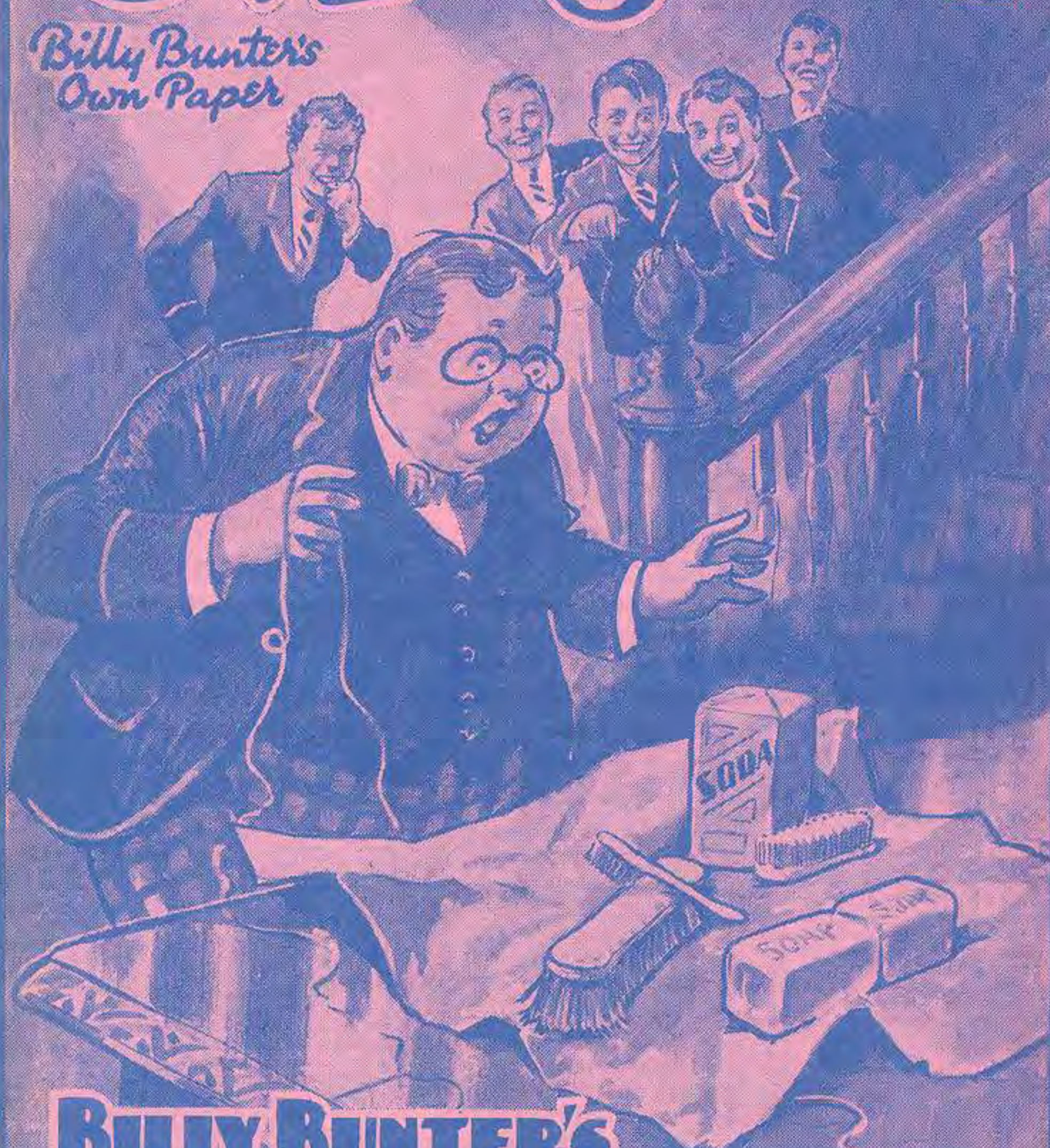


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The Magnet ^{2^D}

*Billy Bunter's
Own Paper*



BILLY BUNTER'S CHRISTMAS PRESENT!

The MYSTERY of WHARTON LODGE!



By
**FRANK
RICHARDS**

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,610. Christmas presents when you went out, I contained five Christmas presents, the

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articles must have been of moderate size.

Bunter wondered cheerily what it contained. The Famous Five had said that the things were useful, and were what they knew he wanted. Probably they knew that he wanted a wrist-watch and a fountain-pen and a travelling-clock and a movie-camera and a Russia-leather notecase. Indeed, they could not have failed to know, for Bunter had mentioned all those articles in careless and casual conversation on the subject of Christmas presents!

Beaming, Bunter fumbled with the knots of string that fastened the brown-paper parcel. The knots were rather obstinate, and his fat fingers fumbled and fumbled.

He was thus occupied, when the library door opened, and Colonel Wharton came out into the hall. The old military gentleman glanced round.

"Did I not hear Harry and his friends come in?" he asked.

"Yes, they've gone up," answered Bunter. "I say, can you lend me a penknife? I can't undo these knots."

"Eh? Oh, yes!"

Colonel Wharton came across to the table, extracted a penknife from his pocket, and handed it to the fat Owl.

Bunter sawed at the string.

"Like to see my Christmas presents?" he asked. "The fellows have just brought them in with them—one from each of them in this parcel. I don't know what they are yet—something decent, I hope."

"Oh!"

"I fancy I can guess, though," rattled

clock, a movie-camera, a fountain-pen, and a Russia-leather notecase. They had said that the parcel contained what he wanted, and he certainly wanted those articles.

But that beaming smile faded suddenly away, and Billy Bunter uttered a howl of rage.

"Beasts!"

Colonel Wharton, who was turning away from the table, turned back in surprise.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"Rotters!" roared Bunter. "Cads! Swabs! Beasts!"

"What—Oh, good gad!" gasped Colonel Wharton, as he stared at the Christmas presents in Bunter's parcel.

There was nothing there even remotely resembling a travelling-clock, a fountain-pen, a movie-camera, a wrist-watch, or a Russia-leather notecase. But the things were things that Bunter wanted—and needed!

In that Christmas parcel lay a bar of soap, a nail-brush, a scrubbing-brush, a tooth-brush, and a packet of soda!

There was one present from each of the Famous Five—undoubtedly things that Bunter wanted.

"Good gad!" repeated the colonel.

"Ha, ha, ha! Are these your Christmas presents, Bunter? Ha, ha, ha!"

Colonel Wharton was generally quite a grave gentleman, but the sight of those Christmas presents banished all his gravity. He roared.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" howled Bunter. "A bar of soap—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

But Billy Bunter was shirty; moreover, Billy Bunter had manners and customs of his own, with which he was satisfied, if nobody else was.

After lunch, the Famous Five were going out to skate on the lake, which was frozen hard. They did not, in point of fact, yearn to have Billy Bunter barging about like a hippopotamus, clutching hold of other fellows and dragging them over, and keeping one or two of the party busy all the time rendering assistance. Still, there was Bunter, and they did not want to leave him out.

"Topping on the lake, old man!" said Harry Wharton.

"Yah!"

"The topfulness is terrific!" urged Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Beast!"

"Do you good, old fat bean!" said Bob Cherry. "Shake down your lunch—it must want some shaking down!"

Grunt!

"We'll lend you a hand, old bean!" said Frank Nugent.

Grunt!

"Oh, come on!" said Johnny Bull. "I don't suppose the ice will stand Bunter—it can't be a yard thick!"

"I've got some skates for you, Bunter," said Harry Wharton.

"Keep 'em!" grunted Bunter.

Bunter had planted himself in his favourite armchair before the fire. He was frowning. He had not, apparently, recovered from the effect of his Christmas presents that morning. Neither,

σηκινθεδιτχοπποσιτεθεστιλεινφριαροδαλελαβε

The Mysterious Message in Greek.

on Bunter cheerily. "They said they knew I wanted the things—they talked it over, you know, and decided on things that they knew I wanted. What I want most is—"

Colonel Wharton was regarding Bunter's fat countenance with a fixed gaze. He interrupted the fat Owl.

"I think perhaps I ought to tell you, Bunter, what you want most at the present moment!" he barked.

"Eh? What's that?"

"A wash!" said Colonel Wharton grimly.

"Oh, really, sir—"

"I presume that soap has been placed in your room, Bunter."

"I—I believe so—I—I mean, yes, of course!" stammered Bunter.

"Do not carry economy to excess in its use," said Colonel Wharton.

Billy Bunter breathed hard, and he breathed deep.

He could not venture to call the colonel a cheeky old frump, so he only thought it.

The cheeky old frump seemed to fancy he could talk to Bunter like Quelch, his Form-master at Greyfriars. More than once Quelch had sent Bunter out of the Remove Form Room for a necessary wash. But anybody who fancied that William George Bunter was going to wash as much in the holidays as he did during the term had another guess coming!

Disdaining to reply—as it was really too dangerous to tell Wharton's uncle what he thought of him—Bunter cut the string and handed the penknife back to the old military gentleman.

The beaming smile returned to his fat face as he unwrapped the brown paper on the parcel. Now he was going to see what he was going to see—in all probability a wrist-watch, a travelling-

"A—a—a scrubbing-brush—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts! Rotters! Look here—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the colonel. He wiped his eyes. "Useful presents—very useful presents—very useful indeed! I recommend you to put them into use, Bunter! Ha, ha, ha!"

Colonel Wharton went back into the library, still laughing. Bunter could hear him laughing after the door was shut.

Bunter was not laughing. Bunter was glaring at his Christmas presents with a glare that almost cracked his spectacles. Five smiling faces looked down over the banisters.

"Like your presents, Bunter?" called out Bob Cherry cheerily.

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You want them, you know!"

"You need them, old fat man!"

"The needfulness is terrific!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter grabbed up the bar of soap and took aim. The five grinning faces disappeared, and the merry sound of laughter floated back. Billy Bunter was left to contemplate his Christmas presents—not with satisfaction, and probably not with any intention of making use of them!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Not Mauly!

"COME on, Bunter!"

"Shan't!"

"Um!"

In the very best circles, a guest did not answer "Shan't!" to his host when the latter requested him to join up for skating.

to judge by his grubby countenance, had he put them to any use.

He gave the cheery five a disdainful blink through his big spectacles.

"I was rather an ass to come here!" he said. "If Mauly hadn't let me down—I mean, I turned down Lord Mauleverer's invitation specially to come here, as you know. And what thanks do I get?"

At which the Famous Five smiled.

Buzzzzz!

It was the telephone, in the cabinet adjoining the hall. Wells, the butler, came through the service door and went to the instrument.

Billy Bunter sat up.

"I shouldn't wonder if that's for me," he said. "I'm rather expecting a call from Mauly. I wrote to him yesterday—I mean, I think old Mauly would be pretty certain to ring me up!"

Harry Wharton laughed. He was honoured with Billy Bunter's fascinating company over the Christmas holidays, chiefly because Lord Mauleverer had succeeded in dodging the fat Owl. Bunter would have preferred Mauleverer Towers to Wharton Lodge—and there was no doubt that he would have changed over had Mauly played up!

Which, though not flattering, would have been far from causing grief or dismay at Wharton Lodge!

"You can cackle!" said Bunter disdainfully. "But—is that call for me, Wells?"

Wells glided across the hall.

"Yes, sir; you are wanted on the telephone," he answered.

Billy Bunter heaved himself out of the armchair. He gave Harry Wharton & Co. a still more disdainful blink.

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"I fancied it would come, after what I wrote to Mauly!" he remarked, with satisfaction. "I'm afraid I shan't be able to stay over Christmas, after all, Wharton!"

"Alas!" sighed Bob Cherry.

"You can't expect it, after the way you've treated me!" argued Bunter. "I'm sorry and all that!"

"The sorrowfulness of our absurd selves is also terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh gravely.

"Sorry, and so on, but I shall have to cut it short!" said Bunter firmly. "After all, I've given you a couple of days. You can't expect more when a fellow's rushed with invitations right and left. Be reasonable!"

"I'll try to stand it, old fat man," said Harry Wharton cheerfully. "But—"

"There's no 'but' in the matter," said Bunter. "I'm going! While you're pottering about in your humble little place, you can think of me at Mauleverer Towers, having the very best—he, he, he!"

"But—" repeated Harry.

"No good jawing!" said Bunter, with a wave of a fat hand. "I decline to stay a day longer, in—in the circumstances!"

"But—"

"Yah!" said Bunter, which was not elegant, but expressive.

"But," said Harry, laughing, "before you turn me down, old fat perpoise, hadn't you better make sure that that call is from Mauly?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Co.

"Might be from somebody else, you know!" chuckled Bob Cherry. "Lord Bunter do Grunter, perhaps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Or somebody who wants to collect an account!" suggested Johnny Bull.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh!" repeated Bunter. "I—I say, Harry, old chap, if—if that call ain't from Mauly, I—I may be able to give you a bit longer!"

"I was afraid so!" asserted Wharton.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Still, I fancy it's from Mauly—I wrote to him yesterday—I mean, you know how pally I am with old Mauly. Still, hang on here while I take the call. I'm pretty certain it's from Mauly, but wait a minute!"

Bunter rolled over to the telephone cabinet, leaving the Famous Five grinning.

He was, at the moment, rather uncertain in his fat mind. If that call came from Mauleverer Towers, Bunter was prepared to turn down Wharton Lodge on the spot with a very heavy down! Still, he realised that possibly that call did not, after all, come from Mauleverer Towers.

The Famous Five were fairly certain that it did not. It seemed to them improbable that Mauly, having once got safely away from Bunter, would open communications again.

They watched Bunter with smiling faces as he jammed the receiver to a fat ear.

"Hallo!" squeaked Bunter. "Is that you, Mauly, old chap? You got my letter? I say, Mauly, dear old fellow—oh!"

Bunter was seen to jump.

He gave a gasping howl.

Evidently, the voice that came through on the telephone was not Mauly's. Lord Mauleverer's voice would never have startled Bunter like this!

"Oh crikey!" gasped Bunter.

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The receiver dropped from his fat hand, and he stood blinking at the telephone, his little round eyes almost popping through his big round spectacles.

"What the dickens—" exclaimed Bob.

"Not Mauly!" grinned Johnny Bull.

"Hardly!" chuckled Nugent.

"Oh crikey!" gasped Bunter. He blinked out into the hall. "I say, you fellows—Oh lor'!"

"Anything up?" asked Harry.

"Oh crumbs, yes! It—it—it—it—it's—" stuttered Bunter.

"Somebody after an account?" grinned Johnny Bull.

"It—it's Soames!" gasped Bunter.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Soames' Last Word!

"SOAMES!"

The Famous Five uttered that name in chorus.

Billy Bunter rolled out of the telephone cabinet, gasping. He left the receiver hanging, unheeded. Even with a telephone wire between, Soames had a terrifying effect on the fat Owl of the Remove.

"That—that villain!" he gasped. "I ain't going to speak to him! Oh crikey! I say, you fellows, it's that beast Soames! Oh lor'!"

Harry Wharton's brow knitted.

"I'll take the call!" he said.

The chums of Greyfriars had almost forgotten Soames. With Christmas so near at hand, they had plenty of other matters to think of; neither had they expected to hear anything again from the man who had once been a manservant in a millionaire's household, a freebooter in the Pacific, a kidnapper, and many other things.

Harry Wharton stepped to the telephone and picked up the receiver. His friends gathered round him to hear the voice that came through. Billy Bunter stood blinking at them through his big spectacles, his fat knees knocking together. The sleek voice over the wires had startled and scared the fat Owl—his teeth were almost chattering.

"I—I say, you fellows, fancy that villain having the neck to ring up—after coming here and grabbing Wharton in the middle of the night!" he stuttered.

"Shut up, old bean, and let's hear him!" said Bob.

Harry Wharton spoke into the transmitter.

"Is that Soames?"

"Quite!" came the smooth, sleek voice that he well knew. "I was speaking to Master Bunter—"

"Harry Wharton speaking—"

"Quite so! I recognise your voice, Master Wharton! I trust that you are well and enjoying this festive season of the year."

"Cut that out!" said Harry curtly. "You've startled Bunter out of his wits! What do you want?"

"Cannot you guess?" said the smooth voice. "If you are taking the message for Bunter, Master Wharton—"

"Cut it short!"

"Certainly! In a word, I want the silver cigarette-case!" said Soames, from the other end. "Probably you have not forgotten it, Master Wharton! If so, I will describe it to you—an oblong flat cigarette-case, with a Greek inscription on the metal inside. It was handed to Master Bunter by a friend of mine to bring to me and he failed to deliver it."

"That's not true—"

"I assure you, Master Wharton, that

it is the fact! It was sent me by an old friend—a comrade in some of my enterprises—from whom I am now parted. I require it, on account of its associations—it is of no great value intrinsically, as you are aware, as you have seen it. I do not suppose it cost more than a couple of pounds when it was new, and it is far from new."

"I can't make out why you want it!" said Harry. "And I don't believe that it belongs to you. You've been hunting Bunter for it, and you came here like a thief in the night, because he pulled your leg by making out that he had sent it to me for a Christmas present and—"

"Quite so, Master Wharton! I realise that that statement, on Master Bunter's part, was a fabrication. No doubt he was willing to set me on your track instead of his own. It was like him—very like him! On reflection, I have decided to believe your statement that it was not in your possession—"

"Thank you for nothing!"

"That is why I desire to speak to Master Bunter! I should be very glad to settle this matter without lawless violence—I have always preferred gentle measures, where practicable. May I speak to Bunter?"

"Bunter won't speak to you."

"Then no doubt you will tell him what I say. Let that cigarette-case be placed on the old sundial in the park by your house, and I will find an opportunity of taking it away. As I have said, it is of little value, and surely it would be wiser for Bunter to avoid further trouble by parting with what does not belong to him."

"Possibly!" answered Harry Wharton. "But I should certainly not advise Bunter to have any dealings whatever with you—a crook, wanted by the police. But, as it happens, he cannot hand over the cigarette-case, if he wants to—he has told me that it is lost."

There was a low, mocking, sardonic laugh over the wires.

"I am not likely to believe that, Master Wharton! I hardly think that you believe it yourself! Bunter has told too many fanciful tales on the subject for me to believe any of them. He told me that he had sent it to you by post for a Christmas present! Was that correct?"

"No; but—"

"I have no use for Bunter's falsehoods! I want the cigarette-case! It is of no value to anyone but myself. Place it on the sundial, and leave it there to be collected—or I shall take other measures! That is my last word!"

"Bunter says—"

"I am not interested in what Bunter says! Unless I find the cigarette-case on the sundial, I shall take very severe measures with Master Bunter—measures that will, I fear, spoil his Christmas holidays very considerably. You knew me some time ago, Master Wharton, and you will remember that I am not a man to stick at trifles. Unless the silver case is put on the sundial before sunset to-day, I shall take my measures to deal with Master Bunter."

"Is that all?" asked Wharton contemptuously.

"That is all, Master Wharton! Bunter is now staying in your house, and he has the silver cigarette-case in his possession! Let it be placed on the sundial, and let the matter end—you will never hear from me again, which I am sure will be a satisfaction to you."

"I hope to hear that the police have got hold of you," answered Harry. "I'm not sure, I admit, whether Bunter has the cigarette-case or not, he's such a fearful fibber—but—"

"Place it on the sundial, and I assure you Bunter will sleep more soundly of nights afterwards!" said the smooth voice. "That is all, Master Wharton! A Merry Christmas to you!"

The man at the other end rang off. Harry Wharton hung up and looked at his friends. They looked at him.

"By gum!" said Bob.

"What the thump does that villain want that cigarette-case for so badly?" asked Nugent. "It's not worth thirty bob."

"Goodness knows! He must have some reason—and not the one he said!" answered Harry. "No good trying to make it out—it beats me! But he's certain that Bunter still has it—of course, he won't believe a word Bunter says on the subject, any more than we do—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Have you still got it, Bunter?" asked Johnny Bull.

"I've told you I haven't!" hooted Bunter.

"I know—but have you?"

"Beast!"

"If you have—"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter went back to his arm-chair and plumped down there. He was frowning over his spectacles. That call had not, after all, come from Mauleverer Towers; and Billy Bunter was not, after all, shaking the dust of Wharton Lodge from his feet to transfer his fat person to that magnificent abode. Which was very irritating to Billy Bunter!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Mystery Of The Cigarette-Case!

COLONEL WHARTON tugged at his grizzled moustache and knitted his brows in thought. He stood with his back to the fire in the hall—rather to the annoyance of Billy Bunter, who wanted all the fire.

The Famous Five had not started yet for the lake. That unexpected telephone-call from James Soames had put skating out of their thoughts for the time. Wharton repeated what Soames had said to his uncle, for the old colonel to decide what—if anything—was to be done.

"Good gad!" said Colonel Wharton. "I can make neither head nor tail of it. What sort of thing is this—this cigarette-case you speak of?"

"Just a common silver case," answered Harry. "Flat, oblong, holds about a dozen cigarettes. I think—made of silver, pretty well worn from being kept in a pocket—not worth very much."

"Any name on it?"

"No; I looked for that when Bunter showed it to me at Greyfriars. Only some Greek letters scratched on the inside."

"Greek letters? Words, do you mean, in Greek?"

"Blessed if I know," confessed Wharton. "We don't do Greek in the Remove, you know. I know Greek letters when I see them, but that's about all—I can't say I know what English letters they're equivalent to. I'm sure it was Greek, and that's all I can say."

