital, you fellows," Billy Bunter explained.

"Oh!"

"I say, that was jolly decent," said Johnny Bull.

"It was our plain duty, especially at Christmas-time," beamed Mr. Skelton.

"My young friend Bunter fully agrees."

"Yes, rather, sir!" said Bunter.

Bunter was, at least, trying hard to

BILLY BUNTER'S ANNUAL!

Did you chaps know that there's a special supplementary annual, "run" by William George Bunter, in this year's bumper production of

"THE HOLIDAY ANNUAL"?

It's a regular corker, boys, and adds just that delightful touch which makes the "H.A." the finest budget of school, sporting and adventure yarns in the world.

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feel that he agreed. The lesson of Scrooge was, perhaps, growing a little fainter in his fat mind. But its effect had not by any means worn off yet.

But Sammy Bunter had not read the "Christmas Carol," and perhaps it would not have affected him in the same way had he done so. Sammy's little fat legs were simply aching with a three-mile tramp in a bitter wind. Sammy had been prepared to "go in" for philanthropy, or anything else, that Christmas, so long as he, Sammy, had a good time. But if this was the sort of good time Sammy was going to have, Sammy had had enough of it already, and a little over.

Mr. Skelton blinked at him.

"You are tired, my little friend?" he asked.

"Yes," grunted Sammy.

"But no doubt that affords you a certain satisfaction, since you became fatigued in a good cause," suggested Mr. Skelton.

Grunt!

Good causes did not seem to appeal to Sammy Bunter.

Mr. Skelton looked at his watch.

"The train will be in soon," he said. "We had better walk along the platform, my young friends."

"First-class stops here, sir," said Bunter, blinking at a sign to that effect on the platform.

"I have taken third-class tickets," said Mr. Skelton gently.

"Eh?" ejaculated Billy Bunter.

"What?" gasped Sammy.

Harry Wharton & Co. wondered a little. On that special occasion, breaking up for Christmas, they travelled first-class. Generally they went third and expended the balance on more useful things. But they naturally supposed that Mr. Skelton travelled first-class as a matter of course. His car was worth a small fortune; his chauffeur was obviously a very expensive chauffeur; his fur-lined overcoat had probably cost a couple of hundred guineas. Third-class fares seemed rather out of keeping with all this. But the juniors had already realised that Sempronius Skelton, though evidently a good and kind man, was a little odd in some ways.

It was the last straw to Sammy Bunter. The trains were crowded, or, rather, crammed, and in the swarming third-class it was likely enough that he might have to stand all the way. If this was holiday-making with a millionaire, Sammy wanted no more of it.

"You see, my boys," beamed Mr. Skelton, "I was about to take first-class tickets, when I said to myself, 'No; we will travel third, and give the balance thus saved to the first poor man we meet.' You see?"

"I see, sir," said Billy Bunter bravely. "Jolly good idea, sir! I—I—I'm glad you—you thought of it in time."

"Exactly what I expected you to say, my dear young friend!" beamed Mr. Skelton.

Sammy did not speak.

He could not.

He was seized by a wild desire to punch Sempronius Skelton on his benevolent nose. The old blighter—by that name Sammy mentally characterised the philanthropist—the old blighter could think of a poor man who wanted a tip, but he couldn't think of Sammy and his aching legs! The prospect of having to stand all the way to London on those aching legs made Sammy shudder.

"Come on, Sammy," said Billy Bunter, as the little old gentleman, with a polite parting salute to the Famous Five, toddled away up the platform to join the swarm of passengers waiting for the third-class section of the coming express.

Sammy Bunter scowled fiercely.

"I'm not coming!" he snarled.

"Sammy, old chap—"

"Go and eat coke! I'm not coming!" hissed Sammy.

"But Mr. Skelton—"

"Tell him to go and eat coke!"

"Look here, Sammy, you ungrateful little beast—"

"Ungrateful!" scoffed Sammy. "I like that! Walking three miles, and taking a third-class ticket and standing up in a crowded carriage! No fear! I don't believe the old codger is a millionaire at all! I believe he's a blighted old miser! Tell him to go and chop chips!"

Bunter paused.

"Shall I tell him you want to go home after all, because you feel that one of us ought to be with the pater at Christmas?" he asked.

"You can tell him any whopper you like; but I ain't coming!"

"Your box went on the car, Sammy."

"You can send it home for me; and you can pay the carriage, as you've grown so jolly philanthropic!"

"Look here, Sammy—"

"Rats!"

"You cheeky little beast—"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter clenched a fat fist. Sammy clenched two! The Owl of the
THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,037.

Remove restrained his wrath and hurried away after Sempronius Skelton.

Sammy Bunter blinked at Harry Wharton & Co.

"That's that!" he remarked.

"The thatfulness is terrific," smiled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"You may be missing a good thing, kid," smiled Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Jolly glad to miss it!" snorted Sammy. "Three-mile walks and third-class fares ain't my idea of a holiday with a millionaire. I dare say when Billy gets to London it will turn out to be Petticoat Lane instead of Park Lane."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going home, anyhow," growled Sammy. "Gatty of the Second asked me for Boxing Day. I told him it was off. I shall jolly well write to him and tell him it's on again. No third-class millionaires for me!"

And Sammy Bunter, snorting with indignation, rolled away, leaving the Famous Five smiling.

The express came in, and Harry Wharton & Co. took their seats in the first-class. In the third-class, Mr. Skelton was wedged in a corner, perspiring in his fur-lined coat; and Billy Bunter, unable to get a seat, stood. Sammy was not on the train at all. Sammy had had enough; and William George, as he felt a deep and painful ache creeping all over his fat legs, wondered whether Sammy, after all, had not made a wise choice. Benevolence and philanthropy were all very well, and extremely appropriate at Christmas-time; but it was borne in upon the mind of William George Bunter that it was possible to have too much of a good thing.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Too Much of a Good Thing!

THE car met Bunter and the millionaire at the station. It was not the same car; evidently Mr. Skelton kept more than one. Billy Bunter, fairly aching with fatigue, was deeply relieved to sink down upon a well-padded seat and rest his weary limbs. The philanthropic millionaire, who had travelled third-class to London from the other side of Kent, was finishing the last lap of the journey in a thousand-guinea car. Bunter had already realised that his kind friend was a little eccentric.

Certainly Mr. Skelton's manners and customs seemed a little inconsistent. But, after all, inconsistency is a common human weakness from which no one is free. Bunter was glad, however, that Mr. Skelton had not lent this car to the poor for a beanfeast and proposed completing the journey by bus. He leaned back in great relief and comfort while the car threaded its way through the thick traffic in the misty streets.

"Bless me! Bless me!" ejaculated Mr. Skelton suddenly.

Bunter blinked at him.

He fervently hoped that Mr. Skelton had not spotted another accident, and was not contemplating placing this car at the service of some damaged person.

But it was not so bad as that!

"Bless me! I had forgotten!" exclaimed Mr. Skelton, blinking at Bunter over his gold-rimmed glasses. "I am growing a little forgetful, I fear."

"What is it, sir?"

"You remember, my dear boy, that we travelled third, with the intention of giving the money thus saved to the poor."

"Oh—ah! Yes!"

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,037.

"I had forgotten," said Mr. Skelton. And he signalled to the chauffeur to stop.

It was some minutes, however, before the car could stop in the crowded street. It drew at last to the kerb. Mr. Skelton, leaning from the window, made signs to an itinerant merchant in the match line, who was mooching along the edge of the pavement.

The match merchant stared at him.

"Matches, sir?"

Probably this was the first time the match merchant had had a customer in a silk hat, a fur-lined overcoat, and a thousand-guinea car. But he was not losing a chance of business. He dived to the car with his tray.

"Matches, sir? 'Ere you are, sir!"

"Thank you, my friend, I require no matches," said Mr. Skelton, blinking at him benevolently.

"Eh?"

"I do not smoke," explained Mr. Skelton. "I regard smoking as a needless extravagance, in a world where so many of our fellow-creatures are in want of the barest necessities."

"My eye!" said the merchant.

He gave the millionaire an inimical glare. He was there to sell matches, not to listen to a philanthropic old gentleman moralising.

"Then wot the blooming thump—" he was beginning, when Mr. Skelton astounded him by pouring out a handful of silver on his tray.

"My blinking eye!" gasped the match merchant.

"I trust that this small sum may be useful to you, my friend, since you appear, judging by externals, to be in somewhat reduced circumstances," said Mr. Skelton.

"Blow me tight!" said the match merchant. "I mean, thank you kindly, sir! Merry Christmas, sir!"

He stepped back.

Mr. Skelton sank back on his cushions with the benevolent satisfaction of a good man having done a good deed. Bunter, watching the match merchant, saw a sign pass between him and the chauffeur driving the car. Mr. Skelton did not observe it; he was not an observant gentleman. Bunter observed it. A peculiar twist of the match merchant's dirty features was answered by a slight deflection of the chauffeur's eyelid. Then the car drove on. But that instantaneous exchange of signs told Bunter exactly in what estimation his kind old friend was held by the match merchant he had benefited and the chauffeur who drove his car. The meaning could not have been plainer had it been put in words.

"You're driving a blooming lunatic!" was what the match merchant would have said, had he expressed his meaning verbally.

"You've got it!" was what the chauffeur would have answered.

Bunter blinked at the millionaire.

He wondered whether Scrooge, in the "Christmas Carol," would have been set down as a lunatic by common, unimaginative persons in his later benevolent period.

Bunter was very thoughtful as the car rolled on.

He wondered whether his father, when he gave permission for Mr. Mr. Skelton to take William George for Christmas, had noticed that the millionaire was a somewhat eccentric old gentleman.

Probably he hadn't. He had undoubtedly noticed that he was a millionaire—and undoubtedly that had been enough for Mr. William Samuel Bunter.

The car rolled into Park Lane.

Bunter forgot all his doubts as he found himself in that region. A man who had a mansion in Park Lane could afford to be as eccentric as he liked. Sammy, had he been present now, would have been sorry that he had "chucked" it, Bunter considered. Bunter had explained to Mr. Skelton that Sammy, on second thoughts, had felt bound to go home for Christmas to be the comfort and consolation of his father during Billy's absence. This was not quite in accordance with the facts, but it was as near to the truth as Billy Bunter generally arrived.

Billy Bunter had reformed; but his reform was not quite complete. Old habits were not changed in a day.

The car stopped.

Billy Bunter's eyes opened wide behind his big spectacles as he blinked at the lofty mansion before him. Undoubtedly it was a magnificent residence. Probably it would have fetched a hundred thousand pounds in the property market; quite a palatial residence for a gentleman who did not smoke because smoking was a needless extravagance in a needy world. But Bunter was used to his kind friend's inconsistencies by this time.

A magnificent door opened, and a magnificent butler bowed before the millionaire and his guest.

But Bunter, who was very observant now, observed a momentary glimmer in the butler's eye as he bowed solemnly before his master, which reminded him of the mute sign that had passed between the match merchant and the chauffeur.

"Parkinson," said Mr. Skelton.

"Sir!"

"This is my young friend Master Bunter, whom I have mentioned to you."

"Quite so, sir."

"Master Bunter is my honoured guest, Parkinson."

"Very good, sir."

"His rooms are prepared?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Where is Mr. Lucas, Parkinson?"

"In his room, sir."

Mr. Skelton turned to Bunter.

"You will meet Mr. Lucas later, William," he said. "Mr. Lucas is my secretary, and a very worthy young man. Parkinson!"

"Sir!"

"Take Master Bunter to his rooms."

"Very good, sir!"

Billy Bunter, like a fellow in a dream, followed Parkinson.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

In Park Lane!

"OH crumbs!" That was William George Bunter's remark when he found himself alone.

Bunter was almost overcome.

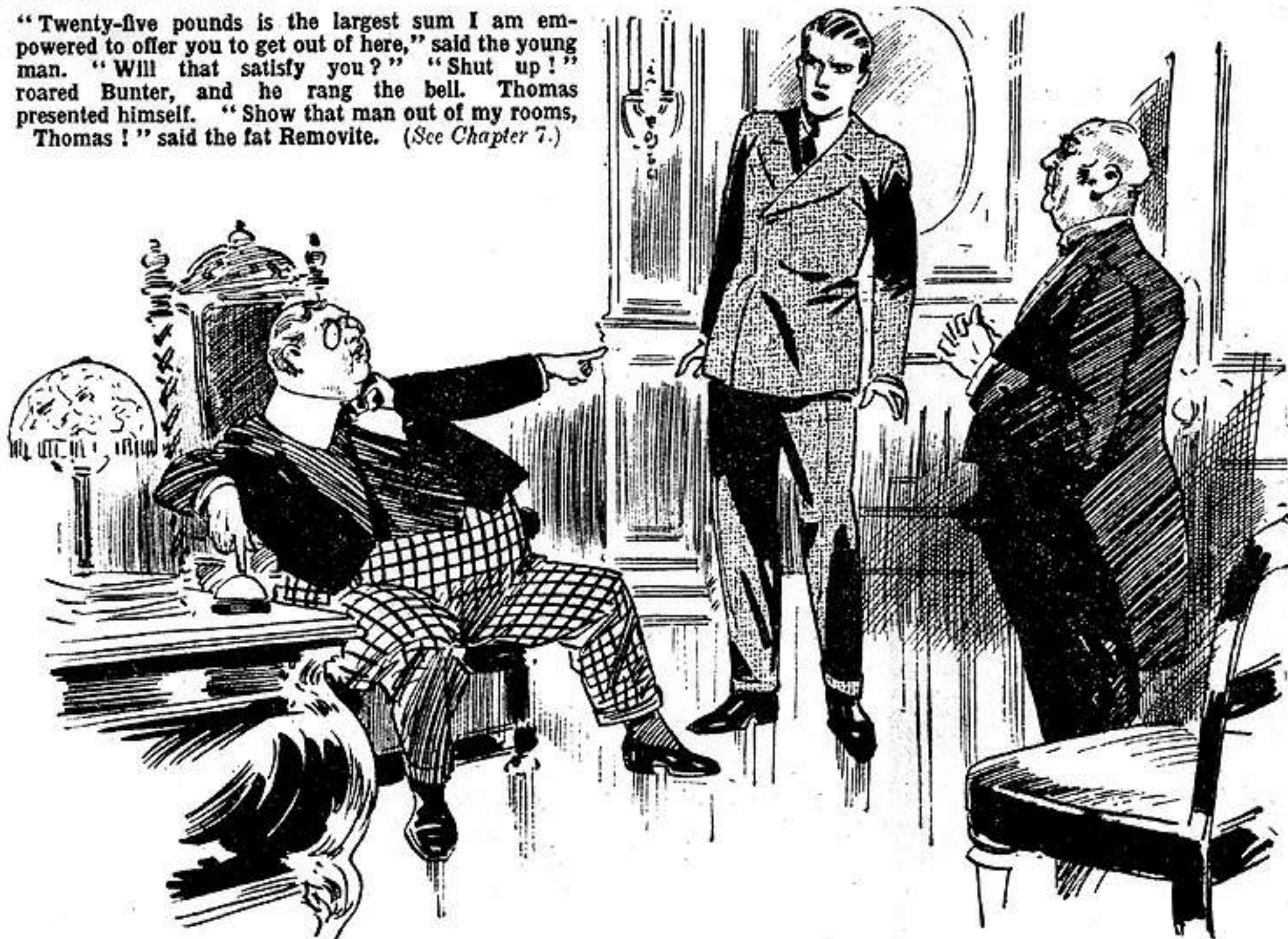
In his rosier dreams, he had not pictured anything like this.

All his imaginary descriptions of Bunter Court faded into insignificance beside the present reality.

Parkinson had shown him his quarters with great gravity, but there was a sort of twinkle behind his gravity which Bunter had not failed to detect.

He realised that Sempronius Skelton's philanthropic benevolence appealed only to the sense of humour of the millionaire's many dependants. No doubt all the numerous occupants of the Park Lane mansion made a good thing out of it. But probably they had not read Dickens, and did not understand benevolence carried to the extent to which Mr. Skelton carried it.

"Twenty-five pounds is the largest sum I am empowered to offer you to get out of here," said the young man. "Will that satisfy you?" "Shut up!" roared Bunter, and he rang the bell. Thomas presented himself. "Show that man out of my rooms, Thomas!" said the fat Removeite. (See Chapter 7.)



