

"A HAPPY AND PROSPEROUS NEW YEAR TO ALL!"

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A NEAR THING FOR BILLY BUNTER!

(A thrilling incident from the grand school story of Greyfriars, inside.)



This Week:

Clapton Orient F.C.

the East End Club which, during the early part of the season, carried all before them.

HAS it ever struck you that, generally speaking, the names of the big football clubs are what might be called "dry as dust"—lacking in imagination? To this general summary there are one or two exceptions. In Scotland they have a club called Queen of the South. That's romantic enough. And in London they have Clapton Orient—a title out of the ordinary.

How the Orient came to have such a name is "wrapt in mystery." Two tales are told as to the why and the wherefore of it. One tale—which I am most inclined to believe—is that in the olden days—going back to 1888—there was associated with the Clapton Cricket Club, out of which the football club grew, a man who was closely connected with the Orient Line of steamships.

The other story is that somebody had a bright idea of tacking the word Orient on to the title of the club because their ground was situated in the East End of London—and the Orient is the East. Whether this story is true or not, it has given the cartoonists a handle to work upon, and the Orient are now generally depicted in the guise of a Chinaman.

"Come on the O's!"

We are not going to quarrel about the origin of the name of Clapton Orient, however. What we can say without any argument is that the name has given the supporters of the club one of the finest of battle cries. Hear them from "Spion Kop," as they call it, when the Orient are hard at it: "Come on the O's!" It is a fine battle cry, stirring the players to extra effort. And some such outside help is wanted, because the Orient have usually been among the strugglers of the football world. Yet they go forth to battle week by week, full of faith, of courage, of whole-hearted endeavour. It has not been in them to command success out of the ordinary, but they have done their best to deserve it.

And the struggle goes on. Just one interesting coincidence connected with the club before I tell you of the Oriental players of to-day. This "Spion Kop" part of the Orient football ground to which I have alluded

covers what was formerly a whippet-racing track. It is likely that next summer there will be greyhound racing on the ground of the Clapton Orient football club.

Too Good to Last!

In the early days of the present season there was great rejoicing out Clapton way, for the "O's" were going very strongly indeed. They had a place right at the top of the League table. It was a giddy height to which the Orient were unaccustomed, but those of us who know football best felt that it was too good to last; that the slender resources of the club, so far as reserve players goes, would tell when injuries came along. And that has actually come about. They can't talk of championships now around the Lea Bridge Road, but they are still full of faith, and it is a fact that the "O's" this season are better than the club has boasted for some time past.

In some places the club is exceptionally well served, and this certainly applies to the position between the posts. Arthur Wood, who guards the fort, is one of the giants of football in every sense. He is so big that I have heard forwards complain that there is no room to shoot at either side of him. He came from Southampton some years ago, and when I tell you that he had one spell of well over two hundred League matches in succession you will see that he is a regular fellow. Captain of the side, too, and a prime

favourite. "The finest goalkeeper who has never received an International cap," is one apt description.

Compelled to Sell!

The trouble is that, when the Orient get a player "capped," they cannot afford to keep him when other clubs come along with a fat cheque. The recent case of Tom Evans illustrates this. No sooner had the merits of this defender been recognised by Wales than other clubs began to make overtures for his services, and a few weeks back he was transferred to Newcastle United. In his place the "O's" have a former member of the Tottenham-Hotspur Cup-winning team in Bob McDonald.

As full-back companion McDonald has Philip Hope, a new player for the current season, who came from South-end, and he highly pleased his new masters. He and Bob Dennison, the inside-left, had a curious experience. They each started their serious football career with Norwich City, and stayed there until May of 1924, both joining the "O's" this season.

In a team like the Orient experiments must be made almost continually, and that is why Broadbent, originally a centre-forward with Brentford, is now figuring with distinction at right-half. Broadbent is one of those "ready for anything" players, the handyman of the club.

(Continued on page 28, col. 3.)

CLAPTON ORIENT'S TEAM OF TALENT.



Reading from left to right (back row) photo shows: Broadbent, Mr. T. S. Ludford (Director), Hope, Wood, Evans, Mr. Powell (trainer), Duffy. Front row: Collins, Whipp, Gardner, Dennison, Corkindale, Spence.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN! Evidently the Christmas spirit still burns strongly in the podgy form of William George Bunter, for he goes out of his way to help a homeless waif who has rendered him a service. And perhaps no one is more surprised at this sudden show of gratitude than William George Bunter himself!



A Magnificent New Long Complete Story of the Chums of Greyfriars School, dealing with their adventures during the Christmas vac. at Wharton Lodge. By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Harry Wharton's Guest!

"ROT!"
 "Now, look here, Bunter——"
 "Bosh!"
 "I tell you——"
 "Rats!"
 Billy Bunter was Harry Wharton's guest at Wharton Lodge. Some guests would not have talked to their kind hosts and entertainers in this style. But William George Bunter had his own manners and customs, which he carried with him wherever he went.
 In the Remove passage at Greyfriars Harry Wharton might have taken the fat junior by the scruff of the neck and knocked his head against the wall. But such methods were not suitable for Wharton Lodge, even with so peculiar a guest as Billy Bunter.
 "Now, look here, you fat duffer——" broke in Bob Cherry.
 "You shut up, Cherry!"
 "What?"
 "Shut up!"
 Bob Cherry breathed hard through his nose.
 "In my esteemed opinion," murmured Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh, "the kickfulness is the proper caper."
 "Hear, hear!" said Johnny Bull.
 "Any objection to a fellow kicking your guest, Wharton?" inquired Frank Nugent.
 Harry Wharton laughed.
 "None at all. But——"
 "Oh, really, Wharton——"
 "Do have a little sense, Bunter," urged Wharton. "I tell you the lake is not safe for skating——"
 "Rot!"
 "There's been a thaw——"
 "Bosh!"

"We've given it up," said Harry. "We're going over to Woodford to see the football match instead. Come along with us."
 "Catch me tramping three miles to see a football match!" said Billy Bunter contemptuously. "Piffle! You fellows come and skate, as we arranged yesterday."
 "I tell you the lake isn't safe for skating!" bawled Bob Cherry. "That's why we've chucked it."
 "You're funky," said Bunter cheerfully.
 "Wha-a-t?"
 "Funky!"
 The Famous Five of the Remove stared at William George Bunter. For the fattest and funkiest fellow at Greyfriars to accuse them of funking was really a little too thick. Five pairs of hands fairly twitched with the longing to collar William George Bunter and bump him. In the Remove passage at Greyfriars Bunter most undoubtedly would have been bumped, and bumped hard. As it was, he had a very narrow escape in the hall of Wharton Lodge.
 "What you fellows want," pursued Bunter victoriously, "is a little pluck."
 "You—you—you——" gasped Bob Cherry.
 "Now, I've got a little pluck," said Bunter.
 "You have—a very little!" agreed Bob Cherry.
 "The littlefulness is terrific!" assented Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. "It is so terrifically little as to be unobservable."
 Billy Bunter's fat lip curled in a sneer.
 "Well, I'm going skating on the lake, when you fellows funk it, and chance it," he answered. "If you mean that you don't want to lend me your skates, Wharton——"

"I'll lend you the skates any time, fat-head! But I tell you the ice won't bear!" exclaimed Wharton. "My uncle looked at it this morning, and he told me so."
 "I dare say he's funky, too."
 "What?" yelled Wharton.
 "These old jossers haven't much nerve, you know."
 "These old what?" said Wharton almost dazedly.
 "Jossers!" said Bunter cheerfully.
 The captain of the Greyfriars Remove drew a deep breath. He pointed to the open doorway, which gave a view of the drive and the leafless trees in the park beyond.
 "You see that door, Bunter?" he asked very quietly.
 "Eh? Yes! What about it?"
 "If you speak of my uncle like that again you'll go through it, with my boot behind you!"
 There was a general grin among the Co. Harry Wharton's chums had wondered a little how the captain of the Remove was able to bear patiently with so very peculiar and original a guest as William George Bunter. It really looked as if his patience was breaking down at last.
 Bunter blinked at Harry Wharton through his big spectacles.
 "If that's the way you talk to a guest, Wharton, I can't say I think much of your manners," he said.
 "You're rather an authority on manners, old fat man," remarked Johnny Bull sarcastically.
 "I never speak to a guest like that at Bunter Court!" said the Owl of the Remove, with dignity. "Unless you apologise, Wharton, I don't see how I can stay under your roof any longer."
 "Fathead!"
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"I'm waiting for your apology."
 "Idiot!"
 Evidently Wharton's patience had broken down!
 "Still, I'm used to your bad manners," remarked Bunter. "If I can stand 'em all the term at Greyfriars, I suppose I can stand 'em during the Christmas holidays. The fact is, it wouldn't be convenient for me to leave here suddenly. I've turned down Lord Mauleverer's invitation—"
 "If any?" remarked Nugent.
 "And I've told my old pal, D'Arcy of St. Jim's, that I can't come to his place—"
 "He must have jumped for joy when he heard that!" remarked Bob.
 "Beast!"
 "Look here, Bunter, are you coming over to Woodford with us?" asked Harry. "We've got to start, or we shall be late."
 "I'm going skating."
 "You can't, I tell you!"
 "Rats!"
 "Oh, let him rip!" growled Johnny Bull. "If he gets drowned it won't be much loss to anybody."
 "Look here, you cheeky rotter—" roared Bunter.
 "Come, come!" said a cheery voice, as Colonel Wharton came into the hall. "What is the argument about, my boys?"
 Billy Bunter blinked at the colonel. "These fellows are funky of skating on the lake," he explained. "They've chucked it up because they're scared. He, he, he!"
 "The ice is not safe to-day," said Colonel Wharton eyeing the fat junior rather curiously. "I have looked at it."
 "Oh, it's all right!" said Bunter. "I'm not funky. I'm chancing it, anyhow."
 The colonel frowned.
 "Do you mean that you are going skating on the lake, Bunter, although I have told you that the ice is not safe?" he demanded.
 "You see, I'm a good skater, and I'm not much weight," explained Bunter. "I shall be all right."
 "Not much weight!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "Oh, my only hat!"
 "The weightfulness is really terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter," murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur.
 "Rats to you, Inky!"

"You will not go skating this afternoon, Bunter," said Colonel Wharton severely.
 "Oh, really, sir—"
 "While you are my nephew's guest here, I am responsible for you," said the colonel. "You may imagine, Bunter, that you know better than your elders, but I forbid you to go near the lake to-day. Understand that distinctly."
 "Look here—"
 "You need say no more," said Colonel Wharton curtly, and he walked across the hall and disappeared into the library.
 Billy Bunter blinked after him, and then blinked at the Famous Five, in great wrath and indignation.
 "Well, of all the thumping cheek!" he ejaculated.
 Wharton compressed his lips.
 "Will you come with us, Bunter?"
 "No, I won't!" snapped Bunter sulkily.
 "Then you can stay in, or go and eat coke, and be blowed to you! Come on, you fellows!"
 And Harry Wharton & Co. walked out, leaving William George Bunter glaring after them, with a glare that almost cracked his big spectacles.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

A Good Turn!

"GIPSIES!" remarked Bob Cherry.
 Harry Wharton & Co. were stepping out briskly. The road ran along the high park wall of Wharton Lodge, and on a belt of grass beside the road, at a short distance from the gates, a gipsy caravan had camped. The juniors gave the encampment a careless glance as they came up to it. A dark, rough-looking man was seated on the shafts of the van, smoking a pipe. The door of the van, at the back, was closed.
 "Hallo, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob. "Look!"
 "My hat!" ejaculated Wharton.
 The juniors would have passed on, with a cursory glance, but for a rather peculiar circumstance that drew their attention as they came up. The little window of the van was open, and from within the caravan a lad was climbing out. The window was small, and the gipsy lad was rather hefty in build, so he was rather squeezing than climbing out. The chums of the Greyfriars Remove stared at him in surprise. Why the fellow should be squeezing out of the little window instead of leaving the caravan by the door, was a mystery to them.
 They slackened speed a little, watching the young gipsy as they drew nearer the van.
 He was making no sound as he squeezed through the little window, and they could see that his face was set and tense. The man sitting on the shafts had his back to the van, and could not see what the juniors saw, and evidently had no suspicion of it.
 "Something's up here!" murmured Nugent. "That kid's locked in the van, you fellows, and he's trying to bolt!"
 "Looks like it," agreed Wharton.
 The Famous Five were quite near the van now, and the gipsy lad heard their footsteps, and looked towards them.
 His dark eyes fixed on them with an imploring look.
 He did not speak, obviously being afraid of drawing the attention of the man who was smoking near at hand. But his look was eloquent. As plainly as words could have expressed his meaning, he was beseeching the passing

schoolboys not to draw the gipsy's attention to him and his effort to escape from the caravan.
 Harry Wharton looked at the gipsy on the shafts. He was a burly, low-browed, sullen-faced man, and the captain of the Remove noticed that a thick, heavy stick lay beside him in the grass. It was not difficult to guess that that stick had been used on the boy in the van.
 "Don't give the kid away!" muttered Wharton. "It's no business of ours. Just walk on."
 "Yes, rather!"
 But at that moment the smoking gipsy looked round, doubtless having heard the footsteps of the approaching juniors. He rose to his feet, scowling, and knocked out his pipe on the van. At the same instant he sighted the boy, who was now out of the little window and about to drop to the ground.
 A black, savage scowl came over his dark face.
 "Ralph, get back!" he shouted.
 He stooped and grasped the stick from the grass, and came along with great strides as the boy dropped to the road.
 "Look out, kid!" yelled Bob Cherry, as the heavy stick whirled in the air over the boy's head.
 But the boy was looking out.
 He dodged the angry blow, which would certainly have hurt him very considerably had it landed on him, and darted into the road.
 "Stop!" shouted the man.
 He plunged furiously after the little fugitive, striking out fiercely with the heavy stick.
 The boy dodged round the group of juniors, who had stopped in the road, rather nonplussed. They had no desire to intervene in a gipsy shindy, and it was no affair of theirs; but it was plain that the boy had been ill-used. The man undoubtedly was a brutal ruffian, and without stopping to think about it, the chums of the Remove closed up in the way of the gipsy, to give the lad a chance to clear.
 "Mind what you're doing with that stick, my man!" rapped out Wharton sharply. "Do you want to crack the kid's head?"
 "I'll do what I like!" roared the gipsy. "Get out of the way!"
 "Stand back!" snapped Wharton.
 The gipsy's breath was laden with the fumes of liquor, and it was evident that the man had been drinking heavily. Certainly he was not in a state to be trusted to deal with anyone with that heavy stick in his grip.
 "Yes, chuck it!" said Bob Cherry. "Wait till you're sober."
 The gipsy lad had run a few paces up the road, and then, as if realising that he had no chance of escaping by flight, he darted across the belt of grass and made a spring at the high park wall that bordered the road. But the jump was too high for him, and he missed his hold and came down into the grass with a heavy bump and a gasping cry.
 The gipsy, avoiding the group of juniors, ran across the grass towards him as he lay panting.
 Wharton set his teeth.
 "Stop him!" he exclaimed.
 "Yes, rather!"
 "The stopfulness will be terrific."
 The heavy cudgel was whirling over the boy as he lay panting in the grass, when the Famous Five rushed on the gipsy. They charged him together, and the man, muscular and heavy as he was, went spinning. He spat out an angry oath as he went staggering and sprawling.
 The boy Ralph scrambled to his feet.

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Grasping a thick stick, the gipsy came along with great strides, as Ralph dropped to the road. "Look out, kid!" yelled Bob Cherry. But the boy was looking out. He dodged the angry blow, which would certainly have hurt him very considerably had it landed, and darted into the road. (See Chapter 2.)

He gave a wild glance round, and the fear in his face went to the hearts of the schoolboys. Whatever might be the dispute between the man and the boy, all their sympathy was with the latter.

"Here, young 'un," exclaimed Bob Cherry, "you'd better hook it! I'll give you a bunk up."

He grasped the little gipsy and bunched him up the high wall.

"Good man!" panted Johnny Bull.

The gipsy lad did not lose the chance. With Bob's hefty aid he scrambled like a cat over the high wall. He threw a leg over the top, and sat there for a moment, panting.

"Thank you, sir!" he gasped.

"All serene, kid," grinned Bob.

"I'm going, Michael!" shouted the little gipsy. "You won't see me again, you beast! You can do your own chicken-stealing after this, Michael!"

The gipsy had scrambled up. Johnny Bull had wrenched the cudgel from his hand and tossed it over the park wall. The man, with an infuriated face, stood glaring at the boy on the summit of the high wall, out of the reach of his angry clutches.

"Get down, Ralph!" he said hoarsely.

Ralph laughed breathlessly. His fear had left him now that he was out of the reach of the ruffian.

"I'm going, Michael!" he said tauntingly. "I'm going, you brute! You won't use that stick on me again! You can steal for yourself now, you beast, and I hope you'll get caught and sent to chokey!"

And with that the little gipsy dropped

on the inner side of the high wall and vanished from sight.

Michael uttered a savage oath.

"I'll find you, Ralph!" he yelled furiously. "I'll break every bone in your body!"

There was no reply from Ralph. The high wall hid him from sight as he vanished through the leafless trees of the park.

The gipsy stared up at the wall, as if thinking of climbing it and taking up the pursuit of the boy through the park. But he gave up that idea, and turned round to the juniors, with bitter fury in his face.

"You helped him to get away!" he growled, through his discoloured teeth. "You helped that whelp get away from his master, you young hounds!"

"And a jolly good thing, too!" exclaimed Nugent indignantly. "If you're his master, he would have to go a long way to find a worse one!"

"If you're not his father, the kid has a right to leave you if he chooses!" said Harry Wharton. "It's a free country!"

"You've helped him to get away!" snarled Michael. "He's got away afore, and I've had to hunt for him. I'll make you pay for it!"

And the burly ruffian, clenching his heavy fists, rushed at the Famous Five, hitting out right and left.

"Back up!" roared Bob Cherry.

No doubt Michael, the gipsy, expected to knock the schoolboys about at his own sweet will. But in that Michael was making rather a mistake. The Famous Five of Greyfriars were not to

be handled easily, even by a hefty, burly ruffian. Instead of scattering before his fierce rush, they closed in on him, and grasped him on all sides.

Crash!

Michael came to the ground with a concussion that made his senses swim. He yelled wildly as he landed:

"Ow, ow!"

The juniors left him lying in the grass, and went back to the road. Michael sat up on the grass, and blinked after them dazedly. But he did not get on his feet. Apparently he had had enough of handling the heroes of Greyfriars. A torrent of unpleasant language poured from his lips as he stared dizzily at the juniors.

"Come on, you men!" said Bob Cherry cheerily.

And the Famous Five walked on their way. For a long distance down the road the gipsy's furious voice followed them.

"Nice man!" remarked Bob. "I hope he won't get hold of that kid again. We shall be late for the footer match."

"But we have done a good turn, my esteemed Bob," said Hurrec Janset Ram Singh, "and the good turnfulness is the execrable duty of honourable and ridiculous Scouts!"

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Bob.

And Harry Wharton & Co. walked on briskly to Woodford, where they forgot all about Michael, the gipsy, as they watched the Soccer match.

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THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Bunter Looks for Trouble!

"CHEEK!" growled Billy Bunter. Bunter was indignant. William George Bunter was not being treated, at Wharton Lodge, as he considered so agreeable and distinguished a guest ought to have been treated.

He was tempted to shake the dust of the Lodge from his feet, and depart with dignity.

But he did not think of yielding to that temptation.

The fact was that, fascinating fellow as Bunter was, people did not seem to yearn for his society as they ought to have done. Invitations did not pour in upon him in the vacation as he had a right to expect that they should. True, he could always have gone home; and, from his descriptions of Bunter Court, anyone—who did not know Bunter—might have supposed that the home of the Bunter tribe was a very attractive place.

But William George never seemed to be keen on Bunter Court—and, apparently, Bunter Court was not keen on William George, for he always obtained permission to spend his holidays away from home without the slightest difficulty. His brother Sammy and his sister Bessie bore his absence with the greatest fortitude, and his parents seemed to thrive on it.

So Bunter did not think seriously of shaking the dust of Wharton Lodge from his feet, and leaving the chums of the Remove deprived of his charming company. Wharton Lodge was, in fact, his only refuge from home; it was a case of any port in a storm.

Bunter had to make the best of it.

But he was quite resolved that he was not going to stand any cheek, even from Colonel Wharton. He did not think of saying so to that gentleman himself; there was something in the colonel's eye that quelled even Billy Bunter's fat impudence. Still, he was not going to stand it. Colonel Wharton had forbidden him to go skating that afternoon. For that reason, if for no other, Bunter was going.

Had Bunter believed that the ice was not safe, wild horses would not have dragged him on the lake. But Bunter knew better. It was Bunter's peculiar system never to tell the truth if a "whopper" would serve his purpose equally well; and he never could understand that other fellows followed any different system. His view was that the Famous Five wanted to chuck up the skating excursion, because they preferred to watch the football match at Woodford.

