"A SCHOOLBOY'S CROSS-ROADS!"

A Powerful, New, Long, Complete Tale of School Life. By Frank Richards.

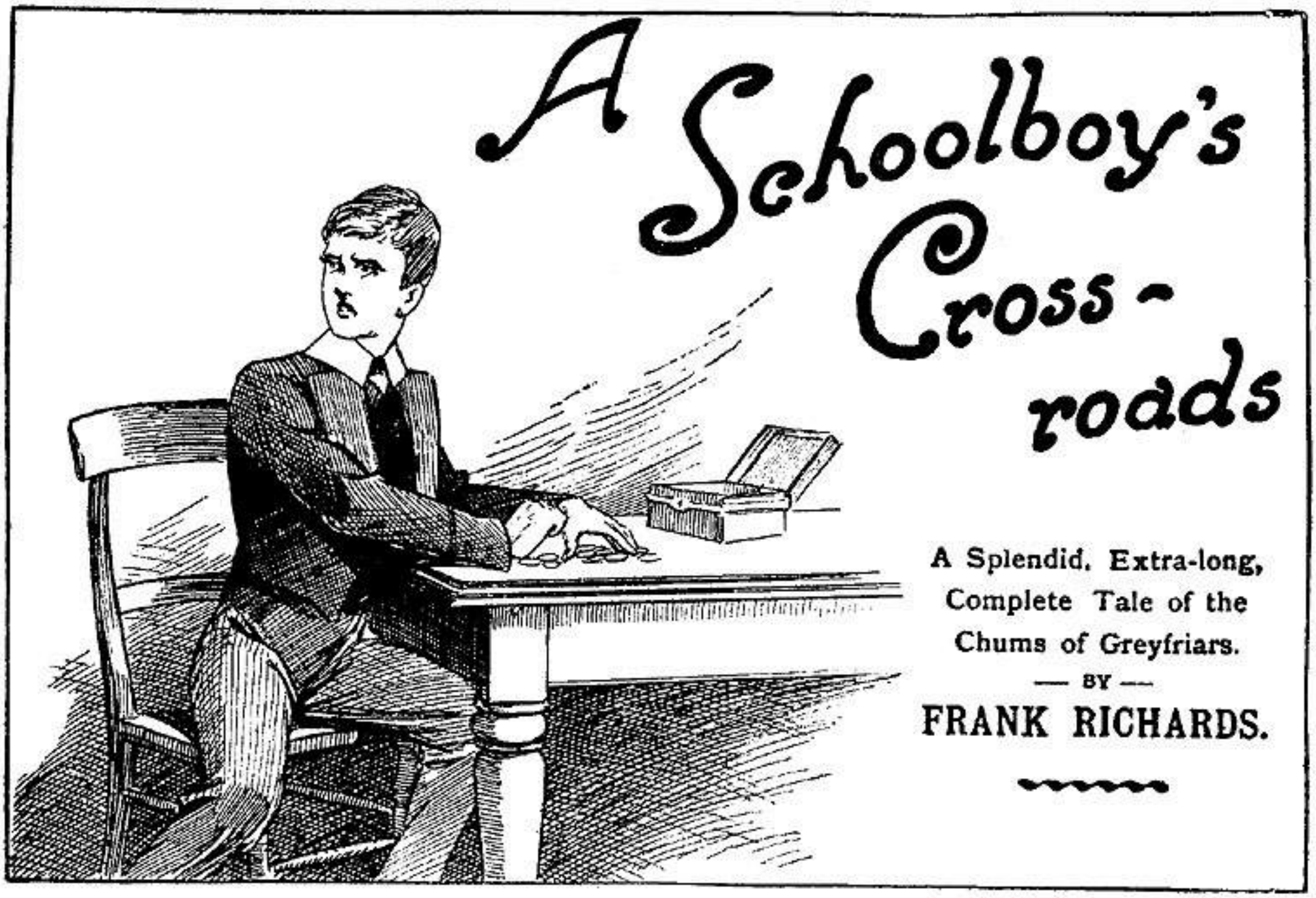
RAGGING THE FACTORY LAD.

Grand Complete Story for Next Tuesday.

"SAVED FROM DISGRACE!"

A Complete School Story-Book, attractive to All Readers.

The Editor will be obliged if you will hand this book, when finished with, to a friend.



A Splendid, Extra-long, Complete Tale of the Chums of Greyfriars.

— BY —

FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Waiting!

"GOT the news yet?"

"No."

"How are you feeling?"

Mark Linley smiled in rather a strained way.

"Anxious," he said.

And he resumed his tramping up and down the passage. He could not keep still. Up and down, up and down the flagged passage he went, his hands thrust deep into his trousers'-pockets, and his brow corrugated in a deep frown.

Mark Linley was usually one of the quietest and most composed members of the Remove Form at Greyfriars. He had had more troubles than generally fall to the lot of a lad of his age; but he bore them all quietly, without complaint; and the heavier the burden, the more stoutly he squared his shoulders to it.

But for once he seemed shaken out of his reserve.

He was waiting in the passage outside the Head's study—waiting to be called in to see the Head. Fellows who passed glanced curiously at him, and some of them grinned. They knew the cause of his anxiety, though most of them were surprised to see him show it in this way.

Tramp! Tramp!

Mark Linley seemed to have to keep in movement. Every time he turned, his eye went towards the Head's study door.

Would the call never come?

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry, of the Remove, came down the passage, and they paused to speak to Mark.

"Heard yet?"

The Lancashire lad shook his head.

"Not yet."

"Time the wire was in," said Harry Wharton, looking at his watch.

"Yes, I should think so."

"Cheer-ho!" said Bob Cherry, patting Mark on the shoulder. "There's not the slightest doubt about it, you know."

Mark smiled faintly.

"I wish I could think so," he said.

Bob stared at him in surprise. Bob Cherry's admiration for the attainments of his chum was unbounded. Mark Linley was a fellow who took Greek as an extra, of his own free will, and a fellow who could do that could do anything in the scholastic line; that was Bob's fixed opinion.

"My dear chap," said Bob, "you're an ass! There isn't the slightest doubt about it. Why, there were only four entered for the Founder's Prize."

"Well, that's three against me," said Mark. "And there would have been another, only Wharton stood out on purpose to give me a chance."

Wharton laughed.

"That's all right," he said. "I was going in for the prize, just to please my uncle if I could carry it off. But I wouldn't go in for it against a chap who needed the tin—you don't mind my saying so."

"Not at all. It's no secret that I need the tin," said Mark. "A chap who comes here on a scholarship, after working in a factory for a living, is not likely to be over-burdened with money, I suppose. Although I have no fees to pay here, and the scholarship money helps me out, it's not easy for my people to keep me at a school like Greyfriars."

"I suppose so," said Bob. "But you'll make it all up to them some day, when you become a judge, or a bishop, or something."

Mark laughed, forgetting his anxiety for the moment, as Bob intended that he should.

"I don't think that's ever likely to come to pass," he said. "But I hope I shall have some chance of showing father and mother how grateful I feel for what they've done for me. There are few fellows have so much to be thankful for as I have. And—and my poor old dad——"

He broke off.

"How is he now?" asked Harry.

Mark gulped something down.

"He's all right," he said. "Getting on as well as could be expected after his accident. Thanks for asking! Oh, I wish that wire would come!"