That, however, did not worry Bunter. He was in clover!

On that point there was no shadow of doubt. He had a suite of rooms to himself; the mansion seemed to contain innumerable rooms and countless servants. A magnificent bed-room, a superb private sitting-room, and a bath-room were all Bunter's. Any of Billy Bunter's acquaintances would have surmised that he would not bother the bath-room very much. Still, it was there, and it was superb.

A neat footman, who was called Thomas, had been presented to Bunter, and it appeared that Thomas would devote his whole service to Bunter during that youth's stay in the Park Lane mansion. There was a special bell to summon Thomas whenever Bunter wanted him.

Bunter roamed through his new domain, feasting his eyes on his superb surroundings, hardly able to believe either his eyes or his spectacles.

He sat down at last in a wonderfully easy armchair at a window which gave him a wide view of the park.

"Oh crumbs!" murmured Bunter.

He wished that the Christmas vacation had been longer. He felt that he could have made himself comfortable here for quite a long time.

Tap!

It was the portly Parkinson again.

"Excuse me, sir!" said Parkinson. "I have omitted to give you a message, sir, received by the telephone."

"Trot it out!" said Bunter.

Then the Owl of the Remove blushed. He realised that the colloquial style of the Remove passage at Greyfriars was not suited to his present magnificent surroundings.

"You may give me the message, Parkinson," said Bunter, with dignity, modelling himself as near as he could—

which was not very near—on the manner of Lord Mauleverer of the Remove.

"A young lady telephoned, sir."

"Indeed?" said Bunter languidly.

"She stated that she was your sister, sir."

"Oh, Bessie!" said the fat junior.

"How the thump did Bessie know that I was here?"

"The young lady did not state, sir."

Parkinson's manner was grave and respectful, but Bunter scented impertinence. Bunter was not the fellow to stand impertinence from servants, even from portly and magnificent servants like Parkinson.

He frowned.

"Give me the message," he said curtly.

"Hem!" coughed Parkinson.

"Well, get it out!" snapped Bunter.

Parkinson coughed again.

"Get it out, I tell you!"

"Hem! The young lady requested me to tell you, sir—hem—that—"

"That what?" hooted Bunter.

"That you were a nasty fat little beast, sir—"

"What?"

"For dodging her, sir."

Parkinson retired gravely after having delivered Bessie Bunter's message. Billy Bunter glared after him.

"Parkinson!" he hooted.

"Sir!"

"Just understand this!" roared Bunter. "I'm here as your master's guest. I don't want any cheek!"

"Cheek, sir?"

"Yes, cheek!" hooted Bunter.

"I am unacquainted with the word, sir," said Parkinson. "Perhaps you will be so kind, sir, as to explain its meaning?"

"When I say cheek I mean cheek!" hooted Bunter. "Don't give me any impertinence. Do you understand?"

"I understand, sir," assented Parkinson. "I should regret very much, sir, to be guilty of impertinence, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"That's all. You can go."

"Thank you, sir," said Parkinson imperturbably.

And he went, leaving Bunter feeling that somehow he had had the worst of it.

The fat junior frowned darkly. More and more the impression of the story of Scrooge was fading from Billy Bunter's mind. His fat mind, in fact, was not made to retain such impressions for long. A really benevolent nature, no doubt, would have regarded Parkinson's veiled impertinence more in sorrow than in anger. Bunter was only feeling angry and annoyed. After a moment or two of reflection he jumped up and rolled across to the door, with the intention of saying something a little more emphatic to Parkinson before he disappeared.

He opened the door noiselessly and blinked out. Parkinson was already out of sight. But from behind a group of statuary on a great landing he heard the butler's voice.

"That's the Old Bean's latest, Thomas."

"A regular cough-drop, Mr. Parkinson!" came the voice of Bunter's own special footman.

"That is a somewhat vulgar expression, Thomas, but it describes the case precisely," said Mr. Parkinson. "This time it is really the limit. An exceedingly ill-bred young bounder."

"It's just like the Old Bean, Mr. Parkinson," said Thomas deferentially.

Mr. Parkinson sighed.

"Oh, just!" he said. "I am really beginning to doubt, Thomas, whether it is quite becoming for a gentleman to—"

retain service with Mr. Skelton in these very peculiar circumstances."

Billy Bunter closed his door again silently and returned to his easy-chair and the view of the park.

So that was how these menials discussed their master and his guests!

"The old scout's too easy with them," Bunter reflected. "What they want is kicking. I'll jolly well show them that they can't give me any lip, anyhow!"

Bunter's benevolence was reaching a very low ebb.

Tap!

Bunter turned his eyes and his spectacles on the door as it opened. He was ready for the impertinent Parkinson this time.

"Look here, don't you butt into my rooms unless you're rung for!" he snapped. "Get out of it!"

"Sir!"

It was not Parkinson!

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter Is Not Taking Any!

"OH!" ejaculated Billy Bunter.

He jumped up.

The newcomer was a young man dressed in black—a gentleman-looking young man. Who he was and why he had come there Bunter had not the faintest idea. The fat junior coloured.

"I—I beg your pardon!" he stammered. "I thought it was that cheeky butler again."

The young man raised his eyebrows.

"Indeed!" he said.

His dry manner had the effect of dashing Billy Bunter's self-confidence considerably.

Bunter stood and blinked at him.

"Pray excuse me for disturbing you, Master Bunter," said the young man in the same dry manner. "My name is Lucas."

"Is it?" said Bunter.

"I am Mr. Skelton's private secretary."

"Are you?"

"I am."

There was a pause.

Mr. Lucas closed the door behind him and came across to Bunter. Bunter sat down again, but did not ask his visitor to be seated. The fellow might be Mr. Skelton's private secretary, but the Owl of the Remove intended to show him that he cared no more for private secretaries than for pompous and cheeky butlers. Mr. Lucas stood before him, scanning Bunter's fat and annoyed face with cool, keen, searching eyes.

"Well, what do you want?" demanded Bunter irritably.

"Only a few words with you, Master Bunter," said the secretary calmly. "In the first place, I should like to know how you come to be here at all?"

"Find out!" retorted Bunter.

"What?"

"Find out!"

Mr. Lucas stared at him. Apparently he had not expected to be answered in this strain.

"I presume that Mr. Skelton asked you here," he said at last.

"Do you think I should be here if he hadn't?" sneered Bunter. "No business of yours, I suppose?"

"That is an error, Master Bunter," answered the secretary quietly. "It is my business very particularly."

"Blessed if I see how you make that out!" answered Bunter. "I suppose Mr. Skelton can ask anyone he chooses to his own house without getting permission from his employees?"

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,037.

"Quite so! But my duties are not merely those of a secretary. I am honoured by the confidence of Mr. Skelton's relatives, and it is my duty to look after his interests generally."

Bunter started.

"Do you mean you're his keeper?" he ejaculated.

"Certainly not! Mr. Skelton is an eccentric gentleman, but his eccentricity is not so great as that. Nothing of the kind," said Mr. Lucas.

Bunter blinked at him. Mr. Lucas declared that it was nothing of the kind, but Bunter suspected that his meaning was that it was something of the kind, all the same.

"Mr. Skelton has often invited guests to this mansion," went on Mr. Lucas, "and some of them of a very extraordinary nature."

Billy Bunter was not surprised to hear that.

"Some of them," pursued Mr. Lucas in a significant tone, "have taken advantage—unscrupulous advantage—of Mr. Skelton's confidence and of his kind and unsuspecting nature."

"I shouldn't wonder," agreed Bunter.

"You will understand, therefore, that as Mr. Skelton is so extremely trustful and unsuspecting, his friends are sometimes a little anxious."

"Very likely," said Bunter.

"No doubt you will now explain how you came to be honoured with Mr. Skelton's invitation," suggested Mr. Lucas.

Bunter eyed him.

He gathered from the secretary's explanation that Mr. Sempronius Skelton had frequently been imposed upon by rogues. That was not surprising news, for if any gentleman ever wandered about asking and begging to be imposed upon, that gentleman certainly was Sempronius Skelton. Bunter gathered further that Mr. Lucas looked on him as one more rogue on the list. That idea roused all Bunter's ire. It was for a good and charitable deed—the only one Bunter could remember performing—that Mr. Skelton had taken him up.

With the influence of the story of Scrooge strong upon him, he had enthusiastically welcomed the idea of helping Mr. Skelton in his charitable work during the Christmas holidays. It was rather too thick for this cool, keen young man to set him down as a young rascal who had planted himself on the millionaire with ulterior motives.

No doubt Mr. Lucas' experience made him suspicious. No doubt Billy Bunter's fat face did not impress him as that of a high-minded and noble-hearted youth. Still, it was too thick.

Billy Bunter glared at him, his very spectacles gleaming with indignation. Mr. Lucas watched him calmly.

"I am waiting, sir," he said icily.

"Wait and be blowed!" was Bunter's independent retort.

"You decline to explain?"

"Mind your own business!"

Mr. Lucas smiled sarcastically.

"I have already explained that this is my business, young man," he said.

"You cheeky cad! Young man! I'll give you young man!" howled Bunter. "How dare you call me young man?"

"Pray keep your temper," said Mr. Lucas, still as calm as a marble statue. "You are probably aware that you are not the first fellow of your sort I have had to deal with, considering my position and duty in this house, and you may reflect that I am not deceived by heroics. I have had a conversation with Mr. Skelton, and I gather that you have succeeded in making him somehow attached to you—how I cannot fathom, for you certainly do not strike me as a

bright or clever youth. But the fact remains. To come to the point, Master Bunter, how much will you take to go?"

"Eh?"

"How much?" repeated the secretary.

"How much what?" gasped Bunter.

"Money!"

"Oh crikey!"

"I may go as far as twenty pounds, if you will clear out of the house immediately," said Mr. Lucas.

Bunter fairly bristled with wrath. Not only was he a reformed Bunter now, but even in his unreformed days he would have felt insulted at this. He rose to his feet.

"You cheeky rotter!" he bawled.

"Calmness, I beg," said Mr. Lucas, perfectly calm himself. "Twenty-five pounds is the largest sum I am empowered to offer you to go, without consultation with my employer's relatives. Will that satisfy you?"

"Shut up!"

Bunter jammed a fat thumb on the bell which had been pointed out as the special bell to summon his special footman. He was quivering with wrath like a fat jolly.

Thomas presented himself at the door. Bunter pointed a fat forefinger at Mr. Lucas.

"Show that man out of my rooms, Thomas!" he hooted.

"Oh, sir!" gasped Thomas, taken quite aback.

Mr. Lucas turned a little pale. It was obvious that in dealing with Mr. Skelton's previous peculiar guests he had not had this experience before. There was a very bitter smile on his lips.

"You are pleased to carry the matter off with a high hand, Master Bunter," he said between his teeth.

"Thomas!" roared Bunter.

"Oh, sir! Yessir!" gasped Thomas.

"Turn that man out of my rooms instantly."

"That's Mr. Lucas, sir!" gasped Thomas. "That's Mr. Skelton's private secretary, sir. Oh, sir!"

"If you don't shift him this minute, I'll ask Mr. Skelton to sack you!" snapped Thomas.

Thomas gave Mr. Lucas a helpless look. Bunter could see that the secretary was a power in the house—rather a greater power than his employer, probably. Obviously Mr. Skelton's relatives had contrived to instal him there to keep a watchful eye on the vagaries of the millionaire philanthropist. But Billy Bunter was not taking any swank from him—not if he knew it. Mr. Lucas openly regarded Bunter's wrath as mock heroics—a sort of trick to put up his price. But the secretary was misled by his weird experiences with Mr. Skelton's former hangers-on. Bunter's wrath was quite genuine, and he meant every word he said.

"You may go, Thomas!" said Mr. Lucas. "As you take this line, Master Bunter, I will leave you."

"And be glad I don't kick you out!" snorted Bunter.

The secretary compressed his lips hard.

"Don't go, Thomas," added Bunter.

"Mr. Lucas told me to go, sir," murmured Thomas feebly.

"You're under my orders, not that fellow's," said Bunter. "Stand where you are till I tell you to go."

Again Thomas gave the secretary a helpless look.

"You will obey Master Bunter's orders so long as he remains here, Thomas," said Mr. Lucas.

"Oh! Yes, sir! Very well, sir!"

"You can hold your tongue, Lucas!" said Bunter.

"What?" exclaimed the secretary, roused out of his icy calmness at last.

He made a stride towards Bunter.

Bunter faced him undauntedly. For once in his fat career William George Bunter's conscience was clear. A clear conscience was a great asset.

"I've told you to turn that man out of my rooms, Thomas," said Bunter. "Turn him out this instant, or I'll see that you're sacked!"

Controlling his feelings with a mighty effort, Mr. Lucas walked out of the room. Thomas was about to follow when Bunter called to him.

"Stay where you are, Thomas."

"Oh, yes, sir!" said Thomas.

"Wait till I tell you to go."

"Oh, very good, sir!" gasped Thomas.

Bunter was very well aware that Thomas was yearning to take him by the neck and shake him. He was also aware that Thomas' place in Mr. Skelton's service was worth more than that to him. Thomas waited till Bunter told him to go, and then he went, breathing very hard.

Meanwhile, Mr. Lucas had gone to the butler's room, where, with a deep and anxious frown on his brow, he was consulting Mr. Parkinson.

"He looks just a fat fool, sir," remarked Parkinson.

"Quite so, but appearances are deceptive. He is evidently a young scoundrel, with unlimited nerve," said Mr. Lucas. "He may have a criminal record. I should judge so from his amazing nerve and impudence. His object may be to admit thieves to the house. Care must be taken."

"Oh, quite so, Mr. Lucas!"

"In the meantime, nothing can be done but to keep him under observation."

"Certainly, sir."

And Mr. Lucas left the butler looking very thoughtful and worried. Billy Bunter, satisfied with his victory over the interfering secretary, was feeling very pleased with himself. He was not aware that in the servants' hall of the millionaire's mansion he was discussed as a hardened young rogue, pulling the Old Bean's leg for what he could get. That was the low estimation that Mr. Parkinson and his colleagues had formed of benevolent Bunter.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Christmas!

"CHRISTMAS DAY!" said Mr. Skelton, rubbing his hands.

"Merry Christmas, sir!" said Bunter.

"Thank you, my boy—thank you!"

said Mr. Skelton. "I think we shall have a very merry Christmas—I really think so!"

"Oh, good!" said Bunter.

William George Bunter had been some time in the millionaire's mansion now.

He had made himself quite at home there.

Mr. Skelton was so exceedingly philanthropic that Bunter had had some fears that in his own house he would disregard the good things of life and expect his guest to do the same.

Fortunately, these fears had proved unfounded.

Everything was of the best, and, what was still more important, there was plenty of it.

Magnificent meals were served in magnificent style, and Bunter fairly revelled in excellent provender.

This, of course, was the most important consideration from William George Bunter's point of view.

So long as the grub was good all was well.

But, in other respects, Bunter was not quite sure that he was satisfied.

His reform, as a matter of fact, was wearing thin.

Bunter was an imaginative fellow. The story of Scrooge had appealed to him deeply. For once he had seen himself as others saw him, his eyes opened by the magic of the master.

But it was said of old that a leopard cannot change his spots nor an Ethiopian his skin.

Bunter's reform had been amazing to the Greyfriars fellows, but no fellow who knew him would have predicted that it would last.

It was not lasting.

Insensibly, by degrees, Billy Bunter was slipping back into his old customary self.

There was no doubt that Bunter, under the wonderful influence of Dickens and the "Christmas Carol," had had a wonderful access of benevolence. The way in which he had become acquainted with Mr. Sempronius Skelton was a proof of it. But it was going—going, and was nearly gone.

He had joined with great heartiness at first in Mr. Skelton's amazing philanthropic stunts. Almost every evening, while Bunter was in the Park Lane mansion, he had made expeditions with the millionaire into the poor quarters of the great city on benevolence bent.

Certainly the distribution of Mr. Skelton's superfluous wealth had brightened many faces. Probably it had also added to the drink traffic in some quarters. Undoubtedly it had

given some persons the impression that Sempronius Skelton and his young friend were a pair of amiable lunatics.

There had been incidents not wholly agreeable. One rough character had not only refused a five-pound note under the belief that he was being spoofed with a bogus note, but had actually hit the millionaire on the nose by way of thanks. Once Bunter, handing out ten-shilling notes in a slum by his kind old friend's direction, had been fairly mobbed, and when the supply of notes had run out Bunter had been rather roughly handled, and had had to flee for his life.