Bunter did not prefer to watch the football match. He would not on any account have walked three miles to see a Soccer match, though he would, perhaps, have walked a greater distance to avoid playing in one. Having changed their minds about the skating excursion, the Co. had told him that the ice was not safe; that was how Bunter looked at it. And he was jolly well going skating if he jolly well liked! It was a case of fools rushing in where angels feared to tread. Colonel Wharton's prohibition only made him the more obstinate! Just as if a fellow couldn't do as he liked, Bunter reflected indignantly.

So the Owl of the Remove selected Wharton's best skates, put them under his fat arm, and sneaked quietly out of the house, anxious to avoid the colonel's eye as he went. Determined as he was to have his own way, and disregard the old military gentleman's order, he was quite aware that if the colonel's eyes

fell upon him he would crumple up at once.

Fortunately—or unfortunately—Bunter did not come under the colonel's observation as he left the lodge. The colonel, in fact, had quite forgotten his existence. The old gentleman allowed his nephew to bring anyone he liked to the house during the holidays, and he generally liked Wharton's friends; but of William George Bunter he saw as little as he could.

Billy Bunter grinned, as he followed a path through the leafless park, with Wharton's skates under his arm.

Bunter rather fancied himself on skates, and he had had some practice since he had been at the lodge; but even Bunter realised that he needed some more practice before he became an absolutely perfect skater.

Later on there was to be a party at the lodge, and there would be skating, if the weather permitted. And Bunter intended to show off his skill and grace to Marjorie Hazelden and the other guests. It was not likely that he was going to give up his skating practice in order to walk three miles to watch a rotten Soccer match. No doubt the other fellows were keen to keep him from practice, Bunter considered. They did not want him to make a great impression on Marjorie when she came. Bunter was sure of that. But he told himself complacently that his leg was not to be pulled so easily.

In his self-satisfied conceit, Bunter did not give a single thought to the possibility of danger. The fellows had been trying to pull his leg, and that was all there was about it, in Bunter's opinion.

He reached the lake at last.

It was a lonely place, at the other end of the park, which was rather extensive. It was far out of sight of the house, and there was no other building anywhere, and the road was shut off by high walls in the distance. A solitary skater getting into difficulties had no chance of getting help. It was odd enough for a funky fellow like Bunter to be rushing into a danger that even a plucky fellow might have been very careful to avoid. But there was no limit to Bunter's self-satisfied obtuseness.

He sat down and put on the skates. The lake was covered by a sheet of ice that glistened in the sun. So far as Bunter could see—which was not very far, even with the aid of his big spectacles—the ice was good, and would have borne even a heavy fellow. Other fellows called him fat; but Bunter was, as he often said, accustomed to jealousy of his good looks and his graceful figure.

"Safe as houses!" Bunter remarked to the desert air. "They can't pull my leg so easily as all that! Here goes!"

And Bunter glided out on the ice.

With the grace of an elephant or a rhinoceros, William George Bunter glided across the lake.

The ice held, as Bunter knew that it would. He glided to and fro and cut figures, and felt that he was getting on splendidly. And then, all of a sudden, there came a long, grinding, threatening crack under him.

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Bunter.

The ice was cracking, and he was a dozen yards from the bank. Under the ice the water was deep, as he knew.

From obtuse self-confidence to panic terror was a single step with Bunter. He let out a yell of fright, and spun round towards the bank, fleeing for safety.

Crack! Cra-a-a-ack!

Before Bunter fairly knew what was happening, the ice was cracking up all

round him and he was in the water. He gave a gasping howl as it surged up round him and engulfed him up to the armpits. His fat arms were flung out wildly and gripped at the ice.

"Yow-ow-ow! Grooogh! Ooooch! Help!" spluttered Bunter.

Fortunately, the ice held where he was gripping it, and saved him from sinking. His fat legs trailed in the icy water beneath, but he kept his head out and uttered frantic yell after yell.

"Yow-ow! Help! Help! Help!" roared Bunter.

He blinked wildly round through his spectacles. The place was utterly solitary, and no one knew that he was there. He yelled at the top of his voice from sheer terror, but he knew all the time that there was no one to hear. The water was freezing his fat limbs, and his arms felt like freezing as he clung to the ice.

"Help! Help! Help!"

He made an effort to drag himself on the ice, but it cracked ominously under his weight, and he desisted. The thin crust over which he had glided on the skates would not bear anything like his weight when he hung on it.

"Help! Help!"

He could not climb out, and he could not hang on for long in the icy water. He yelled and yelled again with frantic terror. And suddenly, like music to his fat ears, there came a voice:

"Hang on, sir! I'm a-coming!"

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Ralph to the Rescue!

BILLY BUNTER blinked dazedly at a tattered figure that came at a run towards the frozen lake. It was a lad of about his own age, with a dark, gipsy face and flashing black eyes. He was dressed almost in rags, and the bitter wind blew through the many rents in his garments. He came up at a swift run, crossing the ground like a deer, and halted on the edge of the lake, staring at Bunter.

"Hold on, sir!" he shouted. "I'll help you!"

"Help!" quavered Bunter.

"Hold on!"

The gipsy lad flashed a quick glance round him. In one place, where the bank was steep, a wooden paling ran along the water's edge. The gipsy ran to it, and, with a strength surprising in a lad of his age, wrenched off a section of the fence. Then he came lightly out on the ice, sliding lightly and swiftly towards Bunter.

Bunter watched him, half-frozen with cold and terror. He knew that his life depended on the young gipsy who had appeared suddenly from nowhere—evidently a trespasser in Wharton Park. The gipsy was a good deal more powerful than Bunter, but he was not half Bunter's weight, and the ice held under his swift feet. He was quickly at the edge of the gap in which the Owl of the Greyfriars Remove was immersed up to the shoulders.

"Hang on, sir!"

"Grooogh! Help!" spluttered Bunter through his chattering teeth.

"'Arf a mo', sir!"

The gipsy slid the paling across the gap. It reached from side to side of it and made a bridge across.

"Now get hold of that, sir!"

"Grooogh!"

Bunter, dreading to let go his hold for an instant, was unable to help himself. The gipsy crawled on the bridge of palings, and grasped the fat junior by the collar.

"Now up with you!" he said encouragingly.

And Bunter, dragged by a strong arm, was safely landed on the fence. He lay there and spluttered.

"Grooogh! Ooooch! Oh dear! Ow! Wow!"

"You're all right now, sir."

"Ooooch!"

"You'll have to crawl across the ice to the bank," said the gipsy.

"Groogh! I'm frozen!"

"You'll be froze worse, sir, if you don't get a move on!"

"Yow-ow! The ice will let me through!" stuttered Bunter.

"I'll help you, sir!"

Billy Bunter, sprawling on the fence that lay across the gap, was loth to leave its safety. But evidently he could not remain there, and, with the litho gipsy's help, he crawled cautiously on the ice, shivering and palpitating. It creaked and cracked under him, and at every foot of his progress Bunter let out a gasp of terror. But the gipsy's strong hand helped him on, dragging him

why? I'm trespassing here, and I should be turned off!"

"Grooogh!"

"Come on, sir! I'll carry the skates!"

"Ooooch!"

Bunter was too far gone to tell his rescuer that the skates did not matter. They did not, of course, matter in the least, as they did not belong to Bunter. The gipsy, being unaware of their very slight importance, carried them under one arm, while he helped Bunter with the other. The fat junior plunged on dazedly, only dimly aware that the gipsy was leading him into the thickest part of the deserted, frosty park.

"Only a minute now, sir!" said the gipsy cheerily.

He led the way into a deep hollow between high banks of earth, so shut in by shrubberies and trees that few eyes would have observed it. Overhead the branches were thick and interlacing, and, though they were mostly leafless, they shut out the light of the winter sun. Bunter blinked round him in

sticks round the fire to dry, after wringing the water out of them.

"Feeling all right, sir?" he asked.

"Yes," gasped Bunter. "It's warm here. I say, Colonel Wharton doesn't know that you're camping like this on his land—what?"

"That the owner of this 'ere place?" asked the gipsy. "'Course he don't know! I'd be turned off fast enough if anybody knowed. You ain't telling anybody, sir, arter I pulled you out of the water?"

"No fear!" said Bunter.

"You see, I'm hiding," explained the gipsy. "I've run away from Michael and I ain't showing up any more till he's gone. See?"

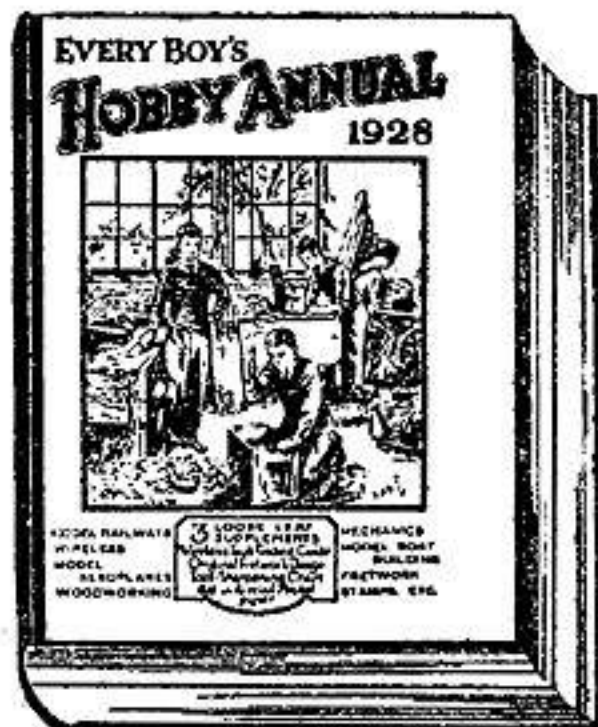
"Who's Michael?" asked Bunter. "Your father?"

"He ain't no relation," said the gipsy. "He jest took me, when I was left among our folks without any relations. My father was a Cooper," he added proudly.

"Is that a gipsy name?" said Bunter.

"'Course, you wouldn't know," said

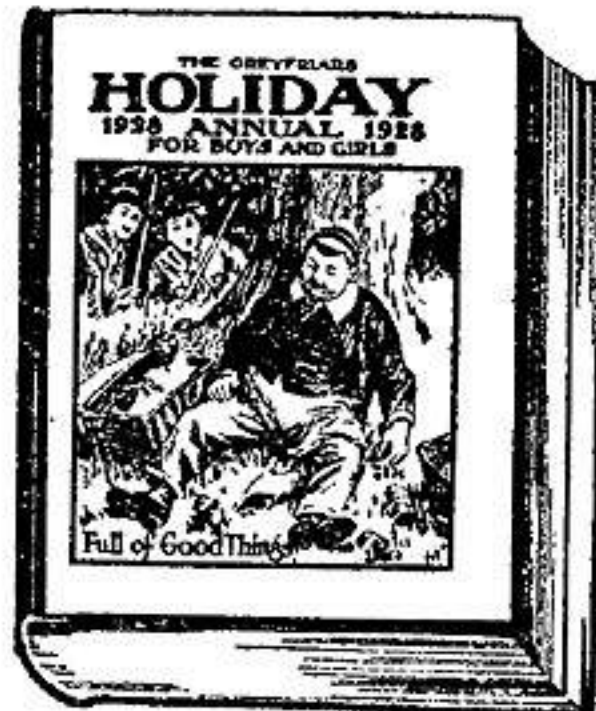
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along, and sliding him across the ice till, close by the steep bank, the thin ice cracked up under them and both plunged in. But there the water was shallow, and the gipsy, grasping the helpless Owl of the Remove, dragged him bodily up the shore.

"Groooooogh!"

Bunter sank down, gasping, breathless, half frozen, drenched, and frightened out of his fat wits by the narrowness of his escape.

"Oh dear! Ow! Wow!"

"Better get them skates off, sir!" said the gipsy cheerily. "You want to get a move on quick, or you'll be froze!"

"T-t-t-take them off for me!" chattered Bunter.

His teeth were rattling like castanets.

"Right-ho, sir!"

The gipsy quickly unfastened the skates and removed them. Bunter staggered to his feet, with a helping hand from his rescuer.

"You come with me, sir," said the gipsy. "I'll get you warm! I've got a place 'ere—" He paused. "Look here, sir, if I take you there, where I've got a fire, you keep it dark, sir! 'Cause

astonishment. At the end of the hollow a camp-fire smouldered, the smoke spreading and losing itself among the tree-tops as it ascended.

The gipsy grinned at the astonishment in the face of the Owl of Greyfriars.

"You wouldn't have spotted this 'ere, sir?" he chuckled.

"Nunno!" gasped Bunter.

"And I 'ope Michael won't if he comes arter me," said the gipsy. "But I reckon he wouldn't have the nerve to come hunting for me in a gentleman's park. You get your clothes off, sir, and dry them by the fire. You'll be all right 'ere."

Bunter did as he was told. Outside it was bitterly cold, but in the sheltered little hollow it was quite warm. The fire, fed by wood gathered in the park, gave out a heat that was very grateful and comforting. In a few minutes Bunter had stripped off his wet clothes and was crouching over the fire for warmth. The gipsy stirred up the fire and added more fuel from a little stack of firewood in another corner of the hollow, and it blazed and crackled merrily. He hung Bunter's clothes on

Ralph. "There's a big family of Romany folk named Cooper. I've got an uncle among the Coopers up in Yorkshire, and I'm going to him when I get safe from Michael. But he won't let me go if he can help it, 'cause why—he wants a boy to steal for him."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"So I run from him," said the gipsy. "I found this 'ere place to hide in, and I'm camping here till Michael's gone. I ain't doing any harm; it won't hurt the gentleman for me to burn some of his dead wood from the park. I'd freeze 'ere without a fire."

Bunter blinked at him. William George Bunter was not of a particularly grateful nature, but he could not help realising what the gipsy lad had done for him. He realised, too, that the gipsy had saved him from a bad cold, if not worse, by letting him into the secret of his hiding-place. He was taking the risk of being turned out, and exposed to the danger of recapture from Michael; and Bunter was not unconscious of it. The fat junior, for once, felt his heart warm towards a person whose name was not W. G. Bunter.

"I say, it's awfully decent of you, kid," he said. "What's your name?"

"Ralph."

"Mine's Bunter. I say, I should have been drowned if you hadn't pulled me out of that lake," said Bunter, with a shiver.

"I'm feared you would, sir."

"Of course, I'm a splendid swimmer," explained Bunter. "But the water was so jolly cold, you know."

"It was that," agreed the gipsy. "Jest freezing!"

"That's what did it," said Bunter. "If you come to swimming, I'm the best swimmer at Greyfriars."

"Greyfriars?" repeated the gipsy.

"That's my school," said Bunter.

"About 'ere?" asked Ralph.

Bunter grinned.

"No; it's in Kent. I'm staying here for the vacation—the holidays, you know—at Colonel Wharton's house."

The gipsy looked alarmed.

"Oh, sir! You won't let on that I'm 'ere," he exclaimed. "I ain't doing any harm; I would not steal anything. The Coopers don't steal—not like that beast Michael. That's why I left him. You won't let on that I'm hiding in this 'ere park?"

"No fear!" said Bunter.

"Thank you kindly, sir!"

"I should be a pretty rotter if I did, after what you've done for me!" said Bunter warmly.

"Well, folks don't like gipsies on their land," said Ralph, "and they're right enough when it's a man like Michael. He would pinch a bloke's watch, and knock the bloke on the head for it, too. I won't do any harm here, sir—I jest want to lie low for a few days till Michael goes on with his caravan and gives up looking for me. Last time I bolted he got me back, and he kept me locked in the van, and larruped me with a stick. I ain't going back to him any more!"

"What are you doing for grub?" asked Bunter. To the Owl of the Remove, that was the most important of all matters.

"I'm doing without," grinned Ralph. "I've got a chunk of bread, and that is all I shall get till I go."

Bunter shuddered.

"You must be famished," he said.

"Well, a cove gets hungry," admitted Ralph. "But that ain't so bad as Michael's stick. I can tell you my back's black and blue."

"Look here, I've got some tin," said Bunter, in a burst of generosity. Perhaps the benign influence of Christmas had not yet worn off the Owl of the Remove.

Ralph shook his head.

"I ain't begging, sir," he answered.

"Sides, it wouldn't be any use, 'cause why—I don't dare to get outside the walls of this 'ere park till Michael's gone on with his van."

"You can't go without food, you know."

Ralph grinned again.

"I've gone without it often enough while I was with Michael," he said, "and the stick into the bargain!"

"You're jolly well not going without grub, after what you've done for me," said Bunter. "Fancy a fellow going without food! Why, it's awful! Look here, I'll bring you some grub."

"Don't you trouble, sir," said Ralph, cheerily. "I'm all right 'ere, and I've got a hunk of bread left. Your clothes is dry now, sir."

Bunter dressed himself again. The gipsy had not troubled to remove his own rags; they had dried on him as he sat by the fire. How any fellow could

keep cheerful in such circumstances, was a mystery to Billy Bunter; but the gipsy lad seemed cheeriness itself. Probably his escape from a cruel master seemed to compensate for his hardships.

"This way out, sir," said the gipsy. "'Ere's your skates, sir. Duck your 'ead under that big root."

Bunter emerged from the hollow. It had been rather late in the afternoon when the Owl of the Remove started on his excursion; and it was deep dusk now. The winter day was rapidly drawing to a close. Billy Bunter blinked round him. In the thickly-wooded park he was not at all certain of finding his way back to the Lodge after nightfall.

"You know your way, sir?" asked the gipsy, as Bunter stood hesitating.

"Ye-ees, of course," said Bunter. "I'm a Scout at Greyfriars, and one of the best scouts, too; I can find my way anywhere. Only—only— Look here, kid, you walk part of the way with me."

"Certainly, sir!" said Ralph.

"You know where the house is?" asked Bunter.

"I'll soon find it, sir," said Ralph confidently.

How the gipsy lad found his way in the thickening winter dusk among the bewildering trees, Bunter did not know. Certainly the Owl of the Remove could never have found it unaided. But for his misadventure, he would have returned to the Lodge before nightfall; but after dark Bunter was quite helpless to follow back the way he had come. But the gipsy lad never even paused. He did not stop till the lights of Wharton Lodge could be seen shining in the distance.

"There you are, sir," said Ralph. "I won't come any further, because some covey might see me. You won't say nothing about having seen me, will you, sir?"

"Not a syllable!" said Bunter. "Look here, kid—I couldn't find my way back to that den of yours—I—I mean, it would be a long walk, and jolly cold. But I'm going to get you some grub." He blinked round him. "There's a summer-house somewhere near here; you can find it easily enough. Nobody ever goes into it after dark. You wait for me there, and as soon as I can, I'll come out and bring you some tuck, see?"

The gipsy hesitated.

"You can't go without grub," argued Bunter. "It's not sense. I can tell you, I'm jolly particular to have plenty of grub. It's that that's made me such an athlete."

"Oh!" gasped Ralph. Possibly William George Bunter had not struck him as an athlete.

"You get to that summer-house and wait for me," said Bunter. "There's one thing about Wharton Lodge—they don't treat a guest really well, but you can always have as much grub as you like. I'll bring you out a jolly good supper, old chap."

"You're very kind, sir," said Ralph. The look on his face showed how much a "jolly good supper" appealed to him.

"That's all right," said Bunter. "You just wait, and I'll get along as soon as I can with the tuck. See?"

"Right-ho, sir, I'll wait and thankful!" said Ralph.

And Billy Bunter, with a glow of unaccustomed hospitality and kindness in his podgy breast, left the waif in the dusky summer-house and rolled on to Wharton Lodge.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

A Secret to Keep!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" Harry Wharton & Co. had returned, and they arrived at the door of the Lodge at the same time as Billy Bunter.

Bob Cherry's cheery voice hailed the Owl of the Remove, and he blinked round.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Enjoying life?" boomed Bob. "You should have come over to Woodford, Bunter. It was a ripping match."

"Rot!" said Bunter.

"Been out for a walk?" asked Nugent.

"Eh? Oh! Yes. Sort of," assented Bunter. "I'm frightfully hungry. You fellows are late for tea."

"So are you," grinned Johnny Bull, "and that's much more surprising. You don't mean to say that you forgot a meal?"

"Oh, really, Bull——"

"Such forgetfulness would be a remarkable record," remarked Hurreo Jamset Ram Singh as the juniors came into the lighted hall. "What has happened to you this afternoon, my esteemed Bunter?"

Billy Bunter did not answer.

Colonel Wharton was in the hall, and he greeted the juniors with a kind smile and a nod as they crowded round the big log fire. In the presence of the colonel Bunter did not want it to transpire that he had been to the lake to skate. It was true, as he told himself indignantly, that a fellow could jolly well do as he jolly well liked; but at the same time, the fat junior's nerve was not equal to telling the grim old military gentleman that he had directly disregarded his command. What the colonel would do in such a case Bunter did not know; but he thought it very probable that his stay at the Lodge would come to an abrupt termination. And Bunter was not prepared to exchange the Lodge, with all its shortcomings, for the delights of Bunter Court.

