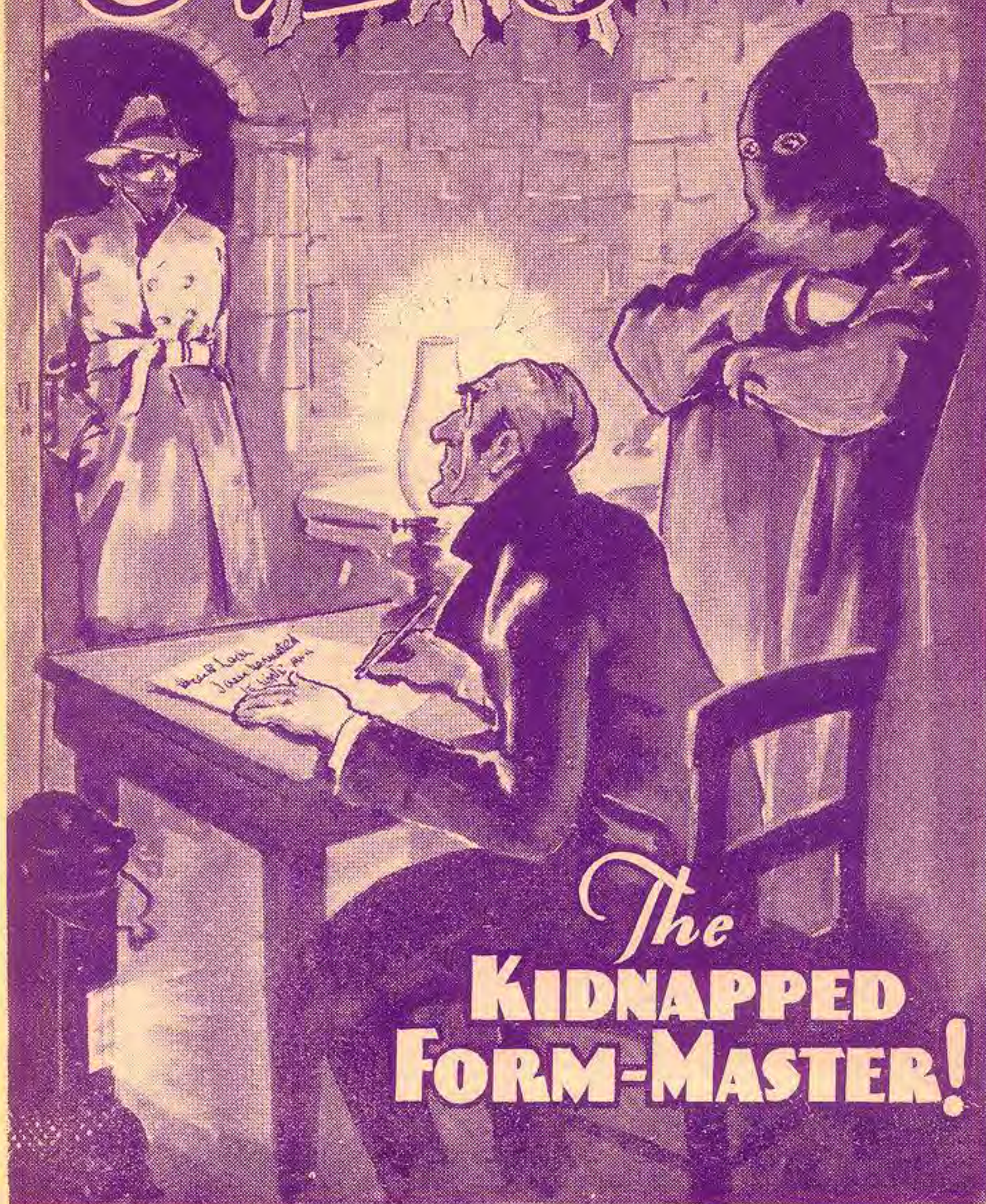


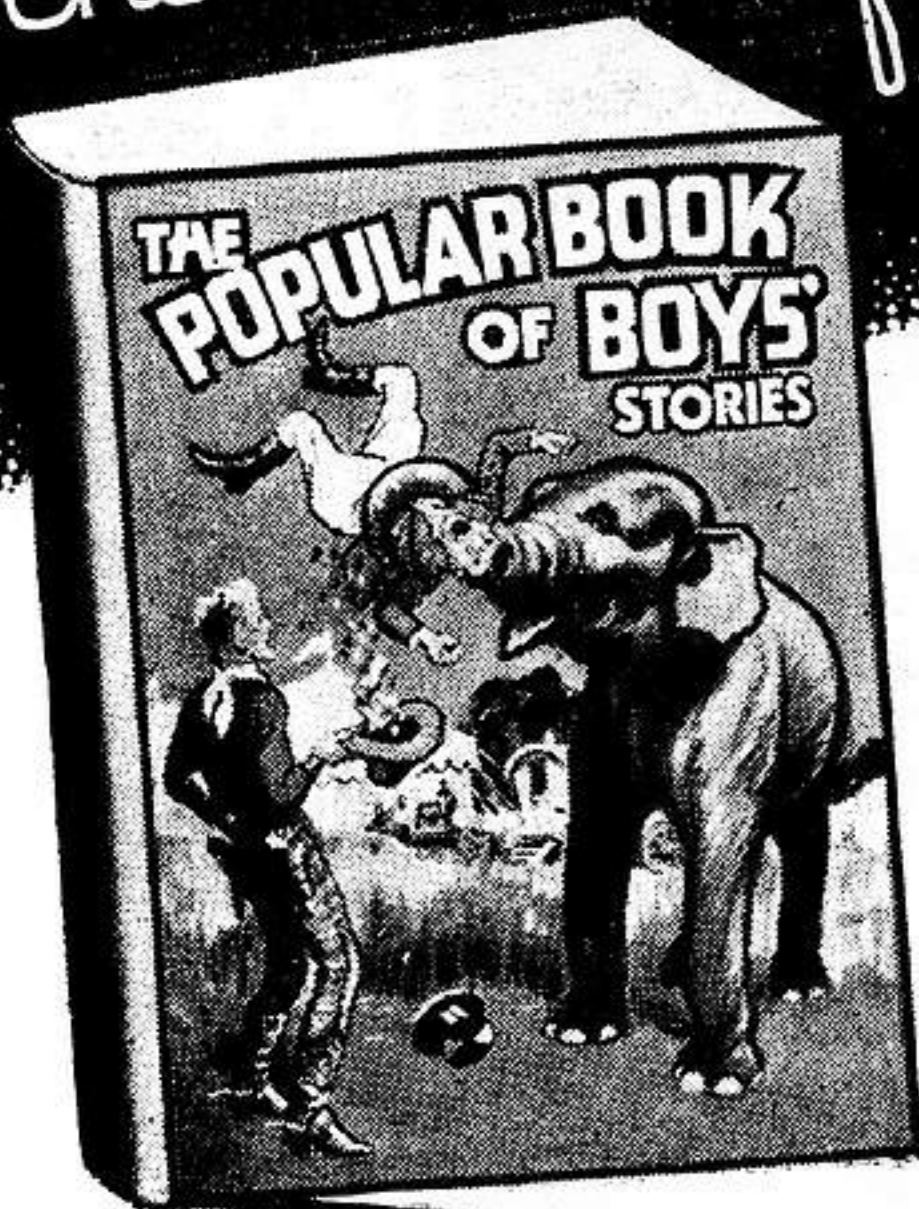
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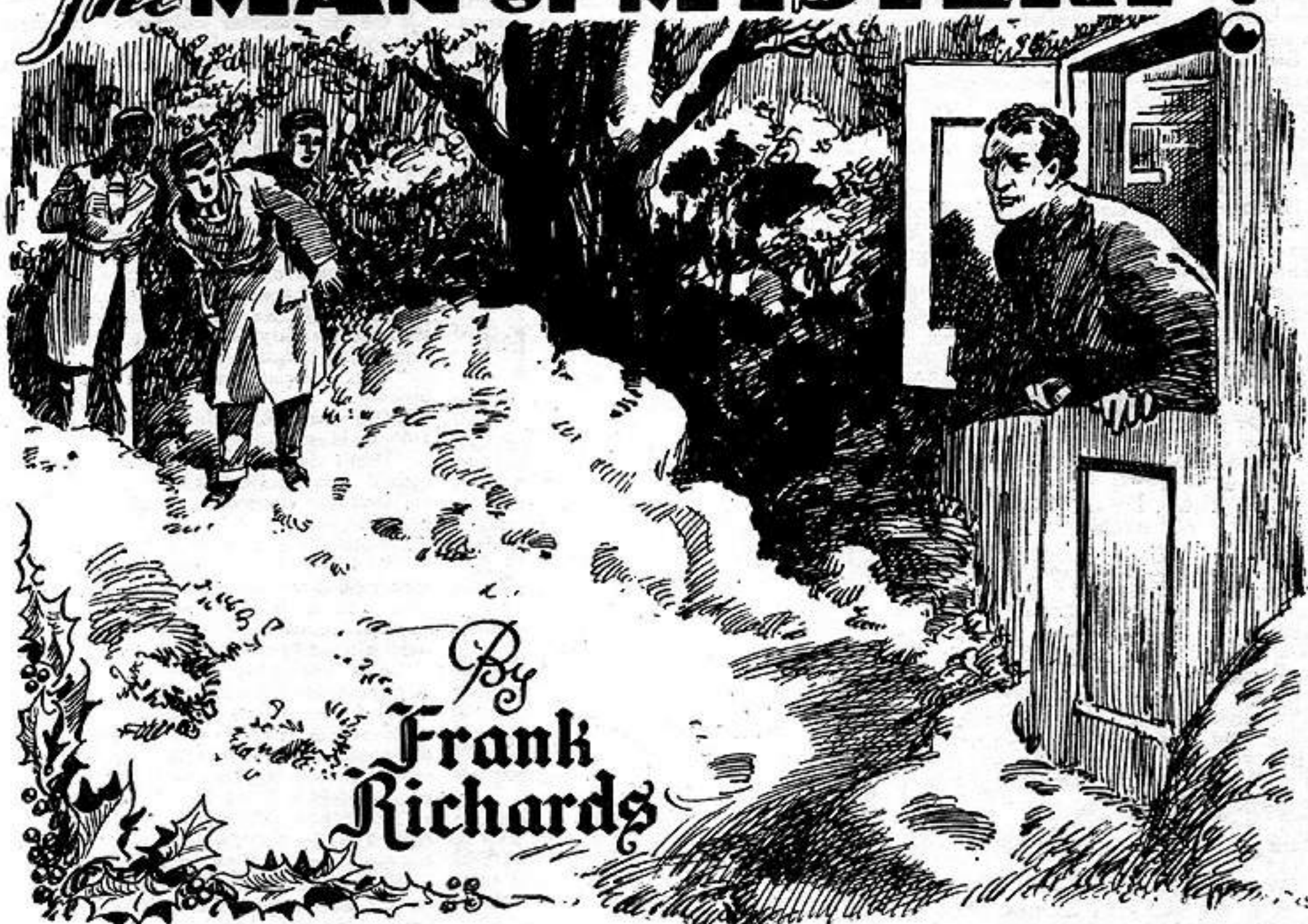
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The MAN OF MYSTERY!



By
Frank Richards

ON THE ICE!

"READY, Bunter?"

"No!"

Billy Bunter made that answer in the negative with calm dignity.

He was not ready. It was hardly to be expected that he would be ready yet.

Bunter had turned out early that wintry December morning; unusually early for holiday-time. He had been down to breakfast at half-past nine!

At ten o'clock he was still punishing the breakfast.

Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh had their overcoats on, scarves round their necks, and skates hanging over their arms. They loitered before the log-fire in the hall at Wharton Lodge, waiting for Bunter—till Wharton at last put his head into the breakfast-room, to inquire whether the fat Owl of Greyfriars was ready—and to learn that Bunter was not!

"Well, buck up, old fat man!" urged Harry.

Billy Bunter blinked round over a fat shoulder, through his big spectacles.

"Can't you wait for a fellow?" he inquired.

"Not much longer. You see—"

"When I have guests at Bunter Court I don't rush them about, Wharton! But I suppose I can't expect much in the way of manners here."

"You fat ass—"

"I don't call my guests names, either,

The three Greyfriars juniors gazed blankly at Mr. Lamb as he stood leaning from the door of the caravan, scanning the lane. "What the thump is he doing here?" said Bob Cherry in wonder.

at Bunter Court!" said Billy Bunter.

"But I suppose—"

"Look here, you fat owl, if we're going to get a spot of skating this morning, we've no more time to lose! We've got to start in an hour for the station, to meet Bob Cherry's train."

"I'm not going to the station! If Bob Cherry thinks I'm going to slog a mile and a half through the snow to meet his blessed train, you can tell him to guess again when you see him!"

"I'm going, ass, and so is Inky! And we're going to skate first! Coming or not?" hooted the captain of the Greyfriars Remove.

"Not till I've finished brekker."

"How long?" hooted Wharton.

"Well, say a quarter of an hour."

"Say anything you like, old fat ass—I'm going now!"

Harry Wharton turned back into the hall and rejoined the Nabob of Bhanipur.

"Come on, Inky!" he said. "No good waiting for that fat owl. Anyhow, he can't skate and he would only be a worry!"

"The worryfulness would probably be

terrific!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I say, you fellows," came a fat squeak, "don't go! I may be finished in ten minutes."

But answer there came none! The two juniors were going out, in the cold and frosty morning, heedless of the fat Owl of the Remove.

Billy Bunter was a guest, of sorts, at Wharton Lodge for the Christmas holidays. But Billy Bunter's manners and customs as a guest were wholly his own—and liable to tire out the patience of the most patient host.

Having waited twenty minutes for the fat Owl, the other fellows did not seem disposed to wait another ten. So they went—followed by a snort of scornful indignation from William George Bunter.

Snow had been falling all the night, and the park gleamed white as Wharton and Hurree Singh tramped away from the house towards the frozen lake.

It was not a large lake—Billy Bunter, indeed, called it a pond, in the agreeable way he had. But it was frozen

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hard, and there was plenty of room for skaters. The two juniors fastened on their skates and shot out on the ice, and circled round the lake with great enjoyment in the keen, frosty air. They even forgot the fat existence of Billy Bunter, and would not have minded in the least if the fat Owl had continued his breakfast till the butler announced lunch!

But they were reminded of that distinguished guest about twenty minutes later, by a fat squeak from the bank:

"I say, you fellows!"

The skaters looked round at a fat figure waving a podgy hand.

"Oh blow!" said Harry.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh chuckled. "The blowfulness is terrific!" he agreed. "Let the esteemed and execrable fat boulder rip!"

And the dusky nabob continued to perform figures of eight, regardless of the waving paw and the fat squeak.

Wharton slid across towards the spot where Bunter stood. It was up to him to bear with that peculiar guest—at least, so long as flesh and blood could stand it!

"Hallo! Come on!" he called out. "Want a hand?"

"No! Think I want helping on the ice?" snorted Bunter. "I can skate better than you can, I hope!"

"What do you want, then, fathead?"

"Skates!" answered Bunter. "I suppose you're going to lend me some skates? Or do you expect a fellow to pack skates when he pays a visit for Christmas?"

Harry Wharton laughed. "I don't expect you to pack anything, old fat man!" he answered. "But you could have got some skates in the house. Why the thump didn't you ask me before we came out?"

"I was having brekker. I can't think of everything at once, I suppose!"

"Well, cut back, and—"

"I'm not going to traipse back to the house, after traipsing down here to this little pond!" roared Bunter.

"Lend me those skates—"

"Eh?"

"You can't skate for toffee! Lend me those, and I'll show you how it's done! You can watch me and pick up some tips about skating! I say, don't rush off while a fellow's talking to you!" yelled Bunter. "Are you deaf, Wharton?"

Harry Wharton seemed deaf.

At all events, if he heard, he heeded not! He shot away across the ice, leaving Billy Bunter snorting.

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

Even that polite oburgation did not recall the captain of the Remove to Bunter's side of the pond.

Bunter waved a fat hand. Then he shook a fat fist! But it was all in vain! Harry Wharton seemed not only deaf that morning, but blind also! Apparently, he was quite oblivious of the fat figure on the bank!

Billy Bunter breathed wrath! This was the way they treated a guest at Wharton Lodge—such a nice guest as Bunter, too!

It was really enough to exasperate Bunter into shaking the dust of Wharton Lodge from his feet and departing in indignant scorn.

No doubt he would have done so had there been any attractive alternative available. But home, sweet home failed to attract Bunter. Really, it was a case of any port in a storm; so Bunter on his travels, like Ulysses of old, had to be long-enduring!

Walking back to the house for

skates was too much trouble for Bunter. Wharton, with the selfishness Bunter really expected of him, was not going to hand over his skates and sit it out.

Still, if a fellow hadn't skates, he could slide! Bunter decided to slide.

Really, he was better at sliding than at skating, if only he had realised it. Sliding, he could maintain the perpendicular for a minute or two at least. Skating, he was liable to turn into a catherine-wheel at the first shot!

Bunter slid out on the ice.

He shot across the pond.

For nearly a minute he sailed along merrily. Then, to his surprise, one leg insisted on travelling faster than the other, while both feet seemed to have an obstinate desire to part company and travel in different directions altogether. Neither legs nor feet seemed to be under Bunter's control.

Bunter gave a roar of alarm.

"I say, you fellows— Yaroooh!"

Bump!

Bunter sat down suddenly.

The ice was good and strong. But even Arctic ice would hardly have stood that concussion. It cracked and split in all directions.

Crash!

"Ooooooooooogh!"

Billy Bunter, clinging wildly to a ragged, broken edge of ice, yelled, and yelled, and yelled.

RUN, RABBIT, RUN!

"I SAY, you fellows—help!" yelled Bunter.

"Oh crumbs!" exclaimed

Harry Wharton.

"Oh, my esteemed hat!" ejaculated

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

They rushed to the rescue.

Bunter had made quite a large gap in the ice. Broken edges surrounded him and dark water welled and oozed over the surface. Up to his fat neck, Bunter hung on frantically and yelled.

Harry Wharton was the first to reach him. He dropped on his knees beside the gap and clutched at a fat neck.

Luckily the ice was thick. Bunter only had to be dragged out on it. But dragging Bunter out was no easy task. Bunter's weight was not easily handled, and he was thrashing about like a frantic fish.

"Ooogh! I'm drowning!" yelled Bunter. "Pull me out, will you? Don't pinch my neck, you beast! You're pinching my neck!"

"I've got to hold you, you mad ass!" gasped Wharton.

"You're pinching my neck on purpose! I'm chok-chok-choking! Ooogh! Will you get me out of this!" shrieked Bunter.

"Lend me a hand, Inky!" panted the captain of the Remove.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh hurriedly kicked off his skates. Then he leaned over and got hold of Bunter. The two juniors pulled.

"Go it!" gasped Hurree Singh.

"Here he comes!" panted Harry.

Between the two of them, putting all their beef into it, the fat Owl was dragged out, and landed on the ice like a fat fish!

He sprawled there, spluttering, while Wharton and Hurree Singh stood gasping for breath.

"Ow! Ooogh! I say, you fellows, I'm wet!" gurgled Bunter. "I'm wet through! Do you hear? Wet to the skin! Wooooogh!"

He glared accusingly at the two juniors. He seemed to have an impression that it was due to them that he was wet! Really, it was not their fault.

They could not help the water being wet! Water, generally, was wet!

"Soaked!" hooted Bunter. "Drenched! Nice sort of a Christmas holiday this! I wish I'd gone home with old Mauly now!"

"I don't!" said Harry Wharton, shaking his head.