"Not a name?"

"I shouldn't think so—it was too long; at least thirty-five or forty letters, I believe," answered Harry. "Too long for even a Greek name, I should think. If it was one word, it was a jolly long one—but it might be more than one word run together on account of space, for all I know."

"Was it an inscription—an engraving—"

"Oh, no! Just scratched with a knife—it looked as if someone had scratched the letters with the point of a knife in the metal and then gone over them again, making the marks deeper. They were fainter in some places than others."

"Very odd!" said Colonel Wharton. "I've known a Greek name run to twenty letters. Christian and surname run together, perhaps, the space between omitted. I don't see why a man, Greek or not, should cut anything but his name in his cigarette-case. Anyhow, the name if it was a name, was not Soames."

"Nothing like it."

"It's odd—and there's more in this than one can see! The scoundrel wants that cigarette-case badly, as he took the trouble, and the risk, to break into this house the other night, thinking that you had it. The man's a crook—a rascal—and whatever his game is, it is a law-abiding citizen's duty to defeat it. That cigarette-case must not go to him in any circumstances."

The colonel paused.

"It's no use trying to make it out," he went on. "That silver case must mean something to that scoundrel Soames, but what, is a mystery; Something in the lining, perhaps, if it had a lining—"

"No; plain metal inside and out," answered Harry. "Nothing on it, but scratches outside, and that Greek name—if it was a name—scratched inside."

"That might be a clue to the owner,"

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if one examined it," said the colonel. "How did it come into Bunter's possession? It is a very odd thing for a schoolboy to have about him. Where did you get it, Bunter?"

Five fixed glares were turned on Billy Bunter—a warning to the fat Owl to depart from his usual custom and tell the truth.

Bunter did not heed them. He was not in the habit of telling the truth, and he was not thinking of forming new habits.

He had already given four or five explanations to the chums of the Remove as to how he had got hold of that mysterious cigarette-case. They did not—as a matter of course—believe any of them.

"It's mine!" said Bunter, blinking at the old colonel. "I've lost it for the present, but I dare say I shall find it next term. It's mine."

"Yours!" repeated Colonel Wharton. "Do you mean to say that a boy of your age is allowed to smoke cigarettes?"

"Oh! Yes! No! I mean, I—I don't smoke, you know; but—but I—I sometimes keep my—my banknotes in it!" explained Bunter. "Being a bit short-sighted, I—I prefer not to mix up the fivers with the currency notes in my note-case—"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Tell me at once how you obtained it!" snapped Colonel Wharton, with a glare at the fat Owl.

"These fellows know," answered Bunter. "I've told them more than

once that it's an heirloom in my family—"

"Good gad!"

"Just a bit of our old silver," said Bunter airily. "We've got tons at Bunter Court—tankards, and goblets, and things, and—"

"You blithering owl!" hissed Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry! I told you that that silver case was given by James the Third to one of my ancestors—"

"I should be sorry, Bunter, as you are my nephew's guest, to box your ears," said Colonel Wharton.

"Eh?"

"But I shall do so, unless you tell me the truth! Cannot you see that this is a serious matter?" roared the colonel. "Tell me immediately where you obtained that cigarette-case!"

"Oh, really, sir! My Uncle William gave it to me!" snapped Bunter. "It was a birthday present from my Uncle William."

"Nonsense!"

"I don't see any nonsense about it!" retorted Bunter warmly. "I'm not used to having my word doubted, I can tell you. It's a very valuable silver case, or that beast Soames wouldn't be after it—I mean, I know it's fearfully valuable, or my Uncle George wouldn't have given it to me—he's awfully rich—"

"Can that boy tell the truth?" asked Colonel Wharton blankly.

"He's never tried, so far!" said Bob. "But I dare say he could, if he tried. Try hard, Bunter, old man! Put your beef into it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I insist upon knowing where you obtained that case, Bunter!" said Colonel Wharton. "It is a matter for the law to deal with, as that scoundrel Soames has attempted to obtain it by lawless violence. Where did you obtain it? Did you pick it up?"

"No, I jolly well didn't!" hooted Bunter. "Think I'd keep it if I picked it up? It was given me by—"

"By whom?"

"My Uncle Reginald—my rich uncle, you know. He—I say, you keep off, you know!" howled Bunter, in alarm, as the colonel made a stride towards him.

He blinked up in great alarm at the old military gentleman towering over him.

"I insist upon a truthful answer!" said Colonel Wharton. "Another untruth, Bunter, and I shall box your ears!"

"I—I—I don't mind telling you!" gasped Bunter. "I—I was just going to. A man gave it to me in Friardale Lane a week before we broke up at Greyfriars, so there!"

"What man?"

"I don't know—never seen him before, and never seen him since. He never told me his name."

"A stranger to you gave you a silver cigarette-case for nothing!" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "That cannot be true."

"Well, he wanted me to take it to a man at Pegg," admitted Bunter. "That's why he gave it to me."

"Good gad! It was given to you to take to some person, and you retained it?" exclaimed Colonel Wharton.

"Are you dishonest, Bunter?"

"I couldn't give it to the man when he wasn't there, could I?" bawled Bunter indignantly. "Think I'd pinch it? I went over to Pegg to give it to Mr. Thompson—the man said he was

on a motor-boat at Pegg. Well, he wasn't! I asked five or six people at Pegg, and they'd never heard of Mr. Thompson. How could I give it to him, I'd like to know?"

The Famous Five glared at Bunter. Whether this was the truth or not they could not tell. But certainly it sounded very extraordinary.

"If that is true, it is a most amazing tale!" snapped Colonel Wharton. "I do not see where that villain Soames comes into the matter at all. How could he know anything about the cigarette-case?"

"You see, I butted into him at Pegg, when I was looking for Mr. Thompson," explained Bunter. "I didn't know him at first, and he had the neck to pretend that he was Thompson—just to get that cigarette-case off me, you know. Luckily I'd dropped it and Bob picked it up, so the swab never got it—though he's been after it ever since—"

"You told him about it?"

"Of course I did, when he made out that he was Thompson—but when I recognised him I jolly well knew who he was—"

"This is most extraordinary!" said Colonel Wharton. "Where is the cigarette-case now, Bunter?"

"Lost!" said Bunter.

"You appear to have told Soames that you had sent it by post to my nephew—"

Bunter grinned.

"That was to stuff him and get him off my track!" he explained. "You see, he didn't believe that I'd lost it, so I stuffed him—"

"Good gad! Neither do I believe that you have lost it!" said the colonel sternly. "That is nonsense!"

"Oh, really, you know—"

"For goodness' sake, Bunter, tell the truth!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Look here, you beast—"

"Tell me how, and where, you lost it, if you really have lost it!" snapped Colonel Wharton.

"A chap at school grabbed it from me!" snorted Bunter. "He grabbed it and chucked it away!"

"Rubbish!" roared the colonel. "No Greyfriars boy would take an article of value from you! How dare you tell me such a tale?"

"Oh, go it!" hooted Bunter. "Soames didn't believe it, either—"

"No wonder he did not believe it, when obviously it is not the truth! By gad, if I were your Form-master at school, I would teach you to tell the truth or wear out a cane on you!" exclaimed the colonel. "Where is that cigarette-case, Bunter? Tell me this instant!"

"I've told you!" yelled Bunter. "A Remove chap grabbed it—"

"Nonsense!"

"And chucked it away—"

"Rubbish!"

"You can ask Smithy if you like!" howled Bunter. "It was Smithy did it!"

"Vernon-Smith!" exclaimed Wharton.

"Yes, the cheeky beast! Making out that I was after his cigarettes!" hooted Bunter. "You know the Bounder—suspicious beast! He made out that I was snooping his cigarettes just because he copped me in his study—and I was taking them out of his box, you know—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"As if I'd snoop a fellow's smokes!" said Bunter. "Just like Smithy! The fact is, he was shirty because I turned him down for the hols—"

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"You howling ass!"

"Beast!"

"Tell me exactly what happened—if that is the truth!" said Colonel Wharton.

"I've told you, and I can jolly well say— Yarooooo! Leggo my ear, will you?" yelled Bunter.

A finger and thumb closed like a steel vice on a fat ear, and Bunter yelled. The old colonel seemed to be losing patience; which, perhaps, was not surprising.

"Now tell me—" he rapped.

"Ow! Ain't I telling you?" howled Bunter. "My case was full of Smithy's smokes, and he took it and chucked it out of his study window— Ow! It fell in the snow somewhere— Wow! I looked for it— Yow-ow! But I couldn't find it— Wow! I suppose it's still sticking in the snow in the quad— Wooogh! Leggo!"

"Is that the truth?"

"Ow! Yes! Wow! Yes! Yow-ow!"

Colonel Wharton released the fat ear. Billy Bunter rubbed it, and gave him devastating blinks.

"If that is the truth, the thing is certainly lost; at least, until there is a thaw!" said Colonel Wharton. "It matters little, as it is safe from the hands of that scoundrel Soames, who cannot have a good motive for seeking it. But there is no doubt that he believes it to be still in Bunter's possession—"

"Low cad, you know," said Bunter.

"He refused to take my word on the subject—as good as called me a liar—that's the sort of low beast he is—"

"Be silent, Bunter! Now," went on the colonel, "Soames certainly believes that Bunter still has the cigarette-case—whether he is right or not I cannot say, as it is impossible to believe a word that Bunter utters—"

"Look here—" came an indignant howl from Bunter.

"Silence! In the belief that Bunter still has the silver case, and that he may be frightened into handing it over, there can be no doubt that Soames will look on the sundial in the park," said Colonel Wharton. "That may give us an opportunity of laying him by the heels. He has to answer a charge of house-breaking at this house, as well as, I believe, a long list of offences against the law. I shall consult Inspector Stacey, at Wimford, on the matter, and see whether it may not be possible to entrap the scoundrel."

"Good egg!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"The goodness of the egg is terrific!" declared Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Colonel Wharton smiled.

"Leave the matter in my hands for the present, and go to your skating, my boys!" he said.

And the Famous Five, leaving it at that, went out with their skates. Colonel Wharton went to the telephone, to call up the police-inspector at Wimford. And Billy Bunter, after a series of angry grunts and indignant snorts, settled down in the armchair and went to sleep; and very soon forgot Soames, and the silver cigarette-case, and everything else in a happy dream in which turkeys, Christmas puddings, and mince pies were delightfully mingled.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Packet On The Sundial!

"T'S kik-kik-cold—"

"The walk will make you hik-hik-hot!" said Bob Cherry.

"The snow's coming down—"

"That's the law of gravitation!"

explained Bob. "Snow seldom or never goes up!"

"You silly chump!" hooted Billy Bunter.

"Get a move on, old fat man!" said Harry.

"It—it's getting did-dud-dark—"

"That's because the sus-sus-sun is setting!" said Bob. "It generally gets did-dud-dark when there isn't any more lid-lud-light."

"Yah!"

A red glow of the setting sun fell across the snowy landscape. Billy Bunter, in the doorway of Wharton Lodge, had a little packet in his hand—with Colonel Wharton's instructions to place the same on the old sundial. Bunter had got as far as the door. He seemed reluctant to go farther.

It was true that it was cold, that it was snowing, and that it was getting dark. But these, though good reasons, were not Bunter's chief reasons for desiring to keep safe within the walls of Wharton Lodge.

"Buck up!" said Johnny Bull. "We're all going with you, fathead! What are you afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid, of course!" yapped Bunter. "You fellows may be afraid of that villain Soames—I've got a little more pluck, I hope. I'm not worrying about whether he may be on the watch or not—I don't care if he is—not a straw. But—but—"

"Is the butfulness terrific?" inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"It's kik-kik-cold, and it's getting did-dud-dark, but Bunter isn't a fuf-fuf-funk!" said Bob Cherry. "You might fancy he was, looking at him, though."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Come on, Bunter!" said Harry. "Soames may be watching, for all we know; but he won't dare to show up while we're around. We'd be jolly glad if he did."

"Yes, rather!" said Johnny Bull.

"Don't we wish he would!" said Bob. "Not likely! Stands to reason he'll come after dark to snaffle that cigarette-case."

"Oh! Think so?" asked Bunter.

"Of course, ass! Think he won't guess that he will be looked for?" said Bob. "Bet he won't be along till late at night."

Bunter thought it out. That packet in his fat hand was to be laid on the old sundial in the park. Soames, if he was watching from some dusky cover, would fancy that his demand had been complied with—in any case, he was sure to make an attempt to collect the packet left on the sundial. And Billy Bunter realised that he was very unlikely to show himself in the daylight. He could hardly fail to guess that there would be watchful eyes open for him, when he came.

Bunter's fat, worried face cleared! If there was not even the remotest spot of danger of meeting Soames, Bunter was willing to make the venture. A lion had nothing on Bunter for courage, when there was no danger.

"Oh!" said Bunter. "I say, you fellows, what are you hanging about for? Why don't you come along?"

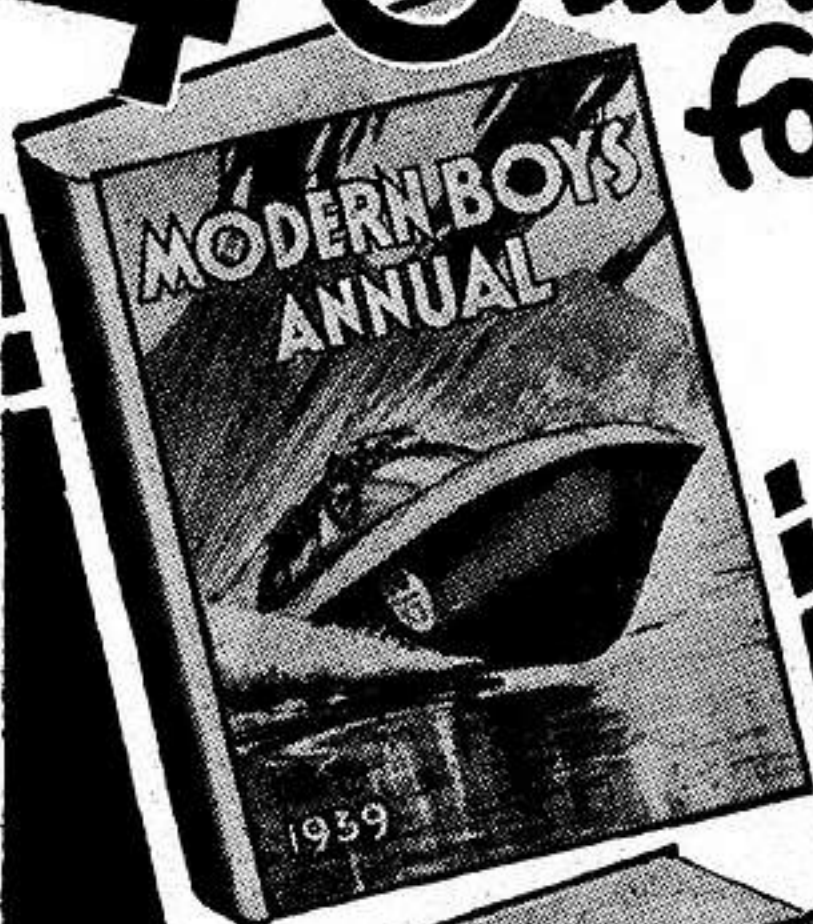
"What?"

"Nothing to be afraid of, old chaps! I shall be with you, you know," said Bunter, blinking at them. "If Soames turns up, leave him to me! But for goodness' sake get a move on, and don't keep a fellow hanging about in the cold! Have a little pluck!"

With which Bunter rolled out, and the Famous Five, with expressive faces, followed him.

They tramped across the snow-drifted
(Continued on page 8)

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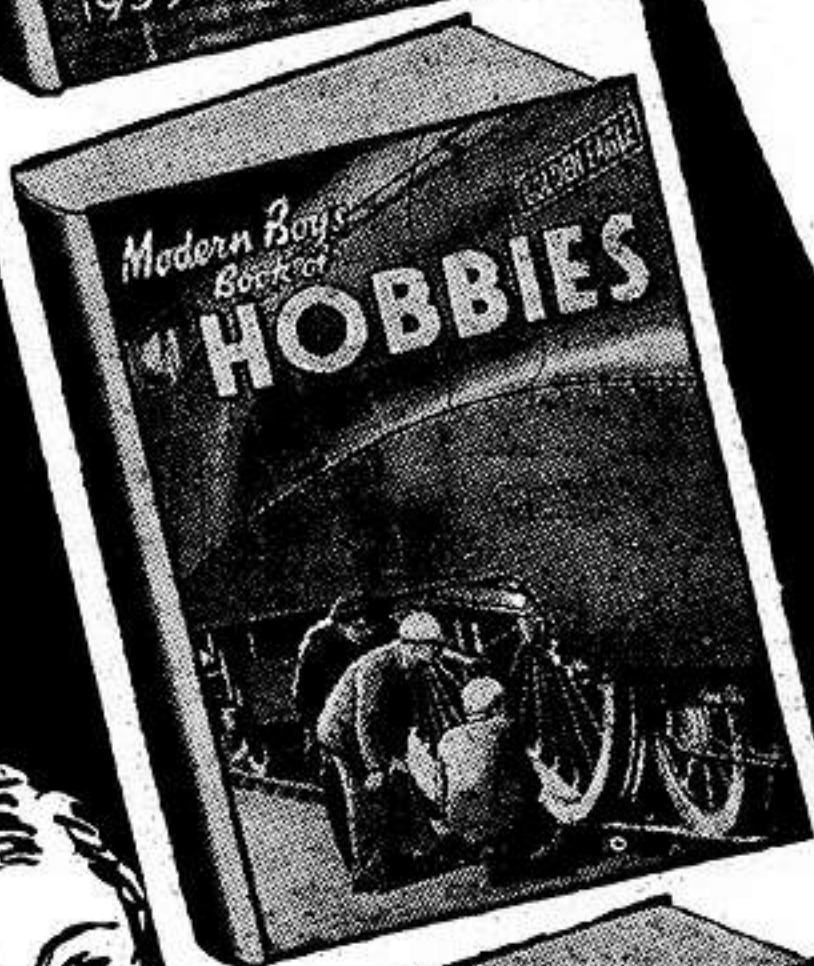
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gardens to the gate of the park, which was a mass of white, gleaming in the level rays of the setting sun.

It was a good quarter of a mile from the house to the spot where the ancient sundial stood. A quarter of a mile was about two furlongs more than Bunter liked to walk!

He grunted, and puffed, and blew. "I say, you fellows, look here, one of you can stick this packet on that dashed sundial!" grunted Bunter, when half the distance had been covered. "You seem to like tramping through this filthy snow! I don't!"

"Fathead! Ten to one Soames is on the watch somewhere, to see whether you put it there or not!" said Harry. "He had better see you do it."

"He can see you do it, then!" grunted Bunter.

"That won't do, chump!"

"Why not?" demanded Bunter, coming to a halt, gurgling for breath, and fairly steaming in the frosty atmosphere.

"Soames isn't ass enough to think that he could frighten me into carrying out his orders!" answered Harry. "If he saw me put the packet there, he would guess at once that it was a dodge to catch him."

"Why, you—you—you cheeky swab!" roared Bunter indignantly. "Think he thinks he can frighten me?"

"Yes, ass—that's why he phoned."

Billy Bunter glared with wrath and indignation. Then he made a retrograde step.

"I jolly well won't go, see!" he roared. "You can stick it there, or not, just as you like, but I jolly well won't."

"Come on, ass!"

"Shan't!"

The Famous Five surrounded Bunter at once. It was necessary for the fat Owl to carry out that part of the programme. Soames, if he was watching, as was most likely, he had to be made to believe that Bunter had been scared into handing over the silver case.

"Get on, fathead!" said Bob Cherry.

"Boot him!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Yah! I'm going back!" snorted Bunter. "I won't take another step, see—I jolly well won't—yoo-hoop!"

Bob Cherry gathered snow. A snowball, landing on Bunter's fat chin, cut short his remarks quite suddenly.

"Urrgh! Beast!" gasped Bunter. "Stoppit! You chuck another snowball at me, and I'll jolly well—urrrrgh!"

Whiz, whiz! Squash, squash! Bang!

"Urrgh! Owl! Beasts! Stoppit!" yelled Bunter frantically as the Famous Five, all gathering double handfuls of snow, piled in together.

Snowballs squashed all over the fat Owl! Billy Bunter yelled, and spluttered, and gurgled. In a few minutes he was of the snow, snowy! Squashed snowballs plastered him all over.

"Go it!" chuckled Bob Cherry. "We'll keep this up as long as you like, Bunt."

"Gurrgh! Stoppit! Ooogh!"

Whiz! Smash! Squash!

"Ooogh! Stoppit! I'm going, ain't I?" gurgled Bunter.

And he went!

The march was resumed, Billy Bunter plugging onward, with deep and indignant wrath in his fat face. Volleying snowballs, at close quarters, were an argument that it was impossible to resist.

They reached the old sundial at last. It lay by a path that ran through the park, almost obliterated by snow. Round about were leafless trees, white with frost, ridged with snow, looming like gaunt spectres against the sinking sun.

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Harry Wharton & Co. glanced round as they came to a halt. That Soames was watching, they could hardly doubt; but there was no sign of him. Any of the frosty thickets might have hidden a watcher from sight. If tracks in the snow had been left, they had been swiftly covered by the fast-falling flakes.