Policemen had regarded the two of them with deep suspicion.

Bunter could not help feeling that things had changed since Dickens' time, and that benevolence on the lines of Scrooge in his later period was somewhat at a discount.

Bunter began to think that a round of the theatres would not be a bad variation in his activities. This, however, did not seem to occur to Sempronius Skelton.

So much money passed through Bunter's hands in these days that he wondered a little how it was that Mr. Skelton was still a millionaire. He began to think that philanthropy was perhaps a new development in that gentleman's character, and he was confirmed in this suspicion by what he heard in the house, where he kept his eyes and his ears wide open. So far as Bunter could make out, these open-handed philanthropic proceedings had not been going on for more than a year or so, and they were causing great perturbation of mind among Mr. Skelton's affectionate relatives. There was no doubt at all that in the servants' hall it was regarded as a case of bats in the belfry.

Bunter's enthusiasm diminished daily till it was almost gone. But he still played up, as it were. He had his benevolent character to keep up if he was to remain in his patron's good graces.

On Christmas Day Mr. Skelton was bubbling with enthusiasm. Bunter bubbled, so to speak, as much as he could.

He felt that he was entitled to a rest by this time. It is said that there is no rest for the wicked. In this instance there seemed to be no rest for the good.

"We start at dusk," said Mr. Skelton.

"A Christmas party?" ventured Bunter.

(Continued on next page.)

TO AND FROM YOUR EDITOR

HERE, I say, you chaps, I didn't get a chance to have a word with you last week, and I've been feeling mighty sick about it. True, I wished you seasonable greetings, via a Christmas card. But that's not the same as talking to you like this. But all of you know that I haven't forgotten you. How could I? How could the editor of such a jolly paper as the MAGNET forget his thousands of loyal chums? Jove! What a year it's been! And hasn't the MAGNET put on flesh? That's the stuff to give 'em! The very thought of it makes me look forward to that Christmas dinner with renewed gusto. I'm going to have the time of my life, and so are you, of course. If you don't I shall feel mighty grieved. The real wish of my life is to stand in front of that loud-speaker gadget they use at the B.B.C. and wish you all

"A JOLLY CHRISTMAS!"

I was conceited enough to think that perhaps that ambition would be realised this year. But no such luck. Perhaps in the future that wish of mine will be gratified. Who knows? But we won't worry about it just now. Take the will for the deed, chums. I shall be thinking of you all Christmas Day—yes, and on Boxing Day, too, if I don't overdo it in the eating line. (That last line took the office boy by storm. I really believe he thinks that I had forgotten what roast turkey and Christmas pudding tasted like.) Ye gods, I'm not so old as all that, now am I? And then, after that delightful jump into feasting and jollity, yours truly will be back at the office planning fresh surprises and literary feasts for your delectation. And, let me whisper it here. I've got several topping wheezes up my sleeve already. Nineteen-twenty-seven has been a wonderful year for the MAGNET, thanks in no small measure to you good fellows, but nineteen-twenty-eight is going to be even more wonderful. That's not conceit—that's a confident prophecy. Now, let me wind up the old year with thanking you all—boys and girls—for having rallied round the MAGNET so loyally, and wishing you in all sincerity the "Happiest of Christmases."

YOUR EDITOR.

"Better than that, my boy," said Mr. Skelton, rubbing his hands.

"Oh!" said Bunter.
"And to-morrow—" said Mr. Skelton.

"There's the pantomime to-morrow, sir," hinted Bunter.

Mr. Skelton beamed on him.
"Thank you for reminding me, my boy," he said.

Bunter beamed in his turn.
"I thought I'd mention it," he remarked.

"Quite so. I knew that I was not mistaken in you, William," said Mr. Skelton. "I thank you for the suggestion. I will make a note of it."

"Good!" said Bunter. Benevolent as he was, Bunter could not help thinking that a pantomime would make a pleasant change from philanthropy.

"Of course, we have no time for pantomimes ourselves," added Mr. Skelton.

"Eh?"

"We must think of others."

"Oh!"

"A thousand poor children shall be taken to the pantomime," said Mr. Skelton.

"Um!"

"The suggestion is a really valuable one."

"Ah!"

"I will leave that matter in Mr. Lucas' hands to arrange. We shall be otherwise occupied."

"Ooooooh!"

Bunter really thought that Mr. Skelton might have arranged for a thousand and one to go to the pantomime. But the millionaire evidently took it for granted that his young friend was as enthusiastically self-denying as himself. Bunter had to let it drop.

At dusk the millionaire left the mansion with Bunter. Mr. Lucas watched them go with a cold, grim eye. So far, the secretary had had to admit that this young rascal was playing his part well. But his opinion of Bunter had not changed in the least. He was quite assured that Bunter was a young rogue pulling the benevolent leg of the Old Bean. He was watching for an opportunity of catching Bunter out. He really would not have been surprised had Bunter bolted one night with the spoons. But since that talk on the day of Billy Bunter's arrival in Park Lane, the secretary had left him severely alone, save for watching him like a cat. Bunter had proved that he could hold his own on that occasion.

The Rolls-Royce bore Bunter and the millionaire away from Park Lane. Bunter observed the customary deflection of the eyelid that passed between James, the chauffeur, and the footman who opened the door of the car. He wondered that Mr. Skelton never observed these things.

The car glided away in the misty streets.

It stopped in a poor quarter of London, and Mr. Skelton dismissed the car.

"What about letting the car wait for us, sir?" Bunter ventured to suggest.

Mr. Skelton gave him a pained look.

"My dear young friend—"

"You see, sir—"

"That suggestion is not worthy of you, William."

"Oh!"

"I must not deprive James of his Christmas evening," explained Mr. Skelton.

"Nunno. But—"

"You think that we may find it difficult to obtain a public vehicle to-night, William?"

"Just so, sir."

"I am aware of it, William. We shall walk."

"But we're miles from Park Lane, sir."

"Precisely."

Mr. Skelton walked on, and Bunter suppressed his feelings and walked on with him. James winked at the misty sky as he tooled the car away.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

A Merry Christmas!

"O H dear!"
The ejaculation was involuntary.

It was really forced from Bunter. Sempronius Skelton was tireless, or apparently so. Bunter was not tireless. Far from it.

A thin, steady drizzle was falling. The fog was not thick, but it was unpleasant, and it got into a fellow's eyes and nose. The pavements were slushy, and footing was uncertain. Bunter thought of a Yule fire, piled with logs, and a comfortable chair with deep yearning. He had never thought that his own home would ever seem to him more attractive than a millionaire's residence. But now it did seem much more attractive. He was tired and cold and wet and foggy, and the very last ounce of his benevolence had been exhausted. Also he was getting hungry. When Bunter was hungry matters were getting serious.

For hours and hours—it seemed to Bunter for years and years—he had been walking in fog and slush. Dim figures loomed in the misty streets and disappeared. Blinds were closely drawn; pedestrians were few; nobody seemed to be out of doors if he could help it. Playing "Father Christmas" seemed to afford Mr. Skelton endless satisfaction. The sight of a wandering vagrant in the fog seemed to be all he needed to make him happy. But Billy Bunter was thinking more and more of a warm fire and turkey and Christmas pudding. His long pent-up feelings found expression at last in a mournful ejaculation.

Mr. Skelton peered at him, and stopped.

"You are tired, William!"

"Yes, just a little!" gasped Bunter.

"No doubt you are happy to fatigue yourself in the cause of charity."

"Um!"

"I trust that I am not to be disappointed in you, William," said Mr. Skelton, with a touch of severity.

"Oh, no! I hope not!" gasped Bunter.

"At midnight we shall return home," said Mr. Skelton.

Bunter suppressed a groan. It still wanted two hours to midnight. Bunter began to wonder whether he would survive so much philanthropy.

"Come," added Mr. Skelton briskly. "I see a group of poor persons yonder, who are obviously in need of assistance."

Bunter rolled dismally after him. At the corner of a dim alley, turning off a dim street, three or four rough and ragged figures loomed up. Bunter, short-sighted as he was, could see that they were a group of roughs, much better left alone in that dubious quarter of the city. Mr. Skelton could see nothing but new objects for his charitable impulses. He approached the rough group briskly, Bunter trailing behind doubtfully.

The roughs looked at Mr. Skelton, and Bunter observed them glancing up and down the street in the mist. No one else was in sight.

There was a sudden rush. Bunter jumped back and dodged. Mr. Skelton had no time to dodge. He was sprawling on his back, and the roughs were grasping him, going through his pockets with the rapidity and precision that comes of long practice in such matters.

Bunter stared on at the scene in terror.

He had an impulse to rush to Mr. Skelton's aid, and a stronger impulse to rush in a different direction. It was the latter impulse that gained the day. Bunter vanished in the mist.

Really, the Owl of the Greyfriars Remove would not have been of much use in a grapple with three or four hefty roughs.

They did not heed Bunter. All their attention was given to Mr. Skelton, who had proved an unexpectedly rich prize.

In two minutes, or less, they had finished with him, and vanished down the alley; leaving the philanthropic gentleman gasping and spluttering on the slushy pavement.

"Groogh! Ooooooh! Bless me! Bless me! Moooooch!" spluttered the unfortunate gentleman breathlessly.

Bunter, palpitating, listened at a distance. When he was quite sure that the roughs were gone, he ventured back.

Mr. Skelton sat up in the slush and blinked at him. He was in a parlous plight. His pockets were turned inside out; his watch and chain were gone as well as his money; even his fur-lined coat had been whipped off and taken away. His silk hat had been left, but it was bashed in. He gasped and spluttered and blinked at Bunter.

"Ow! Help me up!" he gasped.

Bunter helped him up.
"I—I went to look for a policeman," he explained, as he assisted Mr. Skelton to his feet.

"Bless me! Bless me! I am quite out of breath!" gasped Mr. Skelton. "I have been—ow!—very roughly handled—ow! I have several bruises—wow!—and bumps! Oh, goodness gracious!"

He spluttered for breath.

"I have been robbed!" he gasped.

Bunter did not need telling that. He looked as sympathetic as he could.

"Bless me! Oh dear! I think we had better return," said Mr. Skelton. "We can do nothing more to-night—all my pockets have been turned out. Have you any money, William?"

"No, sir!"

"Neither have I!"

"Oh dear!"

Bunter had long ago lost his bearings, but Mr. Skelton seemed to know his way about the highways and byways of the city. He started off, puffing and blowing, and Bunter followed him. With weary limbs he trailed on after the philanthropic gentleman.

"Bless me! Bless me!" exclaimed Mr. Skelton suddenly.

He stopped.

A tattered youth had appeared in sight round a corner. Tattered as he was, he seemed to have his share of Christmas joviality, for he was cheerily whistling "Good King Wenceslaus" through his teeth, and he strolled along with his hands thrust into his ragged pockets for warmth.

"Pray stop, my boy," said Mr. Skelton, and the tattered youth stopped and stared at him in surprise.

"Lost yer way, guv'nor?" he inquired cheerily. "Orlright, I'm the bloke to put you right."

Mr. Skelton smiled.

"Not at all, my dear lad," he answered. "I am sorry to see you without a coat in this extremely cold and chilly weather."

The roughs made a sudden rush at Mr. Skelton, grasped him on all sides, and went through his pockets with the rapidity and precision that comes of long practice. Bunter dodged back and stared in terror at the scene, hardly knowing whether to run or go to the rescue.
(See Chapter 9.)



The youth stared harder.
"No business of yours," he suggested.
"My dear lad—"
"Can it!" said the youth.
"I should be very glad to provide you with a coat, my boy," said Mr. Skelton.
"Oh crikey!" said the youth.
"Gammon!"
"I assure you that I am in earnest," said Mr. Skelton. "No doubt five pounds would be of great assistance to you."
"You can put your shirt on that!" assented the youth.
"I shall be happy—" Mr. Skelton ran his hand into his pocket and uttered a dismayed exclamation. "Bless me! Bless me! I forgot that I had been robbed! I have no money."
"Funny old covey, ain't you?" said the youth. "Pulling a covey's leg, wot? What sort of a blinking hold himago do you call yourself when you're at 'ome, fat face?"
"My dear lad, I assure you—" "I won't 'it you in the eye at Christmas," said the youth good-naturedly. "If you're loony, you can't 'elp it, I dessay. You 'op it back to the asylum where you belong, old covey, and don't you go round these parts playing off your funny jokes, see?"
"I assure you that I was not jesting," said Mr. Skelton. "William, give this lad your coat."
William jumped.
"What?" he gasped.
"You are not deaf, William?"
"Nummo."
"Then you heard what I said," exclaimed Mr. Skelton severely.
"Ye-es—but—" "Have I been deceived in you, William?" inquired Mr. Skelton.
"Oh dear! Oh, my hat!"

"Give this lad your coat."
Bunter, with feelings too deep for words, stripped off his overcoat, and handed it to the tattered youth, who took it in a dazed way.
"Is this 'ere a joke?" he asked.
"Not at all," beamed Mr. Skelton.
"William, help this good boy on with the coat."
William helped the good boy on with the coat. The good boy seemed quite dazed with amazement. But he was undoubtedly glad to get the coat on—as glad to get it on as Bunter was sorry to get it off.
"I fear that your boots let water, my good lad," said Mr. Skelton, peering down at the stranger's footgear.
"Gallons!" said the youth cheerily.
"William!"
"I—I say—" "Give this good boy your boots."
"Eh?"
"Your boots!"
Bunter blinked at the philanthropist as if he could scarcely believe his fat ears, as, indeed, he scarcely could. But Sempronius Skelton was in deadly earnest.
"My—my—my boots!" babbled Bunter.
"Certainly! You can obtain new boots: this lad cannot. You see that, William?"
"But—but—" gasped Bunter.
He had no doubt that the millionaire would stand him a new pair of boots. But walking home for miles barefoot in the winter slush did not appeal to Bunter.
But there was no help for it. He could see that. Mr. Skelton was in earnest, and was not to be gainsaid.
With feelings that could have been expressed in no known language, Bunter

perched himself against a post and took off his boots. The tattered youth watched him in a fascinated way. Obviously, his impression was that he had chanced upon two wandering lunatics; but he seemed to have made up his mind that they were harmless, though he was watchful.

"Put them on, my good boy," said Mr. Skelton.

"Not 'arf!"

The boots went on the tattered youth more quickly than they had come off Bunter.

"I am sorry to have no money about me, my good boy," said Mr. Skelton.

"So am I, sir," grinned the good boy. "You're loony enough to give it away if you 'ad—I see that. I wish you 'ad a million pounds in your trouser pocket."

And the tattered youth—not so tattered now—vanished at a rapid pace, evidently anxious to get clear before these philanthropists had time to change their minds.

Bunter, coatless and bootless, stood shivering in the drizzle.

"Let us go on, William," said Mr. Skelton.

"Ow!"

"Do you not feel the warm glow of satisfaction that follows a charitable deed, William?"

Bunter was feeling anything but a warm glow. He was shivering. He gave a unintelligible grunt, and tramped wearily after Mr. Skelton. His socks were soaked with slush, and the cold wind blew almost through him. In the depths of misery he limped wearily on. The way seemed to him endless; but at last he sighted a taxi, crawling along a street, apparently looking for a fare. He tapped Mr. Skelton's arm.

"Let's take that taxi, sir!" he stammered through his chattering teeth.

"Atchoooooo!"

Mr. Skelton replied with a Garantuan sneeze. The loss of his fur coat seemed to have affected him considerably.

(Continued on page 16.)

BUNTER THE BENEVOLENT!

(Continued from page 13.)

ably. Evidently he was catching a cold; but Bunter was absolutely unsympathetic. He was afraid of catching a cold himself, and, compared with that, anybody else's cold was, of course, a trifle light as air.

"Atchoo! Choo! Grooogh! Ooooooh!" said Mr. Skelton lucidly. "Certainly—ooooh! We will take that—grooogh!—taxi!"

He signed to the driver, and the taxi drew up. The driver looked at the pair with deep suspicion. He was looking for fares; but he was not looking for an old gentleman who was without a coat on a drizzly night and a lad who had neither coat nor boots. The taxi-man was not a philanthropist, and probably had never read the story of Scrooge.

"Where to?" he asked suspiciously.