He turned away towards the door of the Head's study again.

But it remained shut.

"You'll see Trotter bring in the wire when it comes," said Harry.

Mark nodded.

"Yes, so I shall."

"It's bound to be all right. There isn't a chap in the four who had any chance against you, especially on the Greek paper. That's what kept a crowd out, you know; and that's where you get your chance."

"Yes, I thought so; but—but——"

"Which competitors are you afraid of?" asked Bob. "There's Bulstrode—but he doesn't count. As a matter of fact, Bulstrode only entered for the prize to occupy his mind by sticking at work, because of what happened to his brother. He told me he was only doing it to keep from thinking about poor Herbert. He hasn't any expectation of getting the prize—he said so—and he said, too, that he wouldn't like to take it away from you."

"No, I don't think I need fear Bulstrode."

"Then there's Skinner—but he hasn't an earthly."

Mark smiled.

"No; I expect Skinner to come in last."

"The other one is Vernon-Smith—the Bounder! You don't think the Bounder is likely to beat you, do you?" Harry Wharton exclaimed, in surprise.

"That's the one I fear."

"The Bounder!"

"Yes."

"My hat!"

Wharton and Bob both stared at Mark in great surprise. Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars, was the last fellow they would have thought of fearing in an exam.

The Bounder was the blackguard of the Lower School; he had nearly every bad habit a boy could have—he smoked, he gambled in secret, he broke bounds at night to visit a public-house in the village. He turned up his nose at games, and he neglected his studies. His entering for the Founder's Prize at all was a surprise to the Remove fellows, and most of them had laughed.

To imagine him as having a chance against the keen, studious, industrious Lancashire lad seemed absurd.

Yet he was the one Mark Linley feared.

"But it's all holy rot!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Why, the Bounder would be as likely as not to send in his paper smelling of tobacco; and he'd get the order of the boot for that alone."

"He'll be too careful for that."

"But he's the biggest slacker at Greyfriars."

"Yes—by nature—but when he chooses he can work hard. And he only entered for the exam. at all because I had entered, and he wanted to beat me. He doesn't need the fifty pounds; he could have twice as much by asking his father for it. As for the honour of winning, he doesn't care two straws for that. He wants to beat me—out of sheer spite; though, goodness knows, I've never done him any harm!"

Harry Wharton nodded.

Vernon-Smith's motive for entering for the Founder's Prize was well known enough in the Remove. He did not want the money, and he cared nothing for the glory; he wanted to "take a rise" out of the "factory bounder."

But few expected that he would succeed.

"I know that's his little game, and a rotten caddish game it is, Marky," said Wharton. "But he has no chance."

"He has a jolly good chance."

"But at Greek, too," said Bob Cherry. "Remember one of the papers is Greek, and I've heard it's a jolly hard one, too."

Mark Linley smiled miserably.

"You don't know the Bounder," he said. "He can do anything he likes. Do you remember how he always sneered at footer and cricket, and never would play. But when he had a purpose to serve, he bucked up, and played both games as well as any fellow in the Form. He practically won a cricket match for us—after everybody had been saying that he couldn't play cricket for toffee. It was the same with the German prize. Nobody knew the Bounder was strong on German—but his German paper was miles ahead of the others, and he took the prize quite easily."

"Yes, and gave it to a kid in the Second Form afterwards," said Harry Wharton wrathfully. "That was like his caddish swank. He just entered to show that he could beat Hoskins of the Shell, who expected to get it."

"Yes, and he's entered now to show that he can beat me."

"But he won't do it, old chap. He can't."

Mark did not reply.

Wharton and Bob Cherry stood silent too. Their confidence was shaken. They remembered that Vernon-Smith was indeed a "dark horse." Blackguard and rascal as the Bounder undoubtedly was, there seemed to be no doubt that he was cleverer than most of the fellows in the Remove—and that he could do almost anything successfully when he had once set his mind to it.

At the thought of Vernon-Smith winning the Founder's Prize, both the juniors felt savagely exasperated. That prize had been founded for the benefit of needy scholars, long years ago; and for a rich fellow to enter for it was bad form, in the first place. When Wharton had heard that Linley had entered, he had at once withdrawn his name. Common decency should have impelled Vernon-Smith to do the same. But the Bounder was the last fellow in the world to do that.

Fifty pounds was a matter of no moment to the son of Samuel Smith, the millionaire. The Bounder often had bank-notes for as much as that in his pocket. But it was untold wealth to Mark Linley, the factory lad, who had come to Greyfriars on a scholarship, and whose people had to pinch and contrive to keep him there. And lately Mark's father had been injured in an accident in the factory, and money was more than ever sorely needed in the poor home. The Bounder knew it all—but to the Bounder it seemed only like a chance of paying off old scores against the lad from Lancashire. Many a rub had they had—many a time had the mean, false, reckless blackguard of the Remove shrunk from the clear, scornful eyes of the scholarship boy. And Mark Linley was to pay for it all now; that was the Bounder's object.

Mark thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and walked restlessly up and down the passage.

Would the news never come?

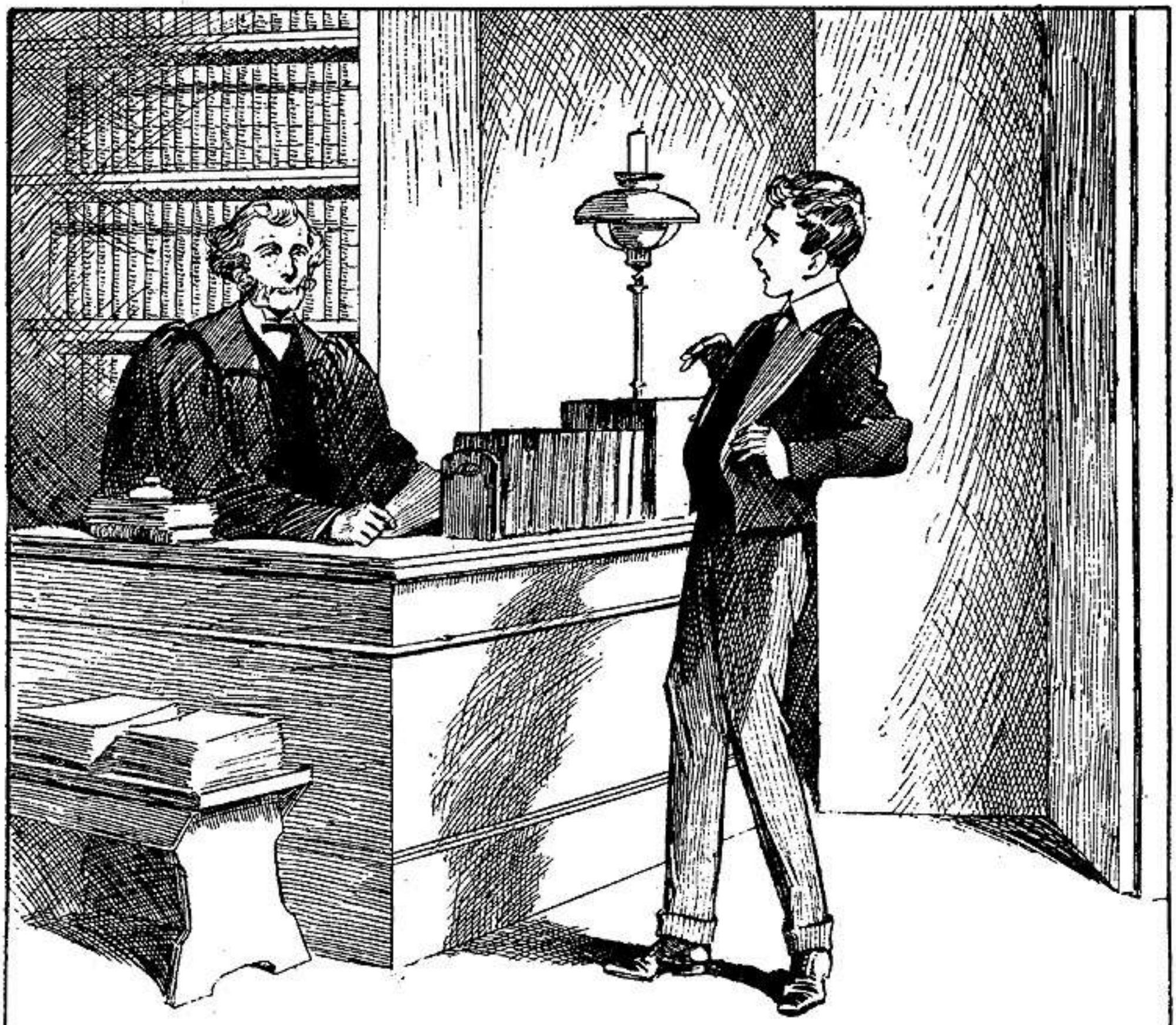
He thought of the little home in far-off Lancashire—of the anxious mother, of his little sister—of his father stretched upon a sick-bed, his strong right arm barred from the work which had supported the home.