Exactly what arrangements the colonel had made with Inspector Stacey, of Wimford, the juniors did not know; but they knew that Soames was to be watched for, when he came to collect the packet on the sundial. There was, however, no sign of the inspector or his men to be seen.

Billy Bunter, with an angry grunt, deposited the packet in the powdery snow on the ancient sundial.

"That's that," said Bob Cherry. "No good waiting here for Soames to turn up. He wouldn't dare to show up while Bunter's here."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter revolved on his axis, and tramped off, snorting. The Famous Five, after a last glance round, followed him. The packet was there, left there by the fat Owl, and the rest was up to the Wimford police. They tramped back to the house, the last gleam of the sun disappearing as they reached Wharton Lodge.

Billy Bunter made for the fire at once; but the Famous Five stood at the window, looking out into the wintry gloom, and wondering what might be happening in the darkness and the falling snow.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Bunter Wants To Know!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

"Dry up, old fat man!"

"I'm jolly well going to bed!"

"Good! Do!"

"Yah!"

It was a rather late hour. After supper the Famous Five were at the hall window again, looking out with rather anxious faces into the whirling flakes.

Aunt Amy, cheerful and placid, as usual, and unaware that anything out of the normal was going on, had presided smiling at the supper-table. But her brother, the old colonel, had not appeared. From which the juniors easily guessed that Colonel Wharton was taking part in the watch that was being kept on the sundial in the park—for Soames, when he came.

They could not help feeling a spot of anxiety. Soames, as they knew only too well, was a desperate man, and more likely than not to be armed. If he was entrapped by that dummy packet on the sundial, they did not feel assured that he would remain in the trap. All the Famous Five would gladly have taken part in the proceedings out there in the darkness; but that, of course, the old colonel did not think of permitting—neither, probably, would Inspector Stacey have consented to schoolboys joining in. But they were anxious moments for the chums of the Remove, as they waited and watched from the frosty window.

Billy Bunter was not sharing their anxiety. His thoughts were happily divided between the supper he had packed away, and a bag of mince pies he had annexed, to take up to bed with him, to place on his bedside-table. If Bunter woke in the night, it was very probable that he would wake hungry, and he was not the fellow to neglect precautions in really important matters.

"What are you fellows up to?" asked the fat Owl peevishly, blinking across the hall at the group at the window. "Nothing to see there, is there?"

"Nothing," answered Harry.

"Then what are you squinting at?"

"Fathead!"

"Well, stick there and squint as long as you like!" yapped Bunter. "I'm going to bed. I say—"

"Hark!" exclaimed Bob Cherry suddenly.

From the silence of the night, broken only by the wail of the December wind, came a sudden sound, muffled by the distance, but unmistakable. It was a bodeful sound to anxious, listening ears. It was the faint, but unmistakable, report of a firearm.

Harry Wharton caught his breath.

"That was a shot!" he breathed.

"From the park," said Nugent, his face a little pale.

"That villain Soames—"

"My uncle!" muttered Harry.

His face had changed colour. What was happening out there in the darkness? A desperate man, with a deadly weapon in his hand, surrounded; and his uncle was there!

Harry Wharton waited to throw on his coat and cap, and tore open the door. The sound of that distant shot was more than enough for him.

"Harry!" exclaimed Nugent.

But Wharton was gone.

"After him!" muttered Johnny Bull.

The juniors jammed on coats and caps, and rushed after the captain of the Remove.

Billy Bunter stared at them in astonishment as they went, leaving the hall door wide open as they rushed out into the snow.

"I say, you fellows, what's up?" yelled Bunter. "I heard something—a motor, I think. Is anybody coming in a car? What—"

But the Famous Five were gone.

Billy Bunter blinked from the open doorway. Something was up. What it was, he did not know. His fat ear had caught a distant sound, which seemed to him like a motor back-firing. But why the Famous Five had suddenly rushed out into the snowy night, he did not know.

"Silly asses!" grunted Bunter.

"What on earth's up?"

Billy Bunter wanted to know. Bunter always wanted to know.

"Scuttled off, all of a sudden, like a flock of geese. They couldn't stop to answer a fellow, of course—just like them!" Bunter snorted. "Leaving a fellow out of everything—as per usual. After all I've done for them, too."

Billy Bunter crammed himself into his coat, jammed on his cap, and rolled out of the doorway.

He was curious to know what was "up," though he had no intention of going beyond the terrace.

The Famous Five had rushed down the steps from the terrace, and disappeared.

Bunter rolled across the snowy terrace, as far as the balustrade on the farther side, by the steps that led down.

There he stood blinking into the darkness, powdered by whirling flakes below. Only snow and shadows met his gaze.

"I say, you fellows!" roared Bunter.

But there came no answer to his roar. Harry Wharton & Co. were already at a distance, running, stumbling, slipping, picking themselves up again—racing through the dark, breathlessly.

They were far beyond Billy Bunter's range of vision.

"I say, you fellows, where are you,



"Word the letter so that it will sound perfectly natural," said Soames. "Your release depends on Master Wharton reading it without suspicion!" Utterly puzzled, Bunter began to write, watched by the steely eyed crook.

and what's up?" roared Bunter. "Can't you tell a fellow what's up, blow you?"

But there was no reply, and he blinked angrily into the gloom, wondering what on earth was "up." But he did not think of going farther to discover. It was altogether too snowy and windy a night to tempt Bunter beyond the terrace.

"Send it!" grunted Bunter.

Soames peered and blinked and blinked and peered, equally inquisitive and irritated.

But it was cold and windy and snowy, and before long Billy Bunter had enough of it. He was about to turn and tramp back across the terrace to the door, when a shifting shadow in the garden below caught his eye, and he stopped again. Someone was there—one of the beasts coming back, Bunter concluded.

"Is that you, Wharton?" he squeaked.

No reply.

"Is that you, Bob Cherry, you silly ass?" hooted Bunter. "Can't you answer a fellow? Look here, what's up? What's the row? Can't you speak, you silly chump?"

Still there was no answer, but the shifting shadow appeared on the snowy shallow steps of the terrace. Who it was, Bunter could not make out in the gloom, and he blinked at it peevishly.

"Is that you, Nugent? Look here, I—"

The half-seen figure reached him. Then Bunter discerned that it was too tall for one of the juniors, and for a moment he supposed that it was Colonel Wharton coming in. But the next moment he gave a startled and horrified squeak as an iron grip closed on his collar.

"I say—what—who—leggo—what the—"

"Quiet!" said a voice—a soft, smooth, sleek voice that Bunter knew—knew only too well. "Silence, fool!"

Hard knuckles ground into the back of Bunter's fat neck. The fat junior almost fainted with terror as he realised whose knuckles they were.

"Ow! Oh crikey! Soames!" gasped Bunter. "I say—"

"Silence! Another word, and—"

Soames did not finish the sentence; but something touched Bunter's fat cheek—a cold, round metal rim.

Billy Bunter gave one gasp—that was all. His fat knees almost failed him, and he sagged in the grip of the man in the dark.

"Come!" said the low, soft voice.

"I—I say—" moaned Bunter.

"Silence; come!"

The grip on Bunter's collar drew him away. The thought of resistance did not even enter his terrified mind. He tottered down the steps in Soames' grip—half-led, half-carried away into the blackness of the winter night.

Where he was going Bunter did not know; the grip on his neck dragged him on, and he went, dizzy with terror. All he knew was that he was led away into the snow and darkness, with Soames' grip on his collar, and the glimmering windows of Wharton Lodge faded into the night.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

No Catch!

BARRY WHARTON crashed through frozen undergrowths, slipped and stumbled in drifted snow—bruised and breathless, but hurrying on without a pause.

In the darkness he could see nothing, but the dazzling glimmer of snow; but he knew every foot of the ground round Wharton Lodge, and he headed direct for the spot where the old sundial lay.

Soames had come; he knew that. And he had come armed, and watchful as a wolf—the human wolf he was. One shot had been fired—only one. The sound had not been repeated. They had seized him—or attempted to seize him—and he had fired on his assailants. Wharton's heart was heavy with anxiety for the old colonel; he dreaded what he might find in that wilderness of snow and frost and wind and darkness.

Breathless, panting, he tore on through the frosty thickets. Again he slipped and fell, tumbling headlong in a bed of snow.

As he dragged himself to his feet a crashing sound came to his ears from a little distance.

It was the sound of some unseen man who ran in the dark, but in the opposite direction, heading for the house in the distance. One of the keepers, perhaps, going for help; he knew that Jessop and the under-keeper were both out with their master. As he gained his feet he called:

"Who's that? Is that Jessop?"

The crashing died away.

Whoever it was, he had passed and gone. Wharton did not delay another moment; he ran on his hardest.

Faintly from behind him came the sound of his friends following; but they did not know the ground so well, and he had dropped them well behind.

He tore on breathlessly and reached the snow-hidden path by which the old

sundial lay. A gleam of lantern-light caught his eyes.

Several figures were gathered there; a lantern gleamed out in the dark. Then, as Wharton's approach was heard, a deep voice called:

"Look out! He's not gone—"

That voice lightened the schoolboy's heart as he heard it; it was his uncle's voice.

The light flashed round; three or four figures ran towards the junior; the light flashed on his face.

"Harry," exclaimed Colonel Wharton, staring at him, "I thought—What are you doing here?"

Inspector Stacey gave a grunt; the Wimford constables stared at the panting schoolboy.

"We—we heard a shot at the house!" gasped Harry. "I—I thought—I—I was afraid that—that—"

"Oh, you should not have come here, all the same! It is not the place for a schoolboy—where bullets are flying," said Colonel Wharton. He turned to the inspector. "The scoundrel has got clear!"

The Wimford inspector gave a grunt. Wharton noticed now that he was holding a handkerchief to his cheek, and that it was stained red.

Evidently it was Mr. Stacey who had received the bullet from Soames' automatic, and it had gone close—close enough to whip a patch of skin from his cheek.

"You saw no one as you came here?" asked the inspector. It was clear that Soames had escaped the ambush.

"No," panted Harry, "but—" He remembered that crashing in the thickets. "I heard someone passing me—"

"In what direction?"

"Going towards the house," answered

Harry. "I thought it was Jessop or his man and called, but he did not answer."

"Jessop and Wilson are here," said Colonel Wharton. "It must have been that scoundrel! He would hardly venture near the house, I think; making for the drive and the gate, no doubt. There may be a chance yet, inspector."

"Lead the way at once, Master Wharton!" rapped Inspector Stacey.

"This way!" answered Harry, and he turned.

The inspector, regardless of the scratch on his cheek and the trickle of crimson that ran from it, followed him at a run, the rest close behind. In a few minutes they came on the Co. plunging through the snow and wind.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" panted Bob Cherry. "Got him?"

"Have you seen anyone?" rapped the inspector.

"No."

Harry Wharton hurried on, his friends joining him. A few minutes more and they reached the spot where Wharton had stumbled in the snow and heard the sound of the running man in the darkness.

In the lantern-light he soon found the spot; and then, without a pause, cut off through the frosty thickets in the direction from which he had heard the sound of the fugitive—who could only have been Soames, as he knew now.

Inspector Stacey flashed the light round on frosty trunks and branches and drifting snow, but there was nothing to be discovered. The fast-falling flakes obliterated tracks almost as soon as they were made. It was hardly a quarter of an hour since Wharton had heard the running man, but no sign remained of his passage through the park.

"You're sure he was heading towards

the house, Master Wharton?" rapped the inspector.

"Quite!" answered Harry. "I'm absolutely certain of that. I heard him crashing, going in the direction I'd come from."

"Keep on!" grunted the inspector.

The whole party hurried on. There was no sign and no sound of the fugitive now, and Harry Wharton & Co. could have little doubt that Soames was already far away. He had had ample time to make his escape—and he was not, so far as they could see, likely to linger.

The park was left behind, and they reached the drive that led down from Wharton Lodge to the gate on the Wimford road. It was a sheet of unbroken white.

But none doubted that Soames had passed that way, and that the falling flakes had hidden his footsteps. They could imagine no other reason why he had taken that direction at all, except to escape by the gates on the high-road.

"Nothing doing," murmured Bob.

Colonel Wharton looked inquiringly at the Wimford inspector, who was flashing the lantern-light over the snowy drive with one hand and dabbing his cut cheek with the handkerchief in the other.

"He is gone!" grunted the inspector at last. "We may pick up some news of him on the road; I have a man watching outside the park wall. He must have gone on foot, that is certain; nothing on wheels could get through this weather. I'll ring you up later, sir, if there is news."

The inspector and the Wimford constables tramped down to the gate; Colonel Wharton and the juniors turned up the drive to return to the house.

The old colonel gave several expressive grunts as he went. Evidently he was deeply irritated by the failure of the plan to entrap the one-time sea-lawyer of the Pacific.

The Famous Five were all keen to know what had happened at the ambush round the old sundial. Wharton ventured to ask at last.

"You saw him, uncle?" he asked. "He came for the packet on the sundial?"

"Yes," grunted the colonel. "We were on the watch all round the spot, but he came so silently that he very nearly reached the sundial without being discovered."

"Soames all over," said Bob Cherry. "He's like a cat!"

"But what happened?" asked Nugent. Grunt—from the colonel.

"Mr. Stacey heard something at last and flashed the light on him; we saw him for an instant. He fired the same instant. By gad, a desperate rascal! A desperate villain, by gad! Mr. Stacey dropped the light as he was struck. I caught it up in a moment, but the man was gone!" The colonel drew a deep breath. "That shot might have gone through the inspector's head, instead of grazing his cheek. Little that villain cared, by gad!"

"Did he get the packet?" asked Johnny Bull.

"No. But I don't fancy he will believe that what he wants is there now," grunted the colonel. "I've no doubt that he watched Bunter this afternoon; but he knows now, of course, that it was a plan to trap him. By gad, my hands were almost upon him! But—" The colonel completed the sentence with another expressive grunt.

They arrived at the house, and were glad enough to gather round the leaping log-fire.

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Bunter was not to be seen; but the Famous Five supposed that he had gone to bed, as he had stated that he was going to do; and the colonel did not give him a thought at all.

And after warning themselves at the fire and discussing for some time the remote chance of Inspector Stacey running the fugitive down, the Famous Five themselves went to bed—and if they dreamed, they little dreamed of what was happening to the unfortunate Owl of the Remove.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Bunter In Bad Hands!

"MOVE, you fool!"
"I kik-kik-can't!" gurgled Bunter.

It was like a nightmare—a fearful nightmare—to the fat Owl of Greyfriars; but it was worse than any nightmare Billy Bunter had ever had, even after his amplest supper.

It was awful! Even his fear of Soames worried Bunter less, after a time, than the ache of fatigue in his little fat legs.

He stumbled, and swayed, and tottered, and grunted, and groaned, only the iron grip on his collar forcing him onward. And, at length, even that dragging grip failed—Bunter could do no more.

Where he was, where he was going, the hapless fat Owl had not the remotest idea. He had been dragged over a wall, which he could guess to be the park wall, and since then he had been tramping through snow, by dim and dusky fields, and woodland paths. Soames was keeping clear of a road, or even a lane.

He seemed to know his way easily enough, but Billy Bunter's fat mind was a perfect blank on the direction they were taking.

Neither did he know what distance they had covered. It seemed to Bunter miles and miles—hundreds of miles, in fact.

On and on, tottering and tumbling and staggering, the fat Owl plugged, through thick snow on the earth, and falling flakes that came thick on a biting wind. No nightmare could have been so bad as this.

He sagged at last, like a sack, in Soames' grip, and the savage drag at his collar could draw him no farther; neither could the threatening, hissing voice drive him to exertion.

"Fat fool!" breathed Soames.

He released Bunter's collar, and the fat junior sank down at once in a heap of snow. In the darkness, Soames' eyes glittered at him, greenish, like a cat's. Then his glance shot round, searchingly, in the blackness of the winter night, and he bent his ears to listen intently.

But there was no sound to be heard, save the wailing of the December wind—nothing to be seen, but whirling flakes ghost-like in the blackness.

Hundreds of miles as it seemed to the unhappy Owl, it was in reality scarcely more than two miles that they had covered—but the going was terribly hard in the snow. But short as the distance was, Soames had no doubt that he was safe from pursuit. No trace remained to tell of the direction he had taken. He had had a narrow escape from the ambush at the sundial, but once clear of his enemies, the wily, wary sea-lawyer had been in little further danger. And now he knew that he was safe.

But he waited impatiently while the fatigued fat Owl rested. He had to let him rest, or carry him, no light task, even for Soames, through the thick snow. He waited only ten minutes.

Then his foot stirred the hapless fat Owl.

"Get going!" he snarled.

"I kik-kik-can't!" moaned Bunter.

"Oh dear! Oh lor! Oh crikey!" Soames' boot stirred him again—harder! Then the fat Owl found that he was able to totter to his feet.

"Get on!" snapped Soames. "It is only another half-mile!"

Bunter gave a deep groan!

"Will you stir yourself, you fat fool?"

"I—I can't!" groaned Bunter. "I'm tut-tut-too tut-tut-tired! I kik-kik-can't—oh crikey!"

"Would you prefer me to leave you here?" asked Soames.

"Oh! Yes! Rather!" gasped Bunter.

"I shall shoot you through the head first—"

"Yaroooh! I—I say, I—I kik-kik-can get on—I—I—I'd rather get on—I—I don't want to stay here!" yelled Bunter.

"Oh crikey! I—I—I say, I—I want to go on—I—I do, really!"

And Bunter went on! He tottered and stumbled and tumbled, with Soames' grip on his collar again. But somehow, he managed to keep going, though he felt as if his fat little legs were dropping off, when at last—at long last—they came to a halt.

Where they were, Bunter did not know, and he was too tired to care. Some sort of a roof was over his head, and he leaned on a wall, mumbling. All was black as the inside of a hat. From the blackness, he heard a sound of a key inserted in a lock, and then he realised that he was in the porch of some building.

He heard a door pushed open; and then a hand grasped him again and led him in. The door shut behind him with the snap of a lock.

All was blackness around him. But the blackness was suddenly dispelled by dazzling light that made the fat junior blink like an owl. It was electric light that had been suddenly switched on.

Billy Bunter blinked round him, dizzily. He was in the hall of a small building, which even Bunter could guess was somewhere near the town, as the electric light was laid on. His eyes almost popped through his misty spectacles at Soames—shaking the snow from hat and coat.

"I—I say—" gasped Bunter.

"You need not speak—yet!" said Soames dryly.

He threw off coat and hat. Then he opened a door from the hall, leading into a sitting-room. He switched on the light there, and turned on an electric stove; which was a comfort to the shivering fat Owl.

Bunter rolled over to the stove at once. The warmth was grateful and comforting, but while he warmed himself, the fat junior blinked at Soames, in deep fear and uneasiness.

Soames watched him, with a sneering, sarcastic smile on his sleek, smooth face. He lighted a cigarette before he spoke.

"I have to thank you for one of the narrowest escapes of my life, Master Bunter," he said quietly.

"Eh?" gasped Bunter. "What?"

"You knew that they were watching for me at the sundial at the park, you fat rascal!"

"Oh!" Bunter realised now that Soames had visited the sundial before turning up unexpectedly at Wharton Lodge. "I—I say, I—I never knew—nothing at all, you know! I—I—"

"Do not take the trouble to tell lies!" said Soames contemptuously. "I watched you this afternoon, from a safe distance, when you placed the cigarette-

case on the sundial. I had not the slightest doubt that the spot would be watched—and I was on my guard—but it was a narrow escape. I shall not try that method again, Bunter."

"Did—did you get it?" gasped Bunter.

The thought that perhaps Soames had that packet in his pocket, and was going to open it and find out that it did not contain the silver cigarette-case was terrifying to the fat junior. He fairly trembled at the thought of the crook's rage and disappointment.

"I did not!" said Soames. "I was lucky to get away, without it!" His eyes gleamed at the relief that came into Bunter's fat face. "It is left where you placed it, Master Bunter. As I have said, I shall not try that method again. I have given you a chance of handing over what I want—I think you will be sorry that you did not take advantage of it. I shall now try other methods."

"I—I haven't got it, you know!" groaned Bunter. "I—I'd give it to you like a shot if I had! I—I lost it—"

"That will do! Did you actually place it on the sundial, or was it a dummy packet, to lead me into a trap?"

"I—I—I—" stammered Bunter. "I—I didn't—I don't—I—"

"Answer me, fool! Was the silver cigarette-case in that packet on the sundial or not?"

"No!" gasped Bunter.

"Then I had my narrow escape for nothing!" The steely eyes glinted at Bunter. "I had to take the chance—and I ran the risk for nothing! That will not happen again!"

"It was Colonel Wharton's idea—he fixed it up with that bobby at Wimford," groaned Bunter. "I hadn't anything to do with it, you know! They made me stick that packet on the sundial! I—I didn't want to—"

"Possibly!" assented Soames. "I calculated on your cowardice, and I have little doubt that, left to yourself, you would have done as I demanded. Have you the silver case about you now?"

"Oh, no!"

"If you have," said Soames, unheeding, "I am done with you, and I will take you back and leave you within an easy walk of Wharton Lodge."

"Oh crikey!" groaned Bunter. He wished he had the silver case about him. "Oh dear! I'd give it to you at once, if I had it—oh lor!"

"I have no doubt of that," said Soames grimly. "But I shall search you to make sure! I have met a good many liars in my time, Master Bunter, but never one who was your equal."

