

“ THE SECRET OF THE SEA-CAVE! ”

Thrill-Packed Adventure Yarn
of Harry Wharton & Co.,

Inside.

The Magnet ^{2^D}

Billy Bunter's
Own Paper



**HELP FOR THE
PRISONERS OF THE CAVE**



THIS WEEK BY
TERRENCE FITZGERALD,
of the Fifth.

"O spring, spring!
The year's pleasant king—"

BONK!
I was slugging so prettily about the spring when my study door opened, and a hand—belonging, I think, to George Potter—thove a book, which smote me on the oral orifice. No matter, no matter! I'll get even with the spalpeen before the sun sets to-night!

Spring, my friend, is here! The sun is shining. The birds are twittering. And the green grass grows all round. I feel a large lump of song rising within me. So—pardon me—

"When the birds do sing,
Hey jing-a-ding-a-ding,
Too-roodie-oodie-oo—"

I may mention that I was singing this song as I walked home from Friardale to-day. Yes, faith, and it's a nice voice I have. But some people have no ear for music entirely. An ancient tramp looked at me as I approached. He seemed nervous.

"Ere, you keep horff!" he shouted. "Elp! Perlice!"

So just to cheer him up I showered wealth upon him—at any rate, I gave him my last bob, and he choked, and said "Gorblesbesser!" I thought he must be a refugee, and I tried to speak to the spalpeen in Russian, but he said he was no foreigner. So I expect he was trying to say "God bless you, sir!"

SPRING SONG!

Spring is here— Oh, I've said that before! Sure! Well, it's another dose of music you want, is it? Faith, it's a pleasure—

"In the spring a young man's fancy
Lightly turns to yellow gloves—"

were the last words of Marmion?"
I replied at once:
"Faith," he said it was unparalleled and unprecedented!"

Which resped me the five hundred lines aforesaid. And it's a most extraordinary thing about this impot. Every time I try to write it I go fast asleep entirely. You know what it's like in a railway train, where the wheels go tocketty-tock-tick-tocketty-tock, and the rhythm sends you to bye-bye. Well, faith, it's the same with my impot. I start off:

"Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!
Charge, Chester, charge! On, Stanley, on!"

And so on until it gets to:

"Char-checky-char! Chong-chanky-chonk!
Char-checky-char! Chong-chanky-chonk!"

And a minute later I'm snoring!
I can recommend this treatment for sleepless nights. Sure, it's better than counting sheep, so it is! Last time I tried counting sheep I'd only got as far as 311,486 when Gosling rang the rising-bell, and next night I forgot the total and had to start again from the beginning. That's no good at all, at all.

MORE SPRING!

Readers—spring is here! Oh, yes, quite—I mentioned that, didn't I? Well, since we can't sing, what about a little poem? Just a little one. It won't hurt you—much.

Readers, I'm an Irish lad,
And yet I haven't said "Bedad!"
And more, to everybody's horror,
I haven't even said "Begorra!"

I know that all my friends and neighbours will think I ought to say "Bejabers!" But, faith, it's not that I'm a snob; it's just that I prefer "Begob!"

Sure, there's nothing wrong in that at all! People have different tastes entirely. Some Irishmen like "Bejabers!" and don't care a bit for "Begob!" while others have an acquired taste for "Bedad!" and wouldn't give a goat for "Begorra!" It's a matter of personal taste, indeed, and it's the same with "Arrah!" and "Throth!" and "Ochone!" and all the other elegant words that we Irish have been made to use ever since "owld Sam Lover" wrote "Rory O'Moore."

Coker-Cricket



And, by the same token, I'm writing this page about spring and not about Eire. You don't catch this child starting any arguments about his native land. For my part, there's no trouble at all, at all. I'm Irish, but I like England, and I leave it at that. As for bombs—I never did nuffink. I can prove I was at Greyfriars while bombs were being planted under railway bridges. And, what's more, Prout wouldn't let me keep bombs in the study. It's against the rules. So—"the back o' me hand and the sowl o' me fut to any spalpeen that thinks the contrary."

AND—SPRING!

Spring is here— Oh, all right, all right! And, begob, the cricket season is about to start! If any reader wants to learn the new art of Coker-Cricket he'll find full directions on this page.

Well, then, here's hoping that England will beat Australia or New Zealand or New Guinea or whoever it is they're going to play, entirely. I've only seen one Test Match. Faith, that was enough! It was the last Test Match against the Cannibal Islands up at Lord's.

The Islands batted first, and used spiked clubs instead of bats. The first man was given out "l.b.w." in the first over, and there was a long argument about it. In the end it was decided to roast the umpire over a slow fire. So they built a bonfire just wide of third man, and borrowed a gridiron from the tavern.

A queer scene it was, and all. Some of the old boys in the members' stand said "Gad, sir, they never did that in Grace's time!" When the fire was ready the whole team did a war-dance round it; but the umpire declared the innings closed and went off in the direction of Asia Minor at sixty miles an hour. So the game was abandoned as a draw. It's a grand game is cricket—begob!



A DESPERATE DEED! With a millionaire client like Mr. Vernon-Smith, Elias Rance has an easy chance of making an honest hundred pounds. But the rascally estate-agent is not satisfied with a hundred pounds—he wants more!

The SECRET of the SEA-CAVE!



By **FRANK RICHARDS**

“My last word, Mr. Vernon-Smith!” said Rance venomously. “If your answer is in the negative, you and your son will never see a human face again—the tunnel will be blocked and you will both vanish from all human knowledge!”

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Where Is Bunter?

“NO sign of Bunter!”
 “No!”
 “Poor old Bunter!”
 “We’ll find him all right,” said Bob Cherry hopefully.

It was dawn on Blackrock Island—the dawn of a bright spring morning. Up over the cliffs of the Devon coast came the bright sunshine, gleaming on the rolling waters of the Atlantic.

Harry Wharton & Co. were up at the first gleam of day.

They had hardly closed their eyes during a long and anxious night. Bright as that spring morning was, the faces of the Famous Five of Greyfriars were far from wearing their usual cheery looks. Even Bob Cherry’s ruddy face was clouded.

Rough as their quarters were, stranded on that lone isle off the Devon coast, the chums of the Greyfriars Remove had been enjoying their Crusoe life on Blackrock. But a shadow was on every face now.

Billy Bunter was missing!
 Billy Bunter’s presence, it was true, did not add to the gaiety of existence on Blackrock. Only too often was Billy Bunter’s room preferred to his company. But all the faults and failings and foibles of the fat Owl of the Remove were forgotten now. Had Billy Bunter been a fellow whom they delighted to honour, the Famous Five could not have felt more sorely anxious.

Bunter had been missing all night. On a small island like Blackrock there was nowhere where even Billy Bunter could have lost himself for so long. There was only one explanation of his prolonged absence, and that was that he must have been caught in the tide.

All round Blackrock, at high tide, the Atlantic washed and dashed against high, inaccessible cliffs. Only at low tide was there a narrow strip of beach.

THRILLING!

Entombed in a sea-cave!
 Such is the terrible plight of Harry Wharton & Co., of Greyfriars!

DRAMATIC!

How and why Billy Bunter could have wandered so far as to be cut off by the tide and unable to return to camp, Harry Wharton & Co. could not guess. But it seemed that it must have happened, for where was he?

The night had seemed terribly long to the worried juniors. They had no boat; they could not search the beach for Bunter till the tide went down. They could only wait, with anxious hearts, for dawn.

Now it was dawn, and they prepared to search for the missing Owl. The tide was down, but it was not yet quite out, and spurs of rock that jutted from the cliffs were still washed by the sea. They still had to wait before they could get round the little island and search for Bunter.

“We’ll find him, all right!” repeated Bob Cherry. Bob always looked on the hopeful side of things. “He may have climbed up somewhere, high enough to keep clear of the tide—”

Harry Wharton shook his head. “If he did, could he hang on all night?” he said. “But there’s a spot of a chance, at least, that he got into the cave on the west side. If he got there he would be all right.”

“A jolly good chance!” agreed Bob. Old Dave Oke came stumping out of his hut on his wooden leg. That ancient mariner, the sole inhabitant of Blackrock before the arrival of the Greyfriars party, glanced inquiringly at the juniors.

“He ain’t coom back yet?” asked old Dave.

“No,” answered Johnny Bull. Old Dave glanced along the shore of the cove, left bare by the receding tide. He shook his head, but made no further remark. It was easy to see what old Dave concluded had become of Bunter.

The ancient mariner proceeded to stack his rusty old stove with chips of driftwood to fry the fish for breakfast. Quite an appetising scent soon spread

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over the camp at the little cove of Blackrock. It would have drawn Billy Bunter like a magnet had Billy Bunter been anywhere at hand.

"Poor old Bunter!" said Frank Nugent. "He must be fearfully hungry by this time. If—"

He broke off.

"We're going to hope for the best till we know the worst!" said Harry Wharton. "Never say die!"

Hurree Janset Ram Singh nodded his dusky head.

"While there is life there is always a cracked pitcher to go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks!" he said.

Even that English proverb did not make the juniors smile.

Old Dave dished up fried fish, and the juniors snatched a hasty breakfast. But they had still to wait for the tide to serve. On the western side of the cove the cliffs bulged into the sea, and the jutting rocks were still washed by the Atlantic.

"Get going!" said Bob Cherry at last. "We needn't mind getting our feet wet. We're not like—" Bob checked himself, just in time, before he said "Bunter." "I—I—I mean, come on, you fellows!"

And the Famous Five tramped away round the base of the cliffs, Bob Cherry taking a bundle in his hand—providence for Bunter, if he was found. There was no doubt if Billy Bunter had survived that night he would be fearfully hungry by morning.

They tramped over wet sand, dodged swiftly round the bulging cliffs, with the sea washing over their feet, and tramped on.

Farther on, the cliffs fell back a little, and the beach, though still narrow, was wider.

In the bright sunshine and the salt sea-wind, their spirits rose as they went. But they scanned the cliffs, high and rugged, with anxious eyes.

It was with little hope of spotting the fat Owl, however, for even if Bunter had clambered up out of reach of the tide he would surely have descended when the tide went down, and striven to get back to camp. In that case, they would have found him on the beach; but there was no sign of him.

The Famous Five had never dreamed that a time would come when they would have given all they had for a glimpse of a fat face and a big pair of spectacles on the beach of Blackrock. But that was how they were feeling now.

Half a mile from old Dave's cove, round the circling cliffs, lay the smugglers' cave, fronting the vast Atlantic. It was on the cave that the juniors centred their hopes.

Deep into the great cavern the sea rolled and roared at high tide; but at low tide there was ample space to reach it. Had Bunter been near the cave when the tide caught him it was a safe refuge, for the interior, far back from the sea, was well above high-water mark. The juniors could only hope that that was what had happened. And yet, if Bunter was there, why had he not appeared, now that the tide was down? He would have had to pass the night in the cave, but the sea was now far out.

"That brute Harker was at the cave!" said Bob Cherry, breaking a rather long silence. "He's a rough brute, but he wouldn't have prevented Bunter from getting in out of the tide."

"Oh, no! He might have pitched into him," said Harry slowly. "But he wouldn't do that. If Bunter got to the cave he's all right. Anyhow, we shall soon see."

They tramped on to the entrance of the smugglers' cave. Dark and gloomy, the high arch of rock opened in the vast, soaring cliff.

On the cliff-top the sun was shining brightly, but below all was still in shadow. The mouth of the cave was cumbered with ridges of pebbles, masses of seaweed and driftwood, left by the receding tide.

Harry Wharton & Co. tramped in under the high arch.

A dim twilight reigned within, deepening to the blackest darkness farther on.

Bob Cherry gave a shout that boomed and echoed in the hollows under the great cliff.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Bunter! Are you here, Bunter? Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

The echoes rolled back like thunder from the cavern. From the shadows an answering voice came; but it was not the voice of Billy Bunter. It was the grunting voice of Big Bill Harker, the longshoreman.

"Avast there! Get out of this!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Fight In The Cave!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. drew together. Bob Cherry dropped the bundle of provisions and Johnny Bull set down old Dave's lantern; and each of the Famous Five grasped the stout stick he carried under his arm.

They were quite ready for trouble, if they found trouble with Big Bill Harker.

For several days the burly longshoreman had been on the lone island, camping in the smugglers' cave, and keeping watch there. For what reason he was keeping watch was known only to himself and his gov'nor, Mr. Rance, the estate-agent, at Okeham.

But whatever the reason was, it was a powerful one, for the ruffian had striven to keep the schoolboys out of the cave by force, and there had been a scrap, in which Bill Harker was rather severely handled.

Whether the man was still there the juniors did not know, till they heard his voice. But if he had not succeeded in keeping them out of the cave when they had only wanted to explore it, he was not likely to succeed now that they were searching for a missing member of the party.

From the shadows, the burly, long-limbed ruffian came slouching with a cudgel in his hand and a scowl on his face. Big Harker did not seem in a good temper that sunny spring morning.

Following him came another figure, a smaller man with a greasy face—whom the juniors knew at a glance. It was Peter Coot, the man who had rowed Rance out to the island, the last time they had seen the estate-agent. Coot also grasped a cudgel, and gave the schoolboys dark looks.

"Out of it!" snapped Harker. "You ain't wanted 'ere, like I've told you afore. Ain't I told you I got Mr. Rance's orders to see you keep at old Dave's cove, where you can be found if wanted?"

"Cut all that out!" said Harry Wharton curtly. "We've come here to look for a fellow who's missing—"

There was an angry grunt from Harker.

"That fat swab with the dead-lights?" he snarled.

"Yes, Bunter—"

"Well, you look for him along the coast, or over on the Irish coast, if you want him!" jeered Harker. "You

won't find him 'ere, and you can lay to that!"

"What do you know about him?" exclaimed Bob.

It was clear to the juniors at once that the two ruffians in the cave had seen something of Bunter. Whether the Owl of the Remove was there or not, he had been there!

"I'll tell you what I knows," snapped Harker, with an angry oath. "That fat swab got away with our boat, and left Peter here stranded along of me—that's what I knows! And if he ain't drifted ashore, I reckon he's sailing the Atlantic now, shiver him!"

"He ain't drifted ashore!" said Peter Coot. "He went out on the tide—and I reckon he's in the middle of the Irish Sea afore this! That's where you young lubbers have got to look for him."

"Oh!" breathed Harry. "Then he was here?"

"Ain't I told you?" snarled Harker. "I see him on the beach yesterday, and got after him, and he hid somewhere—and I reckoned he'd been drowned—till Peter here saw him, sudden like, in our boat, cutting the painter. Must 'ave been 'iding in the cave all the time, I suppose, and I never knowed."

"I see him!" grunted Peter Coot. "Cutting the painter, he was, with the tide dragging at the boat! If I'd got a holt on him—"

Harry Wharton & Co. in silence, turned to look at the open sea, rolling infinite towards the west.

Far away on the horizon hung the smoke of a steamer—nothing else was to be seen over the wide expanse of blue, save the winging sea-birds!

Harker burst into a jeering laugh.

"It was hours before dawn that he went!" he snarled. "You reckon you'd see him yet? He's food for fishes long ago."

The juniors exchanged glances. It was something, at least, to learn that the hapless fat Owl had not been caught in the tide and helplessly drowned, as they had dreaded. If he was in a boat he had a chance, even if he was drifting alone on the waste Atlantic.

"Is that the truth, Harker?" said Harry Wharton quietly. He hardly doubted it, but he could not feel sure.

"Think I got him in me trousers pockets?" jeered Harker.

"He's been here, at any rate!" said Harry. "I believe that much! We're going to make sure that he's not here now."

"You ain't taking a step into this here cave!" said Big Harker grimly. "You got the upper 'and once, but now there's two of us to 'andle you, you look out for squalls, if you hunt for trouble! Git out of it!"

He made a step towards the group of schoolboys, swinging his cudgel. Peter Coot followed him up.

Evidently, now that Harker had the assistance of his associate, he was prepared to resort again to the rough stuff. But the Famous Five did not retreat an inch.

"Stand back!" said Harry Wharton, his eyes gleaming, his grip hard on his cudgel. "If you want trouble, you'll get it—and more than you want."

"The morefulness will be terrific!" declared Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"You going?" roared Harker.

"Shut up, and stand out of the way!" answered Bob Cherry.

Harker's answer was a savage rush, with his cudgel brandished.

Bob jumped back barely in time to escape a savage slash, catching the cudgel on his stick.

Before the ruffian could lift it again, Harry Wharton lashed and landed a



"My hat!" exclaimed Tom Redwing, fixing the binoculars on the distant speck. "It's a boat! I can see a pair of feet sticking up in the air!"

ringing crack on the side of Harker's head.

There was a roar like a bull from the longshoreman as he pitched over, sprawling on the sandy floor of the cave.

Peter Coot was following up the attack, but he was met by Johnny Bull and Frank Nugent, and three cudgels crashed together. And as Peter engaged the two, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's stick landed on the side of his head with a loud crack.

Peter Coot staggered and howled, and the three juniors pressed on him together, while Wharton and Bob Cherry gave their attention to the sprawling Harker.

Three to one seemed more than Peter wanted. He backed, and backed again, parrying instead of slashing, till his cudgel was knocked from his hand. Then Peter Coot suddenly leaped away and took to his heels, scuttling out on the beach in front of the cave.

Big Harker struggled to his feet, snarling with rage. Harker was made of sterner stuff than Peter Coot and, his thick cudgel gripped in his sinewy hand, he fairly hurled himself at Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry.

They gave ground before that fierce attack, but it was only for a few moments. Nugent, Johnny, and Hurree Singh, having finished with Peter Coot, rushed to their aid, and the burly longshoreman was driven out of the cave under a shower of lashes.

For a long minute, he resisted, backing before the attack, but striving to hold it off. But lash after lash drove him back, panting with rage—and at length he followed Peter's example, and scuttled down the beach.

"That's that!" said Bob Cherry, gasping for breath and rubbing his shoulder where he had caught a rather hard crack.

At a little distance, the two longshoremen halted, staring back at the cave with scowling, savage faces. But they showed no desire to come to close quarters again. The Famous Five were too many for them, and they had to leave the schoolboys in possession of the smugglers' cave.

Harry Wharton lighted the lantern, and the juniors tramped up the cavern, calling Bunter's name as they went.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Mystery On Mystery!

"BUNTER!"

"Bunter, old chap!"

"Bunter!"

But only echo answered.

Harry Wharton flashed the light to and fro, as the juniors advanced up the great cavern.

In the sand on the rocky floor were many traces of footprints. But from such sign they hoped to learn little—Harker's heavy sea boots had tramped about the cave, and Coot's also—and they knew that Mr. Rance, of Okeham, had been there the previous night.

But they scanned the sign as they went. Whether the longshoreman had told the truth or not, they could not be sure, but if it was true that Bunter had spent the night in the cave, it was quite likely that he had left traces that would put the matter beyond doubt.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Look here!" exclaimed Bob suddenly. "Show the light here, old man."

Amid the confused, trampled marks in the sand was the track of a shoe—clearly a boy's size.

"Bunter!" exclaimed Harry. "Then he's been here!"

Bob's look was puzzled.

"That's not Bunter's mark!" he said. "Blessed if I can make it out! It's a boy's foot—not a man's—you can see that! But Bunter's track is wider—the fat old bean's a bit flatfooted! Just look!"

The Famous Five bent round the track, Wharton concentrating the light on it, and they examined it keenly.

The result was utterly mystifying.

It was a boy's track—not only was it less than half the size of the tracks left by the longshoreman's heavy sea boots, but it was smaller than the footprints they had seen of Mr. Rance.

It was a boy's foot that had left that mark—but it was not Bunter's!

"Well, this beats the band!" said Bob Cherry, in blank amazement. "Who else has been here?"