He must have the money!

In the midst of gloomy trouble that exam. for the Founder's Prize had seemed like a beacon of light to the Lancashire lad. He had worked for that exam. as he had never worked before. It was wholly a paper exam., and the Lancashire lad had worked on his papers till his eyes were dim, and his head was aching, and his whole body was throbbing. He had sent his papers in at the finish, feeling that he had put into them all that he had in him, and that if he failed it was because he simply hadn't it in him to win.

Then came the dreadful pause of more than a week, while the adjudication took place.

The news was to come to-day—a wire was to announce the name of the fortunate winner. Fuller information, as to who had taken second prize, and so forth, and the number of marks, would follow by letter.



"So far," said the Head, "I simply know the name of the winner, and I regret very much that the name is not yours, Linley." Mark Linley staggered back. *(See page 4.)*

Would the wire never come?

"Buck up!" said Bob Cherry. "It can't be long now."

Mark nodded miserably.

The chums had never seen him so disturbed before. However thickly troubles might pile on him, he had always borne them bravely. But now he seemed to be quite thrown off his balance.

The juniors did not understand the bitter need the boy was in—how terribly the money was wanted.

They stayed with him—to wait for the telegram, though they could say little to encourage him. Into their own minds was creeping a doubt now, and they feared to learn that the Bounder had won.

Bob Cherry uttered a sudden exclamation.

"Here's Trotter!"

Linley started, and turned round quickly, his face pale.

Trotter, the page, came along the passage with a buff-coloured envelope in his hand. He grinned a little at the sight of Mark Linley. He knew what the Lancashire lad was waiting there for.

"Is that for the Head?" asked Mark quickly.

"Yes, Master Linley."

"Thank you!"

Trotter knocked at the door of the Head's study, and went in. Mark Linley clenched his hands hard, and waited.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
A Bitter Blow.

MARK'S face was pale, and there were little beads of perspiration on his forehead. He waited, his face tense, and his hands hard clenched.

In a few minutes now he would know the result.

Either he had won the Founder's Prize, and was the richer by fifty pounds—or else he had failed—and—and what?

He did not dare to think.

If he had failed, if the money was gone, it meant that the little home in Lancashire would be sold up—that his sick father would have to go to a workhouse infirmary, and his mother to a factory.

That, and more, if he had lost!

If he had won, the money would tide over the difficulties at home, and leave a little sum in hand for future emergencies. But if he had failed——

He groaned at the thought.

"I say, buck up, old chap!" said Bob Cherry, in alarm. "I've never seen you like this before. Don't take it to heart like that."

"You don't understand," said Mark.

"I know it must mean a lot to you, but—hang it all, cheer up! My hat!" said Bob. "You don't look like the same

chap who was standing up to the niggers like a little man, when we went down to the African coast to look for my pater."

Mark smiled a little.

"It's easier to stand up with a rifle and face cannibals, than to face a thing like this," he said.

"Blessed if I see it. Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

Trotter came out of the Head's study.

The three juniors made a simultaneous movement towards him.

"Does the Head want to see Linley?" asked Harry Wharton quickly.

"He didn't say so, sir," said Trotter

Mark's heart sank.

"He hasn't given you a message for me? he asked.

"No, sir."

"Oh!"

"Has he read the telegram?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Yes; he read it at once."

"Then why doesn't he want to see Linley?" growled Bob. "Blessed if I catch on! He ought to want to see the winner at once, to put him out of his anxiety."

Mark was silent, his heart throbbing. But Harry Wharton asked the question that was in the Lancashire lad's mind.

"Has Dr. Locke given you a message for anyone, Trotter?"

"Yes, Master Wharton."

"For whom?"

"Master Vernon-Smith."

Mark muttered something. Bob clenched his hands.

"Vernon-Smith!" repeated Wharton.

"Yes, sir."

"You—you're sure," said Harry. "No mistake? You know what a young ass you are, Trotter. You're sure he said Vernon-Smith?"

Trotter grinned.

"Yes, sir, quite sure."

And he went down the passage to find the Bounder, and give him the message from the Head. The three juniors looked at one another

"There must be some mistake," said Bob Cherry, not very hopefully, however.

Mark shook his head.

"There's no mistake," he said quietly. "This is what I feared; but I suppose I shall have to stand it. If it wasn't for——"

He was going to say, if it wasn't for the people at home; but he stopped himself. He never would speak of his home poverty to anyone; he shrank from sympathy on that subject, and the Lancashire lad, poor as he was, had as much pride as a prince.

"Better speak to the Head and make sure," said Harry.

"Yes, I suppose I might do that."

Mark Linley tapped at the door of the study.

"Come in!"

It was the deep voice of the Head.

The Lancashire lad opened the study door and went in, leaving Wharton and Bob Cherry waiting anxiously enough in the passage.

Mark Linley's heart was throbbing almost to suffocation as he entered the Head's study.

In spite of the fact that he had not been sent for—in spite of the fact that Vernon-Smith had been called—he nourished a hope that his name might have come out first. He had feared the competition of the Bounder; but—but all the time he had felt almost as if the prize were rightfully his—as if he must have it.

Dr. Locke looked at him over his desk and nodded.

"Ah, it is you, Linley! I suppose you are anxious to know the result of the examination for the Founder's Prize?"

"Yes, sir," said Mark, in a suffocating voice.

"I do not know the details yet," said the Head. "Those I shall know to-morrow. So far, I know simply the name of the winner, and I regret very much that the name is not yours, Linley."

Mark Linley staggered back.

He had feared it—expected it; but it came like a crushing blow, all the same! His face was white as death.