"Park Lane!" said Mr. Skelton.

That tore it, so to speak. The taxi-man grinned derisively.

"Yus, you look like Park-Laners, I don't think!" he replied.

"My good man——"

"Not so much of your good man, old 'un!" said the taxi-man. "I ain't driving barefoot vagrants. Look 'ere, let's see the colour of your money, and I'll drive you to Buckingham Pallis, if you like."

"Unfortunately, I have no money," explained Mr. Skelton.

"I thought not," agreed the taxi-man.

"And how was you going to pay the fare if you have no money, old 'un?"

"I am a millionaire——"

"You look it!" assented the chauffeur. "Millionaires go out in the rain without coats on, and their little boys go barefoot, I don't think! What sort of mug do you take me for, old 'un?"

"I will pay you double fare at the end of the journey," protested Mr. Skelton. "My good man, surely you do not doubt my word?"

"Ho no! I don't think!" said the taxi-man humorously. "Well, I ain't driving you to Park Lane, old 'un! But I'll tell you what—for two pins I'd get down and wipe up the pavement with you, you old bilk, you!"

And the justly indignant taxi-man drove on.

"Bless me! Atchoooh! Bless me!" ejaculated Mr. Skelton. "I fear that that man has very little faith in human nature, William."

William only groaned.

"We must—atchoooh!—proceed on foot," said Mr. Skelton. "Appearances are against us, William, and sordid natures judge by appearances. After all, it is only two or three miles now."

Groan!

And the hapless philanthropists proceeded on foot.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Something Like!

BOXING-DAY was spent, by William George Bunter, in bed.

He had caught a cold.

Fortunately, it was only a slight cold; and he had the consolation of knowing that Mr. Skelton had caught a very severe cold.

Still, it was very uncomfortable.

The special bell, which summoned Bunter's special footman was kept very busy. Thomas had quite an ache in his well-developed calves.

Bunter had heard that it was a good system to feed a cold. That was, at all

events, a method that appealed to Bunter.

He fed that cold liberally. He was a little feverish, and it is said to be a good method to starve a fever. But that method did not appeal to Bunter in the very least. Perhaps if he had starved the fever instead of feeding the cold he might have recovered sooner. Instead of which, he fed the cold, and left the fever to take care of itself.

Still, there were consolations. There was, at any rate, no more philanthropy at present—Bunter was getting a long rest from good works. And he learned from Thomas that Mr. Skelton was much worse. Bunter's feelings towards that philanthropic gentleman were almost Hunnish. He had resolved to have no more philanthropy. Walking barefoot in the slush was much too much of a good thing. He had almost forgotten the story of Scrooge by this time, and when he remembered it, it was only with aversion. Bunter's benevolence was worn out; the very last vestige of it had sneezed itself away.

The cold abated at last, and Bunter transferred his quarters from his bedroom to his sitting-room, where he took his ease on a soft couch, drawn up before a roaring fire.

"I am getting a little better, Thomas," he told his special footman.

"Yessir," said Thomas.

"I think I shall be able to take a little nourishment now," said Bunter.

Thomas almost staggered. Fears had been expressed in the servants' hall that William George Bunter might burst. But it seemed that Bunter had not really started yet.

Bunter took a little nourishment that day. Well-laden trays were carried up to his rooms and sent away empty.

"Where he puts it all is a mystery to me," Thomas confided to Mr. Parkinson. "Talk about a 'og!"

Bunter, fortunately, was quite indifferent to the opinion of Thomas.

The fat junior realised that his stay in the Park Lane mansion was approaching its end. He was absolutely determined to have no more philanthropy. Not for worlds would he have accompanied Sempronius Skelton again on a charitable excursion to the East End. And that, of course, meant that the philanthropic millionaire would realise that William was not the William he had supposed William to be, and they would have to part. So Bunter's idea was to prolong his illness as long as he possibly could and make hay while the sun shone. Every gorgeous feed he disposed of before he went was so much to the good. In the meantime, he inquired every day of Thomas how Mr. Skelton was, and was glad to hear that the philanthropist was still far from recovery.

Mr. Lucas paid him a visit at last. Bunter blinked belligerently at the secretary when he came in.

"I hope you are almost well, Master Bunter," said Mr. Lucas.

"Not at all," answered Bunter.

"You are not well enough to move?"

"No," said Bunter promptly.

The secretary eyed him.

"Mr. Skelton desires to see you very particularly, as soon as you are able to visit his bedside," he said. "I am not aware of his reason, but he states that it is very important."

"Some philanthropic stunt?" asked Bunter suspiciously.

The secretary smiled faintly.

"Mr. Skelton has not acquainted me with his reason, as I have said. I am merely giving you his message."

"Well, I'll come!" grunted Bunter.

As a matter of fact, Bunter's cold was quite gone; and he suspected that

the secretary would be glad to be able to report to Mr. Skelton that he was malingering. Bunter decided to visit his benevolent patron. If he was going to hear something to his advantage, well and good; if it was some new philanthropic stunt, he would have a relapse. By a series of well-timed relapses Bunter considered that he would be able to prolong his present happy existence as a pig in clover, without being bothered by benevolence or philanthropy.

He followed the secretary to Mr. Skelton's room.

The little old gentleman was in bed, propped up on pillows. His chubby face was rather pale, and it was clear that he had suffered very considerably from the effects of his philanthropy. Mr. Skelton had reached an age when he could not walk about coatless in the winter drizzle with impunity.

"My dear boy!" said Mr. Skelton, in a faint voice.

"I hope you're better, sir!" murmured Bunter.

"Alas, I fear not!" said Mr. Skelton. "I am laid up, William! My doctor strongly advises me to go to a milder climate——"

"Oh!" ejaculated Bunter.

"My dear nephew has offered to accompany me personally to his villa in the South of France," said Skelton. "My doctor advises me strongly to accept the offer."

Bunter blinked at him. He could not help wondering whether Mr. Skelton's dear nephew desired chiefly to get his dear uncle away from the scene of his philanthropic activities. It was probable that the dear nephew viewed with some concern the reckless expenditure of his dear uncle's ample cash.

"It will be some days," continued Mr. Skelton, "before I can be moved. Sit down by my bedside, my dear William. I have a very important communication to make. You may leave us, Lucas."

The secretary rather reluctantly withdrew. He murmured a word or two to Mr. Skelton's nurse as he went out.

"William!"

"Yes, sir," said Bunter.

"You have proved your worth," said Mr. Skelton. "You have proved that my opinion of you was well founded. I have confidence in you, William."

"Thank you, sir!" said Bunter.

"I shall leave my philanthropic works in your hands when I go, William."

"Oh!"

"Young as you are, my confidence in you is complete," said Mr. Skelton. "I shall place you in full charge of this house, William."

Bunter pricked up his ears.

"Ample financial resources will be placed at your command."

Bunter smiled.

"You will have carte blanche in every respect. You will give orders here in my place. All the servants will have instructions to obey you, and Mr. Lucas will act as your secretary."

"You will, in fact, act as my alter ego—my other self," said Mr. Skelton. "I can rely on you, William?"

"Yes, rather, sir!" gasped Bunter.

His little round eyes were dancing behind his spectacles. This was the goods at last! If Bunter was to be left monarch of all he surveyed in the Park Lane mansion, with the servants at his orders, the secretary under his fat thumb, and ample financial resources, there was no doubt that Bunter would have the time of his life.

Philanthropy was not likely to trouble him much. Benevolence would not keep him awake o' nights. He beamed.

"There was a time, William," said Mr. Skelton, "when I was not as I am

now. I was miserly, William. I was hard-hearted. I had much to atone for. I am now prevented from carrying on my philanthropic work. You will carry it on in my place."

"Rely on me, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I do rely on you, William. I shall give instructions to my secretary and butler to-day. From this day you will be master of the house."

"Oh, good!" "I shall remain here for a few days longer, but I shall be confined to my room, and shall not intervene in any way," said the millionaire. "You will be master, William. When I leave, you will remain master. This will continue until you are obliged to return to Greyfriars, when Mr. Lucas will take charge."

Bunter's fat face was irradiated. He was already thinking it would be possible to obtain an extension of the vacation. The Head of Greyfriars would have to agree to that. He would make his father put it to the Head. Mr. Bunter would be only too glad, when he understood the circumstances. Bunter might get a term off from school, and run the Christmas holidays on into the Easter vac. And all the time he would be lord of a millionaire mansion, with ample financial resources at his command. No wonder he beamed.

Truly, that one benevolent act which had won him the millionaire's regard had been a good investment.

He smiled, and Mr. Skelton smiled in return. His happy belief was that Bunter was smiling at the prospect of doing good works. In that Mr. Skelton was rather in error. Bunter was fed-up with philanthropy. He was going to have a good time. He did not, however, mention that circumstance to Mr. Skelton. It was really more tactful not to do so.

When Bunter left his patron he seemed to be walking on air. His fat face was beaming. He passed Mr. Lucas with a lofty sneer. The secretary spoke to him as he was passing:

"One moment, please——"

Bunter gave him a look.

"I've no time to waste on you!" he answered.

And he rolled on, leaving the secretary staring.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Same Old Bunter!

HARRY WHARTON smiled. "Bunter's fist!" he said. "Hallo, hallo, hallo! News of Bunt?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Looks like it."

"Let's all hear it," said Frank Nugent, laughing. "I'm rather interested in Bunter these days."

"The interestfulness is terrific!" declared Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I dare say he's kicked out by this time," remarked Johnny Bull. "Must have asked for the boot before this."

Harry Wharton slit the envelope. The Famous Five were gathered to a rather late breakfast that morning at Wharton Lodge. After Christmas at their various homes, the Co. had gathered at the Lodge for a week with Wharton; and so the communication from William George Bunter found them all together.

The strange circumstances in which Bunter had left Greyfriars, in company with the millionaire philanthropist, made him an object of interest, for once, to the chums of the Remove. They were quite keen on hearing news from the mansion in Park Lane.

The captain of the Remove read out the letter aloud. It ran:

"Dear Wharton,—I daresay you expected to hear from me sooner. But I've been busy; plunged into the vortex of London gayeties. Nacherally, I have not had much time for writing. My friend Skelton is going abroad for his health, and he has lent me his house and servants and things. Perhaps you believe now what I've told you about my welthy connectshuns. I bet you don't know any uther chapp with a manshun in Park lain and ample financial resources. I'm going to make the fur fly. I'm asking a lot of Greyfriars chapps here, and I'm going to give them a good time. I'm given earty blanch. As you mayn't know enuf French to know what that means, I may as well tell you it means a free hand. I'd like you and the other fellows all to come. Grub will be unlimitted. If you'd like to come, I'll fetch you in one of my cars. Make it wednesday. That's the day the old bean bunks. Phone me if you'll be reddy on Wednesday."

"Yours, W. G. BUNTER."

Wharton laid down the letter and smiled. The Co. chuckled. It was evident from that letter that, whatever had been Bunter's experience in the philanthropic line, he was now the old Bunter again—the same old Bunter that the Greyfriars fellows had always known. His reform, such as it was, had evidently petered out.

"Well, my hat!" said Bob Cherry. "The old bean, as he calls him, must be a little bit off his rocker, if he's really leaving Bunter in charge of his house and servants, and cars and things."

"A bit touched, I fancy," remarked Johnny Bull.

"The touchfulness must be terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But perhaps the wishfulness is father to the esteemed thought, and the worthy and execrable Bunter is pulling our leg."

"We know Bunter," remarked Bob Cherry. "When he says a thing is so, that's presumptive evidence that it isn't so."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"He says he will fetch us in the car," he said. "If he does that, it must be genuine."

"Yes, that's so."

"I'd like to have a look at Bunter doing the millionaire," observed Nugent. "If it's square, let's go."

"Let's," said Bob Cherry.

"Might as well give him a look-in," assented Harry Wharton. "A run up to London in a car won't hurt us, and if Bunter makes himself unpleasant, there are plenty of trains back."

"Right as rain!"

"Then I'll phone him," said Harry, looking round. And there was a general nod of assent.

Breakfast being finished, Wharton went to the telephone and asked for a trunk call. He was quite curious as to Bunter's present circumstances; but, knowing the Owl of the Remove as he did, he was prepared to hear that it was all—or nearly all—gas.

When he was through he recognised the fruity voice of the butler on the telephone, the same voice that had answered him when calling up from Greyfriars on breaking-up day.

"Mr. Skelton's butler speaking."

"Please ask Mr. Bunter to come to the telephone," said Harry. "Tell him it is Wharton."

"Very good, sir."

There was a pause.

"Bunter's there, at any rate," said Harry. "The butler's gone to fetch him to the phone. Hallo, here he is!"

A fat voice came over the wires.

"Hallo! That you, Wharton?"

"Yes, Bunter. I had your letter this morning."

"Good! I've asked a lot of chaps—Skinner and Snoop and Bolsover, and a lot more. You fellows coming?"

"We have much pleasure in accepting

(Continued on next page.)

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your kind invitation," answered Wharton, with great gravity.

"Right-ho! I'll fetch you in the car on Wednesday."

"We'll wait for you, Bunter," said Harry. "Getting on all right in Park Lane?"

"Ripping! The Old Bean's mizzling on Wednesday; he caught a cold playing the goat in the East End, and he's got to go away for his health," explained Bunter. "I'm left in charge. I'm going to make things hum, I can tell you. Dress yourselves decently."

"Eh?"

"Of course, you're not used to Park Lane mansions, like me. Do me as much credit as you can."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You don't mind my mentioning it?"

"Not at all," answered Wharton politely. "I got used to your manners at Greyfriars, you know."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"How is the philanthropic business going on?"

There was a fat chuckle on the telephone.

"It isn't going on; I've chucked it. Fed-up, you know. Of course, I shall never give up being a generous and kind-hearted fellow. I always was, as you know."

"Oh!"

"But there's a limit. Old Skelton is a bit potty, as a matter of fact. I find that he was a miserly old hunk once, just like Scrooge, you know, and he turned over a new leaf, and took it bad. I'm not that kind of a silly ass."

"You're not!" agreed Wharton. "You're every other kind of a silly ass, but certainly not that kind."

"Oh, don't be funny. Look here, I'll come along some time on Wednesday in my car."

"Whose car?"

"Mine! I'll give you all a lift to London. You'll enjoy yourselves here. A bit different from your measly homes, you know."

"Oh!"

"Well, good-bye! Can't waste any more time on you; I'm awfully rushed." And Billy Bunter rang off.

"Same old Bunter," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "I feel more inclined to kick him than anything else, but we'll go. I really want to see him spreading himself in Park Lane."

"If there's anything in it," said Johnny Bull dubiously.

"Well, if the car comes that will settle it."

"That's so."

And it was left at that, and Harry Wharton & Co. dismissed William George Bunter from their minds once more.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Spreading!

"PARKINSON!"

"Sir!"

"Some friends of mine will arrive on Wednesday."

"Very good, sir!"

"I shall require—let me see"—Bunter considered—"say, twenty rooms got ready for them."

"Very good, sir."

"School friends of mine," Bunter condescended to explain. "I belong to Greyfriars School, Parkinson. I dare say you've heard of Greyfriars?"

"I have indeed, sir. I was under the impression that Greyfriars was a public school, sir," said Parkinson.

"So it is," said Bunter.

"Oh, indeed, sir!"

Parkinson's manner was irreproachable, but the Owl of the Remove blinked at him suspiciously. He could not help feeling that Parkinson implied some surprise at learning that Bunter belonged to a public school.

"I suppose you knew I was a public school man, Parkinson?" he said.

"It had not occurred to me, sir."

Parkinson's manner was still irreproachable, but this time Bunter was sure that Parkinson meant to be impertinent. He wagged a fat forefinger—not the cleanest forefinger in the mansion—at the butler.

"I've told you before, Parkinson, that I don't want any check!" he said warningly.

"Yes, sir, I remember that you were so kind, sir," assented Parkinson.

"You know that your boss has made me master of this house," sniffed Bunter.

"Mr. Skelton has so informed me, sir."

"I'm not the kind of master to be fooled, like Mr. Skelton," said Bunter.

"You can take that as a straight tip. If you don't remember your place, Parkinson, you'll get the boot!"

"The what, sir?"

"The boot!" roared Bunter.

"I fear, sir, that I do not wholly follow your meaning," said Parkinson, with polite regret. "Perhaps you will be so kind, sir, as to make it plainer?"