The juniors regarded Bunter rather curiously.

Certainly he looked as if something had happened to him. His clothes looked as if they had been soaked in water and dried—as, indeed, was the case. His collar was a limp rag, and stained with some of the colours that had washed out of his gorgeous tie. The same suspicion occurred to all the juniors at once—that Bunter had had a ducking and had dried himself somehow before returning to the house.

Harry Wharton's face grew stern.

So far as Wharton was concerned, Bunter could do exactly as he liked, and bag as many duckings as he pleased; but disregarding the authority of Colonel Wharton was another matter. That matter appeared much more important to Harry than it did to the Owl of the Remove. A serious accident to one of the schoolboys staying at his house would have placed the colonel in a very disagreeable position; and his order to Bunter had been quite distinct and unmistakable. If Bunter had chosen to disregard it, it was time for Bunter to look out a train, in Harry Wharton's opinion.

Nothing, however, was said while the colonel was present. The old gentleman exchanged a few cheery words with the juniors and then left them, warming themselves at the log fire in the hall. When he was gone Harry Wharton spoke quietly to Bunter.

"Where have you been, Bunter?"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"You look as if you've had a ducking."

"You're jolly inquisitive, you know," said Bunter, blinking at him through his big spectacles. "When I have a guest at Bunter Court, I don't keep on asking him questions."

"Never mind that," said Wharton, compressing his lips. "This is my uncle's house, and I can't have a fellow here who disregards his authority. You know that, as well as I do. My uncle told you that the lake was not safe for skating, and told you not to go there. If you've been, in spite of what he said I—"

Wharton paused.

"Oh, really, you know—" murmured Bunter feebly.

Reflection generally came too late to Billy Bunter, when it came at all. He

all the time we were watching the footer match at Woodford."

"That—that was at Woodford, you know," stammered Bunter. "It was raining like—like anything here."

"It was not raining here," said Harry quietly.

"Well, not exactly rain," admitted Bunter. "The dew, you know—there's been a very heavy dew in the park."

"You got soaked with dew in the park!" gasped Bob.

"Exactly! Let's go in to tea. I say, you fellows, it's not very good manners to keep Miss Wharton waiting for us."

"How did you get wet, Bunter?" asked Wharton grimly.

"I've told you," answered Bunter irritably.

"Have you been on the lake?"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Look here, Bunter," he said quietly, "I won't ask you any more questions—you'll only tell me lies, anyhow. But you must understand this. This is my uncle's house, and what he says must be obeyed. A decent fellow wouldn't need telling that. I can't have a fellow here who treats my uncle with contempt. If it comes out that you have gone on the lake, after he told you not to do so, you must leave. Nobody but you would need telling that, I think. But as you need to be told, I'm telling you. I shan't say anything more about it, but if it comes to my uncle's knowledge that you have disobeyed his order you must take the next train home."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"That's all," said Harry. "Now let's get some tea, you fellows."

"In the circumstances, Wharton," said



Bunter let out a yell of fright, and spun round towards the bank, fleeing for safety. Crack! Cr-a-a-a-ack! Before the fat junior knew what was happening the ice cracked and he was in the water! (See Chapter 3.)

had landed himself on the little party at Wharton Lodge, relying on Harry Wharton's good nature and patience. More than once he had had a hint that there was a limit; and now that fact was borne in very clearly upon his mind.

"Well?" said Harry, curtly.

"I—I've been for a walk, you know," stammered Bunter. He was thankful that he had left the skates in the summer-house in the grounds. Had he come in with the skates under his arm, even Bunter could scarcely have hoped to get away with the story that he had merely been out for a walk.

"You look as if you've been ducked in water," said Harry.

"That—that was the rain, you know."

"The rain?" exclaimed Harry.

"Yes; I say, you fellows, let's go in to tea."

"It hasn't been raining," said Bob Cherry, staring at the Owl of the Remove. "There wasn't a spot of rain

"If you've been on the lake you've had a ducking, for the ice won't bear," said Harry. "Is that the case?"

"The fact is, I—I—I fell down!" said Bunter.

"Fell down?"

"Yes; there's a big puddle on the road near the gates, and, coming back from the village, I stumbled and fell into it."

"You said you'd been in the park."

"I—I meant the village."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob.

"Now let's go in to tea," said Bunter.

"I can tell you that I'm jolly hungry. It's frightfully keen in the park."

"The park?"

"I mean the village. How you keep bothering a fellow," said Bunter peevishly. "This isn't the way to treat a guest, Wharton."

"You're such a jolly queer sort of guest, Bunt," grinned Bob Cherry.

"The queerfulness is terrific."

Wharton set his lips.

Bunter, with dignity, "I hardly see how I can remain your guest any longer."

"Please yourself about that."

"I shall do so. I shall write to-night—at least, to-morrow—to my old pal, Mauleverer. As soon as I get his answer I shall leave here for Mauleverer Towers. Until then, please let the matter drop."

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"You'll go to Mauleverer Towers if you get a letter from Mauly?" he asked.

"Certainly!"

"Then I'll bet you ten to one on doughnuts that you don't get an answer from Mauly."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Let's go in to tea," said Harry.

And the Greyfriars juniors went in to tea, at which meal, which was a substantial one, Bunter quite forgot his misadventure of the afternoon, and the bad manners of his host, and even the tattered gipsy waiting and shivering in the dark summer-house.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Very Kind of Bunter!

MISS WHARTON presided over the tea-table, with her kind and smiling face. Miss Wharton was very fond of her nephew, and she liked all his friends, and even to William George Bunter she was unvaryingly kind and gracious. Bunter liked her ever so much better than her rather stern brother, the colonel. He was glad that the colonel did not come in to tea. For once Bunter was rather silent. In ordinary circumstances he would have taken possession of the conversation, and related, with many details, his thrilling adventure on the frozen lake. But for many reasons Bunter realised that that had to be kept a strict secret.

He was quite well aware that Harry Wharton meant every word he had said, and that his patience was wearing very thin. Wharton was willing to let the matter drop without inquiry. But if it came out that Bunter had contemptuously disregarded his uncle, Bunter had to depart. And Bunter did not want to depart. Indeed, had the matter come to the colonel's knowledge Wharton would have had no choice in the matter. The colonel would have taken it for granted that Bunter was going, and would have seen to it that he went. The Owl of the Remove realised that he had to walk very warily.

So he said little or nothing, and indemnified himself by making an effective attack on the excellent things provided for tea by Wharton's aunt. Long after the other fellows had finished, Bunter was still going strong. Harry Wharton & Co. cleared off, leaving the kind and patient Miss Wharton keeping him company. Miss Wharton's kindness and patience were inexhaustible, even by Bunter, though she was perhaps beginning to feel a little alarmed for the fat junior. Where William George stowed away all the supplies he took in was a great mystery which nobody had ever been able to elucidate. Even his ample circumference seemed hardly to afford sufficient accommodation.

But even Bunter was finished at last. Then he remembered Ralph.

The gipsy was waiting in the summer-house for the jolly good supper that Bunter had promised him. Bunter was not much given to thinking of others, but he could feel for a fellow who was hungry. That was, to Bunter's mind, the greatest of calamities. There had been meal-times in Bunter's experience when he had been able to obtain only enough for three or four fellows. So he knew what it was like to suffer want. Moreover, Bunter really was grateful to the gipsy. He was well aware that but for Ralph he would never have emerged from the frozen lake alive. That was a service that impressed even William George Bunter's mind.

"I'm feeling rather tired," he told Miss Wharton.

"Dear me. Did you have a very long walk?" asked the good lady.

"Oh, miles and miles!" said Bunter. "I'm a good walker, of course, Miss Wharton. The fellows at Greyfriars think I'm about the best walker in the school. Still, a fellow gets tired. I think I'll go and lie down in my room for a bit."

"That is quite a good idea if you are fatigued," assented Miss Wharton.

"You wouldn't mind if I take a snack up to my room?" suggested Bunter.

"I never eat much at meals, but I

sometimes feel that I'd like a trifling snack."

"Oh! Ah! Yes, certainly. Anything you like, my dear boy."

Bunter selected a snack to take to his room. It was a substantial snack. He filled all his pockets, under Miss Wharton's wondering gaze, with good things from the table, and put a large cake under his arm. Thus laden, he departed for his room, leaving Miss Wharton feeling a little concerned for him. If Bunter disposed of that snack in his room, after the tea he had negotiated, Miss Wharton could not help thinking that she would be required to telephone for the doctor during the evening.

But for once, as it happened, Bunter was not taking his prey to his den to devour. He had been laying in supplies for the gipsy waif.

He ascended the stairs rather slowly. He passed Wharton's room, and heard a cheery sound of voices and trampling feet. A boxing match was going on there. Walking to Woodford and back did not seem to have exhausted the energies of the heroes of the Remove. Bunter sniffed and passed on his way rather hurriedly. He did not want to be observed by the chums of the Remove just then.

His own room was on the same floor, but at rather a distance from the rooms occupied by the Famous Five. Bunter, though he was generally keen to scent a grievance, did not suspect that his musical snore had been intentionally placed at a distance from the other guests. The Famous Five had enough of it in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars.

Bunter had a room at the end of the corridor, looking out on a little wooden balcony with steps down to the garden. There was a dressing-room attached to it, which Bunter, however, did not use. A cheerful log fire burned on the hearth in his room, and Bunter's first proceeding was to sprawl in a deep armchair before the fire. After his substantial tea he felt disposed to take a little rest. Sitting in that comfortable chair before the warm fire, he was soon dozing, and once more the gipsy waif passed from his mind. It was a good hour later that Bunter stirred and remembered the gipsy.

"Oh dear!" he murmured, rubbing his eyes.

He opened the french windows on the little balcony, and blinked out into the winter evening.

It was dark, with scarcely a star in the sky, and a bitter wind moaned through the trees. Dark clouds were banked over the sky, and it looked like rain. Bunter shivered.

He was extremely reluctant to leave that cosy room and that glowing fire to grope his way through the dark gardens to the summer-house, which was at quite a distance. He groaned at the thought of it. The temptation assailed him to stay where he was and leave the waif to take his chance. But even Bunter was not quite capable of that. Moreover, the fact that the gipsy was hungry still appealed strongly to him.

He made up his mind at last, grumbling, but with a complacent feeling that he was a really uncommonly kind-hearted and charitable fellow. He made up a bundle of the good things he had brought to his room. It made quite a considerable bundle. He had already decided to leave the house by the balcony steps when he went to find the gipsy. It was not only his promise to keep Ralph's presence on the estate a secret that troubled him. He had to

keep his adventure on the lake a secret for his own sake, and his connection with his rescuer had, therefore, to be kept very carefully dark also. And he remembered having heard Colonel Wharton make some very grim remarks about gipsies who trespassed on his land, and poached and cut the trees for firewood.

Bunter did not expect the colonel to approve of his present proceedings if he heard of them. Ralph had assured him earnestly that he was doing no harm, but a landowner was likely to take a different view of a gipsy who camped in his park and lighted campfires there. Fortunately, Bunter was not troubled by any undue regard for his host's views on that subject, or any other. It was only a question of keeping the affair a secret, from Bunter's point of view.

The bundle of food having been prepared, Bunter's charitable thoughts went further. The gipsy was in tatters, and Bunter had seen him shiver in the cold. A warm coat was what the kid wanted. Bunter had a nice warm coat, but he did not think, of course, of giving that away. He wanted it himself. He turned over in his fat mind the coats that belonged to the other fellows in the house. Wharton had plenty of coats, but Wharton and his friends were now in Wharton's room. Wharton's wardrobe was out of reach.

Bob Cherry had two coats with him, one heavy and thick, which he had worn that afternoon, and left downstairs when he came in, as Bunter remembered; the other, a lighter coat of a nice grey, would doubtless be in his room. It was not so warm as the big coat, but it would be a godsend to the freezing gipsy, and Bunter decided on it at once. Bunter was not accustomed to looking ahead, and he did not even consider what Bob would think and say when he found his grey coat missing. Bunter was going to be kind to the waif, and giving away one of his own coats was not to be thought of. At all events, Bunter did not think of it. It was Bob's coat or nothing.

Bunter left his room almost on tip-toe.

There was still a cheery din proceeding from Wharton's den, where the Famous Five were gathered. Bunter went into Bob's room and found the grey coat hanging up there, as he expected. A minute later it was in Bunter's room, and Bunter was grinning over it.

All was ready now for his expedition.

He locked his door, in case anyone should butt in during his absence, and wonder where he was gone. Then he passed out on the little balcony and groped his way to the ground.

"Oh crikey!" groaned Bunter.

Rain was beginning to fall.

Billy Bunter had not bargained for that. Once more the temptation assailed him powerfully to return to his cosy room and leave the gipsy waif to wait unheeded. Once more he struggled with the temptation and overcame it. Rain or no rain, he was going.

He plunged into the darkness of the gardens, with the rain falling steadily upon him. It was a light downfall at present, but evidently it was going to be worse. There was every sign of a wild and stormy night. But Bunter plunged on manfully, occasionally losing his way in the dark and trampling over flower-beds and through shrubberies, fortunately not worrying about the damage thus done. Once he

put his foot through a glass frame with a crash; but as he did not cut himself that did not matter. He was glad when he reached, at last, the little summer-house in a secluded corner of the grounds under a group of oaks and beeches. He rolled into it, gasping.

A shadow moved in the darkness of the interior.

"That you, sir?" said a husky voice. Ralph, the gipsy, was there.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter, the Good Samaritan!

BILLY BUNTER blinked at the gipsy. In the gloom, he could only dimly make out the tattered figure.

It was dry in the little building, but the cold wind blew in through the open doorway and window-frames, and it was bitterly cold. Outside, the rain was falling thickly. It ran in streams off Bunter's coat and hat as he stepped in. The fat junior felt a twinge of remorse. He had kept the waif waiting for hours in that freezing spot; and it occurred to Bunter—rather late, as most things occurred to him—that he might have hurried himself a little. He could hear the gipsy's teeth chattering, as the pale dusky face peered at him in the gloom.

"I say, I'm sorry I'm so late," said Bunter. "I was delayed, you know—something kept me!" He did not add that he had been delayed by taking a nap before a fire.

"That's all right, sir," said Ralph. "It's very kind of you to come at all, sir. I thought p'raps you was prevented; but I stayed and waited 'cause you might come arter all."

The gipsy appeared to be a little more particular about keeping appointments, than William George Bunter was.

"I've got the grub," said Bunter. "There's a seat here—blessed if I can see it in the dark—"

"Here you are, sir!"

Bunter sat down. Then he gave a howl.

"Yow-ow-ow!"

"What's the matter, sir?" asked the gipsy, in a startled tone.

"Ow! wow! I've sat on something!"

Bunter groped over the seat. He had sat down on Wharton's skates, and he pitched them savagely under the seat. "Only those beastly skates!"

"I say, sir, you'll damage your skates," said Ralph, as the skates clattered down on the floor.

"That's all right; they ain't mine!"

"Oh!"

"Here's the grub," said Bunter.

He unpacked the parcel on the seat, and struck a match. The gipsy's face brightened up wonderfully at the sight of the stack of food. There was no doubt that Ralph was hungry.

"Looks all right, what?" grinned Bunter.

"What-ho, sir!" said Ralph heartily.

"I've got a coat for you, too," said Bunter. "Here you are—shove it on."

"Oh, sir!" gasped Ralph, almost overcome. "I say, sir, that coat's too good for me, sir!" He stared at it in the light of a match. "I say, sir, you mustn't give me that coat. I reckon that coat cost pounds."

"Very likely," assented Bunter.

"Shove it on!"

"But, sir"—Ralph hesitated—"your father won't like you giving that coat away, sir."

Bunter grinned. He did not think that Mr. William Samuel Bunter was likely to concern himself much about

Bob Cherry's coat, if he ever knew that Bunter had given it away.

"That's all right, kid," said Bunter. "My father's rich, you know. He would never miss that coat."

That was true enough, considering to whom the coat belonged.

Ralph made no further demur, but slipped on the coat. Undoubtedly its warmth was very grateful and comforting to the shivering waif.

"Feel better in it, what?" asked Bunter.

"Oh, yes, sir! I don't know how to thank you for your kindness, sir," said the waif gratefully.

"My dear chap, that's all right," said Bunter, "the fact is, I'm a kind-hearted chap. I always was."

"I'm sure you are, sir," said Ralph.

"Tuck into the grub," said Bunter.

"Begin on the ham patties—they're good, and solid, too. I'll have a nibble at the cake to keep you company. There's lots of cake; I've brought you a whole one, and a jolly big one, too. Go it!"

Ralph was already going it.

As a matter of fact, the gipsy was almost famished, having had nothing but a crust of bread during the last twenty-four hours. Undoubtedly he found the ham patties good; and they vanished at a rate that could not have been beaten by Billy Bunter himself.

Bunter was feeling quite a glow of charity and hospitality. The heart-felt thanks of the waif were very pleasant to his fat ears. This episode recalled to his fat mind his experiences at Christmas, when he had indulged—for once, and for a short time—in unaccustomed benevolence. Billy Bunter had been very fed up on philanthropy; fed right up to his fat chin. But perhaps the effect of that unaccustomed experience had not wholly worn off. Certainly he found as much enjoyment in watching the gipsy feed, as in nibbling at the plum cake himself.

"I say, sir, this is prime!" gasped Ralph, at last.

"Glad you like it, old chap," said Bunter.

"It must be nice to be rich!" remarked Ralph.

"Oh, a fellow gets used to it," said Bunter airily. "I get quite fed up at times with all the grandeur at Bunter Court."

"Do you really, sir?" exclaimed Ralph, in amazement.

"Oh, yes," said Bunter carelessly.

"That's really why I'm staying at Wharton Lodge now. The place isn't really up to my style."

"I thought it was quite a grand house, sir," said Ralph humbly.

Bunter laughed.

"Wait till you see Bunter Court!" he answered.

He did not add how long Ralph was likely to have to wait.

Ralph's supper was finished at last, and there still remained some of the supplies. It was fortunate that Bunter had partaken of so extensive a tea with Miss Wharton; otherwise, certainly nothing would have remained.

"Had enough, kid?" asked Bunter.

"Yes, sir, thank you!"

"Shove the rest in your pockets."

"Thank you kindly, sir!"

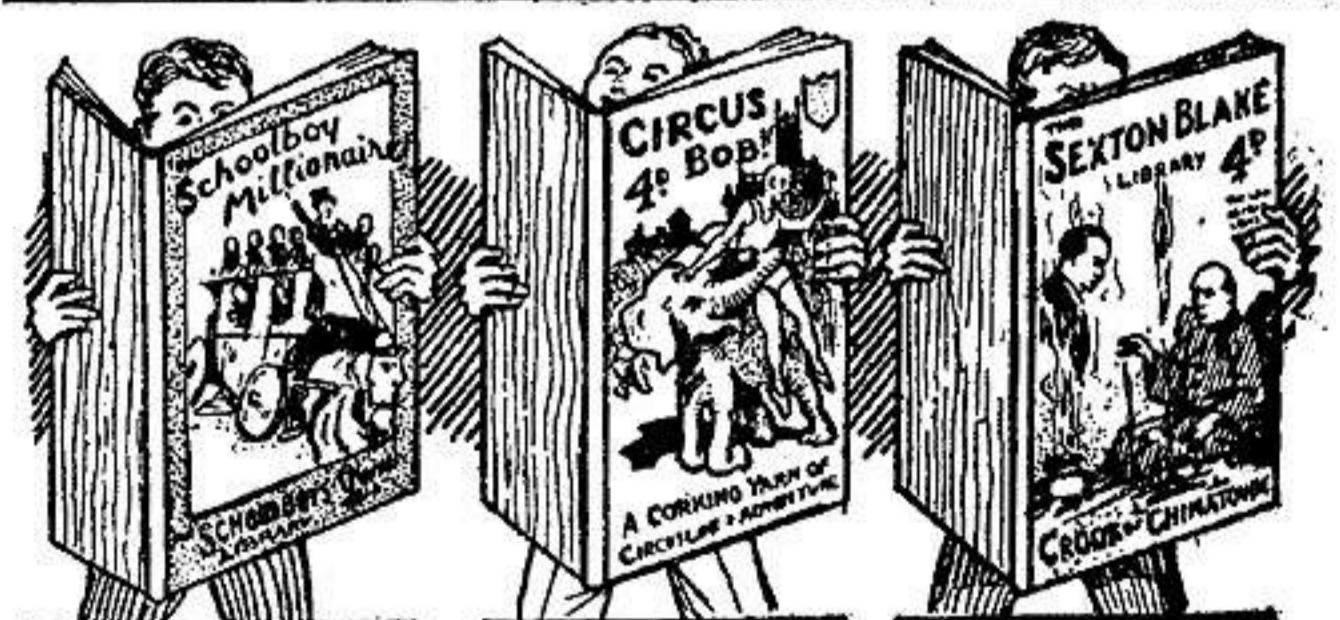
"My hat! How it's raining!" grunted Bunter, blinking out of the summer-house into the drenched and dripping gardens.