"I had fully anticipated, from the list of competitors, that you would carry off the prize, Linley," said the Head kindly. "It is a great surprise to me to find the name of Vernon-Smith as the winner. I am agreeably surprised to find that that lad knows how to work in this way—it is a great surprise."

The Head's voice seemed to Mark to be droning on from a great distance. The room was swimming round the Lancashire lad.

He had lost!

Vernon-Smith had won. But that did not matter. It did not matter who had won. He had lost!

He had told his people that he was practically certain of winning. That was before he had known that the Bounder had entered. What was he to tell them now?

Lost!

"I have not the slightest doubt that your name will come second, Linley," said the Head—"not the slightest doubt. The second prize is a valuable set of books—a most valuable set of books, which any studious boy might be proud to possess. A really thoughtful and studious lad, perhaps, would prefer the second prize to the first—for the books will undoubtedly remain, to be friends through life, long after the money is spent. I shall be very pleased, Linley, if it proves that the second prize is yours. Ah! Come in!"

There was a tap at the door. Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars, entered. Mark Linley turned dully to the door.

"Ah! Vernon-Smith! I congratulate you——" began the Head.

The Bounder's eyes met Mark's for the moment, gleaming like steel with triumph. But Mark was too hard hit to feel even resentment for the ungenerous triumph of the Bounder. He crossed blindly to the door and passed out into the corridor, hardly seeing where he was going, and Bob Cherry passed an arm through his, and led him away.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Nothing for Bunter.

"I SAY, Linley——"

Billy Bunter jerked at Mark Linley's sleeve, as the Lancashire lad walked blindly down the passage. Mark did not see or hear him. But Bob Cherry put out a foot, and pushed the fat junior hard, and Bunter sat down on the flags.

"Ow!"

Bob walked on with Mark.

Many fellows looked at them—the expression upon Mark's face was sufficient to show them what had happened. Some of them looked sorry, most indifferent, a few glad. Some of the Remove had never quite got over the fact that Mark Linley had been a factory lad before he had come to Greyfriars.

With the snobbish set in the Remove—fellows like Skinner and Snoop and Stott—that weighed a great deal. As a matter of fact, the noble nature of the Lancashire lad was the real cause of their dislike. They felt annoyed and inferior in his presence, and they indemnified themselves by sneering at his antecedents.

"He's got it in the neck," said Skinner. "I can't say I'm sorry."

"Same here," Snoop remarked. "Like his cheek to think he was going to bag the Founder's. He's bagged one scholarship here already, and a giddy prize, too."

"I say, you fellows," said Billy Bunter, "do you know who's won the Founder's?"

"No, I don't, for one."

"I suppose it was Linley."

Skinner chuckled.

"He doesn't look like it," he said. "He's going about with a face as long as a fiddle, and Bob Cherry is playing the comforting friend."

"That may be because his people want all the money," said Bunter sagely. "Chap would feel like that if he won a big prize, and his people wanted it. I know I should."

"You would!" said Bulstrode, with a sneer.

"Oh, really, Bulstrode! I don't see why a chap shouldn't be allowed to keep his own money. Besides, I'm expecting a postal-order to-morrow, and I was thinking that Linley would be able to advance me something off it, you know."

"You ass! If he's won, he won't have the money to-day."

"But he could borrow on the strength of it, you know. Which way did he go?"

"Find out," said Bulstrode.

"Oh, really——"

"Oh, buzz off, you fat bounder!"

Which Bunter immediately proceeded to do. He went out into the Close, blinking to and fro with his big spectacles. He fully expected that Mark Linley had won the prize, and if the Lancashire lad was in funds the Owl of the Remove meant to have a share of the money, or know the reason why.

"Anybody seen Linley?" asked Billy Bunter, as he came out on the steps of the School House.

A hand grasped the fat junior by the collar and shook him. Billy Bunter struggled in the strong grasp.

"Ow! Oh, really, Bull——"

"You fat cad——"

"Oh, is it you, Cherry? Look here—— Ow! Don't shake me like that! You might make my glasses fall off, and if they get broken, you'll have to pay for them! Ow!"

"What do you want Linley for?"

"Ow! I want to—to—to return him half-a-crown I borrowed of him yesterday," said Bunter.

Bob could not help laughing. The idea of Billy Bunter

repaying any loan, under any circumstances whatever, was ludicrously absurd.

"I—I say, Cherry, where is he?"

"He hasn't won the prize, and there's nothing for you to borrow," said Bob Cherry. "So you can leave him alone, you fat rotter!"

"Oh, really—— Ow!"

Bunter gasped for breath as Bob slammed him against the wall, and left him. Then he rolled out into the Close.

"Beast!" murmured Billy Bunter "Of course, I know jolly well that Linley has won the prize, but that rotter wants to keep all the borrowing to himself. I wonder where that rotten factory cad has got to?"

Bunter blinked up and down the Close.

Mark Linley, as a matter of fact, had gone into the Cloisters to be alone. Bob Cherry would have remained with his chum, but he saw that Mark wished to be by himself, and he left him at the entrance of the Cloisters.

Under the old stone arches—the most ancient part of Greyfriars—Mark Linley paced to and fro with throbbing brow.

The old stones, worn by the feet of generations, bearing the traces of the sandals of monks who had trodden there five hundred years ago, echoed dully under the restless tread of the Lancashire lad.

What was he to do?

There had always been a risk that he would lose the prize, but the certainty was terrible!

He had lost!

What was he to do?

That question was humming and throbbing in his brain, and aching in his heart. What was he to do?

"I say, Linley——"

Mark started as the creaking tones of Bunter invaded the silence. The Owl of the Remove had found him.

The fat junior rolled up, blinking at him through his big spectacles. There was a fat propitiatory smile upon Bunter's face. He was too short-sighted, and too occupied with his selfish thoughts, to notice the expression upon the features of the unhappy Lancashire lad.

"Linley, old man, I've been looking for you! Congratulations!"

"What?" said Mark.

"So jolly glad you've won," said Bunter. "Bob Cherry said you'd lost, but I knew it wasn't true. I knew you'd won, and he wanted to borrow all the money himself. Look here, I think I ought to warn you against that chap. He——"

"You cad!" said Mark.

Bunter shifted his ground immediately.

"I—I mean—what I meant to say was, I—I think Bob Cherry is the most decent chap going," he said. "That's what I really meant to say. You know how I like Bob Cherry."

"Oh, leave me alone; don't talk to me!"

"But I want to congratulate you about winning the prize. Look here, I'm expecting a postal-order this evening, and if you could advance me ten bob——"

"I can't! I——"

"Yes, yes, I know you haven't the money at once; but you could borrow it on your expectations," Bunter explained. "You've got fifty quid coming. Lots of fellows pay their way by borrowing on their expectations. It's quite common."

"I tell you——"

"Suppose you let me have a pound; when my postal-order comes——"

"Oh, let me alone!" cried Mark. "I tell you I have not won the prize, and I have no money to give you. If I had, I wouldn't give it you. Now get away."

Bunter blinked at him.

"You haven't won!" he exclaimed.

"No."

"Then who has?"

"Vernon-Smith."

"My hat!" said Bunter. "I—I suppose you're telling the truth!" He started back as Mark made an angry gesture. "Look here, Linley, as for what you said about not having any money to give me, I hope you don't think I want any of your rotten money, even if you had any, you poverty-stricken cad! I was speaking of a little loan, and I shouldn't dream of taking money as a gift, even from an equal. And certainly not from a chap who has worked in a factory. Why, you utter outsider——"

Mark Linley made a step towards him, and the fat junior broke off and ran. Mark did not pursue him a single step, but Bunter did not leave off running till he was clear of the Cloisters. Then he stopped, breathless and panting.