"How could anybody have been here, except one of that gang?" said Frank Nugent. "Nobody comes out to this island except Rance and those two brutes who are under his orders."

"Somebody's been here!" said Bob. "That footprint speaks for itself! I can't make it out! The mystery of this dashed place is beginning to make my head spin."

"Let's get on!" said Harry. "It beats me."

Amazed, almost bewildered, the Greyfriars fellows pushed on.

That there was some strange secret hidden in the smugglers' cave of Blackrock, they knew already. It was not without a reason that Mr. Rance, the estate-agent of Okeham, paid secret visits at night, and not without reason that he had ordered them off the island and even attempted to remove them from it by force. And the fact that Big Harker was left on guard indicated fairly clearly that there was some secret to be guarded.

What it was had them guessing.

They had vaguely suspected at first that some sort of smuggling might be going on, as in the old days when contraband cargoes had been run into the cave. But they had very soon given up that idea.

The estate-agent of Okeham was playing some strange game that they could not fathom. They strongly suspected that it was something against the law—for there seemed no other reason for so much secrecy; but they could not begin to guess what it was.

Now it seemed as if one mystery was piled on another.

Harker, Coot, and Rance had been in the cave many times, and it was likely that Billy Bunter had been there. But who else?

"Look!" said Bob.

It was the footprint again.

Evidently the boy, whoever he was, had walked up the cave, though most of his footprints had been obliterated by the heavy tread of the longshoremen's sea boots coming and going.

From the confused trampling, it looked as if Harker and Coot had deliberately trampled out those footprints—only missing one here and there, in the darkness, by the glimmer of lantern-light.

Whether that was so or not, the juniors could not feel sure; but they found no more of the footprints.

"Come on!" said Harry. "Blessed if I can make that out—but it's Bunter we're after! If only the old fat bean was here—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Look here!"

It was another track, clear in the sand, but this time it was one that the juniors knew—one that they had seen often enough in the sands round old

Dave's cove. This time it was unmistakably Billy Bunter's.

"Bunter!" said Harry, with a deep breath.

"The Bunterfulness is terrific!" exclaimed Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "The esteemed and ludicrous Owl has been here!"

All the Famous Five felt themselves breathe more freely.

Bunter had been there! He had escaped the tide the previous night—they were certain of that now!

"That brute was telling the truth, I think!" said Harry slowly. "Bunter's been here, that's certain. He got into the cave out of the tide. If he got a chance at their boat, it's quite likely he would push off in it and try to get round to the cove!"

"Looks like it," agreed Bob. "We jolly well know he's been here, anyhow. And those brutes looked as if they were telling the truth about his getting off in the boat—they were sore and savage enough about something!"

Harry Wharton nodded.

The juniors had been determined to search the cave to make sure if they could that Bunter had been there, and discover whether he was there yet. But they had little doubt that Harker and Coot had stated the facts. Now it seemed clear enough, for Bunter evidently had been there, and certainly he was no longer there.

"If that's what's happened, there's a jolly good chance for him," said the captain of the Remove. "The weather's fine—the sea almost like a pond. Even if he couldn't make the shore, there's no reason why he shouldn't keep afloat—and there's heaps of traffic going up and down the Irish Sea—"

"May have been spotted and picked

up already," said Bob hopefully. "No end of coasting craft going up and down in these waters!"

"Let's make sure while we're here," said Harry. "Give a good look round—thought I suppose there's not much doubt."

The juniors moved on again. They found no more of the strange footprint that had mystified them. But they found many traces of Billy Bunter. Again and again, they picked up the fat Owl's tracks; Bunter appeared to have wandered a good deal about in the cave.

They arrived at last at the rock-wall at the extremity of the cave.

Harry Wharton flashed the light up at the gap that opened in the high rock-wall a dozen feet above their heads.

All the juniors looked up curiously at that dark opening in the rock. It was beyond the reach of climbing, or they would have explored it in their previous visits to the smugglers' cave. They were more than curious to know what might possibly lie beyond.

Every time the Greyfriars fellows had explored the sea-cave, their explorations had led them to that spot; and they had hardly a doubt that that tunnel-like opening led to some clue to the mystery of Blackrock.

But ascent of the sheer wall of rock was impossible to the juniors. They stared up at the dark cavity above, wondering what it might hide.

"We can't get up there!" said Bob. "But Coot or Rance could climb it on the shoulders of a big long-legged brute like Harker. They've been up there—more than once! Look at the tracks all over the place—they come this way often enough, and it can't be for nothing!"

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Something's hidden there!" he said. "We spotted them once with something in their boat rolled in canvas. They never brought it here, whatever it was, to take it back again!"

"No fear! And we've been all over the lower cave and seen nothing!" said Nugent. "Goodness knows what they've got up there—but they've got something!"

"Something they wouldn't like a policeman to see, you can bet on that!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"But Bunter—" said Harry. "It's poor old Bunter we've got to think of!"

"He's not here! That brute Harker was telling the truth!" said Bob.

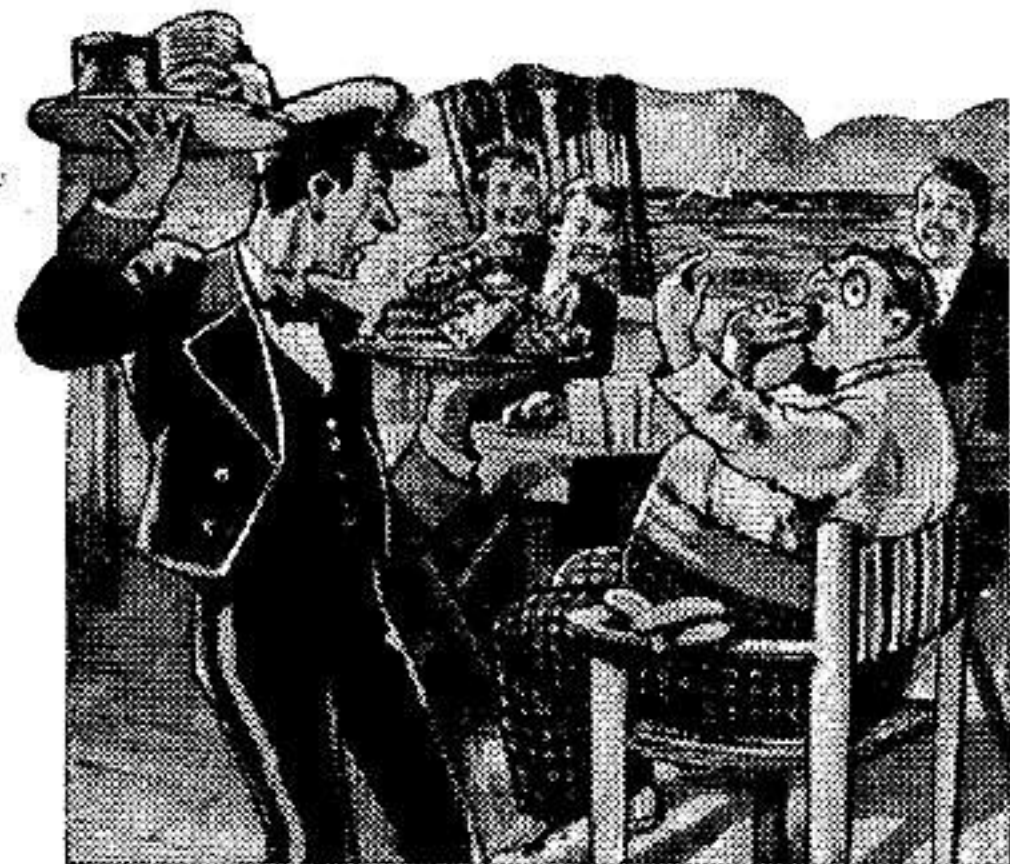
"Not much doubt now," said Harry. "Bunter got off in the boat, as they said. That means that he's adrift on the sea—and we can't help him! But—if we could get word to the mainland somehow, he could be searched for. The fishermen at Poikelly would put out to look for him. There's always a chance of sighting a boat from Dave's cove. We'd better get back!"

The Famous Five tramped down the cave again.

Big Harker and Peter Coot had drawn near, and were standing under the high arch of rock, staring towards them—and it was easy to read the uneasiness in their faces.

They had failed to keep the school-boys out of the smugglers' cave, and they were in uneasy doubt of what the explorers might have discovered there—that was plainly to be read in their looks.

But the juniors were not now concerned about the secret of the cave—mysterious and puzzling as it was. It was Bunter's fate that filled their thoughts.



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They tramped out of the cave—the longshoremen scowling after them as they went—and took their way along the circling beach back to the cove. Their minds were at least relieved, they knew now that Bunter had survived that anxious night; and even if he was adrift in an open boat on the sea, while there was life there was hope.

"That ass Smithy!" said Bob. "He never thought of anything like this when he stranded us and poor old Bunter on this blessed island! Look here, let's get up on the cliffs and see if we can spot a boat out from Potkelly! There's always a chance, at least!"

And with that very faint hope the Famous Five clambered up the cliffs from the cove to watch the sea towards the mainland for a fishing-boat that might possibly come within reach of a hail or a signal.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Adrift On The Atlantic!

BILLY BUNTER heaved himself up in the boat that drifted and plunged on the waste waters of the Atlantic.

He rubbed the salt sea spray from his big spectacles, jammed them on his fat little nose, and blinked to and fro over the wide waste of waters.

"Oh lor!" moaned Bunter.

The sea was calm. It had been a fine and sunny Easter, and the good weather was unchanged. That, at least, was fortunate for the hapless Owl of Greyfriars. The Atlantic rolled, shimmering and glimmering in the bright sunshine, the boat rocking and plunging on the waves, but in no danger of capsizing.

Bunter groaned.

Only the shining waters met his eyes. He was far out of sight of the mainland of Devonshire.

Bunter's knowledge of geography was rather limited. He knew just as much geography as Mr. Quelch had been able to drive into an unreceptive fat head and a very bad memory. But he knew that Ireland lay somewhere to the west, and he blinked round hopefully in the hope of seeing something of Ireland. Perhaps it was just as well for him that he did not know how far north the Emerald Isle lay. He was not likely to see much of Ireland!

On his present course, in fact, he was heading for Newfoundland—with about three thousand miles of ocean between.

The boat drifted on slowly, generally broadside on, and every now and then turning round.

Bunter was not steering, and he had not touched the oars since his vain attempt to pull round from the smugglers' cave to old Dave's cove in the night.

Bunter was scared. He was so scared that he almost forgot he was hungry, but not quite.

Every now and then the sinking in his extensive inside caused the unhappy Owl to give a deep, sorrowful groan.

He blinked to the north, the south, the east, and the west. Nothing was to be seen, save the rolling, shining waters.

The fat Owl was too short-sighted to see the trailing smoke of a steamer in one direction, and a brown topsail in another. But it mattered little, for he had no means of attracting attention, and the drifting boat was far out of sight of either vessel.

Having scanned the sea, and moaned, Billy Bunter sat down again, and groaned.

"That beast Smithy!" he moaned and groaned.

It was all Smithy's fault, of course! That unutterable beast had spoofed Bunter into getting stranded on Blackrock Island.

That was the beast's gratitude for having been helped by the fat Owl to spoof his headmaster, and get leave three days before the holidays.

Having done the Bounder of Greyfriars that service, Bunter had naturally insisted on hooking on to him for the Easter holidays.

And that awful beast had let him hook on—as he supposed; stranding him on an uninhabited rocky island, in place of the expensive and extensive holiday in glorious Devon that the fat Owl had counted on.

It was all Smithy's fault—not Bunter's. Nothing ever was Bunter's fault. Bunter had that satisfaction, at least, such as it was.

"Serve him right!" grunted Bunter.

At the thought of Smithy's trick on him, he remembered the Bounder as he had seen him in the night—in the hands of the longshoremen in the smugglers' cave on Blackrock. Smithy was in a bad box, and it served him right. He had stranded Bunter on that beastly island. Now he was stranded there himself, and serve him jolly well right!

But Billy Bunter did not waste much thought on Herbert Vernon-Smith. His fat thoughts concentrated on himself and his awful position.

He was drifting, out of sight of land. The boat was too heavy for him to pull any great distance, even if he had been on a pond. Pulling it against the current was impossible for the fat Owl.

Bunter had no chance of saving himself.

Unless somebody else saved him, the Owl of the Remove was in a bad scrape. He was not likely to sight Ireland. Still less was he likely to sight Newfoundland, though undoubtedly he was drifting in the direction of that island—the nearest land on his present unguided course. Bunter's only hope lay in being sighted by some passing vessel.

Had he given a little more attention to instruction at school, he might have realised that he had grounds for hope.

A little more knowledge of the geography of his native island would have apprised him that he was in the line of traffic of coasting vessels up and down the west coast of England and Wales.

During the day he was likely to sight twenty ships, at least, and the question was whether one of them would pass near enough to sight a boat adrift on the sea.

Billy Bunter was not only scared and hungry, he was sleepy. But he did not venture to close his eyes. He had not closed them since he had gone adrift in the night.

Every time the boat rocked he dreaded to see the Atlantic rolling aboard. And it rocked and rocked.

It was a bright and sunny morning; but the fat face of the Owl of the Remove was neither bright nor sunny. As it wore on towards noon, hunger began to predominate over terror. Bunter was so fearfully hungry that he almost forgot to be scared.

His last meal had been in the sea-cave, when he had so happily found Big Harker's supply of provisions, and dug deep into the same. But that was more than twelve hours ago. This was getting awful.

Once more the Owl of the Remove heaved himself, standing unsteadily in the rocking boat, and blinked to all points of the compass.

"Oh crikey!" he ejaculated.

Something danced on the sea to the south-west.

Bunter concentrated his eyes and his spectacles on it.

Was it a sail?

A dozen times, at least, he had taken a winging sea-bird for a sail. Was this another beastly sea-bird, or was it a sail?

It was a sail! It drew nearer and nearer, and Bunter could make out a brown sail. It was some small vessel—no doubt, a coasting craft. It was a lug-sail, if Bunter had only known it, but the fat Owl could not have told the difference between a lug-sail and a spinnaker. Some little coasting lugger coming round Cornwall from the Channel. Whatever it was, it was a glad sight to Bunter's eyes.

It was drawing nearer, but it was not heading directly for the boat. It was slanting off westward, keeping well out from the land.

Bunter waved a fat hand.

He did not realise that, though he could see the lugger, the boat was too small to be seen from the lugger at the distance. The brown sail was over the sea-rim; the boat was not. Bunter waved and waved.

"Beasts!" he howled.

He was not seen. The lugger, on its present course, would draw nearer, but still it would pass at a distance. There was a chance—to pull as hard as he could to intersect the vessel's course.

Bunter realised that. He ceased to brandish the fattest and grubbiest paw on the Atlantic, and plumped down to row. He grasped the oars, jerked them into the rowlocks, and pulled with all his strength.

The boat moved through the water. It bumped and slumped heavily, but it moved. It was a heavy boat; the oars were heavy, and Bunter was not much of an oarsman, even in a light skiff. But he pulled and tugged and tugged and pulled, with the perspiration running down his fat face in streams.

It was hard work. Bunter was not used to hard work. In five minutes he was almost in a state of collapse.

But he tugged on desperately. He caught innumerable crabs; he perspired and he panted; he gurgled and he gasped. Blinking round over a fat shoulder, he saw the sail, but it seemed as far away as ever.

He pulled, and pulled, not wisely, but too well. Both oars missing the water, Billy Bunter shot over backwards.

"Yaroo!" floated over the shining Atlantic.

Bump!

"Oooooop!"

Bunter bumped down on a podgy back. His feet flew into the air. The oars, dragged in, clattered in the boat. Bunter did not heed them. He did not even heed the distant sail. Sprawling on his podgy back, Bunter roared and roared.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Mr. Rance Wants To Know!

TRAMP, tramp!

The ruddy-cheeked young man, who sat on a stool in the outer office of Rance & Co., in High Street, Okeham, grinned.

In the inner office his employer was pacing, and had been pacing, on and off, all through the morning.

Tramp, tramp! came the restless footsteps of young Mr. Rance.

Evidently the head of the firm of THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 1,629.

Rance & Co. estate-agents, valuers, and auctioneers, was in a perturbed and disturbed frame of mind that morning.

The young man on the stool was amused. As Mr. Rance's clerk, he knew better than anyone else, except young Mr. Rance himself, the parlous state of the affairs of Rance & Co., and he wondered whether this extraordinary perturbation on the part of Elias Rance meant that the finish was at hand.

Rance & Co. had been quite a prosperous business in the time of old Mr. Rance. Old Mr. Rance had left it sound and thriving to his son. But in a few years, as the ruddy-cheeked young man knew, young Mr. Rance had made ducks and drakes of that old-established business.

Billiards at the Okeham Arms, late hours and whisky-and-sodas, and the selection of a long series of losers from pink papers had not been the way to keep the business in the path of prosperity.

Indeed, Mr. Rance's clerk had expected the crash long since, and fancied that it would have come, but for the new business put in the way of the firm by the millionaire from London, Mr. Samuel Vernon-Smith.

But that had been, as it were, only a flash in the pan, after all. The millionaire, after staying in Rance's house for weeks, had departed suddenly, and had not revisited Rance & Co. since, which looked to the ruddy-cheeked young man as if that chicken had ceased to fight.

Mr. Rance's clerk was interested in the matter chiefly because the finish meant the sack for him personally. But young Mr. Rance was not a nice employer, and of late he had been more unpleasant than ever, so the ruddy-cheeked young man envisaged even the sack with some equanimity. That morning young Mr. Rance had looked out of the inner office five or six times, and bitten his head off each time. The ruddy-cheeked young man was fed-up with it, really.

He grinned, but ceased suddenly to grin as the door of the private office flew open once more.

It was an unpleasant, sharp-featured face that looked out—sharper even than usual, in young Mr. Rance's present state of perturbation and anxiety.

"No message?" he snapped, or, rather, snarled.

"No, sir."

"No telephone call before I came in?"

Young Mr. Rance had asked that question at least three times already! He seemed fearfully anxious about a message or a telephone call.

"No, sir," answered his clerk for the fourth or fifth time.

Young Mr. Rance gave him a glare.

"Don't sit there loafing! I don't pay you to loaf! Find something to do!"

Slam!

Young Mr. Rance retired behind a slamming door, leaving the ruddy-cheeked young man grinning again after the door had slammed!

There was, in point of fact, little or nothing for Mr. Rance's clerk to do. Business was in a very bad way. The ruddy-cheeked young man did not expect anyone to enter that office, unless it was a rate-collector or a tax-collector with an over-due account.

"Ain't he in a wax!" murmured the young man, winking at a fly that crawled on a dusty pane. "Ain't he?"

In the inner office young Mr. Rance paced again, untiring, though he was tired. Every now and then he paused

by the telephone and scowled at it. But no ring came on the telephone.

Blacker and blacker grew his disturbed, scowling brow.

Something had gone wrong—something must have gone wrong. By dawn that morning he should have had word from Peter Coot. He had had no word.

What had happened on Blackrock Island? Had those schoolboys intervened in some manner unforeseen? Young Mr. Rance gritted his teeth at the thought of those schoolboys—and rubbed his nose, which had felt the weight of Johnny Bull's knuckles.

Whether it was the Greyfriars schoolboys or not, something must have happened to prevent Peter Coot from giving him word that Herbert Vernon-Smith had been safely stowed in the smugglers' cave.

Word should have reached him at dawn—even if there had been delay, owing to wind or tide, it should have reached him during the morning. Now it was past noon, and no word had come. What—what had happened on Blackrock?

He paced and paced, a prey to scared anxiety.