"Oh, really, you know—"

Soames stepped to him, and searched him with careful thoroughness, though he did not expect to find the silver case on Bunter. In a few minutes he was satisfied on that point.

"Where is it?" he asked.

"I—I told you, it was—was lost at the school—"

"One more falsehood, and I will make you repent it!" said Soames, between his teeth. "You have told me that it was taken from you at your school and thrown away—that it was packed in your box on the train when you went home—that you had sent it by post to Wharton as a Christmas present—and finally, you led me to believe that it was in the packet on the sundial. Lying appears to be your one resource. You will find the truth pay you better."

"You—you see, I—I—"

"You are in my hands," said Soames. "I have prepared a very safe place for

you; you will remain in my hands until the silver case is in my possession."

"Oh crikey!"

"I have taken all my measures," said Soames in the same quiet tone. "I gave you a last chance, which you did not take. Had I found the silver case on the sundial I should have been finished with you. But I had an alternative plan, which was to get hold of you, Master Bunter—"

"Oh lor'!"

"And you kindly gave me an easy chance," added Soames ironically. "After escaping from the trap at the sundial, I did not, as those fools fancied, bolt; it was my intention to conceal myself near the house and watch for a chance at you, Master Bunter. When I heard you calling from the terrace—"

"Oh dear!" groaned Bunter.

"I did not lose the opportunity! Now you are here, Master Bunter, and here you will remain till the silver case is in my hands. As it was not placed on the sundial, and is not in your pockets, obviously it is still at Wharton Lodge. You will now tell me exactly where. When it is in my hands you will be free. Now give me precise directions for finding it."

Billy Bunter blinked at him helplessly. He had already told Soames the truth; but mixed up with so many untruths that it was not surprising that the crook did not believe it.

"I am waiting!" said Soames in a low tone of menace.

"I—I—I—I've told you!" groaned Bunter. "It was lost—"

He broke off, with a howl of terror, as Soames' hand slid to his hip pocket and reappeared with the automatic in it.

It was extremely improbable that Soames would have used that weapon, but the sight of it was enough for Bunter—more than enough!

"I—I—I say, tut-tut-turn that thing another way!" he yelled. "I—I say, it—it ain't lost—oh lor'!—'tain't lost at all—I—I'll tell you exactly where to find it— Oh crikey! I—I left it in my room at Wharton Lodge—I—I did, really— Oh jiminy!"

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Gone!

"THE mistletoe hung on the castle wall.
The holly-branch hung in the old oak hall!"

Bob Cherry was singing as he splashed in cold water on a cold and frosty morning. His cheery if not melodious roar had the effect of a rising-bell, only rather more so—like Macbeth, it murdered sleep! So the other members of the Co. turned out.

It was a bright morning, a wintry sun gleaming on endless white. It was cold, there was no doubt about that. The snow had ceased to fall, but it had left a thick carpet of white over the whole landscape, and every window-sill was banked with it, every doorstep thickly packed.

"Jolly, ain't it?" said Bob, looking from the staircase window as the Famous Five were going down. "Like a jolly old Christmas-card! No good calling Bunter, I suppose?"

"Not till ten!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. "He has given Wells instructions to take his brekker up at ten."

"Do him good to roll him out—"

"Oh, let him rip! He must be sleeping fearfully soundly if he didn't hear you understudying the Bull of Bashan."

"Fathead!"

The Famous Five went down. That Billy Bunter was not in bed in his room had not occurred to any of them.

No one expected to see him early in the morning—Bunter was not an early riser in holiday time. Breakfast in bed at ten o'clock suited Bunter. That was not practical politics at school, but in the hols. it was. So the fat Owl, naturally, was not missed.

After breakfast the Famous Five went out into the snow, and found some healthy and hilarious exercise in snow-balling one another. When they came in they found Colonel Wharton in the hall, with a puzzled expression on his face, and he called to his nephew.

"Has Bunter left, Harry?"

"Bunter?" repeated Wharton blankly. "Not that I know of! Isn't he up yet?"

"Wells sent up his breakfast at ten o'clock, but he was not in his room, and his bed had not been slept in."

"Wha-a-t?"

"It is very odd for him to have left without saying a word, if he has done so!" said the colonel testily. "It is of no consequence, I suppose, but—"

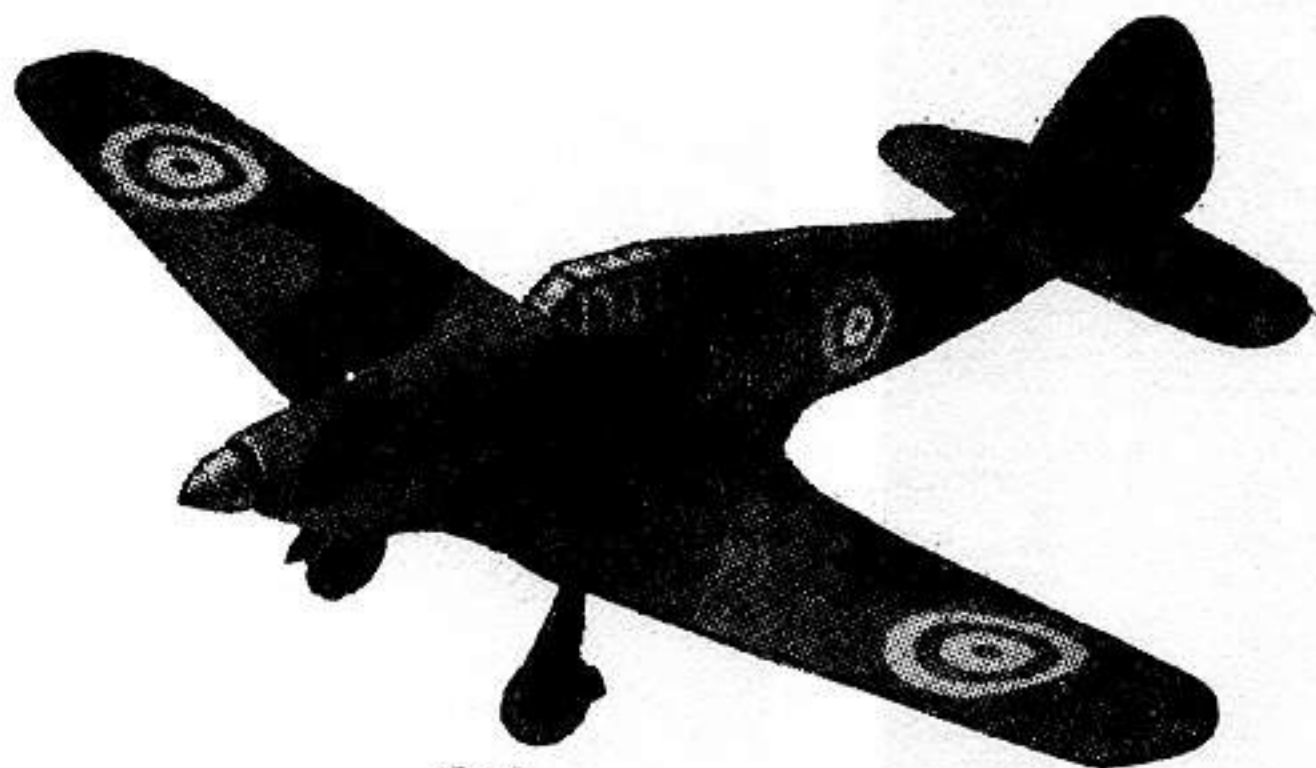
"Blessed if I make it out," said Harry. "He was talking about going yesterday if he had a telephone call from Mauleverer; but he never had it that I know of."

"Well, he is certainly not in the house. He must have left last evening while we were all out of doors."

"Well, my hat!"

The Famous Five were quite astonished.

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That Bunter would have departed on the spot had Lord Mauleverer played up they were quite aware, but so far as they knew he had had no word from Mauly.

His sudden departure was not exactly a blow, but it was very surprising and puzzling.

"Didn't Wells see anything of him after we went out last night?" asked Harry.

"I have asked Wells, but he saw nothing of him after supper," answered the colonel. "He found the front door open—which you boys appear to have left open when you rushed out after hearing the shot in the park—but Bunter was not in the hall then. Wells says that his coat and cap are gone. He had no luggage to take, I think?"

"No!" said Harry, smiling.

Billy Bunter had arrived at Wharton Lodge with what he stood up in—nothing more. It was Bunter's happy custom on such occasions to rely on his pals for anything he needed. So he had nothing to pack before he went.

"It is very odd," repeated the colonel, frowning. "Possibly the foolish boy was frightened, knowing that that villain Soames was in the neighbourhood, and decided to go home. He did not tell you anything?"

"Only that he was going to bed. When we came in last night we thought he'd gone to bed, of course, as we didn't see him here. He may have got that phone call while we were out, and hiked off—though I'm blessed if I understand Bunter walking to the station through all that snow."

"He would have to walk if he went at all; no vehicle could have got over the roads last night!" grunted the colonel. "Bunter is rather an odd boy, but it is very singular that he should walk off in such a manner without a word to anyone."

The colonel grunted again and went into the library. The Famous Five were left exchanging astonished looks.

"Gone!" said Bob, with a whistle.

"Gone from our absurd gazefulness like a beautiful and ludicrous dream!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Must have got that phone call from Mauly while we were out!" said Johnny Bull thoughtfully. "Poor old Mauly!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Well, Mauly's welcome to him," he said. "But even that fat ass might have had manners enough to leave word with Wells that he was going. Still, if he were going, I suppose he had none too much time to get a train; it's a bit of a walk to Wimford in the snow for a fellow like Bunter."

"Got the phone call, bunged on his coat, and hiked right off, I suppose!" said Bob. "Turned us all down flat—nice fellows like us, too!"

"That Christmas present did it!" grinned Nugent. "Bunter was afraid that he would have to wash if he stayed longer."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We shall hear from him, I expect," said Harry. "If he's at Mauleverer Towers he's sure to ring us up and tell us what a topping time he's having."

And the juniors chuckled.

Not for a moment did it cross their minds that anything had, or could have, happened to Bunter during their absence from the house the previous evening.

The fact that his coat and cap were gone showed that he had put them on and left the house of his own accord, and they were quite unaware that he had rolled across the terrace and yelled after them to learn what was "up."

That Soames, after his narrow escape from capture in the park, had been giving Bunter even a thought they were not likely to suspect. They were not likely to be able to guess how the hapless fat Owl had walked fairly into the hands of his enemy, giving the crook a chance for which he could hardly have hoped.

Bunter was gone—he had gone of his own accord, and that was that! They quite expected to hear from the fat Owl that he was installed at Mauleverer Towers and having no end of a time there!

There was no telephone call from Bunter, however, during the day. But when the last post came in that evening there was, among the other letters, one addressed to Harry Wharton in an unmistakable hand.

That handwriting could only have been performed by a spider who had dipped himself in the inkpot and crawled over the paper—or by Billy Bunter. So it was, evidently, a letter from Bunter.

Wharton, as he picked it out, held it up for general inspection, with a cheery grin!

"News from the parted guest," he announced. "Gather round and listen to the glorious time Bunter's having."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And Harry Wharton opened the letter, the Co. gathering round with grinning faces—little dreaming of the circumstances under which that letter had been written by the hapless Owl of Greyfriars.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Mysterious!

BILLY BUNTER groaned.

It was enough to make any fellow groan.

No fellow could sit, hour after hour, in a cellar, without feeling like groaning.

How many groans Billy Bunter had emitted during that weary and dreary day he could not possibly have computed.

He groaned and groaned.

Bunter had passed a fairly comfortable night. Soames had locked him in a bedroom, and left him to repose. There were shutters locked on the window, if Bunter had thought of escape, which he did not. Escape from shelter, into a wilderness of snow and wind, was not much use to Bunter.

In the morning Soames had called

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## STAK-A-STIK

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him. It was a relief to find that there was an ample breakfast, though it consisted only of biscuits and canned meats. After breakfast, however, Soames, with hardly a word to his fat prisoner, led him to the cellar steps and told him to go down.

Bunter did not feel like arguing with Soames. He went down. Soames locked the cellar door on him.

Whether, after that, Soames left the house, Bunter did not know, though he supposed that the crook had gone out, as he heard no further sound.

Bunter was left to his own society—which, fascinating as it doubtless was, was no comfort to him.

He knew that it was useless to yell for help; Soames would not have left him able to yell, if there had been any chance of his voice being heard. Neither would he have ventured to yell, lest the sea-lawyer, after all, should be still about the house.

He groaned—and groaned!

There was no window in the cellar. There was a ventilating grid, high up in a corner; but the air was far from fresh. There was plenty of food, of the canned sort, if Bunter wanted it—and he did! But even food failed to comfort the hapless Owl.

It was chilly in that cellar. Bunter kept his coat on, and walked about to keep himself warm at intervals; and spent the rest of the time sitting down and groaning.

Groan followed groan!

What was to become of him was a dreadful and worrying mystery to Bunter! If he was booked to remain a prisoner until Soames got hold of the silver cigarette-case, it looked like a life-sentence.

So far as he could understand the crook's plans, Soames was going to contrive, somehow, he could not imagine how, to gain access to Wharton Lodge, and search for the silver case there.

He was not likely to find it, as it was hidden somewhere under the snow in the old quadrangle of Greyfriars, a hundred miles away, or nearly. That silver case still lay where it had fallen when Smithy chucked it out of his study window the day before breaking-up at Greyfriars School. So, even if Soames managed to get the run of Wharton Lodge, he was not likely to have much luck there.

Billy Bunter groaned, and groaned, and groaned! He wished from the bottom of his fat heart that he had never seen that putrid cigarette-case with the Greek letters scratched in it.

Why Soames wanted it so badly was still a mystery to him—indeed, it made him wonder uneasily whether the man was "cracked."

The thing was not worth more than thirty shillings, and Bunter was far from guessing how the Greek letters inside added to its value!

Of a raid on the post office at Lantham a week before break-up, he had never even heard. That the Greek letters were a clue to the hiding-place of the loot could not possibly occur to him. He would have jumped had he been aware that the clue in the silver case was worth over a thousand pounds to Soames—if he could only get his eyes on it!

Gladly Bunter would have handed over that wretched cigarette-case, had it been in his power to do so. But it was out of his power; and Soames would not even think of believing that it was lost.

He groaned and groaned.

He was still busy groaning when there was a click of a key, and the cellar door opened.

(Continued on page 16)

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(Continued from page 13.)

Bunter turned his eyes, and spectacles, on Soames.

Soames made a beckoning gesture, and Bunter rolled out of the cellar, and followed him up the narrow stair into the sitting-room in which they had talked the night before.

It seemed to the anxious fat Owl that there was a gleam of satisfaction in the cold, sleek face. Whatever Soames had been doing during that day, the result seemed to have satisfied him.

"Sit down and take up that pen, Master Bunter!" he said.

Bunter, in astonishment, did as he was bid. Pen and ink and paper had been placed in readiness on the table; the notepaper headed: "Station Hotel, Wimford!"

Apparently he was required to write a letter; why, he could not begin to guess; and Soames had borrowed some sheets of hotel notepaper for the purpose.

"I will explain, my young friend," said Soames. "It appears that you have not been missed at Wharton Lodge—I mean, they do not suppose that you left otherwise than of your own accord."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

This was not cheering news to the fat Owl. He had taken it for granted that the police had been called in, and were already hunting for him. He blinked at Soames in dismay.

"Mean to say they ain't looking for me?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing of the sort!" smiled Soames. "You walked out of the house of your own accord, Master Bunter, and no eye was on you when we so happily met in the dark."

"Oh!"

"It seemed to me possible," continued Soames, "that your friends would conclude that you had left suddenly. I have now ascertained that such is the case."

"Oh crikey!"

"There can be no mistake about it," said Soames. "I have been making very careful and discreet inquiries, and there has certainly been no mention whatever of kidnapping. The police have not been called in, as they undoubtedly would have been if such a thing was suspected. Neither do your friends show any sign of concern, as they presumably would do if they fancied that you had fallen into the hands of so dangerous a character as myself."

"You've seen them?" gasped Bunter.

Soames laughed—his soft, almost silent laugh.

"I have seen them," he assented. "I have been quite near them to-day, though, as you may guess, in cover. They have been skating on the lake, and apparently enjoying life—far from betraying any sign of anxiety or concern."

"Beasts!" groaned Bunter.

"No doubt they had some reason to suppose that you might take your leave?" asked Soames, with a keen look at the fat face.

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"Well, they knew I should clear off if that phone call had come through from Mauleverer!" mumbled Bunter. "Perhaps they think it did, while they were out."

Soames laughed again.

"They will, I presume, be expecting you to return?" he said.

"Not if they think I've gone to Mauly's!" groaned Bunter. "Oh lor!"

"You did not have time to pack when you so kindly accompanied me last night," said Soames ironically. "As you have left your belongings at Wharton's house, Wharton will naturally suppose that you are returning—is not that so?" he snapped sharply, puzzled by Bunter's expression, which seemed to indicate that it was not so.

"Well, you see, I—I hadn't anything to pack!" stuttered Bunter. "I—I went without any luggage, as—as it happened, so—so—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Soames.

For some reason, which Bunter could not begin to fathom, that piece of information seemed to afford the crook the liveliest satisfaction. How it could possibly matter to Soames was a deep mystery to Bunter.

"I had already decided upon what you are to write to your friend Wharton," said Soames, "but what you have told me makes it much more plausible—very much more! An additional trunk would be quite an unsuspecting circumstance, I think, as you are staying there over the Christmas holidays—but if you omitted to take any luggage with you, that is better still. There can be nothing surprising in your sending a trunk, in that case."

"But I ain't sending a trunk!" said Bunter, in astonishment.

"You are!" said Soames quietly. "I shall have the pleasure of dispatching it for you, Master Bunter."

"But, I—I say—"

"You need say nothing—listen! You will write to Wharton telling him that you left so suddenly after getting a phone call—"

"But—but I never—"

"I am sure, my young friend, that a few additional untruths will not make you sleep less soundly o' nights!" said Soames sarcastically. "You will write what I tell you, or—"

"Oh! I don't mind pulling his leg, if you like, but I don't see—"

"It is not necessary for you to see. You will go on to say that you are coming back in a few days—"

"Oh, all right!" Bunter's fat face brightened. "I—I—I say, I—I shall be jolly glad to go back, if—if you don't mind, Soames."

Soames smiled faintly.

"You will add that you are sending on your trunk, which Wharton will leave in your room for you till your arrival," he said. "I will not dictate the letter—it must be written in your own way. Put in all I have told you—and word the letter so that it will sound perfectly natural. Your release depends on Master Wharton reading it without suspicion."

"Oh, all right!"

Utterly puzzled, Bunter put pen to paper. Why Soames wanted him to write such a letter to Harry Wharton, he had no idea—it was a complete mystery to him. But he was ready to write that, or anything else, at the order of the steely-eyed crook.

Soames waited patiently till he had written the letter. Then he picked it up and glanced over it, and gave a little start—probably at the spelling he found in it. Then he smiled.

"Excellent!" he said. "Now address the envelope."

Bunter did so.

Soames placed the letter in the envelope, and stamped it. Then he rose to his feet.

"I regret that I shall now have to leave you for a time, Master Bunter," he said. "Oblige me by descending into the cellar again!"

"I—I'd rather stay up here, if you d-don't mind—I—I—I mean, I—I'm going!" gasped Bunter, as the sleek brows knitted.

And a minute later the key of the cellar door turned on Bunter again, and he was left to his own attractive company—from which he derived no more pleasure or satisfaction than before!

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter's Trunk!

"O H!" ejaculated Harry Wharton. He unfolded the letter from Bunter, and the Co. gathered round with smiling faces to read it together.

They had no doubt that it was to apprise them that Bunter, at Mauleverer Towers, was having a gorgeous time, in comparison with which his stay at Wharton Lodge was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine.

But as he glanced at the letter, Wharton ejaculated "Oh!" in surprise. The notepaper heading, Station Hotel, Wimford, showed that the letter had been written and posted locally. And the letter itself was far from being as expected. The Famous Five read it with surprise.

"Station Hotel,
"Wimford,
"Surrey."

"Dear Wharton,—I'm sorry I had to rush off so suddenly, but you see, I had a fone call. I am kumming back in a phew days, so that is all rite. I hoap you won't mis me too mutch."

"I am sending on my trunk, which pleeze tell Wells to plaice in my room till I kum. Relie on it, old been, that I shall be with you for Christmas if I can possibly manidge it, and I shall be phceerfully pleezed to see you all agane."

"Yores,
"W. G. BUNTER."

"Sold!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"So he's not landed on Mauly after all," said Johnny Bull. "It wasn't Mauly that rang him while we were out last night."

"No!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. "He wouldn't be coming back if he had got safely landed on poor old Mauly. We're small beer in comparison. Old Mauly is rather an ass, but he's not ass enough to telephone Bunter in the hols."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"This is written from the hotel at Wimford," said Bob. "Bunter must have lost his train last night and put up there. I wonder if he paid the bill?"

"I wonder?" chuckled Wharton.

"What a sell!" said Nugent. "Still, it was really rather too good to be true. But what is he sending a trunk for? That's rather new for Bunter! Is he going to wear his own shirts and socks these hols?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Colonel Wharton glanced across at the juniors.

"You boys seem to be very merry!" he remarked. "Is there some good news in your letter, Harry?"