"It is that, sir," said Ralph. "You came out in this rain for my sake, sir. I don't know how to thank you!"

"Well, it is rather beastly," said Bunter. "I shall have to make a dash through it to get back. But I say, it's nearly a mile to that den of yours near the lake. You'll get drenched."

"I ain't going back there, sir," answered Ralph. "That hollow will be full of water, raining like this."

(Continued on next page.)



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"Why, of course it will," said Bunter. "What are you going to do then?"

"Oh, I'll manage somehow, sir," said Ralph cheerily. "I've had a square meal and I've got a good coat on. I'm all right. I can get under a tree."

"Better stay here," said Bunter. "It's dry here, anyhow."

"I might be found, sir, and the gentleman at the house wouldn't like a gipsy here."

"Nobody ever comes here at night," answered Bunter. "You'll be safe as houses. But, look here, you can't stay out all night in this weather. You might get pneumonia, or plumbago, or something."

Ralph smiled.

"I've roughed it afore, sir, in worse weather than this. Don't you worry about me, sir."

Bunter regarded him doubtfully. There was something about the gipsy's gratitude, and his evidently genuine admiration and respect for Bunter, that touched the fat junior in a very unaccustomed way. He had never felt so kindly disposed towards any human being, as he did towards this tattered waif.

"Look here, you're not staying out in this weather!" said Bunter determinedly. "If we were at Bunter Court, I'd jolly well take you in with me. Only we—we ain't there. I should get into a row here if it came out about this. Old Wharton is rather a beast!"

Possibly Ralph wondered a little why his benefactor, who had so gorgeous a home, stayed in the house of a man who was rather a beast. But he said nothing.

"Look here," went on Bunter, "I can fix it. I've got two rooms at the Lodge, and I use only one. The other's a dressing-room, and there's no bed in it, but I can give you some things, and you can sleep on a couch or something. Could you sleep on a couch, do you think?"

"I've slept on the ground often enough, sir," grinned Ralph.

"Well, then, that's all right," said Bunter. "There's wooden steps up to a balcony outside my room. You can get in all right without being seen. You come round there when they've gone to bed, and I'll let you in. See? Keep an eye on the house, and when the lights go out you come round to my window. It's at the back of the house, and there's a big oak-tree near it. I'll burn a light till you come. You can whistle, and I'll hear you and let you in. What?"

Bunter was fairly bursting with benevolence now. It was quite like his Christmas experience over again.

"Oh, sir!" said Ralph. "But you might get into trouble letting me into the house—"

"That's all right," said Bunter. "You can slip away in the morning before anybody's about. I'll fix up some clothes for you, and some grub for you to take as well. See?"

"But the colonel what you've spoke of, sir—"

"Oh, blow him!" said Bunter recklessly.

"But, sir—"

"Now, don't you argue," said Bunter peevishly. "You just do as I tell you. See? It's all right."

"If you think I'd better, sir," said Ralph humbly. "I suppose you know best, sir."

"I should jolly well think so," assented Bunter. "Now, you've got it clear, haven't you? I shall expect you."

"I'll do as you say, sir, and thankful."

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It will be a wild night out of doors," said Ralph, with an involuntary shiver.

"That's all right, then," said Bunter. "Stick here till it's safe to come round to my room; you're out of the rain here, at least. Now I shall have to make a dash for it. I mustn't be late for supper; that's important."

And, leaving the gipsy lad looking after him with eyes that were moist with gratitude, Billy Bunter plunged out into the rain and groped and fumbled and blundered his way back to the Lodge.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Bunter is Mysterious!

"LOOKS like skating to-morrow—I don't think!"

Bob Cherry made that remark as the rain dashed on the window-panes under a heavy gust of wind.

"More like swimming!" said Nugent, with a laugh.

"The esteemed wetfulness is terrific," Hurree Janset Ram Singh remarked. "But what is happiness so long as you are odd, as the English proverb says."

"What's the odds so long as you're happy, fathead?" roared Bob Cherry.

"My esteemed Cherry, my knowledge of English proverbial wisdom is deep and ridiculous," assured the Nabob of Bhanipur. "In my early nipperful days I studied such ludicrous subjects under the wise and sage moonshee Mook Mookerjee, and my rememberfulness of his absurd instructions is—"

"Terrific!" grinned Bob. "I know, old man. Along with the esteemed English proverbs, he seems to have taught you an excellent and execrable lot of giddy adjectives. I say, this ridiculous rainfulness is coming down terrifically, you men!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Sorry for any chap who's out in it," said Nugent. "I wonder where that gipsy chap is?"

"A dozen miles away, most likely," said Johnny Bull. "He seemed in rather a hurry to get clear of that man Michael. That brute's van was still by the roadside when we came back from Woodford. What are you looking for, Harry?"

Four juniors were gathered about the crackling fire in Wharton's "den." Harry Wharton was moving about the room, and seemed to be in search of something.

"My skates," said Harry. "They don't seem to be here. I wonder—"
He paused and frowned.

"Bunter!" said Bob.

"He said that he never went skating."

"Which is presumptive evidence that he did," remarked Johnny Bull.

"But even that fat idiot wouldn't have left my skates out of doors if he borrowed them," said Harry. "But he must have bagged them, as they're gone. I think I'll ask him. Anybody know where he is?"

"Look in the pantry," advised Bob. "If he isn't there, try the larder. If he's not there he's most likely gone to sleep somewhere."

"I'll go and see if he's in his room. I shall want the skates if we get ice on the lake again; and it would be just like that fat dummy to leave them anywhere! They were a Christmas present from my uncle; but Bunter wouldn't bother about that."

Harry Wharton went along the passage to Bunter's room. Whether Bunter had gone skating on the lake or not that afternoon, it was fairly certain that he had borrowed the skates, and

Bunter's carelessness with other people's property was well known to the Removites. Wharton tapped at the fat junior's door and turned the handle, but the door did not open. It was locked on the inside. Wharton tapped again.

"Bunter!" he called out.

There was no reply.

"Bunter!" shouted Wharton.

Still no answer.

Wharton listened. If Bunter was asleep, as he often was at all hours, a knock at his door wasn't likely to awaken him; a thunderclap at least would be required for that. But there was no sound of snoring from the room; and Bunter never slept without a nasal obligato. Evidently the fat junior was not asleep; but it was clear that he must be in his room, as the door was locked on the inside. Certainly there was a way into the gardens from his balcony, but it seemed improbable, if not impossible, that Bunter was out of doors in the drenching downpour of rain.

"Bunter!" shouted Wharton.

He knocked and knocked again.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob Cherry and the other fellows came along the passage. "Anything up?"

"Bunter doesn't seem to hear," said Harry.

"Asleep," suggested Nugent.

"He's not snoring."

"I withdraw the suggestion," said Frank, laughing.

"The snorefulness would be terrific," remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "Is it possible, my esteemed chums, that the unhappy Bunter has burst at last?"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob. "I rather thought he was going to burst at tea-time. If he came up here to burst out of anybody's way, it was unusually thoughtful of him."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's all bang together," said Bob.

Bang, bang, bang!

There was no answer from the locked room. Either Bunter was not there, or he was refusing to answer for some inexplicable reason. Wharton's face became grave.

"He may be ill," he said. "He can't have gone down into the gardens in this awful rain."

"Not likely."

"Bunter!" shouted Bob, through the keyhole. "If you're there, you fat duffer, answer, you podgy porpoise!"

"I can hear something," muttered Johnny Bull.

The juniors listened. From the locked room came the sound of a grunt, unmistakably Bunter's.

"Bunter!" shouted Harry.

"Oh, what— You can come in, Wharton!" said Bunter's voice at last.

"The door's locked, fathead!"

"Oh, I forgot!"

Bunter unlocked the door. A gleam under it showed that he had just switched on the light.

"Why on earth didn't you speak before?" demanded Wharton, as he entered the room.

"I didn't hear you."

"Deaf?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

The juniors stared at Bunter. His overcoat lay where he had just thrown it off, and it was almost streaming with water. His trousers were drenched up to the knees and his boots streaming. Obviously, Bunter had been out in the rain. His fat face glistened with water, and his hat lay on a chair in a soaked state.

"You've been out!" exclaimed Harry in astonishment.

"Eh? Oh, no!"

"Why, you're soaked with rain!" exclaimed Bob.



Bunter unpacked the parcel of grub and struck a match. The gipsy's face brightened up wonderfully at the sight of the good things. "Looks all right, what?" grinned Bunter. "What-ho, sir!" said Ralph heartily. "I've got a coat for you, too," said Bunter. "Here you are—shove it on!" (See Chapter 7.)

"Oh, ah! Yes! I've—I've been taking a turn on the balcony," explained Bunter. "Fresh air, you know. I'm a whale on fresh air."

"You've been taking a turn on the balcony in this heavy rain!" ejaculated Harry Wharton.

"That's it, old chap. I'm not afraid of a little rain, like you fellows," said Bunter. "Nothing soft about me."

"Except your brain," remarked Bob.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"
That William George Bunter was lying, as usual, was quite clear to the juniors. For some mysterious reason he had been out in the rain, and for some still more mysterious reason he denied the obvious fact. It was clear enough that he was lying, though why he was doing so was not at all clear, unless it was from force of habit.

"Besides, I suppose I can go out in the rain if I like," added Bunter independently.

"Certainly you can, though goodness knows why you should want to," answered Wharton. "You'd better get those wet things off before you catch a cold. What have you done with my skates, Bunter?"

"Skates!" repeated Bunter.

He had forgotten all about the skates. As he had mentioned to Ralph, they were not his; so he was not likely to bother his fat mind about them.

"Yes, my skates," said Harry.

"Where are they?"

"Oh, really, Wharton! You said you didn't mind lending me your skates—you said so distinctly."

"Yes, ass; but I want to know what's become of them."

"Not that I went skating," added Bunter cautiously. "I've told you that I never went skating this afternoon, and I suppose you can take a fellow's word. It's a bit caddish to doubt a chap's word."

"Never mind that. Where are the skates?" said Harry. "If you never went skating, I don't see what you wanted with them at all."

"Well, I just tried them on, you see," said Bunter. "No harm in trying on your skates, that I know of."

"None at all; but where are they?" exclaimed Wharton impatiently. "It would be like you to leave them out of doors and forget all about them."

As a matter of fact, that was exactly what Bunter had done. The expression on his fat face showed as much plainly.

"Did you leave them by the lake?" asked Wharton, very quietly.

"Nunno."

"Well, then, where?" snapped the captain of the Remove.

"I can't remember for a minute," said Bunter. "They're not in the summer-house, of course."

"In the summer-house?" exclaimed Wharton. "Did you try them on there, you fat duffer?"

"Of course not. I've just said that they're not there," said Bunter. "I never sat down on them in the dark, and—I—I mean—"

"You sat down on them in the dark in the summer-house?" exclaimed Wharton, really beginning to wonder whether the Owl of the Remove was

wandering in his mind. "Is that where you've just been?"

"Certainly not," said Bunter promptly. "I haven't been anywhere near the summer-house. In fact, I don't know where the summer-house is!"

"Eh?"

"I never knew there was a summer-house in the garden at all, if you come to that," said Bunter.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"All I know is that the skates ain't there," said Bunter. "I'm absolutely certain on that point, and you would be a silly ass to go out to the summer-house in this rain looking for your skates."

"You born idiot," said Harry Wharton in measured tones, "if you've taken my skates to the summer-house, and left them there, say so. I won't ask you to go and fetch them in; I'll go myself."

"I've said that I haven't," snapped Bunter. "I don't know my way to the summer-house in the dark. I fell over a dozen times going there."

"Then you've been there?"

"No!" howled Bunter. "Nowhere near it. Besides, why shouldn't a fellow step into a summer-house out of the rain if he likes? I can tell you I jolly well hurt myself when I sat on those beastly skates in the dark. Any fellow would have pitched them under the seat. Not that I did, you know," added Bunter cautiously. "As I've said I haven't been

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(Continued from page 15.)

anywhere near the summer-house. Why should I?"

The juniors gazed at William George Bunter. Bob Cherry tapped his forehead significantly.

"Has this been coming on long, Bunter?" he asked.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

Harry Wharton turned and left Bunter's room. That the Owl of the Remove had, for some inexplicable reason, taken the skates to the summer-house and left them there, was clear, though why he was lying so extensively on the subject was a mystery. Wharton's chums followed him, and Bunter grinned and shut the door after them. He was satisfied that he had pulled the wool over Wharton's eyes, and blissfully unconscious of the fact that Harry had left him with the intention of going directly to the summer-house to recover the skates.

"I'm blessed if I can make Bunter out," Wharton remarked, as the juniors went back to his room. "He's been up to something, though goodness knows what. I suppose he's not wandering in his mind."

"If any!" grinned Bob.

"Anyhow, it's pretty clear that he left the skates in the summer-house. The fat idiot may have taken them there to try on. I'll shove on a mac and cut out and get them."

"I'll come with you, if you like," said Bob.

Wharton shook his head.

"No need for two of us to get wet, old chap. I shan't be long."

And Wharton went downstairs, put on a cap and a macintosh, and let himself out of the house.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

A Blow in the Dark!

RALPH, the gipsy, started.

He was crouched in the most sheltered corner of the little summer-house in the dark gardens, safe from the rain, and snuggled up in the warm grey coat against the cold. From the rain and the darkness outside there came the sound of footsteps.

For the moment Ralph supposed that it was his kind and beneficent friend Bunter returning. But his keen ear quickly distinguished the difference between the firm tread he heard now and the shuffling, shambling footsteps of the fat junior.

He rose silently from the seat, his heart beating, and his eyes gleaming in the dark. Someone was coming to the summer-house, and Ralph's thoughts ran on Michael, the gipsy. That his brutal master would never allow him to escape, if he could help it, the waif knew, and the ruffian had seen him clamber over the big park wall into Colonel Wharton's seat. Ralph had believed that the disreputable ruffian would never have the nerve to follow him into a

"gentleman's park," but at the sound of that tread his fears revived. Bunter had told him that no one belonging to the lodge ever came to that summer-house after dark, and in such a down-pour of rain it was a thing extremely unlikely in itself.

Ralph's heart was beating hard as he stood crouching in the dark corner, and his fists were clenched. He did not mean to be recaptured if he could help it, but in a struggle with Michael he knew that he had no chance at all. His only hope was to dodge in the dark and escape by flight.

He stood in quivering silence and listened.

In the darkness he could see nothing but the faintest glimpse of a dark, moving shadow in the doorway of the summer-house.

That the newcomer was one of the schoolboys who had helped him to elude Michael that day, and that he was there to fetch in the skates that Bunter had forgotten, naturally, did not occur to Ralph.

Harry Wharton groped his way into the summer-house, glad to get out of the splashing rain. Well as he knew his way about the grounds of the lodge, where his boyhood had been passed, he had found himself baffled by the darkness, and had stumbled a good many times among the paths in the dark shrubberies, and twice taken a wrong direction. But he found himself in the little secluded building, at last, and stood inside it, groping in his pockets for a box of matches. He went through pocket after pocket, only to make the discovery that he had no matches.

Not for a moment did it occur to him that the building was tenanted.

As he had no matches, he proceeded to grope for the skates. From what Bunter had said, he knew that the fat junior had pitched them under the seat, which ran round two sides of the building. So it was only a question of groping his way along till he found them.

He started at the end of the seat nearest the doorway, and groped along, utterly unconscious of the fact that every step brought him nearer and nearer to a crouching, quivering figure in the farthest corner.

Ralph suppressed his breathing.

His heart was beating almost to suffocation. He could see nothing but the dimmest of black shadows moving in the blackness; but that dim, black shadow was groping in the darkness towards him, silently groping—and coming directly towards the corner where he crouched against the angle of the walls. That it was Michael, and that Michael knew or suspected that he was there, seemed clear to the gipsy waif; why should anyone else be groping his way to him in the dark, or indeed be in the summer-house at all?

Ralph's fists clenched hard.

He was cornered; but he was preparing for a desperate attempt to get clear.

The moving shadow suddenly stopped.

Wharton had suddenly discerned a grey glimmer in the dark corner. It was Bob Cherry's light grey coat which Bunter had so generously presented to the waif. Even in the darkness he could see it, now that he was close. It came into Wharton's mind with a rush that there was someone in the building, and he was so startled that his heart thumped painfully.

It was at that moment that Ralph stirred. Wharton was so close to him now that he could almost have touched him by stretching out his hand.

The gipsy set his teeth, and made a desperate spring.

A violent shove sent Wharton spinning to one side, and the gipsy darted past him.

"Oh!" gasped Wharton.

Startled and alarmed as he was, Wharton turned instantly on the unseen fellow who had shoved him aside. He clutched at the fugitive, and his grasp closed on the grey overcoat.

Ralph, with an inarticulate cry, turned on him. He felt himself in the grasp of Michael, and in sheer terror he struck out frantically.

Wharton gave a gasp as a clenched fist crashed on his mouth, and he staggered back.

But he held on gamely to the overcoat he had grasped. Who his unseen assailant was he had not the faintest idea; but he was determined not to let him get away.

He dragged at the coat; and suddenly felt it loose in his hands. There was a patter of rapid footsteps in the rain, and then silence. Wharton, half-dazed by the suddenness of the strange happening, found himself alone, with an overcoat in his grasp. The gipsy had slipped out of it and fled, leaving the empty coat in Wharton's hands.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Wharton.

He stood staring dizzily into the rain. It was useless to think of pursuing his assailant in the rain and the darkness: the fellow, whoever he was, had vanished. Still mechanically grasping the coat with one hand, Wharton passed the other over his mouth, where the blow had fallen. His fingers came away wet—not with rain. His lip had been cut by the fierce blow, and was bleeding freely.

"Oh, crumbs!" he repeated.

He took out his handkerchief and dabbed his mouth dazedly. He was hurt, and more puzzled than hurt. Who the fellow was, unless it was some tramp who had taken refuge in the little building, he could not imagine. But the warm coat he was holding certainly did not seem like a tramp's coat. Indeed, even in the darkness, there seemed something familiar about that grey overcoat to Wharton.

The fellow was gone, and pursuit was impossible; Wharton, angry as he felt, gave the matter up. He resumed groping under the seat for the skates, and found them in a few minutes.

He left the summer-house carrying the skates, and with the grey overcoat hanging over his arm. It was possible that that coat, when examined in the light, might give some clue to the owner; and Wharton, with his mouth tingling from a fierce blow, was naturally anxious to get within hitting distance of the unknown fellow who had struck him.

He tramped back to the lodge in the rain and gloom. It was a good distance to the house, and the rain was coming down more thickly than ever; and he was glad when he arrived.

He let himself in by the door by which he had left, in a lobby opening off the hall. There he laid down the skates, and proceeded to look at the grey overcoat in the light.

A startling change came over his face.

In the light, there was no mistaking that coat. It was Bob Cherry's. Harry Wharton stared at it like a fellow in a dream.

Bob Cherry!

It was impossible!

He passed his hand over his mouth, still bleeding from the fierce blow that had been struck in the dark.

What did it mean? Bob might have hidden himself in the summer-house, to startle Wharton when he got there—it was utterly unlike him to play such a

foolish trick, but it was possible; and Wharton remembered that he had missed his way going there, and lost time—Bob had had time to get there first, if he wanted to. But—

But that savage blow was no joke!

It seemed to Wharton that his brain was in a whirl, as he stood gazing at the coat that was Bob Cherry's, and that he had dragged from the fellow who had struck him.

"You've been out in this rain, Master Harry."

Wadham, the lodge butler, came into the lobby. Wharton hurriedly hung the grey coat on a peg, and began to take off his own macintosh.

Whatever this strange affair might mean, he did not intend to let the household know that his friend had struck him down in the dark.

Wadham took the wet raincoat from him, his eyes lingering on the cut on Wharton's mouth, which was still bleeding.

"You've had an accident, Master Harry."

"I—I had a knock—" stammered Wharton.

"You've had a blow, sir," said Wadham quietly. "Did you come on anybody in the grounds, sir? There are gipsies camped by the park—I saw one of them to-day hanging about the park gates—a low-browed ruffian, sir—he was hanging about for no good—"

Wharton's face was flushed.

Wadham was evidently surprised and curious, and he could not fail to know what had caused the cut on the junior's mouth. It was the blow of a clenched fist and nothing else.

"If that gipsy's got into the grounds, sir—" said Wadham, as the junior did not speak.

"No, no!" said Harry.

"But you've had a blow, sir," said the astonished Wadham.

"Yes—but—I didn't see the fellow in the dark," stammered Wharton. "It's all right. Nothing to make a fuss about, Wadham."