The ruddy-cheeked young man in the outer office knew that the affairs of Rance & Co. were in a bad way, but he never dreamed of the strange means young Mr. Rance had adopted to set them right again. He did not know that young Mr. Rance had dipped into funds placed in his hands by the millionaire. Still less did he dream that Mr. Samuel Vernon-Smith had been kidnapped only just in-time to prevent him from learning of young Mr. Rance's embezzlements.

The wretched man pacing the inner office had saved himself—for the time—by that desperate means. But one desperate step led to another inevitably!

No one in Okeham suspected that Mr. Vernon-Smith had departed otherwise than willingly. But Mr. Vernon-Smith's son suspected foul play, and there was only one way to ward off that danger—by kidnapping Herbert Vernon-Smith in his turn to keep him quiet! It was a dizzy and descending path that young Mr. Rance had entered upon—and, once on that path, he was not able to stop.

And now—now something had gone wrong. Something must have gone wrong, or he would have heard from the ruffians in his pay.

Instead of extricating himself from his difficulties, young Mr. Rance seemed to be deeper in the mire than he had been in the mud. Visions of a police-constable stepping into the office floated before his tormented mind. If anything was known—

He had to know, and at length the ruddy-cheeked young man heard his anxious pacing no longer.

Young Mr. Rance had left his office and gone round to the garage.

He drove away in his little two-seater, with a set, savage face, in the direction of the coast.

He was unwilling to visit Blackrock Island in the day-time, all the more so since the millionaire had been a prisoner in the hidden den behind the smugglers' cave. But he had no choice now—he could not wait till night.

If anything had come out he still had time to run! He might not have time if he waited longer. He had to get out to the island and learn the worst.

He drove fast by deep, winding Devonshire lanes.

He halted the car at last at Pen-ruddy, which was opposite the island. He did not want to draw attention to the fact that he was going out to Blackrock.

Leaving the car at the inn in Pen-ruddy, young Mr. Rance went down to the quay for a boat. But he refused the boatman's offer to row him out. He picked the lightest craft available, and sat himself to the oars.

Young Mr. Rance did not handle an oar so well as he handled a billiards cue. Neither did late hours and whisky-and-sodas make him fit for hard exercise. He rowed clumsily and laboriously, and at less than half the speed to which he was used with Big Harker or Peter Coot at the oars. Drops of perspiration dripped under the rim of his bowler hat, and his collar flew unpleasantly damp.

But he drew near Blackrock at last, circling round the island to the western side, where the smugglers' cave lay.

Suddenly he showed his teeth in a savage snarl, and his narrow eyes burned at the sight of five boyish figures on a high cliff, waving.

They were the Greyfriars schoolboys—who had refused to leave the island at his order and resisted when he set on the longshoremen to remove them.

They were waving hands and caps now from the top of the cliff to draw his attention as they sighted the boat coming out from the mainland; why, he did not know, and did not care! If they had changed their minds, and wanted to be taken off the island, they could wait.

He had to reach the sea-cave and discover what had happened there, and why Coot had sent him no word. He dreaded what he might learn, but he was anxious to learn it, all the same.

He pulled on and passed out of sight of the waving schoolboys on the cliff-top.

But he was not able to pull into the smugglers' cave. The tide was coming in, but it had to be full flood-tide to row into the cave. There was still a wide stretch of beach between the cavern and the sea.

But as he neared the shore he discerned two figures—the long-limbed Harker and the squat Coot. Both of them were there, and seemed to be watching for him. Nothing was to be seen of a boat, and it suddenly flashed into young Mr. Rance's mind what had happened—some accident had deprived them of their boat, leaving Coot stranded on the island with Harker.

If it was nothing worse than that, it was a relief to the estate-agent of Okeham.

He pulled closer in, and Big Harker, wading into the water in his high sea boots, grasped the gunwale and drew him to the shore.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Never!

MR. SAMUEL VERNON-SMITH clenched a plump hand.

The millionaire's formerly ruddy face was pale. His imprisonment in the rock vault in the heart of the cliff behind the smugglers' cave was telling on the plump City gentleman.

The days and night he had spent in that hidden den seemed like weeks to him. He had ample leisure for thought, and all his thoughts were disagreeable and disturbing.

He thought of his many affairs, now left without his guiding hand. He thought of his son, whom he had turned out in anger at Okeham; deeply incensed by the trick he had played, using his father's name to delude his headmaster and gain an extra holiday. He thought of Mr. Rance, who had drugged him in the house at Okeham



Harry Wharton's fingers were torn away from their grasp and he went back into the water. Splash! "Pull!" panted Harker. The boat shot away, leaving the Greyfriars junior struggling in the water!

and had him conveyed to this dismal and solitary den, far from discovery, far from hope of rescue.

Of his son the millionaire thought without anger now. He knew, from Rance, that Herbert had returned to Okeham, that he had suspected foul play, that he had threatened to go to the police unless Rance put him in touch with his father. From that the millionaire drew a spot of hope.

But of Rance he thought with rage and bitterness. He had put a great deal of business in the way of the estate-agent—Rance could have made hundreds, honestly, out of it. Instead, he had embezzled thousands, and covered up his tracks by kidnapping the man he had robbed.

Whenever Mr. Vernon-Smith thought of Rance his eyes gleamed and his plump fist clenched. And now, by the light of the lamp that burned on the rough trestle-table, he saw him—emerging from the narrow rocky tunnel that led up from the smugglers' cave.

It was day, the millionaire knew, but only from his watch. No gleam of daylight even penetrated within a great distance of that hidden recess in the cliff. The night before he had seen Rance, and he had not expected to see him again so soon. But here he was.

The millionaire made a fierce stride towards him, forgetting, for the moment, the chain padlocked to his leg.

But the chain brought him up sharply short, and he stood breathing rage as he glared at the man who had trapped him.

"You again!" he said savagely. "You said that you would not call again soon, you scoundrel! Why are you here?"

His eyes scanned the sharp, rat-like face of the estate-agent. He could see that there was some change in Elias Rance.

The night before Rance had been cool, mocking, sardonic; and he had said that he would give his prisoner plenty of time to reflect on coming to terms. He had meant then to leave the millionaire for long days and nights in solitude, to break down his resistance.

But he had returned, and his look was different now—there was no cool, sardonic mockery in the sharp-featured face; there was bitter anger, uneasiness, suppressed fear and apprehension. Rance looked rather like a rat in a corner.

"Has my son—" exclaimed Mr. Vernon-Smith, with a sudden hope.

Something, he could see, was amiss with the rascal's schemes. If his son had gone to the police—if justice was already at the heels of the thief and kidnapper—was that it?

Rance gave him a dark and evil look.

"Your son will not interfere with my plans, Mr. Vernon-Smith," he answered. "You will soon have proof of that! I have returned—sooner than I intended—I have no more time to lose. We come to terms now."

"I make no terms with a crook!" snorted Mr. Vernon-Smith. "The answer I gave you will not be changed."

"We shall see!" said young Mr. Rance, with compressed lips. "You will sign the necessary documents to clear Rance & Co. of indebtedness to you. You will place in my hands the sum of one hundred thousand pounds—little enough to a man of millions."

"Not a sixpence!"

"Think!" said Mr. Rance. "Think again! What is left of your supply of food here will be taken away. What is left of water in the keg will be run off! Think!"

"I have answered you, you rascal!"

"I have no doubt," went on the estate-agent of Okeham, "that another week here would bring you to terms. Circumstances have changed now, and I cannot afford to wait! Listen! Whether I am in danger or not, I cannot say for certain—but the possibility of danger must be removed! You must make it safe for me to release you—and at once! Beyond to-morrow morning, I cannot wait!"

"The same hour that I am released, I shall give you into custody for kidnapping!" retorted Mr. Vernon-Smith.

"I advise you to reflect!" sneered Rance. "I am not speaking idle words! You did not know, I think, that a number of schoolboys, from your son's school, had landed on this island—"

Mr. Vernon-Smith started.

"I did not know! How—"

"From what they told me, they were asked here by your son—some sort of a practical joke on them! But they refused to leave the island. One of them, a boy named Bunter—"

"Bunter!" repeated Mr. Vernon-Smith. He remembered the name: he had seen the fat Owl of the Remove a good many times.

"This boy Bunter appears to have wandered into the cave below, yesterday, and to have been shut in by the tide," said Mr. Rance. "So I have just learned from my men. He must have been here last night. What he may have seen, I do not know. He may have seen nothing. He may have seen much! I do not know. But if he saw the boat, when it came in—"

Elias Rance breathed hard.

"He was seen when he escaped in the boat," he went on. "He got away in the boat, no doubt intending to return to the cove on the other side of the island, to rejoin his friends there. But

the tide was running out, and running strong—and both Harker and Coot saw him swept out to sea."

Mr. Vernon-Smith watched him in silence as he was speaking. He began to understand the suppressed fear he had read in the sharp face.

"The other boys have been here this morning, I learn, in search of him," went on Rance. "That proves that he never returned to them. It is beyond doubt that he drifted out into the ocean. The chances are great that he has gone to his death. If so, what he may have seen here is a matter of little moment. Bat—"

"But he may be picked up!" said Mr. Vernon-Smith grimly. "And the chances are that he will be seen and picked up by some coasting craft."

"I cannot say! But there is the risk!" said Rance. "If he has made any discovery here, and if he is picked up at sea, my game is up! How the matter stands I cannot know! But I am not going to take the chance with the risk of a constable's hand falling on my shoulder at any moment, Mr. Vernon-Smith. You are going to come to terms—at once."

"My terms are—immediate release, and your surrender to the law, on a charge of conspiracy and kidnapping!" said Mr. Vernon-Smith.

Rance gave him a look of hate.

"Let me make myself clear!" he said venomously. "I want you to understand that I cannot afford to stick at trifles—that I am driven to actions that I never contemplated when this business began."

Mr. Vernon-Smith shrugged plump shoulders.

"From what Harker and Coot tell me," continued Rance, "the fool Bunter hung about the entrance of the cave—he seems to have gone to sleep in Harker's blankets while he was absent. They did not see him when they came back with the boat—but he must have been there, close at hand, for when they came up the cave to the tunnel, he seized the boat while their backs were turned."

"Well?"

"He may or may not have seen who landed with them!" said Rance. "If he did not, he knows nothing, and may talk to the wide world for all I care! But if he saw who landed with them, the game is up, if he talks!"

"Who landed with them?" asked Mr. Vernon-Smith. "Did someone land in the cave with your rascally crew? Is there another victim of your treachery, you rat? Who—"

He broke off, as he suddenly comprehended. The bitter, vicious look on Rance's face enlightened him.

"My son!" he breathed huskily.

"Your son!" said Rance. He waved his hand to the rock tunnel from which he had emerged. "In that tunnel, Mr. Vernon-Smith, lies your son, bound hand and foot!"

The millionaire stood quite still.

"In seizing him," went on Rance, "my only object was to keep him quiet, till I had finished my dealings with you. But, as I have said, circumstances have changed! That troublesome fool Bunter was on the spot when he landed from the boat—he may have seen him—and if he saw him, he knew him, as they belong to the same school."

"My son!" breathed the millionaire. His face was white.

"Now you know the danger in which I stand!" said Rance. "A danger that must be removed. You sign the necessary documents—"

"Never!"

"Never—and I shall be driven to my

last resource!" said Rance, his face white, perspiration in drops on his forehead, but a bitter and inflexible determination in his tones. "Sign the papers that will see me safe, and you are free, and your son is free! Otherwise, my safety demands that you both disappear from all human knowledge, before a search can be made—as a search certainly will be made, if Bunter saw your son, and if he survives."

"You dare not!"

"I advise you not to bank on that!" Rance waved his hand towards the dark tunnel again. "Near the opening of the sea-cave, Mr. Vernon-Smith, you may remember that that tunnel narrows to a mere bottle-neck—you passed through it when you came here."

His eyes glittered like a cat's.

"In other places, it is wider, and there are loose rocks and boulders in abundance. It will be easy to block the tunnel, leaving no sign that there is anything beyond. That is my only way to safety, if there is a search! It is the way I shall take. I shall return to-morrow morning—for the last time!"

The man was speaking with venomous earnestness. He was not the man to plan such deeds; but now he was like a rat in a corner; and there was nothing at which young Mr. Rance would have stopped to save his skin.

He had, in fact, left himself no retreat; one crime led to another, as it must always do. He dared not release the millionaire, unless he came to terms; and he dared not face what would follow if a search discovered the prisoner there.

From reckless gambling to embezzlement, from embezzlement to kidnapping, and now from kidnapping to the darkest of crimes, the wretched man had gone on, fatal step by step.

"Your answer!" he said at last.

Mr. Vernon-Smith's face was white. But it was no less firm than before.

"You have had my answer!" he said. "I will make no terms with a kidnapper and a thief!"

Rance looked at him. He did not speak again. He gave the inflexible millionaire a long, long look, and in silence stepped back into the rock tunnel and disappeared.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Picked Up At Sea!

TOM REDWING, standing in the bows of the little lugger that was slanting before the wind, shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked across the shining sea.

Several times he had looked; and now he fixed his eyes intently on the speck that bobbed and danced on the blue rolling waters.

Old John Redwing, his arm over the tiller, had his eyes on the sail. There was not too much wind, and the lugger was making hardly four knots. At that rate, it was a long way to Bideford, his next port of call.

Tom Redwing, of the Greyfriars Remove, would hardly have been recognisable as a Greyfriars junior now—in old duck trousers and jersey, and with his face bronzed by sun and wind. Tom had sailed in that old lugger with his father before he had ever seen Greyfriars School; and he was glad to sail in it again in the holidays; and had his best chum, Smithy, been content with such a holiday, he would have asked nothing more.

But, good pals as they were, there was a wide gulf fixed between the tastes of the sailorman's son and the millionaire's son.

Smithy's tastes ran to cars, and theatres, and expensive hotels, evening clothes, and top hats, with a spot of blackguardism thrown in occasionally, when he was on holiday. Tom loved the sea, and wanted nothing better than to pull and haul on his father's old lugger.

But he hoped that he would see something of Smithy in the hols, all the same.

Herbert Vernon-Smith was to be with his father in Devonshire, according to what he had told Redwing; and the lugger from Hawkscliff in Kent, after coasting round the south of England, was to put in at Bideford—and there, Tom hoped, he would see the old Bounder.

But at the moment Tom was not thinking of the Bounder, often as he had thought of him during the Easter holidays.

His attention was fixed on that speck on the sea to starboard. Whether it was some spot of driftwood, or a boat adrift, he could not be sure—and at length he stepped to the tiny cuddy and came away with his father's binoculars in his hand.

Old John glanced at him inquiringly. "Something on the water, father?" said Tom. "Looks to me like a boat!"

He opened the glasses and fixed them on the distant speck, leaning on the lugger's gunwale.

Far across the heaving sea, he picked up the shape of a boat; and a puzzled expression came over his face. It looked like an empty boat; but something seemed to be sticking up in the air—two things, in fact, that bobbed in a puzzling way.

"My hat!" murmured Tom.

It was a pair of feet that stuck up in the air—their owner being hidden by the boat's gunwale.

Somebody, clearly, was in that boat; but why he should be lying on his back, with his legs sticking up in the air, was quite a puzzle to the sailorman's son.

But the fat legs that waved in the air did not continue to wave! Redwing had, in fact, spotted the occupant of the boat just after he had tumbled over backwards! Now that occupant scrambled up—the legs disappeared, and a head was seen, and a pair of fat shoulders.

Tiny as that object was, in the distance, there seemed something familiar about it to Tom's eyes.

"Is it a boat, Tom?" called out John Redwing from the tiller.

"It's a boat, and a man in it!" answered Tom. "Looks to me like trouble—it's far out at sea for a row-boat! It won't take long to run it down, father."

"Ay, ay!" answered old John, and he gave the tiller a twist.

Redwing watched the boat as the lugger drew nearer. He saw the fat figure in the boat standing up, waving hands and arms. He caught a glitter of reflected sunshine from a pair of big spectacles.

More and more familiar that fat figure seemed to Redwing; yet he could hardly believe that he really was looking at William George Bunter, of the Greyfriars Remove.

He had last seen Bunter at the school before breaking-up for Easter. He had forgotten his fat existence since. But that podgy figure, and those gleaming spectacles, reminded him of the Owl of the Remove.

How could it be Bunter—adrift in an open boat, miles and miles off the coast of Devonshire?

But it was Bunter—more and more

clearly he saw him, until at last there was no further doubt.

It was Billy Bunter, as large as life, amazing as it was to see him there.

"I've seen that lad before!" Old John was staring at the fat figure in the boat, in easy range of vision now.

"It's Bunter, father!" said Tom. "Bunter, of my Form at Greyfriars! I can't imagine how he got here! It beats me hollow! But it's Bunter. On holiday in Devonshire. I suppose—he's just the chap to go adrift in a boat, if he got into one! Thank goodness we spotted him!"

He leaned over the gunwale, and shouted:

"Boat ahoy!"

"Help!" came back a howl. "Help! I say, help!"

"Stand by to catch a rope!" called out Tom. "Make fast, and we'll take your boat in tow!"

The lugger glided close.

Tom Redwing threw the rope, and Billy Bunter grabbed at it, and missed it, and scrambled in the bottom of the boat after it, and finally grabbed it.

The pull on the rope as he held it, brought the boat rocking close to the lugger.

"Make it fast!" called out Tom. "We can tow your boat into Bideford for you."

"Tain't my boat!" squeaked Bunter. "I say, help me out of it, will you! I say, I'm starving! I say, never mind the boat! Give me a hand!"

Tom Redwing grinned.

Billy Bunter was blinking directly at him through his big spectacles, but evidently he did not recognise the bronzed lad in the jersey as a Greyfriars junior.

"Better not lose the boat!" said Tom.

"I tell you it ain't my boat!" hooted Bunter. "Blow the boat!"

Bunter was not bothering about a boat that did not belong to him. All Bunter wanted was to get out of that beastly boat.

But whether the boat was Bunter's or not, Tom certainly did not mean to leave it adrift. He reached down, and gave the fat Owl of the Remove a strong, helping hand, jerking him out of the boat over the lugger's low gunwale. Bunter squeaked as he sprawled aboard.

"Ow! Look out! Wow! Don't grab a fellow like that! Do you want to pull a fellow to bits? Wow!"

Bump!

Bunter landed on the lugger and spluttered.

Tom dropped lightly into the boat and made fast the rope—noticing that the boat's painter had been cut with a knife, as he tied on.

Then he came lightly on board the lugger again.

The boat rocked astern, towing, as John Redwing gave the tiller a twist, and resumed his former course.

Bunter sat and spluttered.

"Ow! Ooogh! I say, I'm hungry! I've been in that putrid boat since last night! I'm starving! I say, have you got any grub?"

"Lots!" said Tom cheerily.

"Oh, good!" Bunter gasped with relief. "I say, I'll pay for it, of course! I've left all my money ashore, as it happens, but I'll pay anything you like—I've got lots of money—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Tom.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I say, you said you had some grub! Will you give a fellow some grub when he's starving?" wailed Bunter.

Tom Redwing lost no time! When Billy Bunter was hungry, the matter was serious. In less than a minute, cold meat was vanishing down Billy

Bunter's fat neck at a rate that would have astonished any fellow who did not know Bunter! Cold potatoes accompanied it, and plum duff followed it—and the champing of Billy Bunter's fat jaws made an unending melody.

And Tom, if he was curious to know how Billy Bunter had got into that extraordinary scrape, had no chance of learning—for a long, long, long time, Billy Bunter's jaws were too busy for speech; for a long, long, long time, the only words he uttered were: "Got some more grub?"

More and more grub was forthcoming; and Bunter ate, and ate, and ate; and life, once more, was worth living!

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

The Only Way!

HARRY WHARTON knitted his brows.

Bob Cherry brandished a clenched fist.