"Not the very best," answered Harry. "It's from Bunter, and he's coming back in a few days."

"Oh!" said the colonel. He did not seem overjoyed by that information. "Does he explain why he left in such an extraordinary manner?"

"Yes. He had a phone call, it seems, while we were out and had to rush off."

Grunt!

"He's sending his trunk," added Harry. "He wants it put in his room for him till he comes."

"You had better tell Wells."

And Wells was told, and the matter dismissed from mind.

By the time they went to bed that night, the Famous Five had rather forgotten Bunter's fat existence.

Where he was, and what he was up to, they did not know, and were not really interested; though doubtless they would have been had they had the remotest suspicion that that letter had been written under duress, and that the hapless fat Owl was a prisoner in a building not more than two miles distant.

That, of course, they were not likely to suspect, or dream of.

So far as they could see, Bunter had had a phone call, and started at once for the station, the night before; and the letter having been written apparently at the Station Hotel in Wimford, it looked as if he had lost the last train and stayed the night there.

It was not at all surprising, if he had lost the last train, after plugging more than a mile through heavy snow—such a walk must have taken Bunter a very long time. It looked as if the letter had been written, and posted, before he restarted on his journey in the morning.

There was nothing about it to excite doubt or suspicion, and no one thought of doubting or suspecting.

The hope Bunter expressed in the letter that the juniors did not miss him too much was well-founded.

They did not miss him too much—and, in fact, did not miss him at all! There was, the next day, no perceptible diminution of cheerfulness in the Christmas party at Wharton Lodge.

Sad to relate, the Famous Five did not even think of Bunter at all during the morning following, and probably would not have thought of him during the afternoon, either, had they not been reminded of his fat existence by the arrival of the trunk.

The Famous Five had been out, and they came in for tea, and found a large trunk in the hall, with Wells and Thomas regarding it.

The juniors regarded it, too, with some surprise.

It was labelled and addressed to W. G. Bunter, at Wharton Lodge, and was evidently the trunk referred to in the fat Owl's letter. The carrier's cart from Wimford had laboured through the snow to deliver it, and there it was.

It was a little unusual, on Bunter's part, to bother his fat head about baggage at all. Generally his visits were like the invasions of the Picts and Scots of olden time, who lived in the country they invaded.

But if he did send a trunk, it was hardly to be expected that it would be a very large one, or that it would have much in the way of contents.

So this trunk was rather a surprise.

It was large—very unusually large—as large as one of those tremendous Saratogas with which American travellers sometimes test the strength and endurance of railway porters.

And it was heavy! It was very heavy! Not only the trunk itself was large and heavy, but it was, from the weight, evidently full.

Wells and Thomas seemed a little dubious about carting it up the staircase to Bunter's room.

"My only hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "Is that Bunter's trunk?"

"The trunkfulness is terrific!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Bunter's going the jolly old limit this time!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"I wonder whose trunk that is?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The big trunk did not look by any means new. It was dented in places, the steel bands on it were a little rusted, and there were traces of many old labels.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"People don't use these whopping trunks much nowadays," he remarked. "You can pick them up for next to nothing second-hand. That jolly old trunk has seen a lot of service in its time!"

"Heirloom in the Bunter family, perhaps, like that silver cigarette-case!" suggested Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors had no doubt that Bunter had picked up that immense trunk second-hand at a very reasonable price. Its imposing appearance was very likely to appeal to Bunter, and its reasonable price still more.

That accounted for the size of the trunk. But what Bunter had packed in it was rather puzzling. There was room for all Bunter's possessions, and Bunter himself, for that matter, inside that trunk.

However, that was no concern of anyone, but Bunter. The chief concern was to get that heavy trunk up to Bunter's room.

"All hands on deck!" said Bob Cherry.

"The trunk seems extraordinarily heavy, sir!" said Wells, rubbing his smooth chin as he stared at the trunk. "Very heavy indeed, sir! I think, perhaps, I had better call John and William."

John and William were duly called, and, with Thomas aiding, they bore that big trunk up the staircase, the Famous Five going with them to lend additional hands.

Everybody was breathing rather hard by the time it was landed in Billy Bunter's room.

But it was landed at last and left there—after which the Famous Five once more forgot the fat and important existence of Billy Bunter!

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

The Midnight Prowler!

BOB CHERRY awoke, and stared into the darkness.

Bob was a fairly sound sleeper, not much given to waking in the night. Now, however, he woke, and lay drowsy before he turned over to go to sleep again.

His drowsiness vanished, however, and he quite dismissed the idea of going to sleep again after a few moments.

There was a slight sound in his room and a tiny glimmer of a moving light.

He turned his head on the pillow and stared blankly.

Bob was not in the least nervy, and sounds in the night had no effect on him. The December wind was whistling round the old roofs and chimneys

of Wharton Lodge—old wainscots were given to creaking in the night-time, and embers might have shifted in the fireplace.

He would have gone to sleep again, heedless of that slight sound. But he heeded that spot of moving light.

His heart beat a little faster.

Someone was in the room! That speck of light could mean nothing else. And he realised now that it was the fact that someone was in the room that had awakened him.

He made no sound himself as he lifted his head from the pillow and stared hard.

He was utterly amazed—more amazed than alarmed. Someone was rooting about his room, stealthily and almost silently; but he could hardly think that it was a burglar. Burglars, of course, sometimes happened—but a burglar would head for the colonel's safe—he could hardly be supposed to be much interested in any loot that could be picked up in a schoolboy's room. It could only be some petty pilferer. But who, and how, was a puzzle.

Leaning on his elbow, Bob peered in the darkness, trying to make out the figure that held the light.

It was the tiniest of flash-lamps, giving a tiny bright beam. That beam was all that Bob could see—only there was some sort of a dim, dark shadow in the darkness behind it.

The light was gleaming on the dressing-table for a moment. Then it shifted again and passed to a wardrobe. A faint sound showed that the wardrobe had been opened, and there was a soft brushing, as of a searching hand stealing among coats and pockets.

Bob's heart was beating a little unpleasantly; but he was very far from scared. Somebody was searching the room—and, at the moment, going through pockets. He did not know the time, but he knew that it must be past midnight. Who and what that pilferer could be he did not know, and could not guess; but he was going to know.

Carefully making no sound, he sat up in bed and reached for the switch of the bedside light.

He snapped it on suddenly.

To his astonishment no light followed. It was out of action, and in the dark he could not see the cause—that the bulb had been partly pulled from the socket.

The sound of the snapping switch, slight as it was, evidently reached keen ears.

He heard a quick breath, and knew that the figure at the wardrobe turned, though he could not see it. The beam of light shot full at his face, dazzling him with its brightness.

The next second it was shut off. Not a gleam and not a sound came from the mysterious searcher.

Bob leaped up in bed, grasping his pillow.

For all he knew, the unseen visitant might be coming at him in the dark. He bounded from the bed with the pillow in his grasp and swept it round his head.

Had the unseen one been close to him, that sweeping whirl of the pillow would have landed on him and knocked him over.

But the circling pillow met only empty air. A slight sound reached him from the direction of the door.

He knew what that meant. Whoever it was, was stepping quickly out of the room and was going!

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Guided by the sound, he hurled the pillow at the doorway.

Crash!

He knew that the pillow struck the unseen figure in the doorway, for he heard the sound of a gasp and a staggering footfall. Then there was silence again, and Bob groped to the door and groped for the switch there.

This time the light flashed on as he pressed the switch. The room, the doorway, and the passage outside were suddenly lighted.

The pillow lay at his feet where it had fallen. Bob grasped it up, to use as a weapon if needed, and stared into the passage.

So far as the light from the doorway extended, nothing was to be seen. Further, in either direction, was black darkness—and silence.

He stepped out and switched on the passage light and shot a swift glance to and fro. The corridor was empty, except for himself. There were a dozen doors on that corridor, and all of them were closed.

But one of the doors opened as Bob stood staring. Harry Wharton's surprised face looked out. The crash of the pillow and Bob's footsteps had awakened him.

"Bob!" he ejaculated "What—"

"Somebody's here!" gasped Bob.

"Somebody was in my room—"

"Eh? Who?"

"I don't know, as I couldn't see him. I got him with the pillow as he was going—"

"Oh, my hat! Who the dickens—"

Wharton joined his chum in the passage. His look was rather doubtful.

"Sure—" he began.

"Yes, fathead!" grunted Bob. "Look here, I can't make out how he got clear so quick! He never had time to reach the stairs before I got the light on, I'm certain of that! He can't have reached the other corner in the time. He must have dodged into one of these rooms."

"Let's look," said Harry. "But—"

"Think I was dreaming, fathead?" demanded Bob gruffly. "I tell you, whoever he was, he was searching my room with a flashlight—"

"What for?"

"For what he could snaffle, I suppose! Don't be an ass! I tell you I never saw him—my bed light wouldn't go on, and he bunked before I could turn on the other. I'll call the fellows—"

"But—"

"Rats!" grunted Bob.

He could see that his chum doubted. But he knew what he had seen, and he knew that his pillow had struck some unseen form in the doorway. He stepped quickly to Nugent's room, threw open the door, and switched on the light.

"Wake up, Franky!" he called.

"Oh! What the thump—" came a surprised voice from Nugent's bed.

Without answering, Bob passed on and called Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. Under a minute the Famous Five were all in the passage—four of them in a state of great astonishment.

"There was a man in my room, and he got away—and I believe he's dodged into another room!" said Bob. "Get hold of something, and let's search!"

"Oh! Sure—" began Johnny Bull.

"Yes, fathead!"

"Oh, all right—we'll search!"

Four members of the Co. could not help feeling dubious. Still, it was obviously only prudent to search the

passage. Their own rooms and Bunter's vacant room were drawn blank. The other doors on the corridor were locked, the rooms being unoccupied.

Bob knitted his brows, quite well aware of suppressed smiles on four faces.

"You think I've been dreaming?" he growled.

"Well, if there's a man here, where is he?" asked Harry. "You said yourself that he had no time to get out of the passage—and he's not in it."

"Blessed if I know! But—"

"Christmas ghost, perhaps!" suggested Johnny Bull. "Jolly old grisly spectre revisiting the glimpses of the moon, what?"

"Don't be a silly ass!" snorted Bob.

"There's an ass here!" agreed Johnny. "But I ain't the man! I'm going back to bed—too jolly parky for me!"

And Johnny went to bed.

"My esteemed Bob—" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I tell you," said Bob savagely, "that I woke up and saw a light; somebody was searching my room and going through my pockets."

Harry Wharton frowned a little.

"If that's so, it could only be one of the servants pilfering," he said. "I can't get that down, Bob."

"I'm not saying anything of the kind. I'm telling you what I saw and heard. If you don't believe me you can do the other thing."

"Keep its ickle temper!" said Nugent soothingly. "Let's look in your room and see whether anything's missing. If the mystery man was going through your pockets, I suppose he wasn't doing it for fun!"

"Oh, good egg!" said Bob. "Come on! He must have taken something. He can't have been rooting about for nothing."

The four went into Bob's room. That the midnight searcher had been pilfering seemed hardly possible to doubt, if he had been there at all, and in that case something would be missing. Bob had no doubt that something would be missed, and a rather peculiar expression came over his face as he went through his belongings and found everything in order.

There was loose cash in one of the coat pockets in the wardrobe, but it was still there. There was a watch on the dressing-table. There was a notecase, with several currency notes in it, in the pocket of Bob's trousers. But everything proved to be intact.

The thief, if thief it was, had taken nothing!

That he had been occupied some time in the search before Bob awoke and spotted him, Bob Cherry was sure. It was the man's movements that had awakened him, and he had actually heard him groping in the pockets in the wardrobe. Yet nothing was gone.

Smiles on three faces were no longer suppressed. Bob's chums had no doubt at all that he had dreamed it. A pilferer who pilfered nothing, and who vanished into space, was rather hard to believe in.

Bob himself almost began to doubt. It was utterly puzzling.

"You don't think you'd better call your uncle?" he asked.

"Oh, no! Hardly, old man!" gasped Wharton.

"Please yourself. I know somebody was here. I heard him fumbling in the pockets in that wardrobe."

"He's left the cash there!" remarked Nugent.

"Y-e-es; but I heard him at it."

"H'm!"

"Look here, old chap, you had a nightmare," said Harry. "Nobody's been pilfering, especially as nothing's been pilfered. Really—"

Bob gave a grunt. His usual serene temper was rather ruffled now.

"I tell you, the bedside light wouldn't come on!" he snapped. "He must have monkeyed with that, to start with, in case I woke up."

"Let's look at it," said Harry.

He pressed the switch, but the bedside light did not come on. But a brief examination revealed the cause. The bulb was loose in the socket, and there was no contact. Pushing it back into place brought on the light.

"You see!" grunted Bob. "That was done on purpose!"

"It's not an uncommon thing to happen, old chap. Things work loose sometimes, you know," said Harry. "Haven't you ever switched on and found that the lamp had got loose, and the light wouldn't come, before?"

Another grunt from Bob. As Wharton said, it was a thing that happened sometimes. There was no proof that it had been intentionally made to happen this time. All the same, Bob knew.

"The long and the short of it is, that you think I've been scared by a silly nightmare!" he snorted.

"Well, you see—"

"Yes, I see! I'm going back to bed! Get out!"

Bob's friends, grinning, got out. Bob went back to bed, but not to sleep. He remained awake some time, rather hoping that that mysterious pilferer would return. But the pilferer, if there was a pilferer, did not return, and Bob's eyes closed at last in slumber, and did not open again till the winter sunlight was gleaming through the frosty window-panes.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Was It Soames?

"SOAMES!"

Bob Cherry uttered that name suddenly in tones of excitement.

"What?" ejaculated four juniors at the same time.

They stared round.

After breakfast in the morning the juniors had gone out on the terrace in the clear, frosty air. Bob Cherry's brow had been deeply corrugated with thought. He was puzzled over the strange happening of the night, and still a little ruffled by the unbelief of his friends.

Still, he realised that to anyone but himself it looked as if the episode had been some strange dream. In the morning he had made another search of his room, but failed to find any trace of the midnight intruder, or to discover any article missing.

It seemed impossible to suppose that the midnight visitant was a pilferer, when nothing had been taken; yet if he was not a pilferer, it seemed equally impossible to suppose that he had been there at all. For what other imaginable motive could he have had?

Bob knew that he had not been deluded by a nightmare; but he could hardly blame his chums for taking that view, in the circumstances.

But as he cogitated on the subject a sudden flash of illumination came into his mind, and he ejaculated "Soames!"

"Where?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

Bob's sudden, startled exclamation gave them the impression that he had sighted Soames. But as they stared round there was nothing to be seen of him.

"The wherefulness is terrific!" mur-

(Continued on page 20)

IS YOUR NAME HERE?

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Walden, L., Camberley; Ward, K. A., Ashton-under-Lyne; Warder, A., Chelmsford; Warnes, J., Norwich; Watt, B., Harrow; Waugh, B., Wallasey; Weedon, T., Nottingham; Wellbelove, S., London, S.W.; Welch, M. F., London, N.W.7; West, E., Reading; West, E., Gosport; West, V., Leicester; Westwood, B., Lye; Wheatley, K., London, N.W.9; Wheeler, D., London, N.15; Whiffen, F., Bishops Cleeve; Whitehouse, J., Nottingham; Whitehouse, R., Tipton; Whitlock, M., Milford-on-Sea; Widger, J., Plymouth; Wiggins, D., London, S.W.15; Wilcock, J. O., Halifax; Wilkinson, R., Belfast; Williams, G., London, N.W.11; Williams, M., Newport Mon.; Williams, R. H., Brentwood; Williams, T., Sevenoaks; Willis, R., Bath; Wilson, J., Colchester; Wilson, J. A., London, E.3; Withers, D. F. R., Bristol; Woodburn, A. R., London, E.C.1; Woods, D., Baldoke; Woods, L. O., Whittlesey; Woodward, G. A., London, N.8; Wright, V., London, S.W.2; Wyatt, A. R., Basingstoke; Wyatt, E. M., Rainham; Yeats, S., Devizes; Yorke, L., London, N.W.2.

mured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

"Still dreaming, old man?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Soames!" repeated Bob, with conviction.

"Blessed if I can see him!" said Nugent. "What on earth are you driving at, Bob? Do you think Soames would dare to show up here, or what?"

"Not now, ass! Last night——"

"Oh!"

"Soames!" repeated Bob. "I wonder I never thought of it. Soames, of course!"

His comrades gazed at him. They did not believe that there had been anybody in the night—least of all, James Soames.

"You think it was Soames?" asked Harry blankly.

"I'm jolly sure of it!"

"My dear chap," murmured Wharton, "why the dickens should Soames——"

"Bunter never lent you his cigarette-case, did he?" asked Johnny Bull, with a grin.

"No, ass! But I'll bet that it was Soames after Bunter's cigarette-case, all the same," said Bob. "We know that he doesn't believe that Bunter lost it, as he said."

"I don't quite, either," said Johnny. "Bunter would say anything so long as it wasn't true. He would jib at the truth."

"Well, it's pretty clear that Bunter did lose it—that is, Smithy chucked it away at the school, and he never found it again," said Bob. "I believe that much; but we know that Soames doesn't."

"No; but if he believes that Bunter's still got it, he knows that it's not here, as Bunter's gone——"

"He mayn't know that Bunter's gone," said Bob. He little guessed how much Soames knew on that subject. "If he thinks Bunter's still here, that would account——"

"How could he get in?" asked Johnny.

"He goot in the night he tackled Wharton, by the french windows in Wharton's den, when he fancied Wharton had it. He could have done the same again."

"My uncle has had a bolt put on that door since," said Harry. "He never got in there."

"Some other door or window then!" said Bob irritably. "He can't know which is Bunter's room. If he was looking for that fat ass and his silly cigarette-case, he would have to search the rooms, and that's what he was doing in my room last night."

"Um!" said Harry slowly. "But, you say he had a light, whoever he was—well, if he was looking for Bunter's room, he would take a squint first at the fellow in the bed to see whether it was Bunter."

"I—I suppose he would," admitted Bob. He had not thought of that objection to his theory.

"Couldn't have taken you for Bunter, old bean!" grinned Johnny Bull. "You're really paying Bunter a compliment if you think that's possible."

"The likeliness is not terrific!" remarked Hurree Singh.

"Oh, don't talk out of your silly hat!" grunted Bob. "If he looked, he saw that it was not Bunter, and I suppose he must have. But——"

"Nightmare, old chap——" said Johnny.

"Oh, shut up!" roared Bob.

"Of course, it was Soames, if——"

"If what?"

"If you're going to get shirty about it, old chap!" said Johnny blandly.

"But otherwise not!"

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Bob Cherry set his lips.

"I believe it was Soames!" he said obstinately. "He couldn't have thought it was Bunter's room—he must have spotted that it wasn't, first shot. I admit that! But——"

"But what?" asked Nugent, smiling. It seemed to him, and to the others, that Bob was clinging to his theory of Soames because he was unwilling to admit that it was all moonshine.

"He may suspect that Bunter has handed the rotten thing to one of us to take care of!" said Bob. "Just the thing Bunter might do, if he still had it, with that brute after him. He landed Soames on you once, Wharton, by telling him that he had given it to you. Soames may have seen him, since he left here, and got a fresh pack of lies from him—Bunter would tell him anything to get away from him."

"That's possible!" admitted Harry.

"We know that Soames snaffled him before we broke up at Greyfriars, and again in the train home, and again at his home!" said Bob. "Bunter stuffed him with whoppers every time. Suppose he's seen him since, and got a fresh yarn from him? He may have found that Bunter hadn't the thing on him—well, then, if Bunter told him he had left it here, he would believe it."

Harry Wharton whistled.

This was beginning to look probable to him.

It was two nights since Bunter had left Wharton Lodge. They had heard nothing from him, except the letter dated from the Station Hotel at Wimpford. It was quite possible that Soames had got on his track again; and there was no doubt that Billy Bunter would tell him anything, true or untrue, to get shut of him, as he had done before.

"By gum!" said Nugent. "I wonder if——"

"See?" said Bob eagerly. "We know he grabbed Bunter on the train and searched him—the fat chump told us about that. Suppose he's grabbed him since and searched him again—and Bunter's told him that he left it here? Just the thing he would tell him."

"Just!" agreed Harry, with a nod. "He landed him on me once—might have landed him on you next."

"Or he might have told him he left it lying about in his own room," said Bob. "If Soames didn't find it there, he would want to find out whether one of us had picked it up, seeing it lying about."

"How would he know which was Bunter's room, as Bunter isn't here?" inquired Johnny Bull.

"Ass! If he looked into the rooms on our passage, he could see that trunk—it's big enough to be seen—with Bunter's name on it."

"Oh!" said Johnny, and he grinned. "You win, old man! I'd forgotten Bunter's trunk! Yes, he could spot Bunter's room by that all right."

"It was Soames!" said Bob. "And I jolly well know it! He believes that that dashed silver case is here, and he was looking for it last night. Just think of it—he got in, and hunted Bunter's old room first thing—found nothing there, and started searching the other rooms, thinking that one of us might have it! I tell you it's clear as daylight."

Harry Wharton's face was grave now.

"It's possible!" he said. "It's possible, at least. We can't know whether he's seen Bunter again till the fat ass comes back—but, of course, he may have—in fact, it's pretty certain that he's watched him, I think. Bunter may have told him anything. But——"

"Well, but what?"