"Oh!" Bunter blinked at him through wet spectacles. "You don't?"

"No! I can stand it better than Mauly!"

"Why, you beast——" roared Bunter.

"Heave him up, Inky! He will have to get in and change, or we shall have him laid up with a cold."

"I'm catching a cold already!" howled Bunter. "Fat lot you care! You'd like me to catch a cold!"

"Up you come!" sighed the captain of the Remove.

Two fat arms were grasped, and Bunter was heaved to his feet. He stood unsteadily on slippery ice, clutching at his helpers.

"Don't twist my arms off!" he howled.

"Oh, come on! Get him off the ice, Inky! Heave away!"

"Don't drag me about like a sack of coke!" roared Bunter.

"Do you want to get off the ice or not, fathead?"

"Beast!"

The fat Owl was piloted ashore. He was landed at last on the bank. But it was not a happy landing. Bunter snorted, sniffed, gurgled, and glared with almost speechless indignation.

"Are you going on skating and me in this state?" he roared.

"Cut back to the house——"

"I can't without help! I'm nearly drowned! I'm exhausted! Fat lot you care! I dare say you want me to perish at your feet! It would be like you!"

"Oh dear! Chuck the skating, Inky! Anyhow, we should have to get off to the station pretty soon. Come on!"

Whether Billy Bunter was exhausted or not, he hung very heavily on the two juniors as they led him away towards the house. There was no doubt that he was wet and cold and very uncomfortable. When Billy Bunter was in that state he was not an agreeable Bunter.

"For goodness' sake don't hang on a fellow like a ton of lead!" protested Wharton, as he staggered under the weight of the fat Owl.

"Beast! I can't walk! I'm too exhausted after being nearly drowned! You'll have to carry me!"

"Oh, my hat! I'm not a ten-ton lorry!"

"Yah! Leave me here to perish of cold then!" said Bunter bitterly. And he plumped down in the snow.

Harry Wharton and Hurree Singh looked at him. Then they looked at one another eloquently. Then they made a chair with their arms and heaved Billy Bunter up.

He clutched two necks with two fat arms to hang on as he was chaired.

"Oh crumbs!" howled Wharton.

"Don't choke me!"

"You'd like me to fall down, wouldn't you?" snorted Bunter. "Well, I ain't going to fall down to please you!"

Harry Wharton suppressed his feelings.

Staggering under the weight, the juniors bore Billy Bunter towards the distant house.

Half-way to the house two figures were encountered on the path. They were old Colonel Wharton and Miss Amy Wharton, Harry's uncle and aunt. Both of them gazed at Bunter and his bearers.

"What ever has happened?" exclaimed Miss Wharton in alarm.

"Bunter's been through the ice!" explained Harry. "We're getting him back to the house."

Grunt! from the old colonel. "What are you carrying him for?" he demanded. "He should run as fast as he can as he is wet through."

"I can't!" gasped Bunter. "I'm exhausted, struggling for my life in the water, and—and all that! I'm too exhausted to speak—"

"What?"

"I—I mean, nearly too exhausted to speak! I say, you fellows, do get on—I shall be catching cold directly! I can feel it coming on. If you fellows want me to be laid up with pneumonia and plumbago—"

"You had better run, Bunter!" said Colonel Wharton decidedly. "Put him down at once!"

"Look here—" howled Bunter.

The chair under the fat Owl parted, and he was put down at once. He landed in a sitting position with a bump and a roar.

"Wow! Beasts! Ow!"

"Now run, Bunter!" said Colonel Wharton. "Run as fast as you can!"

"Shan't!"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Harry Wharton, quite alarmed by the expression that came over the old military gentleman's bronzed face at that answer.

"What!" ejaculated Colonel Wharton.

"Good gad!"

"If the poor boy cannot walk, James—" said Aunt Amy in her gentle tones.

"We shall see whether he cannot!" snorted the colonel.

He leaned over Bunter and took a grip like a steel vice on a fat ear. By that means he lifted Bunter.

Never had the Owl of the Remove got on his feet so quickly. He fairly bounded. An india-rubber ball had nothing on Bunter as he bounced up.

"Yaroooh!" he roared.

"Now run to the house, Bunter, as fast as you can!" said Colonel Wharton, releasing the fat ear.

"Ow! Yow!"

"Do you hear me?"

"Yow! Ow! Yow!" roared Bunter.

"I can't! I can't put one foot before another, being so exhausted! I can't lift— Yaroooooooop!"

He bounded again as the vice-like finger and thumb approached a fat ear!

Then he started for the house. He started at quite a good pace—and kept it up! Bunter's chief object at the moment was to keep at a safe distance from that finger and thumb! He fairly raced!

"It appears that Bunter can walk, and, indeed, run!" remarked Colonel Wharton grimly. And, with another grunt, the old military gentleman resumed his walk with Aunt Amy.

Wharton and Hurree Singh, grinning, walked after Bunter to the house.

Bunter was in first. They found him spluttering over the fire in the hall when they got in. He blinked round at them with a ferocious blink.

"Look here, Wharton, if you think I'm going to have my ear pulled—" he roared.

"You mustn't cheek my uncle, old fat man!" said Harry.

"Blow your uncle! Look at my ear!"

The two juniors looked at it and grinned. It was crimson. The old colonel had given it a good grip.

"The silly old fossil!" hooted Bunter.

"Do you want another ear to match that one?" asked Harry.

"Eh? No!"

"Then shut up!"

"Beast! If you fancy I'm standing

this sort of thing you're jolly well mistaken—see? I'm going!" roared Bunter.

"O.K.!" Good-bye, then, as we shan't see you when we get back from the station!" said the captain of the Remove. "Merry Christmas, old bean! Tell us all about it next term!"

Billy Bunter did not answer that. He glared—speechlessly.

Harry Wharton and Hurree Singh started for Wimford, to meet Bob Cherry's train at the station—having said good-bye to Bunter. But they had a suspicion that the fat Owl would not, after all, carry out his deadly threat, and that they would find him at Wharton Lodge when they returned.

QUITE A SURPRISE!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" came a cheery roar.

A ruddy face, with a cap pushed back on a mop of flaxen hair, looked out of the train.

Bob Cherry had a powerful voice. It apprised quite a good portion of the county of Surrey that he had arrived at Wimford Station.

Two waiting juniors cut across the platform.

Bob Cherry jumped from the carriage and waved a hand.

READERS PLEASE NOTE!

The next issue of the
MAGNET will be on sale
THURSDAY, December 21st.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" he repeated, fortissimo. "Here we are again!"

"Are you speaking to the esteemed Gosling?" asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Eh?" Bob stared. "Gosling?"

Gosling, the ancient porter of Greyfriars School, was at least eighty miles away, Greyfriars being in the adjoining county of Kent, and on the farther side of it. So Bob looked puzzled for a moment.

Then he grinned.

"Funny old ass, ain't you, Inky?" he said, and he gave the Nabob of Bhanipur a cheery smack on the shoulder which made him stagger. "Jolly glad to see you fellows again! Johnny or Franky around yet?"

"No. Nugent's coming to-morrow, and Johnny Bull a day or two later," answered Wharton. "But we've got Bunter, if you're keen to see him."

Bob made a grimace.

"Bunter! Got Bunter with you? Wasn't Bunter telling us before we broke up at Greyfriars that he was going to have a specially gorgeous time with the Bunter clan?"

"He was," said Harry, laughing; "but something seems to have side-slipped with the gorgeous time, and so—so—"

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"So he picked out the softest spot to fall on," he remarked. "I heard you tell him at Greyfriars that if he barged in there would be a boot."

"Well, you see, it was rather awkward," explained Wharton. "The howling ass walked over and got caught in a snowstorm and took shelter in the old moat house. You remember that old ruin I showed you in the summer."

"I remember," assented Bob. "Jolly old haunted house; phantom miser, with a ghostly light, shaking a spook bunch of keys. Warranted genuine, but when looked for the visibility isn't good—"

"Well, Bunter saw the ghost!"

"Eh?"

"At least, he heard him. He saw the ghostly light, and heard the rattling of the phantom keys—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And was frightened out of his wits," said Harry. "Inky and I picked him up in the snow in Redgate Lane and got him to Wharton Lodge and—"

"And since then he's used no other?" grinned Bob.

"Well, yes."

"Good old Bunter! Some sticker!" said Bob. "I suppose he spun you that ghost story to pull your leg?"

"Oh, no; he was frightened to a frazzle! He must have heard something—the wind, very likely. There's a man living in a caravan close by the haunted house; Bunter may have heard him putting his kettle on and taken it for the ghostly bunch of keys!"

"A caravan at this time of the year!" exclaimed Bob. "Must be a pretty hardy specimen, caravanning in December."

"Not exactly caravanning; he's settled down there, from what I can make out. The van's on the phone," said Harry. "We went along the next day; but the ghost was not on view, and the man in the van called us a pair of fools when we asked him if he'd seen anything; rather an unpleasant sort of blighter, with a face like a rat. We haven't been there since; the place is fairly stacked with snow, and it's not easy going."

"I say, though, that's one way to your place!" said Bob. "We're going to walk; let's go round that way. I'd like to see Bunter's ghost."

"Right-ho!" assented Wharton.

The three juniors left the station, Bob Cherry swinging a suitcase in his hand. They walked cheerily out of the little town and crossed a field path into Redgate Lane.

A train journey from Dorsetshire—even in war-time trains—had not tired Bob Cherry. He tramped along lightly, swinging a heavy suitcase almost as if it were a feather-weight.

Bob was quite keen to have a squint at the old moat house where Billy Bunter had encountered the ghost—probably the only fellow who ever had! He had rambled over the old place in the summer with his friends, but certainly no ghost had been walking at that time. Still, Christmastide was the time for ghosts, so perhaps Bunter had had better luck.

Redgate Lane, in which there was little traffic in the winter, was a sheet of snow. There was no traffic at all now; the snow was too thick on the ground to make it practicable for a vehicle to use the road.

A lonelier place could hardly have been found in all Surrey. The three juniors left deep tracks in the snow as they tramped.

"Not a soul about," remarked Bob.

"Nor likely to be in this weather," answered Harry. "It's pretty tough going here."

"The toughness is truly terrific!" gasped Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, as he dragged a leg out of a deep rut, hidden by snow, into which it had slipped.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob. "Somebody's been by here since the last snow fell."

He pointed to a track in the snow at the side of the lane.

Harry Wharton glanced at it. The tracks of two good-sized boots were clearly marked.

"The man from the van, I dare say," he said. "I suppose he trots into Wimford sometimes for grub."

"Going to the town, anyhow," said Bob; "the toes are turned that way. I say, this is a jolly lonely spot for a man to live in a caravan! Jolly nice in the summer, or the autumn, but in December—Grooogh! But I suppose he can camp there for nothing. I think you told me the old place was in Chancery, so I suppose nobody asks him to pay any rent."

"I expect that's it," agreed Harry.

The three schoolboys tramped on, halting at last in a gap in an ancient, crumbling wall, where a gateway once had been.

Looking through it, they saw the old moat house—a mass of ruins, surrounded by an ancient moat choked by rubble and piled with snow.

At a little distance from it, to the right, stood a caravan, so thickly banked round with snow that the wheels were hidden from sight.

The door was shut, and a curtain covered the little window. But it seemed to be occupied, as a wisp of smoke curled up from the chimney.

"It was the man from the van who left that trail," remarked Bob Cherry. "Was it?"

"Look, old bean! The trail ends here," said Bob; "or, rather, it starts here. From the van to the lane, and then on towards Wimford."

Harry Wharton nodded. The deep footprints in the snow came from the caravan. The lonely caravanner by the old moat house seemed to have left his camp.

"He must have left his stove burning," said Harry. "The smoke's coming out of the chimney. I'm rather glad he's gone; he made himself rather unpleasant when we came round the day after Bunter was here."

"Like his cheek!" said Bob. "He can't have any more right here than anybody else. Anyhow, he's gone, so—"

Buzzzzzz!

Bob broke off at that buzz of a raucous bell from the direction of the van. It was the buzz of a telephone-bell. The juniors had noticed the telephone-wire joined up to the van—which looked as if it was a more or less permanent residence, unless the rat-faced man had gone to some expense to keep in touch with the outer world for a short stay.

Bob burst into a chuckle.

"That's the phone!" he said. "Was that what Bunter took for the rattling of ghostly keys?"

"I shouldn't wonder," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "He was in a blue funk, and might have taken anything for anything else. Come on, let's get into the place."

The juniors tramped through the snow, off the lane, towards the moat house.

The buzz of the telephone-bell in the van cut off. Silence followed.

Bob glanced round.

"That's queer!" he said.

"What is the esteemed queerfulness?" asked Hurree Singh.

"That bell," said Bob. "There must be somebody in the van who has taken the call, or it would ring again. They never ring only once."

"By gum! Yes, that's so!" said Harry, glancing round towards the

van. "That ill-tempered sweep has a visitor for Christmas, perhaps."

That van was, after all, occupied, though the trail in the snow showed that one occupant had left.

However, it did not concern the Greyfriars juniors very much, and they pushed on towards the moat. They had reached its edge, and were looking for a good place to cross, when the caravan door opened, and a man leaned out, scanning the lane with searching eyes. Apparently, he was looking out to see whether the other man was returning.

He did not glance towards the moated house, and did not observe the three juniors standing there. Probably he did not expect to see anyone in so desolate and snowbound a spot.

But they had looked round, at the sound of the opening door in the van, and they all saw him as he leaned out. And they all stared.

"Oh gum!" ejaculated Bob.

Not for a moment had it crossed the minds of the juniors that they knew the man in the van, or anything about him. But all three of them knew the face that looked out into the clear, frosty air—a rather pale-complexioned, clean-shaven face, which had been quite familiar to them during the last week or two before break-up at Greyfriars School.

"The Pet Lamb!" exclaimed Harry Wharton in astonishment.

THE PET LAMB!

MR. LAMB stood leaning from the van, scanning the lane.

Still his eyes did not turn towards the juniors at the moat of the old house a few dozen yards away.

Obviously, he was anxious for the other man to return—there was impatience in his look as he scanned the snowy landscape.

The three gazed at him blankly.

The sight of the headmaster of Greyfriars, or of Mr. Quelch, their old Form-master, could hardly have surprised them more.

The man in the van was a Greyfriars master. True, he was a new master at the school; he had been there only about a couple of weeks before break-up, being the new art master who had come in Mr. Woosey's place.

But the Remove fellows had seen a great deal of him, as, in Mr. Quelch's absence, he had taken Quelch's Form, acting as Form-master to the Remove while Mr. Quelch was away.

The face at the van door disappeared, and the door shut with a slam. That sharp slam seemed to indicate annoyance on the part of Mr. Lamb.

"Well, my hat!" said Harry Wharton blankly. "That's the Pet Lamb, and no mistake!"

"The esteemed and ridiculous Pet Lamb!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"The Lamb all right!" said Bob, in wonder. "What the thump can he be doing here—in that van?"

"Well, the queer thing is, Inky and I passed a man in this lane whom we thought was Lamb, the evening we got here from school!" said Harry. "I wondered then whether he was staying in this quarter for the vacation. But we haven't seen anything of him since. Shall we go and speak to him?"

"It would be polite," remarked the nabob. "We get on terrifically well with the esteemed Lamb at school."

"Bunter doesn't!" grinned Bob. "He

pitched into Bunter and gave him a record whopping one day."

"Yes, he's got a temper, when he lets it rip!" said Harry. "But he's quite harmless, as a rule. It would be only civil to go and speak to him."

"Well, you go and do the civil, while I look round this old show!" said Bob. "We've got to get in for lunch, and I'm getting as hungry as a hunter, or a Bunter."

"O.K.!"

Leaving Bob Cherry to scramble across the choked old moat and into the ruined moat house, Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh walked away to the caravan.

As Mr. Lamb was their Form-master at school, during Quelch's absence, it seemed to the captain of the Remove only civil to speak to him, now that they had so unexpectedly encountered him during the holidays. He was Mr. Lamb's head boy, so long as Lamb had the Remove. And though the art master had once or twice let an angry temper rip, he was generally so meek and mild that the juniors had named him the Pet Lamb, and most of the Greyfriars Remove rather liked him.

Harry Wharton stepped up on the snowy steps and tapped at the door of the van.

There was no answer from within, and he tapped again, more loudly. Still there was no answer, and but for the fact that they had seen Mr. Lamb, the juniors might have supposed that the caravan was untenanted.

Wharton, considerably puzzled, knocked a third time. Then a sharp and rather angry voice rapped from within the van.

It was Mr. Lamb's voice, but it did not sound so amiable as was its wont at Greyfriars School.

"Who is there? Go away at once!"

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, who was standing beside the steps, grinned up at his chum, a dusky grin. Mr. Lamb certainly did not know who was knocking at the door, but he did not seem to want visitors.

"It's I, Mr. Lamb!" called out Harry.

"What? I don't care who you are—go away!" Evidently Mr. Lamb did not, for the moment, recognise the voice of his head boy at school.

"It's Wharton!" called out Harry.

"Wharton?"

"Yes—Wharton of the Remove."

"Oh!"

There was a pause.

Then the door opened.

If Mr. Lamb had been angry, he did not look angry now. At all events, if there was anger and annoyance within, they were well hidden. His rather sleepy-looking face wore the mild smile to which the Greyfriars fellows were accustomed in the Pet Lamb.

"Wharton!" he said. "My dear boy—and Hurree Singh, too! How very unexpected to meet you here—perhaps you live in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes—my home is only half a mile from here, sir!" said Harry, as the art master of Greyfriars shook hands with him very cordially. "We saw you look out of the van a few minutes ago, so we thought—"

"So you very kindly came to give me a Christmas greeting!" said Mr. Lamb, smiling. "Thank you, my boy—I am very glad to see you! And you, Hurree Singh. This is really an unexpected pleasure. I am staying at Redgate for the vacation—probably you know the place?"

"Oh, yes, sir!" answered Harry.

"In lodgings," said Mr. Lamb, with a cough. "Art masters are not wealthy



Billy Bunter sailed merrily along on the ice. Then, suddenly, both feet seemed to have an obstinate desire to part company and travel in different directions. "I say, you fellows—Yaroooh!" roared the fat junior in alarm.

people—hem! But have you boys seen anything of a man in the lane—the man who belongs to this van—or, I should say, to whom this van belongs? I do not know his name—a man with a somewhat sharp face—"

"We haven't seen him," said Harry. "Not to-day, I mean."

"It is very awkward," said Mr. Lamb. He was still standing in the doorway of the van as he talked. "I really cannot remain much longer, if he does not come back. He said an hour—and he has been gone much longer than an hour! I have to get back to my lodgings for lunch—my landlady is a very, very pleasant soul, but she does not like lodgers to be late for meals—she does not like it at all! I—I dislike making her cross—I dislike it very much."

The two juniors smiled.

This was, so to speak, the genuine bleat of the Pet Lamb! They could imagine the mild little gentleman in a state of nervous awe of a determined landlady!

Mr. Lamb fumbled in his pocket and took out a spectacle-case. He proceeded to put on a pair of gold-rimmed glasses—which he had not worn when he looked out of the van. He blinked at the juniors, and then stared along the lane. It looked as if he hoped to spot the rat-faced man, now that he had his glasses on. But no one was in sight.

"Are you waiting for him, sir?" asked Harry, rather puzzled.

"Yes—it is most awkward!" bleated the Pet Lamb. "You see, I had taken a walk from Redgate this morning, and the snow was very troublesome—very troublesome indeed. I was very tired.

I am not an athlete—not a good walker at all! The good man allowed me to sit in his van to rest—it was very kind of him indeed."

He gave another blink along the lane.