From the top of the high cliff over the cove, the Famous Five watched Rance's boat disappear round the island with deep feelings.

For long, long hours, they had watched from the cliff-top in the faint hope of spotting some craft coming within hail. That hope was very faint, for all through their Crusoe life on Blackrock, no boat had come near the island, except Rance's; and the regular boat from Potkelly was not due for two or three days yet.

Brown sails of fishing-boats were seen in the distance, but too far off for signalling. But they still watched—and then, at last, a boat appeared—with Elias Rance in it, and they waved to it—in vain!

They did not like the man; they had had trouble with him, and they strongly suspected him of carrying on some secret and lawless rascality at the smugglers' cave. They would not willingly have asked any favour of Elias Rance. But all such considerations had to be dismissed, now that it was a question perhaps of life or death for the hapless junior who had gone adrift in the Atlantic.

It was a chance of getting in touch with the mainland and starting a search for the lost Owl—and it was the only chance.

But Rance, unheeding their waving signals, had pulled on, and disappeared round the cliffs.

"Look here," said Johnny Bull. "we've got to use that boat! That man Rance is a rotten rascal, but he can't refuse to take word ashore that a fellow has gone adrift. He can't—and he shan't!"

"He's gone to the cave," said Nugent. "Goodness knows what his game is there, but that's where he's gone. We can find him there."

"The rotter!" said Harry. "I hate being civil to him, but we've got to think of Bunter. Look here, you fellows, that rat wanted to clear us off the island, and we weren't taking any. But now—now we want more than anything else to get to Potkelly and get out some craft to search for Bunter. We can hire some sailing craft and get going if we can only reach the mainland. I don't like giving in to that rat, but—"

Wharton paused a moment.

"Look here, Rance wants to get us off the island. It's to hide some rotten rascality he's afraid we may spot; but we can't bother about that now, we've got to think of Bunter. We'll agree to clear off Blackrock if he will give us a passage in his boat."

There was a brief silence. Not one member of the Famous Five liked the idea of knuckling under to young Mr. Rance. All the more because he had ordered them off Blackrock, they had been determined to remain.

But they had to think of the hapless fat Owl adrift on the ocean. All other considerations had to yield to that. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but they had to get it down.

"Let's," said Bob Cherry at last. "It's the only way, I suppose."

Harry Wharton gave a last look round at the sunlit sea.

Far away on the blue water was the brown sail of a fishing boat, but it was a mere speck in the distance. There was nothing doing; it was Rance's boat or nothing, and the chums of the Remove descended from the cliff.

They left the cove and tramped round the shore at the base of the rugged cliffs towards the smugglers' cave.

Whatever might be young Mr. Rance's mysterious business at that spot, they had no doubt of finding him there. Neither did they doubt that, hostile as he was, he would be glad to give them a passage to the mainland to get them away from the island.

It was their presence on Blackrock that was the cause of his hostility. They expected, indeed, that he would jump at the chance of getting rid of them.

Harker and Peter Coot were lounging by the entrance to the smugglers' cave when they arrived there. On the shingle lay the boat in which Rance had pulled out, but nothing was to be seen of the estate-agent of Okeham. Apparently he was within the cave.

The two longshoremen watched them coming with scowling faces.

"Where is Mr. Rance?" asked Harry, as the juniors reached the spot where the longshoremen stood.

"Mr. Rance?" repeated Harker. "Ow should I know?"

"He is here—"

"He ain't 'ere!" answered Harker. "I ain't seed nothing of Mr. Rance. He'll be in his office along to Okeham."

"Don't take the trouble to tell lies!" said Harry contemptuously. "We saw him pulling out in that boat. We know that he is here. We want to speak to him."

"You can want!" grunted Harker.

"Is he in the cave?" snapped Bob.

"Find out!" growled Harker.

"Look here, Harker," said Harry quietly. "we haven't come here for a row. We're ready to leave the island, as Mr. Rance wanted us to do, and what we want is to ask him for a passage ashore in his boat. That's what he wants, I suppose."

"Oh!" said Harker. "Ay, ay! That's what he wants—and you can lay to that. You won't have to ask twice if that's what you want."

"Well, then, give him a call, and let's speak to him."

The two longshoremen exchanged glances.

Big Harker turned his head and looked into the dimness of the deep cave, then he looked at the juniors again.

"You got to wait," he said surlily. "You can lay to it that Mr. Rance will take you off Blackrock and be glad to get shut of you. But you got to wait."

"And why?" snapped Nugent.

"Look here, if Rance is in the cave, we can please ourselves!" growled Johnny Bull. "Come on, and if those

rotters stick in the way, knock them out of it!"

"Come on!" said Harry.

The Greyfriars fellows made a movement forward.

Harker and Coot backed into the cave and stood blocking the way, both of them grasping their cudgels.

It was clear that the two ruffians were not keen on another conflict after their defeat that morning. But it was equally clear that they were determined to dispute the way. Whatever might be young Mr. Rance's mysterious occupation in the cave, they were going to do their best to keep the schoolboys off the scene.

"Stand back!" snarled Big Harker. "You got to wait—and you'll wait outside!"

Bob Cherry swung up his cudgel.

"If you want some more there's lots ready!" he exclaimed.

"The readfulness is terrific!" declared Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"Old on!" said Peter Coot pacifically. "Look here, you got to wait till Mr. Rance goes back in the boat. He won't go till he's ready. Well, you sit by the boat till he comes."

The juniors paused.

"Well, that's so," admitted Bob. "Rance won't start any sooner to please us, I suppose. Let's wait here, you fellows."

Harry Wharton nodded.

It was clear that Rance was occupied in the cave in the mysterious business he had on Blackrock.

Whatever that mysterious business was, the juniors had to wait till he was ready to leave the island.

They sat down on the gunwale of the boat to wait for the estate-agent of Okeham to come out of the cave.

Harker and Coot stood together, cudgel in hand, under the rugged arch of rock, watching them suspiciously—evidently ready for a shindy if the schoolboys attempted to push in.

But the juniors were not there for a shindy; their thoughts were on Billy Bunter, drifting somewhere far out of sight beyond the sea-rim.

They waited impatiently till at length there was a sound of footsteps from the shadows of the smugglers' cave.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

Mr. Rance's Last Word!

HERBERT VERNON-SMITH started and blinked in the sudden dazzle of light.

It gleamed on his face from the deep darkness.

Where he was the Bounder of Greyfriars knew, though he could see nothing, and for long, long hours he had lain there in the dense darkness—helpless.

It was only the previous night, and at a late hour, that he had been brought there, but endless spaces of time seemed to have elapsed since in that black recess in the rocks.

He had been taken up the cave, dragged up by a rope ladder into a gap in the high rock wall, and forced along a narrow tunnel in the solid rock to the spot where he lay—a fissure in the wall of the tunnel.

There he had been left, his hands and his feet bound, unable to stir a limb—left to silence, darkness, and something like despair.

Hours had elapsed since, but they seemed like days and nights to the Bounder—like long weeks. He lay on

hard rock that chilled him by its contact.

The longshoremen had left him there; he had not seen them since—he had seen nothing. The sudden light that flashed in his face now was the first glimmer he had seen in all those weary hours.

He lifted himself on his elbow and stared blindly.

The light shifted from his face. He glimpsed a figure and saw the flash-lamp hooked on a point of rock; then he saw the man who had carried it—and his teeth gritted at the sight of Elias Rance.

"You hound!" breathed the Bounder.

Young Mr. Rance stood looking down on him.

There was bitter hostility in his sharp-featured, rat-like face.

Young Mr. Rance had disliked the millionaire to whom he had cringed in the office at Okeham. Still more intensely he disliked the millionaire's son. Smithy, no doubt, had been rather high-handed in his earlier dealings with Mr. Rance, and Rance's nature was the kind to save up and brood over every spot of offence.

"Do you want to get out of this, Master Herbert?" asked young Mr. Rance, looking down at him with eyes that gleamed like a rat's.

"You fool and rotter, of course I do!" snarled Vernon-Smith. "And I'll make you pay for it, too, you treacherous cur!"

Rance smiled a bitter and sardonic smile.

"Like father like son!" he said, with a sneer. "A chip of the old block! Do you know that your father is here, you insolent young cub?"

"I've guessed it!" said the Bounder savagely. "I know now why you trapped me, you cur—to keep me from getting the police after him! You've kidnapped my father, as you've kidnapped me, you rotten rascal!"

Rance made a gesture, pointing along the tunnel on which the fissure opened.

"Your father is there, at a distance, as helpless a prisoner as yourself," he said. "He has just refused my terms for release."

"You fool, did you think he would make terms with you?" snarled the Bounder. "You don't know him!"

"Given time, I think he would have come to terms," said young Mr. Rance. "But time is short. A week or two in this den, with a spot of hunger and thirst, would have brought him to terms, I think. But time is wanting, Master Herbert." He paused and scanned the Bounder's face searchingly. "You came here in the boat last night with Harker and Coot. Did you see anyone in the cave when you landed with them?"

Vernon-Smith stared at him. There was a keen eagerness in Rance's face—it was clear that this was an anxious matter to him.

"I saw nobody but those two scoundrels who brought me here," answered Smithy.

"Is that the truth?"

"Go and eat coke!"

Rance's rat-like eyes searched his face.

"Was there somebody in the cave?" exclaimed Vernon-Smith. "Are you afraid that your game's been spotted, you cur? Oh!" His eyes gleamed. "One of those fellows, if they're still on the island—" A sudden hope flashed into the Bounder's face.

It was by a malicious trick that he had stranded the Famous Five on Blackrock. But he knew that that would make no difference if they learned that

he was in a kidnapper's hands. Well enough he knew that they would forget all offences and leave no stone unturned to come to his help, if only they knew.

"By gad! Is that it?" he panted. "Are they still on the island—Wharton and his friends?"

"They are still on the island, though far from here!" said Rance. "One of them was in the cave last night—a fat fool who was caught in the tide, and took refuge in the cave. You did not see him?"

"Bunter?" exclaimed the Bounder. "Do you mean Bunter?"

Rance's description could hardly have applied to any of the Famous Five.

"Then you saw him?" hissed Rance.

"I did not see him or think of him—but I knew that Bunter was on the island—and just the fool to be caught in the tide, too!"

"You did not see him?"

"I tell you, no! But—he may have seen me, if he was in the cave! If he only did—"

"Yes, I think he may have seen you!" assented Rance. "That is why time is now short, Master Herbert."

"You rotter, you rascal!" The Bounder's look was almost gloating. "If he's told them—if they know—your time's short enough, you villain! They'll have me out of this if they only get to know—"

"Bunter has told them nothing," said Rance quietly. "Bunter seized on the boat you were brought here in, and got away in it—and was carried out to sea."

"Oh!" gasped the Bounder.

The hope died out of his face.

"He is adrift somewhere in the Atlantic, probably fifty miles from land by this time!" said Rance. "He is not, I think, a capable lad—able to handle a boat—a clumsy and obtuse fool, from what I have heard. The chances are that he has gone to his death in the Atlantic. But—"

"Not on this coast!" The Bounder's hope revived again. "In foul weather, yes—but if the calm holds—no! Hundreds of coasting craft up and down between Cornwall and the Irish Sea. You rotter, it's ten to one that he will be picked up—a hundred to one! And if he saw me—"

"He was on the spot," said Rance moodily. "That fool Harker did not know that he was in the cave at all—but from what I learn, he was hanging about near the entrance and seized on the boat when their backs were turned. He could not have seen where you were taken—he never came up the cave! But he may have seen you landed—I think he must have! And if he survives—"

"Then your game is up, you rat!"

"Not quite, Master Herbert!" said Rance. "It cuts the time short, that is all. If Bunter knows, and if he survives, this cavern will be searched—but I have time to take care that nothing shall be discovered. Search of this tunnel will be blocked by a wall of rock—and you will be behind it, Master Herbert—and never discovered."

"You cowardly rotter!" muttered the Bounder.

Rance stooped and loosened the cord at the Bounder's feet sufficiently to enable him to walk. Then he dragged the junior upright.

"Come!" he snapped.

"Where are you taking me now, you rat?"

"To your father," sneered Rance. "Mr. Vernon-Smith may think again, perhaps, with his son under his eyes, condemned to share his fate if his obstinacy continues. I had you brought here, Master Herbert, only to keep your



Billy Bunter sipped coffee and grinned with satisfaction. "I say, Redwing, this is a bit different from that filthy island!" he exclaimed. "'Tain't what I'm used to at Bunter Court, of course. But after that beastly island and the beastly prog there—phew!"

tongue quiet—but now you may serve another purpose. Come!"

He put the flash-lamp in his pocket; he did not need a light in the tunnel.

With a hand on his shoulder, the Bounder stumbled along with his shackled feet.

In silence, Rance led him along the narrow, winding tunnel in the rock.

A gleam of light ahead caught his eyes at last.

He stumbled into the rock vault at the end of the tunnel.

Mr. Vernon-Smith almost bounded to his feet at the sight of him.

"Herbert!" he exclaimed. "Then it is true—you are here——"

He made a movement towards his son, but the clinking chain checked him.

Rance was very careful not to venture within reach of the millionaire's plump hands.

Smithy gave his father a haggard look.

Rance dragged him to the farthest corner of the rock vault, out of reach of the man to whose leg the chain was padlocked. There he passed a rope round him and knotted the end to a jutting point of rock above his head.

Rance stepped back to the tunnel. He looked from one to the other with a black and bitter look.

"My last word, Mr. Vernon-Smith!" he said venomously. "I shall return for your answer! If it is still in the negative, you will not see me again! You will never see a human face again—neither you, nor your son! I am driven to this—you have left me no choice—the tunnel will be blocked and you will vanish from all human knowledge. Think over it while you have yet time! To-morrow, noon, is the limit!"

And without waiting for an answer, the estate-agent of Okeham turned and left them.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

To Go Or Not To Go!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! Here comes the Rance-bird!"

Footsteps sounded down the dark hollows of the sea-cave. Into the sunshine, under the high rocky arch, a figure emerged into the view of the Greyfriars juniors—the weedy figure and sharp-featured face of young Mr. Rance.

Harry Wharton & Co. looked at him curiously as he appeared in the sunlight. They could read the mingling of spiteful anger and nervous uneasiness in the sharp rat-face, and it puzzled them.

Rance's business there was an utter mystery to them. Whatever it was, it seemed to have disgruntled him. They could have fancied that he had come now from some angry and bitter altercation, to judge by his looks.

He did not notice the schoolboys at the boat immediately. He stopped to speak to the longshoromen; and it was a gesture from Big Harker that drew his attention to the Greyfriars group.

Then he gave a start and turned towards them, fixing his eyes on them with angry and hostile inquiry.

The juniors rose to their feet.

They did not like Rance, and liked him less than ever now. He looked, in fact, a disappointed, irritated, and uneasy rascal—as, indeed, he was! Never had he appeared so unpleasant in the eyes of the Greyfriars schoolboys.

But they were not there to quarrel with Rance, whatever he was, and what-

ever his unknown game was. So they carefully took no notice of his hostile and angry glare as he came towards them, the longshoromen following him.

"You impudent young rascals!" he began. "What do you want here? You are on this island without leave, and——"

"Never mind that now, Mr. Rance!" said Harry Wharton, as civilly as he could. "We're ready to leave the island as soon as you like."

"Oh!" said Rance. He seemed taken aback.

"That's how it stands, Mr. Rance," said Bob Cherry. "Smithy asked us here, and I'm quite sure that Mr. Vernon-Smith would give us free leave to stay as long as we like, if he knew we were here. We've a right to stay—as we told you when you wanted to clear us off. Now we want to go—so that suits all parties. All we want is a lift to the mainland."

"And then you'll be done with us and we shall be done with you!" grunted Johnny Bull.

Rance stood silent, looking at them.

It was clear that he had not expected anything of this kind after his previous disputes with the Greyfriars fellows. There was suspicion in his rat-like face as he watched them in silence. They could see that their offer to leave the island did not give him satisfaction, as they had naturally expected it to do.

"That's why they come 'ere, Mr. Rance," said Big Harker. "I've told them you'll be glad to get shut of them, the young swabs! You give the word, and I'll pull them across to Potkelly."

Rance made him an irritable sign to

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(Continued from page 13.)

be silent. But he did not answer the juniors; he stood watching their faces with suspicious eyes.

"Well, what about it, Mr. Rance?" asked Harry, puzzled and impatient. "You wanted us to go the other day—you ordered us off—"

"And you refused to go!" said Rance, with a sneer. "Now, it seems, you have changed your minds."

"Isn't that what you wanted?" asked Frank Nugent.

Rance did not answer. Certainly it was what he had wanted; but it did not seem to be quite what he wanted now.

His narrow eyes searched their faces. "Why do you want to go, after staying here so long, in defiance of my authority on this property?" snapped Rance.

"I suppose you know that Bunter went adrift in a boat last night," said Harry. "We want to get to the mainland and start a search for him."

"Oh!" Rance gave a start. "That fat fool—"

"Fool or not, he's our schoolfellow, and we've got to do what we can for him," said Harry. "We can hire a sailing-craft at Potkelly, to look for him, and send word along the coast for a look-out to be kept by coasting craft. It may make all the difference between life and death for him."

Rance stood silent. "If there were any other boat to be had we should not ask you," went on Wharton, "but there's no chance of that till old Tregelly comes out to Blackrock. We'll agree to leave the island, and promise not to come back, if you like. All we want is to do what we can for Bunter."

Still Rance did not speak. The juniors could not understand the expression on his hard, sharp face, and Harker and Coot looked at him curiously. They, like the juniors, had not doubted that he would be glad to see the Greyfriars Crusoes cleared off the island.

But they had to doubt it now. For some reason unknown to the Famous Five, Rance was no longer eager for them to leave Blackrock. Indeed, they could see that he was unwilling for them to go.

Why, they could not guess. They could not know that they were, in effect, asking young Mr. Rance to increase the danger that already had his nerves in a state of jitters. The rescue of the hapless fat Owl was the last thing that young Mr. Rance would have desired. The measures the juniors hoped to take made Bunter's rescue not only possible, but probable. All they needed was to get to the mainland and get going.

Rance, in the circumstances, was not likely to help them.

"Will you give us a passage ashore in your boat, Mr. Rance?" asked Harry at last. "Or one of us, at least, to send a boat out for the others. I tell you

that all we want is to get off this island. Isn't that what you want?"

Rance compressed his thin lips. "I decline to have anything to do with you," he said at last. "You refused to leave the island when I ordered you off; now you must take the consequences. I have no more to say to you."

He made a sign to Harker and Coot to push the boat into the water.

Harry Wharton & Co. exchanged glances, and the captain of the Remove set his lips hard.

"That won't do, Mr. Rance," he said quietly.

Rance stared at him. "We've told you that our schoolfellow's life is in danger, and you know it, without our telling you. If you refuse to give us a passage in your boat or, at least, one of us, to take word ashore—"

"I do refuse!" snapped Rance. "Then," said Harry Wharton, with a flash in his eyes, "we shall come in the boat, whether you like it or not. We're going to do what we can for Bunter, and you're not going to stop us!"

"Hear, hear!" said Bob Cherry. Young Mr. Rance clenched his hands almost convulsively.

The Famous Five stood between him and the boat with determined looks. They had made up their minds, and if they had to fight for a passage in the boat they were ready; and they had already proved that they could deal with the longshoremen when it came to a tussle.

Harker and Coot, holding the boat in the water, stood looking across at Rance.

For a long minute the estate-agent of Okeham was silent, his face black and bitter. It was quite clear how he would have liked to deal with the Greyfriars fellows, had force been on his side.

But he controlled his evil temper and answered, at length, quietly.