"I don't quite see how he got in, if it was Soames," said Harry. "My french window was an easy spot before—but it's got a bolt on now, and you can't burgle bolts! Look here, we'll have a look round and see if there's any sign of any door or window having been forced."

And that being agreed to, the Famous Five began at once.

They were engaged on this amateur detective work when Colonel Wharton came out and inquired what was going on.

He stared when the juniors explained. He shook his head.

"Impossible!" he said. "You must have been dreaming, Cherry!"

"We've told him that!" grinned Johnny Bull. "But he won't take our word for it!"

The colonel smiled.

"Since the night that scoundrel penetrated into the house and attacked my nephew, every precaution has been taken!" he said. "Every door and every window that can be reached from outside is carefully secured at night—and I myself make a round of the house before going to bed to ascertain that all is in order."

"But——" said Bob.

"But," went on the colonel, "the barest possibility that that desperado may have lurked round the house during the night must not be disregarded. Certainly no door or window could be forced without leaving some traces—and to make all sure, I will join you in looking for them."

After which, there were six instead of five amateur detectives hunting for traces of a possible entry overnight.

That search was rigorous enough, and it kept the whole party occupied till the gong sounded for lunch.

But the result was nil.

Not the slightest trace of any kind could be found of a forced entry into the house. Neither were any traces to be picked up in the snow.

The earth was thickly carpeted; but no fresh snow had fallen since the evening before. The juniors' own boots left plenty of tracks wherever they moved. But there was no sign in the snow to indicate that any stranger had been prowling round the building since the last snow-fall.

The colonel and the Co. were quite satisfied after that investigation that no one had approached the house during the night, still less forced an entrance into it. Bob Cherry, certain as he was in his own mind of what had happened in his room, had to admit the weight of evidence.

No intruder had gained admittance to the house during the night. That mysterious midnight visitant, therefore, must be a member of the household, if he had a real existence. But, in that case, it could not have been Soames, but only some petty pilferer after all! And a pilferer who did not pilfer was a very extraordinary sort of pilferer!

The colonel was smiling and four members of the Co. cheerfully grinning when they went in to lunch. Bob was silent, puzzled, perplexed, and quite staggered. Almost he began to believe that he had, after all, dreamed that strange episode in his room.

Only—he knew that he hadn't!

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

Caught!

"GOOD-NIGHT, old bean—and pleasant dreams!" grinned Johnny Bull.

And Wharton, Nugent, and Hurree Singh grinned also.

Bob Cherry grunted.
"Good-night, and go and eat coke!" he replied.

And he went into his room and closed the door with rather a bang.

The Co. went to their rooms and turned in. But Bob Cherry, in his room, was not thinking of turning in.

All through that day Bob had been thinking over the strange problem of the midnight prowler; non-existent, in the opinion of his chums. And when bed-time came and the other fellows went to bed, Bob was not thinking of sleep.

He turned off the light in his room, threw a few logs on the fire, and sat down in an armchair—to keep awake! And by his side he placed a golf-club—more effectual than a pillow in dealing with a midnight visitant.

The more Bob thought over the matter the more he felt assured that the dark figure that had prowled in his room was Soames—in search of the silver case. It was very likely that, if it was Soames, he had searched the other rooms, as well as Bob's, but without awakening the sleepers there. On the other hand, Bob's might have been the first room he entered—there was no telling. But, in the latter case, his quest was unfinished, and certainly unsuccessful; and he would try again.

If he tried again that night, one fellow, at least, was going to be on the watch for him!

If it was Soames, it was a baffling mystery how he had effected an entrance without leaving a trace behind. It seemed impossible that he could have done so. Still, if it was Soames, he must have done so, somehow—and Bob was more and more assured that it was Soames.

Who else could have had any imaginable motive for making such a search in the darkness of midnight?

Colonel Wharton and his nephew were both certain that there was no pilferer among the household staff at Wharton Lodge; and Bob had no doubt that they were right. But, if that were so, the secret prowler came from without—and it could only be Soames.

He sat and waited.

For an hour or so it was not a difficult matter to keep awake; but, after that, Bob found himself nodding.

It was a weary business, sitting up by himself, while the winter night grew colder. He nodded, and nodded; and, without intending it in the least, dropped off to sleep in the armchair.

But his sleep was uneasy, and he woke again. He sat up, with a start.

"Ass!" murmured Bob, addressing himself.

In the dim glimmer of the firelight, he looked at his watch. It was a quarter to twelve.

He rose from the armchair. He was not going to take the risk of nodding off to sleep again.

In soft slippers, making no sound, he moved about the room, yawning from time to time, tired, and not in the best of tempers. The longer his vigil lasted, the more he hoped that the prowler would come again and give him a chance to get in one or two with the golf club!

Presently he opened his door silently, looked into the passage, and listened.

All was silent, and black as a hat. From outside the house came a faint wail of the December wind; there was no other sound.

Bob stepped quietly into the passage. He could not turn on a light without giving the alarm to the prowler, if he was at hand. But in the blackness, the unseen figure might have been stealing within a few feet of him, for all he

knew. Softly he moved along the passage to the landing at one end, the golf club extended before him in the dark.

There was a pale glimmer from frosty windows over the staircase. Nothing else was to be seen there—nothing heard. He turned back, and moved softly up the passage again, to the other end.

Then once more he came back, his ears intently on the strain. For all he knew the prowler might be in one of the rooms, silent and stealthy. He listened intently from door to door.

Suddenly his heart gave a bound.

There was a sound in the blackness that was not the wail of the wind, not the creak of old wainscot. It was a faint, indefinable sound, and it came from one of the rooms—from the room next to his own.

Bob stopped at the door of that room, his heart beating, his ears on the strain. That was Bunter's room; now unoccupied. If someone was stirring in that room, it could not be one of the occupants of Wharton Lodge.

What could it be? Only the midnight prowler—and what could he be doing in the room Bunter had occupied, but searching once more for the silver cigarette-case?

To his straining ears came another sound—faint, but unmistakable. Someone was in that room. It was the unmistakable sound of a stealthy movement!

Bob shut his teeth.

He was right—and this was proof! But he knew how necessary it was to be cautious. Soames—he was certain that it was Soames—was there. His ears could not be deceiving him.

Bob was not afraid of Soames, or of anyone in the wide world; but he was a schoolboy against a desperate man; and what had happened at the sundial in the park showed that Soames carried a deadly weapon, and would not hesitate to use it if hard-pressed.

If the crook remained in the room, searching it, there was time to call his comrades, and the old colonel. If he emerged—

His thoughts moved swiftly. The key was on the inside of the lock; he knew that! Softly, with his left hand, he turned the door handle, suddenly opened the door a few inches, reached round with his right, and jerked out the key!

In an instant he had shut the door, jammed the key into the outside of the lock, and turned it.

He heard a movement in the room as he stood panting after that sudden, swift action. The man there had, of course, heard him, though he had had no chance of intervening before Bob locked the door on the outside.

But Bob Cherry did not stay to listen. He cut down the passage and switched on the light, and shouted:

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Wake up, you men!"

Bob's roar would have awakened the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus! Four voices answered at once, and four doors opened.

"What the thump—"

"Look here, you ass—"

"Nightmare again—"

"Bob, old man—"

"Fatheads!" roared Bob, his face blazing with excitement. "I've got him—"

"Eh? Where?" asked Wharton, staring.

"In your pocket?" asked Johnny Bull.

"In Bunter's room—locked in!" panted Bob. "I got the key and turned it on him! He's there now!"

"You saw him?" gasped Wharton.

"No—I heard him! Call your uncle—"

"I—I say, we'd better make sure before we wake people up at midnight—"

"Duffer! Fathead! Ass! He's there!"

"But—"

"If you won't call Colonel Wharton, I will!" roared Bob. "I'm not unlocking that door till the colonel is here with his gun, too! You know what to expect from Soames when he's cornered."

"Oh! But—"

"Rats!" hooted Bob.

He tramped down to the landing, switching on lights as he went. On the landing he stood and roared at the top of his voice:

"Colonel Wharton! Wake up! Wake up! You're wanted!"

The four juniors in the passage stared at one another.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Nugent. "If this is another nightmare your uncle won't be too pleased, old bean!"

"The pleasesfulness will be far from terrific!" murmured Hurreo Singh.

"Let's look at Bunter's room!" exclaimed Harry. "I suppose it's possible—I hope to goodness it's not a mare's nest this time."

The four gathered round the locked door of Bunter's room. Bob had taken the key, so it was impossible to open it. They could only listen for sounds from within; but there was no sound.

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull.

"Blessed if I can make it out!" said Harry blankly. "It's not like Bob to be nervy, but—but—"

"Nobody's there!" said Frank.

"Here comes my uncle."

The deep voice of the colonel was heard, calling. They heard Bob's excited shout in reply.

"I've got him locked in Bunter's room! I believe it's Soames! Get your revolver, sir!"

"Good gad!"

"Oh crikey!" murmured Johnny Bull.

The four could not help feeling dismayed. If the colonel sorted out his old Army revolver and brought it along, to find that it was only a false alarm after all, the prospect was quite dismaying. And there was not the faintest sound from the locked room to indicate that anyone was there.

A minute later the old colonel came striding into the passage from the landing, his service revolver in his hand, followed by Bob.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

Vanished!

COLONEL WHARTON came to a halt at the door of Bunter's room.

Half-dressed, in his dressing gown, and evidently not in the best of tempers, the old military gentleman glanced, or rather glared, at the waiting juniors.

"In there, is he?" he barked.

"So Bob thinks—" stammered Harry.

"Hum! We shall see! Where's the key? Open the door?"

"I've got the key," said Bob. "He's there, sir—I heard him moving, quite plainly, and whipped out the key and locked him in—"

"Very good—if he is there!" grunted the colonel. "I cannot understand how he got there, if he is there—but we shall see!"

"He's armed, sir—"

Snort!

"You boys stand clear! If he is there, leave him to me! I have not

forgotten how to use a revolver, by gad! Unlock that door!"

It was clear that the colonel doubted—as the Co. did! Still, he gripped his revolver, ready for use, as Bob slipped the key into the lock. If it proved that Soames was cornered in that room it was necessary to be wary—they all knew how desperate the sea-lawyer would be, and that he would not hesitate to handle his automatic.

Click!

Bob turned back the key.

Colonel Wharton threw the door wide open.

The light from the passage streamed in. It revealed only the furniture of the room and Bunter's big trunk standing in a corner. A moment more and the colonel reached in to the switch inside the door and turned on the light. Then the room was flooded with illumination.

The colonel's revolver was half-raised. He was ready if a desperate man with a weapon in his hand was to be found there.

But no one was to be seen.

With a snort, the old military gentleman tramped into the room.

Bob followed him in, gripping his golf club. The Co. crowded in after him. No one was to be seen, and they did not believe that anyone was there. Bob stared round him, stupefied.

"He—he's here!" he panted.

"Where?" snorted the colonel. "Show him to me!"

"I tell you, he's here!" almost shouted Bob. "I heard him and locked him in."

"Well, if you locked him in, he is here! Where is he?"

"He—he's here—he must be hiding!" stammered Bob. "Or else he's got away!"

"Look under the bed!" snorted the colonel. "Look in the wardrobe! Look up the chimney, by gad! Huh!"

Bob's face was crimson.

He was utterly amazed and utterly discomfited. It was impossible—surely it was impossible—that his nerves and imagination had played him such a trick, and that he had only fancied the sounds he had heard in that room!

But where was Soames—if it was Soames—where was anyone, if it was anyone?

He looked under the bed and into the wardrobe, though he knew it was useless. Then he cut across to the window to examine it.

"He's got away—and he must have got out of the window!" stammered Bob. "I know he was here, whether it was Soames or not."

"Is the window unfastened?"

"No."

"Is the snow on the sill disturbed?"

"No."

"Do you think that a man got out of the window without opening it and without disturbing the snow on the window-sill?"

Bob Cherry did not answer that question. It hardly needed an answer. He stared round the room in utter bewilderment.

The window had not been opened. The door had been locked. The chimney was not large enough to admit a man, even if it could be supposed that a desperate man had thought of such a resource.

What had become of the man he had heard moving in that room? Had there been a man at all, or had his imagination played him strange tricks?

The Co. stood silent, avoiding looking at Bob's burning face. They deeply

pitied the unfortunate Bob at that moment.

Had he only called them up on a false alarm they would have chipped him and gone back, laughing, to bed. But the snorting old military gentleman was another proposition.

It was not a laughing matter for the old colonel to be called up in the middle of the night, and to come hurrying to the spot with a revolver in his hand—for nothing! The colonel slipped that revolver into the pocket of his dressing-gown. He seemed rather anxious to get it out of sight—in the circumstances. Certainly, it would have been needed, badly needed, had Soames been there! But it was a little ridiculous, as nobody was there! He gave the hapless Bob a concentrated glare.

"Well," he barked, "where is he?"

"He was here—"

"You young ass! If he was here, he is here now! Point him out, before I go back to bed!" snorted the colonel. "I shall be glad to see him, whoever he is, if he is here! Where is he?"

Bob could only stare round the room with a bewildered stare. Someone had been there—unless he had been dreaming! But where?

In sheer desperation, as it were, Bob stepped towards the big trunk with Bunter's name on it. There was no hiding-place in the room—but it came into his mind that that huge trunk was large enough to conceal a man. Was it possible—

"If he got this unlocked, he—he—he might—" stammered Bob.

"Good gad! Is the boy a fool?" snorted the old colonel, quite out of patience. "Do you think that a house-breaker came here with a key to Bunter's trunk? What?"

"N-no—no—"

"Bob, old man!" murmured Wharton.

Bob Cherry examined the lock on the trunk. But it needed only a glance. The trunk was locked.

"Well?" snorted the colonel. "Is the trunk unlocked? What?"

"N-no!"

"You are a young ass, Cherry! Do you hear? You are fully dressed—does that mean that you have not been to bed? Have you been sitting up?"

"I stayed up to keep watch," stammered Bob.

"Then the best thing you can do is to go to bed and stay there! Good gad! This is the second time you have fancied burglars! What is the matter with your nerves? Hey?"

"I—I was sure I—I heard—"

"Nonsense!" barked the colonel. "Nobody is here, as I suppose you can see for yourself! You have been dreaming and fancying things! What is the matter with you? You are not a stupid boy and frightened at a shadow, like Bunter? Perhaps all this is one of your schoolboy jokes, what?"

"I tell you I was sure I heard—"

"Rubbish!"

The colonel stalked to the door.

"You boys go back to bed at once!" he rapped. "You go to bed, Cherry! No more of your keeping watch! Go to bed, and go to sleep! And don't call me again in the middle of the night for nothing! Go to bed at once, all of you!"

The juniors, in silence, went to their rooms—Bob with a face like a peony.

The colonel, grunting, turned off the light and slammed the door of Bunter's room. Then he stalked away.

Four members of the Co. were soon asleep again. But Bob Cherry, though he went to bed as bidden, did not find it easy to sleep.

What did it, and could it, all mean? Unless his nerves were playing him strange tricks, he had heard a man in Bunter's room. Yet no one was there! He could not have heard anyone, when no one was there—and yet, as he thought it over with bewildered mind, it seemed to him that he could still hear those stealthy sounds.

He almost wondered whether the house was haunted—and whether that strange midnight prowler was a visitant from another world. The winter dawn was at hand before Bob's eyes closed at last in troubled slumber.

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Soames On The Spot!

"CHRISTMAS Eve," said Frank Nugent, the next morning, "and no Bunter!"

"Looks as if he's giving us the go-by!" remarked Harry Wharton. "I wonder whether poor old Mauly's got him, after all?"

And the Co. chuckled.

Billy Bunter's letter had stated that he would return in a "pew" days. But several nights and days had elapsed and the Owl of the Remove had not yet put in a reappearance. From which it seemed probable to the Famous Five that Lord Mauleverer, after all, might have obtained the priceless boon of Bunter's company for the hols.

On the other hand, his big trunk was still in his room at Wharton Lodge, which looked as if the fat Owl intended to blow in sooner or later. That night the Famous Five were going to a "show" at Wimford Theatre Royal, and the colonel had telephoned for five seats for them. If Bunter turned up, a sixth would be wanted, and the juniors, though not fearfully bucked by the prospect, were prepared to extend a Yuletide welcome to the wandering Owl, if he did.

But during the day there was no Bunter—and when the car was brought round for the schoolboy party, there was still no Bunter.

There was plenty of snow on the roads, but none was falling, and it was a fine frosty evening, with a myriad stars glittering in the steely sky, when the cheery five packed into the car, to roll off to Wimford for the evening "show."

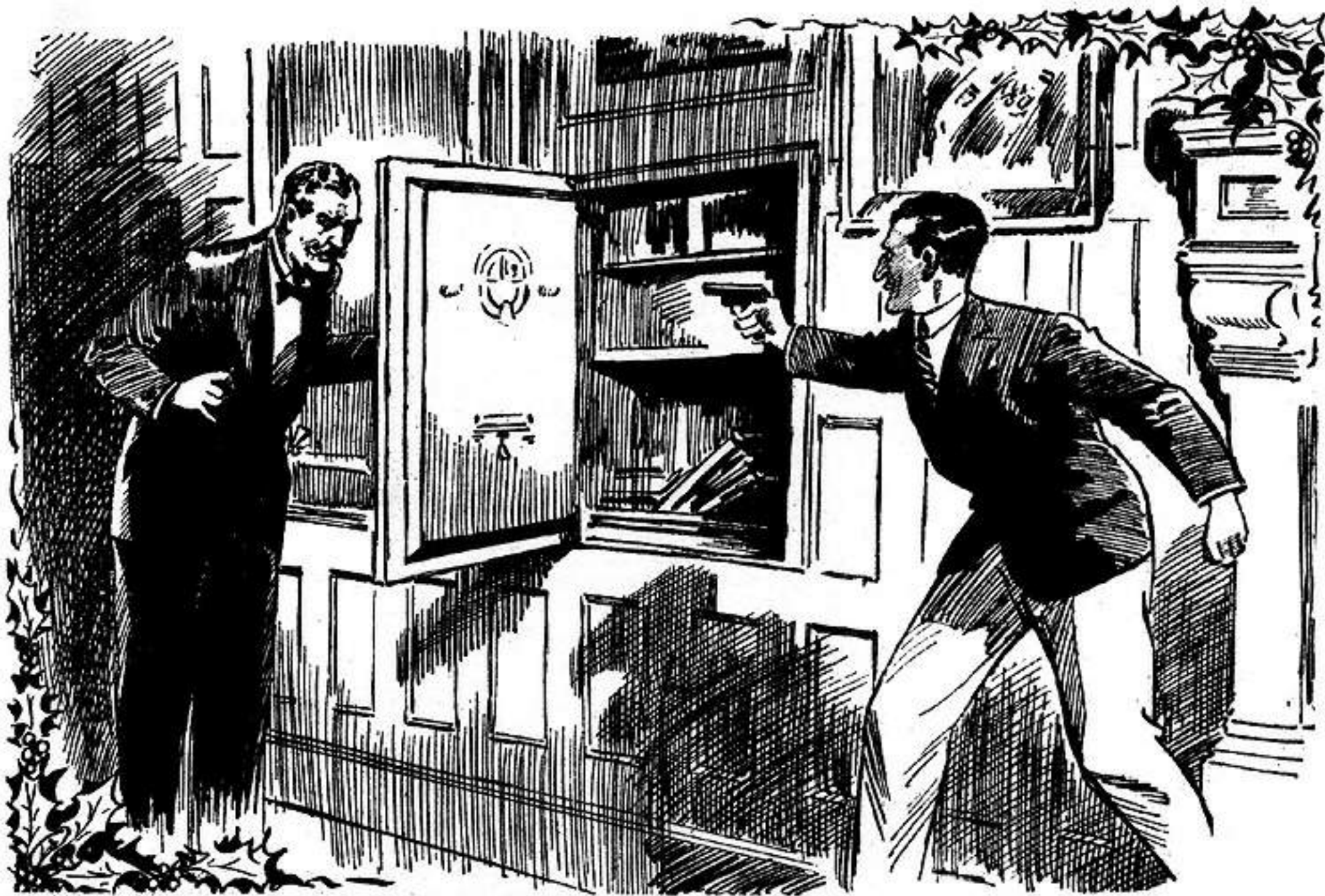
Colonel Wharton stood in the doorway and watched them start. The old colonel had been very kind to Bob Cherry that day, no doubt by way of making up for his gruffness of the night before; but Bob was feeling far from comfortable.

His friends, and the old military gentleman, had no doubt that he had made a fool of himself, and Bob was wondering a little whether he had!

The car gone, the colonel turned across the hall and went into the library. Miss Wharton was in the drawing-room, with several other old ladies of the vicinity, in deep consultation about blankets and Christmas puddings for the poor of the village. The colonel went into the library to smoke his after-dinner cigar, and then to write letters.

The cigar duly smoked, in an arm-chair by the fireside, Colonel Wharton went to his desk, turned on a reading-lamp, and started with pen and paper.

He was thus engaged when a faint sound behind him caused him to turn his head. Before it was fairly turned, however, a grip that felt like a steel vice was laid on his shoulder, and something



Soames stood with the automatic at the level, his steely eyes gleaming icily over it, while Colonel Wharton inserted a key and opened the iron door of the safe let into the wall!

ound and hard and cold was pressed behind his ear.