"I mean that you'll get the sack!" hooted Bunter.

"The what, sir?"

"The kick-out!" yelled Bunter.

"Oh, sir, I think I comprehend now, sir. You mean that if I fail to give satisfaction I shall be discharged, sir?" asked Parkinson. "Pray excuse me, sir, for not comprehending your expressions sooner, sir. I have not had the advantage of a public school education, sir!"

Billy Bunter breathed hard.

"That's enough," he said. "Bear it in mind. I am master here, and I'll sack you as soon as look at you!"

"I will bear it in mind, sir."

"What would happen if I went in to Mr. Skelton now and told him that you had cheeked me?" demanded Bunter.

"Mr. Skelton being so attached to you, sir, for reasons beyond my humble comprehension, sir, I have no doubt that he would relinquish my services," said Parkinson.

"Then you'd better look out!" said Bunter.

"Thank you, sir. I certainly will look out, as you are so kind to suggest, sir. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes. Hook it!"

The stately Parkinson did not ask Billy Bunter to explain the meaning of the verb to "hook." He hooked it. The fact was that Billy Bunter had only to lay a complaint to Mr. Skelton, and Parkinson knew that his term of service in the Park Lane mansion would come to a sudden end. This was deeply irritating and offensive to Parkinson; but it was an undoubted fact, and he did not close his stately eyes to it.

Parkinson did not want to lose what was doubtless a very fat and prosperous berth, though had Bunter been likely to remain permanently master of the house, no doubt Parkinson would have not felt it consistent with his dignity to remain there also. But Parkinson was of opinion that William George's presence in the Park Lane mansion was not likely to be permanent—or anything like permanent. Indeed, he fancied that it was very near its end. For the present, therefore, the stately Parkinson played patience, looking forward eagerly to something that was to happen in the

near future—of which William George Bunter at present had no suspicion.

Parkinson retired to his room, where, having closed the door, he lifted his right foot, and went through the pantomime of kicking somebody hard. Parkinson repeated this several times, and seemed to derive solace from it. Perhaps he was looking forward to a time when he would go through that movement with William George Bunter's fat person in front of his boot.

Bunter, having put the butler in his place, dismissed him from his fat mind. Bunter would not, perhaps, have felt so happily satisfied had he known what was passing in Parkinson's thoughts. Fortunately, he did not know.

Bunter was spreading himself these days.

By order of Mr. Sempronius Skelton, William George Bunter was master of the mansion. Mr. Skelton was still laid up in his room, but he was quite able to deal with any servant who had disputed his orders or any secretary.

The wary Mr. Lucas and the stately Parkinson and the rest of the numerous staff walked delicately in dealing with Bunter. He was a power in the house—the only power, in fact, so long as he had the unhesitating support of the millionaire. And Bunter was a fellow to make his power felt.

Benevolence and philanthropy had utterly vanished from his fat mind now. The lesson of the "Christmas Carol" was quite forgotten; the story of Scrooge was disregarded; benevolent Bunter had utterly relapsed into the W. G. B. of old. When he had to see Mr. Skelton, the Owl of the Remove kept up the game, pulling the simple old gentleman's leg in the most unscrupulous manner, bent on keeping the Old Bean's good opinion.

It was rather a bore, of course; but, then, the Old Bean was going soon. Once he was gone, Bunter would be free to do as he liked, and he had already made a lot of preparations for a really gorgeous time, which was to compensate him for the trouble of pulling the Old Bean's leg, and for the dismal experiences he had been through in the East End. The ample financial resources that were to be placed at his disposal were not likely to be expended in reckless philanthropy. On the other hand, catering firms in the vicinity of Park Lane were likely to do a roaring business.

In this matter Bunter's fat conscience did not worry him. Bunter had a conscience, and he never did anything against his conscience. But his conscience was remarkably accommodating. Indeed, had it been made of elastic, it could hardly have stretched so many points in its owner's favour.

It was Tuesday now, and on Wednesday the Old Bean was to start for the Sunny South, in the affectionate charge of a dutiful nephew. Once he was gone—Bunter beamed at that thought. Only the Old Bean's presence stood between Bunter and the realisation of his gorgeous plans.

He would have been surprised had he known that many others in the mansion were also looking forward to Wednesday, especially Mr. Lucas and Mr. Parkinson. They had their own reasons for that, quite unknown to Bunter.

Billy Bunter rolled along to the secretary's room. The ample financial resources were under the secretary's control, and Bunter wanted to have the matter clear. He did not trouble to knock at Mr. Lucas' door. The fellow could give himself all the airs he liked, but, in Bunter's opinion, he was simply

a paid employee, and could be treated as Bunter liked.

As the door opened Bunter heard a voice within—not Mr. Lucas' voice. Apparently the secretary had a visitor.

"I should certainly advise it, Mr. Lucas," the voice was saying. "So far as the legal aspect of the matter goes, you will be in a strong position. Mr. Skelton will be quite out of reach of communication, and you will have the support of his relatives, who will be on the spot. Young Mr. Skelton hopes to persuade his uncle to reside permanently in the South of France, and Mr. Skelton's doctor strongly advises the same. The whole family are in agreement on the subject. My opinion is that you will be perfectly secure in acting as you suggest; indeed, as a man of law, I strongly advise it in dealing with a person who is obviously an unscrupulous rogue!"

The voice ceased suddenly as the speaker observed that the door was open. Bunter, seeing that he was observed, rolled into the room.

The man who had been speaking was standing on the hearthrug, with his hands crossed under his coat-tails, blinking through horn-rimmed spectacles at Mr. Lucas, who sat with his back to the door.

"Dear me!" he said, blinking at Bunter.

And the secretary spun round and stared at the Owl of the Remove.

"This is my private room, boy!" he snapped.

Bunter's fat lip curled.

"Who's master in this house?" he demanded.

Mr. Lucas bit his lip, and did not reply. Billy Bunter turned to the horn-rimmed gentleman on the hearthrug, who was regarding him very curiously and intently.

"Who are you?" he demanded. "I heard what you were saying, though I can't make head or tail of it! Who are you?"

"You are Master Bunter?"

"Yes; and boss in footgear. Gallons!" said the youth cheerily. "William," said the millionaire, turning to Bunter. "Give this good lad your boots!" Bunter groaned, but he obeyed the order. (See Chapter 9.)

"Quite so. I am young Mr. Skelton's legal adviser," said the old gentleman suavely. "No offence, I trust, Master Bunter?"

Bunter blinked at him suspiciously.

"I've seen that young Mr. Skelton," he said. "I don't think much of him! My opinion is that he's after the old josses' money!"

"Indeed!" said the legal gentleman dryly.

"I don't like all this pow-wow in my house!" said Bunter.

"Your house?" asked the legal gentleman.

"My house!" repeated Bunter grimly. "I couldn't make head or tail of what you were saying, but I've no doubt it was some plotting against me! I'm not having it—see? Young Mr. Skelton can go and eat coke! You can go and eat coke! Look here, Lucas, if you're going to keep your job in this house, this won't do! No more confabbing with lawyers, and scheming! You get up!"

The secretary seemed to find some difficulty in breathing.

"I will take my leave, Mr. Lucas," said the legal gentleman, reaching for his hat. "I repeat the advice I have given you, and since I have had the pleasure of seeing Master Bunter, I urge you more strongly than ever to act upon it!"

"What do you mean by that?" snapped Bunter, his little eyes gleaming behind his spectacles.

"Mr. Lucas will understand my remark, Master Bunter," replied young Mr. Skelton's legal adviser, "and will follow out my advice, I am sure!"

And the legal gentleman departed.

"Don't have that fellow here again, Lucas!" said Bunter.

The secretary gasped.

"Mind, I'm taking no nonsense from



"I fear that your boots let water, my good lad," said Mr. Skelton, peering at the ragamuffin's feet. "Gallons!" said the youth cheerily. "William," said the millionaire, turning to Bunter. "Give this good lad your boots!" Bunter groaned, but he obeyed the order. (See Chapter 9.)

you!" said Bunter, wagging a fat forefinger at the gasping secretary. "None at all! Get that into your head! I'll sack you as soon as look at you! See?"

Mr. Lucas did not reply. He seemed to have lost his voice.

"Now, about money," said Bunter. "It seems that that is left in your hands. I don't mind, so long as it's handed out just as I want it. That's got to be understood. See?"

"I—I—I see!" gasped Mr. Lucas.

"Do as you're told, and don't be cheeky, and I'll keep you on," said Bunter, "otherwise it's the sack for you, short and sharp! Chew on that!"

And Bunter rolled out of the secretary's room, banging the door behind him to testify how little he thought of the fellow.

After he was gone Mr. Lucas lifted his right foot in the air, and went through motions similar to those of the butler. Mr. Lucas, as well as Mr. Parkinson, seemed to be looking forward eagerly to kicking somebody.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Swelling Visibly!

"THOMAS!"

"Sir!"

"I shall want the Rolls at eleven."

"Very good, sir!"

"Tell James to bring it round."

"Certainly, sir!"

Billy Bunter was enjoying a late breakfast. It was quite a fine morning for the time of year, and Bunter was breakfasting at a great window that gave a view of the Park. His fat face was cheery and contented.

That day was Wednesday, and Mr. Skelton was leaving that day. Bunter was already lord of the Park Lane mansion, but once his patron was gone, he would be, he considered, absolutely free

and untrammelled. The departure of the Old Bean was to be followed by great doings.

Billy Bunter had asked a whole army of Remove fellows to visit him. The mansion, large as it was, would be crowded. It was not so much hospitality that moved Bunter, as the desire to swank in the eyes of the Greyfriars fellows.

Fellows who had known him at school, who had never believed in his tales of wealth and lofty connections, or lordly mansions and magnificent cars, were to see with their own eyes; as many of the Remove as Bunter could gather together, were to behold him in all his glory. Chief among them were the Famous Five, whom Bunter very particularly desired to impress with his magnificence.

There was a rather peculiar expression on the face of Thomas the footman as he retired. Bunter did not

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,037.

notice it. He was too fully occupied with his own happy thoughts.

After breakfast, the Owl of the Remove visited Mr. Skelton's room to say good-bye to the little old gentleman. Bunter did not consider it necessary to be on the spot to see the Old Bean off when he left. He was, in point of fact, fed up with the Old Bean.

He did not, of course, tell the Old Bean so.

He explained to Mr. Skelton that he was called away that morning to visit some school friends who were in need of his assistance. The Old Bean warmly approved.

Having thus done with Mr. Skelton, William George Bunter prepared for motoring down to Wharton Lodge.

James had brought the car round from the garage, and it was ready. Parkinson opened the door for Bunter, and the Owl of the Remove rolled loftily down the steps of the great mansion. Thomas stood at the door of the car. He bowed Bunter into it.

Bunter smiled with satisfaction as he sank back on the well-cushioned seat. He was pleased to see that he had his household in order—even the stately Parkinson seemed ready to feed from his hand, as it were. Bunter flattered himself that he knew how to manage servants.

Mr. Lucas came out of the house, and came down to the car, as Bunter was about to start. The Owl of the Remove gave him a lofty glance.

"Well?" he snapped.

"You will return before Mr. Skelton leaves, Master Bunter?" asked the secretary.

"No. I've told Parkinson I shall not be in to lunch," said Bunter.

The secretary's eyes gleamed curiously.

"But you are returning to-day?"

"Certainly. I've given Parkinson instructions for a dinner for twenty," said Bunter.

"Indeed, sir!" smiled Mr. Lucas.

"Yes, indeed," snapped Bunter. "The fact is, I don't care to be on the scene while old Skelton's relations are hanging about. I don't like them. After to-day, they've got to keep clear of the house. I can't have my house swarming with Mr. Skelton's needy relatives."

"I understand," said Mr. Lucas. "I have no doubt that there will be rather a change here after Mr. Skelton is gone."

"You can bet on that," assented Bunter. "I'm running this show to please myself and anybody who gives me any trouble will get the boot. I'll keep you on if you're civil and make yourself useful, see?"

"I see!" assented the secretary.

"Now stand back; I've no more time to waste on you."

The secretary stood back, and the great car rolled away.

Bunter enjoyed the drive down to Surrey.

A large hamper had been placed in the car, and it was well-filled with many good things; Bunter had seen to that personally. At the beginning of the drive, the hamper was full. By the time Wharton Lodge was sighted, it was nearly empty; but William George Bunter was full almost to overflowing.

James tooled the car up the drive to Colonel Wharton's house. Five cheery juniors greeted Bunter as he stepped out.

"Hallo, hallo; hallo! Here you are again!" bawled Bob Cherry.

"I say, you fellows, here I am," said

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,037.

Bunter. "What do you think of my car, eh?"

"Topping!" said Bob.

"It's only one of my cars," said Bunter carelessly. "I've four or five—I really forget exactly how many."

"Oh!"

"You can garage the car, James," said Bunter. "I'm not going back till this afternoon."

"Very good, sir," said James.

"Glad to see you, old fat man," said Harry Wharton, with a smile. "Trot in."

"Not a bad little place you've got here, Wharton," said Bunter condescendingly.

"Eh? No."

"Looks a bit like a cottage, though, after what I'm accustomed to."

"Oh!"

"How the poor live, and all that, what?" said Bunter agreeably. "He he, he!"

"Dear old Bunter!" said Bob Cherry affectionately. "Quite unchanged!"

"The unchangeableness is terrific."

Harry Wharton looked at Bunter. He really did not quite know how to reply to these polished remarks.

"You'll open your eyes a bit when you see my house," said Bunter, in his most patronising manner.

"Your house?" murmured Nugent.

"I keep up some style in Park Lane, you know," explained Bunter. "Quite in the style of Bunter Court, in fact."

"Oh!"

"Where's the old jossie?" asked Bunter, blinking round as Wharton led him in.

"If you mean my uncle, he is away for the day, and my aunt also," said Harry quietly. "I suppose you're ready for lunch, Bunter?" That was a safe proposition at any time.

"Oh, quite!" said Bunter.

How Bunter could be ready for lunch, after disposing of the hamper in the car, was a deep and impenetrable mystery. But he was ready.

He lunched, as usual, not wisely but too well.

It was quite a good lunch, and Bunter did it justice. But there was a derisive smile on his fat face.

"Do you always live like this, Wharton?" he asked.

"Eh? Much the same."

"Poor old chap!"

The captain of the Remove made no reply to that. Really, it was not easy to know what reply to make.

"You'll see something a bit different at my splendid house in Park Lane," said Bunter consolingly. "I'll feed you up! I fancy you need it! He, he, he! Everything of the best, and tons of it! I've told my butler to prepare dinner for twenty this evening. Some dinner, too. I can tell you! I'm expecting a crowd of Greyfriars men. You fellows will open your eyes! You'll open your mouths too, I fancy—he, he, he!"

"The esteemed Bunter adds to the pleasure of his excellent invitation, by his princely and execrable manners," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh gravely.

"Oh, really, Inky—"

"Had a Jolly Christmas, Bunter?" asked Bob Cherry, by way of changing the conversation.

Bunter frowned.

"Rotten!" he answered. "Charitable stunts, and I caught a cold. That old ass, Skelton, made me give my coat to at tattered ruffian in the East End. I caught a rotten cold. I'm fed up on it. I can tell you. No more blinking benevolence for me."

"But isn't that what you're there for?" asked Bob.

Bunter gave a fat wink.

"You wait till the Old Bean has bunked, and you'll see," he answered. "He goes to-day, and then I shall have an absolutely free hand. I'm jolly well going to paint the town red, I can tell you. No more East End stunts for me! The West End is good enough for me. He, he, he!"

Bunter rose from the table and yawned.

"I'll take a bit of a nap till we start," he said. "Call me at four!"

"Oh! Right-ho!"

Bunter retired to a comfortable easy-chair, and the music of his snore was soon audible over the greater part of Wharton Lodge. Harry Wharton & Co. looked at the sleeping beauty, with mingled feelings, and then went out for a stroll till it was time to start. They had rather repented, by this time, that they had accepted Bunter's invitation to visit him in Park Lane; but at the same time, they were certainly curious to see the fat junior carrying on in the great mansion.

At four o'clock Bunter was called. He required further refreshment, liquid and solid, before he started; but at last he took his place in the car, with the Famous Five.

"Home, James!" he said, with dignity.