"Then he told me that he had to go to Wimford to do some shopping, and asked me if I would mind the van while he was gone!" he said. "Of course, I said I would at once—but he said he would be gone an hour—and, really, it is much more than an hour! It is very awkward indeed."

Harry Wharton and Hurree Singh exchanged a smile. The presence of Mr. Lamb in that lonely van, which had astonished them, was thus simply explained.

"I hardly like to go until he returns," said Mr. Lamb. "But, really, I cannot wait much longer! I have to consider my landlady! I think a lodger should always consider his landlady! Consideration on both sides makes life so much more peaceful in lodgings. It is so very awkward when a landlady takes offence. A pleasant soul—a very pleasant soul indeed—but so very particular about meals."

The two juniors could not help feeling concerned about Mr. Lamb in his distress.

"Really, I wish I had asked the man to look up his van when he went," Mr. Lamb went on. "He must do so on other occasions—at least, I suppose so! But I was glad of a rest—very glad—I am not at all athletic. But really and truly, I wish that he would return. Perhaps, if you boys are going towards Wimford, you might meet him, and ask him to hurry up."

"We're going the other way, sir—

we've just come from Wimford!" answered Harry. "But we'll cut along and see if he's coming, if you like, sir! The lane's so winding, he mayn't be far away."

"Will you really?" exclaimed Mr. Lamb, beaming. "That is very kind of you, my dear boys! If it is not really too much trouble—"

"Not at all, sir! We'll go like a shot. I dare say Bob would like to hang on and explore that old show a bit, so it's all right!" said Harry. "Bob Cherry's with us, sir—he's in the moat house now—"

"What?"

Mr. Lamb seemed to snap out that word. The expression on his mild face changed strangely for a moment.

But the next, he was the Pet Lamb again.

"Is it safe to explore that old ruined building?" he asked. "I hope Cherry will meet with no accident! I have been told it is in a very ruinous condition."

"Oh, Bob's all right, sir!" said Wharton, smiling. "He won't come to any harm! I'll give him a call as we pass. Come on, Inky!"

"Thank you so much, my dear boy!"

The two juniors turned away, leaving Mr. Lamb in the doorway of the van.

They walked back to the edge of the moat, and Harry Wharton shouted across:

"Bob, old bean!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" came back from the dusky interior of the moat house.

"Going down the lane—come back for you!"

"O.K.!"

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Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh went down the snowy lane at a trot. The high, snow-banked hedges soon shut them off from sight.

Mr. Lamb, from the caravan, watched them till they had disappeared; then he slipped his gold-rimmed spectacles back into their case and descended from the caravan.

THE HAUNTED HOUSE!

"OH!" ejaculated Bob Cherry suddenly.

Bob had been quite enjoying his exploration of the old moat house, while his chums talked with Mr. Lamb at the caravan. He was not sorry when Wharton hailed him, and told him that they were going down the lane. Bob was getting quite keen on that exploration, for he had made what looked to him like an interesting discovery.

More than half the ancient mansion was roofless. Apertures gaped to the wind, where doors and windows once had been.

The old flagstones of the floor were cracked and broken in places, and here and there were gaps which might have been dangerous in the dark.

Wherever the ancient roof was gone, snow had fallen in, and lay in a thick carpet. Even in the sheltered spots there was snow, drifted by the winter wind.

At the end of the old hall was an arched doorway, of which most of the ancient arch remained. Below it a flight of steps led downwards, doubtless to vaults or cellars under the moat house.

Looking down, Bob could only see blackness after a short distance. It was not inviting, and he was not thinking of going down, as he had no light.

But what struck him was that there was drifted snow on the steps; and in the snow, the unmistakable print of boots.

Someone, it was certain, had gone down that dark way, to the dim regions under the old mansion. Possibly the man who lived in the caravan had a taste for exploring old ruins. Standing at the top of the steps, under the broken arch of the old doorway, Bob scanned the steps, and made out that there were tracks going and coming— whoever had gone down had come up again! That was only to be expected—nobody could be supposed to want to stay down in such a dreary place for long.

But in view of the yarn Billy Bunter had told, of a ghost in the moat house, this was rather an interesting discovery. It showed that the haunted house was not always deserted—somebody was there, sometimes. Bob wondered whether that somebody might have been there at the same time as Bunter, and might have played some trick to scare the fat Owl.

Scanning those footprints, Bob was more and more interested. Bob was a good Scout—the Famous Five were all keen Scouts. And Bob read the sign on those steps with an eye accustomed to Scout-craft.

The top steps were fairly carpeted with snow. They bore the tracks clearly and distinctly.

And Bob's keen eyes discerned, as they scanned the prints, what he had not at first observed—that there were two sets of tracks, both going and coming.

One set was large and might easily have been made by the boots of the man whose track had been seen in the lane.

The other was much smaller, made by

a man with smaller feet, and with neater and better-made shoes.

From which Bob, without being a Sherlock Holmes or a Ferrers Locke, deduced that two men had gone down, and come up, together.

"So there's somebody about!" grinned Bob. "Very likely they pulled that fat chump's leg when he barged in! They'd have a light, if it was after dark—and very likely one of them had a bunch of keys to rattle. Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob's merry laugh rang and echoed in the silent old ruin, as he thought of Billy Bunter getting the wind up, for such a reason.

Then suddenly he jumped and ejaculated:

"Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came back, like an echo to his laugh. But it had a strange, hollow sound that was oddly eerie in the dim old place.

Bob Cherry caught his breath. He stared quickly over his shoulders. He was taken utterly by surprise.

It was not an echo—he knew that it was not an echo. He had heard the echo before that strange, hollow laugh followed. He had believed that he was quite alone in the ruin. If he was, who had laughed?

Looking about him, he saw the old shattered walls and windows—the old flags covered with snow. If there had been tracks on the floor, they had been covered by snow; only on the steps, which were sheltered, the footprints remained clear to the eye.

Dead silence lay on the moat house.

Bob peered to and fro. He could hear nothing but the wail of the December wind.

It was ten minutes since his chums had gone down the lane. It suddenly occurred to him that they might have come back, unheard, and that this was a lark!

He ran back to the entrance of the moat house.

His suitcase lay where he had put it down. No one was in sight. The whole landscape, sheeted in snow, was deserted, under the steely December sun.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob. "Are you fellows about?"

His powerful voice echoed and re-echoed through the moat house. But this time only echo answered him.

"What silly ass—" grunted Bob.

He tramped back the length of the great old hall, to the steps at the rear. He was not going to be scared away, like Billy Bunter, by some ass playing tricks. He resumed his examination of those tracks on the snow-carpeted steps.

Clink!

Bob Cherry jumped almost clear of the old flagstones as he heard that strange, uncanny sound.

He knew what it was—the clinking of iron keys—the sound that was said to be heard when the old miser's ghost was walking, looking for his lost hoard.

Clink!

The strange sound seemed to float on the wind.

Bob stared round him, his heart beating. A creepy, eerie feeling was coming over him. All was silent—all was still—all seemed utterly solitary and deserted! Yet he had heard that ghostly clink!

His heart thumped uncomfortably. He did not believe in ghosts, of course. But just then he wished that his chums had been with him. There was something uncanny in the solitude and silence, and that ghostly clink echoing from apparently nowhere.

"Who's that?" roared Bob.

But his powerful voice rather lacked its usual ring as he shouted.

Only echo replied! With a rather grim expression on his ruddy face, Bob started searching round the old hall.

Great masses of fallen masonry, most of them under a mantle of snow, lay about; there was ample cover for a dozen fellows to hide, if they wanted to.

It was a trick of some sort—the same kind of trick that had scared Billy Bunter a few days ago; and Bob wanted to find that trickster, and tell him what he thought of him! And that uncomfortable thrill at his heart made him feel inclined to add a punch!

Clink, clink, clink!

Bob stopped suddenly in his hunt and stood staring upward. That eerie sound came from above his head. Unless he was dreaming, he heard it above him, and he stared up, with starting eyes.

Not a single upper apartment was left in the old ruined mansion. Upper floors and ceilings had all fallen in and lay piled in confused ruin. Here and there, remains of upper walls reared high, with jagged tops, some of them thickly overgrown with ivy, laden now with snow.

Clink, clink!

Bob's ruddy face paled.

Most of the mansion was open to the sky. Where fragments of old roof or upper floor remained, they were practically impossible to climb, and had anyone been perched on them, Bob could not have failed to see him—clear against the steely sky. No one was to be seen—yet that ghostly sound of the phantom keys had floated above his head. At first he had been uncertain of the direction of the sound—but he was certain now.

He stood staring up at the tops of the old shattered walls. A shiver ran through him, and suddenly he started for the old doorway towards the moat.

He did not run—he would not. But he walked very quickly—and twice, thrice, he cast hurried glances over his shoulders as he went. Then, picking up his suitcase, he scrambled over the moat and tramped back to the lane to seek his friends—breathing quickly and with a good deal less colour than usual in his cheeks.

MYSTERIOUS!

"HERE comes the man!" said Harry Wharton.

"That is the esteemed caravanner!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The two juniors had covered some little distance in the lane when they sighted the man trudging along from the direction of the town. They had seen him once already, and so they knew him again—it was the sharp-featured, rat-faced man who lived in the caravan by the moat house.

They came to a halt, waiting for him to come up. As he approached, he gave them a sharp, suspicious look from under the thick cap that was pulled low over his brows.

He carried a bag, slung over one shoulder—doubtless the supplies for which he had gone to Wimford. It seemed to be rather weighty, and he trudged slowly. He would have passed the two schoolboys without giving them attention after that one suspicious look, but Wharton called to him.

"The man at your van wants you to hurry up!"

The rat-faced man came to a sudden halt, and stared at him.

"What?" he ejaculated.

"Mr. Lamb—if you know his name!" said Harry. "He asked us to tell you to hurry up if we spotted you—he wants to get away!"

The rat-faced man gave him a searching look. Without replying, he tramped on, at an accelerated pace.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh grinned a dusky grin.

"Nice civil chap!" grunted Wharton.

"The civility is terrific!" grinned Hurree Singh. "He does not seem a preposterously good-tempered person!"

"Disgruntled sweep!" said Harry.

"Blessed if I know how he came to let Lamb sit down to rest in his van—he doesn't look obliging! Let's get back!"

They turned back and walked in the track of the rat-faced man, who was now hurrying fast enough.

"There's Bob!" said Harry, as they came round the bend in the lane and in sight of the moat house.

Bob Cherry was standing in the middle of the lane, evidently having finished his explorations in the haunted house.

The rat-faced man passed him, with a suspicious stare, and went on to the van.

Wharton and Hurree Singh rejoined Bob.

"Had enough of the jolly old haunted house?" asked Harry, with a smile.

"Yes," answered Bob, in a rather subdued voice. "Come on!"

"Better say good-bye to the Pet Lamb," said Harry.

"Oh, all right!"

The rat-faced man had gone into the van. Now he was looking from the door at the three schoolboys, his eyes sharp and suspicious under his low brows.

A hostile expression came over his sharp face as they stepped towards the caravan.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Only to speak to Mr. Lamb!" answered Harry.

"Who's that, I'd like to know?"

"The man who was waiting here, minding your van for you."

The rat-faced man eyed him.

"Did that bloke tell you he was minding my van?" he asked.

"Of course he did! How should we know if he hadn't told us?" said Harry Wharton tartly. "We happen to know him."

"You 'appen to know him?" repeated the rat-faced man, staring.

"Yes—he's a master at our school!" said Harry. "Tell him we're here, will you, if he's in the van?"

"He ain't! He's gone!" grunted the man in the caravan. "If you know him, it's more'n I do—never set eyes on him afore this morning, and never want to agin—nor on you, neither!"

And, with that, the rat-faced man stepped back into the van and slammed the door.

"Pig!" remarked Bob Cherry.

"The pigfulness is terrific."

"Oh, come on!" said Harry. "If Lamb's gone, let's get off! Jolly queer that he shouldn't have waited, after sending us to see if that brute was coming! We've just time to get in for lunch."

The three juniors tramped away down Redgate Lane.

Mr. Lamb's departure, in the circumstances, was rather surprising. Having sent them to look for the caravanner, they had certainly expected him to wait there till they came back. Apparently, his anxiety not to displease his landlady had got the better of him, and he had gone.

They turned at last into the road that led to Wharton Lodge.

Bob Cherry spoke hardly a word.

His two comrades glanced at him in surprise from time to time. His silent manner was so in contrast to his usual

exuberance that they could not help feeling surprised.

"Anything up, old chap?" asked Harry, at last, as they came in sight of the gates of Wharton Lodge.

"Oh! No!" mumbled Bob. His cheeks coloured.

"Nothing happened in the haunted house, I suppose?" asked the captain of the Remove, with a smile.

Bob did not answer that, but his colour deepened.

Wharton stared at him.

"Bob, old man! You don't mean to say that—" he ejaculated.

"Well, no—yes!" stammered Bob.

"It—it's jolly queer! I—I suppose it was a trick of some sort, but I can't make it out. It beats me hollow."

"But what?" exclaimed Harry.

Stately Homes of Greyfriars!

By Our Special Reporter

HEAVY taxation and changes of fashion have turned many of the "stately homes of England" into hotels, hospitals, and road houses. But there are still several of our chums in the Greyfriars Remove whose journey's end at holiday-time is a mansion surrounded by parkland in the good old-fashioned style.

Stateliest of all, undoubtedly, is Mauleverer Towers, where Lord Mauleverer frequently entertains his friends during the vacation. Opinions differ among Mauleverer's guests as to just exactly how many rooms there are in Mauleverer Towers; but there are no differences of opinion as to the magnificence of the place.

Vernon-Smith's pater runs a sumptuous country house, embellished with all that is modern in the way of domestic comfort. But the Bounder prefers Mr. Vernon-Smith's smaller, though equally sumptuous, town house.

Trevor goes home to a palatial residence in the North Country where a host of servants and a small fleet of cars give the guest a taste of what it feels like to be a millionaire. Ogilvy, too, boasts a mansion in the Highlands.

"The esteemed ghost that scared the fat and frabjous Bunter?" asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a grin.

"I can't make it out!" repeated Bob. "I found some footprints there, which showed that two men had been rooting about the place. I was looking at them when—when—" He paused, flushing more deeply.

"You didn't spot Bunter's ghost?" asked Harry, laughing.

"I heard what you told me Bunter said he heard—rattling of iron keys," said Bob abruptly.

"My dear chap!"

"Well, I did!"

"Not the telephone bell from the van again?"

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"You thought that Bunter—"

"I'm not a fool like Bunter, I suppose!" said Bob abruptly. "I know

what I heard—the rattling and clinking of iron keys! There's no mistake about that—I heard it all right."

Wharton and the nabob looked at him. They were very much inclined to laugh; but Bob's expression made them check that inclination.

"Nobody was there—so far as I could find out, at any rate!" went on Bob. "And—the sound came from over my head—"

"How could it, old chap? There's no upstairs to the place!"

"Well, it did!"

"Somebody sitting on top of a wall?"

"I should have seen him!"

"It must have been the wind," said Harry. "The wind makes all sorts of queer noises in that old ruin."

"It was the rattling of iron keys. I

Wharton Lodge, scene of many a memorable episode in MAGNET stories, is hardly in the same class as these; but Wharton's home is the epitome of solid English comfort, and might well be regarded as stately by less fortunate fellows.

For sheer opulence, Hurree Singh's palace in Bhanipur probably takes the prize. Inky's home, however, has an Oriental glitter which might not be to the liking of quieter English tastes.

Not all Remove men, of course, dwell in marble halls. Linley comes from a working-class district in Lancashire. Redwing lives in a sailorman's cottage at Hawkscliffe. Penfold is the son of the Friardale village cobbler. But Greyfriars is a great place for "mixing," and none of these fellows is made less welcome because of their humble origin; nor, may it be added, do they feel in any way out of place when they visit their school chums' statelier homes.

It would be unfair to conclude without mention of Bunter Court, which, if Bunter is to be believed, is more luxurious than all the rest put together.

The strange thing about Bunter Court, however, is that nobody has ever seen it. Hence the occasional unkind suggestion that Bunter really means the "Bunter Arms." The most likely solution to the mystery is that its real name is Bunter Villa. But Bunter will never admit that his home is not the stateliest of all the stately homes of Greyfriars!

can't make it out. I thought that ruffian in the van might have played tricks to scare Bunter the other night—but he was not on the spot this time—couldn't have been."

"He certainly was not!" said Harry. "We met him in the lane—he was nowhere near the moat house, while you were there."

"That settles that!" said Bob. "It wasn't that brute! Nobody else hangs about that lonely place, I suppose?"

"Not that I know of! It's not likely! Lamb trickled round there this morning, on a ramble from his lodgings at Redgate—"

"It could not have been the esteemed Pet Lamb playing tricks!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, don't be a goat!" grunted Bob. "It must have been somebody! And yet—of course, somebody might have

been skulking among those ruins—it would take hours to search the whole place—but—but I tell you, it sounded over my head—and there was no one—nothing! It's just mysterious—"

He broke off, his face crimsoning, as he detected the lurking smiles on his chums' faces. For a moment, Bob looked angry. But it was only for a moment.

"Oh, chuck it!" he said. "I wish I'd never looked into the rotten place! Let it drop!"

The subject was dropped, and the three juniors walked on to Wharton Lodge, where Bob was warmly greeted by the old colonel and Miss Wharton—and had the pleasure, or otherwise, of meeting Billy Bunter again.

Bunter had not, after all, carried out his deadly threat, and the chums of the Remove were not going to lose him!

THE KIDNAPPED SCHOOLMASTER!

HENRY SAMUEL QUELCH, master of the Greyfriars Remove, laid down his pen and rose to his feet.

Mr. Quelch's face was pale, and looked thinner and sharper than of old.

The Remove master of Greyfriars was in strange quarters.

He was not in his comfortable study at Greyfriars School. He was not enjoying his Christmas vacation. It was two or three weeks since Mr. Quelch had mysteriously disappeared from the school; and where he was, no one at Greyfriars or elsewhere knew, or could guess—and Mr. Quelch was as much in the dark as everybody else.

All that Quelch remembered was the sudden blow that had knocked him senseless on Courtfield Common, a mile from the school. After that, he knew little or nothing.

All he knew was that he had come to his senses to find himself rolled in sackings and tied securely on the floor of a car. He had been able to see nothing—hear nothing—only the motion told him that he was in a car. He had an impression that the journey in the car was a long one, that was all.

Whether it was daylight or dark when that journey ended, he did not know. He had felt himself carried from the car by men who stumbled over rough ground—he had been aware of being carried down steps. But the sackings had not been removed till he was in his present quarters—and in those quarters he had remained ever since.

He had not the remotest idea where he was! Whether he was still in the county of Kent, where he had been kidnapped, or in any other county in England or Wales, he could not even have guessed.

Under his feet was an old stone floor. Round him were stone walls.

The place was underground. There was no window. Some ventilating pipe, no doubt, supplied air; but it was hidden from sight in the dim stone-work.

Days and nights had passed—how many, he hardly knew. All that time, he had not seen a human face—for the face of the man who brought him food was hidden from his eyes.

An oil-stove lessened the chill of the vault, but it was cold. A lamp burned on an old wooden bench that served as a table. A camp-bed stood in a corner—and there were a few other articles of furniture, but of the plainest description.

Mr. Quelch had his coat on—he

needed it in that chilly vault. He had been sitting down at the bench, writing a letter. He rose to his feet at the sound of a key in the low arched door of the vault.

His eyes glinted as the door opened to admit his gaoler.

A man of powerful frame entered. What he was like, even Quelch's keen gimlet eyes could not detect, for he wore a loose overall that descended to his feet, and his head and face were covered by a hood fastened round his neck.