"Don't move!" said a soft voice. "Don't call out! I shall press the trigger if you do, Colonel Wharton!"

The colonel sat quite still.

He was taken utterly by surprise. He did not know the voice that breathed in his ear, but he could guess whose it was. He was lost in wonder.

The old colonel was a brave man. He had served through the War from start to finish, and looked death in the face too often to fear it. There was no fear in his heart now, and his nerves were as steady as steel. But he did not stir. His life was at the mercy of the man who had so suddenly and strangely grasped him from behind, and he had no idea of throwing it away. Only his grizzled brows set grimly.

"Is that Soames?" he asked quietly.

"You've guessed it."

"You scoundrel, how in the name of mystery did you get here?" breathed Colonel Wharton.

He heard a low laugh.

"I am here, Colonel Wharton! I am glad to see that you are acting sensibly. I am not, and never was, a man of violence; and in your case, I should be particularly sorry to be driven to hard measures. Believe me, I have a respect for a man who has served his country as you have done, my dear sir; and I would not willingly do you hurt."

"Cut that out!" snapped the colonel. "If I had a chance—"

"I shall see that you do not get one! I should dislike extremely to do you harm; but if you endanger me, I shall shoot without the slightest compunction. I regret to say that you would not be the first, by more than one, my dear sir."

"I can well believe it, you scoundrel!" said Colonel Wharton, contemptuously. "But how—how did you get here?"

"I took the liberty, sir, of slipping into this room while the family were at dinner," answered Soames softly. "Except that I had a narrow escape of being spotted by your excellent butler, when he crossed the hall, I had no difficulty. Fortunately, I eluded the good man's observation—otherwise, I fear, your butler would now be lying in a secluded corner with a cracked head."

The colonel breathed hard.

"How did you obtain admission to the house? How—"

"I am not here to discuss such details, sir, but more important matters. For more than an hour I have been concealed in this room—hoping, and watching, for a chance to deal with you alone! The chance has now materialised."

"A servant may enter—"

"You did not hear me lock the door before I made my presence known," smiled Soames.

"Oh! You cunning rascal—"

"Such a description, I fear applies to me only too justly!" murmured Soames. "But we will not waste time discussing my personal character, which I fear is past praying for. I am going to ask you, as a favour, to unlock your safe."

"You know that the safe is in this room, then!" exclaimed the colonel in blank astonishment.

"I have taken the liberty of making a few observations of late, sir."

"You lying rascal, you cannot possibly have obtained admittance to the house—"

"There are ways and means, sir—ways and means! But we waste time.

The safe is in this room—and I am not skilled as a cracker of safes—my education, in that respect, has been a little neglected. I shall request you to open it for me."

"Then you are here for robbery?"

"Not in the least! I hardly suppose that the contents of your safe would reward me for the risks I am taking—except with regard to one article, which as it happens belongs to me," answered Soames. "I am not a sneak-thief, sir, and I shall not touch your property."

"Then, what—"

"Come, come, do not affect ignorance, my dear sir—it is really unworthy of you!" said Soames. "What I want is the silver cigarette-case."

"Are you mad? Do you imagine for one moment that I have it?" exclaimed the astonished colonel.

"Quite! Listen to me, my dear sir! I have seen the boy Bunter since he left here; I may add that I have searched him and questioned him. The silver case, which was in his possession, was not on him; and he confessed that he had left it in his room here."

"Possibly! But—"

"I have searched his room with great care," pursued Soames, "and failing to find it there, I concluded that it might be in the keeping of one of his friends—whether he handed it to them for safe keeping, or whether they may have seen it and taken it to place it in safety for him. With this view, I have searched their rooms and their belongings—"

"What!" gasped the colonel.

"I have made the search with the greatest care and thoroughness, and I am satisfied that the silver case is not,"

after all, in the keeping of one of Bunter's friends here."

"Good gad! Then what the boy Cherry fancied—"

"The boy Cherry was the only one who awakened while I was engaged in my search the night before last!" smiled Soames. "Last night I repeated the search to make all sure—though, owing to interruptions, I had to leave it till quite near to dawn."

"Oh!" gasped the colonel. "But how—how—how—" He almost stuttered with amazement.

He knew now that Bob had been right. But how the crook had obtained entry into the house was still an utter mystery to him.

"Never mind that, my dear sir—let me finish. None of the boys has the silver case—it is not in their rooms, or in Bunter's; and I am therefore driven to the conclusion that it is in your hands."

"Oh!" The colonel understood now. "No doubt that foolish boy Bunter may have asked you to lock it in your safe for him!" suggested Soames. "Or possibly it was found after he went, and you did so, to keep it for him when he returns."

"No doubt I should have done so, had it been found," said Colonel Wharton. "But it has certainly not been seen here. I have never set eyes on it at all. According to Bunter's own statement, it was lost before he left school for the Christmas holidays and—"

"I fear, sir, that I can place no reliance on Master Bunter's statements—neither, I think, would you do so."

"Perhaps—but I certainly know nothing of the case."

"It goes to my heart, my dear sir, to express a doubt of your statement," murmured Soames. "I feel that it is an insult to a gentleman of your well-known integrity. Nevertheless, I must ask you to open your safe."

"That," said the colonel contemptuously, "means that you do not believe me, you scoundrel and rascal!"

"I regret it, sir; but hard experience has made me of a somewhat doubtful nature!" murmured Soames. "I must satisfy myself. Will you open the safe?"

The round, hard rim of the automatic pressed a little harder.

Colonel Wharton breathed deep. Had he had the remotest chance, he would have turned on the crook—but there was not the ghost of a chance.

It was true that James Soames, as he had declared, shrank from violent measures, if they could be avoided—but it was equally true that he would have used the deadly weapon in his hand without the slightest hesitation if driven to it.

Soft and smooth as his voice was, the old colonel's life hung on a thread, and he knew it.

In silence he rose from the chair, taking a key-ring from an inner pocket. Soames stepped a pace or two away but with the automatic at a level, his steely eyes gleaming icily over it. The colonel gave him one look—one grim look at the sleek, smooth face. Then he stepped to the wall near the desk and turned back a picture on a hinged frame.

Behind it was an iron door let into the wall.

Silent, with compressed lips, the colonel inserted a key and opened the iron door. Soames motioned him to stand close beside the safe, so that he could keep him under observation and under cover of the automatic while he examined the interior.

Colonel Wharton stood like a ramrod, a contemptuous smile on his face. For

five minutes he stood, while the crook examined the interior of the safe—the sleek face growing darker and darker as he failed to find what he sought.

He stepped back at last, gritting his teeth.

"Are you satisfied?" asked the colonel scornfully.

Soames' eyes gleamed at him.

"I am satisfied," he answered quietly. "The silver case is not there! Where is it, Colonel Wharton?"

"You scoundrel!" said the colonel. "I have told you that I know nothing of it, and have never even set eyes on it."

Soames' eyes seemed almost to penetrate him with the intensity of their searching gaze. But the sea-lawyer seemed satisfied at last. The black look disappeared from his face, leaving him impassive as before.

"I must apologise, my dear sir, for not having accepted your word in the first place," he said, with his old manservant air of deference. "But you will understand that, in my way of life, I cannot afford to believe everything I am told. It appears that Master Bunter has been lying again, and that he did not, after all, leave the silver case in this house—or, if he has done so, he has concealed it in some spot known only to himself."

His eyes gleamed again for a second.

"I must see my fat young friend and question him more closely," he went on. "I am through here. Master Bunter will tell me the truth next time, or it will be very much the worse for him. I think I shall be able to make him realise that I am not a man to be trifled with." He paused. "Sit in your chair again," he added sharply, "and do not think of resisting. I beg you—it would be as easy for me to leave you stunned, with a cracked skull, as to tie you in your chair! Do not force me to it."

Colonel Wharton gave him a long look. Then, in silence, he sat down in his chair, and made no resistance while the crook bound his arms to it and stuffed a gag in his mouth.

But his eyes burned after Soames as the crook stepped to the door, opened it a few inches, and listened and watched. And then, apparently satisfied that the coast was clear, stepped out, and shut the door after him.

It was half an hour later that Wells, passing the door and hearing muffled, mumbling sounds from the library, looked in, and almost fell down with astonishment at the sight of his master, bound and gagged, in the chair.

Then the colonel was released. Too late, as he knew only too well, to have the faintest hope of laying hands on James Soames.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

'Something Like A Surprise!

"O WHAT a fall was there, my countrymen!" said Bob Cherry. It was a fall of snow to which Bob alluded.

When the Famous Five came out of the Theatre Royal, at Wimford, they found that the snow had been falling again during the performance within. It had ceased before they emerged; but the fall had been heavy, and the High Street of the little country town was piled and banked with it.

Hardly a vehicle was attempting to push through the thick carpet of white. People coming out of the theatre made up their minds to walk; and the Famous Five stood for some minutes, in doubt.

"The fallfulness is terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"We are not likely to see the esteemed Brown with the car."

"Um—no!" agreed Wharton.

The car had left the juniors at the theatre, and was to have called for them after the show. But traffic in the street was hardly possible, and it was clear that on the open country road it was impossible. No car could have scraped through, and the juniors had to make up their minds to it.

"Well, we can walk," said Johnny Bull. "Lucky Bunter wasn't with us, after all. We should have had to roll him home, like a barrel."

"No good waiting for the car," said Harry. "Better buck up and get through before the next lot comes down."

"Come on!" said Bob cheerily.

The juniors turned up their coat collars and started. A mile and a half of road lay between them and Wharton Lodge; but there were short cuts that Wharton knew, to save almost half the distance. And they were rather anxious to get through before the "next lot" came down, if more was coming.

They tramped out of the town, over the bridge, and down the country road, almost knee-deep in snow in the open. At a little distance out of Wimford, Wharton turned into the footpath through Wimford Wood, and his comrades followed him.

It was yet early in the evening—the Christmas Eve show at the theatre had lasted only an hour and a half. But the winter darkness had set in, black as a hat, relieved only by the glimmer of endless snow.

Tramp, tramp, tramp! they went by the snowy footpath, under the gaunt, leafless branches. It was heavy going, and hardy as the Famous Five were, they were soon feeling rather tired. But they kept on as good a rate as they could, for it was plain that another snowfall was coming—flakes were already beginning to fall. And, seasonable as it undoubtedly was, nobody enjoyed the prospect of being caught in the open in a heavy snow-storm.

"It's coming," remarked Bob.

"It's come," grunted Johnny Bull.

"Push on," said Harry. "If it gets too thick, we can get shelter half-way. I know a place."

"Not much shelter about here," said Nugent. "Can't be a house for miles, I should think."

"There are the holiday bungalows along the river," answered Harry. "They're shut up in the winter, but we could shove into a porch, or a shed. One of them is just off this footpath."

"Push on, if we can," said Bob.

"Oh, yes, rather! Go it!"

They tramped on, while the flakes fell thicker and thicker. The wind was rising again, tossing the branches, shaking down snow, wailing and howling through the wood. Thicker and thicker came the snow—not in flakes, but rather in chunks and masses.

Harry Wharton came to a halt, at length.

"What about it?" he asked. "It's only a step off the path to that bung, and this flurry won't last long. Wait under shelter till it's over—what?"

"Lead on, Macduff!" said Bob.

In the darkness little could be seen, but Wharton knew the wood from childhood. He turned off the footpath into a narrower path that led through the gaunt trees to a gate in a fence, now almost over-topped by drifting snow.

It was not easy to shove the gate open, so the juniors clambered over it, and tramped up to the dim, one-

storied building in the centre of a garden that was an unbroken sheet of white.

They reached the little porch in front of the bungalow. It was thick with drifted snow, and masses of thick flakes beat in on them on the fierce wind.

"Urrgh!" murmured Bob. "This what you call a shelter, old bean?"

"The shelterfulness is not terrific," mumbled Hurree Singh.

"Well, we can't push on till this flurry is over," said Nugent. "It's coming down in cartloads."

"Half an hour, perhaps," said Bob. "Oh crikey! Never mind! What's the odds, so long as you're 'appy?"

For some minutes the juniors stood there, getting what shelter they could. The fierce wind beat on them, piling snow thicker and thicker. Bob Cherry tramped to keep his feet warm. Hurree Singh shivered. The Indian junior was almost blue with cold.

"Look here!" said Harry. "Nobody lives here, and there's no harm in getting under a roof in a storm like this. My uncle knows the estate agent at Wimford who lets these places in the summer—Mr. Jenkins. He's a decent old bean, and I know he wouldn't mind if we got inside. If we can push in—"

"Oh!" said Bob. "Sure he wouldn't mind?"

"I'm quite sure of that, and we can make good any damage. Let's get inside, if we can."

"Good egg!" said Bob.

"The goodness of the egg is terrific!" mumbled Hurree Singh. "My absurd feet are getting like idiotic icicles."

"Come on, then, and let's try it on," said Harry.

The front door was locked and immovable. The juniors trudged out of the porch, and moved round the little building.

It was a small bungalow, let for the fishing and boating in the summer, and contained only a hall and two rooms, and a kitchen at the back. All the windows were fastened, and the juniors came to a halt at the little kitchen window.

"We can manage this," said Bob. He groped over the window. "There's a catch inside, but I fancy I can shift it. The jolly old speculative builder doesn't make his sashes fit like a glove."

"Go it, Bill Sikes!" grinned Johnny Bull.

Bob chuckled, and "went it." The sashes of the kitchen window fitted far from perfectly, and the blade of a pocket-knife was easily pushed between.

"Sure Jenkins won't mind, old chap?" asked Bob, pausing.

"Quite!" said Harry. "If he were here, he'd tell us to get in out of the snow, if we had to break a pane."

"Here goes, then!"

Bob snapped the catch open without difficulty, and the lower sash was pushed up. One after another the five juniors clambered in into utter darkness, and the window was closed again.

"Well, it's something to get under a roof," said Bob. "No light on, I suppose?"

"Not likely! The electric light is laid on from Wimford, but it's shut off when the place is unoccupied," answered Harry. "Might try it—oh!"

Bob groped for a switch, and found it, and a sudden flood of light followed. The juniors blinked at one another.

"Well, that's jolly odd!" said Harry Wharton. "The current must have been left on, after all. Thank goodness, it was!"

"What—ho!"

"Might find something to make a fire," said Nugent.

"Not likely. The place can't have been used since last summer—" Harry Wharton broke off, staring.

Now the light was on the juniors could see their surroundings. On the kitchen table was a pile of canned foods; firewood was stacked by the grate, and there was a box of coal.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Harry blankly.

Bob Cherry whistled.

"Well, you prize ass!" he murmured.

"Somebody must be living here! Look at that! My only hat! We've jolly well burgled a place that somebody lives in!"

"Oh crumbs!"

The Famous Five gazed at one another in utter dismay.

Getting into an empty building for shelter from a snowstorm, when Wharton knew the owner was one thing; but getting into an occupied building, tenanted by some stranger, was an altogether different matter. It was an utterly dismaying discovery.

"Somebody's here!" gasped Nugent. "Oh crumbs! What on earth will he think?"

"Blessed if I can understand it!" said Harry Wharton. "I tell you, this place is let only in the summer, furnished, for fishing and boating. How could anybody possibly want to take it in the winter?"

"Somebody has," said Bob.

"Looks like it, and no mistake!"

"Well, we've done it now," said Johnny Bull. "If the man's at home, we can explain to him, and apologise—that's all we can do now. Let's see."

"Can't be at home—all in the dark," said Harry.

"All the better. We can get out, and no harm done! But let's see!"

The juniors moved through the kitchen doorway, which opened on the hall—what Mr. Jenkins, no doubt, would have described as a "lounge hall."

Bob switched on the light there.

Muddy traces of footmarks on the linoleum on the floor showed that someone had been in the house not more than a few days ago.

Two doors opened from the hall, one on either side, and the juniors tapped at them, wondering whether possibly anyone might be present. They had to explain their presence in the house if the tenant was at home.

But there was no reply to the tapping, and, opening the doors, they found the two rooms empty when they switched on the lights.

"Nobody at home," said Bob.

"Can't be anybody down there, I suppose?" He pointed to a door at the back, by the side of the kitchen door, which evidently gave access to a stair down to a cellar.

"Hardly!" said Harry. "Look here, what are we going to do? No harm in waiting here till the snowstorm blows over, but—"

"But—" murmured Nugent.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" gasped Bob suddenly. "Listen!"

Knock, knock, knock!

The Famous Five fairly jumped. They had decided, beyond doubt, that the lonely bungalow in the wood was unoccupied, the tenant obviously absent. They were utterly startled by that sudden sound of knocking.

"What—" gasped Harry.

"Who—"

"Where—"

Knock, knock!

"It's from below!" stuttered Bob. "There's somebody in the cellar. But what is he knocking for—"

Knock, knock!

"Might have got shut in—must have, I think!" gasped Harry Wharton, in utter wonder. "He's heard us, and he's knocking—"

Knock, knock, knock!

The knocking, it was plain, came from the cellar under their feet. Then faintly, muffled by the floor and the distance, came a voice:

"Help!"

"That settles it," said Harry. "The man must have got shut in his own cellar somehow. Thank goodness we got in, after all. This way!"

He cut across to the door on the cellar stair. It was fastened by a wooden batten. How it came to be fastened outside when somebody, evidently, was below was utterly bewildering; but the juniors did not pause. Wharton flung the door open and led the way down the narrow wooden stair.

At the bottom was a shut door which evidently gave access to the cellar. It was locked and there was no sign of a key.

Knock, knock! came on the inside of the door.

"Help!" came a gasping howl.

Bob Cherry thumped on the door.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" he roared.

"This door's locked. Let us in if you want help. Who's there?"

There was a gasp from within.

"Oh crikey! You!"

"Are we dreaming this?" gasped Bob. He knew that fat, familiar voice.

"Are we asleep and dreaming?"

"I say, you fellows!" came a frantic squeak. "Oh crikey! I say, you fellows—"

The Famous Five stood rooted. They were too utterly astounded to stir or speak. They just stood and stared.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

Luck For Bunter!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Knock, knock! Bang!

"Bunter!" gasped Harry Wharton, the first to recover his voice. "Bunter—or his ghost!"

"Bunter!" stuttered Bob. "Bunter. This is a dream!"

"I say, you fellows, let me out! Let me out before that beast comes back!" came the yell from within. "I say, I've been here for weeks and weeks! Lemme out!"

"The door's locked!" gasped Harry.

"I know it is, fathead! That beast locked it when he went away and left me here days and weeks ago. I say, nearly all the grub's gone— Oh crikey! Do let me out, will you?"

"You—you—you've been locked in there?"

"Yes, you chump! Lemme out, will you? Oh crikey! Fancy you fellows coming here! Just fancy! I've been here for weeks, I—I think—a fearfully long time, anyhow!"

"It—it—it's Bunter!" gurgled Nugent. "Oh, my hat! How on earth did you get in that cellar, Bunter?"

"That villain—"

"What villain, fathead?"

"Soames!" yelled Bunter. "I say, I thought he'd come back when I heard your hoofs—and then I heard that there were a lot of you, so I knew it couldn't be Soames. And so I yelled for help—and banged on the door—but I never dreamed that it was you! How did you get here, miles and miles and miles from Wharton Lodge?"

"Soames!" gasped Harry. "Soames! Oh crumbs! Did—did Soames bring you here?"

"Yes, weeks ago!"

"You ass, it's only three or four days since you left!"

"Oh crikey! Is it? It seems like weeks! Ain't it over Christmas yet?"

"It's Christmas Eve."

"Oh crikey! I say, get me out of this before that villain comes back! Suppose he comes back— Oh lor'!" squeaked Bunter. "Buck up! Hurry! Don't hang about! Can't you get a move on?"

"We'll get you out, old fat man!" said Bob. "Wait till we get something to bust in the door."

"Hurry!" yelled Bunter. "Quick!" Almost dizzy with amazement at that astounding discovery in the cellar under the lonely bungalow, the juniors lost no time. They rushed up the stairs, and very soon sorted out a chopper, which Bob was soon wielding on the cellar door.

It was a fairly strong door, but Bob's smites with the chopper very soon put paid to the lock. The door crashed open and there was a yell from within. Bunter, it seemed, was very near the door.

"Yaroooh! Yo-wow! Wharrer you banging that door on my nose for, you silly ass? Ooooh!"

The Famous Five crowded in. Billy Bunter, rubbing his fat little nose, stood blinking at them through his big spectacles.

They gazed at him. Even yet they could hardly believe that it was Bunter, so utterly unexpected and amazing was the discovery of the fat Owl.

There was an electric light in the cellar. There was a chair-bed in a corner, and a few other articles of furniture, and on the table a supply of canned foods, and some crockery that needed washing. Bunter, evidently, had been camping there—amazing as it was.

"Well, this beats Banagher!" said Bob Cherry. "Blessed if I don't half believe it's his ghost now!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"But—but—but what does it all mean?" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "If Soames bunged you in here, what on earth did he do it for?"

"He's after that putrid cigarette-case!" groaned Bunter. "I say, you fellows. I've had a fearful time. Nothing to eat but canned meat and biscuits and potted things, and nothing to drink but cold water! I say—"

"Did Soames bag you after you left?"

"No, you idiot; he bagged me, and that's why I left! He collared me on the terrace at Wharton Lodge that night you rushed off into the park!"

"Wha-a-t?"

"Oh crumbs!"

"I—I came out to see what you were up to," groaned Bunter, "and that beast spotted me, and got me in the dark, you know!"