The look on the chauffeur's face, for a second, was so peculiar, that all the juniors noticed it. Even Bunter noticed it.

"Don't stand goggling there!" he snapped. "Are you deaf?"

"Oh, no sir!" said James.

"Get going."

"Very good, sir."

James got going. Bunter grinned as the juniors packed in the big car.

"That's the way to talk to 'em," he said.

"Is it?" said Bob.

"You bet! Leave it to me to manage servants!" said Bunter. "The butler, Parkinson, was a bit uppish; but, bless you, I soon put him in his place. That secretary chap, too—he will feed out of my hand now. Leave it to me to put the lower classes in their place."

"Oh!"

Bunter leaned back on his cushions and went to sleep, and snored musically all the way to London. He woke up again as the car turned into Park Lane. He blinked round him and grinned at the Famous Five.

"Now, you fellows, get ready for the surprise of your lives!" he said impressively.

And—although Bunter was not yet aware of it—the surprise of his own life was also awaiting him.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

No Admittance!

"THAT'S the show!" said Skinner. "Phew!" murmured Snoop.

"Looks a spanking place!" remarked Stott.

Skinner & Co. had arrived in the misty afternoon. They stood before the great mansion in Park Lane and hesitated.

They, among others, had received Bunter's generous invitation. Naturally, they had accepted. A holiday at a big house in Park Lane, living on the fat of the land, had its attractions. How Bunter had wangled it they did not know, but they knew that he had wangled it somehow; they had seen him leave Greyfriars with the millionaire, in a magnificent car, on breaking-up day; they had received his invitations



"Turn him round, Parkinson," said Lucas. Billy Bunter was whirled round. Biff! Mr. Lucas' foot landed on the fat junior's trousers with a crash that sent him flying through the doorway, and down the steps, to land right at the feet of his guests! (See Chapter 15.)

scrawled on the notepaper that bore the Park Lane address; and to remove all lingering doubts they had telephoned to the house, and had been answered by the butler to the effect that Master Bunter was expecting them on Wednesday afternoon.

Nothing could have been clearer; and Skinner & Co., dressed in their best, had arrived. But the magnificence of the great house daunted them a little, and they felt a slight misgiving.

"It must be all right," said Skinner. "We know that that old donkey was a millionaire, and he took to Bunter for some idiotic reason. We know the fat young grampus is here. That's the house right enough."

"Hallo, you fellows!"

Two more Remove men of Greyfriars came up and joined Skinner & Co. as they hesitated outside the magnificent portal. They were Bolsover major and Micky Desmond.

"This Bunter's place?" asked Bolsover major.

"This is it," said Skinner. "Pig in clover, what?"

"My hat! He's got on to a good thing," said Micky Desmond.

"Looks like it," said Snoop. "Hallo, here's another!"

Hazeldene of the Remove came up. "You going to see Bunter, too?" asked Skinner, with a grin.

"Yes. I say, this is some show!" said Hazel, staring at the great house, with its many windows, looming through the winter mist.

"Well, come in, you fellows," said Bolsover major. "No good waiting here. I'm going in."

Bolsover major led the way up the steps, and the other fellows followed him. All of them were feeling a little uncertain; but Bolsover major was not

the fellow to show it. He rang a tremendous peal on the bell.

The great door opened.

If the visitors had been a little daunted by the magnificence of the mansion, they were still more daunted by the pompous portliness of Parkinson, the butler.

Parkinson eyed them. He did not need telling that these were some of the visitors that Billy Bunter expected that day. There was a rather grim smile on Parkinson's face. Mr. Skelton was gone now. Matters were very much changed in the Park Lane mansion, though Bunter was not yet aware of it. The Old Bean was far away, and safe in the hands of an affectionate nephew who was very determined to see that he was no longer imposed upon by a young rascal. Mr. Lucas, backed up by young Mr. Skelton's legal adviser and numerous Skelton relations, had taken control. Matters were very much changed indeed.

The portly form of Parkinson barred ingress to Skinner & Co.

"This is Mr. Skelton's house, isn't it?" Bolsover major demanded.

"Quite so," said Parkinson. "But Mr. Skelton is absent now."

"Bunter's here, I suppose?"

Parkinson smiled.

"A young person of the name of Bunter was staying here," he assented. "Is your business with him?"

"Yes; we've come to stay with him." Parkinson smiled still more broadly.

"That is very unfortunate," he remarked.

"What do you mean?" demanded Skinner uneasily. "Isn't Bunter here now?"

"He is absent at the present moment," said Parkinson.

"Then we'll wait for him to come in."

"I regret that that cannot be permitted," said Parkinson. "When that

young person returns here, if he has the audacity to return, he will be ejected."

"What?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Great pip!"

"That young person will not be allowed to enter this house," said Parkinson cheerily. "His impudent imposition is at an end. It follows, therefore, that his friends cannot enter. I am sorry!" grinned Parkinson. "No doubt this is a disappointment to you. If you will have the kindness to step outside I will close the door."

"Look here—" bawled Bolsover major.

"I am waiting to close the door," Parkinson pointed out, with great politeness.

"I suppose you're the butler, what?" demanded Bolsover major, glaring at him in great wrath and indignation.

"I have the honour to serve Mr. Skelton in that capacity," assented Parkinson.

"Well, I want to know what this means!" roared Bolsover major. "Bunter asked us here—"

"That young person was not entitled to do anything of the kind," said Parkinson. "I trust that you young persons will retire without creating a disturbance."

Parkinson glanced at four or five footmen who were gathering behind him in the great hall, with grinning faces.

Now that the Old Bean was gone, all the household was ready—and eager—to deal with William George Bunter and all his friends. Bunter's masterly way of dealing with servants had not endeared him to the household. That Bunter was to be kicked out when he returned, all the footmen knew; and their only regret was that they would not all be able to kick him at once.

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There was not sufficient room on Bunter for all the feet that were ready and eager to land on him.

Mr. Lucas came out of his room and crossed the hall to the door. The secretary had a grim look.

"Who are these boys, Parkinson?" he asked.

"These young persons have called on some invitation from the other young person, Bunter, sir," answered the butler.

"Bunter asked us here!" hooted Hazeldene.

The secretary's lip curled.

"That young scoundrel is finished with here!" he said. "You had better go. Shut the door, Parkinson."

"Certainly, sir!"

"Look here—" roared Bolsover major furiously. "Oh, my hat! Hands off, you dashed monkey! Yaroooooh!"

Thomas, gently but firmly, deposited Bolsover major on the steps outside. Skinner & Co. hurriedly followed, without assistance from the other footmen. The great door closed with a slam.

With feelings too deep for words, Billy Bunter's guests trailed down the great steps and gathered once more in Park Lane.

"What a go!" groaned Micky Desmond. "Sure, I'll scalp Bunter next term at Greyfriars!"

"I'll smash him!" roared Bolsover major.

"I'll lynch him!" hissed Scott.

"Oh dear! What a sell!"

"Oh, that fat rotter Bunter—"

"That fat villain Bunter—"

"I'll burst him!"

"I'll scrag him!"

The hapless guests trailed away down Park Lane to look for an omnibus.

Obviously the magnificent cars of which Bunter had told them in his letters would never be at their disposal. They breathed fury as they went. All the party had come from longer or shorter distances; and all of them had to make a dismal way homeward, in deep disappointment. They yearned to be within hitting distance of William George Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

A cheery hail from a big car coming up Park Lane met the ears of the disgruntled guests. They stared round.

It was Bob Cherry who had hailed. Billy Bunter put a fat face and a pair of spectacles out of the window, and blinked at the infuriated guests on the pavement.

"I say, you fellows—"

"You fat rotter!" roared Bolsover major.

"Eh?"

"You spoofing fat villain!" shrieked Skinner.

"Oh, really, Skinner—"

"You wait for next term at Greyfriars!" hooted Snoop. "We'll jolly well scrag you."

"Oh, really, Snoop—"

The car was rolling on, and Bunter blinked back in amazement at the party, who shook their fists after him. Then he blinked at his companions in the car.

"I say, you fellows, what does that mean?" he asked.

"Ask me another!" said Bob. "Blessed if I can make it out! They seemed jolly ratty about something."

"I shall rescind my invitations to that lot, after the way they've spoken," said Bunter, with dignity. "They don't seem to understand what is due to a fellow in my position."

Skinner & Co. disappeared behind.

The last that was seen of them was a bunch of shaking fists. The Rolls rolled on to the great mansion, where the surprise of his life awaited William George Bunter.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Order of the Boot!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. alighted from the car.

Billy Bunter blinked around angrily.

Footmen should have flown to the spot, as it were, as soon as the Rolls halted outside Bunter's mansion.

They had not flown, however.

No well-fed menial had appeared from nowhere to open the door of the car. James had apparently forgotten that that was his duty in the absence of any other menial. Bunter had had to open the door of the car himself! This, of course, was intolerable. A fellow in Bunter's position could scarcely be expected to handle the doors of cars. Such menial offices were miles—indeed, leagues—beneath his dignity.

Bunter was annoyed. Bunter was a great man; and if his greatness was not apparent to others, at least he himself made no mistake about it. Neglect by menials roused his deepest ire. He felt as Jupiter might have felt on high Olympus, had Ganymedes forgotten to bring the customary cup of nectar. No doubt Jupiter, in such a case, would have made an example of Ganymedes. Billy Bunter resolved to make a whole series of examples of his forgetful menials.

"James!" rapped out Bunter.

"Hallo!" yawned James.

Bunter blinked at him. His very spectacles flashed with wrath at such a reply from his chauffeur.

"James! Don't be cheeky! Do you want the sack?"

"Oh, come off," said James.

Harry Wharton & Co. exchanged glances. They did not quite know what to make of this. Hitherto, James had been a very respectful chauffeur, from what they had seen of him. Now his respect seemed to have dropped from him like a cloak. He was grinning in Bunter's fat face—grinning in the most disrespectful manner imaginable.

"You cheeky menial!" roared Bunter.

"You're sacked!"

"Thank you," said James. "The sack from you won't hurt me, young 'un. Can't you see the game's up?"

"I decline to bandy words with a disrespectful servant!" roared Bunter. "You're sacked! Sacked without a character."

James yawned.

"Something seems to be up here, you fellows," murmured Bob Cherry.

"The upfulness appears to be terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Come on, you chaps," said Bunter. "I'll send the footmen out for your bags. They don't seem to know I've arrived, and that's odd, too, as I can see that podgy Parkinson blinking out of a window! I'll teach him! I'll show him who's master here, by gum! I'll sack him for two pins! Follow on."

Billy Bunter whisked up the broad steps of the mansion.

The other fellows paused.

From the amazing outbreak on the part of James, the chauffeur, they could not help thinking that something was wrong; and they remembered the sur-

A NEW YEAR FEAST.



They've seen the last of William George Bunter at the Park Lane mansion, and now our cheery "old fat man" has tacked himself on to Wharton's party at Wharton Lodge. Here, would you believe it, he gets mixed up in another first-class adventure. Just possess yourselves in patience, you chaps, until next Saturday and then you'll enjoy one of the finest treats Mr. Frank Richards has ever given us.

"THE MYSTERY OF WHARTON LODGE!"

—that's the title of our next Geryfriars yarn—kicks off the New Year in grand style.

ORDER IN
ADVANCE, CHUMS!

prising words of Skinner & Co., who had evidently been coming away from the Park Lane mansion when the Famous Five sighted them. Something was obviously wrong. There could be no doubt about that.

James, the chauffeur, stared after Bunter with a grin, and then turned to the chums of the Remove, with a resumption of his former respectful manner.

"If you'll take my tip, young gentlemen, you'll stay outside," he said. "The Old Bean is gone now, and that young rip's game is up. I can see that you're not his sort: that's why I'm speaking to you. Keep clear."

"Of what?" asked Harry.

James grinned again.

"What you'll see in a minute," he answered. "That young fat codger don't seem to know it yet, but he soon will. There's a taxi yonder, sir—if you'll take my advice, you'll hail it, and I'll put your bags on it. I don't think Mr. Lucas would allow me to run you to the station in this car."

And James, without waiting for a reply, signalled to the passing taxi, which drew up behind the Rolls.

"My only hat!" muttered Johnny Bull. "What on earth does all this mean, you chaps?"

"Goodness knows!" said Nugent. "But I fancy we're not out to do any Park-Laning with Bunter."

"We were duffers to come," said Harry. "But now we're here I think we ought to stand by Bunter, as we've come up with him. Come on."

Billy Bunter had already delivered a thunderous summons at the door. The great door opened. Parkinson stood there—smiling! It was a smile of the purest enjoyment. Parkinson, at last, was going to deal with Billy Bunter as he had longed to deal with him. It was the happiest moment in the portly career of the plump Parkinson.

Bunter glared at him.

"Send out the footmen to bring in the baggage, Parkinson!" he snorted.

"I think not!" smiled Parkinson.

"What?"

"I think not!" chuckled Parkinson. "Thomas, will you tell Mr. Lucas that this person has returned?"

"Thomas!" roared Bunter.

Thomas grinned at Bunter and turned his back on him.

"You're sacked!" yelled Bunter.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Parkinson cheerily.

"You're sacked, too!" hooted Bunter.

Mr. Parkinson seemed almost to lose his professional gravity at this. His plump, smooth face wrinkled up with mirth.

"Here's the young person, Mr. Lucas!" he gasped.

The secretary came across the hall

with a smile on his face—the smile that a tiger might have worn in sight of his prey.

"So you've come back, boy!" he said.

"No cheek!" roared Bunter.

"You impudent young blackguard!" said the secretary in measured tones. "Your rascally game is up here!"

"Why, you—you—you cheeky cad!" shrieked Bunter. "You're sacked! I'll sack the lot of you! I'll make a clean sweep of the whole gang, and get in a fresh lot of servants!"

"I fancy not!" smiled the secretary.

"Didn't Mr. Skelton appoint me master of this house?" roared Bunter.

"Verbally!" assented Mr. Lucas. "Mr. Skelton is now on his journey abroad, however, and out of the influence of a designing young scoundrel. Care will be taken that that influence is never resumed. You have no legal standing here whatever, my boy. Can't you comprehend that? Or am I mistaken in supposing you an astute young rascal, and are you as obtuse as you look?"

"Why, you—you—you—" spluttered Bunter.

"Parkinson!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Turn that young rascal round."

"Certainly, sir!"

"Here, what I say—ow!" roared Bunter, as the plump hands of the butler were laid forcibly upon him.

Bunter was slewed round.

Mr. Lucas, measuring his distance as carefully as if he were kicking a goal from a try, projected his right foot at Bunter.

It landed on the fat junior with a crash.

"Whoop!"

Bunter spun out of the doorway.

Harry Wharton & Co. had halted on the steps. Bunter came back to them fairly flying.

As he flew Parkinson rushed out of the doorway. He kicked as Bunter flew, and gave further impetus to his flight.

"Yaroooooh!"

Bump!

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Bob Cherry.

Billy Bunter landed among his guests. He sprawled and roared. Parkinson grinned down at the group for a moment, stepped back into the house, and closed the great door. It closed for ever on Billy Bunter.

Harry Wharton & Co. picked up the Owl of the Remove. He gasped and spluttered wildly.

"Groooh! I say, you fellows—yaroooooh! I—I say, you know, they've turned me out now that the Old Bean's gone! I say, what's a fellow to do?"

"Mizzle, I fancy," said Bob Cherry. "There's nothing else to be done. Your game's up, old fat bean!"

"But—but the Old Bean gave orders—distinct orders—" gasped Bunter. "He told them—told them plainly—Why, they're disregarding his orders

now they've got him away! It's his nephew at the bottom of it, and that beastly lawyer! I say, you fellows, if I could get in touch with the Old Bean, I—"

"I fancy you can't, from what we've just seen!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at!" snorted Bunter. "I say, you fellows—"

"Time we travelled, I think," yawned Johnny Bull. "Holidays in Park Lane seem to be off. You should take more care of your old beans, Bunter. Chain the next one and keep him about the house."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

James and the Rolls were gone. The bags of the Famous Five were piled on the waiting taxi. Evidently there was nothing to be done but to depart. But Bunter, though he realised that the game was up, was loth to turn his back on the scene of his greatness. Really, it was a crushing change in his fortunes—from the sublime to the ridiculous. Like Lucifer, Son of the Morning, he had fallen from his high estate, and great was the fall thereof!

The Famous Five packed themselves in the taxi.