"Beast!" he muttered. "Well, I think I gave it to him pretty straight! The rotter! He ought to be jolly glad to have some notice taken of him by a gentleman! My fault is that I'm too kind to these fellows! H'm! Vernon-Smith has won, has he?"

And Billy Bunter, when he had recovered his breath, rolled away in search of the Bounder of Greyfriars.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
In the Depths.

"LETTER for Linley!"

Mark Linley heard the words as he came in.

The Lancashire lad was looking a little pale, but he was quite composed now. He had wrestled the matter out with himself, as it were, and had come to a more composed frame of mind. Whatever he felt, it was useless to show it—there was no object in wearing his heart upon his sleeve for daws to peck at.

He knew, too, that there were many fellows at Greyfriars who would be glad to see the signs of discomfiture in his face—who would rejoice to know that the "factory cad" had had a fall.

And Mark did not intend to gratify them.

Outwardly, the Lancashire lad was quiet, calm, as usual, only a little unaccustomed pallor in his cheeks showing that he felt the blow that had fallen upon him. Inwardly, he was suffering.

The post had come in, and many of the fellows had letters. There was a letter for Linley, in the rack, and some of the juniors were standing round looking at it, some of them grinning.

The letter was addressed in a strong, though uneducated hand—the hand of Mark Linley's father. Snoop especially was very much amused.

"I like that fist," he said. "You can see that the hand that wrote that was used to handling a pick or something."

"Yes, rather," said Stott.

"And why not, you cad?" exclaimed John Bull. "Is there anything disgraceful in handling a pick, you ass? Isn't a pick a more useful instrument than a pen, any day?"

Snoop sneered.

"I dare say it is," he said. "All the same——"

"All the same, you're a low cad, and if you say any more I'll jam your head against the wall," said John Bull wrathfully.

And Frank Nugent sang out:

"Hear, hear!"

"Look here——" began Snoop savagely.

He got no further; John Bull kept his word. He seized Snoop by the collar, ran him to the wall, and solemnly jammed his head there.

Snoop roared with anguish. He was a child in the hands of the sturdy junior. He was taller than Bull, but he never kept himself fit, and he had not the courage of a canary.

"Ow! Ow! Leggo! Yow! Yah!"

Mr. Quelch came along the passage.

The master of the Remove looked sternly at John Bull.

"What is this disturbance?" he exclaimed "What are you doing, Bull?"

"Knocking Snoop's head against the wall, sir," said John Bull calmly.

There was a chuckle from some of the juniors. Coolness was John Bull's great gift. Mr. Quelch frowned. John Bull's coolness did not please him so much as it tickled the Removites.

"Take a hundred lines, Bull, and release Snoop at once."

"Yes, sir."

And Mr. Quelch walked away.

Snoop rubbed his head, and gave John Bull a malevolent look.

"You—you rotter!" he muttered.

Bull shrugged his broad shoulders.

"You can call me any fancy names you like," he said. "I don't mind. But if you begin any more of your caddish remarks about Linley's pater, I'll jam your head against the wall again, if I get a thousand lines for it."

And Snoop, thinking that discretion was the better part of valour, said no more.

"Blessed if I know why you can't keep your oar out of it, Bull," said Skinner. "Look here——"

John Bull turned on him in a flash.

"Do you want your napper jammed on the wall?" he demanded.

"Oh, no!"

"Then shut up."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here's Marky!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Here's a letter for you, Marky."

"Thank you!" said Mark quietly, taking the letter.

His heart throbbed as he looked at the address on it. It was in his father's hand, and Mark could guess the contents of that letter.

Many sneering looks were cast upon him. Most of the fellows there had people who were at least well off, and they did not know poverty—the state in which the mass of the nation is plunged. To them, poverty seemed mean, rotten, contemptible, disgraceful. It was a natural view for a thoughtless fellow to take.

"It's a letter asking for money," Skinner murmured to Stott. "I'll be bound his people are after that Founder's Fifty!"

"What-ho!" said Stott.

"I shouldn't wonder," Hazeldene remarked. "I suppose they're frightfully hard up, you know, and they naturally want a look in when the kid bags fifty quid."

"He hasn't bagged it this time," said Ogilvy. "I'm sorry, too. I wish he had."

"Rats!" said Skinner. "I was in for it, too, and you never wished me luck."

"You hadn't an earthly—it was like your cheek to enter."

"Rats!"

"Well, it will be a dot in the eye for them when they find that he hasn't got the tin," said Stott. "And he hasn't, you know."

"Serve them right!"

"Yes, rather! What right have they to Greyfriars cash?"

"Blessed bloodsuckers, I call them!"

"It's hard on the cad himself," said Skinner, with an air of great fairness. "I think he's a rotten outsider, and he oughtn't to be allowed here. But as he's here, if he wins any prizes, he ought to have them."

"Oh, they're all of a sort!" said Stott. "Lot of awful rotters, of course."

Mark Linley, careless of what the cads of the Remove might be saying, went on up the passage with his letter. Tom Brown, the New Zealand junior, tapped him on the shoulder.

"Busy?" he asked.

Mark stopped.

"No."

"I want to pay my subscription," said Tom Brown, diving his hand into his pocket. "I'm sorry it's so late; but you know the money had to come from Taranaki, over in Maoriland. I was hard up till the remittance came."

"It's all right," said Mark.

"Will you take it now?"

"Certainly, if you like."

"Here you are, then."

Mark took the money without counting it, and slipped it into his pocket. Tom Brown looked at him in great surprise. Mark Linley was secretary and treasurer of the Remove Cricket Club, and as a rule he was extremely careful and methodical in his accounts. The fellows had been glad to get him as treasurer for that reason, because he didn't mind how much trouble he took, and because he could always be relied upon to have the accounts exactly in order.

But certainly order and method seemed to have departed from him now.

"I—I say," said Tom Brown, as Mark turned to go upstairs, "we made it a rule for the treasurer to give a receipt for the payments, you know."

"Oh, I forgot!"

"I don't mind, of course," said Tom hastily; "but—but it's more in order, in case of any forgetfulness on either side."

"Yes, yes, of course," said Mark; "I forgot! I'm sorry! I will give you the receipt."

He pencilled the receipt.

"Nothing wrong, I hope?" asked Tom, looking at him curiously.

"No, only—well, I've lost the Founder's, and I feel a little upset about it, that's all," said Mark, in his frank way.

"Oh, sorry I bothered you now!"

"It's all right."

"I'm sorry about the prize, too," said Tom Brown sincerely. "I was certain you would pull it off, you know, and certainly I jolly well hoped you would. Do you know who's got it?"

"Vernon-Smith!"

"My hat!"

Mark Linley went upstairs. He went into his own study—the study he shared with Bob Cherry at the end of the Remove passage. Little Wun Lung, the Chinee, made a third in the study. But neither Bob nor Wun Lung was there now, and Mark was glad to see that he had the room to himself. He wanted to be alone.

He sat down to read his letter.

It was from his father, and it was the kind, strong, hopeful letter that the lad knew he would receive from the brave and sturdy Lancashire man.