He hurried away, leaving Wadham staring. If Colonel Wharton's nephew had been struck by some vagrant in the grounds, it seemed to Wadham that it was far from being "all right!" and that it was an occasion for a very considerable fuss to be made.

Harry Wharton went upstairs. His face was pale and set, and his eyes burning. He did not intend to tell Wadham, but it was the wearer of the grey overcoat who had struck him, and that matter had to be settled without a fuss—but it had to be settled.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Trouble!

"HARRY! What on earth's happened?"

Frank Nugent was the only fellow in Wharton's den when Harry arrived there. He was looking over a Holiday Annual, in an armchair by the fire, when Wharton came in. He glanced round carelessly; but started to his feet with an exclamation as he saw his chum's face.

"Where's Bob Cherry?"

"Gone to his room, I think," answered Frank. "Johnny and Inky have gone down to the billiards-room. But what—"

"I've got to see him. He's indoors?"

"Eh? Of course!"

"He didn't go out after I did?" exclaimed Wharton.

"Not that I know of."

"Well, he must have!" said Harry. "Anyhow, I'll see him."

He was turning away, when Nugent crossed the room swiftly and caught him by the arm.

"What's the matter, Harry?" he asked.

"Something I must settle with Cherry."

"Hold on a minute!" said Frank quietly. "You can't have a row with Bob under your own roof, Wharton. Tell me what's happened."

Nugent knew only too well what that look on his chum's face meant. He had seen it there before, when there had been trouble among the Famous Five of Greyfriars.

Wharton set his lips.

"I'd rather not speak about it," he muttered. "It's something that's got to be settled between Bob and me."

Frank Nugent drew Wharton almost forcibly into the room and shut the door. His face was very grave.

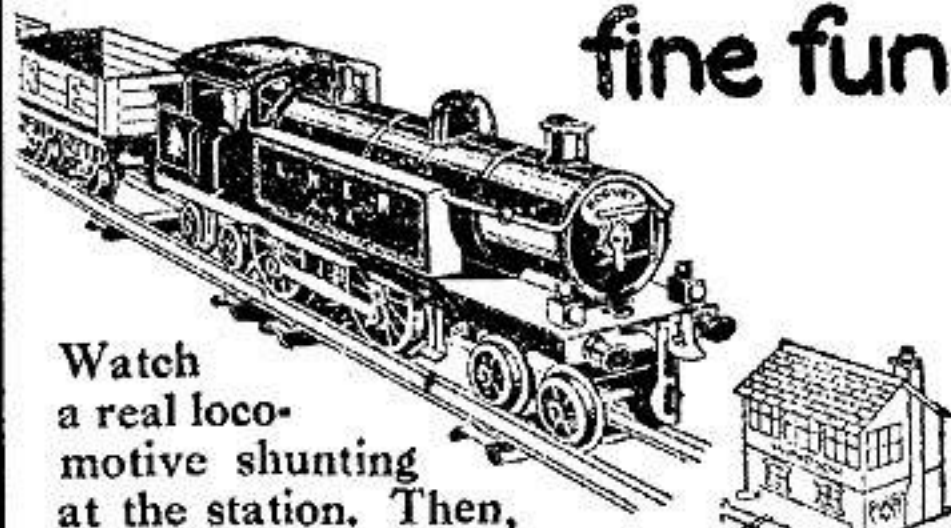
"You can tell me," he said. "It won't be the first time that I've saved you from making a fool of yourself, Harry. It would be bad enough to quarrel with Bob at Greyfriars, but you can't row with him under your own roof. Have a little sense!"

Wharton gave him a fierce look. His temper was at boiling point.

"Let go my arm, Nugent."

(Continued on the next page.)

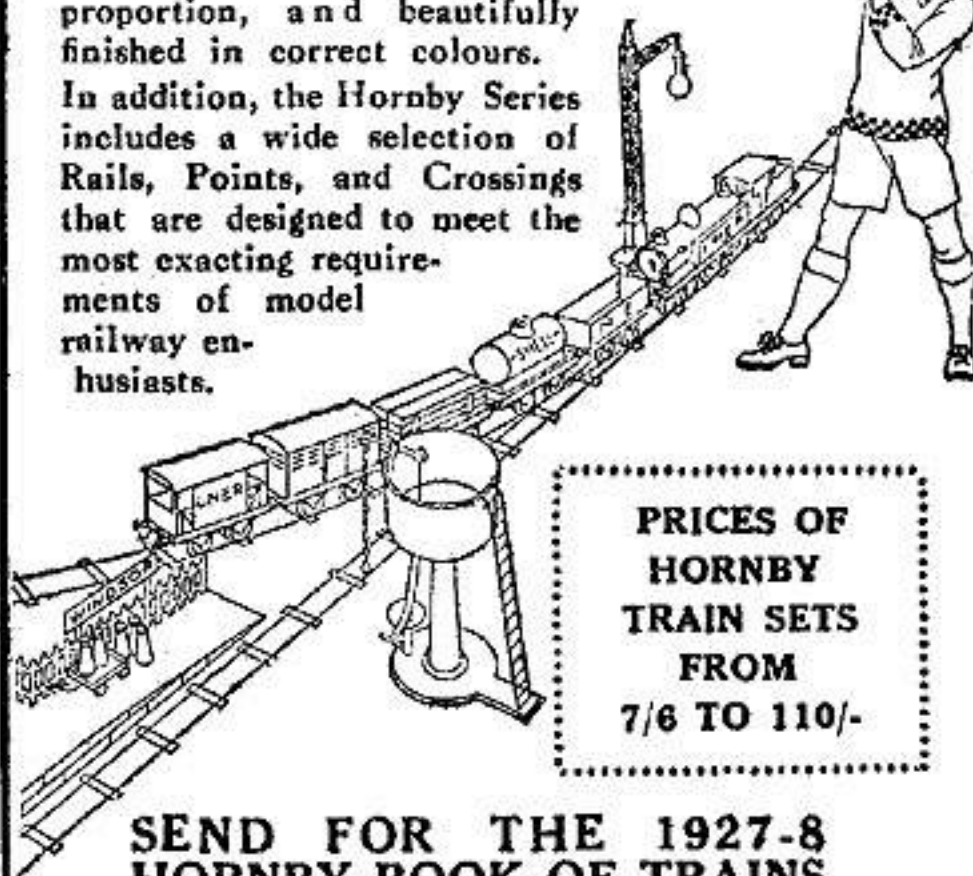
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"I won't!" answered Frank coolly. "If you want a row you can row with me first. I'm a bit more used to your temper than Bob is, as I'm in your study at Greyfriars. Go it!"

Wharton jerked his arm away by main force.

Frank Nugent put his back to the door. His eyes were rather angry, but his face quite calm as he faced his chum.

"Stop playing the fool, Frank!" snapped Wharton. "Let me pass! I tell you I've got to see Cherry!"

"Not till you're in a humour to call him Bob, instead of Cherry," answered Frank.

"You dummy!"

"Go it—if it relieves your feelings," said Nugent.

Wharton breathed hard.

"I'll tell you what's happened, then. Don't let it get over the house. My uncle mustn't hear of it. You know I went to the summer-house to get my skates. Bob Cherry was there—he got there first—and he struck me—"

"Are you mad?"

"Look at my mouth!"

"You're mad!" said Nugent, aghast. "You mean to tell me that you saw Bob there, and he struck you—"

"I'm not a cat to see in the dark!" snapped Wharton. "It was as black as pitch in the summer-house, and I had no matches."

"You idiot!" said Nugent. "Somebody struck you in the dark. It was no more Bob than it was myself!"

"He was wearing Bob's overcoat."

"Rubbish! Overcoats are much alike; and if you're not a cat to see in the dark, you couldn't identify the coat."

"He slipped out of it and ran, and left it in my hands. I didn't know it was Bob's coat till I got back to the house and looked at it in the light."

Nugent stared at him blankly.

"You've got the coat?"

"Yes. It's hanging up in the lobby now."

"You're sure it's Bob's coat—"

"Yes, ass!"

"I don't believe it, Harry. You're making an idiotic mistake!"

"Will you come down and look at the coat?" asked Wharton angrily.

"Yes; and you'll be jolly glad that I stopped you in time, before you made a thundering fool of yourself!" snapped Nugent.

"Come on, then!"

The two juniors went downstairs together.

"There's the coat!" grunted Wharton.

Frank Nugent's face was very startled as he examined it. He knew at once that it was Bob Cherry's coat. But to make assurance doubly sure, he felt in the pockets and found there a pocket-knife which he knew belonged to Bob, as well as an envelope addressed to Bob in the handwriting of Major Cherry. There could be no further possible doubt as to the ownership of the coat. Wharton watched him with an angry, sarcastic look as he made the examination.

"Well, are you satisfied now?" he demanded.

"It's Bob's coat," said Nugent slowly.

"Well, then—"

"I can't make it out. You're sure you pulled this coat off the fellow who struck you in the summer-house?"

"Do you think I'm dreaming?" exclaimed Wharton angrily.

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"Somebody else may have put on Bob's coat!" muttered Nugent, though even as he made the suggestion he realised how feeble it was.

"Who?" growled Wharton. "You, or Johnny, or Inky? Don't be a silly ass! A man couldn't get into the coat; it was a boy!"

"I—I can't make it out!" Nugent was quite staggered. "I can't believe that Bob did as you say. Why should he?"

"I don't know why he should; I only know that he did."

"I—I suppose Bunter—"

"Bunter couldn't get into the coat—he's too fat. And do you think a fat frump like Bunter could knock me spinning?"

"Well, no."

"It's rotten to think of putting it on Bunter, too!" growled Wharton. "He's a fat little beast, but that's unjust."

"I'd rather put it on Bunter, or anybody else, than Bob," answered Frank quietly. "But I admit that it couldn't have been Bunter. It beats me hollow. Look here, Harry, I can't understand this. But it wasn't Bob who hit you; I know that!"

"Oh, don't be a silly idiot!"

"Anyhow, you can't row with a fellow in your own house."

Wharton's eyes flashed.

"Do you think I'm going to take this quietly? I shan't row with him, but I'm going to see him about it. It's got to be settled."

"Let me see him first and ask him if—"

"Rot!"

Wharton tramped away up the staircase again. Frank Nugent followed him, with deep misgivings in his breast. He took the grey overcoat over his arm. The affair utterly mystified Frank, but it was impossible for him to believe that Bob Cherry, for no imaginable reason, had acted like a brutal hooligan towards his friend and his host. He felt that there must be some explanation, though he had to confess that he could not even begin to imagine what it was. He hurried after Wharton and arrived with him at Bob Cherry's door.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter's Guest!

BILLY BUNTER yawned. It was very cosy and comfortable in the big chair before the crackling log fire. Bunter had changed his wet clothes, and he was now clad in a flowing, gorgeous dressing-gown, which displayed nearly all the hues of the peacock. It was a magnificent gown of Oriental manufacture, and its value was fabulous. Needless to say, it did not belong to William George Bunter. He had found it in Hurree Janset Ram Singh's room, and borrowed it, in the agreeable little way he had. It was warm and comfortable, and that was all that the Owl of the Remove thought it necessary to consider.

Bunter was taking his ease while he waited for the supper-bell. Supper was the next important event in the history of the universe.

Tap, tap, tap!

For some minutes Bunter did not notice the light tapping at his window. The rain was still falling and the wind howling through leafless branches, and the tapping at the window was light and cautious. But he noticed it at last and stared round.

Tap, tap, tap!

Bunter blinked at the window. From the darkness without a white face was pressed to the pane.

Billy Bunter's fat heart gave a startled jump.

There was something strange and eerie in that white face pressed to the glass and the dark, wild eyes staring into the room.

"Ow!" ejaculated Bunter.

But in a moment or two he realised what it was—what it must be. It was the face of Ralph, the gipsy.

Bunter grunted.

In the kindness of his podgy heart he had told the gipsy to come to his balcony that night, and told him how to find it. But he had not expected the waif so early. He had told him distinctly not to come till a late hour when the lights were out in the house.

Tap, tap, tap!

It was a light tap like a woodpecker. Bunter grunted again, and detached himself from the armchair. He was irritated, and his hospitality was at a low ebb. But it was evidently necessary to let the gipsy in. Standing on the little wooden balcony against the brightly lighted window, Ralph would have been a conspicuous object to anyone who had been out in the grounds in the rear of the house—not that anyone was likely to be out there in the dark and the rain.

Bunter rolled across to the window and unfastened it, and opened one side.

The gipsy stepped in lightly, panting.

"Look here—" began Bunter.

"Oh, sir, he's after me!" panted Ralph.

"What? He? Who?"

"Michael!" panted Ralph.

"Oh!"

"He came to the summer-house, and nearly had me!" breathed the waif. "I got away, but he's sure to hunt for me, sir. I—I thought you'd let me hide here for a bit, sir, till he's gone! He won't dare to come near the house—a fellow like that! He wouldn't dare to let the servants see him hanging about—" Ralph broke off as he caught the expression on Bunter's fat face. "I—I know I ought not to have come, sir, but I'm feared of him! He'll nearly kill me if he gets hold of me! But—but I'll go, sir! I'll go—"

The terrified look that the waif cast into the darkness outside moved Bunter. His irritation passed.

Bunter rather fancied himself in the role of protector, and his gratitude to the waif who had saved his life had not yet faded away.

"That's all right. You stay here, kid," said Bunter. "It's a bit awkward, but I'll manage somehow. Keep where you are."

He pushed the hesitating gipsy farther into the room, closed and fastened the french windows, and drew the heavy, dark hangings across them.

Then he blinked dubiously at Ralph.

The tattered gipsy was drenched and dripping with rain, and panting with haste and terror.

"Where's the coat I gave you?" asked Bunter.

"I slipped out of it when he got hold of it, sir!" breathed Ralph. "I left him holding it. But for that I'd never have got away!"

"Oh, I'll get you another some time!" said Bunter. "Look here, get yourself dry by the fire! You're soaked!"

"I don't care about that so long as I keep clear of Michael!" said the waif, shivering.

"Dry yourself!" said Bunter.

He led the gipsy to the wide hearth, where the log-fire crackled and blazed



Wharton held on gamely to the overcoat he had grasped until he suddenly felt it loose in his hands. Half-dazed by the suddenness of the strange happening, Wharton found himself alone, with an overcoat in his grasp. His assailant had slipped out of it and fled, leaving the empty coat in Wharton's hands. (See Chapter 9.)

cheerily. The shivering waif held out his half-frozen hands to the heat.

Bunter locked the door of his room. Then he opened the door that gave admittance to the dressing-room. It seemed a safe refuge for the waif. As Bunter did not use the dressing-room, the communicating door was kept locked, and the maids did not go into the room, so far as Bunter knew. Anyhow, it would be easy for him to keep the key in his pocket, and in case of inquiry he could say that he had lost it, Bunter being happily untrammelled by any consideration for the truth.

"Here's a towel, kid!" said Bunter, once more the compassionate benefactor. "Rub yourself dry. By gum, you're jolly muddy! I'll get you some dry clothes later when the fellows are downstairs—I—I mean—Never mind. Dry yourself, and get into this dressing-gown. It's jolly warm, and there's no fire in the next room. Feeling better now?"

"Yes, sir!" gasped Ralph. He rubbed himself into a warm glow with the towel, standing before the blazing fire. But his dark, startled eyes turned continually upon the hangings at the window. Bunter smiled.

"You're safe here, kid," he said. "You've only got to keep quiet, and nobody will have any idea that you're in the house at all. As for that beastly gipsy, he won't dare to come near. The servants would take him for a thief or

a burglar if they saw him lurking about. You needn't worry about Michael. I can't understand how he found you in the summer-house."

The waif trembled. "He found me, sir, in the dark——" "The beast!" said Bunter sympathetically. "But he won't find you here, kid. You rely on me. I'll protect you!"

"I can't thank you as I ought, sir, for all your kindness!" faltered Ralph.

"That's all right," said Bunter, with a wave of his fat hand. "I'm a kind-hearted chap, you know. I can jolly well tell you that I spent most of my Christmas holiday going round among the poor and helping them in London, you know—in the East End."

"That was like you, sir!" said Ralph. Bunter coughed.

His outbreak of philanthropy that Christmastide had been, as a matter of fact, very unlike him, and Bunter was rather conscious of the fact. But he was, at least, feeling extremely philanthropic towards this hapless waif, whose gratitude and admiration gave him a very pleasant feeling of complacency.

"You can jolly well stay here as long as you like, kid," he said. "I'll keep an eye open to-morrow for that man Michael, and if he's been in the grounds Colonel Wharton will only need a word to make him have the fellow run in for trespass. Then you'll have a chance to

get clear and get away to that uncle of yours up in Yorkshire. What's his name—Hooper or Snooper?"

"Cooper, sir," said Ralph. "Yes, Cooper. I knew it was something. Now you get into this dressing-gown and go into your room. The fellows might come here, and it wouldn't do for you to be spotted."

Ralph obediently enfolded himself in the ample folds of Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh's gorgeous gown. Undoubtedly that warm and ample gown was very grateful and comforting to the gipsy waif. Bunter led him into the dressing-room. There was a couch in the room, and Bunter generously carried in the eiderdown from his own bed.

"Take a rest, kid," he said. "I'll lock the door, and if you hear anybody, don't make a sound."

"I'll be careful, sir." "You see, I should get into a row if you were found here, and you'd be chucked out, of course," said Bunter. "The people here are rather beasts—not my style at all. I only stay in the place out of good nature. Mind, not a sound!"

"Yes, sir." "I'll wangle you some supper later," added Bunter. "Depend on me not to forget that."

And, leaving the gipsy snuggled up warm on the couch under the eiderdown, Billy Bunter returned to his own room,

locked the communicating door, and put the key in his pocket. Then he sat down in his armchair again before the fire, to wait, with growing impatience, for the sound of the supper-bell.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

A Test of Faith!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! Trot in, old beanlets!"
Bob Cherry's manner was hearty and unsuspecting. He greeted Wharton and Nugent in his usual cheery manner when they presented themselves at his door. Bob had been making himself tidy for supper, being rather more particular on such points at Wharton Lodge than he was at Greyfriars School. His mop of flaxen hair was almost smooth and his tie nearly straight.

Nugent smiled faintly. Bob's manner was enough to convince him, if he had needed convincing, that the cheery junior had had nothing to do with the strange episode in the summer-house, and knew nothing of it. Even Wharton, passionately angry as he was, was staggered. It seemed impossible that this cheery, ruddy-cheeked fellow, in high good humour as usual, could have been guilty of a wanton and brutal attack on his friend in the dark. But the evidence of the overcoat was overwhelming.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" repeated Bob. "That's my coat! What on earth are you larking with my coat for, Franky?" "You admit it's your coat?" said Harry.

Bob stared at him. "Eh? Of course it's my coat! I suppose I know my own overcoat, that the pater gave me new this Christmas? What do you mean?"

"You know where I got that coat?" "You must have taken it from this room, I suppose?" said the puzzled Bob. "I hadn't missed it, but I left it here yesterday. I wore my heavy coat at Woodford to-day."

"I've just brought it in from the summer-house in the gardens," said Harry, his eyes fixed on Bob's face, to read there the signs of conscious guilt.

But there was no sign of guilt in Bob's face. His looks only expressed utter bewilderment.

"From the summer-house?" he repeated. "Yes."

"You went there for your skates? Mean to say you found my coat there? I suppose that fat idiot Bunter wasn't trying on my coat there when he was trying on your skates?"

Bob broke off, as he noted the cut on Wharton's mouth, from which a few drops of crimson were still oozing.

"Had an accident?" he asked. "I have been struck in the face in the dark by a rotter who got away, leaving his coat in my hands," said Wharton deliberately.

"Not that coat?" ejaculated Bob. "Yes, that coat—your coat!"

"Mean to say that some fellow was wearing my coat? Who?"

"That's what I want to know," said Harry.

Bob looked at him, and then looked at Nugent. A change came over his ruddy face. He looked rather grim.

Now that he gave Wharton his attention he could read the look on his face aright.

"Did you see the fellow?" he asked quietly.

"No."

"You got hold of him?"

"Yes; and he slipped out of the coat, leaving me holding it."

"You don't know who it was?"

"I mean to know!"

Bob Cherry looked the captain of the Remove fairly and squarely in the eyes.

"I think I catch on," he said, and there was something like ice in his voice. "You look as if you think that I was the fellow in the summer-house. You think that I hit you in the dark and bolted—is that it?"

"What else am I to think?" asked Wharton, between his teeth. "I was struck in the face by whoever was wearing this coat. It's your coat!"

Bob's blue eyes glinted.

"That will do," he said. "I needn't tell you, Franky, that I know nothing about the matter. You're a decent chap."

"Does that mean that I'm not?" flamed out Wharton furiously.

"Yes."