"I say, you fellows, this is rotten for me!" said Bunter. He did not seem much concerned about the Famous Five; but whether it was rotten for them was, of course, a minor consideration. "I'm done! I say, it looks to me as if I shall have to come back with you, Wharton and—"

"Eh?"

"And finish the vac with you!" said Bunter dismally.

"Oh!"

"Rather rotten, your pokey little place, after this. But what's a fellow to do?" groaned Bunter.

Wharton looked at him fixedly for a moment.

"You can come," he said curtly. "Hop in!"

Bunter hopped in.

* * * * *

Billy Bunter spent the rest of the vac at Wharton Lodge. He explained to Wharton, not once but many times, that the place was hardly up to his style, but it was a case of any port in a storm. The glory had departed from the House of Israel, so to speak, and Billy Bunter had to take what he could get. And Wharton, though not a philanthropist, was benevolent enough to resist the temptation to expedite Bunter's departure from the Lodge in the same manner as his departure from the mansion in Park Lane. But he came near it several times; and, in fact, the rest of the Christmas vacation was a series of narrow escapes for William George Bunter.

The



End

The Footballer's Christmas!

Lots of people reckon that the professional footballer leads a cushy life, but not much fun comes his way at Christmas, at any rate.

IF you met a professional footballer at this period of the year you would say to him, of course: "A merry Christmas!" He would reply: "The same to you!" But if you looked at him closely you would probably find that there was a look in his eye which suggests that he would have liked to add: "I don't think!" There can be very little of the "merry Christmas!" stuff for the footballer in the generally accepted sense of the term. The reason for this is, that of all times of the year, Christmas is the busiest for the footballer.

In one respect the footballer is in luck this year—he won't have to play a football match on Christmas Day, for the simple reason that it comes on a Sunday, and we don't play professional football on a Sunday in this country. Thus it is possible that there may be some footballers who will spend Christmas Day of this year in their own homes for the first time for many years. But there won't be many who will be able to sit beside their own fireside.

No Christmas Pudding!

One reason for this is that as a rule the manager of a football team is not particularly anxious that his players should spend Christmas at home. It is all very well to say that the footballer should look after himself; that he shouldn't eat Christmas pudding and indulge in nuts and wine, and that sort of thing, at Christmas-time. But there is a big and natural temptation to do so—just a little of that pudding please! The player has the idea that just once in a way it won't affect him, of course. But it may. And I have already heard of several managers who have made arrangements for their players to be kept together in hotels right over the coming festive season.

Another reason why many of the footballers won't see their homes much during the week-end is because of the amount of travelling which has to be done. Although there is no actual Christmas Day football, the player doesn't escape a glut of matches. There are three games in four days for practically all the big clubs, and to give you an idea of what this means I have just picked out at random the programme arranged for some of the leading teams.

Take Portsmouth as a typical example. On Christmas Eve they play at home to Huddersfield Town. Between the finish of the match and Boxing Day they have to get from Portsmouth to Bury. This, for a certainty, will mean spending practically the whole of Sunday in the train—a cheery prospect!

Christmas in a Train!

That isn't the end of the story, though. As soon as they have finished at Bury on Boxing Day they will have to pack up their Christmas presents—points, if they have gained any—in their kit-bags, because they are due back at Portsmouth to play the return match with Bury on the day after Boxing Day—Tuesday.

It is a certainty, too, that there will be little of home for the players of Cardiff City. They have a Christmas Eve match in Lancashire—at Burnley—and then on the Monday they are due at Everton, while the Tuesday will see them back at Cardiff. I suppose these Cardiff players will be taken to some Lancashire seaside resort for Christmas Day. Let us hope it is fine for them. Let us also hope that they won't have the same experience as befell the Manchester United players some years ago. They were away "special training" for Christmas, which really means that all the men were under the eye of the trainer. On their way to the station on Christmas morning the char-a-banc broke down, and they had to tramp for some miles on a bitterly cold morning. So you see it isn't all nuts and crackers being a "pro" footballer at Christmas-time.

The Cheery Spirit!

Perhaps you may think that the footballer gets special pay for his three matches in four days at Christmas. He doesn't. The footballer's wages are not reckoned at so much

per match, but at so much per week. Actually no footballer can ever be compelled to play on Christmas Day or Good Friday. He can cry off without any punishment. Seldom have players availed themselves of this clause in their agreements in the past, because they are conscientious fellows, out to do their best for their clubs. And the Christmas holiday games are very important.

The clubs are so closely bunched together in the various Leagues that three or four defeats may send a team in a moderately good position toppling to a very low place in the list. And the club which gets down at this period of the year can reckon on a hard struggle in the remaining months of the season.

Jock Rutherford, who told me not so long ago that he had spent twenty years in football without ever having had a Christmas Day with his family, also told me that he loved to play on Christmas Day. "Everybody seems cheerful, and less critical than usual," he said. "The holiday spirit is in the air, and a Christmas holiday defeat for a home team never seems to be taken as seriously as a defeat at any other time of the year."

Fun Between Matches!

The home and away games between the same clubs which are played at Christmas-time—on Monday and Tuesday—will mean that in many cases the players of opposing clubs will travel together from one game to the other. And there will be plenty of fun and frolic in the trains, even though the turkey and the Christmas pudding may be absent from the menu. I have seen two football teams, which had played a match on Christmas Day, having a snowball match on Crewe Station in the early hours of Boxing Day morning. On the day after they again faced each other on the football field.

The big trouble so far as the footballer is concerned with these three matches in four days is that he is apt to get hurt, and yet be compelled to play another game because there is no other player available to take his place. And then, of course, the pitches are usually in a bad condition at Christmas-time, all of which adds to the troubles of the players. But this rush of Christmas football is the price which the player has to pay for being a public entertainer. Let us hope that there is a lot in the story that crowds are more charitable at this season of the year. They can cheer up the player no end by being so.

And a Happy New Year!

Even when he has got through his Christmas rush the footballer cannot look forward to anything like a rest. The programme for the opening of the year is not so crowded as the Christmas festival, but as January 2nd is a holiday in the North of England and in Scotland, many of the clubs have League fixtures on that day as well. Thus in succession come two week-ends with extra matches.

And on top of it all, making this holiday period even more anxious, is the fact that the Cup-ties are just ahead. All the big clubs now know who will be their opponents in the Third Round proper, which is really the first round in which the biggest clubs are involved. Every club wants to do well in the Cup; desires to be in a position to play its very best team. These big Cup-ties are to be played on the 14th January, and as no player can turn out for a club in the Cup until he has been signed on for at least fourteen days, there is no chance to replace a man injured during the New Year holiday matches with a player from another club.

Remembering all things, you can now see why such precautions are taken at this time of the year by the trainers in the effort to keep the men fit and well. The trainer's nightmare is that the men under his charge will go stale. This staleness comes from too much football. How to prevent men from going stale when they have five or six matches in ten days is a problem not easy to solve. Because so many trainers fail to solve it we get clubs cracking up at this time of the year.

THEY SAY there's more than one way of killing a cat. There's certainly more than one way of identifying a "wanted" man. Ask Sergt. Curtis of the North West Mounted Police; you'll meet him in this topping yarn, boys!

Gold for the Getting!

Stanton Hope



A Stirring Tale of the Frozen North.

The Thumb Print!

EVEN the heavens themselves appeared to be frozen that night. Never had the oldest sourdough known such bitterly cold weather so late in the season. The moon was like an aluminium plate suspended overhead and round it was a cold halo of sinister aspect. Already a wind was stirring in the Yukon Valley, and dull thumps heralded the fall of small avalanches of snow from the overlaid branches of spruce and pine.

"A dirty night, by the look of it," muttered Terry, as he plodded along on snow-shoes beside Jack.

And Jack, remembering his experience in the dog race, optimistically answered:

"You'll see, it will be as right as rain when we get over the next range of hills."

"Bogorra," returned Terry wistfully, "'tis giving a month's washings of gold I'd be to see a drop of real spring rain."

"Soon you shall, Terry," smiled Uncle Dave, who had caught the last remark. "The spring will soon be here—spring that makes a new world of the frozen North, that puts fresh hope into the hearts of men."

On through the threatening night they mushed on the trail to Dawson.

Unfortunately Jack's optimism was unfounded, and instead of getting better, the weather became worse across the range. It was no night even for a husky dog to be abroad. "The bottom dropped out of the thermometer," and though usually at a very low temperature, the atmosphere was deathly calm, to-night a gale was rising fast. The moon and its halo, indicative of wind, appeared fainter and more distant owing to the ghostly veil of powdered snow drifting swiftly between the white-clad earth and blue-black sky.

"I don't like the look of it at all," mumbled Uncle Dave, as though to himself. "I'm afraid there's a blizzard blowing up and we're in for something bad."

Partly to give the boys a rest and partly to get exercise himself, Uncle Dave insisted on his young companions riding in turns while he "mushed" with the team.

For half a mile he gamely plodded on, his head bowed low as a measure of protection against the keen-toothed

wind. Not a word of complaint did he utter about his health or the conditions, though with every painful step of the terrible trail, he regretted bringing out the boys. Then, on the sudden, Nature took toll of the hardships and sufferings of the past weeks which had helped to undermine his constitution, and he collapsed head foremost into the snow.

Skookum gave a warning yap and himself stopped the team, while Jack and Terry hurriedly went to the aid of the fallen man. They got Uncle Dave on to the sledge and wrapped him up, vigorously rubbed the frost-bite out of his cheeks with snow, and revived him somewhat by a few fiery drops of brandy on the tongue.

"Faith, we can niver beat our way to Dawson through this," panted Terry.

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INTRODUCTION.

Jack Orchard arrives in San Francisco to find his uncle, Dave Orchard, missing, having apparently absconded with a bag of gold. Jack falls in with Terry O'Hara, a cheery Irish boy, and Clem Hardy, an old prospector, with whom he joins forces in a gold rush up the Yukon. At intervals the trio have trouble with Bull Morgan and Lefty Simons, two shady camp followers. Later Hardy is identified as Dave Orchard and arrested; but he manages to escape again. Jack purchases a team of huskies, enters them for the great Dog Derby, and wins. Then to aid Uncle Dave in proving his innocence he, with Terry and Uncle Dave, sets out for Dawson to draw the necessary cash from the bank.

(Now Read On.)



"Phwat about turning back to Kettle Creek, my bhoy?"

"It would be almost as bad trying to reach there," returned Jack; "we must be about halfway on the journey."

"There's an old deserted shack about these parts," murmured Uncle Dave faintly from the sledge. "That is Sugar Loaf Rock over there, and it's about half a mile due west of it, though whether we can strike it in these conditions is mighty doubtful."

Again they hit the frozen trail, with Uncle Dave lying full length on the sledge and covered from head to foot with blankets and rugs.

Gamely the two boys plodded along beside it, while Skookum and the dogs strained every ounce of their steel muscles, as though aware that they were making for shelter. At times one or other of the huskies ki-y'd, aware even as the boys and Uncle Dave were aware, that the White Death of the North was swiftly descending upon them in the shape of a blizzard.

In intense anxiety the chums kept a look-out for the cabin, and almost when hope had died and they believed that they had missed it, they caught a glimpse of the shack through the swirling snow-clouds.

The finding of the log cabin was the saving of them. The place was bare inside and indescribably dirty, but it provided shelter from the blizzard, and so satisfied their most pressing need. They took the sledge inside and used it as a kind of bed for Uncle Dave, and the dogs made themselves cosy trenches in the snow under the lee of the cabin and huddled together for warmth.

The blizzard died down, though the cold was still intense, and the wayfarers remained at the log cabin long after grey day had dawned over the pitiless Yukon.

The snarling of the dogs shortly after breakfast gave Jack and Terry the first hint that others beside themselves were abroad.

Two men were approaching, and at first Jack, who had opened the door to give them welcome, thought that they were a couple of prospectors. With something of a shock, he realised that the men, both of whom were wearing snow-shoes, were Sergeant Curtis, of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, and a



With fast beating hearts Jack Orchard and Terry O'Hara saw Sergeant Curtis stoop and draw aside the coverings of the improvised bed and silently gaze upon the haggard, brown-stained face of the sufferer. "A Chilkoot Indian!" he murmured. (See this page.)

constable whom he had seen several times in Dawson.

"They—they surely haven't got on the track of Uncle Dave?" muttered Jack to Terry.

"Of course not, me bhoys," answered Terry, though a trifle nervously. "'Tis but an accident thim coming here."

The boys warned Uncle Dave of the approach of the police, and their old pard, though anxious, professed to share Terry's optimism.

"Don't worry, lads," he said; "just talk and behave as though I were an Indian you'd come across on the trail, and the sergeant will never suspect me in this disguise."

Returning to the door, the boys gave the trail-worn sergeant and constable a rousing welcome.

"Come right in!" invited Jack cheerily.

"Glad to see you, sonnies," the sergeant exclaimed equally cheerfully. "We camped under a hill during the night, and we thought we'd better make for this cabin as there are signs of another blizzard blowing up. This cold is sure the worst I've ever known so late in the season. There's no wood for a fire inside the cabin, I suppose?"

"None," Jack answered. "Anyway, we're not bothering about fire now, for we're going to hit the trail to Dawson in a few minutes."

The sergeant and his companion removed their snowshoes, kicked the snow from their boots, and stumped into the cabin.

"Please don't make too much row!" Terry implored. "'Tis old Nak-Ta, who was in a mighty bad way when we brought him along to the cabin."

"An Indian—eh?" murmured Sergeant Curtis. "What's the matter with him—frost-bite?"

"Exposure and lack of food were his troubles," Jack answered. "He's a bit better now, and we're going to take him on with us to the city."

"You're kind-hearted lads!" the sergeant commented.

He brushed some of the frozen snow from his trousers and knee-boots, took off his mitts with the leather thong attached to them, and stepped over to the improvised bed.

With fast-beating hearts the boys saw him stoop and draw aside the coverings and silently gaze upon the haggard, brown-stained face of the sufferer.

"A Chilkoot Indian?" murmured Sergeant Curtis, at last.

"From the Chilkoot camp, somewhere beyond Dawson, I believe," Jack remarked casually.

Making no further comment, the sergeant took a small flat tobacco-tin and a pipe from his pocket, and seated himself on the edge of Uncle Dave's rough couch. The patient stirred restlessly, and the police-officer drew the covering away, and took the sick man's hand in his own.

A look of fear came into Uncle Dave's face, and he tried to draw his hand away, but became inert again with weakness while the sergeant soothed him.

"His pulse is poor," said Sergeant Curtis, "and he's got a touch of fever."

As tenderly as a woman he drew the covering up again over Uncle Dave, who had kept his face partly averted and his eyes closed. Then, beckoning to the constable to go to the side of the

sledge, he crossed the floor of the shanty to Jack and Terry.

"See here, boys," he said, "I've always liked you, though in the past you've given me a deal of trouble. You succeeded once in putting it across me, but I reckon that there's no one who twice can pull the wool over my eyes."

"I—I don't understand," said Jack.

"'Tis riddles ye're speakin' in!" grunted Terry. "Phwat do ye mean?"

The sergeant was frigidly calm and his tone was matter-of-fact—no more ruffled than a father admonishing two troublesome sons.

"You know well enough what I mean," he said. "The man on that sledge is no Chilkoot Indian; he's the man I've been after since Christmas—Dave Orchard, your pardner."

It was as though the chums had been struck with the butt-end of a caribou whip!

They had believed that no one would penetrate Uncle Dave's disguise—a disguise made the more effective by the haggard look caused by his recent privations and the dirt he had been unable to remove. Their throats seemed parched and their tongues incapable of speech, as, with hypnotised gaze, they watched the sergeant calmly restore his pipe to his pocket and toy with the lid of the tin tobacco-box.

Suddenly Terry gave a rather mirthless cackle of laughter.

"'Tis off the rails this time ye are, sergeant darlint!" he said. "Shure you've got Uncle Dave on the brain! And phwat proof have ye got at all, at all?"

"The most positive proof of all, Terry," replied Sergeant Curtis gravely.

"I wonder if you ever heard of a great Frenchman known as M'sieur Bertillon?"

"Niver!" Terry said, positively. "Where's his claim, bedad?"

The sergeant smiled.