All Quelch knew of him was that he was strong and muscular; for once he had made an attempt to force his way out of the vault, and the hooded man had handled him like an infant. Once in twenty-four hours he came—by night!

The hooded man stood aside from the low, arched doorway, for another man to enter.

This was a man of much slighter build, equally unrecognisable. He wore a long raincoat, belted round him, and his face was covered by a mask from forehead to chin. Through the eye-holes of the mask, a pair of very keen dark eyes glittered.

Those keen eyes fixed on Mr. Quelch.

The Remove master clenched his hands. It was useless to attempt resistance; he was no match for the hooded man alone, much less a match for the two together. But the bitter anger that swelled up in his heart almost made him fling himself at the masked man.

"You again!" he said.

"Exactly, my dear sir! My second visit!" came a voice from under the mask. "If you have written the letter—"

"I have written it!"

"Good!"

"You rascal—you villain!" said Mr. Quelch, in a low, bitter voice. "Why do you trouble to mask your face here? Do you think it is strange to me? I know every feature under that mask."

"Perhaps!" said the masked man.

"Do you think I do not guess—do not know—the reason of this outrage?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "Do you think I do not know who tricked me into coming to that lonely place on Courtfield Common? Do you think I am a fool? The night before I was struck down, I saw your face—the face of the cracksman—Slim Jim—it was you—you that I saw escaping from Popper Court at midnight, after a robbery—"

"Do you think so?"

"I do not think—I know! No one else could have any motive for this—only the crook whose face I saw, and whom I should recognise again! It is because I am the only man who has seen your face unmasked that I am here in this dreary vault—"

"Perhaps!" said the masked man again.

The hooded man did not speak; he stood like a statue beside the low doorway. Evidently he was only there in case the prisoner of the vault should make some attempt to escape.

"And this place," said Mr. Quelch. "No doubt some hidden den, ready for you to hide from the police in time of need—and you use it as a prison for me—because I am the only man who can identify you, you scoundrel!"

"You have little to complain of, Mr. Quelch!" said the masked man coldly. "If matters are as you suppose, there are some who would not hesitate to put you in a surer place! Your life is in my hands."

"You dare not!" answered Mr. Quelch contemptuously. "I have not the slightest fear of anything of the kind—you dare not!"

"Do not be too sure of that!" came from under the mask in a menacing tone. "But I am not here to talk! When I came last, I offered to let you write a letter to Dr. Locke, at Greyfriars, to tell him that you are alive and well. If you choose to take advantage of an act of kindness—"

"An act of perfidy!" answered the Remove master scornfully. "You have some purpose of your own to serve. I know that! But, to relieve Dr. Locke's anxiety, I have written the letter. If it serves any purpose of your own, as I have no doubt it does, I care little, so long as the headmaster of Greyfriars is reassured on my account."

"I must read the letter! I have warned you to say nothing of your surroundings here—"

"I have said nothing to alarm you!" said Mr. Quelch, with a curl of the lip. "Read the letter and satisfy yourself."

The masked man glanced round, and picked up the letter that lay on the bench. He held it close to the lamp, and read it carefully from end to end. He read it through a second time, and then nodded, as if satisfied.

An envelope, addressed to Dr. Locke at Greyfriars School, lay on the bench. The masked man slipped the letter into it, and sealed it.

"That letter will be posted to-night, and it will relieve Dr. Locke's anxiety!" he said, with a mocking intonation in his voice.

"At a distance, I presume, to mislead the police, when they see the post-mark!" said Mr. Quelch contemptuously.

A slight laugh came from under the mask.

"You are very keen, Mr. Quelch—perhaps too keen for your own good!" said the masked man. "It is dangerous to know too much!"

"Pah!" was Mr. Quelch's answer.

Without speaking again, the masked man left the vault, the letter in his hand.

The hooded man followed him, and the thick oak door closed. There was the grind of a heavy key in the lock.

That sound was followed by a heavy thud.

The same sound had followed every time that door had been opened and shut again. Mr. Quelch could guess what it meant—some great block of stone had been rolled against the door by the man in the hood.

Little as the gaoler perhaps guessed it, the kidnapped schoolmaster drew a faint hope from it.

For the thick oaken door did not need strengthening from outside. It was not to prevent some desperate attempt at escape that the stone was rolled against the door. There was another reason—and the keen-witted Remove master guessed what it was—it was to conceal the low door in the arch from outward sight!

And what could that mean, except that this hidden vault was below some building that might be entered—that some chance eye might have detected that door, and investigation might have followed, had it not been hidden?

If that was the case, there was some faint chance that other hands might roll aside the stone to see what lay behind—and that chance, faint as it was, was a comfort to the Remove master of Greyfriars in his long and weary imprisonment.

BUNTER—AS USUAL!

I SAY, you fellows!" "Lend a hand, Bunter!" "Oh, really, Cherry—" "Hold these steps!" suggested Bob Cherry.

"If you think I'm going to stand there holding those steps, Bob Cherry, you're—"

"Well, shut up, at any rate!" said Bob.

And he mounted the steps in the hall at Wharton Lodge with a stack of holly in his arms.

Billy Bunter blinked round him with indignation.

Four fellows were busy that afternoon—the day following Bob's adventure at the moat house. Frank Nugent had arrived in the morning and four members of the famous Co. were now gathered together—Johnny Bull, the fifth member, who was coming down from Yorkshire, being due a couple of days later.

The four were putting up Christmas decorations in the hall.

Billy Bunter had no objection, so far as that went. But after lunch Billy Bunter liked to sprawl his fat person in a deep armchair before the log-fire in the hall, and rest after his exertions at table, taking a little nap.

Taking a nap, while four fellows were putting up decorations and talking all the time, was a matter of some difficulty. So Bunter was annoyed.

"Can't you fellows go and stick up holly and mistletoe somewhere else, and leave this till later?" he asked peevishly.

"Why, fathead?" asked Frank Nugent. "We're going to do the gallery next—we're doing the hall now."

"Well, go up the stairs and do the gallery first, and keep quiet about it!" said Bunter. "I don't want to be disturbed!"

"Fathead!" said Frank.

"Beast!" retorted Bunter.

"Make yourself useful, my esteemed lazy Bunter!" suggested Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Carry some of the absurd holly up to the gallery ready for us."

"Oh, really, Inky—"

Four juniors chuckled.

After a meal, Billy Bunter did not like carrying his own weight up a staircase. He was not likely to carry anything in addition.

"There, that looks fine!" remarked Bob Cherry, having arranged a branch of red-berried holly over a pair of antlers high on the wall.

"Topping!" agreed Harry Wharton.

"I say, you fellows, don't jaw, at least!" said Bunter. "Do let's have a little quiet! Can't you go out and skate on the pond?"

"The pond?" said Frank Nugent. "Got a pond here, Harry?"

"Bunter calls the lake the pond!" explained Wharton. "It's such small beer, after the magnificence of Bunter Court!"

"Oh, why don't you boot him?" asked Frank. "Shall I?"

"Don't jaw so much!" said Bunter. "Blessed if I ever saw such fellows for jawing—like a sheep's head—all jaw! Do let a fellow have a spot of quiet!"

"Hold on—don't sit down in that chair, Bunter!" called out Harry Wharton hastily, as the fat Owl of the Remove backed to a big armchair by the fire.

Billy Bunter gave him one scornful blink, and sat down. There were several armchairs about, but that was the deepest and most comfortable, and Bunter was going to sit in that one! Why Wharton called out to him not to sit in it, he did not know, and did not

care—but he knew that he was going to do as he jolly well liked!

Plump!

Bunter sat down good and hard—his weight landing in the armchair with a plump that made it creak.

The next moment a fearful yell awoke the echoes of Wharton Lodge!

Bunter bounded out of that armchair as if it had been red-hot!

"Yaroooooh!" roared Bunter.

He had discovered suddenly why Wharton had warned him not to sit in that armchair!

There was holly in that armchair—a heap of it, thrown there till wanted! The short-sighted Owl of the Remove had not observed it! He had not chosen to heed a warning! He had sat on it—good and hard! And it was thorny!

"Yooo-hoop! Oh crikey!" roared Bunter. "Oh crumbs! Beast! Making a fellow sit down on thorns—yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared four juniors.

Wells, the butler, who was in the hall, lending a respectful hand, suppressed a gurgle. Wharton and Nugent, Bob Cherry and Hurree Singh roared.

So did Bunter—though in a different manner. They roared with laughter—Bunter with anguish.

"Oh! Ow! Wow! Ooogh!" bellowed Bunter. He wriggled and twisted frantically. "Ow! I say, you fellows, I'm stung all over—wow!"

"I called to you!" gasped Wharton.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Beast! What silly idiot put that holly in that chair?" roared Bunter. "What blithering chump put holly in an armchair? Yow-ow-ow!"

"Look before you leap, old fat man!" chuckled Bob Cherry. "The holly must be laid somewhere till we use it, old porpoise! Stand there, and hand some of it up to me!"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter wriggled and squeaked. Then, with an enraged fat face, he grabbed the holly from the chair and hurled it far and wide.

"Oh!" ejaculated Wells, as a sprig caught him under his double chin. "Oh! Really—oh!"

"You fat ass!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Mind what you're at!"

"Beast!"

Bunter cleared the armchair and plumped into it again, with sprigs of holly scattered all over the hall.

Wells rubbed his double chin, and glanced at that distinguished guest with an expressive glance. Wells was a well-trained butler and incapable of boxing the ears of a guest in his master's household; but several times in the past few days Wells had come awfully near it. At this moment he was nearer than ever!

"Sorry, Wells!" said Harry Wharton. "I hope you're not hurt."

"Not at all, Master Harry!" said Wells, more politely than veraciously, for the sprigs of holly had fairly banged under his double chin, and it had some sharp points.

Bob Cherry descended from the steps. He picked up double-handfuls of the scattered sprigs and tossed them back into the armchair. As Bunter was now in the armchair, they landed on Bunter.

"Whooooh!" roared Bunter. He was settling down comfortably at last when the shower of holly landed on him.

"What's that?"

"Holly!" answered Bob affably.

"More coming!"

"You silly idiot!" yelled Bunter.

"Wharrer you chucking holly at me for?"

"Trying to catch you under the chin, same as you did Wells!"

"What?" howled Bunter.

"Keep steady—" said Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter did not keep steady! He bounced out of the armchair as if moved by a spring.

"Stoppit!" he roared. "You silly fathead—stoppit!"

"Chuck it, Bob!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Ain't I chucking it?" answered Bob. And he went on chucking it.

"The chuckfulness is terrific!" chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter, for the next three or four minutes, was busy dodging sprigs of holly. He hopped, he jumped, and he bounded. Then he made for the staircase. Bunter did not want to go up to his room—he disliked stairs. But stairs were better than this.

"Going?" chuckled Bob. "Take up a load of holly with you, old fat man!"

Billy Bunter gave him a glare!

But, to the general surprise, he took up an armful of holly to convey aloft! It was really quite surprising—for Billy Bunter was never known to make himself useful, if he could possibly help it. And he was particularly disgruntled at the present moment.

But he tramped up the stairs, loaded with holly.

High up at the back of the old hall was an oaken gallery, to which the staircase gave access. The railing of the gallery overlooked the hall below.

Billy Bunter halted in the gallery. He blinked over the oaken rail with a deadly blink behind his big spectacles. Then he lifted that load of holly to hurl! It was not, after all, to make himself useful that the fat Owl had carried it up. Bunter was on the trail of vengeance. Bob Cherry was going to have that holly—in bulk!

It was just then that Colonel Wharton came out of the library, to give a glance at the work going on in the hall, with a genial smile suitable to the festive season on his face.

He came out from below the gallery into the hall—just as Billy Bunter got busy above.

"Getting on with it, I see," said the old military gentleman genially. "I—Ah—oh! Oh gad—what—Oh!"

A load of holly swept down over the rail of the gallery. It missed Bob Cherry by a couple of yards—which was a pretty good aim for Bunter, who might have been expected to miss by three or four. But it did not miss Colonel Wharton by an inch. It swamped down on him!

"Gad! What—" roared the surprised colonel.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Oh crumbs!"

"Bunter—"

"That mad porpoise—"

"He, he, he!" came squeaking from above. "Got you, you beast!" Billy Bunter's big spectacles gleamed over the oaken rail. "Got you, you rotter! He, he, he!"

"Good gad!"

Colonel Wharton, standing in a sea of holly, glared up.

Billy Bunter blinked down. Then it dawned on him.

"Oh crikey!" he ejaculated—and he scudded. The look on the old military gentleman's face quite alarmed Bunter. A door slammed, a key turned in a lock. Bunter had hunted cover—and hunted it quick!

Colonel Wharton made a stride to the staircase. But he stopped, snorted, and strode back to the library.

Four juniors looked at one another very expressively as the library door shut hard.

"I can't slaughter Bunter," said Harry Wharton, with a deep breath.

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"Will one of you fellows take him out and drown him?"

Really, it almost looked as if that peculiar guest at Wharton Lodge was wearing his welcome thin!

FERRERS LOCKE ON THE CASE!

WILLIAM GOSLING, the ancient porter at Greyfriars School, touched his ancient hat very respectfully as a taxi-cab turned in at the gates.

Gosling knew the rather lean, athletic gentleman, with clear-cut features and keen eyes, who sat in the taxi—Mr. Ferrers Locke, a relative of Dr. Locke, the headmaster of Greyfriars School.

As the taxi rolled on towards the House, old Gosling ambled away to tell Mr. Mumble, the gardener, that the Baker Street detective had come back to Greyfriars—not, as Gosling sagely opined, just to pay a Christmas call on the 'Ead, but after Mr. Quelch, what was still missing goodness knewed where!

In which sage surmise the ancient porter was right.

Ferrers Locke was shown into the Head's study, where Dr. Locke was awaiting him.

The headmaster of Greyfriars greeted his young relative warmly. Ferrers Locke eyed him rather keenly as they shook hands.

The mysterious disappearance of his old friend and colleague, Mr. Quelch, the most valued member of his staff, was deeply distressing to Dr. Locke.

Owing to Mr. Lamb, the art master, having been able to take the Remove in Mr. Quelch's absence, it had not caused so much inconvenience as it might have done. But that did not lessen the Head's worry and distress on his old friend's account. Now that the school had broken up for the holidays, the Head missed his colleague more than ever, for Quelch had been accustomed to pass Christmas with Dr. Locke and his family.

But Ferrers Locke noticed, at the first glance, that Dr. Locke's kind old face had a relieved and hopeful expression. It looked as if his anxiety had been somewhat relieved in some way.

"Sit down, my dear fellow," said the Head. "Nothing, so far, at your end—or you would have let me know at once."

Ferrers Locke sat down and crossed one lean leg over the other.

"Nothing," he said. "I have not been idle—"

"I am sure of that."

"We are dealing," said Ferrers Locke, "with a man who is as cunning as a wolf. There are difficulties in the way that do not usually occur—for we are seeking a man whose face has never been seen except by the man who has disappeared. From that, we know why Mr. Quelch disappeared—but we know nothing more."

"There can be no doubt that it was the cracksman, Slim Jim, as he is called—"

"None," said Locke. "But who is Slim Jim? Where is Slim Jim? Even the name he is known by is merely a nickname given him by the police because of his trick of gaining admission to buildings by small, obscure windows—and for want of any other name to call him by. We have no clue to him except his invariable custom of clinging to one vicinity until he has combed it clean of plunder—which indicates that he is still in this neighbourhood, or, at all events, passes most of his time here. But—"

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"But—" said the Head.

"But," went on Ferrers Locke, "when the mask is off Slim Jim's face, nobody knows what he looks like—except Mr. Quelch. Had Mr. Quelch remained at liberty, the police would have had a chance they have never had before—the help of a man who could identify that man of mystery. But in his normal life, unmasked, I have no doubt that the slim gentleman is a respectable member of society, keeping up respectable appearances. And yet—"

"Yet—" said the Head.

"He must have confederates—at least one," said Ferrers Locke. "The kidnapping of Mr. Quelch could hardly have been carried out single-handed."

"Only one man was seen—"

"And he was disguised!" said Locke. "True; but a car was used, and was on the spot when required. It is very probable that another man drove the car. And wherever Mr. Quelch may be, he must be guarded—he must be supplied with food—and there can be little doubt that it is in some place at a considerable distance. Otherwise, a car would not have been needed. Moreover, Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, has combed this neighbourhood with the greatest thoroughness. It is scarcely possible that Slim Jim himself guards his prisoner, all the time, at all events, and that implies at least to one other man in his confidence."

"True!" assented the Head.

"I have not been idle," said Locke, "and my assistant, Jack Drake, has not been idle—and if either Slim Jim or his unknown confederate had connections in the usual haunts of crooks and criminals, I think we should have picked up some hint. But where the police have always failed, we also have failed—so far!"

Locke's jaw set squarely.

Failure was not a common word in his vocabulary.

He did not mean to fail. He had entered into a contest with the mysterious cracksman who had so long defied the police, and, having set his hand to the plough, he was not turning back.

But, as yet, there was no light—and the Baker Street detective confessed it frankly.

"What can be done elsewhere I have done," he went on. "What is to be done next must be done in this locality. Slim Jim has not yet done with this quarter—and it is in this quarter that I shall trail him—if I trail him at all. If he is found, Mr. Quelch is found!"

"My dear Ferrers, if you become a resident in this locality, surely the man will not fail to learn as much, and will keep a safe distance so long as you are here!" exclaimed the Head.

Ferrers Locke smiled slightly.

"I shall not reside at Courtfield in my own proper person," he answered. "I shall take care that I am not known."

"Oh!" said the Head.

"You mentioned when last I saw you that your chauffeur had been called up for service," said Ferrers Locke.

"That is so! But why—"

"You will require a new chauffeur when he leaves you."

"Certainly. But what—"

"I am as good a driver as most chauffeurs," said the Baker Street detective, with a smile. "In these days of petrol restrictions, you do not use your car so much as of old—and your chauffeur will have a great deal of time on his hands—he will be able to rest by day if he is active by night."

"Oh!" exclaimed the Head.

"You will engage John Robinson as your chauffeur, sir—and leave the rest to me," said Ferrers Locke. "I will guarantee that no one, in Greyfriars

School or outside, will suspect that your chauffeur Robinson has any connection with your relative Ferrers Locke."

"And you think—"

"I hope," said Locke. He paused. "And now—your news! I have none, as I have said. But what is yours?"

Dr. Locke started.

"My dear Ferrers, I have not said—" he exclaimed.

"I think I read as much in your face, my dear sir, when I entered this study," said Ferrers Locke. "Your mind is relieved in some way. What has happened?"

"I was about to tell you, Ferrers—but I did not expect you to guess," said Dr. Locke, smiling. "It is true that my mind is considerably relieved. I have received news that Quelch is alive and well, and that is something—"

"In what manner did the news reach you?"

"By a letter—"

"Not from Mr. Quelch!" exclaimed Locke.

"In his own hand!"

Dr. Locke took out a pocket-book, opened it, and selected a folded letter. He handed it to the Baker Street detective.

"That letter reached me this morning," he said. "I should have communicated with you at once had I not been expecting to see you to-day—"

Ferrers Locke nodded, unfolded the letter and examined it, with a glint in his eyes. It was written, probably with Quelch's own fountain-pen, on a sheet of common paper, without any heading or address, or even a date. It ran:

"Dear Dr. Locke,—I am permitted to write you a brief note to assure you that I am safe and well. I regret deeply the distress and inconvenience that the present state of affairs must have caused you."

"Yours sincerely,

"H. S. QUELCH."

Ferrers Locke knitted his brows over that brief missive. It had been evidently written by permission of the kidnapper—posted by him. Why, was not immediately clear.