"Dear Marky,—We are all glad to hear you feel so hoapful about getting the prize. I know what you mean to do with the muney—I know, my lad! But we sha'n't let you part with all of it. You shall help us over this bad time; but half of the money shall be put in the bank for you, and in your name, for you will need it when you get into a higher Form at your big school. Don't say any more about being a worrit to us. It's nothing of the kind. You don't know how proud and pleased your owd folk are to see you getting on so fine."

Mark lowered the letter.

The tears were blinding his eyes.

His father said nothing of it, but Mark knew—knew only too well—the bitter need there was for that money in the far-off home.

He knew that his father had not had work for weeks, that illness had sapped away the little savings of the thrifty family, that there were bills to be paid, rent in arrears, a hard and grasping landlord to be faced.

He knew it only too well!

He had not been away from home long enough to forget the troubles of home, in the class he belonged to—that brave and hard-fighting class, which does so much of the work of the world and wins so little reward.

How was he to write and tell his father that he had been over-confident—that he had lost the prize—that there was no money?

He knew that he had not a word of reproach to expect. It was not that, but the blow it would be to his people. And, besides, what were they to do? Without money, the little home would be broken up.

Mark groaned aloud.

There was a step in the passage, and Harry Wharton came in. Wharton's face became very grave and serious as he saw Mark sitting in a dejected attitude, the letter in his hand.

"Linley, old man!"

Mark looked at him dully.

Wharton clapped him on the shoulder.

"Linley, old man, buck up!"

— —

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Out!

MARK LINLEY rose to his feet slowly, heavily. As a rule the Lancashire lad was in the best of condition—his form was elastic, his step springy. But all the spring had gone out of him now.

"Bad news?" asked Wharton, his eye falling on the letter.

Mark shook his head.

"No."

"Well, I'm glad of that. Your pater's no worse?"

"No; he's getting better."

"Jolly good! I suppose you're feeling horribly cut up about the prize?" said Wharton. "It was too bad! But it's no good moping over it, you know. I want you to come out to the cricket."

"Oh, no, no, no!"

"Better come!" urged Wharton. "When you get a knock-out blow the worst thing possible is to mope over it indoors. It's always better to get out and to get some fresh air into your chest; and the trouble doesn't seem half so big then."

Mark smiled faintly.

"It's all right, Wharton! You're very kind. I shall buck up. But I don't think I will come down to the cricket just now."

"Hang it, old man, you can't waste a half-holiday in this way!" said Wharton. "It's gorgeous weather, and you simply must come back."

"I should jolly well say so!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, putting his head in at the door. "We're not going to let you mope, Marky."

"Come on, Linley, old chap!" said Frank Nugent, over Bob's shoulder. "It's the best thing to be done, you know."

Mark hesitated.

The chums of the Remove only thought of him as depressed by his failure, and perhaps hit a little hard by the loss of the money. They did not know all the circumstances. Mark would never have dreamed of telling them. They regarded his depression as a feeling that was natural; but that had to be got over, and the sooner the better. They did not know that the lad was in a difficulty from which there seemed no escape.

"Come on, Marky!" said Bob. "Besides, we want you to bat. We're getting up a match with the Upper Fourth chaps."

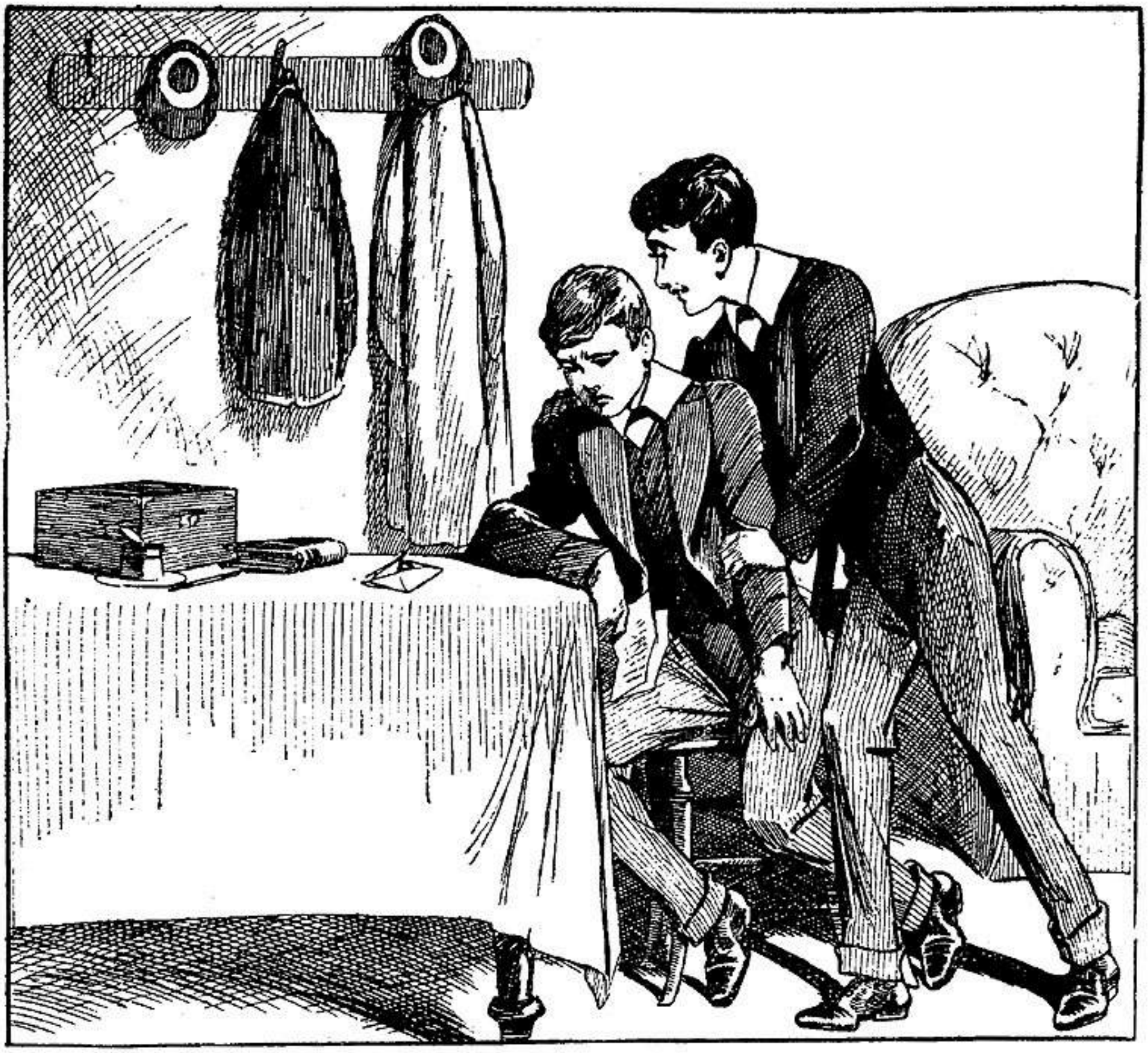
"Oh, very well!" said Mark.

After all, he could do no good by staying in the study. Like a wounded animal, he felt that he wished to creep into a corner and be alone. But it was not good for him to do so.

"I'll come," he said.

"That's right!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

Mark followed the juniors from the study.