"His claim isn't here on the Yukon creeks," he returned; "his claim is to fame as the originator of the Bertillon system of finger-prints, used by the French Surete-General, Scotland Yard, and the police of the United States, and elsewhere. We use it even in the Yukon, and after Dave Orchard's arrest, his thumb-print was taken, as a matter of routine. I've a copy of it pasted inside the lid of this box."

"Well?" muttered Jack dryly.

In response, the sergeant opened the tobacco-box and showed the print in question, and in the lower part of the box was another freshly-made thumb-print in soft plasticine!

"This thumb-print in the plasticine," said the sergeant, "I obtained exactly two minutes ago from the patient lying on that sledge. It happens to be identical with this printed one of Dave Orchard."

The White Death!

OUTSIDE, the wind howled round Lone Cabin. The bottom had dropped out of the thermometer, and it was as though the bottom had dropped out of the hearts of Jack and Terry.

Again Uncle Dave—their old pardner whom they had learned to love—was under arrest.

The prisoner himself was too ill just then to take heed of the fact, even if he actually understood it. No handcuffs encircled his wrists, and Sergeant Curtis, who had acted like a sportsman and a gentleman in the performance of his grim duty, merely contented himself with a search to see that he had no fire-arms or other weapon.

Through Jack's head kept ringing the words of an old miner whom he had once heard discussing the Royal Canadian Mounted Police:

"They'll get ye—get ye in the end! They'll track ye to the North Pole or down to the flaming fire that burns in the centre o' the world, if needs be. But they'll get ye—get ye in the end!"

Well, they had got Uncle Dave. The red-coated trackers of the white wastelands had followed him—followed him remorselessly as the bear trails the wounded cariboo. The sunshine of hope was blanked out by the leaden clouds of despair; life had become chaos again, bitter as the weather raging in the snow wastes outside.

Jack gave a choking sob.

"For mercy's sake don't take him back to gaol, sergeant!" he pleaded, clutching the officer's sleeve. "You don't know him like we do, or you'd understand that Uncle Dave could no more have stolen gold from a man who trusted him than the sun can freeze! He's had information that Morgan's still got the Bear's Claw, and with a few more days of liberty—"

"I'm sorry, Jack," the sergeant inter-

posed, gazing into the boy's swimming eyes; "but I can do nothing but take him back to Dawson with me, where he'll be well cared for. Any information he has I will investigate personally, and you can rest assured he shall have a square deal."

It was cold comfort. Uncle Dave's disguise as a Chilkoot Indian would have enabled him to have associated with Morgan and Lefty Simons entirely unsuspected. And as the two rogues had secreted the stolen gold from the police after the burning of the High Life, they would assuredly do so again as soon as they got wind of another investigation.

There was no question of starting yet for Dawson. The weather had grown steadily worse again, and the blizzard was beginning to sweep the Yukon Valley with renewed force. The cabin afforded shelter against the howling wind; but it was bitterly cold even inside, without stove or fire, and the snow shaken from the clothes of the wayfarers lay mingled among the dirt on the floor.

Soon the blizzard was raging with terrific force again.

Powdered snow came whipping in little streams through every crack and crevice of the log walls, roof, and door, and the wind beat against the old shanty like a legion of shrieking fiends clamouring to get in. Winter was having its last mad fling ere releasing its iron stranglehold on the Yukon.

"Bedad, it feels loike about fifty below zero!" muttered Terry, beating his arms across his chest. "'Tis slipping out to see phwat's happening to the dogs O'll be!"

"You stay right here, my boy!" grunted Sergeant Curtis, gripping his arm. "Skookum and the rest of the dogs are under the lee of the cabin in their snow trenches, and well able to look after themselves. They'll come to no harm. The white death stalks outside, and the arctic frost can strike down a man as surely as can the flaming tropic sun. While this weather's raging, you musn't stir outside the shanty."

He began to unpack some provisions from a small knapsack, and with a small tomahawk began to chop fragments from some frozen butter in a tin. Jack and Terry went to the side of Uncle Dave, who had revived a little, though he now took no interest in the presence of the police.

The howling of the blizzard made conversation difficult, and no one felt inclined for much talk, anyway. The jets of powdered snow, whipping through the crevices in the walls, spread a soft carpet on the floor, and a white counterpane over the rugs and blankets which covered Uncle Dave on the sledge.

The yapping of dogs broke out. All thought the huskies were merely quarrelling among themselves until, on the sudden, a knocking sounded and a terrified voice faintly beat through the howling of the blizzard:

"Let me in! By heck, let me in! I'm dyin'—dyin'!"

All inside the cabin became rigid, gazing in surprise from one to another. Then Jack, who was nearest to the door, tore back the rusty bolts.

Immediately the force of the slashing wind and the weight of a heavy body outside flung the door backwards, hurtling Jack full length on the floor. And among a wild swirl of snow, which swept into the cabin, staggered a man, with bowed head and arms pressed tight across his snow-blinded eyes and half-frozen face.

"The door!" gasped Sergeant Curtis. "Shut the door!"

Together with the constable, Jack, and Terry, he flung himself against it with all his force, and even then found great difficulty in shutting it against the wind and driving home the bolts.

The refugee had dropped down upon his knees, his blue lips quivering, and whining with dreadful fright. His hands, encased in ice-covered mitts, closed together as though in supplication as he swayed backwards and forwards.

"By the great mackinaw, if it isn't Lefty Simons!" exclaimed Jack. "In a jolly bad way, too, by the look of him!"

"Mighty lucky he stumbled on this cabin!" cried the sergeant. "He'd have been frozen stiff if he'd have remained in the open much longer!"

He made a sign to the constable to hold Simons firmly while he began the painful process of rubbing the frost-bite out of the victim's face with handfuls of snow. Simons grovelled through the snow and dirt on the cabin floor in alarm, and Jack, who had been struck by a sudden thought, begged the police officers to "wait a moment."

"Did you come here alone, Simons?" he demanded. "Or was anyone with you? That pard of yours—Morgan—where is he?"

"He—he was with m-me," he stammered, "outside the c-cabin—not far—"

Then he loosed a flood of abuse in selfish fear of his own plight, utterly callous to the fact that his own pard was in the icy grip of the white death outside.

"Me bhoi," muttered Terry in a horrified tone to Jack, "we can't leave the other spalpeen to freeze! I'm going to—"

"Get out of the way!" snapped Jack roughly.

Thrusting his chum aside, he dragged back the bolts of the door before anyone could stop him. This time he avoided being hurled backward himself as the heavy door crashed back on its creaking hinges, and bowed his head to the furious burst of wind and snow that drove into the cabin. Then he staggered blindly across the threshold into the blizzard, with Terry following hard at his heels.

"You crazy young galoots!" gasped the sergeant. "Come back! Come back!"

(This powerful story of the Yukon will be concluded in next week's bumper number, boys.)

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Oyez! Oyez!! Oyez!!!
ISTEN-IN, scholars of St. Sam's, and lend me your ears! A grand performance of my new and novel Christmas pantomime,
'THE COMING OF SANTA CLAWS!'

will be held in the concert-hall on breaking-up night. Curtain rises at 8 sharp.

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(people in the panto):

SANTA CLAWS Dr. BIRCHEMELL
DR. SKINFINT

(the mean and miserly master of Dr. Skinfint's Academy for Orphaned and Poor Parents)
TUCKLESS Mr. LICKHAM
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Scenery by Mrs. Dr. Birchmell.
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PRICES OF ADMISSION: Masters, a "tanner," juniors, a "tanner," seniors, half-a-crown. Fags, half a "brown."

The whole of the takings will be devoted to Charity; and Charity (whose other name is Dr. Birchmell) will be devoted to all loyal scholars who roll up and swell the funds.

This will be positively THE FIRST, LAST, and ONLY APPEARANCE of DR. BIRCHEMELL as the princely boy in a panto!

ROLL UP IN YOUR THOW-SANDS!

It was breaking-up day at St. Sam's, and the above poster had been placarded all over the school.

It was common knowledge that the Head had been getting up a panto, because there had been secret rehearsals, night

Doctor Birchmell's Pantomime!



DICKY NUGENT.

after night, behind locked doors. Mr. Lickham and Jack Jolly & Co. had taken part in them; and the Head had lashed them unmercifully—both with his birch-rod and with his tongue—until he had brought them to the pitch of perfection. All was now in readiness for the grand panto to be played; and from the moment that breaking-up day started to break, St. Sam's was in a fever of excitement. There were no isolated cases. Everybody, from the youngest fag down to Dr. Birchmell, had the "panto" fever badly. Long before the appointed time for the curtain to rise, the concert-hall was fairly besieged. There were queues of eggshelled fellows outside, shivering and struggling and straining for admission.

Dr. Birchmell, attired as usual in gown and mortar-board, was at the door, taking the "tanners" and "tanners" as fast as he could go. There were not many "tanners" of course. That had nearly been the Head's little joke. But there were "tanners" and "bobs" and "brows" in plenty; and the Head's eyes glinted as he surveyed the rapidly-growing pile of cash on the little table. He gloved with glee, and rubbed his skinny hands like a mean old miser.

"Charity is doing well, and no error!" exclaimed Dr. Birchmell. "Roll up! Roll up! Don't miss the chance of a lifetime! Come and see your headmaster in the role of Santa Claws! Come and see my perfectly priceless panto—the sensation of the term! Don't hang back, there!"

The fellows didn't. They pressed forward, barging and changing as if they were taking part in a Rugby scrum. Dr. Birchmell found himself suddenly overwhelmed by a surging tidal wave of humanity. In vain he strove to stem the tide. It swept over him and past him, sending the table flying, and scattering the mummy in all directions.

"The Head was fairly bowled off his feet by the onrush. He lay sprawling on his back, and the eggshelled mob used him as a doormat, wiping their feet on him as they surged into the concert-hall. "Help! Rescue!" roared Dr. Birchmell. "Yarooooo!" I refuse to take this lying down!"

But the Head had no choice in the matter. He had to lie on his back until the last pair of boots had passed over him. Then he crawled around on his hands and knees, making a frantic screech for the scattered mummy.

It was estimated, afterwards, that nearly a hundred fellows had got in without paying. This was a bitter blow to Charity, but Charity had to grin and bear it.

Having collected such of the spoils as he could find, Dr. Birchmell hurried away behind the scenes. There was a long delay before the

curtain rose, and the audience fidgeted impatiently. There were sounds of bumpings and bangings on the stage, as of heavy furniture being hauled into place, and above the din the voice of Dr. Birchmell could be heard, wrapping out orders, and threatening certain members of the cast with birchings. Then there was a sudden wild yell of anguish from the Head.

"Yaroooo! Why did you let go, Lickham, before I was ready? That was my pet corn!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the audience. At long last the curtain rose, revealing a dormitory scene at Dr. Skinfint's Academy. The time was supposed to be Christmas Eve. There were four beds in a row, and four very miserable-looking boys were in the act of undressing. They were Tommy Tuckless, Sammy Skelington, Little Willie, and Little Alfie—pupils of the cruel, hard-hearted tyrant, Dr. Skinfint.

In spite of their make-up, the audience had no difficulty in identifying Tommy Tuckless & Co. as Jack Jolly & Co., the heroes of the St. Sam's Fourth. The first words fell to Jack Jolly, who was suffering badly from stage-fright. It was in a feeble whisper that he began: "To-night is Christmas Eve, you chaps."

"To-night is Christmas Eve, you chaps," "Loud!" hissed the voice of Dr. Birchmell, which appeared to come from the roof. "Let your words ring out loud and bold! This is a panto—not a dumb-show!"

Jack Jolly tried again. But it was still in a very weak and faint voice that he managed to mumble the opening lines: "To-night is Christmas Eve, you chaps. And Santa Claws will come—perhaps! When the first stroke of midnight tolls Santa will roll up in his Rolls!"

"Rolls!" snapped the voice from the roof. "No idea at all, Jolly! If you don't put more pop into your part, I'll drop down on to the stage before I'm your birchrod!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the audience. "They were enjoying these unheard-of effects better than the show itself. It was now the turn of Sammy Skelington to speak. Sammy's part was played by Frank Fearless, and he played it with gusto feeling and fervor. He began by bursting into tears, and his wails and lamentations rang through the concert-hall. In a clucking voice door



DICKY NUGENT.

looked on breathlessly, the miracle started to happen.

"Lower me gently!" muttered a voice from the roof. "I don't want to dash my bones out on the stage!"

There was a loud creaking sound, as of an overhead pulley being worked; and presently a pair of feet came dangling into view. They were very large, flat feet, and they kicked vigorously as they hovered above the stage. They dangled there for fully a minute, in a state of suspended animation.

The audience stared at those feet in amazement. Sammy Skelington, who was lying in bed, in the direct line of descent, stared at them in apprehension. He trembled to think what might happen if something went wrong with the works, so to speak.

"Quicker! Lower me quicker!" muttered a wailing voice. "The audience must be tired of looking at my feet! Quicker, you cubs, or I'll birch you black and blue!"

"All serene, sir!" came the response from above. And then, with a sudden jerk, the feet shot downwards into space. They were followed by a pair of long, lean legs; and these were followed in turn by the body, and then the head, of Santa Claws.

Dr. Birchmell had made his dramatic appearance! He hovered in mid-air, suspended by an invisible wire. He was dressed up as Father Christmas, and his red face and long, white beard gave him the true Santa Claws touch. But he looked very agitated and alarmed as he dangled there. His eyes were bulging from their sockets, and he had an awful fear that the invisible wire might suddenly snap.

"Looks like a trussed fowl, duzzent he?" remarked a member of the audience. "Ha, ha, ha!"

Dr. Birchmell rolled his eyes upwards towards the roof. "You've stopped again, you young scamps!" he hissed. "You're lowering me in jerks, instead of gradually and gracefully. It was my intention to float down on to the stage like a howling angel!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a whisper of dismay from above. "Sorry, sir, but something's gone wrong with the works! We can't get the blessed thing to unwind any further!"

"Then haul me up again—quick!" gasped Santa Claws. "I cannot remain any longer in this ludicrous and perilous position!"

Again there was a creaking sound, and Santa Claws started to soar slowly upwards. But he didn't soar very far. The invisible wire suddenly snapped under the continuous strain, and Santa Claws descended like a bolt from the blue! He shot downward through space, to alight with a terrific concussion on top of poor Sammy Skelington!

Crash!
"Yarooooo!"

The unfortunate Sammy Skelington was flattened out like a pancake. As for Santa Claws, he made frantic signals for the curtain to be lowered.

"The curtain—quick!" he gasped.

A couple of stage-hands sprang to the curtain, and ran it down, merrily shutting off Dr. Birchmell from the yells and shrieks of the audience, who were in hysterics.

The performance was suspended for quite ten minutes. During that interval, sounds of steady swishing could be heard from behind the curtain. And the swishing sounds were accompanied by loud wails of anguish.

Evidently the juniors who had been responsible for working the overhead pulley were going through it—badly!

Dr. Birchmell had suffered, and he was making doubly sure that the stage-hands paid in full for their carelessness. His birchrod swished over their backs mercilessly.

When the curtain went up again Santa Claws was observed to toss a birchrod through the wings. The performance then proceeded—though Santa Claws made no more spectacular descents from the clouds. That tumble had shaken every bone in his body, and he was not anxious to repeat the experiment.

The remainder of the panto passed off according to programme.

There was a lively scene when Santa Claws chastised the rascally Dr. Skinfint with a whip, chasing him round and round the stage.

The Head had assured Mr. Lickham, beforehand, that it would only be a make-believe thrashing. But, judging by Mr. Lickham's wild yells of anguish, there was no make-believe about it. He danced like a dervish as the whip curled and lashed about his sholders; and finally he fled from the stage in a panic, with Santa Claws in hot pursuit.

Of course, the panto had a happy ending. It showed a Christmas morning scene, with Tommy Tuckless & Co. waking up to find their stockings filled with good things. Santa Claws had triumphed over the mean and miserly Dr. Skinfint, and all was jolly and merry and bright.

The curtain fell amid roars of applause, and cries of "Othello! Othello! Where's the merry producer?"

But the producer—feeling far from merry at that moment—was behind the scenes, rubbing embrocation into his brooded anatomy, and vowing that it would be a long, long time before he again played the part of Santa Claws in a Christmas pantomime!

THE END.

(Whatever you do, chaps, don't miss the next amusing yarn in this topping series, entitled: "THE TERROR OF THE HIGHWAY!" Every time you raise a laugh.)