"If you fancy that there is a chance of saving that fat fool I shall not, of course, stand in your way. There is no room in my boat for such a crowd—you can see that for yourselves. I will give one of you a passage ashore, and you can make any further arrangements you please—on condition that you all leave this island as soon as you can get a boat to carry you."

"That's good enough!" said Harry. "You fellows get back to Dave's cove and get the bags packed. I'll be back in a sailing-craft under two hours."

And, that being settled, Harry Wharton followed the estate-agent down to the boat.

Rance stepped in, and the captain of the Remove followed him, and the longshoreman pushed off.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

Tricked!

HARRY WHARTON'S face was brighter as he sat in the stern of the boat beside the estate-agent of Okeham.

Harker and Coot, at the oars, pulled with long strokes, and the boat glided swiftly out to sea.

On the beach the captain of the Remove could still see his friends, tramping round the cliffs, to return to Dave Oke's cove, tiny in the distance, for the boat was making a wide sweep round the rocky island.

Rance sat silent, with a set and vicious face.

Wharton did not address a word to him. The man was unwilling to give him a passage in the boat, for no

reason, that Harry could see, but a bitter, evil, and malicious temper. But he was getting the lift to the mainland, and that was all he wanted.

Rance spoke at last, his narrow eyes turning on the schoolboy at his side, with a peculiar glint in them.

"You fancy that there is a chance of saving that fat fool?" he asked.

"I hope so," answered Harry. "There's no reason why the boat shouldn't have kept afloat, in this calm weather."

"Quite!" agreed Rance, with a nod. "But it must have drifted a great distance out to sea by this time."

"Yes, but so long as it floats there's quite a good chance," answered Harry, rather surprised by Rance's interest in the matter, after his previous indifference. "We can get a sailing-craft at Potkelly, with a couple of good seamen to handle it. But that's not all! As soon as word goes down the coast that a fellow has been lost at sea every fishing craft from Bidford to Land's End will be looking for him."

"Quite!" said Rance again.

"And that's not all, either," went on Wharton. "The news will be radioed to ships at sea, and there are hundreds of coasting craft in these waters, lots of them with wireless. Once we get going, it's practically certain that Bunter will be found and picked up."

"Quite!" said Rance, for the third time.

Harry Wharton looked at him. That this man was some sort of rascal he more than suspected, but he could not guess that Rance had any motive for desiring that the unfortunate fat Owl should never be picked up. But something peculiar in the estate-agent's tone struck him.

"Otherwise," went on Rance, "it does not look hopeful for him. Unless a search is instituted he must take his chance—and the chance is not good."

"Well, he may be seen and picked up," said Harry. "But it's as good as a cert, if we lose no time."

Rance laughed—a jarring laugh. But he said no more, and sat watching the cliffs of Blackrock as his crew pulled round the island.

Wharton, puzzled, sat in silence also.

Never had he disliked the sharp-featured, rat-faced man so much, and he was anxious to get away from his company at the earliest possible moment. Nothing but his anxiety for Bunter's safety would have induced him to stop into the boat at all. But that could not be helped; his own feelings had to be put aside in such circumstances.

To his surprise, Rance made the crew a sign to pull in as the boat was passing Dave's cove in the distance.

The Co., tramping round the shore, had disappeared from sight.

The boat swerved into the entrance of the cove. It drew near the sandy beach at the foot of the cliffs.

Harry Wharton expressed his impatience. He was anxious to get to the mainland without losing a moment, but it was Rance's boat, and if the estate-agent had some business in Dave's cove it was for him to decide.

But the longshoremen did not pull up the cove. At a sign from Rance they drew in to the shore.

There was a grin on Harker's rugged, stubbly face, and Peter Coot was grinning almost from ear to ear.

Harry Wharton looked at them, and looked at Rance with a vague uneasiness.

"Are you landing here, Mr. Rance?" he asked at last.

Rance smiled—a cat-like smile.

"Don't talk rot!" said Tom sharply. "Smithy wouldn't let a fellow down if he asked him for the hols."

"That's all you know!" snorted Bunter. "Got any more sugar I take six lumps. Ungrateful cad, you know, after I helped him spoof the Head and get extra leave before break-up!"

Tom's face clouded. He had not forgotten Smithy's scheme of getting off early for Easter for a jaunt with Pon & Co., of Highcliffe. He had hoped when he had left to join his father on the lugger that Smithy had given up that reckless scheme. But he was not surprised to learn that Smithy had not.

"I did the whole thing, you know," went on Bunter, with his mouth full. "It was Smithy's idea—but I did it all! Nobody else could have! You know my wonderful ventriloquism! Well, I made the Head think it was Smithy's pater asking for leave for him on the phone—see? It worked all right!"

Tom Redwing knitted his brows, but he said nothing.

"After that, of course, I thought Smithy would be glad to have me for the hols!" went on Bunter, with his mouth full of cold pork. "I consented to come! And what do you think he did?"

Bunter almost choked over the cold pork in his indignation, as he recalled Smithy's iniquitous trick.

"The cad! The rotter! The swab!" said Bunter. "He gave me a letter for the butler at the castle on the island—and when I got there, there wasn't any castle, there wasn't any butler—there wasn't anything or anybody, but a wooden-legged old image in a beastly hut! And the boat was gone—and I couldn't get back! That's what Smithy did—What are you grinning at, you beast?"

Tom Redwing laughed.

"Serve you right, for playing such a trick," he said. "I suppose you hooked on to Smithy on the strength of it; you might have expected him to pull your silly leg, if you did!"

"Beast! Dirty trick, I call it!" grunted Bunter. "We've been stranded on that rotten island ever since—"

"Well!" repeated Tom. "Who else, then?"

"Wharton and his gang—Smithy fooled them, the same as he did me—because they bumped him for pulling the Head's leg, I suppose! Not that it doesn't serve them right—they haven't treated me at all well on that island! Putting everything on me, you know! They made me cook the fish, once."

"Are Wharton and his friends there, too?" exclaimed Tom. "Where is the island? What is it called?"

"A rotten chunk of rocks, about a mile off the coast, called Blackrock," answered Bunter. "Got any more treacle?"

"Sorry, no!" Tom turned to his father. "Do you know Blackrock Island, dad?" he asked.

Old John Redwing nodded.

"Ay, ay, Tom! It lies off the shore, between Penruddy and Potkelly. I've passed it many a time in this lugger."

"Sure there's no more treacle, Redwing?"

"You've had the lot."

"Any cake?"

"No!"

"Well, I'll go to sleep, I think. I never got any sleep in that putrid boat—not a wink! I'm pretty tough—hardy, and all that—but I'm tired out! I'll have forty winks," said Bunter.

"But—" said Tom.

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"Don't jaw when a fellow's going to sleep!"

"But Wharton—"

"Blow Wharton—"

"Won't they be alarmed about you—"

Snore!

Billy Bunter was asleep again.

Once more he slept, and once more he snored, while the lugger pulled on and the sun went down in the glowing Atlantic, and the bright stars came out over the sea.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

On The Track!

"THAT rotter—"

"That rascal—"

"That terrific toad—"

It was bright morning again on Blackrock Island. But the brightness of the spring morning was not reflected in the faces of the Famous Five of Greyfriars.

Billy Bunter would, perhaps, have been flattered had he been aware of the deep anxiety his absence was causing on Blackrock.

Certainly no such idea occurred to his fat mind, as he alternately guzzled and snored on the lugger rolling far out at sea.

Billy Bunter was not accustomed to bestowing much of his fat thoughts on others. The Famous Five, rather unfortunately for themselves in this case, differed from William George Bunter in that respect.

The thought of the fat Owl drifting helplessly on the wide ocean haunted their minds and gave them little rest.

Mingled with anxiety for Bunter was deep and intense anger towards the rascal who had prevented them from starting a search for the lost Owl.

In the sunny morning, they scanned the sea in the hopeless hope of seeing some craft coming out to Blackrock. But Tregelly's boat was not due yet, and there was no craft anywhere near the lone island.

They had to wait, and with every hour of waiting, their feelings towards Rance grew more angry and bitter.

"That terrific and execrable rat!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The punchfulness of his disgusting nose would be a boonful blessing!"

"I'm glad I gave it a punch!" said Harry. "By gum, if we get hold of that tricky scoundrel again—"

"I can't make it out!" said Bob. "He wanted us off the island—why did the brute change his mind? It beats me! It looks as if he doesn't want Bunter to be picked up—but he couldn't be such a rotter as that! Poor old Bunter never did anything to him!"

"I've been thinking about that," said Harry Wharton, "and I think I've got that much clear! Rance can have only one reason for acting as he did—he doesn't want Bunter saved."

"But why not?" asked Nugent. "He's hardly seen Bunter—he's had trouble enough with us, but not with Bunter."

"Bunter was in the cave, all night, the night before last!" said Harry quietly. "Suppose he may have spotted what was going on there! We don't know what's going on, and we can't guess—but something is—something rotten, and against the law—there can't be any doubt about that! If Bunter found it out, that accounts for Rance not wanting him to be picked up—"

"Oh!" said Bob.

"It locks to me as if that's what the brute had in his mind," went on Harry. "He's willing for Bunter to be lost at

sea, to keep his secret—whatever it is."

"The awful villain!" muttered Nugent.

"We can't help Bunter," went on Harry. "We're stranded here till Tregelly's boat comes out. But there's something we can do! We can put paid to that villain Rance! Before old Tregelly comes to Blackrock, we can find out what villainy is going on in the smugglers' cave—and as soon as we get to the mainland, put the police on to it."

"Good egg!" said Bob Cherry.

The prospect of action was a relief to the minds of the juniors. And they were keen enough to discover the strange mystery of the smugglers' cave.

"Rance fancies that he is safe," went on Harry. "He knows that we've explored the cave a good many times and found nothing. He's left us stranded here, when all we wanted was to get away and search for Bunter. The rotten rascal may be sorry for it, if we spot the secret while we're here."

"The sorrowfulness will probably be terrific!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"This time we're going to get up into that gap at the back of the cave," said Harry. "Whatever the secret is, it's there! We've got to manage it somehow."

"That means making a ladder," said Bob.

"Oh, blow your ladders!" grunted Johnny Bull. "You made a ladder the other day, and what happened to it?"

"I didn't put in enough nails!" said Bob. "Next time—"

"Never mind a ladder!" said Harry. "I've been looking over old Dave's stack of driftwood, and there was a long pole in it—the mast of some small craft that went down some time or other. If we get that round to the cave, we can manage the rest."

"Oh, all right! Let's try it on, at any rate."

Old Dave Oko was setting his nets at the end of the jetty. He gave no heed as the juniors sorted over the stack of driftwood and wreckage he had collected and piled up by his hut under the cliff. A great deal of wreckage came ashore on the tides at Blackrock, and the ancient mariner gathered it on the beach for firewood, and for repairing his hut, which was built out of old ship's timbers.

Among old timbers of all sorts and shapes and sizes lay a slim cedar mast that had once risen from the deck of some vessel that had gone down in the Atlantic storms long years ago.

The juniors disentangled it from the stack and dragged it out. It was old, but it was sound, and it was a good sixteen feet in length. By planting it against the rock wall at the back of the sea cave, Harry Wharton had little doubt that it would be possible to clamber up to the tunnel.

It was weighty, but the Famous Five were strong and sturdy. They grasped the old mast and swung it off the earth.

"Go it!" said Bob.

And they tramped away down the shore, bearing the pole among them.

Old Dave glanced after them as they went, and then gave his attentions again to his nets.

Twice, on the way round the cliffs, the juniors set down their burden to rest. It was hefty work, in the warm spring sunshine. But they carried on, and arrived at the smugglers' cave at last.

The tide was far out. They tramped in under the rocky arch, and the timber was set down again, while Harry Wharton lighted a lantern



"Smithy!" Five voices gasped the name in a chorus of amazement as the Famous Five saw the Bounder of Greyfriars. "And—and—and Smithy's pater!" stuttered Johnny Bull, blinking almost dizzily at the millionaire. "Oh crikey!"

The lantern was strung on the pole, and they lifted it again, and tramped up the cavern.

"By gum!" gasped Bob Cherry, when they reached, at last, the rock wall at the extremity of the sea-cave, and the pole was dropped once more. Bob mopped a perspiring brow. "Anybody feel warm?"

"The warmfulness is terrific!"

"Well, here we are!" said Johnny Bull. "Stick that lantern to show a light, and let's get going."

Harry Wharton placed the lantern on the floor of the cave, aslant, to cast up its light on the gap, fourteen or fifteen feet up. Then, all hands grasping the heavy pole, it was reared up and planted against the opening in the rock.

The Famous Five were all feeling a thrill of excitement now. Many times they had explored the smugglers' cave, but now, for the first time, they were going farther than they had ever gone before—and they were as good as certain that some discovery awaited them, when they once penetrated into that black tunnel in the rock.

What it was, they could not guess; but they were assured that Elias Rance's secret was hidden there. That it was a guilty secret they could not doubt; and there was a grim satisfaction in the idea of handing Rance over to the police, if it proved so.

"You fellows hold it, and leave it to me!" said Bob.

"Go it, old man!"

Four pairs of hands grasped the slanting pole to hold it in position. It was not easy to climb, but Bob Cherry climbed it. With arms and legs gripping it, he worked his way upward.

"Ow!" yelled Johnny Bull suddenly.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's up?" gasped Bob.

"Can you keep your hoof out of a

fellow's ear?" inquired Johnny, in concentrated tones.

"Oh, blow your ear!" Bob clambered on.

"Ooogh!" spluttered Nugent suddenly.

"Oh crikey! What's the matter with you?" roared Bob.

"Can't you keep your hoof off a fellow's nose?" howled Nugent.

"Oh, blow your nose!"

"What about letting him down wallop?" asked Johnny Bull ferociously.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Hold on!" he said. "Don't kick like a mule, Bob, if you can help it! Yaroooh!"

"Is that Wharton yelling now?" hooted Bob.

"You clumsy ass, you've nearly cracked my nut!" roared Wharton.

"How many feet have you got—as many as a centipede?"

"Oh, rats! Shut up and hold that pole!"

"Is the silly ass ever going to get to the top—Oooh!" Johnny Bull broke off as one of Bob Cherry's feet slipped again and caught him a nasty crack on the head. "Clumsy ass!"

"Hold the pole still, then!" hooted Bob.

Bob clambered on—and his feet passed out of reach of ears and noses and nuts—much to the relief of his comrades.

Slowly but surely he worked his way up the pole, his friends watching him, in the gleam of the lantern light.

Bob was breathing hard by the time he reached the top.

But he reached it, and changed his grasp from the pole to the rock-edge of the gap in the wall. He drew himself on the rock and rested on his elbows on it. Then, with a final heave, he disappeared into the gap.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Light In The Tunnel!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" shouted Bob.

Bob Cherry's face looked out of the gap in the high rock wall. He grinned down at his comrades.

Harry Wharton was grasping the pole, to follow up. But Bob waved a hand to him from above.

"Chuck it!" he called out. "No need to do the monkey-on-the-stick act! There's a rope-ladder here!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"I stumbled over it, and found it with my nose!" grinned Bob. "Stand from under and I'll let it drop."

"Good egg!"

The four juniors stood back from the rock wall.

Over the edge of the gap a rope-ladder came slithering—two thick, strong ropes, with wooden rungs between. It slithered down against the rock and hung.

"By gum!" said Johnny Bull, with a deep breath. "We don't want any more proof than that that we're on the right track. That's the way that swab Rance gets through."

"No doubt about it!" agreed Harry.

It was an exciting discovery. Obviously that rope-ladder was used for ascent into the gap by Rance and his associates. Suspicion was certainly now; the rock tunnel was the way to the hidden secret.

"You fellows can come up the jolly old ladder!" called out Bob. "It's safe at this end! I say, you remember that long boat-hook we found parked in the cave—we couldn't make out what it was wanted for! Pretty plain now, what? They had to hook that rope-

ladder down when they wanted to use it. This end is looped over a rock—safe as houses."

"Plain enough now," said Harry. "Anything else up there?"

"Can't see anything else in the dark! Bring up the lantern with you! Looks to me as if this gap goes a jolly long way back—like a tunnel! We'll see when we get the light up."

Harry Wharton slung the lantern over his arm and clambered up the rope-ladder. It was easy work—very much easier than Bob's ascent of the pole had been.

Hand over hand, he went up, and as he reached the top, Bob reached out and took the lantern from him. Then he clambered into the gap, and stood beside Bob.

Bob held up the lantern. Its light showed the gap extending back into the solid cliff, into the blackest darkness. Where they stood, there was nothing to be seen, excepting the rope-ladder.

But there was something to be seen farther on, they knew now. And they were eager to explore those dark recesses in the heart of the cliff.

"Come on, you fellows!" called out Bob.

"Coming!" answered Johnny Bull.

The ladder swayed, as Johnny clambered up. He landed, in his turn, and Hurroo Jamset Ram Singh followed, and then Nugent.

The Famous Five stood together, at last, in the gap in the rock.

Under their feet the rocky floor was rugged, but more or less level. Before them, as they turned their backs on the sea-cave, the tunnel stretched, black as the inside of a hat.

"By gum!" said Bob. "I wonder what the dickens we are going to find here! We're jolly well going to find something."

"What-ho! Get on with the light, old scout!"

Bob, holding up the lantern, stepped ahead. His comrades followed him, in a bunch. The tunnel was not more than six feet wide; but at a little distance from the gap it widened into a space of more than twenty feet.

Bob halted at that spot, and flashed the light round.

In the wide space there were great rocks and boulders, which had evidently fallen from above at some period or other.

But nothing else was to be seen; and Bob led the way onward again, the lantern gleaming before him.

His comrades followed him, in a bunch; but at a little farther distance the tunnel narrowed and narrowed, till it was a mere bottle-neck. Then they had to string out in single file; for there was room for only one fellow to pass at a time, between the rugged rocky walls.

"Wow!" came a sudden howl from Bob. He halted. "Ow! Oh! Wow!"

"Found anything?" called out Johnny Bull, from the rear.

"Ow! Yes! I've found the roof—with my napper! Ow!"

Bob rubbed his head, and flashed the light up. In the narrowest part of the bottle-neck the roof abruptly lowered; and Bob had not noticed it in time. But he had noticed it at once when his head had established contact!

"Ow! My napper—"

"Nothing in it to damage, old man!" said Johnny consolingly from behind.

"You silly ass!" howled Bob.

"Carry on, old bean!" said Frank Nugent, chuckling.

Bob Cherry lowered his head under the edge of rock and proceeded forward

with head bent. His followers carefully lowered their heads as they followed. Nobody else wanted to establish contact with hard rock.

But a dozen paces farther on the tunnel widened again to six feet or more, and the roof was higher. Once more they were able to proceed in comfort.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob halted again, and flashed the light into a deep fissure in the side of the tunnel. "Is this our goal?"

The juniors gathered at the opening and stared into the fissure in the lantern light. But there was nothing there—the goal was evidently farther on.

Bob stepped into the fissure, scanning it in the light.

"Nothing there!" said Johnny Bull. "Come on!"

"Looks to me as if somebody's been here," said Bob, scanning the rocky floor. "Somebody with sand sticking to wet sea boots. Look! That brute Harker, I suppose—goodness knows why! There's nothing here."

The juniors resumed their way—leaving behind them the spot where, little as they knew it, Herbert Vernon-Smith had lain for many weary hours, after Big Harker had left him there.

Bob led the way again, holding up the lantern. The tunnel narrowed and widened several times, winding and turning into the very heart of the cliff.

As they pressed on, the juniors wondered more and more what they were going to find when they reached the end. Something—some strange discovery—awaited them; there could be no doubt of that. But what it could be they still had not the remotest idea.

"Oh!" ejaculated Bob suddenly in suppressed tones.

He halted.