Harry Wharton entered the study, and saw the Lancashire lad sitting in a dejected attitude, a letter in his hand. "Linley, old man, buck up!" he said, clapping him on the shoulder. *(See page 6.)*

When they came out of the shady old house into the brilliant sunshine of the Close, Mark felt his spirits revive, in spite of himself.

"You'll feel better when you're batting," Bob remarked.

Temple, Dabney & Co. of the Upper Fourth were already on the cricket-pitch. They greeted the Remove cricketers with superior smiles.

Although the Lower Form of the two, the Remove was a great distance ahead of the Upper Fourth in all sports, but that fact never had the slightest effect in diminishing the swank of Temple, Dabney & Co.

They were the Upper Fourth, and the Remove were the Lower Fourth; and as a consequence Temple, Dabney & Co. put on airs, which were not diminished by repeated lickings on the cricket-field.

"Hallo! Here you are!" Temple exclaimed. "I suppose you know you're late?"

"Two minutes," said Harry.

"Oh, it doesn't matter! We shall have lots of time to lick you before dark!" said Fry of the Fourth.

"Oh, rather!" said Dabney.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"I think I know who'll get the licking," he remarked. "But never mind that! We're ready if you are."

"You skippering the team?" asked Temple.

"Yes."

"I understood that Bulstrode was skipper."

"He's asked me to take his place for a bit. He's still feeling cut-up over what happened—you remember—to his brother."

Temple nodded.

"Poor chap! Well, if you're skipper, let's toss for innings."

Harry Wharton won the toss, and elected to bat. He put in Mark Linley to open the innings with Bob Cherry.

His idea was that Mark would be bucked up by the play—the cheery old familiar sights and sounds of the cricket-field would enliven him.

But the trouble in Mark's breast was more deeply seated than the junior knew.

Before Mark's eyes danced a picture that never faded—the picture of a quiet and humble home, of a father's care-worn face, a mother's anxious looks, a little sister whose childish face that should have been happy and bright bore the signs of early worry, like so many of the faces of the children of the poor.

And that home, humble but happy in its way till now, was to be broken up; there was to be farewell, want, separation.

And he could not save it!

No wonder Mark Linley went on the pitch walking like

a fellow in a dream. He was a keen cricketer, as a rule. But what was cricket to him now?

Dabney went on to bowl against Bob Cherry, who scored a couple of runs for the over. Then Fry was put on against Linley's wicket.

Harry Wharton glanced rather anxiously at the batsman. Mark Linley was standing in his place; but his look was far from attentive, and his eyes seemed dreamy.

"Linley," called out Harry sharply, "buck up!"

Mark Linley started.

"Oh, all right!" he exclaimed.

"Look out!"

Whiz!

The ball came down. Mark Linley made a feeble stroke at it and missed it, and the leather went crashing into his wicket.

There was a yell from the Upper Fourth:

"How's that, umpire?"

"Ha, ha! Out!"

Mark Linley had been bowled first ball. Harry Wharton's face was a study.

Mark glanced miserably down at his wicket, and left the pitch with his bat under his arm. He looked at Wharton as he passed him.

"I'm sorry!" he said quietly.

Wharton nodded.

"Oh, never mind!" he said, with an effort. "It's all serene! Never mind! Next man in!"

Mark Linley tossed down his bat. Most of the fellows on the ground were laughing. It was rare enough for the Lancashire lad to retire with a duck's egg to his credit, but he had done so now.

Mark left the ground with a heavy heart.

Several of the Removites jeered at him as he went. But he hardly heard them. His heart was too heavy to be made heavier by the jeers of Skinner & Co.

"It's rotten, Harry!" Bob Cherry said, speaking to Wharton, as the next man came in. "Marky must be simply rocky to lose a wicket like that."

"Yes, it's rotten!"

"I guess it can't be helped," said Fisher T. Fish, the American junior. "I kinder reckon you should have played me instead, Wharton. I guess I could show you how we play cricket over there."

"Oh, rats!" said Wharton crossly.

Mark Linley walked off the cricket-field, feeling that he had done very badly for his side—as, indeed, he had! But the thought that was hammering in his mind was what was to happen at home—that was the thought that tortured him.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.
Many Friends.

VERNON-SMITH, the Bounder of Greyfriars, was in high feather.

He had won the Founder's Prize—one of the biggest things going at Greyfriars for the junior form. He had beaten Mark Linley, who had been generally considered to have a "dead cert." in that direction.

And the Bounder of Greyfriars was very, very pleased with himself.

Not that he cared twopence for the money. He could have had as much by asking his father for it if he had wanted it. Samuel Smith, the millionaire, did not stint his hopeful son—indeed, many of Vernon-Smith's vices might have been directly traced to the circumstance that he had more pocket-money than was good for him.

Neither was the honour of winning of much account to the Bounder; for scholastic distinctions he cared not a straw.

But he had triumphed. He had a peculiar kind of vanity—he liked to show that he could do things easily that other fellows did with difficulty, or could not do at all.

For that reason he had thrown himself into football once, and come out ahead as a splendid player; for the same reason, only lately, he had distinguished himself at cricket, and then dropped the game entirely.

Nobody had believed that at the exam. for the "Founder's Fifty," as the juniors called it, he would have a chance against Mark Linley.

He had proved that he had a chance—a winning chance—and he had revenged himself upon the Lancashire lad—two very gratifying circumstances to the Bounder of Greyfriars.

Not that Mark either had done anything to provoke his dislike, apart from being quiet and decent and clean-living—a contrast to the Bounder. But those were the reasons why the Bounder could never endure him.

Fellows like Wharton and Bob Cherry, Nugent and John Bull took to the boy who had been a factory lad, and stood his firm friends through thick and thin. They did not take to the Bounder; and his reckless extravagance, his piles of money, did not make them do so. The best set in the Remove did not care a straw for his money, or for the millions of Samuel Vernon-Smith.

And at that the Bounder chafed.

He had hit Mark Linley hard, and, through Mark, he had hit the other fellows hard, and therefore he rejoiced.

And there were plenty of fellows to congratulate him. Few, if any, liked him. But a good many liked his money and the free way he spent it. And fellows like Snoop and Skinner liked his reckless blackguardly ways, too, and were glad to be taken on little excursions with him to haunts forbidden by the rules of the college—rules at which the Bounder snapped his fingers.

It was a marvel to many how it was that Vernon-Smith escaped being expelled, and many surmised some mysterious influence which his pater exercised over either the Head or the Board of Governors.

Fifty pounds was a large sum for a junior to possess, and the Bounder's ways were too well known for him to be supposed to have any intention of saving any of it.

He was certain to expend it, or most of it, in some jollification, some celebration which would not bear the light in all probability; and there were many fellows who were only too eager to be asked to it.

Fellows dropped into Vernon-Smith's study by chance, as it were, during the afternoon.

The Bounder was not playing cricket, he was not on the river, he was not in the gym. He was occupying the golden summer's afternoon by sitting in his study, smoking cigarettes and poring over a betting book. It was a marvel how the Bounder kept himself fit, considering the life he led, yet he never seemed to be seedy.

After a night out of bounds with Vernon-Smith, Skinner or Snoop would look like ghosts on the following morning; but the Bounder himself seemed to be made of iron.

When a fellow dropped in, and began to talk about the weather or the cricket or the Founder's Fifty, Vernon-Smith grinned quietly.