"Why, you rotter, after what you've done—"

"Hold on!" said Bob. "I've done nothing. If I wanted to hit you, I shouldn't hit you in the dark, and you can depend on it that I shouldn't bolt afterwards. When you're cool you'll know that just as well as Nugent knows it now; you always come round when you get out of your beastly tempers! But you can't talk to me, Wharton, as if I was a fellow like Bunter, butting into a house where I'm not wanted! I'm going down now to telephone to my father that I'm coming home to-night, and you needn't trouble to speak to me when we meet again at Greyfriars!"

"Bob!" exclaimed Nugent, in dismay.

"Can't be helped, Franky. There's a limit, you know. Besides, Wharton can hardly want to entertain a guest whom he suspects of lying in wait for him in dark corners and punching his mouth!" added Bob, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, in spite of his anger.

"If it was not you, who had your coat?" said Wharton savagely.

"Find out!" answered Bob coolly.

"What?"

"Find out! No business of mine, except that I'd like to punch the fellow who had the neck to borrow my best coat!"

"Nobody could have borrowed your coat. You say yourself that it was here in your room; it could only have been taken by somebody in the house."

"Looks like that," agreed Bob.

"Well, then, who—"

"I've told you to find out if you want to know. No good asking me. Have a row with Franky here if he's staying to enjoy it!" said Bob scornfully. "I'm going! I've had enough of your hospitality! I'm a bit more particular than Bunter!"

Bob strode to the door. There was a tap on it before he reached it, and it opened, and Hurree Janset Ram Singh's smiling, dusky face looked in. Johnny Bull was with the nabob.

"My esteemed friends and ludicrous chums," said the nabob, "I—" He broke off as he observed the looks of the three juniors. "What's the trouble? You are not having an esteemed and ridiculous row?"

"Anything up?" asked Johnny Bull.

And he followed the nabob into the room and closed the door.

"Nothing much," said Harry, biting his lip.

"The upfulness appears to be terrific," said the nabob gently. "Let dogs delight to bark bitefully, my esteemed chums, but the risefulness of your angry passions would be stopped by a stitch in time."

"You came in to speak to me, I suppose, Inky," said Bob. "Get it off your chest, old black bean! I'm just going down."

"I was going to ask if any esteemed ass had been larking with my beautiful and absurd dressing-gown?" explained the nabob. "It is missing from my elegant room."

"Oh, somebody borrowed your dressing-gown, too!" ejaculated Bob. "Well, if the giddy borrower puts it on, and taps Wharton on the nose, he will come and accuse you of doing it! Then you can come along to my place, Inky, and keep me company for the rest of the vacation!"

"You're not going home?" exclaimed Johnny Bull.

"Yes, I am!"

"But what the thump—"

"Somebody pinched my overcoat," explained Bob. "He put it on, and tapped Wharton's mouth, and he thinks I did it! Not being quite so easy-going a chap as Bunter, I'm leaving! Good-bye, everybody!"

Bob went to the door, and Johnny Bull promptly placed himself against it and pushed him back.

"We'd better clear this up," he said. "No good going off in a temper, Bob. You're making a mistake. Wharton doesn't think anything of the kind."

"He says he does!" answered Bob curtly.

"What am I to think?" exclaimed Wharton passionately.

"Anything you like except that," said Johnny Bull. "If that's how the matter stands you're not going alone, Bob! I'll go with you!"

Wharton's eyes gleamed with anger.

"You can suit yourself!" he snapped.

"You don't know what's happened yet, and you take sides against me!"

"I know that you're accusing Bob of a dirty trick, and that's enough for me!" answered Bull stolidly. "You ought to be jolly well ashamed of yourself!"

"When you know what happened—"

"Well, what happened, then?" demanded Johnny gruffly.

Wharton explained once more what had occurred in the summer-house. Both Johnny Bull and the nabob looked startled.

"The esteemed Bob says it was not he," said Hurree Janset Ram Singh gently. "That settles the matter, my esteemed chum. As it was not Bob, it was somebody else."

"Somebody else wearing Bob Cherry's coat, which must have been taken from this room!" exclaimed Harry. "Well, who?"

The Nabob of Bhanipur shook his head.

"The knowfulness is not great," he admitted, "but the trustfulness of a chum's word should be terrific!"

"You didn't get that thump on the mouth!" said Wharton bitterly. "You might think differently if you had!"

But Wharton's anger was already passing, and he was assailed by doubts. If Bob had done as he suspected, the action was almost inexplicable. There was no mistaking the angry scorn in Bob's honest face. Yet if the assailant had not been Bob Cherry, who had it been? Wharton felt his brain in a whirl. But his chums' unhesitating faith in Bob made him feel that he had been hasty and ungenerous.

"We can find out who did it, somehow," said Johnny Bull. "My belief is that Bunter has borrowed Inky's dressing-gown, and he may have borrowed Bob's coat as well—"

"Bunter couldn't get into the coat."

"I know that: but he may know something about it. If he had it out of doors, somebody may have found it and put it on."

"Some stranger, wandering about the grounds in this weather!" snapped Wharton.

"Jolly unlikely, I know," said Johnny Bull unmoved. "But more likely than that Bob has played a dirty trick, as you ought to know yourself."

Wharton bit his lip.

"You're all against me, I can see that," he said.

"What the thump do you expect?" snapped Johnny Bull. "You're not acting decently."

"Look here, Bull—"

"You won't get anything but plain English from me," growled Johnny. "If my coat had been taken instead of Bob's, I suppose you'd be accusing me instead of him. I call that rotten. We can find out who had the coat, and we can find out who wore it when you were punched in the dark, very likely; but before we do anything of the kind, it's up to you to apologise to Bob for suspecting him."

"No need for that," said Bob, "I'm going. Let a fellow pass, Johnny."

"Not yet," answered Johnny Bull grimly. "If Wharton doesn't do the decent thing, you're not going alone—I'm going with you. And I think these other fellows ought to come, too."

Wharton looked at the other fellows. There was no mistaking the expressions on their faces. Their support was wholly for Bob Cherry in this dispute. If there was a split in the Co., Harry Wharton would stand alone. Even his nearest and dearest chum, Frank Nugent, was against him in this. And yet the evidence was overwhelming that it was Bob Cherry who had struck him in the dark.

Wharton's eyes flamed.

He opened his lips, and upon them trembled words of passionate anger and scorn. Never had the Famous Five of Greyfriars been so near to a hopeless breach in their ranks. But with a great effort, Wharton checked the hot words.

Bob Cherry's eyes were upon him. Bob was angry and resentful, as was not to be wondered at. But friendship, after all, was strong.

"Wharton, old man," said Bob, very quietly. "Think it over! I wouldn't have believed such a thing against you on any evidence. It's not sense."

Wharton made no answer: he was struggling with himself. Johnny Bull waited a few moments, and as Harry did not speak, he put his hand on the knob of the door.

"Come on, Bob," he said quietly. "We'd better clear."

"Stop!"

Wharton spoke at last.

It had been a struggle, but his better nature had won: against all the evidence, against his own sense as it seemed, his faith in his chum won the day.

"Hold on, Bob. I—I believe you. I—I'm sorry."

Bob Cherry's face brightened.

"Now you put it like that, Wharton, I'll say on my word of honour that I know nothing whatever about it. I—I don't know that I blame you for thinking so, either, though I wish you'd trusted a fellow a bit more."

"I do trust you," said Harry. "I'm sorry—I suppose I was a fool to think anything of the kind for a moment. But—but—" His face was crimson. "I'm quite bewildered—I can't make it out at all."

"We'll find out who it was," said Bob.

"You're not going, old chap?"

Bob smiled faintly.

"Not if you want me to stay—if you feel sure—"

"I do feel sure—quite sure. I'm ashamed of having suspected you for a minute," said Harry. His mind was quite clear on that point now, though the matter was still an utter mystery.

"That does it," said Bob. "Let's forget all about it, and keep our little tempers."

"Hear, hear!" said Johnny Bull.

"The hear-hearfulness is terrific," said Hurrec Singh. "Now that the cloudfulness of distrust has rolled away under the benign sunshinefulness of friendship, let us find out who was the esteemed and execrable rotter who wore Bob's elegant and disgusting coat."

"Bunter knows something about it," said Johnny Bull, with conviction. "He bagged Wharton's skates, and he bagged your gorgeous gown, Inky, and he bagged that coat, though goodness knows who got hold of it afterwards. Let's go and see Bunter."

"Let's!" said Nugent.

The Famous Five left Bob's room together, harmony once more happily restored. In the passage, as the other fellows went ahead, Wharton spoke in a low voice to Bob.

"Sorry, old fellow! You can kick me if you like."

Bob grinned.

"All serene: wash it out," he said. "I'll kick Bunter."

Wharton laughed, and they went on together to the end of the corridor—where to their surprise, they found a crowd gathered.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Search I

COLONEL WHARTON was standing at the door of Bunter's room, tapping. No reply came to his tap from within. Wadham, the butler, was near at hand, and behind him stood John, the footman, and Giles, the keeper. All of them showed traces of having been out in the rain, and Giles had a gun under his arm. Evidently something very unusual was going on.

The colonel glanced at the juniors as they came up.

"Bunter is in his room, I suppose, Harry?" asked Colonel Wharton. "The door appears to be locked."

"He was there some time ago, uncle," answered Wharton. "He went out after tea, by way of the balcony, but he came back. He's not likely to have gone out again in this rain."

"I am afraid something may have happened to him," said the colonel. "There is some unknown person lurking in the grounds—or was. Wadham thinks he got into the house."

The juniors all started, and exchanged glances. An unknown person lurking in the grounds let in a little light upon the mysterious happenings in the summer-house. Harry Wharton was glad, at that moment, with a heartfelt thankfulness, that his faith in his chum had stood the test. He felt that he was about to learn something of the truth of what had happened.

Wadham gave an apologetic little cough.

"I was aware, Master Harry, that you had been attacked by some person, when you came in, sir," he said. "Although you did not desire a fuss to be made, as you said, I felt it my duty to make a search of the grounds."

"Perfectly right," said the colonel. "I do not quite understand this, Harry. I can see the mark of a blow on your face, and it appears that the blow was struck in the grounds of this house. Is that the case?"

"Ye-es, uncle."

"You should have told me at once what had occurred," exclaimed the colonel. "There may be some dangerous character hanging about the house. A very ruffianly-looking gipsy has been camped by the roadside for the last day or two."

"It was not a man who struck me," said Harry, flushing uncomfortably.

"Did you see him?"

"No: it was too dark."

"Where did it happen?"

"In the summer-house in the west garden. I went there to fetch in my

(Continued on next page.)



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skates; that ass Bunter had left them there."

"If you did not see him, how did you know it was a boy and not a man?" asked his uncle.

Wharton's colour deepened, and he did not answer. Bob Cherry chimed in, to save him from the difficulty of replying.

"The fellow was wearing my coat, sir."

"What?" exclaimed the colonel, in amazement. "Harry! Tell me at once what happened?"

Once more the strange tale was told. Colonel Wharton listened in blank astonishment.

"I cannot imagine how this person can have obtained possession of Cherry's coat," he exclaimed. "It is inexplicable. You know nothing of it, Cherry?"

"Nothing, sir, except that the coat was bagged from my room."

"It is extraordinary. However, Wadham thinks that the person concerned gained admittance to the house, and if that is the case we shall find him."

The colonel knocked again, loudly and impatiently, on Bunter's door.

"You don't think he could be in Bunter's room, uncle?"

"Yes, from what Wadham says."

"You see, Master Harry, I saw him as I was searching the ground with Giles," explained Wadham. "I distinctly saw him against the light of Master Bunter's window, standing on the balcony."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry.

"We saw him from a distance, sir," said Giles. "But I'm quite certain of it—a ragged-looking chap."

"He was gone when we reached the balcony," continued Wadham. "He may have slipped away, but I am sure not—I feel sure that he found the french windows unfastened and entered. But the window was fastened, and covered by the curtain when we reached it. I am sure that the person is inside the house."

"Joyce is watching the balcony, so he cannot escape that way," said Colonel Wharton. "It is clearly the same person who struck you in the summer-house, Harry. You must have surprised him hiding there, though how he came into possession of Cherry's coat is a mystery."

"You think he is in Bunter's room now?" exclaimed Harry.

"It appears so, if Wadham is not mistaken. From Bunter not answering my knocking, I am beginning to fear that some harm may have happened to him. The door must be forced open."

There was a sound of a movement in the room.

"Bunter's there!" exclaimed Bob.

"Bunter! Are you there?" exclaimed the colonel sharply.

"Eh? Yes. It's all right. I heard all you were saying, and there's nobody here," stammered Bunter.

"Why did you not answer me, if you heard me?" exclaimed the colonel.

"I—I was asleep."

"What?"

"Fast asleep."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob involuntarily.

"The esteemed Bunter takes the whole esteemed cake," remarked Hurrée Janset Ram Singh.

It was evident that Bunter, for some mysterious reason of his own, did not desire to let anyone enter his room, and he had hitherto kept silence in the hope that they would go away. It was the colonel's decision to force the door that had brought an answer from him.

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"Is the boy out of his senses?" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "Bunter, let me in at once!"

That sharp, authoritative voice was not to be denied. William George Bunter reluctantly opened the door of his room and Colonel Wharton strode in, followed by the juniors, and Wadham, and John, and Giles. Billy Bunter blinked at them peevishly. He had heard every word that had been spoken outside his door and knew that the gipsy had been seen entering his window. But if prevarication could save the situation the game was not up yet.

Colonel Wharton looked sharply about the room.

"Is anyone here with you, Bunter?"

"How could anyone be here?" grunted Bunter.

"Wadham and Giles saw someone on your balcony, and he entered by the window."

"What rot!" said Bunter. "Perhaps they have been drinking, sir."

"What?"

"Drinking—seeing double, you know," suggested Bunter cheerfully.

Giles stared at Bunter, and Wadham gave him a most expressive look. It was the first time that anyone had ever suggested that the staid, middle-aged butler of Wharton Lodge was capable of drinking and seeing double.

"Do not be absurd, Bunter," snapped the colonel. "Did you see anyone enter by your window?"

"I've been fast asleep, sir."

"Then someone may have entered without your knowledge."

"Oh, no, sir!" exclaimed Bunter, in a great hurry. "I—I mean I've been wide awake, sir."

"You mean that you've been wide awake?" ejaculated Colonel Wharton, almost dazedly.

"Just that," assented Bunter. "I haven't closed my eyes since lunch. I'm not a fellow for napping."

"The window is locked, sir," said Wadham, examining the fastening. "The person must have locked it after entering."

"Anyone can scarcely have entered without Bunter seeing him, if he was awake," said Colonel Wharton. "However, he may have been asleep. If the vagrant came in and locked the window he must be in the room now."

"I locked the window," exclaimed Bunter. "In fact, it's been locked all day. I keep it locked. I—I'm nervous of burglars. It hasn't been unlocked all day."

"You fat duffer!" exclaimed Wharton. "You went out that way this afternoon, and came back the same way."

"I—I—I mean it's been locked ever since I came back," stammered Bunter. "That's what I meant to say. Nobody could have got in through a locked window. That stands to reason."

"Someone has been in here quite recently, sir," said Wadham. "There are wet and muddy footmarks; you can see them, sir."

"Certainly!" said the colonel.

"They're my footmarks," stammered Bunter. "I went out for a walk, and—and came in, and—and that's how it was, sir."

"You fat chump!" exclaimed Harry. "What are you gammoning for now?"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Your shoes are quite dry, fathead!"

"I—I changed them after I came in."

"Where are the wet ones, then?"

"Eh?"

"If you changed your wet shoes where did you put them?"

"I—I forget."

Colonel Wharton stared at Bunter.

and then at his nephew. It was growing clear that someone had entered by the french windows on Bunter's balcony, and that the fat junior was trying to conceal that obvious fact. Why he should want to conceal it was a mystery.

"Blessed if I don't think he's wandering in his mind," said Bob Cherry, staring at Bunter in wonder. "Someone has been here. What are you trying to keep it dark for, Bunter?"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"I cannot understand this at all, Bunter!" rapped out Colonel Wharton, knitting his brows. "Someone has been here, and you desire to keep it from my knowledge. Why?"

"Oh, really, sir—"

"Search the room!" rapped out the colonel.

And the whole party, unheeding Bunter further, proceeded to search the room.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

An Amazing Discovery!

BILLY BUNTER watched the search with a covert grin. He had no objection to his room being searched, so long as the adjoining dressing-room was left alone. And the key of that room was safe in Bunter's pocket.

"I say, you fellows, look under the bed," grinned Bunter. "Look up the chimney. I'll eat anybody you find here. He, he, he!"

The juniors did not look up the chimney, but they looked under the bed and searched every other corner of the big room. But nothing came to light.

The outcome of the search was the assurance that no stranger was within the room.

Wadham turned the handle of the dressing-room door.

"The person must be in here, sir," he said. "The door is locked. No doubt he hid himself in the dressing-room while Master Bunter was asleep and locked the door."

"No doubt," assented the colonel. "He cannot have escaped, as Joyce is watching the balcony."

"He's not in there!" exclaimed Bunter in alarm. "Nobody's in there, Colonel Wharton. I locked that door myself."

"Give me the key, then."

"I—I've lost it."

"You have lost the key of this door?"

"Yes, sir. I—I dropped it when I went out for a walk."

Colonel Wharton fixed his eyes upon Bunter.

"This passes my comprehension," he said. "Cannot you understand, boy, that the person who has entered the house must be some thief, and probably a dangerous character?"

"Nothing of the kind, sir. I can assure you on that point. It's all right."

"Do you mean to say that you know the person?" exclaimed the astonished old gentleman.

"Oh, no, sir! Not at all!" gasped Bunter. "There isn't anybody. Nobody at all, sir!"

"Is this boy quite right in his head, Harry?"

"Oh, really, Colonel Wharton—"

"He's an utter fool, uncle," answered Wharton. "I can't imagine what he's playing this silly game for. He knows as well as we do that somebody got in here, and must be in the dressing-room at this moment."

"That is perfectly clear," said the colonel; "and the person must be found at once. It is clearly the person who struck you in the summer-house, and



"Oh, crikey!" There was a startled exclamation in the dressing-room, and a figure in a gorgeous dressing-gown leaped up from the couch. "Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is!" cried Bob Cherry. "It's the gipsy kid!" "What—what?" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "Have you seen this boy before?" (See Chapter 14.)

who must have stolen Cherry's overcoat."

"Nothing of the kind!" hooted Bunter. "He never knew that it was Cherry's overcoat."

"Then you know that there is someone in that room?"

"Oh, no! There's nobody there."

"Good gad!" ejaculated the colonel. "Wadham, stand aside and let Giles force the door."

"Look here——" gasped Bunter.

"Silence!"

The burly keeper approached the dressing-room door. The lock was a light one, and the heavy impact of the keeper's shoulder sent the door flying wide open. Billy Bunter gasped with dismay.

"Oh, crikey!"

The game was up now, with a vengeance!

There was a startled exclamation in the dressing-room. As the searchers crowded in, a figure in a gorgeous dressing-gown leaped up from the couch, and stood facing them with wild, startled, dark eyes, dazzled by the electric light that the colonel had turned on as he entered.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is!"

"Collar him!"

"Great pip!" yelled Johnny Bull.

"It's the gipsy kid!"

"What—what?" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "Have you seen this boy before, Bull?"

"Yes, rather!" said Johnny Bull.

"We've all seen him."

Ralph, the gipsy, backed to the farthest wall of the room, a strange figure in the gorgeous folds of the Oriental gown. His dusky face was tense and scared.

"I mentioned him to you, uncle," said Harry Wharton. "It's the kid who was running away from the brute of a gipsy on the road this afternoon."

Ralph stared at the juniors. He recognised them now as the party of schoolboys who had helped him to escape from Michael.

"I'm doing no harm here, sir!" he panted. "I'm not a thief! Master Bunter will tell you so, sir."

Colonel Wharton stared at him blankly. The discovery of the young gipsy in the room utterly astounded him. It was as great a surprise to Harry Wharton & Co.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the colonel.

"Hiding, sir!" stammered Ralph.

"Hiding—from what—from whom?"

"Michael, sir."

"Good gad!"

"Don't you blame Master Bunter, sir," stammered Ralph. "He gave me shelter, like the kind-hearted young gentleman he is, sir. I wouldn't have come into the house, only that brute Michael found me in the summer-house where I was, and I had to run for it, sir."

"Michael found you in the summer-house?" exclaimed Wharton.

"Yes, sir. You remember that brute what you helped me to get away from. He came on me there in the dark, and I only got away by slipping out of the coat what Master Bunter gave me, sir, and leaving it in his hands."

"Oh, my only hat!" gasped Wharton.

He understood now.

Wharton passed his hand over his mouth.

"You punched Michael when you dodged him?" he asked.

"I hit him and got clear, sir—leaving him the coat——"

"My coat!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"You young ass!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, laughing. "It wasn't Michael who came into the summer-house. It was I."

"You, sir!" stuttered Ralph,

"Yes; and I've got the mark of your fist on my mouth now."

Ralph stared at him.