"What—?" began Johnny Bull.

"Quiet! Somebody's here!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"There's a light—and somebody is—"

Bob quickly extinguished the lantern. He had caught a glimpse of light ahead, and now that the lantern was out all the juniors saw it, glimmering from the deep darkness. And as they listened there came a sound, and they knew that it was the murmur of voices.

"Rance!" breathed Harry Wharton.

"He left the island yesterday," muttered Bob. "He must have come back, I suppose! By gum, we've run him down, then—if it's Rance! We're going on!"

"Yes, rather!"

"We can handle them if it comes to that! Anyhow, we're going on!"

And the Famous Five trod on towards the light—little dreaming of what was to meet their eyes when they reached it.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

Redwing Cuts Up Rusty!

BILLY BUNTER sat up. He started to yawn as he did so.

He never finished that yawn.

Rang!

"Yaroooooh!"

Instead of yawning, Bunter roared.

Sleeping quarters on old John Redwing's lugger were close. Billy Bunter really was quite aware of that as he had noticed it, and grunted his disapproval, when he crawled into that bunk.

But in the mists and shadows of sleep the fat Owl had forgotten all about it. He was reminded when he sat up and banged his fat head.

Bunter's roar rang through the lugger from stem to stern. It rang for a considerable distance to starboard and port.

"Ow! Wow, wow! Oooooh!" roared Bunter.

Tom Redwing's cheery bronzed face looked into the tiny cabin.

Billy Bunter gave him a glare. He groped for his spectacles, jammed them on his fat little nose, and gave him another glare.

"Anything up?" asked Tom.

"Ow! I've nearly cracked my nut!" howled Bunter. "Nice sort of a poky little hole to shove a fellow in to sleep!"

"This isn't an Atlantic liner, old chap," said Tom, smiling. "I hope you're not much damaged—"

"What's the good of hoping I'm not much damaged when I've got a fearful pain?" hooted Bunter. "I've banged my head! Ow! I wish I'd stayed on deck now! Ow! My napper!"

"Ready for breakfast?" asked Tom soothingly.

"Oh!" Bunter seemed to recover at that magic word. "Yes! I hope you've got something decent. I'm fearfully hungry!"

Bunter turned out.

"I'll get you the bucket for a wash, old scout, while I'm getting you some brekker," said Tom.

Billy Bunter concentrated all the contempt of which his eyes and his spectacles were capable in the look he gave the sailorman's son.

"Do you wash in a bucket?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Well," said Bunter, with crushing dignity, "I don't! I'd rather not wash at all than wash in a bucket—see?"

And Bunter did not wash at all whether from a dignified disinclination to use a bucket for that purpose, or from a general disinclination for the process of washing!

He rolled out into the sunshine.

Old John Redwing, at the tiller, gave him a cheery nod.

"Morning, sir!" he said.

"Oh, good-morning!" said Bunter off-handedly. Billy Bunter did not think that a great deal of politeness was due to a sailorman. "I say, are we anywhere near land?"

"I reckon we'll make Bideford this afternoon, sir," answered John.

"Oh crikey!" said Bunter. "Have I got to stick on this beastly tub all day?"

The old sailorman of Hawkscliff looked at him. He had seen something of Tom's friends at Greyfriars; he knew and liked the Famous Five; and the Bounder, with all his arrogance, had never failed in respect to his chum's father. But Billy Bunter had his own manners and customs, which seemed to puzzle old John a little. However, he said nothing, and, after a long look at Bunter, transferred his attention to the canvas.

Billy Bunter blinked round him. He could see nothing but sea and sky—both bright and blue in the spring sunshine, if that were any good. But Bunter was fed-up with sea and sky and had no use for either.

But his fat face brightened at the scent of food and hot coffee. Tom, with untiring patience and unbounded hospitality, waited on the wants of that unexpected and remarkable guest.

There was bacon, Bunter discovered, on the lugger. Tom fried numberless rashers. Bunter sat down to a mountain of the same and condescended to smile.

"I say, this is better than that filthy island," said the fat Owl. "I'll bet

those fellows would be jolly glad to have a whack in this. He, he, he!"

That happy thought seemed to amuse Bunter, and he chuckled, and nearly choked over his ninth rasher.

Tom Redwing regarded him rather curiously.

From what Bunter had told him, it seemed that the fat Owl had been stranded on Blackrock with the Famous Five, and from the situation in which Tom had found him it was clear that he had gone adrift from Blackrock in the boat. It seemed to Tom that in those circumstances the fellows on the island would probably be worried and anxious about him, and he was already thinking out some way to send them word that Bunter was safe as soon as the lugger put in at Bideford. But no such matter, evidently, was occupying Bunter's fat mind.

As the lugger rolled on, and Bunter ate and Tom went about his duties, he was thinking chiefly of his chum Smithy and wondering whether he might see him when the lugger touched land.

Wide asunder as the Poles as their fastes and ways were, he knew that Smithy would be glad to see him—and undoubtedly he would be glad to see Smithy!

He pictured Smithy with his father—rolling about Devonshire in the magnificent Rolls, splashing cash about in his usual extravagant manner, a contrast to his own holiday in sea boots and jersey on the coasting lugger. Little did Tom dream how the Bounder really had spent that eventful Easter.

"I say, Redwing—" squeaked Bunter.

"Hallo!" Tom came over to him.

"Sure there ain't any more treacle?"

"Quite!" said Tom, with a smile.

But you'll be able to get anything you like at Bideford, Bunter; we shall be there late in the afternoon."

Billy Bunter blinked at him! He did not feel quite so sure of that. Devon folk were hearty and hospitable, it was true; but a fellow whose cash resources were limited to a French penny doubted whether he would be able to feed on the fat of the land even in that hearty and hospitable county.

"That beast!" said Bunter, with deep feeling.

"Oh, dry up, Bunter!" said Tom curtly. He could guess that that remark was an allusion to the Bounder and the glorious holiday that Bunter hadn't had! He turned away.

"I say, don't walk off while a chap's talking to you!" said Bunter irritably. "I suppose you haven't got any chocs or toffee?"

"Neither."

"I suppose you couldn't afford them!" agreed Bunter. "I suppose you don't even happen to have any bullseyes?"

Tom laughed.

"No, not even a bullseye. You'll be able to get all the bullseyes you want at Bideford."

Again Bunter doubted it!

"That cad!" said Bunter. "A castle and a butler and a touring car and all that—and then stranding a fellow on that putrid island with nothing to eat—practically nothing!"

"I've no doubt you asked for it," said Tom. Only when Bunter got on the subject of Herbert Vernon-Smith did Tom's almost inexhaustible patience show signs of wearing thin.

"Yah!" snorted Bunter. "You'd stick up for him, of course—pal of yours, ain't he? Precious sort of pal! Well, he's jolly well stranded worse than I was, anyhow, and serve him jolly well right!"

Tom stared.

"Do you mean Smithy?" he asked.

"Yes, I jolly well do!" grunted Bunter. "Still, I shall tell a policeman when I get ashore. He's treated me rottenly, but I'm not the chap to leave him to it. Kindest friend and noblest foe—that was always my way."

"What the thump are you talking about?" exclaimed Tom Redwing impatiently.

"Eh, Smithy!" answered Bunter.

"Has anything happened to Smithy? What do you mean?" exclaimed Tom. His voice was sharp and anxious. "You told me Wharton and his friends were on Blackrock. You never said that Smithy was with them."

"He ain't with them," answered Bunter. "How could he be, you fat-head, when it was Smithy stranded them there by a rotten trick?"

"Then what do you mean?" hooted Redwing. "What do you mean by Smithy being stranded, you fat ass?"

"You needn't yell at me, Redwing. If you think you can yell at me, because you've given me a lift on this putrid old tub—"

"Will you answer me, you fat fool?" Tom's voice was sharp with anger and anxiety, and his inexhaustible patience seemed to be exhausted at last. "Isn't Smithy with his father?"

"I suppose he was," answered Bunter. "But he jolly well isn't now."

"Have you seen him, then?"

"Eh? Of course, I have," answered Bunter, blinking at him. "How could I know what had happened to him if I hadn't seen him?"

"Will you tell me what's happened to him—if anything has?" roared Tom.

"I thought he was with his father. Do you mean that he's on Blackrock, or what?"

"Well, he was the night before last," answered Bunter. "They had him in that cave—"

"Who had?" yelled Tom.

"Those two beasts—Harker and Coot. You see, I saw them getting him out of the boat, and I got the boat and cleared," explained Bunter. "I don't know what they were going to do with him—rob him, I expect. I mean to say, they wouldn't bring him out to that cave in the middle of the night for nothing. I say, how many lumps did you put in my coffee?"

"You saw Smithy—" gasped Tom.

"Yes, I like six lumps. That old goat, Oke, never had any sugar on the island at all. Not a lump. Where's the sugar?"

"Will you tell me what's happened to Smithy, you burbling fat fool?" roared Tom Redwing.

"Yes, if you'll give a fellow time to speak. Where's the sugar? If you're going to be mean with the sugar, Redwing, I can jolly well say— Yoo-hoo-hoop!"

Billy Bunter forgot all about the sugar—important as it was—as Tom Redwing, quite out of patience now, and looking anything but his usual good-tempered self, grasped him by the fat neck, dragged him to his feet, and shook him with all the strength of a vigorous arm.

"Now, you fat fool!" he panted.

"Groooogh!" gurgled Bunter.

"Tell me about Smithy—"

"Urrggghh!"

"Tell me this instant—"

"Gurrghh! How can I tut-tut-tell you, when you're chook-chook—choking me, and I haven't any bib-bob-bub-breath?" gurgled Bunter. "Urrgh! Leggo, you beast—wurrgh—and I'll tut-tu-tut-tell you! Yurrgh! Wharrer you cutting up rusty like that for, you beast? Gurrghh!"

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Bout Ship!

TOM REDWING let go the fat Owl's collar

Billy Bunter gasped and spluttered for breath, his fat face crimson with wrath.

Tom was wild with impatience. Why, Bunter did not know. Bunter did not know why Redwing had so suddenly cut up rusty, and he was naturally annoyed.

"Urrggh!" gurgled Bunter. "Look at my collar, you cheeky beast!"

Tom calmed himself with an effort. Shaking Bunter was a satisfactory process in itself, but it was not the way to draw information from the fat Owl of the Remove.

"Tell me at once, Bunter!" he said, as quietly as he could. "Where did you see Smithy, and when?"

"Urrggh! In that beastly cave! Urrggh!"

"What cave—on Blackrock Island?"

"Urrgh! Yes, the smugglers' cave. There ain't any smugglers, but there's a cave. Those fatheads were always exploring it. I fancy they thought they were going to find something there. Blessed if I know what, or care, either, and—"

"Never mind that. You were in the cave at night?"

"Yes. I couldn't get out, because of the beastly tide! I couldn't let that beast Harker see me, you know."

"Who is Harker?"

"He's the brute who was with Coot!"

"Then who's Coot?"

"He's the brute who was with Harker."

Tom Redwing breathed hard. It was not easy to elicit information from Billy Bunter, though the fat Owl was doing his best—reading very clearly in Tom's face that there was danger of another shaking.

"Who are both of them, then?" asked Tom.

"They're the brutes who were with Rance."

"Rance! Who is Rance?"

"The man who was with those brutes Harker and Coot."

Tom Redwing made a movement, and Billy Bunter promptly popped back out of reach.

"Look here, you beast, if you shick-shack-shook—I mean shake—me again, I'll jolly well—"

"Give him time, Tom," said old John, from the tiller. "He can't help being stoopid, mebbe."

"Look here—" hooted Bunter.

"You say that you saw Smithy in the cave in the night?" said Tom Redwing, trying to be patient. "And that Harker and Coot, whoever they are, were with him? What were they doing? What makes you think that they had him there to rob him?"

"Well, they had his hands tied behind him," said Bunter. "They chucked him out of the boat like a sack of spuds."

Tom compressed his lips. In all his thoughts of Smithy, he had pictured him, as usual, having a gorgeous time in expensive places; money flowing like water. It was a startling shock to him to learn that his chum was in a bad scrape—perhaps in deadly danger. But he controlled his angry impatience. Bunter had to burble what he knew in his own way.

"You are sure his hands were tied?" he asked.

"Eh? Of course! Think Smithy would have let them chuck him about, if they hadn't been? You know his rotten temper."

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"If his hands were tied, he was a prisoner. Do you mean that they brought him off the mainland in the boat to the cave—as a prisoner?" asked Tom.

"Blessed if I know where they brought him from! I know they brought him to the cave, because I saw him. You see, I thought it was one of the other fellows at first. I couldn't see his face with that muffer tied over his mouth."

"A muffer—tied over his mouth!" muttered Tom.

He was getting the story out of Bunter, fragment by fragment. But every fresh item added to his deep alarm for his chum.

"That was in the boat," explained Bunter. "They took it off when he was landed, and I saw his face. Besides, I knew his voice when he started calling them names. You know Smithy does—"

"What did they do with him?" breathed Tom.

"Walked him up the cove," answered Bunter. "Then I got out of the blankets."

"The blankets!" repeated Tom.

"You see, when they went away with Rance in the boat, I thought they were gone for good," said the fat Owl, "so I got into Harker's blankets, and went to sleep. I was jolly sleepy, I can tell you, and it was jolly cold."

Tom tried to piece out the rambling narrative.

"There were three of them—Rance and Coot and Harker—and they went off in the boat," he said. "After that Harker and Coot came back in the boat, with Smithy a prisoner. Is that it?"

"Yes. I woke up when they came back, trampling and grunting almost on a fellow's head. I say, wasn't it jolly lucky they never saw me?" said Bunter. "They might have bagged me, just like Smithy, if they had."

"After they'd taken him up the cave, did you see him again?"

"Oh, really, Redwing! How could I, when he never came back? Have a little sense," said Bunter.

"Then what did you do?"

"I jolly well hiked into the boat! You see, the tide was going out, but it wasn't low enough for me to get along the beach, so I thought I'd pull round to old Dave Oke's cove in the boat—see?"

"Who is Dave Oke?"

"He's the man on the island—fisherman and caretaker, or something. Old goat with a wooden leg. He was cheeky—"

"Where were Wharton and his friends?"

"Gone to bed, I expect. They were miles away—half a mile, at least, at the cove. I should have got back there, you see, only the beastly tide carried the beastly boat out, so I couldn't. I got fearfully hungry—"

"Then, so far as you know, Smithy was left prisoner in the cave?" said Tom Redwing.

"Yes, I suppose so," agreed Bunter.

"Why didn't you tell me this at once—when I picked you up yesterday?" breathed Redwing.

"I forgot."

"What?" yelled Redwing.

"I wish you wouldn't bellow at a chap!" yapped Bunter peevishly. "What did it matter?"

"What did it matter!" gasped Redwing.

"Yes! I forgot all about it—I was jolly hungry in that beastly boat, and had something a bit more important than Smithy to think about! I don't

see that it matters, anyhow. I was going to tell somebody when I got ashore—"

"You fat fool!"

"Oh, really, Redwing—"

"I've a good mind to boot you from one end of the lugger to the other," said Tom. "But I suppose you can't help being a born idiot!"

"Beast!"

Tom turned away from the fat Owl. He had not got it all clear yet—but he had got it clear that his chum, Herbert Vernon-Smith, was in danger in lawless hands. If Billy Bunter had seen him brought to a lonely cave, by boat, at night, a prisoner in the hands of two ruffians of some sort, the Bounder of Greyfriars was in peril; and there was only one thought in Tom's mind—to throw everything else aside and go to his help!

His father, at the tiller, had listened to Bunter with a perplexed and thoughtful frown on his bronzed face. As Tom came over to him, old John read his thoughts at once and smiled faintly. He answered Tom's unspoken question.

"Ay, ay, lad!" he said. "'Bout ship, Tom! We're making Blackrock Island. That's what you want, I reckon."

"Yes, father!" Tom breathed quickly. "Bunter's a fool—it's not easy to get any sense out of him, but it's plain enough that Smithy is in a bad scrape. You remember Smithy, father—one of the best chaps breathing—"

"Ay, ay! 'Bout ship, Tom!"

Billy Bunter, left to his own devices, helped himself to the sugar. He was too busy crunching lump after lump even to notice that the course of the lugger was changed. Bunter had a sweet tooth, and lumps of sugar came in welcome when no toffee, butterscotch, bullseyes, or such articles were available.

Bunter crunched lumps of sugar with considerable satisfaction; and not till the tin was empty did he bestow any more of his attention on Redwing.

Then he squeaked:

"I say, Redwing! Got any more sugar?"

Tom did not heed. He was busy with the sail.

"Deaf?" hooted Bunter. "I say—"

"Oh, shut up!"

"Beast! Look here, how long is it going to be before we get to Bideford?" demanded Bunter indignantly.

"Fathead!"

Bunter had to make the best he could of that answer. As the lugger's stern was now turned towards Bideford it was likely to be long before Billy Bunter got to that ancient seaport of Devon.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

Something Like A Surprise!

"HERBERT!"

"Yes, father!" muttered the Bounder.

"It's nearly noon! That villain said that he would return this morning. When he comes—"

Mr. Samuel Vernon-Smith paused.

"Never!" said the Bounder. "You're not giving in to that scoundrel on my account, father! Never!"

The millionaire stood silent.

The dreary hours had passed slowly in the rock vault in the heart of the Blackrock cliff. Only by his watch could the millionaire tell that it was day again on the island.

The millionaire's plump face had a haggard look.

For himself, Samuel Vernon-Smith would have faced anything that might come rather than have surrendered to

the demands of the kidnapper. Indeed, the thought of yielding had not even entered his mind.

But it was different now—with his son a prisoner in the rock vault, doomed to share his fate.

Smithy, in the corner of the vault, had employed the weary hours in attempts to get loose—but unavailingly. His hands and feet were shackled, and a rope fastened to the rock kept him out of reach of aid from his father. Rance had taken care of that—he was taking no risks.

The Bounder could move about within a radius of a few feet. But he could not get loose, and he could not reach his fellow-prisoner. He was pale, haggard, worn; but his spirit was still indomitable.

"It's all my fault!" the Bounder muttered miserably. "If I hadn't been a fool—a rotter—a beast—I should have been with you, father, and then—then that brute might never have got away with this—"

The Bounder could have groaned as he thought of it.

He had been determined to have his own way—and he had had it! By that wretched trick on his headmaster he had gained his point—he had had his extra leave, and he had had his jaunt with Pon & Co., of Highcliffe. And this was what had come of it! This!

True, he had never expected that trickery to come to his father's knowledge. But he had risked that; and the risk had materialised. And instead of staying with his father, when he came to Okeham, he had been bidden to go his own way—his own master, since that was what he wanted!

But for that, he would have been with his father—he would have been on the spot. Rance would not then have found it so easy to carry out his plot, if he had been able to carry it out at all. One act of thoughtless and self-willed disobedience had led to this disaster!

There was a long silence.

"You did wrong, Herbert—you did very wrong—but I fear that I was harder than I should have been!" said Mr. Vernon-Smith, with a sigh. "Let us forget all about that, my boy. Herbert, it goes badly against the grain to think of yielding an inch to that rascal, but—"

"Never!" said the Bounder. "I tell you it's all my fault, and I can stand it better than you can, father. Besides, we've got chances—lots of chances! Those chaps from my school are on the island—I dare say they're feeling pretty sore with me now, but they'd do anything to help, if they knew—and they might stumble on this place!"

"That is a very faint hope, Herbert."

"There's Bunter, too—from what Rance said it's practically certain that Bunter saw me brought here. He got away—"

"Adrift at sea, Herbert—"

"It's a hundred to one he will be picked up! Ten to one he's been picked up already! Help may be already on the way! Even that fat fool will have sense enough to tell what he saw—"

"That is true, Herbert! But—you heard Rance's threat! If there is danger of a search he will block the tunnel! All the more because he is a coward and a rat, he will not dare to let us be found here if he can prevent it."