"This naturally came as a great relief to my mind," said Dr. Locke. "The man in whose hands my old friend is now a prisoner is doubtless a crook—a criminal—an unscrupulous rascal—yet his nature cannot be without the milk of human kindness, as



"Gad! What—holly landed on his Bunter, from the g

he has allowed Quelch to give me this assurance of his safety—"

"I fear, sir, that much in the way of the milk of human kindness cannot be expected of Slim Jim!" said the Baker Street detective dryly. "You have, of course, the envelope in which this letter came?"

"It is here!" The Head's face was a little eager. "And, if I am not mistaken, it furnishes a clue—"

"A clue!" repeated Ferrers Locke.

"I must not set up as a detective,"



roared Colonel Wharton, as a load of head. "He, he, he!" cackled Billy Bunter above. "Got you, you rotter!"

said Dr. Locke, smiling, "yet I think that, when you have examined this envelope, you will change your intention of taking up your quarters here, my dear Ferrers, and will decide to go as far afield as Devonshire."

"Devonshire!" said Locke.

"I think so!"

Ferrers Locke looked at him, and then at the envelope. It was addressed to Dr. Locke, at Greyfriars

School, Kent, in Mr. Quelch's hand. It was postmarked "Lynton."

"Lynton, as of course you know, is in Devonshire," said Dr. Locke eagerly. "No doubt you know the place—a rugged country, not far from Exmoor—where a secret hiding-place—"

"The postmark on this letter is, to a certain extent, a clue!" said Ferrers Locke. "Hitherto, we have had all England to choose from in seeking the kidnapped member of your staff, sir! Now—"

"Now it will be possible to concentrate on Devonshire—"

"Now," said Locke, "we may exclude Devonshire—which leaves us all the other counties—perhaps a slight lessening of the task!"

Dr. Locke blinked.

"But the postmark, my dear fellow!" he exclaimed. "Surely it is genuine—this letter, written by Quelch, was undoubtedly posted at Lynton, in Devonshire—"

"Undoubtedly," said Locke. "And that, no doubt, is why Slim Jim allowed it to be written at all. I have no doubt that he would be glad to concentrate the search for Mr. Quelch on the rocky coast of the Bristol Channel and the wilds of Exmoor."

"But—" exclaimed the Head.

"But," said Ferrers Locke, "unless I underestimate the cunning of Slim Jim, he travelled at least a hundred miles to post this letter."

"Oh!" exclaimed Dr. Locke.

"If Mr. Quelch proves to be within a hundred miles of Devonshire I shall be greatly surprised!" said Ferrers Locke. "That postmark, sir, leads me to infer that he is most probably in one of the Home Counties."

"Oh!" repeated the Head. His face fell. "You think—"

"It is a trick—and a palpable one!" said Ferrers Locke. "It might have worked—it cost him nothing to try it on. That is all!" He laid down the letter and the envelope. "I am glad that your mind has been relieved, sir, but I still hold to my belief that Mr. Quelch can only be found by finding Slim Jim—and that Slim Jim, if he is found at all, will be found within a few miles of Greyfriars School!"

BUNTER'S BOOBY-TRAP!

"WELLS!"

"Sir!"

"Where are those beasts?"

Wells raised his plump eyebrows.

In the best circles, perhaps, a guest at Christmas did not allude to his host and his host's friends as beasts! But Billy Bunter was disgruntled that afternoon.

He had a suspicion that Harry Wharton & Co. had gone out and left him on his lonely own! That was not the sort of thing Bunter liked!

His own company, true, was the best going. But Billy Bunter was a gregarious animal, and he tired of his own company—though not so soon as other fellows did!

"Those what, sir?" asked Wells, with a cough.

"Beasts!" said Bunter, with a snort. "You jolly well know that I mean those swabs, Wells, so don't gammon! Where's Wharton?"

"Master Harry has gone to Wimford, sir, to meet a train."

"Have the other ticks gone with him?"

"The other what, sir?"

"The other fellows!" roared Bunter.

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"Gone to meet that ruffian Bull, I suppose!" grunted Bunter. "They said he was coming to-day. Sneaking off quietly while a fellow was having forty winks!"

Wells permitted himself a faint smile. Perhaps he suspected that Harry Wharton & Co. had been glad to get away while the fat Owl was snoring. Bunter, as a guest, had to be taken in small doses—and the smaller the better.

"Have they gone in the car?" demanded Bunter.

"No, sir."

"Oh! Then I jolly well didn't want to go—catch me slogging through that filthy snow!" grunted Bunter. "All right, then—I can have the car! I told them I'd go to Wimford with them this afternoon—not to meet that lout Bull, of course—but I've heard that they've got the cinema open! Order the car for me, Wells!"

"I shall have to speak to the master, sir!" said Wells. "Owing to the restrictions on petrol—"

"Lot of silly rot!" grunted Bunter. "Plenty of petrol, but they like restricting things, just to throw their weight about! Anyhow, I must have the car—I can't walk to Wimford! There's only one car here, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir."

"I was a fool to come here," said Bunter. "We have six at Bunter Court—I'm accustomed to having a car just when I want one! But it's my own fault!"

"Yes, sir!"

"One thing, though, before you order the car," said Bunter. "Coming away in rather a hurry, I left my note-case at home. I suppose you can lend me a ten-shilling note, Wells?"

"No, sir!"

"Eh?"

"No, sir!"

Billy Bunter blinked at Wells' smooth, sleek face. That smooth, sleek face was calmly respectful.

Nevertheless, Wells' answer left no doubt on the subject. He was not going to lend Billy Bunter a ten-shilling note!

Bunter breathed hard.

"You're cheeky, Wells!" he said.

"Indeed, sir!" said Wells smoothly.

"If I were boss here, I'd sack you!" said Bunter.

"Thank you, sir!" said Wells imperturbably. "Is there anything more, sir?"

"Oh, go and eat coke!" yapped Bunter.

Wells went—though probably not to eat coke!

Billy Bunter rolled across to the fire in the hall and stood blinking at it peevishly. Wharton, Nugent, Bob and Hurree Singh had gone out for the afternoon—though he had told them plainly that he would be ready in an hour and a half! This was the sort of thing he had to stand at Wharton Lodge!

And there was only one car—and he couldn't have it—and it wouldn't have been any use, anyhow, as that cheeky butler, failing to realise how honoured he was by the request, declined to lend him a ten-shilling note!

Those beasts would be out for hours, very likely—and in the meantime there was no company for Bunter but an old jossler and an old frump—such being Bunter's description of Colonel Wharton and Aunt Amy.

He could have gone into the drawing-room and talked to Aunt Amy. But as likely as not she would have

some other old frumps there—and if she was alone she would want to talk about Harry—she liked talking about Harry, for reasons unknown to Bunter—she could hardly be fond of him, he thought. If so, there was no accounting for tastes.

The library door opened, and Colonel Wharton looked out.

Bunter gave him a blink.

The old josses's company was better than nothing, perhaps!

But the old josses, as soon as he saw Bunter standing there, stepped back into the library and shut the door again. Possibly he did not think Bunter's company better than nothing!

Bunter gave a grunt.

The beasts were out—and when they came in they would have that lout Bull with them. Bull was the least long-suffering member of the Famous Five of Greyfriars. He was liable to kick Bunter if Bunter was obnoxious, even on a Christmas visit! Bunter had told Harry Wharton plainly that he would prefer Bull not to come! Wharton had taken absolutely no notice! Johnny Bull was coming just the same, though Bunter did not want him.

"Beasts!" said Bunter, addressing the leaping blaze of the log fire. "But I jolly well know what I'm going to do!"

And the fat Owl ascended the stairs to the oaken gallery above and rolled into the passage to the rooms occupied by the juniors. At the near end of that passage two doors opened on Harry Wharton's rooms—one on his bed-room, the other on his den, a large and very pleasant sitting-room. It was into the latter that Billy Bunter rolled.

There was a grin on his fat face now.

Bunter knew what he was going to do. He was going to make those beasts sorry for themselves—and the method was going to be a booby-trap!

They were sure to come up to Wharton's den when they came in. That snug room was their general meeting-place; all the fellows used it as their own. Often they came in and out by the balcony at the window, which had steps down to the garden.

Billy Bunter placed the door a few inches ajar. He placed a chair inside to stand on. Then he got busy!

Three or four big Christmas volumes were piled on top of the door, resting on the lintel over the doorway. "Holiday Annual," "Modern Boy's Annual," and other Annuals, delightful in themselves, were not likely to prove so delightful when they came thumping down on fellows' heads!

But the disgruntled Owl was not satisfied with that. On top of the pile of books he placed a box that had contained chocolates. It did not contain the chocolates now—Bunter contained the chocolates! But it was not empty!

Before placing it in position, the fat Owl filled it with ashes from the grate, on which he poured all the ink he could find in the room.

"He, he, he!" cachinnated Bunter, as he stepped back and surveyed his handiwork.

This looked good to Bunter.

Having thus prepared a happy surprise for the Famous Five when they came in, the fat Owl replaced the chair by the wall and rolled out of the room by the communicating door to the bed-room.

By the bed-room door he reached the passage again. With a cheery grin on his fat face, he rolled into the oaken gallery over the hall. A buzz of cheery voices reached him from below.

He blinked over the rail. The beasts

had come in—that stocky, sturdy figure among the others was Johnny Bull's.

Colonel Wharton and Miss Wharton were greeting Johnny; Wells was deftly removing coats and taking hats and caps. Everybody looked as jolly as anything, and apparently forgetful of the existence of the fat Owl who blinked down over the oaken rail.

Still, they wouldn't look so jolly when they came up and put their heads into Bunter's booby-trap! Bunter was sure of that! And the fat Owl grinned and waited for them to come up!

BUNTER'S THE BOOBY!

"HE, he, he!"

Billy Bunter chuckled as five cheery schoolboys came tramping up into the oak gallery over the hall.

The Co. were escorting Johnny Bull to his room, and they were all merry and bright.

Bunter blinked at them in great amusement, thinking of what was coming.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here's Johnny, old fat man!" roared Bob Cherry.

"Glad to see you, Bull!" grinned Bunter. He was going to be glad, at least, to see the booby-trap tumble down on Johnny among the others.

Johnny Bull looked at him. Johnny was a rather painfully truthful fellow. He was not glad to see Bunter, so he did not feel inclined to say that he was; but, on the other hand, something was due to good manners, and something to the spirit of Yuletide.

"Hallo, old porpoise!" said Johnny. "Merry Christmas, old slug!"

"I say, ain't you going into your room, Wharton?" asked Bunter anxiously.

"Eh? Not at the moment. Come on, Johnny!"

"Oh, all right! I'll wait."

Harry Wharton looked at the fat Owl. He failed to see why Billy Bunter cared a straw whether he went into his room or not, or why he should wait.

"There's a nice fire in your room, old chap," said Bunter. "You fellows would like a chat round the fireside now you're all together again—what?"

"Quite!" agreed Wharton. "What have you been in my room for? I don't remember leaving anything eatable there!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! I haven't been in your room. Nowhere near it."

"You saw the nice fire through a shut door?" asked Harry.

"Oh! I—I—I mean, I—I just looked in to—to see that it was all nice and comfortable!"

Grunt! from Johnny Bull.

"Queer thing," he remarked, "last thing I heard Bunter say at school when we broke up was a crammer. First thing I hear him say here is another crammer. I suppose he's been telling crammers all the time and never left off for a minute."

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Come on, old bean!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

The Co. marched Johnny up the passage to his room, leaving Billy Bunter grinning with happy anticipation.

Bob, as he passed the door of Wharton's sitting-room, paused. It was perfectly clear that Billy Bunter had been in that room and that he was anxious for other fellows to go into it now.

Bob chuckled. He was not a suspicious fellow, but it was obvious that Billy Bunter was up to something.

"Look at this, you men," murmured Bob.

"Eh? What?" Harry Wharton & Co. glanced round.

"Don't push open that door!" grinned Bob. "Just look at it!"

The juniors looked at it.

Looking at it, they could hardly fail to see that it was six inches open, and that a stack of books was lodged across from the top of the door to the lintel of the doorway.

"That fat villain!" breathed Harry. "That's why he wanted us to go in!"

"That's why he's waiting!" grinned Nugent.

"To hear the crash!" chuckled Bob. "Hold on a minute!" Bob turned, and shouted down the passage: "Hallo, hallo, hallo, Bunter!"

Billy Bunter blinked along from the oak gallery.

"Going into Wharton's room?" he asked. "That's right! You'll find a jolly good fire, and—"

"Have you been along this passage, Bunter?"

"Eh? Oh, no!"

"Then you didn't drop a ten-shilling note here?"

"What? Oh! Yes! I jolly well did!" exclaimed Bunter.

He rolled quickly into the passage. If there was a ten-shilling note on the floor, and no owner for the same, Billy Bunter was immediately prepared to supply an owner.

"Sure you dropped it?" asked Bob.

"Oh, yes! I heard it drop!" exclaimed Bunter.

"That's what comes of having such jolly long ears. Precious few fellows would have heard a ten-shilling note drop!" remarked Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean, I saw it drop! I was going to pick it up, but I—I forgot! It's mine, you know! I say, you fellows, where is it?"

Billy Bunter stooped and scanned the oaken floor in search of a non-existent ten-shilling note.

"Can't you see it?" asked Bob. He pointed to the floor just outside the door of Wharton's den.

The other fellows looked on. They guessed what Bob was going to do. Billy Bunter did not—being happily unaware that his deadly trap had been discovered.

The fat Owl bent outside the door to scan the oaken planks.

Bob Cherry lifted his foot and gave a gentle shove at the tightest trousers for miles around.

"Woohoo!" gasped Bunter, as he toppled forward.

He bumped on the door. He sprawled in the doorway. From above came a crashing of Christmas volumes and of a chocolate-box full of inky ashes.

Crash! Bang! Bump! Crash! Squash!

"Yurrrrrrooooooh!" roared Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Famous Five, as the fat Owl sprawled and roared amid crashing volumes, with a chocolate-box lodged on his fat neck, exuding inky ashes.

"Oh crikey! Ooooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Dear me!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "Somebody's been fixing up a booby-trap at that door, and Bunter's the booby! Who could have done that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I wonder who—you know, Bunter?"

"Yaroooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Know anything about it, Bunter?"

"Yow-ow! Groogh! Beast! I'm all smothered—I'm all inky!" Bunter sat up dizzily, clawing inky ashes out

of his fat neck. "Look at me—ow! Ooogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors. "Oh, you beast!" roared Bunter, as it dawned on him. "You jolly well knew—ooooh!"

"He guessed it!" said Bob. "What a brain!"

"Beast! There wasn't any ten-shilling note at all—you just wanted to bump me into that door!" yelled Bunter.

"Just!" agreed Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oooooogh! Beast! Wooogh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Famous Five; and they marched on up the passage, leaving Billy Bunter sitting in the wreck of his booby-trap, like Marius in the ruins of Carthage.

A RIFT IN THE LUTE!

"GHOSTS!" said Johnny Bull.

He grunted. Johnny Bull was a plain, practical youth, with a cool, clear head and lots of common sense. So, naturally, he had no use for ghosts.

It was evening—a wild winter's evening. Outside, the snow was falling in soft flakes that whirled on the December wind. Round the old chimney-pots of Wharton Lodge the wind wailed, every now and then shrieking like a lost spirit in the darkness.

The Famous Five were gathered in Wharton's den. Logs blazed in the wide old grate. Armchairs were drawn up in a half-circle. Green holly glistened on the walls, red berries catching the fire-light.

Downstairs, Colonel Wharton had a meeting of the local A.R.P. wardens in the library. In the drawing-room, Miss Amy Wharton had another meeting of kind old ladies like herself, debating the question of blankets and coal for people in need of those articles in the wintry weather. Both meetings were good and useful; but the schoolboys preferred to gather in Wharton's den and leave the older people to their own devices.

Billy Bunter—recovered from the effects of having been the booby in his own booby-trap—was enjoying life. He had brought up a dish of almonds and muscatels and was steadily travelling through them, with an incessant munching and crunching that made a more or less musical accompaniment to the crackle of the logs and the wail of the wind.

Johnny had just been listening to the tale of the old moat house.

Bob Cherry sat rather silent.

His own experience in the moat house was not a pleasant recollection. Something had happened for which there was no accounting. It was a puzzle—and not a pleasant remembrance. When he thought of it, he recalled the eerie, chilly thrill that had gone through him at the sound of the rattle of the ghostly keys.

"Ghosts!" repeated Johnny Bull. "Rot! Bunter must have been an ass! Still, he always was an ass!"

"Beast!" came in muffled tones from a large mouth full of almonds and muscatels.

"Well, tell us what you saw, if you saw anything!" said Johnny.

"I didn't see anything," snorted Bunter, "except a light, which went out when I called. But I heard somebody rattling keys in the dark! I wasn't frightened, of course! I don't believe in ghosts or such rot! I simply decided to walk away! I didn't run! I was just strolling along in a leisurely way

when I ran into Wharton and knocked him over—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cackle!" said Bunter. "You'd have been scared, anyhow! I bet Bob was scared when he was there! Yah!"

"You've been there, Bob?" asked Johnny. He had not yet heard of Bob's visit to the moat house.

Bob Cherry nodded.

"Yes! I fancy Bunter did hear what he says he heard—because I heard the same thing."

Johnny stared at him.

"You heard a ghost rattling spook keys!" he ejaculated. "Mad?"

Bob coloured.

"Don't be a goat!" he said, rather gruffly. "It can't have been a ghost, of course, as there's no such things as ghosts. But I did hear iron keys rattling."

"Same as I did!" said Bunter. "I'd have looked into the matter, only—only I was rather in a hurry—"

"The hurryfulness was terrific!" murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur.

"Yah!"

"Now, look here," said Johnny Bull, "talk sense! Bunter's a funky ass, and might be frightened by anything—"

"Beast!"

"But you're not, I suppose?" went on Johnny.

"I hope not!" grunted Bob.

"Well, you have heard something!" said Johnny. "It wasn't spook keys, because there aren't any spooks. If you heard it—"

"I've said I heard it!"

"Don't get shirty, old man, because a chap doesn't believe in spooks."

"Who's getting shirty?"

"Sounds to me as if you are!"

"Oh rats!"

"Oh, bother the moat house and its giddy ghosts!" said Harry Wharton. "I say, Johnny, we met the Lamb there—the Pet Lamb from Greyfriars."

But Johnny was not to be turned from the subject. When Johnny had his teeth in a subject he was rather like the tyke of his native county, warranted to bite, alive or dead.

"Never mind the Pet Lamb," said Johnny. "Let's hear about this spook! If there's a jolly old spook, we'd better take a trip to the place and look for it—ghost-hunting is a good game for Christmas. Now, Bob heard something that he took for the rattle of keys—"

"It was the rattle of keys!" said Bob curtly.

"If it was, somebody was rattling them, and it wasn't a spook," said Johnny. "It was somebody playing spook. Did you fellows hear it?"

"No! You see—"

Harry Wharton explained how he and Hurree Singh had interviewed Mr. Lamb while Bob was exploring the moat house.

Johnny listened attentively, and nodded.

"So Bob was alone there? Chap might get nervy in such a place, on his own, and fancy that the wind in the ruins was something else."

"Chaps fancy all sorts of things!" said Bob Cherry. "I've known a chap fancy he was talking sense when he was gabbling out of the back of his silly neck!"

"Hem!" murmured Frank Nugent.

"Queer meeting old Lamb there, though, wasn't it?" remarked Harry Wharton.

"Never mind old Lamb! Bob thinks he heard keys rattling—well, if he did, somebody all alive-o was rattling them. If he'd looked—"

"I did look!"