"Soames did!" gasped Bob.

"Ow! Yes! Then he walked me here through the snow—dozens of miles—I was nearly dropping—about twenty miles, I think—"

"Twenty rats!" said Johnny Bull. "You're not more than a mile from Wharton Lodge."

"Oh, really, Bull! I know I walked twenty miles, at least—nearer thirty, I think—"

"Soames may have gone a long way round to keep off the roads," said Nugent. "Perhaps a couple of miles!"

"About thirty-five, I think," said Bunter. "I know I was nearly dropping. I say, you fellows, let's get out of this! Suppose he comes back?"

"We'll handle him all right if he does," said Bob. "Don't you worry."

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May as well shift out of this cellar."

The juniors tramped up the stairs to the upper regions, Billy Bunter rolling after them. The fat Owl rolled across at once to the front door and opened it. A mighty blast roared in, laden with snow, and he gave a squeak.

"Ow! Oh crikey! Ow!"

"Shut the door, fathead!" said Bob. "We got in here out of the snowstorm; we've got to wait a bit for it to clear before we start."

"Suppose Soames—"

"Blow Soames! We can't get out in this!"

"You silly ass!" yelled Bunter. "He may come back—"

"Fathead! Look at the snow! Bless Soames!"

"Beast!" roared Bunter. "I'm going!"

Roaring wind and whirling snow, coming down in hatfuls, did not attract Bunter! But anything seemed better to the fat junior than the possibility of Soames reappearing and clutching him again.

Regardless of wind and snow, the fat Owl plunged out into the winter dark.

"You fat ass—" roared Bob.

"Beast!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Come on!" he said. "The fat chump will get lost. We can stand it, if he can! Get going."

And the Famous Five tramped out after Bunter.

Through howling wind and swamping snow they tramped in a breathless bunch, and for a quarter of a mile even Billy Bunter kept up a good pace, spurred on by his terror of Soames.

After that Bunter had to be taken by his fat arms and helped on his way, and for the rest of that long, weary, fatiguing tramp the juniors had the pleasure—or otherwise—of hearing Bunter's melodious voice as a sort of musical accompaniment to the march, in a series of wails, moans, groans, grunts, snorts, and breathless squeaks!

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

Light At Last!

COLONEL WHARTON stared at Bunter.

The juniors were in at last, breathless and tired.

Billy Bunter, most tired and breathless of the party, tottered to an armchair in front of the blazing log fire and collapsed there, gasping.

The colonel looked at him long and hard.

Judging by Bunter's look, he was more in need than ever of the Christmas presents the Famous Five had handed him the day of his departure. Even Billy Bunter had never looked in more desperate need of a wash!

"I am glad you have got in, my boys," said the colonel. "It was impossible to send the car—"

"We guessed that one, sir, and walked!" said Bob cheerfully. "Jolly good thing we did, as it turns out. We've rescued Bunter."

"Rescued him!" repeated Colonel Wharton, staring. "I see that you have him with you. Did you meet him in Wimford?"

"No fear! Hooked him out of durance vile!" said Harry smiling.

"That villain Soames had him—"

"Soames!" exclaimed the colonel.

"Yes; bunged in a cellar, in Jenkins' bungalow, in Wimford Wood," said Harry. "He must have taken the house from Jenkins, as a tenant; but why he wanted to keep Bunter there beats me hollow."

"The hollowfulness is terrific."

"I fail to understand this!" grunted Colonel Wharton. "Soames has been here, during your absence—"

"Here," exclaimed Harry.

"The lawless scoundrel penetrated into the house in some mysterious way—I cannot discover how," said the colonel. "He attacked me suddenly in the library, with a revolver in his hand—in search, as he said, of that rubbishy cigarette-case! He appeared to believe that Bunter had left it here when he went away. I gather that he had seen Bunter, and was told so—"

"He'd seen Bunter all right!"

"I am sorry, Cherry, that I did not take you more seriously last night," went on the colonel. "I supposed, as your friends supposed, that you were making an absurd mistake; but from what the villain said to me it is clear that he has searched all your rooms!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bob.

"It remains an utter mystery how he was able to enter the house and leave again without a trace!" said the colonel. "But it is clear that he did so."

"Then—then Bob had it right!" exclaimed Harry.

"Quite, as it appears now! But explain to me what has happened. How did you find Bunter?"

The juniors told the story, the old colonel listening with blanker and blanker astonishment in his face.

"Good gad! Is the man out of his senses, or what?" he exclaimed. "Why should he have kept Bunter a prisoner? It is inexplicable!"

"Can't make it out!" said Harry. "He's after that silver case—though goodness knows why. But he must have found that it was not on Bunter, at once; and what he wanted to keep Bunter for, beats me! I can't see what use Bunter was to him."

"Can't have kept him as an ornament!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!" came from the armchair before the fire.

"Perhaps Bunter will be able to explain," said Colonel Wharton. "Bunter, did you leave that silver cigarette-case in this house?"

"Oh, really, sir! I've told you it's lost—"

"Answer my question!" rapped the colonel.

"No, I didn't!" yapped Bunter.

"You appear to have told Soames that you did," said the colonel sternly.

"What was I to tell him, when he was going to blow my brains out?" demanded Bunter, warmly. "I'd have told him I'd left it at the top of the Tower of London, if that would have kept him quiet."

"Have you no regard whatever for the truth, Bunter?" hooted the colonel.

"No—I mean yes! Oh! Yes. But, you see, he was going to blow my brains out—"

"Did you tell him you had any?" asked Bob. "I suppose you can't help telling whoppers."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

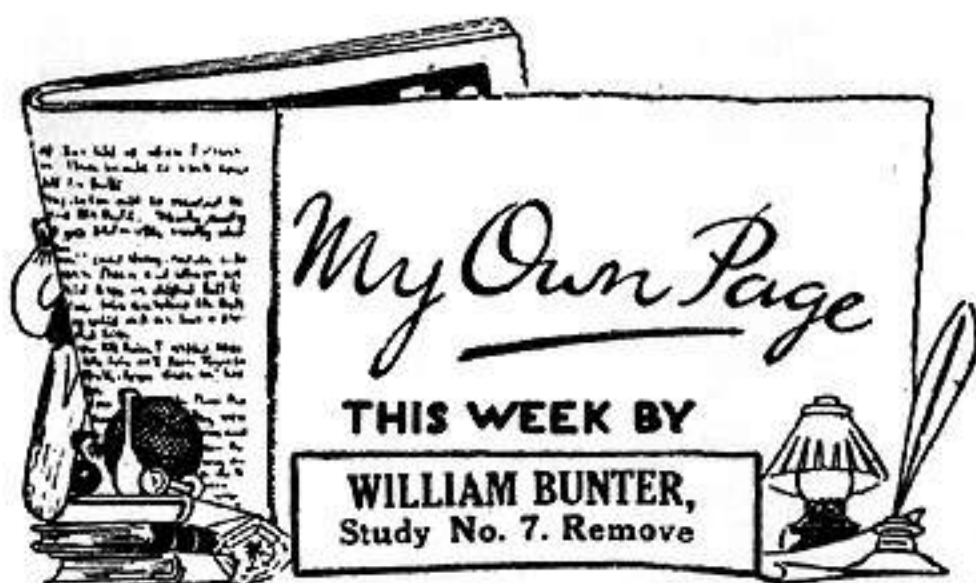
"Yah!"

"Do you know why Soames kept you a prisoner, Bunter?" asked the colonel.

"How should I know?" grunted Bunter. "I jolly well know he did! He never told me why. He grabbed me that night there was something up in the park, when I went out on the terrace, and he's had me ever since—but he never told me why, the beast!"

"Harry, you had a letter from Bunter, after he left—"

(Continued on page 28)



AT last the Edditer has hadd the sense to give a chance to a fellow with reel jernalistick abillity. For wunce in a way, deer readers, you can take your fill of 1st-class stories, brilliyunt poetry and lernedd artickles from the penn of that gifted orther, William George Bunter.

It's not my way to boste of my branes or sporting achievements, but everywun knoes that I am the biggest awl-rownd man at the skool. (Hear, hear!—Ed.) Quelch says that I ort to be in a klass by myself. (He certainly does.—Ed.) Wharton has offen begged me with teers tremmling on his i-lashes to rite for the "Herrald," but I have phelt compelled to refewse. "Certainly nott," was my kontempeluus repli. "I disdane to soyl my penn by riting for such a ragg."

But at last, deer readers, your eeger impayshunts is sattisfied, and here is a hole page ritten and eddited by W. G. B. himself. It kontains noos, poems, and artickles, and is the last word in maggazeen produckshun.

GRATE ENGLISH KOUNTRY HOWSES!

Bunter Court

A speshul artikle dealing with the magnifisense of this well-known manshun.

From the days of Willyum the Konkeror the grate titled fammily of Bunters have dived in Bunter Court, altho sum jellus beasts say that there is no such plaice. It is troo that during the vack the deekoraters dessend upon the manshun and turn it inside owt, so that I am frekwently kom-pelled to seek uther akkommerdation, but only to minds like Wharton's or Toddy's would imagine that this is becaws my deer pater kan't stand the site of me.

The bankwetting hall at Bunter Court is about as bigg as Madame Toosord's, and kontains just as many celebrieties, for kings and princes and dooks and erls awl crowd rownd the dinner-table, and wate for my puter to karve the joint. They kan have as many helpings as they like, for there is nothing stinly about Bunter Court—not like that beast Quelch, who stopps me after the 5th helping.

Awl the Bunter fammily are very jenniferous, and if a dook or an erl wants to borro a few bobb until his postle order cums he has only to menshun it. There is a tuck-shop at Bunter Court, where the noble gests can fortyfy themselves between meals, and if one of the kings or princes takes a phancy into his hedd to raid the kitchen larder he isn't whopped when he is kort, becaws my pater would meerly lart and say: "Karry on, old been, and lett me help you—I'm a bitt peckish myself!"

There are thowsands of rooms at Bunter Court and milyuns of servants, wile the grounds eggstend to about 2,000 akers, and kontain a nornamental lake for huntin' and shootin', and large forests for fishin', in addishun to a post ophiss for the use of titled relashuns who wish to send postle orders to their nevvews at skool.

The motto of the Bunter fammily is "Eet not to live, but live to eet," and they are awl fine figgers of men, strong and sturdy, espeshully me. And may noo glories ever shedd their luster upon their magguitent manshun—Bunter Court.

(This artikle is copyrite by William George Bunter.)

NOOS of the WEAK!

Yesterdayer in the jimnasium, William George Bunter, the famous atherlete of the Remove, thrashed Bolsover major till he crawled on the floor and wined for mercy. Bolsover had venched to call Bunter a fat porpuss. "Those words can never be fourgiven," replide Bunter hortily. "This insult must be whiped owt in blud. I shall eggspet you to meet me in the jim to-nite."

Bolsover larted a hollo, mocking lart, but he soon hadd reeson to lart on the uther side of his phace, for Bunter made rings rownd him and landed feerful blows on awl parts of the body and also the jaw. Bolsover plected for 3, but there was nothing dooing. "Take that, you beestly booly!" retorted Bunter, and lade him lo with an upper-cut which would have slortered an ocks. Bunter was cheered to the ecko, wile the remanes of Bolsover were remoovd in an ambewlance to the sanny. (I can't quite imagine it!—Ed.)

Wingate, the skool captin, tapt Harry Wharton on the sholder this morning. "Look here, Wharton," he sedd seeriously, "why is Bunter left owt of the jewnior elevun? You kno very well he's far and away the best player you've gott." Wharton was erblidged to admitt the trooth of this. "It's a matter of pursonal jellusy with me," he muttered, flushing hotly. "I kan't bare to be put in the shade by a better player." He therefour bribed Wingate with a 10-bobb note to keep owt of the affare, and there is now no chance that Bunter will be given his proper sho in the Socker matches.

(NOTE.—The idea of Wharton bridging Wingate to keep Bunter out of the football has reduced the whole school to hysterics.—Ed.)

MY POSTLE ORDER!

The shades of nite were falling phast, When throo the gates of Greyfriars passed The postman who had brort at last My postle order.

For years I'd awlmost been resined, My hoaps had dwindled, pecked, and pined, I thort that I shoold never find My postle order.

And now at last it had appeered, Altho its look was rather weerd, For it hadd grown a flowing beerd, My postle order.

Alas, my plezzure soon was gone! It came from meen old Unkle Don, And "SIXPENCE" was the word upon My postle order.



My spirrits had a sudden dropp, But still, in Mrs. Mimbble's shopp, I turned to tarts and jinjer-popp My postle order.



LITTEL LETTERS

To MRS. MIMBLE.

Deer Maddam,—It is a well-known factt that creddit is the life-blud of bizziness, and unless you start giving credit rite away you'll never gro into a bigg store with branches on all the main traffick roots—do you twigg? I shall be plected to open a creddit akkount with you, and suggest a limmit of a thowsand pounds to start with. Shall I call for the tuck to-nite?

To MR. QUELCH.

Deer Sir,—If you find any gum in yore slippers to-nite it wasn't me, becaws I wasn't there, as Skinner can tell you—he saw me do it. Hooping this is now quite cleer,—Yores respectfully—

To G-R-L-D L-D-R, With Form.

Yah! Go and eet koke! I skorn you from the bottom of my hart, you kadd!—Yores affectashunility—

To ALL THE REMOVE.

Mr. William George Bunter rekwests the plezzure of yore kompany to-nite to skoff a whopping bigg hamper witch he has just had from Coker Court—I meen, from Bunter of the Fifth—that is to say, from my titled Aunt Judy. Nunno, I meen from a titled relashun at Bunter Court. Roll up and help yourselves!

HERE'S SUM CONNUNDRUMS TO TRY ON YOUR PALS:—

When will Gosling, the porter, go to prizzou?

As soon as "locking-up" time cums.

Who is the champion singer in the Greyfriars Remove? This is rather a difficult question to answer. Johnny Bull can bellow; and a certain Chinese junier is handicapped by having only Wun Lung. But you shoold come and hear Hurreo Singh!

WILLIAM GEORGE BUNTER

Billy Bunter is the world's most famous fat boy. Words are almost useless to describe him. He weighs fifteen stone, and is eternally on the search for tuck. No hamper, picnic, pie, or pastry is safe when Bunter scents it. His nose for tuck is sharper than a bloodhound's. He tells the most amusing whoppers when caught, and invariably gives himself away. His "postal order," which he is always expecting and never receives, is a standing joke among fellows from whom he tries to borrow money. So is Bunter Court, his magnificent home, which no eye but Bunter's has ever seen—or ever will see. In strict fact, he lives in quite a modest Surrey villa. He is a first-class ventriloquist and can imitate almost any voice. As full of tricks and fatuous cunning as a monkey, Bunter is often licked and kicked—but he still goes on Buntering! Long may he continue to do so!

(Cartoon By HAROLD SKINNER.)

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1.610.

"Certainly I did!" answered Harry. "It was written from the Station Hotel, in Wimford—"

"It wasn't!" snorted Bunter. "Soames made me write it, in that beastly bung. He must have pinched the paper."

"You fat ass!" exclaimed Harry. "Are you fibbing again, or dreaming, or what? You told me that your trunk was coming, in that letter—"

"I know I did! Soames told me to, and if you think I was going to have my brains blown out, you're jolly well mistaken—see? I'd have written anything he liked."

"But the trunk came!" roared Wharton.

"Did it? Soames must have sent it, then."

"Good gad!" exclaimed Colonel Wharton testily. "What can all this mean? Bunter, your trunk was delivered here the day after you left, as you stated in your letter that it would be, and so—"

"Tain't my trunk! I never sent it!" grunted Bunter. "Blessed if I know why Soames did, either!"

The Famous Five and the colonel looked at Billy Bunter, and then at one another, in mute amazement.

Bunter's letter, and the trunk following, had made it quite impossible for anyone to suspect that he had been kidnapped. Yet it was certain that he had been kidnapped, and kept a close prisoner, that the letter he had written served some purpose of Soames', and that it must have been Soames himself who had sent the trunk in Bunter's name.

Bunter's imprisonment was explained now—it was to keep him out of the way while that trunk was landed at Wharton Lodge in his name.

But why?

"Is the man insane?" echoed Colonel Wharton, at last. "His determination to get hold of that cigarette-case is extraordinary. And now this. In the name of all that is absurd, why did he want to send a trunk here, and keep Bunter away for that purpose—"

"Blessed if I know!" said Bunter. "Must be cracked, I should think. I say, you fellows, is there any supper going?"

Bob Cherry gave a sudden yell! He was the first to jump to it, as it were!

"That's how he got in!" he roared.

"What?"

"In the trunk!" yelled Bob. "We all wondered why that fat ass wanted such a whopping trunk. I remember saying there was room for Bunter himself in it. Soames was in it!"

"Sus-Sus-Soames was—was in it!" gasped the colonel. "Good gad! Are you dreaming?"

"No more than I was last night!" grinned Bob. "Bet you, sir! That's why we couldn't find him in Bunter's room. He'd got back into the trunk, and locked it on the inside!"

"Good gad!"

"Oh crikey!" There was a howl from the armchair before the fire. "I say, you fellows, if that beast is here—I say, ring up the police!"

Colonel Wharton stared at Bob like a man in a dream for a moment or two. Then, as he grasped it, he gripped a heavy Malacca stick and started up the staircase.

The Famous Five forgot that they were tired, as they rushed after him.

Bunter, perhaps, did not forget that he was tired. Anyhow, he did not join in the rush. If James Soames was packed inside that big trunk Billy Bunter had no desire whatever to lend a hand in unpacking him!

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

Too Late!

"LOOK out!" breathed Harry Wharton. "If he's there—"

"He was there!" said Bob. "No doubt about that! Look out, you fellows!"

Colonel Wharton switched on the light in Bunter's room; the Famous Five followed him in, wildly excited.

All eyes fixed on the huge trunk.

That Bob had hit on the truth no one doubted; it was, in fact, self-evident now that they knew that it must have been Soames who had sent the trunk there, cunningly making use of Bunter for the purpose.

The midnight mystery was explained if Soames had been in the house, hidden in the trunk supposed to be Bunter's. That was how he had so strangely escaped; and the juniors knew now that when they had searched Bunter's room he had been there all the time, probably hearing every word they uttered.

It had even occurred to Bob that he might have hidden himself in the trunk, but as it had been found locked that had seemed impossible. But if Soames had sent it, Soames, of course, had the key—which he could use inside as well as out.

"Look!" breathed Bob.

They gathered round the trunk; and now that they examined it they could detect what they had never dreamed of looking for before—air-holes that were pierced in the ends to enable the hidden occupant to breathe within.

"That settles it," said Harry.

"The settlefulness is terrific."

The last doubt was banished now. The whole thing was clear. Soames had entered the house packed inside that trunk, and for two nights and days he had been an unknown and unsuspected inhabitant of Wharton Lodge. Probably he had passed little time in the trunk; for, as Bunter's room was never entered, it was easy for him to emerge from those close quarters, taking refuge there again at a sound of alarm.

The only question was—was he there now? From what had happened in the library that evening, it looked as if Soames realised that his game at Wharton Lodge was over. It was probable that he had gone—to seek Bunter again in the lonely bungalow and wring the truth from the fat Owl. His last

words to Colonel Wharton implied as much. But if he was still there—

Colonel Wharton gripped the thick Malacca lifted for use if wanted.

"See if it is locked," he said. "If it is not, he is not there. But—"

Bob Cherry grasped the lid; it lifted without resistance. The trunk was unlocked! That, of course, could only mean that it was empty. The next moment the juniors saw that it was empty.

Colonel Wharton lowered the stick, with an angry grunt. He would have been very glad to find Soames in his hiding-place.

But the crook was gone. The fact that he had left the trunk unlocked showed that he had no further use for it. He was finished at Wharton Lodge, and did not care whether the trick was discovered or not.

Nothing at all was inside the huge trunk. The weight that had made the bearers stagger when it was carried upstairs was gone. It had been the weight of James Soames.

"Too late!" grunted the colonel.

"If we'd spotted it yesterday—"

said Bob.

"Well, we couldn't have, as we believed that the trunk was Bunter's," said Harry Wharton.

"There may be a chance yet," said Colonel Wharton. "He must have gone back to the place where he left Bunter; you boys must have narrowly missed meeting him there. The police may find him there. There is a chance."

And the colonel hurried down to the telephone.

SOAMES was not found at the lonely bungalow when the Wimford police got there. No doubt he had already missed Bunter, and realised that it was wise to go while the going was good. Where he went, and whether he still nourished a hope of getting on the track of the mysterious cigarette-case, the Greyfriars fellows did not know—and did not care very much. They had far more agreeable things to think about than the baffled and defeated sea-lawyer.

"Jolly, ain't it?" said Billy Bunter the next morning, beaming on the juniors through his big spectacles. "You fellows might have missed me entirely this Christmas! Lucky it ain't so bad as that—what?"

"The luckfulness is terrific," declared Hurree Singh solemnly.

"But it's all right now!" said Bunter. "I'm here, after all; so it's going to be a topping Christmas!"

And a topping Christmas it was—though whether that was because Bunter was there, or in spite of it, was another matter.

THE END.

(The next splendid yarn in this thrilling series: "A DAZZLING QUEST!" will appear in our great CHRISTMAS WEEK NUMBER of the MAGNET, on sale THURSDAY, December 22nd.)

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