"He mayn't be able to prevent it! I don't care!" said the Bounder doggedly. "I'd perish in this hole before I'd give in an inch to that cur! But I tell you, father, there's lots of chances—lots! While there's life there's hope! I tell you—"

Mr. Vernon-Smith smiled faintly.



"All together, you fellows—shove!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, planting his strong shoulders against the rock. His chums reached round him and lent their aid. They exerted their strength to the utmost, but the rock did not shift a fraction of an inch!

"You're a chip of the old block, Herbert! He will come soon—I believe I can hear someone in the tunnel now. When he comes—"

"Leave it to me to answer him!" said the Bounder savagely. "By gum, if I could get a grip on him! I knocked him out in his office at Okeham when he refused to tell me where you were! Oh, if I'd guessed then—" Smithy gritted his teeth. "Leave it to me to answer the cur!"

Mr. Vernon-Smith nodded. There was an unmistakable sound in the dark tunnel now. Someone was coming, and it could only be Rance.

Smithy fixed his eyes, gleaming, on the opening of the tunnel. There was no doubt about the answer he was going to give the estate-agent of Okeham when he came. Savage words of scorn and contempt were on his lips as a figure appeared at the opening of the tunnel.

But he did not utter them. He stood transfixed, his eyes bulging, as he saw, not Elias Rance's rat-like face, but the ruddy countenance of Bob Cherry of the Greyfriars Remove! He stared in amazement.

Mr. Vernon-Smith gave so violent a start that his chain rattled and clinked. His eyes, like the Bounder's, bulged at that unexpected sight.

Bob Cherry stepped in—warily, with a stick in his hand—ready for Rance and his crew, if they were there, as the Famous Five naturally expected, never dreaming that anyone else could be there. Following him came the rest of the Co. watchful and wary.

"Smithy!" Five voices gasped that name in a chorus of amazement as the juniors saw the Bounder of Greyfriars.

They stared at him—not merely amazed, but utterly stupefied.

"Smithy!" repeated Bob, like a fellow in a dream. "Is—is—is that Smithy? Is—is—is that the old Bounder? Are we dreaming this?"

"My esteemed Smithy—" stuttered Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"Smithy!" said Harry Wharton. "Oh holy smoke! Smithy! What the thump are you doing here, Smithy?"

"And—and—and Smithy's pater!" stuttered Johnny Bull, blinking almost dizzily at the millionaire. "Oh crikey!"

"What on earth—" gasped Frank Nugent.

In sheer stupefaction, Harry Wharton & Co. stared at the prisoners of the rock-vault—or rather goggled at them. Never had they been so utterly astounded. It seemed to them more like a strange vision from a dream, than reality.

They had wondered, and surmised, what might be the secret of the sea-cave. They had never dreamed of anything like this! Never for a moment had they thought of the Bounder of Greyfriars, or his father, in connection with it. And now—

"You fellows—" The Bounder's voice came, husky. "You fellows—" After the first shock of astonishment, his face brightened, his eyes danced. "Father! Only a few minutes ago I said they might stumble on us—"

"But-but what what—" Bob Cherry fairly stuttered. "Oh! That footprint in the cave yesterday! Smithy's—"

"Smithy's!" repeated Harry Wharton. "Oh! But—what—what—what are you tied up like that for, Smithy? What—what—"

"Ask Rance!" said Smithy. "Here, get me loose! Cut me loose, for good-

ness' sake! Rance is coming back—I want my hands loose for him when he comes! Oh, this is tophole! I tell you, get me out of this!"

Harry Wharton opened his pocket-knife and cut at the cords.

In a minute or two Smithy was free—aching, cramped, stiff from his bonds, but with dancing eyes; his hands free, ready to deal with Elias Rance when he came!

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER. A Desperate Deed!

ELIAS RANCE stopped from the boat, his rat-like eyes watchful and wary.

It was high moon; the spring sunshine streaming down on Blackrock Island and the blue sea.

Up and down the shore Rance glanced—relieved to see that no one was in sight. After his treachery of the day before, he knew what to expect of the Greyfriars fellows, if they came on him; and it was a relief to see that they were nowhere near the smugglers' cave.

Rance had returned—for the millionaire's answer. The tide was out—he trod upon the shelving sand to the cave, and Harker and Coot, after securing the boat, followed him.

During that morning Rance had made some inquiries up and down the Devon coast; and had heard no news of Bunter. It was certain that the fat junior had not drifted ashore.

So far Rance was safe. But if the fat schoolboy had been picked up by some vessel at sea he would land when that vessel reached port, and then he would tell what he had seen—what

Rance did not doubt that he must have seen. Had he been picked up?

If he had, the police might be at the cave next day—nay, even by sunset this day. A search of the smugglers' cave was certain—if Bunter was saved. Rance hoped—he tried to believe—that the chances were against it—and he had, at any rate, prevented Bunter's friends from starting a search.

If the fat schoolboy had gone down, all was well for him—he could carry on with his original plan. But if there was danger, he was driven to his last desperate resource—and though his heart quaked and his nerves shook, he was resolved upon it.

That noontide Mr. Vernon-Smith had to yield. If he yielded, all was clear. If he refused, the bottle-neck in the tunnel would be blocked up, entombing him. Then, if Bunter's tale was told, Rance was safe.

And if, after the passage of days, nothing was heard of Bunter, if all proved safe, he could still return to the sea-cave and open the tunnel again.

It would remain blocked, hidden from all human knowledge, so long as there was danger of a search—he was savagely, pitilessly resolved on that. He had little courage for such a deed; but he had the vicious desperation of a rat driven into a corner.

"They've been here!" grunted Harker, and Rance turned back to look at him.

"Ay, ay, they have been 'ere, and they're 'ere yet!" said Peter Coot.

"The schoolboys?" muttered Rance. "The whole gang, and you can lay to that!" grunted Harker. He pointed to the sand left bare by the tide.

Rance stared down at the many footprints left by the Famous Five hardly an hour before his landing.

He looked into the shadowy cave savagely.

If the schoolboys were there he had to wait. He could not ascend the rope-ladder with eyes on him. He gritted his teeth.

"I see nothing—hear nothing of them!" he snapped. "What makes you think that they are still there?"

Harker gave a grunt.

"Look at them tracks," he said. "Don't they all lead inward? There ain't one coming back."

"Oh!" muttered Rance.

It was unmistakable, now that he looked at the sign in the sand. The Greyfriars juniors were in the cave; there was no doubt about that.

He stared in under the rocky arch. Nothing was to be seen of them, nothing heard; there was no gleam of a light. Yet they must be there.

A light in the darkness of the cave would have been visible. If they were there they were in the dark. Had their lantern gone out, or what?

Rance looked round at the longshoremen again.

"They must be there!" he muttered.

"You can lay to that!" grunted Harker.

"Perhaps not all of them—if only two or three we can deal with them—" muttered Rance.

Harker shook his head.

"It's the 'ole gang!" he answered. "Look at them tracks—count up to five, can't you? Looks as if they was strung out, like they was carrying something long and 'eavy—jest look!"

Rance looked again. There was no doubt of it—five separate sets of footprints were easily picked up in the level sand; so deeply imprinted, and so strung out that it looked, as Harker said, as if the schoolboys had been carrying something long and heavy.

"The lot of them!" muttered Rance. "Yes—they are all there! But—but—I can see no light!"

He stared up the cave again. His gaze became fixed—frightened.

"Have they—" he breathed. "Can they—" He broke off, his lips palsied, and wiped a damp brow.

"They ain't gone up the tunnel," said Harker reassuringly. "They couldn't! Peter 'ere had to stand on my shoulders the first time when we fixed up the rope-ladder. They couldn't do it—a monkey couldn't!"

"No!" breathed Rance. "It is impossible! Yet—"

"They ain't got into the tunnel, even

if they ever seen it at all," said Peter Coot, shaking his head.

Rance did not answer; he ran into the cave.

Harker and Coot followed him, more slowly.

Neither of the longshoremen believed it possible for the schoolboys to have climbed into the gap in the rock wall at the back of the cave, even if they had ever noticed it at all; indeed, they knew that such a climb was impossible for the juniors. But there was dread in Rance's heart.

He flashed on his pocket-lamp as he passed the limit of daylight, and ran on, breathless.

After him the longshoremen tramped in their heavy sea boots.

There was no sound, no sign of the schoolboys. Where were they, if they were in the cave—and the tracks at the entrance proved that all five of them had gone in since last the tide was up!

Rance, breathless, reached the rock wall at the end!

Then he knew—and he staggered, with a faint cry. The light of his flashlamp revealed the old mast, leaning up against the gap high above as the juniors had left it—and beside it hung the rope-ladder!

Every vestige of colour drained from the wretched man's face. The light flickered as the lamp shook in his hand.

"By hokey!" breathed Big Harker, as he reached the spot and stared at the old mast and the hanging rope-ladder.

Peter Coot whistled softly.

"They—they are—they are there!" Rance's voice came in jerks. "They—they brought that pole to climb—they found the rope-ladder—they must be there now!"

"You can lay to that!" grunted Harker. "They ain't gone, or we should see their tracks! They've found the old lubber and the young lubber—you can lay to that, Mr. Rance!"

Rance gave a groan.

It was plain now that his secret had been discovered; at that very moment, the Greyfriars schoolboys were in the tunnel above, if they had not already reached the rock-vault where his prisoners were!

His game was up now, with a vengeance!

It was not now the uncertain danger from Bunter that he had to dread! It was the absolute certainty that his kidnapped prisoners had been found—that they would be released and rescued; that before the sun went down in the Atlantic he would be arrested on the charge of kidnapping, and the charge of misappropriation of funds! The prison doors yawned wide for Elias Rance.

He staggered against the rock wall, limp, as if his knees were failing him.

Harker and Coot muttered together. They were not so deep in the mud as Rance was in the mire; but they knew what the result of this must be to them—long terms of imprisonment for the part they had taken in the kidnapping. Rance had paid them well for their rascally work—with money that belonged to Mr. Vernon-Smith. The two ruffians realised now that they had more than earned his pay, as matters had turned out. They muttered together, with savage, sullen faces.

Rance leaned on the rock, white as chalk.

All was lost now. All that was left to him was to save his skin by a dreadful and desperate deed.

Never for a moment had he dreamed of so terrible a thing when he had entered on the slippery path of crime.

Old Mr. Rance had left him a good

PUMPKIN BARRAGE!

From the direction of Tod's House a large, round object rose into the air. The two prefects watched it, then dodged just in time. It descended with a squelch, covering their trousers with pulp. A laugh echoed across. "That's Boulton," Congreve observed. "I'd spot his guffaw anywhere. If he's going to heave pumpkins at us it's time we took a hand!" So Congreve and Batty Haynes join Jiggers Pratt and his comrades in their battle against the inmates of Tod's. And not for nothing had Batty the reputation of being a mechanical genius! Read of the ensuing conflict in

"War of the Catapults"

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business, if he cared to give time and industry to it. Cars to the races had been much more attractive than dull days in the office—billiards and late hours at the Okeham Arms more agreeable than early to bed, early to rise. Gambling had led to debt—but even when he had dipped into a client's money to meet pressing debts it had been with the intention of replacing it—shortly! Which led, inevitably, to a morass of difficulties—deeper and deeper—

Young Mr. Rance had been on the brink of ruin when Mr. Vernon-Smith came to Okeham, and the funds placed in the hands of Rance & Co. had saved him—but left him the millionaire to deal with! Then came the kidnapping—just in time to prevent discovery and arrest.

Even at that stage the wretched man had never dreamed of anything worse. But fatal step followed fatal step—unforeseen! And now—

Now he was not going to screw a full acquittance and a heavy ransom out of the kidnapped millionaire! Now he had the choice of facing penal servitude for what he had done already, or adding a darker and more dreadful crime!

His face was white—his hands shaking. But his mind was made up—he was a rat in a corner, biting to the last.

He made a sign to Harker and Coot to follow him, and clambered up the rope ladder. They followed, in silence, and he flashed on the lamp and led the way up the tunnel—to the spot where it narrowed to little more than a slit, and the rocky roof came down low.

There he stopped.

The two ruffians looked at him, and their own faces paled. Beyond that bottleneck, far beyond, was the rock-vault, with the millionaire and his son, and the Greyfriars schoolboys! Trapped and entombed, if that outlet was closed!

There was a long minute of silence.

"Lose no time!" Rance spoke in a low whisper. "If they return—before we are ready—all is lost!"

Peter Coot looked at him and, without a word, turned and walked back the way he had come. He, at any rate, would have no hand in such a deed.

Harker hesitated. He was a brute and a ruffian, and he had no liking for the schoolboys who had handled him unceremoniously enough. But he could not do it, and he, too, turned and followed Coot.

Rance was left alone, breathing in jerks.

Those brutes, those ruffians, faced prison rather than have a hand in such a deed.

Rance stood by the bottleneck, wiping his brow. Then, in the fear that the schoolboys might return, and that it would be too late, he moved along to the spot where the loose boulders lay, grasped a heavy rock, and strained his strength to move it! It moved—it rolled—it crashed into the narrow bottle-neck of the tunnel, blocking it!

The crash rang booming in the hollows of the cliff.

Then, with feverish haste, he piled rock on rock, rugged boulder on boulder, sweating as he worked with terrified haste. He was panting, exhausted, when at last he limped away down the tunnel—his terrible work done.

Harker and Coot were waiting at the boat. They did not speak when the white-faced, shaking wretch joined them; neither did Rance speak. He

stepped into the boat, and the long-shoremen pulled away from Blackrock Island.

No eye fell on them as they went. Far away on the sea was the brown sail of a lugger, beating slowly shoreward; the only speck on the boundless Atlantic. But only the wheeling sea birds saw the guilty wretch as he fled.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

Entombed!

"WHAT luck!" breathed the Bounder. "Oh, what luck!" Smithy's eyes danced. He rubbed numbed wrists, jerked at stiffened limbs, grinning with anticipation all the time.

Rance had not come yet! But Rance was coming—and when he came—

The Bounder of Greyfriars was ready for him when he came! He pictured his knuckles dashing into the sharp rat-face with almost savage satisfaction.

Harry Wharton & Co. had gathered round the millionaire.

It had been easy enough to free Smithy, but the padlock and chain that secured the millionaire were not so easy to deal with. It was clear that careful preparations had been made for his imprisonment in the rock-vault—the kidnapping of Smithy had been an unforeseen contingency.

"We'll get you loose, sir!" said Bob Cherry cheerfully. "It will take a bit of time—but we'll manage it all right."

"And if Rance drops in he won't stop us!" said Harry Wharton. "We'll collar him when he comes, sir, if you say the word!"

Mr. Vernon-Smith's plump face expressed a grim satisfaction.

"Do so!" he said. "My dear boys, I cannot say how glad I am to see you here. Rance told me that some of my son's schoolfellows were on this island—but he mentioned no names but Bunter's. Did you come to Blackrock for your Easter holidays?"

"Oh! Sort of!" stammered Bob.

The Famous Five had rather forgotten the trick that Smithy had played on them. Now they were reminded of it by the millionaire's question they did not want to put Smithy's father wise on that subject.

But the Bounder broke in.

"It was my doing, father!" he said quietly. "I had a row on with these fellows, and stranded them on the island with Bunter to get even."

Mr. Vernon-Smith gave a grunt.

"I need not ask who was to blame in the quarrel, Herbert!" he said dryly.

"No!" said Smithy, in the same quiet tone. "You need not, father! But I'll tell you, all the same! They found out about that rotten trick I played to get my extra leave before Easter, and humped me in my study for it—as I jolly well deserved."

"Oh!" said Mr. Vernon-Smith.

"I needn't tell them I'm sorry—they can guess that much!" added the Bounder. "It was rotten—though I did not think so at the time. If any fellow here wants to punch my head for it, he can get going."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"We were all going to punch your head, next term, Smithy!" he said. "That is, when we first got landed and stranded here. But the fact is, we haven't had a bad time, playing Crusoe, and we'd rather forgotten all about it."

"The punchfulness was going to be terrific, my esteemed Smithy! But in the esteemed circumstances the forgetfulness and the forgiveness are the proper caper!" declared Murree Jamset Ram Singh.

Boom! came a deep, echoing sound from the rock tunnel.

The juniors all started and stared round.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What was that?" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"Sounded like a fall of rock!" said Frank Nugent. "A good distance away, if it was!"

The Greyfriars fellows listened.

Faintly, vaguely, echoes came along the tunnel. But the sounds died into silence.

"Not Rance yet, anyhow!" said Bob. "By gum, it will be a bit of a surprise for the dear man if he barges in while we're here. Collar him as soon as he shows his nose."

"You bet!"

"Leave that to me!" said the Bounder, his eyes glittering. "Rance won't want much collaring after I've finished with the rat. By gum! I shall be glad to see him again! Can you get my father loose?"

"I fancy so!" answered Bob. "We can't bust the chain and we can't get it off that rock—but I think we can handle the padlock. If you'll stand clear, sir, I'll try my stick on it."

The millionaire stretched out his foot so that the padlock rested on the rocky floor.

Bob swiped it with his cudgel.

Crack, crack, crack! landed swipe after swipe, and the padlock burst at last.

Mr. Vernon-Smith shook himself free.

"That's that!" said Bob. "We can get out of this now, sir, and wait for Rance in the cave! We want to see the dear man—not only because Smithy's waiting to push his features through the back of his head, but we shall have to bag his boat to get off the island."

"I suppose there's no doubt that he's coming?" asked Harry. "We can't get off Blackrock without a boat."

"He said so!" answered Mr. Vernon-Smith. "I fancied that it was Rance when I heard you boys coming through the tunnel. He was coming back once more, for my answer to his demands! He is, I think, sure to come."

"Then we'll bag him in the cave, when he does, and collar his boat!" said Harry. "We'll take him ashore with us, and hand him over to the police, sir."

"Exactly!" said Mr. Vernon-Smith.

Bob lighted the lantern again, and stepped out of the rock-vault into the tunnel. His friends followed him, and Herbert Vernon-Smith followed on with his father.

It seemed "all clear" to the Greyfriars party now. If Rance did not come they had to wait at the cove for the boat from Potkelly, in a few days' time. But if he came, he would fall into their hands, and his boat would be at their disposal. Rance would go back to the mainland, a prisoner in his own boat. It was a very cheery and satisfied party that threaded the winding way along the rock tunnel, following Bob with the lantern.

The greater part of the distance had been traversed, when Bob came to a sudden halt, with a startled face.

"Oh, my hat!" he exclaimed.

"What's up?"

"Look!" said Bob, in a low voice.

"What is it?" came Mr. Vernon-Smith's voice from behind. "Why do you not proceed?"

"The way's blocked, sir!"

"What?"

The millionaire pushed forward. The colour wavered in his face as he looked. Where the tunnel narrowed and lowered to a bottle-neck, the way was blocked

by a mass of rock. He remembered Rance's threat.

"Good heavens!" he muttered. "That villain—"

"That noise we heard—" breathed Bob. "By gum! It was this rock falling—"

Harry Wharton set his lips.

"It never fell," he said. "It's been pushed in from the other side. Put that lantern down, and let's shove, all together!"

It was not easy to get at the obstruction in the narrow space. But Bob Cherry's strong shoulders were planted against it, and his chums reached round him and got their hands on it, and they all pushed together, exerting their strength to the utmost.

The rock did not shift a fraction of an inch. Heavy as it was, that concentrated effort would have moved it had it stood there alone; but it did not show a sign of moving. They did not need telling that other rocks were piled against it, and they did not need telling whose hands had piled them.