"And didn't you spot him?"

"Nobody was there."

"Well, somebody must have been there, if you heard keys rattling!" said Johnny, in a tone of patient argument. "Somebody who knows the story of the old miser must have been playing ghost just to scare you."

"He didn't scare me."

"The esteemed Lamb—" began Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Never mind Lamb!" said Johnny Bull. "Lamb's got nothing to do with it. Somebody's playing ghost—that's it, in a nutshell."

"Blessed if I see why anybody should!" said Harry Wharton. "Once, perhaps—but sticking there constantly playing ghost—that sounds rather rot! There were three or four days between Bunter's visit there and Bob's."

"There's a man on the spot, from what you've told me!" said Johnny. "Perhaps that man in the caravan doesn't like people about."

"I know he doesn't—judging by his manners! But we saw that man on the road while Bob was in the moat house."

"That washes him out," said Johnny. "Nobody else about?"

"Only Lamb—and he cleared off before we got back!"

"Lamb, perhaps!" said Bob sarcastically. "Might have got a bunch of old keys from somewhere and started playing potty larks—sort of thing a school-master would do, perhaps!"

"It's no good getting shirty and coughing up sarc," said Johnny Bull. "That ain't sense! I remember seeing that old place in the summer—lots of fallen masonry stacked about—plenty of cover for a fellow to hide. Somebody was keeping doggo and rattling those keys, Bob."

Bob gave a grunt, and no other reply.

"He, he, he!" came from Billy Bunter. "I heard Bob saying that he heard it over his head!"

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull.

"Rot or not, I did!" said Bob Cherry tartly. "The sound was overhead. I don't claim to be able to make it out, and I don't believe in ghosts—but that's what happened."

"Somebody sitting up on a wall—"

"Perhaps I was blind!" said Bob. "I must have been, as I never saw him!"

"Well, unless somebody was sitting on top of a wall, it isn't possible, you see!" explained Johnny. "I suppose you can see that?"

"Fathead!"

"Calling a fellow names won't make impossible things possible!" said Johnny Bull. "Have a little sense, old chap! It was fancy! When a fellow gets nervy he will fancy anything!"

Bob Cherry looked at Johnny Bull. He liked old Johnny—and old Johnny liked him! A strong bond of friendship bound the whole Co. together. But there are times when the best of friends fall out; the best of friendship requires a spot of tact to keep it going without a hitch. And Johnny Bull, with all the sterling good qualities that his friends liked and esteemed, did not shine in tact. His solid common sense was a valuable gift—but at times it was a trifle too much in evidence.

Bob looked at him without speaking. Certainly he was not going to quarrel with old Johnny—especially at Christmastide. But he had to make an effort to keep back angry words.

(Continued on next page.)

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"That's how it was, old chap!" said Johnny cheerfully. "A spot of nerves—anybody might have had it!"

"I believe there's something rather good on the radio!" remarked Harry Wharton casually. He rose from his chair.

"Yes—shove it on, old chap!" said Nugent.

"Hold on a minute," said Johnny. "My idea is that this is worth looking into. It looks as if somebody's been playing ghost. Bob only fancied that bit about the keys rattling over his head, of course—"

Bob opened his lips—and shut them again, hard.

"Still, if they rattled at all, somebody was rattling them!" said Johnny. "What about going along to the place to-morrow and seeing what's up?"

"Might as well, if you like!" agreed Harry Wharton.

"We'll all go," said Nugent, "and—"

"I shan't go!" said Bob abruptly.

Johnny blinked at him.

"You don't mean to say that you funk going, Bob!" he exclaimed.

Bob rose to his feet, his blue eyes glinting.

"No!" he said, very distinctly. "I don't mean to say that I funk going! But I'm not going, and that's that! Wharton, old man, I'll trot along to my room—I've got a letter to write."

Bob Cherry quietly left the den.

Wharton and Nugent and Hurree Singh exchanged a rather dismayed glance.

Johnny looked round at the closing door and seemed puzzled.

"Is old Bob shirty about anything?" he asked.

"He, he, he!" from Bunter.

Harry Wharton hastily put on the radio, and a volume of music filled the room and cut short further discussion.

BOB ON HIS OWN!

BOB CHERRY went into his room and shut the door rather hard.

He switched on the light; but switched it off again as he stepped to the window to look out.

His face was set.

Seldom or never was Bob angry. He was too thoroughly healthy, from top to toe, for disgruntled feelings to find a place. Other fellows sometimes had a feud on; Bob never, for he simply could not remember offences. But it was a fact that he was angry now.

He had gone through an eerie, uncanny experience at the haunted house. It still gave him a creepy feeling to think of it. He did not want to revisit the place. But to be classed with a fellow like Bunter, funky and fanciful and scared if a rat scuttled behind the wainscot, was rather too much. Bob had left the cheery circle in Wharton's room only in time to keep himself from punching Johnny's nose.

Letters to write was the usual way for a guest to keep to himself at awkward moments. But Bob intended to write a letter when he went to his room—he had plenty of arrears of correspondence to make up.

But he abandoned that idea; he did not feel in the mood to write a cheery Christmas letter. He stood at the window and looked out into darkness and snowflakes that whirled and circled on the December wind.

With that set expression still on his face, Bob Cherry sorted out overcoat and scarf and changed his shoes for a pair of thick boots. Then he hunted out a flashlamp and put it in his pocket.

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Then—his lips setting harder—he opened the window.

He stepped out on the balcony, his boots sinking into a deep carpet of snow, and shut the window behind him.

Quietly in the snow he stepped along the balcony, passing the window of Wharton's den, towards the steps at the end. That window was blacked-out and dark; but from within came the roar of the radio. A bitter expression crossed Bob's face for a moment as he passed.

Then he trod carefully down snow-covered steps. With set lips, he started tramping away across the gardens through the snow to a gate on the Wimford road.

Piles of snow were scraped away as he dragged the little gate open. He passed through and shut the gate.

The wind drove snowflakes into his face as he started down the road to the corner where Redgate Lane turned off! Bob Cherry was heading for the haunted moat house. He disliked a visit to the place after his experience there—it was the most unattractive spot in the county of Surrey to him. But he was going there—and he was going there alone at night—after which, Johnny Bull could say that he funk it if he liked.

That was his angry determination.

A bitter wind swept through leafless, frosty trees as he turned into the lane. He bent his head to it and tramped on. Few people would have cared to be out on such a night—and Bob thought of the warm fireglow and the cheery faces in the house he had left. But he tramped on.

A mass of white against the dark sky showed him the ruined moat house at last. Standing away from it on the right, by a fringe of icy trees, was a smaller white mass—the caravan.

No light was to be seen from the van. But under the black-out dispensation no light was to be expected, whether the rat-faced man was at home or not. Bob gave the caravanner no thought.

He halted where the gap in the wall gave access to the grounds and flashed on his light. He needed a light to pick his way into the shattered building across the choked moat. Carefully—remembering the black-out—he kept the light on the ground.

He picked his way across to the moat. The spot of light gleamed on glimmering snow as he went slowly and carefully.

"By gum!" breathed Bob.

He concentrated the light on a deep imprint in the snow. It was the mark of a heavy boot.

Someone had trodden ahead of him the same way—heading for the shattered old doorway of the moat house. A heavy man, to judge by the depth of the print in the soft snow.

Falling flakes were filling that deep print. In a quarter of an hour, in all likelihood, it would be obliterated. That meant that the track was recent, or it would have been obliterated already.

Somebody had gone, quite recently, into the moat house ahead of him—and was still there, as there were no return tracks, unless he had left by a different way—which was possible, but not likely, for why should he?

Who, in the name of all that was mysterious, could have penetrated into that desolate, windy, frozen ruin on a bitter winter's night?

Nobody could be supposed to have any business there—or, if he had, daylight was an easier and more agreeable time for such a visit. Darkness would hide him if he wanted to keep such a visit from all eyes—but why? Anybody who liked could explore that old ruin

—there was no need to be secret about it.

It was puzzling enough.

Bob pushed on, slowly and carefully, keeping on that track. It led him to the spot where the old moat was easiest to cross. He picked his way across the snow-piled rubble in the moat and into the courtyard beyond.

The old yard was a sheet of snow; and across it ran that deep track, leading into the shattered old doorway.

No sound came to Bob save the wail of the wind and the rustle of icy branches and old ivy. If the unknown man was there he was silent.

But why was he there? Even if he was someone who played ghost in the haunted house, as Bob half-suspected, that did not account for it. For he could not possibly have expected anyone to come on such a night; he could not be perpetually on the watch to play his ghostly tricks.

Under the broken arch of the old doorway Bob paused. His heart was beating rather unpleasantly.

Was anyone, after all, there? Ghosts, if ghosts there were, surely could not leave footprints in the snow? And yet—

The darkness, the silence, the low wail of the wind were eerie; the solitude was oppressive. Ghosts, easy enough to laugh at in a lighted room under a roof, seemed different, somehow, in that blackness and solitude on a winter's night with no human being anywhere at hand, unless the silent being in the ruined mansion was human.

If he was there, why was he silent? Why was he there at all? How could anyone be there in that black darkness, finding his way without a light? The spectre of the old miser was said to carry a ghostly light, but there was no gleam in the blackness.

Standing there, with flakes falling softly over him, the wind wailing, staring into the blackness within, Bob felt a tremor creep over him.

At that moment he would have been glad to turn back, and hurry away from that desolate, dismal spot. But, as he thought of that, he set his teeth.

He was not going to funk it. His cheeks crimsoned in the gloom at the thought of going back—meeting the eyes of his comrades, and confessing that he had got as far as the moat house, and dared not enter.

He tramped in, doggedly.

In the old roofless hall the snow floated in, flakes scattering round him. The track was as clear as outside. Bob followed it till suddenly he halted, his heart thumping.

From the blackness ahead, beyond masses of snow-covered masonry, a light gleamed. He heard no sound, saw nothing but that sudden glimmer of light that seemed as if it rose from the earth.

Was it the ghostly light of the phantom miser? It was not—he knew it was not—and could not be, yet the blood seemed to freeze in his veins. But he pulled himself together, and shouted:

"Who's there?"

The light vanished.

THE MYSTERY OF THE MOAT HOUSE!

DARKNESS, black and impenetrable, settled in the interior of the old moat house where that strange light had glimmered. Bob stood with his heart thumping.

He listened, hearing only the wailing wind. No answer came to his call, no sound of a footstep, or a movement.

He had a feeling of the flesh creeping on his bones.

This was what Bunter had seen, according to his story. No wonder the frightened fat junior had bolted!

Bob Cherry felt very much like bolting. Indeed, it seemed that his legs were going to run away with him. He had to make an effort of will to remain where he was in that wrapping, suffocating darkness, listening for a sound that did not come.

But he would not run as Bunter had run. He was not going to be called a funk again. He was going to see what it all meant.

Several minutes, which seemed like hours, crawled by. Then at last there was a sound—a faint sound. It was a moan from the darkness.

He started and listened more intently. It was not the wind—it was a low, moaning sound. It came from a direction different from that of the light he had seen—from somewhere among the old shattered walls and stacks of fallen bricks and stone.

Bob breathed hard. Was it, could it be, some grisly spectre that lurked in the darkness? Or was it, after all, some trickster, who had taken warning by his shout, and so knew that he was there, and was trying to frighten him?

But why—why? If it was a human being, why was he there at all? Who, in the name of all that was incomprehensible, could be lurking by night in that frozen, desolate ruin, in snow and wind and darkness? It did not seem sense.

The low, moaning sound was repeated—from a different direction again. Then came another sound—a sound that he had heard and remembered—the clinking rattle of a bunch of keys. That eerie sound seemed to float on the wind over his head.

Bob made a movement. He would have given a good deal to go, but he was not going. Holding his light before him, he tramped onward into the old building, with a fierce and savage determination.

Making his way round masses of ruined masonry, he followed that track in the snow. It led him to the spot where a few days ago he had looked down the steps under the arched opening, and seen the footprints. There was only one set now.

He stood there, looking down. The track he had been following led down the steps into the well of darkness below.

But as he flashed his light round him on the snow-covered flags he discerned the track—reversed—leading up from the underground stair. Whoever had gone down had come up again while he was standing and looking in from the courtyard. Was that why the light had seemed to his eyes to rise from the earth?

He turned, and followed the return track.

It led him to a vast mass of masonry, sprinkled with snow. He stood staring at it. The man—if man it was—must have scrambled over that mass of rugged ruins. Was it to avoid leaving a track in the snow, now that he knew that someone was on the spot?

Bob began to feel sure that it was a trickster that he had to deal with. He turned back to the steps again.

Clink, clink, clink! came on the wind—the rattle of ghostly keys. He did not turn his head at that eerie sound behind him.

With his teeth set he tramped down

the steps. If the unseen, unknown lurker in the ruins had gone down; he must have had some reason—if he was not a flitting spectre. Bob was going to know the reason.

There was snow only on the top steps. Four or five steps down the stairs lay bare.

The tracks were no longer to be seen

I Spent Christmas At Greyfriars 50 Years Ago!

By Colonel Wharton

THE fact that large numbers of boys will be spending Christmas at school this year reminds me that I spent Christmas at Greyfriars myself something like 50 years ago. (I will refrain from telling you the exact number in case you are tempted to start reckoning out my age!)

Several cases of an infectious disease had occurred at the school, with the result that Greyfriars had been placed "in quarantine" over the Festive Season, and we boys were not allowed to go home.

I was in the Fourth Form at the time (there was no "Lower" or "Upper") and the Fourth was looked on as a particularly enterprising Form. We set out to justify our reputation!

At a Form meeting over which I presided, we drew up a full week's programme of festivities, which included two indoor sports meetings, football matches, a magic lantern show, an amateur pantomime, a public debate, and a grand Christmas party.

The programme was so successful that before we were half-way through, almost the entire school had joined up with us. So big were the crowds that our magic-lantern show had to be transferred from the Junior Common-room to the dining-hall, while Big Hall itself had to be used to accommodate the audience that turned up to see our pantomime!

Everything we did that week went off, as I believe you express it now, with a "bang"! In those days we were a rougher, heartier crowd than our modern counterpart. Our football (under very different rules from those of to-day) was more boisterous and less scientific. Our pantomime was a very crude affair in comparison with the smart modern junior show. It consisted chiefly, I remember, of knockabout turns, and the "humour" was hardly more than horseplay. But our football and our acting alike were well suited to the requirements of that age, and proved enormously successful.

Throughout our enforced stay at the school, we were well supplied with "tuck" (we called it "tummy"!), and my recollection is that when our delayed breaking-up did arrive, some time after Christmas, we were all quite sorry to go home!

—but there was only one way to go. Bob went on—downward.

The dim, damp, icy-cold stone stairway consisted of a dozen steps. He reached the bottom, and stood in an arched passage, floored by mouldy flagstones, reeking with damp.

He held up his lamp, and looked about him.

The passage was low; his head almost touched the arched roof. Here and there lay great masses of masonry, blocks of stone still held together by the ancient cement, that had evidently rolled down the steps when the old walls crashed long years ago.

He picked his way among them, and pushed on to the end of the underground passage.

It ended in a wall of solid stone.

Bob came to a halt, staring at it.

That solid stone wall blocked all further progress.

He turned back. So far as he could see the arched passage led to nothing.

Possibly it had been a shelter or some sort of a hiding-place in ancient days. It did not, at all events, seem to lead to any cellar or vaults as might have been expected.

Bob scanned the passage in the light of his torch as he moved back towards the steps, rather blankly.

Here and there it was almost blocked by the masses that had rolled down when the old walls collapsed. One huge block was jammed close to the wall—a block so large and heavy that only a very muscular man could have moved it. The other masses were smaller, of all shapes and sizes.

Bob got back to the steps in a state of wonder and doubt.

What possible motive could any man have had for penetrating to that dismal, dank recess on the dark winter's night? He felt a shiver as, looking up the stairway, he heard that strange sound again.

Clink, clink!

It was the rattle of iron keys.

Man or ghost, it was between him and the open. Bob felt his heart thump. But his jaw squared, and his eyes glinted, and he tramped up the steps. He did not believe, and he could not believe, that he had followed ghostly footprints in the snow, though if there was a natural explanation, the mystery of the moat house was beyond his understanding.

He reached the top of the steps.

The clinking sound had ceased. All was silent.

Bob held up his lamp, and flashed the light round.

It revealed nothing but snow-covered ruins, shattered walls topped with snow and frosty ivy. A moment later he gave a startled gasp as the lamp was struck from his hand.

"Oh!" gasped Bob.

No one was near him. It must have been a sudden missile from the dark—as likely as not a snowball—that had struck the lamp away.

He was left in black darkness.

He peered round him helplessly. It was futile to search for the fallen flash-lamp. It had dropped in snow, and he had not heard it fall. But, as he panted, with thumping heart, he heard a faint sound in the darkness as of a stealthy, creeping form.

He shuddered. In that black darkness it seemed as if ghostly fingers were reaching out to touch him.

He moved at last. He had to grope his way blindly among the fallen ruins in the old hall to get back to the courtyard and out of the moat house. He moved, with his hands outstretched in front of him, slowly, feeling his way,

his footsteps making no sound in the thick carpet of snow.

Suddenly his outstretched hands touched something in the dark, and, with a shudder that ran through him from head to foot, he realised that it was a face—a human face.

The next moment he grasped savagely at the unseen figure. By chance, in the blackness, he had run into the mysterious lurker in the moat house, and his momentary panic changed to a burst of anger. He grasped at the form in the darkness.

"Now, you rotter!" breathed Bob. "Who—"

There was a crash, and a thousand lights seemed to dance before his eyes. After that Bob Cherry knew nothing.

WHERE IS BOB CHERRY?

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Billy Bunter opened his little round eyes behind his big round spectacles and blinked round at four faces in Harry Wharton's den.

Having finished the almonds and the muscatels, the fat Owl had dropped off to sleep in his armchair before the fire—lulled, perhaps, by the buzz of the radio. Now he had awakened. The radio had been shut off, and there was silence, save for the crackle of the logs.

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent had sat down to a chess table, but did not seem very deep in pawns and pieces. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh was gazing meditatively at the fire, which flickered on his dusky complexion. Johnny Bull had a "Holiday Annual" on his knees, but he seemed to be thinking rather than reading.

The fact was that it seemed high time to the Co. that Bob Cherry got back after writing that letter. It was dawning on Johnny Bull that Bob had gone off in a huff, which was very unlike Bob—and it was still more unlike him for his huff to last an hour. There was a general feeling of something like discomfort in the hitherto merry party.

"Where's Bob?" asked Bunter, blinking round.

"Gone to write a letter," said Harry, without looking round.

"He, he, he!"

Billy Bunter chortled. He seemed amused.

No one heeded that fat chortle, only Johnny Bull giving the chortling fat Owl a rather dark look.

"I say, you fellows, it's taking Bob a jolly long time to write that letter, ain't it?" inquired Bunter.

No reply.

"You fellows are the fellows for rowing, ain't you?" went on the fat Owl agreeably. "Bull only got here to-day, and he's rowing already."

"Who's rowing?" asked Johnny Bull in a deep voice.

"He, he, he! You call a fellow a funk, and don't call it rowing?" asked Bunter. "Not that it doesn't serve him right! He's called me a funk more than once—"

"You are a funk!" said Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Now shut up!"

"Shan't!" retorted Bunter independently. "I don't expect much in the way of manners from you, Bull. But really there's a limit, you know! Rowing and ragging the minute you get to a place—"

Johnny Bull rose to his feet.

"Are you going to shut up, Bunter?" he asked.

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"No," said Bunter emphatically, "I ain't!"