"Oh, sir, I'm sorry; I'm awfully sorry! I thought it was Michael after me. He was groping towards me in the dark, and—and——"

"Of course, you couldn't see me; I couldn't see you," said Harry. "I was there to get my skates, and I hadn't any matches. It was I who had hold of the coat when you slipped out of it."

"Oh, sir!"

Ralph stood overwhelmed with confusion. Colonel Wharton was staring at the scene like a man in a dream.

"Bunter!" he rapped out.

"Oh dear!"

"Come here at once, Bunter!"

Billy Bunter reluctantly entered the dressing-room. His fat face was the picture of dismay. The game was up now; and Bunter could already see himself, in his mind's eye, catching a train for home.

"You hid that boy in the summer-house in the west garden?" demanded the colonel.

"Well, you see, sir, it was raining——"

"You gave him Cherry's coat?"

"Well, he hadn't a coat, and it was jolly cold," argued Bunter. "I'm a kind-hearted chap, sir. I was bound to give him a coat."

"Why did you not give him one of your own coats, then?"

"Eh! I want my own coats!" gasped Bunter. The question appeared to him utterly frivolous.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Colonel Wharton. "So you exercise your charitable feelings by giving away other people's property?"

"I don't think Cherry ought to be

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selfish about that coat, sir. I can say that I never was selfish."

"The unselfishness of the esteemed Bunter is terrific," remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "He has also given the excellent and execrable gipsy my dressing-gown."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Oh, I've only lent him that!" said Bunter. "I was wearing it myself, and I lent it to him. I'm always doing these unselfish things, though I seldom get any thanks."

"You let this boy into the house?" demanded Colonel Wharton, eyeing the Owl of the Remove grimly. "For all you know, he may be a thief, or the accomplice of burglars."

"Oh lor'! You—you see, sir—" stuttered Bunter.

"What is the boy to you? What do you know of him?" rapped out the colonel.

"You—you see, sir, he—he shaved my wife—" stuttered Bunter.

"What?"
"I—I mean, he saved my life!" gasped Bunter. "He shaved—I mean saved my life, sir, so—"

"How did the boy save your life? What do you mean?"

"He got me out when I went through the ice on the lake—" groaned Bunter.

"You have not been on the lake!"

"Nunno! Of—of course not! That's what I meant to say. I haven't been near the lake."

"Then how did the boy save your life? What absurd story are you telling me now?" snapped the colonel.

"I helped the young gentleman out of the lake this afternoon, sir," said Ralph.

Colonel Wharton knitted his brows.

"Am I to understand, Bunter, that you went skating on the lake this afternoon, after I had strictly forbidden you to do so?" he exclaimed.

"I—I—I—" "Answer me!"

"Not—not exactly skating, sir!" groaned Bunter. "I—I just took Wharton's skates there, to—to—to—"

"To what?"

"To—to admire the scenery, sir!" gasped Bunter. "The—the beauties of—of Nature, and—and that sort of thing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Oh, really, you fellows—"

"Good gad!" said the colonel, staring at Bunter. "So you went skating on the lake, and fell through the ice, and this gipsy boy saved you. You are a disobedient and disrespectful young rascal; but it is fortunate that the lad was there. And from gratitude, I presume, you befriended him. That, at least, is to your credit. But why have you acted in this absurdly surreptitious manner? If this boy is in any danger from a ruffianly character, he will be safe under my protection, and you should have told me so."

"Eh?"
"Cannot you understand that I should have befriended the boy?"

"Wha-at? Ain't you going to kick him out, sir?" gasped Bunter, in astonishment.

"You stupid young rascal! Do you think that I would turn the boy from my doors in such weather as this?" snapped the colonel angrily.

"Eh! Yes."

"Shut up, you fat idiot!" breathed Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Why did you not tell me, Bunter?" rapped the colonel.

"Well, sir, you're such a gruff old bear—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"I—I mean—I don't mean a gruff old bear—I—I mean, such a kind-hearted old chap!" gasped Bunter, in a great hurry.

Colonel Wharton stared at him.
"You had better say no more, Bun-

ter," he said. "You appear to have acted kindly and charitably towards this unfortunate boy, though in an absurdly deceitful and surreptitious way. I can, however, excuse your disrespect and deceitfulness, in view of your kind action."

"Oh lor'!" gasped Bunter, in a state of the greatest astonishment. "I—I suppose you ain't pulling my leg, sir?"

"Be silent, for goodness' sake, you absurd boy! Ralph—if that is your name—take off that dressing-gown and follow me. If matters are as you have told Bunter, you shall have food and shelter here, and full protection from the man you seem to fear. Come, lad!"

"Yes, sir," said Ralph respectfully.

He followed the colonel. Wadham and John and Giles had already gone. The exciting hunt for a dangerous character had ended in the discovery of the gipsy waif; and there was evidently no occasion, after all, for alarm.

Billy Bunter was left alone with the Famous Five, who looked at him expressively. Bunter's proceedings had been weird and mysterious, and the juniors had wondered what they could possibly mean; but certainly they had not expected to find Bunter befriending the helpless, and taking the stranger in.

"Well," said Bob Cherry, "this beats it!"

"The beatfulness is terrific!" agreed Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"I say, you fellows—"

"You fat idiot!" said Harry Wharton. "If we'd known that that kid was hiding from Michael, we'd have looked after him. You never do the right thing; but if you do, you're bound to do it in the wrong way."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Bunter can't really be such an absolute rotter as he makes out!" remarked Frank Nugent.

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"I say, you fellows—"

"Well, ass?"
"What about supper?"

"Supper!" repeated Wharton. The juniors had forgotten supper; but that important function was uppermost in Bunter's mind.

"Yes, supper," said Bunter. "We never have meals late at Bunter Court, I can tell you. I don't want to criticise your hospitality, Wharton; but if you keep a fellow waiting for his meals—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at! I tell you that I'm jolly hungry!" said Bunter warmly.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the bell!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

"Oh, good!" gasped Bunter, in great relief.

And all was calm and bright!

Ralph, the gipsy, stayed some days at Wharton Lodge; and when he left, it was a well-dressed and well-fed Ralph who took the train for the north, to join his uncle in Yorkshire; safe now from Michael, the gipsy.

Billy Bunter, much to his surprise, found that, instead of getting into a fearful row, as he had fully expected, his peculiar proceedings had raised him in the estimation of everyone at Wharton Lodge.

The Famous Five, who had been feeling a natural anxiety to know when Bunter intended to catch a train for home, resolved to bear with him as cheerfully as possible until the end of the Christmas vacation, and, needless to state, before that date arrived William George Bunter had put their cheerfulness to a very severe strain.

THE END.

BILLY BUNTER AGAIN, BOYS!



Trust old Billy to run into another adventure.

This is a Christmas vac. Bunter won't forget for many a long day.

All Magnetites are strongly urged to read next Saturday's treat, for it shows Mr. Frank Richards in great form which augurs well for the bumper programme of stories he's writing for us in 1928.

"BILLY BUNTER'S CONVICT!"

is the title of his latest masterpiece—full of laughs and exciting situations.

Don't miss it, chums, whatever you do!

Gold for the Getting!



By Stanton Hope

The Story of a Thrilling Gold Rush to the Land of the Midnight Sun!

Light at Last!

DAVE ORCHARD is arrested on a charge of having absconded with a bag of gold, but makes a bold bid for freedom and joins his nephew, Jack Orchard and Terry O'Hara, his chum. Jack determines to prove his uncle's innocence, for he has seen part of the stolen gold—a "bear's claw"—suspended round the neck of Bull Morgan, a rascally camp follower. Before Jack can succeed in his purpose, however, Uncle Dave is "dropped on" again by the police in a cabin where the trio are sheltering from a snow blizzard. Then, unexpectedly, Lefty Simons, a confederate of Bull Morgan, staggers into the cabin and informs Jack that Morgan is lying helpless in the snow outside. With Terry at his heels, Jack dashes from the hut.

Sergeant Curtis hurled himself through the blinding snow which swept round the interior of the cabin and plunged after the two boys, whose bent forms he could faintly see like wraiths in the white chaos without.

An excited barking, and gallant Skookum left the other dogs and the cosy warmth of the snow trench in the lee of the cabin and sprang after them. Only an acute instinct could have made him aware that they had left the cabin, for it was impossible that he could have heard their exit amid the shrieking babel of the storm.

In a few seconds the cabin was as completely lost as though it had been a mile away.

In the blinding white storm the three gallant rescuers, with Skookum following hard behind, reeled onward a few more paces, while, as it seemed, thousands of invisible hammers were beating at them. Speech was out of the question; they could scarce breathe. They felt the frost strike into their cheeks like knives, but they heeded neither the pain nor the dread results which might be in store, in their resolute determination to find Bull Morgan.

Twenty yards from the cabin the sergeant was within arm's-reach of the two chums, and was about to give furious vent to his opinion of their folly, when a cry swung up on the wind from just

ahead of them. It came—one word—in a tone of crazy exultation through the shrill, demoniacal voices of the gale—"Gold!" Then it rose, again and again, in a frenzied crescendo of repetition: "Gold! Gold! Gold!" And Skookum gave tongue vociferously in answer.

There, on hands and knees, was Bull Morgan, heedless of the slashing knives of the wind, as he frantically delved a hole with some small object gripped in his right hand.

Exulting that they had found Bull Morgan, Jack and Terry laid hold upon him, and the sergeant who had staggered up, hoarsely gasped an order as he came to a halt, facing the way he had been going.

For only Sergeant Curtis realised that though they were not more than twenty or thirty yards from the cabin, neither they nor even Skookum might ever find it again in that blinding snow-storm. There was nothing by which they could take a direction, and even their footsteps in the snow were obliterated immediately by the sweeping seventy-mile-an-hour wind. By remaining where he was and turning right-about-face, there was just a chance that the sergeant might find the way back.

"Quick! Drag him up, Terry!" panted Jack.

But Morgan was a dead weight, and in his madness still scratched deeper into the snow in crazy search for phantom gold.

In his frenzy he was quite oblivious of the presence of his would-be rescuers, until, mumbling incoherently, he rolled heavily over on his side and gazed upward, with glazed, blood-shot eyes. And for the first time the sergeant and the boys saw, to their amazement, that frozen in the palm of his right mitt was a great claw-shaped nugget of gold, with a broken piece of frost-rimed string attached!

"Sufferin' Mike!" gasped Terry. "It's the Bear's Claw!"

So astounded were the boys and buffeted by the weather that no more comment was made, nor was anything said by the equally amazed sergeant. All knew that the long search for the

stolen gold was ended, for here was the great nugget frozen fast in Morgan's grip.

By this time Morgan was incapable of helping himself, and Jack and Terry half-raised him by lifting under his massive shoulders; the sergeant turned right-about-face, bent down, and hoisted his legs. Then with their heavy burden the three staggered drunkenly through the snow, back in the direction the police-officer conceived the cabin to be; while Skookum, barking loudly, as though in the hope of attracting attention, kept hard at his young master's heels.

In the blinding snow they would have missed the shack completely, but that they luckily heard the voice of the constable in a momentary lull in the blizzard, shouting to them from the door.

They turned in the direction of the sound, and the sergeant almost barged into a side wall of the cabin, which was not more than two or three yards away and yet had been invisible in the maelstrom of snow.

In renewed hope and strength, they dragged Morgan round to the door and got him inside with the aid of the constable, and Skookum seized the opportunity of darting in, instead of returning to the other huskies.

To close the door was a titanic task against the blizzard, and it took their combined efforts before they could shut out the fierce, snow-laden wind which threatened to lift the heavy roof clean off the cabin. By the time the bolts were securely shot, snow four and five feet deep was piled in corners of the room and the sledge and Uncle Dave were almost buried in it.

"Never mind him," whined Lefty Simons, who had recovered somewhat, "look after me! Do you want me to die? Can't you see I'm half-frozen? Haven't you got a heart? Haven't you got a flask?"

The coward's selfish whinings caused the sergeant to turn sharply on him and shove him contemptuously away with his boot.

"Your turn will come at last, y' skunk!" he snapped angrily. "Come on, you fellows, there's much work to be done here! Let's get this poor brute thawed out, if it's possible!"

The deadly white finger of the frost had set its mark both on Bull Morgan's face and the cheeks of the boys.

The chums and the sergeant, however, were heedless of themselves in the more pressing need of restoring the circulation into the crook's partly frozen frame. First, they dragged off his fur mitts with the golden nugget still adhering to the ice of one of them, and afterwards his knee-boots, mocassins, and two pairs of thick grey socks. Both his hands and legs were badly frost-bitten, as were his features.

Then began a task which was destined to go on for the best part of an hour.

At first Morgan was practically unconscious, and made no movement as the sergeant started to rub handfuls of snow against his frozen cheeks, nose, and chin. The constable attended to his hands, and Jack and Terry each massaged a chill-white foot with the snow scraped from the cabin floor.

Uncle Dave, too weak to help, watched from the sledge, and Lefty Simons slunk up and down the cabin as restive as a caged bear, pausing every little while to beat his hands across his chest and moan distressively.

Slowly, slowly the blood began to run in Morgan's extremities. Like molten fire it flowed again in his frozen veins. The sweat burst in cold beads from his forehead, and streamed over his distorted face as he writhed in the most terrible anguish that any human soul can endure.

Roused from his lethargy, he kicked and screamed and fought like a madman with those who were striving to save him. But the powerful sergeant and constable held him down while Jack and Terry went on with the work unaided.

Nothing could mitigate that agony, and Jack and Terry knew that for Morgan's own sake they must go on with

the task, or gangrene would set in, and his life might pay the forfeit.

Though Morgan had been their deadliest enemy, they would have spared him every bit of that pain, had it been in their power. But they had to carry on to the bitter end, while Lefty Simons cringed in a corner, pressing his mitts over his fur ear flaps and shivering at the thought that he, too, in a lesser degree, would have to pass through that fiery valley of pain.

When at last the circulation had been fully restored to Morgan, the big fellow, haggard with the ordeal through which he had passed, collapsed, shivering, upon the floor. Those who had worked on him were themselves in a state of exhaustion.

"He—he'll be all right now," mumbled the sergeant, "except for those legs of his. I don't like the look of them. We shall have to get him to hospital in Dawson as soon as this blizzard blows itself out."

After a brief rest the sergeant and the boys attended to their own frost-bite, while the cowardly Simons was imbibing Dutch courage from a flask which the constable contemptuously tossed him.

All bore the pain of returning circulation in their faces without a murmur, but when, finally, Simons underwent the ordeal of being rubbed out he made almost as much fuss as Morgan, though he had not been affected by frostbite to anything like the same extent.

Meanwhile, Bull Morgan sat propped up on the floor, half delirious, and obviously holding the belief that he was on the verge of dying.

"Come, pull yourself together, man!" the sergeant ordered sternly. "You're out of danger now, and there's a matter we have to deal with that affects the welfare of another. The Bear's Claw nugget—how did it come in your possession?"

A snarl like that of a suddenly-aroused animal proceeded from Lefty Simons, and he turned towards his crony.

"Aw, don't spill the beans, Bull," he warned. "Don't let 'em trick you into saying things you'll be sorry for afterwards."

"Silence, you half-breed dog!" thundered Sergeant Curtis.

He turned to Morgan and repeated his question, and the big, cowardly rogue, believing that he was well on his way to the happy hunting grounds, stammered a full confession of his past iniquities.

In the old days in 'Frisco, when he and Lefty Simons had been pardners in the Red Rat doshouse in Spanish Causeway, they had employed a small gang of sandbag men. One of these rogues laid out Dave Orchard in the waterside district and brought in the stolen gold, including the famous Bear's Claw, to the crooked pardners, who paid him handsomely for the haul.

Subsequently, Morgan and Simons disposed of the smaller nuggets, but because Morgan held a superstitious belief that the big golden claw was a talisman of good fortune he had retained it in spite of the protests of Simons, who claimed a half interest in it. After the fire in the High Life, in Dawson, the golden claw had been cached in a secret hiding-place, and only recently Morgan had deemed it safe to secure his mascot and wear it as formerly.

The sergeant and the constable heard out the confession without comment, and only Terry, who was inwardly seething with excitement, interpolated a few breathless exclamations.

Directly Morgan had finished, the sergeant walked across to the improvised bed and sought Uncle Dave's hand under the thick coverings.

"Orchard," he said quietly, "I guess this puts you right with the law. I never believed your statement about being waylaid in 'Frisco, and now I freely admit I was wrong. I'm glad for your sake, and for the sake of these two gallant boys, who are your pardners, and who've believed in you and stuck by you."



Mumbling incoherently Morgan rolled heavily over on his side; and for the first time Sergeant Curtis and the boys saw, to their amazement, the great claw-shaped nugget of gold frozen in the palm of his right mitt. (See page 25.)

Jack could only mumble incoherently in his joy as he strove to congratulate his uncle, and the excited Terry did a wild Irish jig in celebration.

"Thank Heaven! Thank Heaven!" was all that old Uncle Dave could keep muttering. And the knowledge that his innocence had been proved revived him as nothing else could have done.

Even Skookum sensed that something of joyful importance had come about. He rubbed his long, vulpine muzzle in the soft snow which covered the piled-up blankets, and wagged his tail until it seemed that it must surely come unmoored from its fastenings.

The Clean Up!

THE ice was breaking up on the rivers of the Yukon, and the sun and warm winds of spring were melting the snow in the valleys and the lower slopes of the rugged hills. A new world, pulsating with life and hope, was emerging from the dead white wilderness of snow and ice. Men everywhere took fresh heart and welcomed joyfully the change of season, and none more so than Jack Orchard, Terry O'Hara, and old Uncle Dave.

Dawson had claimed their presence for many days after their return from Lone Cabin, in company with Sergeant Curtis, the constable, and the two prisoners. Good food, good sleep, and freedom from worry worked wonders with Uncle Dave, and soon he was as fit and strong as ever.

His old cell in the Dawson gaol was now occupied by Bull Morgan, who first spent a period in hospital owing to the result of severe frostbite in his feet, and Lefty Simons had another exactly similar apartment close by.

As might be supposed, the rogues "squealed" on the members of their former gang in Frisco. Later, two or three of them, including the sandbagman who had actually committed the robbery of the Bear's Claw from Uncle Dave, were caught and sent to the penitentiary. So, subsequently, were Morgan and Simons, as receivers of stolen property, and it is to be hoped that their term of confinement brought them remorse and the desire for reformation.

Instead of going to Kettle Creek, which hitherto had proved a sore disappointment, Jack, Terry, and Uncle Dave returned to the Yellow Horseshoe, on Starvation Creek, having first sold all the huskies, with the exception of Skookum.

There, piles of dirt burned out in the early winter, were awaiting washing, and in the clean-up they obtained two or three thousand dollars' worth of gold. This coarse gold and dust they took to Dawson and banked. Then, this done, they hit the trail for Kettle Creek, also to make a clean-up, though they did not expect to get much for their labour.

On the way, their hopes were sent soaring sky-high by a rumour that a big strike had been made somewhere on the creek, and that the camp was seething with excitement and activity in consequence. They hurried faster to the diggings, and found that the rumour was not only correct, but actually was an under-statement of the facts.

The man who had made the lucky strike was none other than Washington K. Gellibrand, who had bought claims five and six from Morgan and Simons for a mere song. He had been working getting out dirt near rock-bottom as usual on the previous day, when, to his utter surprise and joy, he "struck it rich"—a vein of red gold a foot deep and almost a yard across!

Hardly had Jack, Terry, and Uncle Dave arrived in their cabin on claims

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three and four, when the youthful discoverer of the pay-streak burst in upon them, followed by several other excited miners. Vigorously Washington K. Gellibrand shook their hands, and, pacing like a cat on hot bricks round the shack, narrated for the fiftieth time since the previous day, how he had come to make his strike.

"Gee, I was working just as usual, boys," he cried, "when my pick struck through the dirt to solid metal. And there it was—the gold—the real red goods I came up here to get! It means a fortune—a fortune to me!"

The three partners heartily congratulated him, and turned to welcome old Jock McLennan, who strode into the cabin.

"And this may mean a fortune to others of us, too," remarked Jock. "That vein may run through other claims beside Gellibrand's."

It was this possibility which already had turned the camp at Kettle Creek into a seething hive of industry. Claims three and four were only just above discovery, and number two—Jock's own claim—was, of course, higher.

That very day, Jack, Terry, and Uncle Dave examined the gold in Gellibrand's workings, and Jock McLennan gave his expert opinion as to the direction he believed the vein might take.

Yet it took nearly a fortnight of hard work to prove that the vein actually did penetrate claims three and four, and also one and two, worked respectively by Shorty Gibbs and Jock McLennan. Near the edge of the creek, in claim number six, the gold petered out altogether, and although the majority of the prospectors were disappointed, the lucky owners of the claims in which gold was situated, were able to provide highly-

paid, all-the-summer work for them.

By the late summer, Jack, Terry, and Uncle Dave had each mined a golden fortune, and finally they sold all the claims for a handsome sum to a big syndicate.