"Rance!" breathed the Bounder. "He must have come—Rance! He must have known you fellows had come, then—and now—now—"

The Bounder broke off.

In the glimmering lantern-light, the trapped schoolboys looked at one another with paling faces. There was no outlet, save by the tunnel, and the tunnel was blocked with immovable rocks.

In deep silence, they looked at one another's paling faces—knowing that they were entombed in the heart of the great cliff of Blackrock.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.

Redwing To The Rescue!

BILLY BUNTER blinked—and blinked again—through his big spectacles.

There was a puzzled pucker in Bunter's fat brow.

Under the red sunset, the lugger, with the boat towing behind, was standing in towards the cliffs of Devonshire.

Billy Bunter looked in vain for a sign of a seaport, or any human habitation. If this was Bideford, it did not look as Bunter had expected that ancient port to look. Bunter could see no sign of a seaport, or of any shipping, or any building. But there was something strangely familiar in the soaring cliff that jutted into the red of the sunset.

"I say, Redwing—" squeaked the fat Owl.

Redwing did not answer. He had hardly spoken to the fat Owl all day. It was useless to tell Bunter what he thought of him, and not very useful to boot him round the lugger.

"Look here!" howled Bunter. "Where are we getting? That looks to me just like that rotten island again!"

Old John glanced at him, and smiled faintly.

"That's Blackrock," he said.

"Oh crikey! What the dickens have we come here for?" demanded Bunter. "You said you were going into Bideford, you fathead, Redwing!"

"Oh, dry up!" snapped Tom.

All day the lugger had been beating back over her former course. Every hour, every minute, had been crammed with anxiety for Tom Redwing.

What had happened to his chum? From what he had learned from Bunter, it looked like kidnapping. Whatever it was, his chum had been

taken at night, a bound prisoner, into the cave under the great cliff of Blackrock. He could hardly have been taken there unless he was to remain there, a prisoner. Tom's only thought was to get to the cave, without losing a moment after so much time had already been wasted by the fat Owl's fatuous stupidity.

Bunter blinked at the soaring cliff again. Then he turned his spectacles on Tom once more.

"You silly chump! Wharrer you come back here for?" he squeaked. "If you've come here for Wharton and his lot, I think you might have landed me first! They've been on that beastly island long enough to stay a day or two longer. Besides, they like it. I don't suppose they want to be taken off!"

"Be quiet, you fat ass!"

"Beast! I can jolly well tell you you've had your trouble for nothing!" hooted Bunter. "Smithy thought he was pulling their leg a treat when he stranded them there—but they liked it all right—it's the sort of thing they do like, silly asses like those chaps! They wouldn't leave the island when Rance ordered them off—they said they were going to stick there till the end of the hols—"

Redwing looked at him.

It had not apparently occurred to Bunter that Redwing had made Blackrock Island in the lugger to seek for his chum.

Bunter had not really had time to give the matter much thought; he had been occupied during most of the day in diminishing the lugger's store of provisions and snoring between meals.

And if Bunter wanted something to think about, he had his own affairs to occupy his fat mind—for even if he landed at Bideford, it was rather a problem how he was going farther, with nothing but a French penny to see him through!

Whether Tom Redwing had any money, and whether if he had he would lend some to Bunter, was quite enough for the fat Owl to think about—and a much more urgent matter than anything that could have happened to Herbert Vernon-Smith—in Bunter's opinion, at least!

"You fat idiot!" said Tom. In his keen anxiety, he seemed to have quite lost his usual patience with the exasperating Owl. "Look! Is that the cave?"

"The cave!" repeated Bunter. He blinked at the soaring cliff, but the dark opening of the cave under it was beyond his range of vision. "I can't see it! It's under that cliff, though—I know that cliff, blow it! I climbed up it once from the island side, and when I asked those beasts to help me, that idiot Bob Cherry lugged me along by my ear—"

"That's the place, Tom!" said old John Redwing. "And with the tide running in we shall lay the lugger close!"

"What are you going to the cave for?" asked Bunter.

"For Smithy, you utter idiot!" growled Tom.

Bunter blinked at him. This did not seem sense to Bunter! Bunter was not feeling specially anxious about Smithy. It had not occurred to his fat brain that Redwing was.

"Well, that's rot!" said the fat Owl. "You could have told a policeman when we got to Bideford. I was going to, as I said. I don't see what you want to come here yourself for. We could have got to Bideford before this!"

"Idiot!"

"You can call a fellow names!" snorted Bunter. "But I think it's rot—wallowing about in this putrid old tub to get back to this beastly old island all day long! I've seen as much as I want of this filthy island, and I can tell you so. I'd much rather have gone on to Bideford."

"Fool!"

"Is that what you've been shirking about all day?" asked Bunter, further enlightenment dawning on his podgy brain. "It's like you, I must say—thinking of that beast Smithy—I think you might have thought of me a little. I really think that!"

"Will you shut up?"

"No," answered Bunter firmly. "I won't! I call it rotten—keeping a fellow on this old tub just because of Smithy! And I can jolly well tell you that I shall expect you to run into Potkelly—that's the nearest place—and land me there! You can't expect me to stick on this lugger till you get to Bideford, after wasting all this time!"

Tom Redwing made no answer to that. He took the tiller from his father and John Redwing handled the sail—both of them eyeing the shore with watchful eyes as the lugger drew closer in.

The sail dropped, and the lugger floated in on the tide till old John let the hook go. Then Tom grasped the tow-ropes and pulled the towed boat alongside.

The sea was washing in at the cave-mouth; but there was no depth for the lugger. The vessel swung to her cable at a distance from the cliff, and Tom dropped into the boat.

His father handed down a lantern, and tossed in a couple of belaying-pins. Whether Smithy was a guard-prisoner in the cave, they did not know; but if the two ruffians Bunter had described were still with him, Tom and his father were ready to deal with them.

Billy Bunter eyed all these proceedings with dignified disapproval.

It was clear that both the Redwings were thinking wholly and solely of Tom's chum—and not giving William George Bunter—so much more important a person—a single, solitary thought! Bunter reflected bitterly that it was what he really might have expected of them!

"I suppose you're not going to leave me here alone!" yapped Bunter, as old John followed his son into the boat.

"Jump in, but be quick about it!" snapped Tom.

"I'd rather stay here, if one of you would—"

"Cast off, Tom!" said John Redwing.

"Hold on—I'm coming!" howled Bunter. And he rolled into the boat, stumbled, and sat down with a bump that made it rock against the lugger. "Wow!"

Even then, Tom did not seem to realise that Bunter mattered! Leaving him sprawling unnoticed, he cast off the rope and pushed off.

Old John took the oars and pulled, and Tom steered; and Billy Bunter scrambled up, breathless with indignation.

He sat in silent wrath as the boat pulled into the smugglers' cave of Blackrock. Deep and dark and gloomy, it stretched into the cliff, far beyond the red rays of the setting sun.

Billy Bunter blinked round him uneasily in the deep shadows.

"Ow!" gurgled Bunter, as the boat bumped on the sand.

Tom and his father trampled out

through the shallow water, and Tom gestured impatiently to Bunter to follow.

"If you think I'm going to get my feet wet—" began Bunter, in tones tremulous with indignation. "Ow! Leggo, you beast!"

John Redwing grasped him and hooked him out of the boat with a swing of his powerful arm. Then the boat was dragged up out of reach of the tide.

Tom lighted the lantern.

Nothing but rock and sand met his eyes as he held up the light and looked round.

Billy Bunter blinked at the spot where Big Harker had had his camp, but no signs of it remained.

Tom moved on up the cavern with his father. Billy Bunter, unwilling to be left alone in the dark, rolled after them. Only silence and darkness met them as they tramped up the smugglers' cave to the end.

THE TWENTY-FIRST CHAPTER.

What Bunter Knew!

TOM REDWING flashed the lantern light on the rock wall that barred all further progress.

Old John scanned it and shook his grizzled head.

Billy Bunter grunted. Bunter was a little breathless.

He pointed with a fat finger.

Tom looked at him and flashed the light up at the dark gap high above. Then he looked at Bunter again.

Smithy had been there—a prisoner. But after the lapse of time, was he still there? The rocky cave was utterly silent, deserted.

"You think they took Smithy up there, Bunter?" asked Tom, puzzled.

"I jolly well know they did!" said Bunter. "You see, I heard one beast say to the other beast that he wanted the other beast to help him up with Smithy."

"Up?" repeated Tom.

He stared up at the gap. Then he set down the lantern. There was no sign of the pole that Harry Wharton & Co. had used. Rance had taken care, before he went, of that, and of the rope-ladder. Both had long ago been slid into deep water.

"I reckon you can make it, Tom, on my shoulders," said old John, scanning the wall. "It don't look likely to me, but if the boy is hid away in that cranny we've got to know. You can make it."

The sturdy old sailorman braced himself against the rock, to take the weight.

Tom was on his broad shoulders almost in a moment.

From that height he was able to "make it," as old John expressed it. Even with such a lift, few fellows could have climbed the steep rock, but the sailorman's son had been accustomed to climbing the steep cliffs at Hawkscliff from childhood. Even to Tom Redwing, it was not easy, but he made it.

He clambered, at last, into the gap. Kneeling on the edge he drew up the lantern with a cord.

Then he disappeared from sight.

Old John and Bunter were left in deep darkness below.

It was five or six minutes before the light reappeared, and Tom's face looked down again, set with disappointment.

"Nothing?" asked old John, looking up.

"Nothing!" answered Tom. "There's a sort of tunnel runs back into the cliff about six fathoms—only rock beyond."

"And nothing—"

"No."

Billy Bunter blinked up at him. "Ain't the rope-ladder there?" he asked.

Tom stared down at the upturned fat face.

"The what?" he repeated.

"The rope-ladder," answered Bunter. "The one Rance used, you know."

"There's no rope-ladder here. There's nothing here—no sign that anyone has ever been in the place. What do you mean, you fat ass?"

"Oh, really, Redwing—"

"What do you mean, Bunter? I tell you there is nothing up here—"

"I expect they've shifted it, then," said Bunter. "I jolly well know that Rance went up there on a rope-ladder, because I saw him. He hooked the end down with a boathook when he wanted it."

"Rance?" repeated Tom. "Was that before they brought Smithy here?"

"Of course it was!" grunted Bunter. "You see, I was up this end of the cave first, to keep out of that beast Harker's way. You can bet I never let Rance see me when he came. But I jolly well saw him; he had a lantern, you know. And I jolly well saw him hook a rope-ladder down and climb up and pull it up after him."

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom.

"He dropped, when he came back, and left the ladder up there," said Bunter. "Sure it ain't there now?"

"There's nothing here!" said Tom. "Is that why you thought they had taken Smithy up this way?"

"Eh? Of course! When that beast Harker said to the other beast that he wanted the other beast to lend him a hand up with Smithy I jolly well knew where they were going to park him."

Tom caught his breath.

He had explored that tunnel with the light, as far as it went. Further progress had been blocked by solid rocks.

Was it possible—

Rance had calculated well. To all appearance, the tunnel in the cliff ended where it was blocked. No voice, no sound of knocking, could penetrate through that solid mass. Tom had turned back, as any other searcher would have turned back. There was no sign that any foot had ever trodden there—no reason to suppose that that gap had ever been entered. But now—

Rance, with all his cunning, did not know what Bunter knew.

That the fat schoolboy in Harker's blankets at the mouth of the cave, had seen Herbert Vernon-Smith land with his kidnappers, he guessed. But that earlier he himself had been watched by the fat junior he did not know, and had never suspected for a moment.

But for Billy Bunter, and what Billy Bunter had seen, his scheme would have been perfectly sound, and he never dreamed, for a moment, that it was not so.

But now—

Tom Redwing picked up the lantern again. His face was white.

Old John's voice came quietly from below.

"If the lad's got it right, Tom, that lubber's hole up there was used by some of the crew. I reckon you want to make sure."

Tom nodded, and turned into the tunnel again.

If Billy Bunter had seen a rope-

ladder fixed at the gap and one of the gang using it, it meant that that tunnel in the cliff was used by them—it meant that Herbert Vernon-Smith had been there. Did it mean that he was there still?

Tom's keen eyes scanned the rocks on either side as he went slowly on again up the tunnel. But the rock was solid and unbroken. He reached the blocked end again.

There was no sign that that stack of rocks had not been there from time immemorial, that human hand had ever touched them. No sign that there was anything beyond but solid cliff. Well, indeed, had Rance calculated.

But what Bunter had seen he had seen. Tom knew now that the kidnappers had been there, though they had left no sign. Setting down the lantern, he examined that stack of rocks. If there was something beyond—if that was how the kidnappers hid their prisoner—

He found that the rocks would move as he dragged. He rolled back a boulder from the bottle-neck. He dragged down another, and rolled it away. And now he knew that they were all loose rocks, piled and stacked, far from the solid mass they had seemed to be.

He dragged away rock after rock, panting, gasping, tireless. If there was a further way beyond—

THE TWENTY-SECOND CHAPTER.

Saved!

"HARK!" Bob Cherry breathed the word.

In the rock tunnel the Famous Five stood, their faces pale in the gleam of their lantern.

Again and again they had tried their strength on the rocky barrier—utterly in vain. Hours—that seemed like weary days—had passed since they had found themselves entombed in the heart of the great cliff.

They leaned on the rocky walls, exhausted by their vain efforts.

The Boulder was raging like a caged animal, the Famous Five were subdued. Mr. Vernon-Smith sat on a boulder, his fat face pale.

All knew what had happened—that Rance had shut them in, to perish, to cover up his crimes. They knew it, yet it was hard to realise—and they had not given up hope. But the air, shut off from the sea winds in the cave, was growing heavy; and every effort to shift the barring rocks had failed.

Dead silence reigned in the rock tunnel, broken only by the fierce mutterings of the enraged Boulder. Then suddenly, through that deep, dead silence, came a sound.

"Hark!"

They started, and listened.

It was a sound from beyond that rocky barrier.

"Rance!" breathed Nugent.

The same thought was in all their minds. The estate-agent of Okcham had returned. Who else could it be? The sounds grew louder; they knew now that the rocks piled against the bottle-neck were being dragged and rolled away on the other side.

Louder and sharper came the sounds of rolling rocks. Someone was there—someone was clearing the barrier from their path.

Bob Cherry shouted.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

They listened as the booming echoes died away. It seemed to them that they caught a returning shout, faint through the rocks.

Mr. Vernon-Smith rose to his feet. His pale face flushed with hope.

"Someone's coming, father!" muttered the Bounder. "Not Rance; that rat meant us to finish here! But someone—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob. "Help!"

This time they could hear the voice that came back—the barrier was thinner.

"I hear you! Coming, Smithy!"

"Smithy!" repeated Bob. "It's somebody who knows you, Smithy—and knows that you're here!"

"Can Bunter—?" said the Bounder blankly.

"But Bunter never knew anything about this place, did he? And how could anybody guess—?"

"I can't make it out!"

"Anyhow, we're all right!" said Bob. "Oh glory be! Whoever it is, I'll kiss him on his baby brow when he gets through!"

A gleam of light came through interstices in the rocky barrier; then came a voice clearly through some small opening.

"Are you there, Smithy, old man?"

The Bounder gave a gasp. He knew that voice.

"Redwing!"

"Yes, old fellow! Yes, old chap! Oh, thank Heaven I've found you! Can't you move the rocks from that side, Smithy?"

"Not an inch; too narrow on this side to pull, and they won't move to a push. Redwing, old man, is that you, or is this a dream?"

"The dreamfulness appears to my absurd self to be truly terrific," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is!" roared Bob.

Another rock rolled away, leaving an open space. Through it looked the sunburnt face of Tom Redwing, glimmering in the lantern-light.

"Smithy!"

"Here, old chap!"

"God bless you, my boy!" said Mr. Vernon-Smith with a quiver in his voice. "Herbert, your school chum has saved all our lives."

"Don't I know it?" said the Bounder.

"Wharton! Bob!" Redwing stared at unexpected faces.

"The whole jolly old family!" roared Bob. "And never so jolly glad to see your chivvy, Reddy, old bean! You'd never guess how nice you look at this moment!"

Tom Redwing laughed.

"A few more minutes now," he said.

"But how did you know, Reddy?" gasped Harry Wharton.

"Bunter—"

"You've seen Bunter?"

"We picked him up in the lugger. He's back in the cave with my father.

If seems that Bunter, when he was in the cave, watched a man named Rance in this tunnel; that put him on the track. But never mind that now. All plain sailing now!"

Redwing dragged and rolled away the last of the rocks. The way was open at last. One by one the imprisoned juniors passed through the bottleneck, and Mr. Vernon-Smith followed.

A few minutes later they were dropping into the cave, and John Redwing was helping the millionaire down from below, while Smithy and Redwing helped him from above. And Billy Bunter, in a state of great astonishment, blinked at the numerous party as if he could hardly believe his eyes or his spectacles—as, indeed, he hardly could!

OLD Dave Oke stared and rubbed his ancient eyes when a lugger ran into the cove in the sunset and a crowd of fellows landed at the stone jetty.

But the Famous Five stayed only to pack their bags, to say good-bye to the ancient mariner, and to leave him a substantial reward for his hospitality during their Crusoe life on the island.

Then they packed in the lugger again and sailed for Penruddy, where there was an inn, at which Billy Bunter was able to obtain some solid refreshment—which by that time he sorely needed—and Mr. Vernon-Smith was able to get busy on the telephone.

In the town of Okeham young Mr. Rance was feeling quite safe and secure—from everything but his conscience. His feeling of safety and security had a rude jolt when the Okeham inspector of police called with a constable and requested him to accompany them to the station—a request that young Mr. Rance was not in a position to refuse.

In a locked cell that night young Mr. Rance had ample leisure to reflect—if he so desired—that honesty, in the long run, was, after all, the best policy, though that reflection came too late to be of much use to young Mr. Rance.

"I SAY, you fellows—"

"Say on, old fat man!"

There was a very cheery party at breakfast in the inn garden at Penruddy in the sunny morning. On Billy Bunter's fat brow was a thoughtful frown; and when he had parked three breakfasts, one after another, the thoughtful fat Owl voiced the subject of his cogitations.

"I say, we had a rotten time on that putrid island—"

"Rot!" said Bob. "We had a ripping time!"

"The ripfulness was terrific!"

"Well, you fellows aren't accustomed to the luxuries of life as I am," said Bunter. "You may have liked it; I didn't. I say, pass the jam. It's ripping to have jam again; none on that rotten island, and none on that old tub of yours, Redwing. You can give me a tablespoon, too. But, I say, you fellows, you seem to have made it up with Smithy—"

"Love him like a brother!" agreed Bob.

"And, from what you've been saying, you're going to have the rest of the hols with him, after all—"

"They are!" said the Bounder. "I'm going to punch their heads if they don't!"

"And old Smith—?" went on Bunter.

"Who?" asked the Bounder.

"I—I mean Mr. Vernon-Smith—"

"Then you'd better say what you mean, if you don't want that jam down the outside of your neck, instead of the inside!"

"Oh, really, Smithy! Old—I mean, Mr. Vernon-Smith has chartered old—I mean, Mr. Redwing's lugger to take you on trips up and down the coast, and—"

"He has—he have!" said Bob. "Time of our lives, old fat man! Aint it top-hole to have old Reddy for the rest of the hols?"

"Is it?" said Bunter. "Well, I don't mind—"

"Thanks!" said Tom, laughing.

"Well, I'll stick to you!" said Bunter. "I never was a chap to let fellows down. I'll stick to you!"

Billy Bunter made that statement like a fellow who was doing a generous action and knew it. At the same time he blinked a little uncertainly round a circle of smiling faces. Rather to his surprise, there was a general chorus:

"Oh, do!"

And Bunter did!

THE END.

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