"I'll shut you up, then!"

Johnny Bull picked up a cushion. He swiped with that cushion! Still Billy Bunter did not shut up—he roared!

"Yow-ow! Beast! Keep off, you rotter! 'Tain't my fault if you row with old Bob, and he goes off in a sulk, is it?"

Swipe!

"Wow! Stop it, will you?" howled Bunter. "Look here, Wharton, if you think a fellow is going to stand this—"

"Why not shut up?" suggested Wharton.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter shut up at last. It was clear that Johnny was going on swiping till he did, and there did not seem to be any support available from the captain of the Remove. So Bunter shut up, contenting himself with giving Johnny devastating blinks through his big spectacles.

Johnny, however, was not devastated by those deadly blinks; they had no effect on his back, which he turned to Bunter.

Johnny's face was thoughtful, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh smiled a faint, dusky smile as he looked at him.

"You fellows think old Bob's got his back up?" asked Johnny, looking round. "Blessed if I know why! Think he has?"

"Hem!" murmured Nugent.

"Um!" remarked Harry Wharton.

Johnny knitted his brows.

"Well, I never meant to put his back up, as I suppose you fellows know," he said. "But if I did, I'll go and tell him I'm sorry."

Johnny Bull marched out of the room with his heavy tread. Johnny was unaware of having given Bob any cause for getting his back up. He was, it was true, a plain speaker, but he believed in plain speaking. However, if old Bob had got his back up, with or without cause, Johnny undoubtedly was sorry for the same, and was prepared to say so—after which, it was to be expected, all would be calm and bright.

He was back, however, in a couple of minutes.

"Bob's not in his room," he said. "I suppose he went down after he'd done that letter. I'm going down."

"O.K.!"

Johnny Bull departed again, and this time his absence was longer. But he came back in about ten minutes.

"You fellows know where Bob is?" he asked.

"Haven't you found him?"

"No."

"Well, he must be in the house somewhere!" said Harry, in surprise. "He can't have gone out in this weather on his own. Did you ask Wells?"

"Yes. Nobody's seen him. Dash it all, the chap can't have gone out in this blinking snow because he had his back up, I suppose!"

Three juniors rose to their feet.

Billy Bunter sat up and grinned.

"Perhaps he's cleared off!" he suggested.

"Oh, don't talk rot, Bunter!" snapped Wharton.

"Well, I've come jolly near clearing off more than once!" said the fat Owl, with a sniff. "The way a guest is treated here—"

"Shut up, you fat fool!"

"Wha-a-ah!" ejaculated Bunter. He blinked at Harry Wharton. "Look here, if that's the way you talk to a fellow, you can jolly well expect to

lose me as well as Bob this Christmas! I can jolly well tell you—"

"Be quiet, idiot! Come on, you chaps!" said Harry. The suggestion that Bob Cherry might have had his back up to the extent of clearing off was too dismaying to Wharton for him to have his usual patience to waste on the fat Owl.

He hurried out of the room.

Billy Bunter sent an indignant snort after them as the Co. followed him.

Wharton switched on the light in Bob's room. One glance was enough to show that Bob had not cleared off, as the fat Owl had so happily suggested. His belongings were about the room, as usual.

"I suppose he's gone out," said Harry. "Bob always says that if a chap's huffy a walk is the best thing to cure it. I expect he's gone out for a tramp; most likely he went this way, by the balcony."

Bob's shoes lay by a chair, where they had been taken off. That looked as if he had changed into boots to go out. And it was soon ascertained that an overcoat was gone.

"Is it preposterously possible—"

murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton looked at him.

"Cough it up, Inky!" he said. "I was thinking that Bob might have gone off to the haunted house, just to show us—"

"The sameful thought was in my debilitated mind," admitted the nabob.

"I—I suppose he might, after what Johnny said—"

muttered Nugent.

"I never said anything, did I?" said Johnny Bull.

"Hem!"

"He said he didn't want to go there, and I asked him if he funk'd it. Of course, I didn't mean that he funk'd it."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if the silly old ass has gone there, just because of what you didn't mean, you fathead!" said Harry. "Blessed if I see why he should go out, otherwise! I think I'll look for him; we may find him enjoying a tramp on the terrace."

Wharton went to his room for a coat and a cap. The other fellows did the same, and they gathered in Bob's room again.

Wharton opened the french window on the balcony, and they passed out into the snowy December night. A flash-lamp turned on the carpet of snow revealed traces of boots, though almost obliterated by fresh flakes. There was no doubt that Bob had gone out that way.

They descended to the terrace. All windows were blacked out, and it was densely dark.

"You about, Bob, old man?" called out Harry.

There was no answer; but they did not really expect one. Wharton, Nugent, and Hurree Singh had little doubt that Bob had gone off to the haunted house on his own—as a sort of crushing retort to Johnny Bull.

They went down from the terrace to the path below. Following it, they arrived at the little gate on the road.

There they found unmistakable signs that someone had gone out. Footprints were lost under fast-falling flakes, but the mass of snow which had been scraped back when the gate was dragged open told its own tale.

"The old ass went out this way!" said Harry. "Ten to one he's gone to the moat house—"

"Nothing to hurt him there if he has!" said Johnny.

"No, ass; but I don't like the idea, all the same. It's a rotten place for a fellow to be alone in the dark. Blessed



"You've called me a slacker often enough, Bob Cherry!" said Billy Bunter. "Now what are you doing—slacking about, tucked up like a tabby cat, at half-past ten in the morning?" Only the pain in Bob's head saved Bunter from a severe kicking.

if I can see what's keeping him all this time, too!"

"What about pushing on to the moat house and looking for him?" asked Nugent.

"Yes, let's."

The juniors turned up their coat-collars against the bitter wind, and tramped down the road towards the corner of Redgate Lane. There they turned the corner and tramped on through the windy darkness and falling snow, heading for the moat house.

THE MAN IN THE VAN!

BOB CHERRY opened his eyes. He was conscious first of a grinding ache in his head. For a minute or two he did not remember—and he lay, his half-opened eyes blinking in the light, without moving. Then, as it came back to him, he stirred and lifted his aching head and looked round him dizzily.

He had fallen senseless under a sudden crashing blow on the head—he was aware of that. He had fallen in the snow in the old roofless moat house in the darkness of the winter night. But there was light in his eyes as he opened them—and he was not lying in the snow on the frozen old flagstones. Where he was, and how he got there, was a mystery to him for a moment or two.

There was a scent of oil from a lamp, and a stronger scent of tobacco. The stuffy atmosphere made him catch his breath.

He stared round him in wonder.

He was lying on a sort of bed on a floor—a bed made up of a pile of dingy blankets. Close round him were

wooden walls, and his first impression was that he was in a hut. Then, as his dazed eyes fell on a figure near at hand, he realised where he was—in a caravan.

Within a few feet of him a man sat on a box, leaning against the wall of the van, his legs stretched out across almost the whole width of the caravan.

On another box, beside the man, was a tin of tobacco, a bottle, and a glass, and a pile of newspapers. By the light of a swinging lamp, the man was reading a paper, and smoking a pipe, which filled the confined space with smoke and smell.

It was the rat-faced man who lived in the caravan in the grounds of the old moat house.

Bob blinked at him. He had been quite unconscious of it, but it was clear that the caravanner must have carried him into the van and laid him where he now was.

He sat up, putting a hand to his head. The man with the pipe looked round, gave him a nod, and laid down the newspaper.

"Oh, you've come to, 'ave you?" he grunted. "Time you did, young feller-me-lad! I can tell you this, young whoever-you-are, you wouldn't have come to in a 'urry if I hadn't found you and brought you in 'ere! You'd have been froze stiff!"

"You found me?" mumbled Bob.

"Lucky for you I did!" grunted the rat-faced man. "If you hadn't yelled out fit to raise the dead when you fell over yonder, I'd never have known you was there. It gave me a start, I can tell you—what with the stories of ghosts they tell about that place."

"Did I call out?" asked Bob.

He was quite unconscious of having

cried out when he was struck down by that blow in the dark.

"Didn't you!" grunted the rat-faced man. "Might have been heard half a mile. I tell you, it gave me a start! So I got out my lantern and come to look—and there you was, lying where you fell over—and I think it's worth ten bob to you to be brought out of it."

"Yes, yes!" said Bob. "But—did you see him?"

"Him! Who?"

"The man who struck me down!"

The rat-faced man stared at him.

"I never saw nobody but you," he answered. "What was you doing there in the dark? There's been tramps who've camped there at times—but you ain't a tramp, I s'pose? Did you run into some tramp there?"

"I—I don't know." Bob pressed his hand to his aching head. "I ran into somebody in the dark, and he knocked me on the head."

"Did he?" The rat-faced man stared. "When I found you I thought you'd fallen over something in the dark and knocked your head."

"Well, I didn't. I was knocked down."

The man in the caravan shrugged his shoulders. His look indicated that he did not believe that statement.

"You was frightened in the dark, and never knew what 'appened, I expect," he said. "What was your game there? You're one of the young coves I saw around here the other day, ain't you? What was you up to, coming there in the dark?"

"I was exploring the place," muttered Bob.

"More fool you to come in the dark! I s'pose it's the sort of place a

schoolboy would like to root over, but daylight's the time! You better stick to daylight if you come again! If you came in the dark, why didn't you bring a light?"

"I did! I lost it——"

"And then you fell over and knocked your head!" said the rat-faced man. "Well, if you hadn't howled out fit to raise the dead, you'd be there still! And froze! You can lay to that!"

The rat-faced man resumed his pipe. Bob sat, leaning on the wall of the caravan, pressing his hand to his aching head, collecting his wits.

From what the man said, he had cried out when he was struck down, though he remembered nothing of it. It was likely enough. And the man, rough customer as he looked, had come out to see the cause, found him, and carried him into the van. He looked a surly brute; but he could hardly have left the schoolboy to freeze in the snow, and Bob certainly was thankful that he had taken the trouble. He was more than willing to hand over the reward at which the man had very plainly hinted.

But he was utterly puzzled and mystified.

Whatever the rat-faced man thought, Bob knew that he had not stumbled over and fallen and knocked his head; he knew that he had been struck down. Was it possible that he had run into some ruffianly tramp who had sought shelter from the weather in that lonely place?

But if that was the case, who was it that had played ghost? Somebody had—unless, indeed, the moat house was haunted by an unearthly being.

According to what his chums had told him, it could not be the man in the caravan who played that uncanny trickery. They had seen him, at a distance from the moat house, while Bob was there on the previous occasion. Otherwise his suspicions certainly would have turned on the low-browed, rat-featured occupant of the caravan.

He spoke again, after a long silence: "You're sure you saw nobody there?"

The man gave a grunt.

"Seeing as there was nobody, of course I didn't," he answered.

"Did you hear anything?"

"Only the wind."

"Nothing like the rattling of keys?" asked Bob.

The man stared at him, and then gave a gruff laugh.

"That's the ghost story," he said. "I've 'card it often enough from people in these parts. But I ain't never 'eard them keys—and I ain't never seen a ghost light, neither—and I been 'ere long enough! If there's a ghost, he keeps to the moat house—he don't come along to this here van! You young idjit, you've been frightening yourself in the dark!"

Bob's face crimsoned, and he was silent again.

The man gave him a grinning stare and rose, opened the door of the caravan a few inches, and looked out into the night. He gave a grunt, and turned back to Bob.

"It don't look like giving over!" he said. "But if you're going to get 'ome to-night you better get a move on. You live about 'ere?"

"I'm staying at Wharton Lodge."

"I know the place—'arf a mile from 'ere!" The man stood staring at him surlily, and seemed to consider. "Look 'ere, I'll give you a 'and 'ome, if you like. You looked pretty sick, and you can lay to that. You gave your bean a hard knock, and no mistake."

He crammed his burly figure into a rough greatcoat.

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Bob staggered to his feet, with his hand on the side of the van. His head ached horribly, and he was dazed and dizzy.

He stood unsteadily, and the rat-faced man gave him a hand.

"I'll 'elp you!" he grunted, and he gave Bob a helping hand down from the van. Leaving him standing in the snow, he locked the van and then rejoined him.

Taking the schoolboy by the arm, he led him to the lane, and they turned in the direction of the road.

Bob's head was swimming, and he was glad enough of the helping hand, little as he liked the man's company. He tramped unsteadily through the snow, by the side of the rat-faced man. But before the road was reached there came a gleam of a flash-lamp in the darkness, and a voice called:

"Who's that?"

"Bob, old man!"

The next moment Bob was surrounded by his friends.

BUNTER THE COMFORTER!

BILLY BUNTER grinned—a sarcastic grin.

It was bright morning—the snow had ceased to fall, and a wintry sun was shining on a world of white.

Bunter had breakfasted in bed that morning. Nobody objected to Bunter breakfasting in bed—indeed, had he remained in bed, snoozed till lunch, lunched in bed, snoozed till dinner, and dined in bed, nobody would have minded. It would have been almost as good as not having Bunter there at all!

That programme, however, though attractive in itself, did not suit the gregarious Owl. At half-past ten, Bunter rolled forth in search of company.

Downstairs, he learned that four fellows had gone out to skate on the lake, which Bunter persisted in calling a pond. Colonel Wharton had gone out also, and Miss Wharton was busy with household duties—not that the company of either was much desired by the fat Owl. Another guest was expected at the Lodge—Jack Drake, who had once been at Greyfriars, and was now Ferrers Locke's assistant in London. But Drake had not turned up yet. The only available company was that of Bob Cherry, who, Bunter learned, was lying down that morning, in Wharton's den.

So up to Wharton's den went the fat Owl, and as he pushed open the door and blinked in through his big spectacles, he grinned that sarcastic grin.

Bob was lying on a settee pulled up before a crackling log fire, his head on a cushion.

His ruddy face was a good deal paler than usual. He had a bandage tied over a great bruise on his head—which ached badly. He had the Christmas number of the "Gem" in his hand, but he was not reading.

For once, Bob's cheery, sunny spirits were dashed.

He hated, first of all, being an invalid—and anything like being fussed over disconcerted him. But with his aching nut, he could not carry on with the usual strenuous life—every movement gave him a pain, and any energetic movement a fearful pang. He just had to lie up for a time and make the best of it.

Reading was not much of a resource, with an aching head. But Bob was not the fellow to keep other fellows in, sitting about doing nothing. The whole Co. would willingly have sat it out with him, but he had shooed them

off—and they had at last gone out with their skates.

He would have liked their company, all the same, as he lay staring at the fire. But he did not seem to want Bunter's. His face did not brighten in the very least at the sight of the grinning fat Owl.

"Oh, here you are, all on your own!" said Bunter, rolling in. "Nice sort of manners here—what? Leaving a fellow all on his own! You're getting some of it now, same as I have! Scrubby lot here, ain't they?"

"Cheese it, you silly ass!" grunted Bob.

"That's what you call gratitude, I suppose, when a fellow fags up all those stairs to keep you company, while you're lying on your beam-ends!" said Bunter.

Grunt from Bob.

"Look here, let's go out—what?" asked Bunter. "I shouldn't lie about being an invalid if I were you, Cherry. After all, what's a crack on the nut? Nothing to make a fuss about, that I can see! I wouldn't be a slacker, old chap!"

Bob looked at him. Only the circumstance that he could not have kicked Bunter without getting a fearful pang in his nut saved the fat Owl. To be called a slacker by the fat, frowsting Owl was rather too much.

"You've called me a slacker often enough," remarked Bunter. "Now what are you doing slacking about, tucked up like a tabby cat, at half-past ten in the morning? Not Greyfriars style, old chap. You'd better go to a girls' school next term! He, he, he!"

Bob Cherry stirred and glanced about him—for something to throw at Bunter. But there was nothing at hand to throw, and the fat Owl rattled on cheerfully.

"Looking for something? Want something to eat?"

Bob grinned.

"I'll ring if you want something to eat! I don't see why servants shouldn't work," said Bunter. "I believe in making 'em work! Plenty of up and down stairs—that teaches 'em! Like me to ring?"

"No, you footling freak!"

"They've all gone out," said Bunter, settling down comfortably in an armchair. "I say, old chap, are you still sticking to that funny story you told last night?"

Bob did not reply to that, but his colour deepened.

"Of course, you only fancied it!" said Bunter, blinking at him. "Nobody banged you on the nut, old chap! Nobody believes anybody did—they'd tell you so, only they don't want a row! I can tell you the old jossier thinks you fell over in the dark and banged your head. So do they all. You did, you know! You fancied the rest—because you were frightened. See?"

Bob lay silent.

His friends had been kind and sympathetic. Colonel Wharton and Aunt Amy had been deeply concerned. It was plain that he had had a bad knock on the head—there was a big bruise to show for it. But that some mysterious and unknown person had struck him down in the dark he knew that his friends doubted. If he had stumbled and slipped in the dark, and crashed his head on the masonry, he might easily have fancied the rest.

Indeed, it was all so mysterious and perplexing that Bob himself almost wondered whether it might be that. Yet he remembered the unseen face that his fingers had touched in the darkness—the unseen figure on which his grasp had closed when that sudden blow was struck. He knew that it was not fancy

—though he could hardly blame his friends for thinking that perhaps it was!

Certainly he did not feel disposed to discuss it with the fat Owl. He said nothing. Bunter, however, had enough to say for two.

"That's how it was, old fellow—mere fright! A pity I wasn't with you! What you wanted was a pal with a spot of pluck, you know. I say, the old josses' gone to the moat house—gone to look round. Think he'll find a tramp who banged you on the napper? He, he, he!"

"You fat, footling, frabjous owl!" breathed Bob. "I can't move without my head going like a cracker! Shut up!"

"Well, I wouldn't give in to it," said Bunter, shaking his head. "But then, I'm not soft! You were always a bit soft, old chap, if you don't mind my mentioning it! Not such a milksop as Nugent, perhaps—not so bad as that—but rather soft! I wouldn't be soft, Cherry!"

Bob Cherry cast an almost frantic glare round for a missile. It was really awful to be pinned down by a splitting

was flattened back in the armchair by the crashing cushion. "Yaroooh!"

Bob Cherry sank back on the settee, his head going like a steam-hammer from the exertion. But it was a comfort to see the fat Owl kicking up his little fat legs, sprawling and roaring.

"Ow! Oogh! Ow! Why, you beast, wharrer you up to?" roared Bunter. "This the way you treat a chap who gives up his morning to keep you company, when everybody else has let you down? Yoooooh!"

Billy Bunter struggled out of the

Dr. Birchmall's Christmas-tree!

A Seasonable School
Story of JACK JOLLY
& CO., the Cheery
Chums of St. Sam's

By
DICKY NUGENT



"**B**ROUGHT the Christmas-tree with you, sir?"

Jack Jolly fired that eager question at Dr. Birchmall as the latter poked his head into Jolly's study in the Fourth Form passidge.

It was breaking-up day at St. Sam's, and Jolly and his chums, Merry and Bright and Fearless, were sorting out the presents to put on the Christmas-tree for their breaking-up party. Jolly's pater had sent along a ripping lot of presents for the Fourth. He had also given the Head enuff munny to buy a Christmas-tree on which to hang them.

Dr. Birchmall sneaked into the study. He had a guilty look on his face. Traces of mince-meat were visible round his mouth.

"I—I'm sorry, Jolly," he plattered. "I'm afraid your hoaps will have to be turned down. You see, the Christmas-tree has not turned up!"

"But you ordered it, sir!" protested Fearless.

"True, Fearless! I had to cancel the order, however, because I spent the munny on mince-pies—I mean, because we're all meant to economise!" corrected the Head quickly. "Sorry and all that, boys!"

"Shame!" cried Jolly & Co. fiercely.

Dr. Birchmall sighed simperthetically.