Then, wealthy beyond their wildest dreams, they hit the trail for the outside, taking Skookum, the faithful husky, with them, and reluctantly leaving the gold-maddened Washington K. Gellibrand flinging away his own fortune among a number of riotous "friends" in Dawson.

In their case, the words of the old Frisco oyster pirate had proved true. There had been "gold for the getting" in the Yukon, as they and a few more had discovered. But they were among the very few favourites of fortune who had kept their heads, and, incidentally, their earnings.

To Jack, the money seemed to mean less than to his two pardos. Chiefly he rejoiced that in the wild wastes of the Northland he had found his uncle, whom long before he had set out from England to join, and, secondly, his uncle's innocence had been proved.

Terry's great idea was not to stay in the sunny warmth of Frisco long, and on the voyage south from Skagway to the Californian coast he urged on Jack and Uncle Dave that they must spend some of their fortune in "seeing the world."

By which Terry was careful to explain that he meant the Lakes of Killarney, the Giant's Causeway, the lovely Shannon, Kilkenny, where the cats come from; and, most important of all, Macgillicuddy's Reeks, in County Kerry, the birthplace of Terry O'Hara!

THE END.

THE TERROR OF THE HIGHWAY!

(Continued from page 15.)

my watch—my perfectly priceless, peerless, eighteen-carrot gold watch!"

"And my half-crown—all the munny I had in the world!" cried Mr. Lickham.

"And my German sossidges, which were being specially saved for my supper!" groaned Herr Guggenheimer.

"It was a garstly eggspereience, sir," said Mr. Justiss. "It would have seared you stiff—frozen the marro in your bones! Just picture the scene to yourself—a lonely road late at night, and a fierce storm raging. Suddenly, from a clump of trees, emerges a stelthy and sinnister figger, armed to the teeth. There is a shout of 'Stand and deliver!' and we find ourselves gazing down the barrels of a couple of blunderbusses! Such an ordeal, Doctor Birchermall, would striko terror into the harts of the boldest!"

The Head stared at the masters in blank amazement for a moment. Then he threw back his head and roared with larfter.

"Ha, ha, ha! Hold up at the cross-roads by a highwayman, and forced to turn out your pockets at the point of the pistle—or rather, blunderbuss! Do you seriously eggspereict me to swallow a cock-and-bull yarn of that sort?"

"It isn't a cock-and-bull yarn!" cried Mr. Lickham indignantly. "It is the sollum, sober trooth!"

"Ratts!" said Doctor Birchermall, skornfully. "I refuse to believe a word of it! It is an insult to my inteeligence, to ehspect me to swallow a tail like that."

"It vas der trooth!" cried Herr Guggenheimer.

"Go along with you, Guggy! The fact is you have all been to the Pictures, and seen a thrilling highwayman film, and it fired your imaginations. On your way home you were worked up to such a pitch that you were prepared to imagine anything. Every shadow was a footpad; every bush consealed a brigand. Your imagination, gentlemen, has been playing you trix!"

"Nothing of the sort!" said Mr. Justiss indignantly. "Do I imagine that my pockets have been picked? Look!" And the speaker turned out his pockets, revealing them to be full of emptiness. "Does Lickham merely fancy that he has been robbed of half-a-crown, and Guggy

of his German sossidges, and Tyzer of his gold ticker? Of course not! The hold-up was a grim reality; and I suggest, sir, that you tellyfone at once to the perlice, and put them on the track of this seoundrel who calls himself Deadshot Dick!"

But Doctor Birchermall flatly refused to believe the masters' story, or to take any action in the matter. He promptly ordered them off to bed, and they reluctantly went. And their slumbers were roodly disturbed by garstly nightmares, in which they again came face to face with the Terror of the Highway!

THE END.

(Look out for next week's amusing yarn of St. Sam's, entitled: "A PRICE ON HIS HEAD!" It's a corker, chums!)

A STORY OF THE ROYAL NAVY.

MAGNET readers all appreciate the stirring yarns of Stanton Hope, and without a doubt they will be interested to hear that this writer has just published a grand new romance of the sea and the glittering East, entitled, "Deroliet Gold!" (Thomas Nelson). The tale starts off in grand style, and the interest never flags from the moment young Dick Grenville steps aboard the Cyclone. Dick's father is a learned professor, who in the course of his investigations in the East, has discovered a fabulous treasure which dates back to a century before Nebuchadnezzar. Then the news reaches Dick that his father has perished in the mighty storm which wrecked the Babylonian, the ship on which the gold is being brought to England.

After a prodigious sequence of thrilling happenings, the action of the story is transferred from the white decks of the Cyclone to a certain dreary old hulk which is slumping lazily off the coast of Persia. The gold of ancient Chaldea is on board, and so, too, is a gang of the most ill-begotten rogues who ever eheated prison. The story sweeps to a culmination of real dramatic intensity, with a picture of heroism characteristic of the Service of which this story gives so accurate a picture, with its humour, its pluck, and self-forgetting chivalry.

FAMOUS FOOTBALL CLUBS.

(Continued from page 2.)

Workers, Everyone!

Some little time ago financial stress caused the directors to part with Jack Towürow, their International centre-half, to Chelsea. James Galbraith has stepped into the breach, but he has not had good luck this season, and injuries to Galbraith left an opportunity of trying a promising youngster in Spence. With experience, this lad may turn out to be "the goods."

Left half-back Duffy is a Scot who was first heard about at Blantyre. From Bellshill he joined Chelsea, but was later induced to assist the Orient. He can show a Scottish Junior Cup medal, as well as other decorations.

It is almost an entirely new forward line which is working with a will on behalf of the "O's" this season. Outside-right Collins comes from Cardiff City, but the man who can best be described as the brains of the attack is inside-right Percy Whipp. He was an Orient player years ago, but like many other "finds" was allowed to go elsewhere. Among his other exploits was that of assisting materially to get Leeds United into the First Division. Now he has returned to Clapton, his first love, and he found the word "Welcome!" written on the map in large letters.

For the centre-forward position there are two men of about equal merit, Robert Kerr, formerly of Wolverhampton Wanderers, and James Gardner, a Londoner, by birth, who picked up much knowledge of the game with Ipswich Town. Outside-left Corkindale is a flyer who came from Swansea.

The manager of the team is Peter Proudfoot, a wise Scot with a lot of actual experience on the football field. He certainly has to be careful of the bawbees, because the Orient, always struggling against First Division counter-attractions, either at Tottenham or at Highbury, don't get big gates. But what the Orient lack in numbers so far as support goes, is made up for in enthusiasm.

Not by any stretch of imagination can the "O's" be called a scientific side. But they are workers, every one, and that counts for something.

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7-1-28

The Terror of the Highway!

RAISING THE WIND! This is a problem that often confronts Dr. Alfred Birchmell, M.A., I.A.R., for he's seldom got two he-pennies to rub together. But he's a 'cute old bird,' is Birchmell, and his latest scheme for filling the empty coffers is a corker!

WHAVE a night!" eggs-splained Mr. Lickham.

"Not fit for a dog to be out in," said Mr. Chas. Tzyer, with a shudder. "Not even for gay dogs like ourselves. I vote, gentlemen, we hire a cab to take us back to St. Sam's."

"Dot vos a very good suggestion, ain't it?" said Herr Guggenheimer, the German master.

The four masters had just come out from the "Pictures." It had been very cosy and cheery in the Muggleton Cinema, and the masters had forgotten their worries and cares in watching the merry antics of Harold Loyd, Tom Micks, and other famous film stars.

They had stepped out into a dark and stormy night. A blizzard was raging, and the snowflakes whirled and stung their faces, and the wind blew and buffeted about their ears. Their noses were soon blue with cold; and they clapped their hands, and stamped their feet on the frozen pavement.

Certainly, it was no sort of night to walk back to St. Sam's—a matter of four miles away.

Presently an ancient horse-cab came ruffling down the street. The masters huddled in with one voice.

"Cab alroy!"

The cabbie touched his fountlocks, and rained up his horse. It was a very old and jaded animal—a Derby winner in the rain of Queen Victoria.

"Drive to St. Sam's with dispatch!" ordered Mr. Lickham.

"Sutlingy, sir! But where's the dispatch?" asked the cabbie, holding out his hand, and expecting to be handed a letter.

"Dot!" snorted Mr. Lickham. "By 'dispatch' I mean swiftness. You know jolly well that we are masters, and if we get in too late old Birchmell will give us a fearful wicking—p'raps a birching! Squeeze in, gentlemen!"

The masters clambered into the cab, and huddled together for warmth. Then the cabbie cracked his whip, and the old Derby winner started off at a gentle jog-trot.

"This is what comes of going to the pictures, and seeing sensational films."

"No harm is likely to happen to us," said Mr. Lickham. "It is a dark and dreary road, I grant you; but like the notorious Dick Turpin—have ceased to exist."

But Mr. Justiss was very nervous and jumpy. He was a very well-dressed gentleman, but his nerves were in rags. He kept darting a scared glance out of the window, and when the cab drew near to the cross-roads—the scene of many awful atrocities in the days of Dick Turpin—the master of the Fifth became quite panicky.

He trembled like a leaf, and the inspiration stood out in beads on his forehead.

The other masters luried at Mr. Justiss, and called him a chicken-hearted funk; and though if the truth were told, they were feeling none too easy in their own minds. One covered in a party can easily infect his companions with the germ of cow-ardice.

Suddenly, as soon as the cab came to the cross-roads, the horse shied. It was too dark to see what he shied, or what he shied at; but he certainly reared up in the air, and danced about on his hind legs, uttering a loud wimble of fright.

The startled masters opened the window of the cab, and four scared faces peered out into the darkness.

Then the moon popped out from behind the clouds, and at the same instant a figure popped out from a clump of trees—a figure on horseback, dressed in the garb of a highwayman of old.

The despair scoured wore a black mask, so that it was impossible to discern his features; but he wore—which was rather unusual for a highwayman—a long, flowing beard.

"Halt!" he cried, in a gruff voice. And, as he spoke, he levelled a couple of ancient blunderbusses at the four scared faces of the masters.

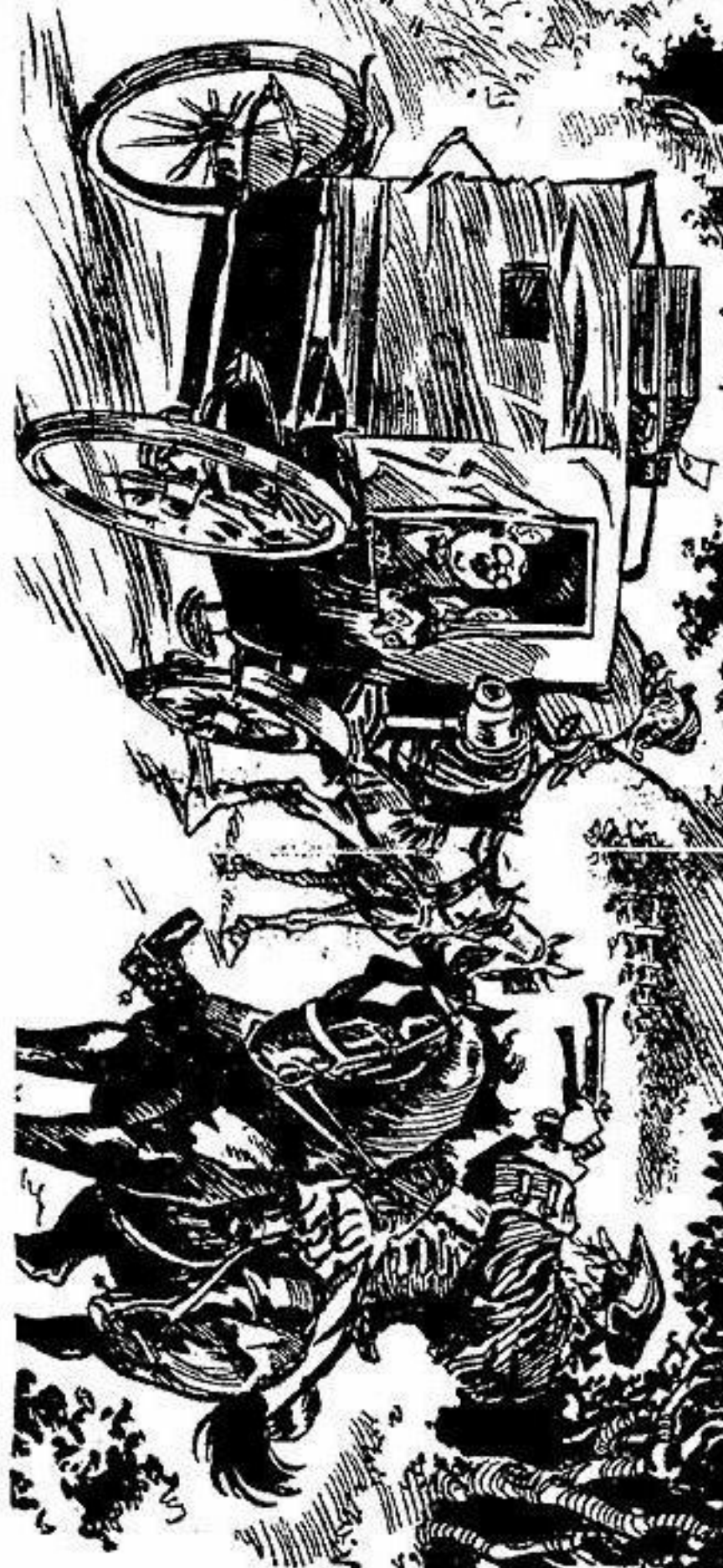
They goggled at him with eyes which fairly goggled from their heads. An armed highwayman was the last thing on earth they had expected to meet. Even Mr. Justiss had not imagined this, in his wildest terrors.

It really seemed as if a hundred and fifty years of time had been cut away, and the notorious Dick Turpin had sprung to life again.

"M-m-my only hat!" gasped Mr. Lickham.

"Donner und blitzt!" ejaculated Herr Guggenheimer. "You could knock me down with a feather, ain't it?"

"I'll knock you down with something more weighty than a feather, unless you



obey my orders!" rapped out the highwayman. "Stop out of that cab, all of you! I mean, put 'em up!"

The masters did not dream of defiance. In fact, they fairly tumbled over each other in their eagerness to obey orders. They didn't like the look of those two blunderbusses, the barrels of which glistened wickedly in the moonlight. So they scrambled hastily out of the cab, and stood in a row, looking very sheepish, and locking their hands above their heads like lambs.

"Who—the are you?" faltered Mr. Justiss, blinking at the highwayman. The scoundrel luried—a mocking, sinister laugh.

"My real name is known only to myself," he replied. "Suffice it to say that I'm known to my intimate friends as Deadshot Dick, the Terror of the Highway."

Mr. Justiss recoiled with a shudder. "And now, gentlemen," said Deadshot Dick, "we will get to business. Stand and deliver! In other words, you will step up to me one at a time, and turn out your pockets. He who hesitates will be lost. I have only to press the trigger—"

"Yaroooo!" yelped Mr. Justiss, in mortal terror. And he promptly dashed up to the highwayman, and started to turn out his pockets.

It was not a very rich haul that Deadshot Dick obtained from the master of the Fifth. There was a chunk of toffy, a blunt penknife, a catterpult, and a few cigarette-pictures. Cash there was none; but Mr. Justiss had just treated his colleagues to three penny seats at the pictures. The

highwayman gave a snort, as the articles were handed over.

"Phh!" It seems that I have hold-up a party of pawpers!" he said, scornfully. "But perhaps the next gentleman will prove more prosperous."

Mr. Justiss was waved back, and it was now Mr. Lickham's turn to disgorge the contents of his pockets.

Mr. Lickham was in funds, having received a half-crown postal-order from his aunt only that morning. The order had been cashed, and Mr. Lickham handed over the half-crown, with a deep sigh.

"That's better!" said Deadshot Dick. "It isn't a fortune, egg-sactly, but it will keep Black Bess in oats for a day or two. And the highwayman patked the main of the big black cart-horse on which he was mounted."

Mr. Chas. Tzyer was the next person to "put up." So far as worldly wealth went, Mr. Tzyer was hardly a Midas or a Croesus. He only possessed a few odd copper, and these he had confiscated from his pupils at different times. But Mr. Tzyer was the owner of a magnificent gold watch—eighteen-carrot—and it gave him a pang to part with this treasure. But the highwayman insisted on the watch being handed over, and his eyes sparkled as he transferred it to his own pocket.

Last of all came Herr Guggenheimer. With the air of a conjurer, he drew from his pocket a long string of German sossidges, at the sight of which the highwayman snatched his lips. He snatched eagerly at the string of sossidges and hung them round his neck.

"A nice supper for me by-and-by!" he remarked. "Anything else, my fat friend?"

"I have no oddings else," said the German master, shaking his head sadly. "I vos not a rich man. Masters at St. Sam's are badly underpaid—ain't it?"

We work like niggers, and Doctor Birchmell pays us like a niggard. He vos a light-fashed skinnin'!"

"Yes, rather!" said Mr. Lickham. "Old Birchmell's as mean as they make 'em!"

This seemed to annoy the highwayman very much, for he glared at Herr Guggenheimer and Mr. Lickham, and clawed angrily at his long beard.

"How dare you!" he roared. "How dare you say such nasty things about Doctor Birchmell?" Then he suddenly checked himself. "Ahem! What I mean is, Doctor Birchmell is nothing to me. You may return to your cab, gentlemen, and prosseed on your way."

Feeling gratefully relieved, both of their belongings and in their minds, the masters clambered back into the cab.

The cabbie, who had been a scared spectator of the proceedings, cracked his whip, and the ancient horse set off at a speed which he had not shown since the day he won the Derby.

Glancing back along the storm-swept road, the masters had a last glimpse of Deadshot Dick, sitting astride his steed, and waving them a moeling farewell. Then the highwayman rapped out a sharp command, and his cart-horse wheeled round and lumbered away into the night.

"And my supper!" groaned Herr Guggenheimer. "My German sossidges! Dot scoundrel has pinched them, ain't it?"

"Oh, you mustn't begrudge him the sossidges," Guegy, said Mr. Lickham. "None but the brave deserve the fare, you know!"

But Herr Guggenheimer mourned for his sossidges, and Mr. Chas. Tzyer mourned for his eighteen-carrot gold watch; and they would not be comforted.

"This outrage must be reported at once," said Mr. Justiss. "We must go to the Head, and the Head will probably inform the police. That scoundrel calling himself Deadshot Dick must be laid by the heels!"

"Play we couldn't have tackled him ourselves," said Mr. Lickham. "But he was armed, and we wore quite 'armless.' Egg-sactly!" said Mr. Justiss. "If we had offered resistance, we would assuredly have lost our lives. But here we are at St. Sam's, gentlemen! Let us hurry up and see the Head. Every minute is precious, if we wish Deadshot Dick to be captured."

The cab halted outside the school gates, which Fossil the porter was in the act of unlocking.

"Vot about my fair?" asked the cabbie. "Well, you know how we're fixed," said Mr. Lickham. "That villain robbed us of every penny peace. We'll settle up with you another time."

The cabbie drove off, grumbling and growling, and not best pleased at the prospect of having to pass the cross-roads alone. And the four masters hurried across the quadrangle, buffeted by the storm, and made their way to the Head's study.

It was an hour when Doctor Birchmell was usually "at home," studying the classics. But on this occasion he was not in his study.

The masters fretted and fumed with impatience, and after waiting some minutes they went out to hunt for the Head. They made inquiries up and down the school, but nobody had seen Doctor Birchmell that evening.

After a vain search, the masters returned to the Head's study; and as they entered that sacred apartment, Doctor Birchmell came in by another door. He was in a very breathless state, and was in the act of putting on his gown and mortar-board.

"Good evening, gentlemen!" he gasped. "Sir!" cried Mr. Lickham. "We have been hunting for you everywhere! Where have you been?"

"Having supper," eggsplained the Head. "A delishus supper, of German sossidges. But why have you been hunting for me at this late hour? And why are you all looking so flushed and egg-sited?"

"Doctor Birchmell!" cried Mr. Justiss. "An astounding thing has happened! As you know, you very kindly gave us late passes to go to the Pictures. Well, we decided to return by cab, owing to this awful storm, and on reaching the cross-roads we were held up by a highwayman!"

"Gammion!" said the Head incredulously.

"A real, old-fashioned type of highwayman," said Mr. Lickham, taking up the tale. "But for the fact that he was bearded, he might have been Dick Turpin himself! He was mounted on a fiery charger; he wore a black mask to conceal his features; and he carried a couple of blunderbusses."

"My only aunt!" ejaculated the Head.

"The scoundrel held up our cab, and called upon us to stand and deliver!" said Mr. Tzyer. "We had no option but to hand over all our possessions, including

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With the air of a conjurer Herr Guggenheimer drew from his pocket a long string of German sossidges, at the sight of which the highwayman snatched his lips.