"It's a beestly shame, boys—agreed! The meer thought of breaking into the breaking-up munny makes me feel like breaking down! But have a topping Christmas party, all the same, won't you? Eggscuse me now."

And Dr. Birchmall skedaddled out of the study.

"Bust it!" said Jolly disgustedly, as the door slammed behind him. "He gorged himself on mince pies instead of buying our Christmas-tree! Now what can we do?"

"I know!" said Fearless. "Let's use the Head's whiskers!"

"Wha-a-at?"

"They're as bushy as any Christmas-tree! Besides, it would be a good joke to have the fellows swarming round Dr. Birchmall picking presents out of his face-fungus!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But the Head would never stand for it!" objected Jack Jolly.

"In that case, he could sit down," retorted Fearless. "I'll put it to him, if you like."

"I'll come with you, then—with the presents!" larfed Jolly.

No answer from Bob.

"I wonder that surly brute in the van took the trouble to look for you," went on Bunter. "He was uncivil enough to me when I saw him—a low beast, you know! I came near to knocking him down! What are you grinning at?"

Bob did not explain what he was grinning at.

"But I suppose you tipped him," said Bunter. "I dare say he expected a tip! That's why he did it, of course. Low beast—he checked me! But I say, old chap, are you going to stick there all the morning? I shouldn't frowst over a fire on a ripping morning like this if I were you. Buck up! Make an effort! Don't give way to it, you know!" said Bunter encouragingly.

head when his toes were itching to kick Bunter.

Slowly, moving with care, he extracted the cushion from under his head. He had nothing else to throw.

"Come down to the billiards-room and knock the balls about a bit," suggested Bunter. "It's not much of a table—nothing like the billiards-table at Bunter Court. But you can get a game on it—of sorts! If you'll take my advice, old fellow, you won't give way to a little spot of pain like this—you'll brace up and bear it, like a man! Dash it all, old chap, be a man! That's my advice—be a man!"

Whiz!

Crash!

"Whooooop!" roared Bunter, as he

armchair and grasped the cushion. He glared at Bob with a glare that might almost have cracked his spectacles.

"I've a jolly good mind to bang this cushion right on your nut!" he roared. "You cheeky beast—"

"Get out!" hooted Bob.

"Yah! I'll get out fast enough!" snorted Bunter. "Catch me wasting any more of my time on you! This is the thanks I get! It's always the same—I do these kind and generous things, and I get rotten ingratitude! Talk about ingratitude being a sharper child than a serpent's tooth! Beast!"

The indignant Owl turned away. Then he turned back.

"I say, though," he added, blinking

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at Bob attentively, "are you really laid up, Cherry? Can't you get off that settee, really?"

"Not without my head cracking like crackers, you fat ass!"

"Couldn't you race me to the door?" asked Bunter.

"No, ass!"

"Sure you couldn't?" asked Bunter. He seemed quite interested in that point. "Mean to say that if a burglar, say, cut off with your watch, you couldn't cut after him?"

"No, I couldn't!"

"Oh!" said Bunter. "Then you can jolly well have this cushion back, you beast!"

And lifting the cushion in both fat hands, Bunter brought it down on Bob Cherry's features with a terrific smite. Then he cut to the door.

Bob gave a yell of anguish. He leaped up from the settee—but immediately his unfortunate head started cracking like crackers, as he expressed it, and he staggered and sat down again.

"He, he, he!"

A fat cackinnation floated back, and then the door slammed after Bunter.

Bob was left alone again—far from comforted by Bunter's kind visit!

PLOTTING A PLOT!

"BOOT him!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"The bootfulness is the proper caper!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"There's a limit!" said Frank Nugent.

"And that fat ass is the limit!" assented Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton was silent. So was Billy Bunter.

Bunter, as well as being silent, was invisible! Bunter, as a rule, was big enough to be seen—especially sideways! But on the present occasion the fat Owl of Greyfriars was lying low—very low!

It was a couple of days since Bob Cherry's adventure at the moat house. That adventure had hardly been mentioned since. Bob, aware of what his comrades thought, did not care to discuss it. He was feeling, perhaps, a little sore about it; but if so, he kept it to himself, and did not allow it to affect his sunny temper.

The bump on his head was better and was no longer painful, except for a twinge every now and then. He had been able to join his comrades in skating, and the party had just come in, in the December dusk, and crowded into the den, round the fire.

In the den was a desk, which Harry Wharton had closed when he went out—and which he had found open when he came in. He looked at that desk with an expressive expression on his face.

He had no secrets in particular. It did not matter much whether anybody rooted through his desk or not. All the same, it was irritating and annoying—and, really, not the sort of thing that a guest was expected to do! The Peeping Tom of Greyfriars had not left his happy habits behind him at school. Obviously he had gone through that desk and doubtless read every letter that lay therein—improving the shining hour while the Famous Five were on the ice.

The desk had been left open, the contents in a disturbed state—as if the

fat Owl did not care whether his investigations were noticed or not.

But, as a matter of fact, Bunter would have shut that desk—had he had time! But he hadn't!

He had been at it when he heard the footsteps of the juniors at the door, and he had had barely time to dodge behind the big settee—which was now against the wall—before the door opened.

There the fat Owl huddled and palpitated. Given time, the fat investigator would have covered up his tracks. As the present state of the desk revealed that he had been there, he was anxious to keep out of sight till the beasts cleared off and gave him a chance of getting out of the room unseen. It was nearly time for the gong to sound for tea. Billy Bunter was more anxious than usual to hear the gong.

"I'd jolly well boot him all over the shop!" said Johnny Bull, with a grunt. "I'd boot him all the way to the railway station and into the train!"

"Beast!" murmured Bunter, under his breath.

"Must have been Bunter," said Harry slowly. "If I'd caught him at it— But I didn't! Well, I can't boot him! I've a jolly good mind to, but I—"

The captain of the Remove shook his head. He would have booted Bunter for that exploit in the Remove passage at Greyfriars. But booting him under the roof of Wharton Lodge was another matter.

"My esteemed Wharton," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, "if the absurd and obnoxious Bunter departfully cleared, would it be a terrific blow?"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"If you can think of any way of getting him unstuck, Inky, short of kicking him through the front door, cough it up!" he said.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter.

"Suppose," said the nabob, with a twinkle in his dark eyes, "suppose the ghost of the moat house haunted the esteemed fat Bunter?"

"Catch him going anywhere near the place after the fright he had!"

"But a ghost has the power of locomotion," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Suppose the esteemed ghost followed Bunter here?"

"Eh?"

Four fellows stared at the Nabob of Bhanipur. One fellow, out of sight behind the settee, pricked up his fat ears.

"Suppose," went on the nabob, "that when the esteemed Bunter lays his fat head on the pillow to-night, he hears the rattling of the ghostly keys that he heard in the moat house—"

"Or dreamed that he did!" grunted Johnny Bull.

Bob Cherry opened his lips—to close them again. He had heard that mysterious and ghostly sound in the haunted moat house, as well as Bunter. But he was not going to argue about it. He remained silent.

"But how the dickens——" exclaimed Nugent.

"That is an easy one, my esteemed Franky. My honourable self could slip into Bunter's room before he goes to bed and keep doggo! And Wharton can find a bunch of keys somewhere."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. He laughed. "By gum, it might work! That funky fat ass would fancy that the spook was after him——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Co. A fat Owl behind the settee shook a fat fist. The Famous Five seemed

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greatly entertained by the idea of Billy Bunter fancying that the ghost of the moat house had followed him home! Bunter was not amused!

"It's a winner!" chuckled Nugent. "The minute Bunter hears those keys clinking, you can bank on hearing a yell that could be heard from here to Greyfriars."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bunter will wake the house," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "But it's worth it! If he hooks it in the morning—"

"If he doesn't, the ghost can go on haunting him till he does!" grinned Johnny Bull. "Bank on it that he will be scared out of his wits—such as they are! A rabbit could frighten Bunter—let alone a spook!"

"Beast!" hissed Bunter silently.

"It's a go!" said Harry. "If he bolts out of Wharton Lodge as fast as he bolted out of the moat house the other day, he will get a quick trip home!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Not a word about it, though!" said Nugent. "Not a word for that fat ass to hear! Where is he now?"

"Somewhere where there's food, I expect!" said Johnny Bull. "Keep it dark—not a word after we've gone down. Hallo, there's the gong!"

Five fellows, grinning, left the den as the gong from below was heard announcing tea. After the door had shut, a fat figure crawled out from behind the settee and shook a podgy fist at the door.

"Beasts!" hissed Bunter.

He breathed indignation. Had Bunter, unaware that a plot had been plotted, heard that ghostly sound haunting him in the dead of night, there was little doubt what the effect would have been.

But, having overheard the plot plotted, Bunter was not likely to be scared out of his fat wits when he heard those ghostly keys clinking! Bunter was not afraid of that—now! But he was fearfully indignant!

But the indignant frown on his fat face gave place to a grin. Forewarned was forearmed. Bunter chuckled.

He rolled to the door. He opened it softly and stepped out on tiptoe and closed it behind him. Then he stepped along to the gallery over the hall, and blinked down over the oaken rail. The Famous Five were in the hall below.

Bob Cherry's voice floated up.

"Where's Bunter? He's generally first in the field at feeding-time!"

"I say, you fellows, was that the tea gong?" Bunter squeaked over the banister. "Something woke me up!"

"Yes. Come down to tea," called back Harry Wharton.

And Bunter, having thus artfully given the impression that he had been asleep in his room during that plotting of the plot in the den, rolled cheerfully down the stairs.

Five fellows, over tea, were smiling—in anticipation of the events of the night. They little guessed that the fat Owl of the Remove was also looking forward to the night with anticipation.

BUNTER LAYS THE GHOST!

BILLY BUNTER ascended the stairs slowly and laboriously at bed-time.

He had done well at supper—very well indeed. But he was laden without as well as within.

There was a cake of considerable size under Bunter's fat arm as he mounted the staircase. A fellow might wake in the night. At Greyfriars,



COME INTO the OFFICE, BOYS - AND GIRLS!

Your Editor is always pleased to hear from his readers. Write to him: Editor of the "Magnet," The Amalgamated Press, Ltd., Fleetway House, Farringdon Street, London, E.C.4.

WELL, chums, what do you think of our present Christmas series of school and detective-adventure yarns? Prime, aren't they? Frank Richards is certainly giving us one of his best treats. I have lately been receiving lots of letters from loyal readers congratulating me on having such a tip-top author. The present series will be welcomed especially by those of you who have been asking me to re-introduce Ferrers Locke and Jack Drake into our stories. I can assure you all that you are going to thoroughly enjoy the exciting adventures of these two famous "lights" from Baker Street.

In next week's super story of Greyfriars:

"THE BOY FROM BAKER STREET!"

Jack Drake joins up with his old school chums at Wharton Lodge. Like his chief, Ferrers Locke, Drake is keen to assist in solving the mysterious disappearance of Mr. Quelch. Accompanied by the Famous Five, the boy detective sets out on a tour of investigation, and very soon hits upon a clue. Strange as it may seem, however, Bunter, alone and unaided, discovers the whereabouts of the kidnapped Form-master! But the secret of Mr. Quelch's fate is hidden as deep as ever—for Bunter himself is made a prisoner! You'll find fun, excitement, and thrills in plenty in this great yarn, chums. Be sure you order next week's **MAGNET** early—the publishing date, by the way, is Thursday, December 21st.

The all-important question of the day is: "Have you got your 'Holiday Annual' yet?" If you haven't, then do so before it is too late! Orders have been pouring in from all over the world for this bumper Annual. Think of it, chums, 232 pages of rollicking fine school stories telling of the amusing and exciting exploits of such world-wide favourites as Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars, Tom Merry & Co., of St. Jim's, and Jimmy Silver & Co., of Rookwood. There are many other topping features, too! Hours and hours of happy reading are guaranteed in this year's famous "Holiday Annual"—and all for the modest sum of five shillings.

Space will not permit me to deal fully with readers' queries this week, so here are some

REPLIES IN BRIEF

to go on with:

N. W. THORNBURY (no address).—Stories dealing with the early adventures of Harry Wharton & Co. were republished in the "Schoolboys' Own Library" some considerable time back. These particular issues have long since been out of print.

Gerald PRICE (Staffs).—Greyfriars have won more cricket and football matches than St. Jim's, who, in their turn, have a far better record in the sporting line than Rookwood.

"Admirer of Bob Cherry" (Holmesfield).—Your favourite character—Bob Cherry—has fair curly hair and light blue eyes.

J. HOUGHTON (Carshalton).—Your idea sounds a good 'un, but far too expensive to carry out during war-time!

W. WEIR (Shelmorlie).—Forward me the date of the particular issue, and I will be only too pleased to oblige.

B. SPICE (Kent).—Afraid your idea would not appeal to many readers. Then again, there's the question of space.

J. McDONALD (Belfast).—The copies of the "Schoolboys' Own Library" you mention have long since been out of print. Sorry!

J. WATSON (Herts).—Greyfriars is situated near the south coast of Kent. The ages of Wharton and Bunter are 15 years 4 months and 15 years 1 month respectively.

R. BAIRD (Glasgow).—Cannot promise you anything now, but will bear your idea in mind.

Miss H. PARLICK (Canada).—Percy Bolsover is the oldest junior in the Remove and Wan Lung the youngest. Lord Mautlevener's Christian name is Herbert.

And now to thank the following readers who have written me, and whose letters need no reply. **A. E. Andrews** (Blackheath), **G. Gardiner** (Reigate), **D. Jackson** (Southport), **E. Wreford** (Wood Green), **R. Moore** (Southampton), **C. Barnes** (Walsall), and **N. Stephenson** (Sutton).

That's all for now, chums. Here's wishing you all a right royal Christmas.

YOUR EDITOR.

Billy Bunter could not take these precautions against waking up hungry. At Wharton Lodge he could—and did! And if Wells gave that cake a fixed stare as the fat Owl walked off with it, Bunter did not mind; he was above considering what a dashed butler thought of his manners and customs.

Four smiling faces surrounded Bunter as he laboured up the staircase. All was going well. Bunter did not seem even to have noticed that Hurree

Jamset Ram Singh had gone up to bed early that night.

Billy Bunter rolled into his room: the door shut. The light was shut off in the passage.

Then four fellows gathered in that passage, in the dark, to listen. They expected to hear the sound of the ghostly keys clinking soon—from Billy Bunter's room. And they had no doubt that a fat Owl would come

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bolting from that room like an arrow from a bow.

Billy Bunter, having shut his door, rolled across to his bedside table and deposited the cake thereon, then he blinked round the room in the electric light; then he sat down in an armchair before the fireplace and threw another log on the fire.

It seemed that he was in no hurry to go to bed. He sprawled in the armchair, with his fat little legs stretched out and his feet resting on the fender.

From behind a tall wardrobe which stood across a corner of the room a dusky face peered out.

Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh was ready—with a bunch of keys to rattle. But he had expected Bunter to shut off the light and turn in. Ghostly stunts in the glare of electric light were not so ghostly. The nabob waited rather impatiently for Bunter to get going.

Snore!

That deep and resonant sound from the armchair indicated that the fat Owl had fallen asleep before the fire.

Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh stepped silently out of his hiding-place. If Bunter had gone to sleep, it might be hours before he stirred again. The nabob stepped silently to the lighting switch and turned it off.

Only the leaping firelight illumined the room, casting strange lights and shadows. Bunter snored on. Naturally, Hurree Singh was unaware that a pair of little round eyes were wide open behind a pair of big round spectacles as Bunter snored.

Clink, clink, clink!

Four fellows in the passage suppressed a chuckle as they heard the clinking of the ghostly keys. Bunter snored on. The nabob tiptoed behind the armchair and clinked the keys fairly in a fat ear.

"Oh!" came an exclamation from the fat junior. Bunter decided that it was time to wake up.

The nabob stepped swiftly back.

Clink, clink, clink!

"Oh crikey!" ejaculated Bunter.

He jumped up from the armchair and stared round him through his big spectacles.

Clink, clink!

But for the fact that Bunter had overheard the plot, no doubt all would have gone like clockwork, and a terrified fat Owl would have gone charging out into the passage like a runaway hippopotamus. As it was, he didn't; he stooped, picked up the poker, and stirred the fire.

There was a sudden leaping of light, illumining the room.

Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh ducked just in time behind the high back of a chair.

Clink, clink!

Groan! Moan!

Really it was eerie! It was weird! It was uncanny! But Billy Bunter did not rush across to the door, hurl it open, and charge forth, yelling with terror.

Instead of that, the fat Owl gripped the poker in a fat paw and charged round the chair behind which Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh had ducked.

Swipe!

"Yaroooh!" roared the nabob. He bounded to his feet. The bunch of keys went with a crash to the floor.

Swipe, swipe!

"Oh! Yow! Yaroooh!"

"I say, you fellows! Burglars!" roared Billy Bunter. "I say, I've got him! I say, I'm pitching into him! I say, come and collar him!"

Swipe, swipe!

Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh bounded frantically away from the swiping poker; but the poker followed him up.

"Stoppit!" shrieked the nabob. "Oh, my esteemed hat! Stoppit! Yaroooh!"

The door was pitched open from without. Four fellows in the passage realised that something had gone wrong with that plot—very wrong indeed. It was not Bunter, but the nabob, who seemed to be getting the trouble. Four startled faces stared in, and Harry Wharton switched on the light.

"Draggimoff!" shrieked Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh. "Rescue! Yaroooh!"

"Bunter!" gasped Harry Wharton. "Oh crumbs!" stuttered Bob Cherry. Bunter was grabbed and dragged back from the attack.

"You fat idiot!" roared Johnny Bull. "It's Inky! Can't you see that it's Inky, you blithering fat owl?"

"Eh? Isn't it a burglar?" Bunter blinked at the nabob, apparently recognising him at last. "Why, it's Inky! What's Inky doing in my room?"

The juniors looked at one another. Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh rubbed numerous places where the poker had swiped, and mumbled.

"He had a bunch of keys!" said Bunter. "Of course, I thought it was a burglar with a bunch of keys! What was a fellow to think?"

"Ow!" moaned the hapless nabob. Harry Wharton & Co. looked at Bunter.

Bunter had not been scared. There was no sign of scare about Bunter—not a spot! The ghostly keys had been rattled in vain. Bunter had taken the poker to the ghost—as bold as brass! Undaunted, Bunter had laid the ghost—with the poker! It was quite mystifying!

"He knew!" yelled Bull suddenly. "Oh!" gasped Wharton. Bunter blinked at them.

"I say, you fellows, I never knew anything!" he squeaked. "I hadn't the faintest idea that Inky was going to play ghost in my room! I never noticed him sneak off to bed early—"

"What?"

"Why should I when I knew nothing about it? I never heard a word you fellows said this afternoon. You see, I wasn't behind the settee—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Nowhere near it!" said Bunter.

"I thought it was a burglar, of course; that's why I swiped him. I never sat in that chair and pretended to go to sleep till he started. I never knew he was in the room at all. Taking him for a burglar, you know, I swiped him. He, he, he!"

Hurree Jamsat Ram Singh limped from Bunter's room—and four fellows followed him.

Billy Bunter grinned after them as they went—a fat grin that extended from one fat ear to the other.

"He, he, he!" chortled Bunter. Bunter had laid that ghost. He did not think it likely that he would be haunted any more during his stay at Wharton Lodge. Billy Bunter considered that he had got rather the best of this—and the Famous Five ruefully had to admit that Billy Bunter had!

THE END.

(Watch out for next week's *Bumper Christmas Week* issue of the *MAGNET* and another exciting yarn of Greyfriars, entitled: "THE BOY FROM BAKER STREET!" It's the real goods, chums!)

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