He knew what they wanted, and he asked those whom he had already selected in his own mind to join his party, and the others he did not ask, in spite of the most genial blandishments.

Bunter was one who was not asked. The fat junior rolled into Vernon-Smith's study with his most ingratiating smile turned on, and blinked at Vernon-Smith through his big spectacles in a way that was meant to be very engaging.

The Bounder raised his pencil to point to the door.

Billy Bunter blinked round at the door, not understanding for the moment what the Bounder intended to convey, or, perhaps, not caring to understand.

"I say, Smithy, old man," he said affectionately.

"Outside!" said the Bounder.

"Eh?"

"Get out!"

"I came to speak to you on a rather important matter. I want to congratulate you about winning the prize, first. I'm so jolly glad that factory cad never got it," said Bunter. "He's an insulting beast! Of course, I knew that he hadn't an earthly all along, when I knew that you had entered!"

"Liar!" said the Bounder calmly.

"Eh?"

"You know very well that you thought I hadn't an earthly against Linley," said the Bounder. "So did all the other fellows. I had some doubts myself."

"Yes; that—that's exactly what I meant to say!" stammered Bunter. "I—I meant that you hadn't an earthly, you know——"

"Oh, get out!"

"I'm sincerely glad you won! I've been thinking that, as you are simply rolling in money at the present moment, you might care to make me a small advance upon a postal-order I'm expecting——"

"Travel! I haven't the money, you young ass! If I had, it would make no difference!"

"No; but you can borrow on it," said Bunter. "You see, you can borrow on your expectations. Lots of chaps do, who have relations who are going to die and leave them money, you know!"

"Are you going?"

"With you—for the celebration?" said Bunter, purposely misunderstanding. "Certainly! I shall be very pleased indeed to accept your kind invitation——"

"You'll be pleased to accept a thick ear, you fat duffer, if you don't get outside this study!" said Vernon-Smith.

"Oh, really, Smithy——"

Vernon-Smith rose to his feet, and the Owl of the Remove skipped hurriedly to the door. He stood with the handle of the door in his grasp, ready to bolt if the Bounder made a step towards him.

"Now, look here, Smithy," he said, "I want you to be businesslike! If you hand me a pound, I'll give you twenty-five bob for it when my postal-order comes to-morrow!"

"Cut!"

"Anyway, I know you're going to stand a feed out of that prize, and I'll come," said Bunter. "You will need a good cook, and I'm a good cook!"

"There won't be any cooking, fathead!"

"Well, I don't mind if it's a cold collation," said Bunter. "I can enjoy a cold chicken as much as anybody."

"I dare say you can," said the Bounder, with a grin. "But you won't have any cold chickens at my expense."

"Oh, really, Smithy——"

"Buzz off!" exclaimed Vernon-Smith, picking up a ruler.

Bunter dodged outside the door. Then he put his head cautiously into sight again.

"Look here, Smithy——"

Crash!

The ruler crashed on the door, and Bunter gave a yell and jumped away. The next moment he put his head in again.

"You rotter!" he yelled. "You blessed parvenu, I wouldn't come to your mouldy old feed if you asked me, now! Yah! Beast!"

And Bunter fled down the passage—so suddenly that he fled right into a junior who was coming to the study, and there was a terrific collision.

"Ow!"

"Yow!"

"You silly ass!" roared Hazeldene, catching Bunter by the collar. "You chump——"

"Ow! Oh, really——"

"You—you——"

Bunter twisted himself away and ran. Hazeldene kicked wildly after him, missed, and lost his balance, and sat down on the linoleum.

Vernon-Smith stood in the study doorway, laughing.

Hazeldene limped up.

"Hallo! I was just coming to see you!" he said.

"Come in!" said the Bounder cordially.

Hazeldene entered the study.

"Sit down!" said the Bounder. "What is it? Have you seen Marjorie lately?"

Hazeldene coloured uneasily. He wished that the Bounder would not speak of his sister, but it could not be helped.

"Yes," he said, "I've been over to Cliff House this afternoon."

"Good! You might have mentioned that you were going, and I would have come with you," said Vernon-Smith.

Hazeldene's colour deepened. It was for precisely that reason that he had not mentioned the matter to Vernon-Smith.

"Well, I'll think of it another time," he said. "I really looked in just now to congratulate you about the prize."

"Oh, thanks!" said the Bounder carelessly.

"I'm sorry about Linley; but I'm glad you've got it! I suppose you're going to have a bit of a celebration?"

"Yes; I've asked some fellows. Look here, I'd like you to come——"

"Good!"

"And bring your sister."

"I'm thinking of having a nice little party, quite suitable for a girl to come to," the Bounder remarked. "She could bring Miss Clara with her, of course!"

Hazel shook his head.

"It's no good; she won't come!"

"How do you know?"

"You know she doesn't get on with you, Smithy. It's no good talking about it; she doesn't like you. I don't like telling you so, but there it is."

"You might ask her."

"I wouldn't be any good."

"Just as you like," said the Bounder, with a bitter gleam in his eyes, in spite of his careless tones. "It's of no importance. If there are no ladies present, however, the party will be a bit—well, a bit more lifey! I couldn't think of asking such a nice, well-conducted chap as you are! Will you excuse me now? I'm busy!"

He turned to his book again, and began jotting in figures with his pencil. Hazeldene rose and stood irresolute. He wanted very much to make one of Vernon-Smith's little party, but he knew the hard nature of the Bounder.

"I say, Smithy——" he said weakly.

The Bounder did not even look round. Hazeldene hesitated another minute or so, and then quitted the study.

Then the Bounder looked up, with a savage snap of the teeth.

"She won't come!" he muttered. "And yet she'd come like anything if—if it were that beggar—that factory cad Linley who asked her! Hang him! Hang him! But I think I've settled him this time, anyway!"

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Cross-roads of Life.

MARK LINLEY, if he could have heard that remark of the Bounder's, would probably have agreed with him fully—that Vernon-Smith had "settled him" this time. It seemed to Mark, as he left the cricket-field with downcast looks, that he was indeed "settled."

His cheery optimism had led him to speak confidently to the people at home about the prize. He had had high hopes, and his hopes had seemed well founded. Now they were shattered at a blow. And what was to be done?

Even if he had not led his people to depend upon him in this matter, the situation would have been the same; the need of money would have been just as pressing, just as bitter. The little home would have been in just as much danger of being broken up. The fact that his people expected the money made little or no difference. They needed it just the same, whether they expected it or not. His hopes had not led them to incur any additional expense. It was the necessary expense of keeping alive, while the head of the family was out of work in sickness, that had piled debt on the Linley house and brought the family to the verge of ruin.

Mark was the only one who could help, and Mark had failed.

There remained, perhaps, one thing that he could do. He could leave Greyfriars, throw up his education and his hopes of success in life, and go back to the factory—back to the work in which his earliest years had been spent. By that means he could keep the wolf from the door while his father recovered—by that means, perhaps, he might stave off the ruin that threatened his people.

Give up everything!

The hard struggle for the scholarship, against fellows who had had many more advantages; the difficulties which he had met and overcome at Greyfriars—all must go for nothing!

He had to throw everything up, and recommence life as a factory-hand!

And even that would not save his home.

The Linleys would have to go, and it was only in some cheap garret that they could hope even to subsist on the money that Mark could earn.

No wonder there was a grim shade of gloom upon the brow of the Lancashire lad—no wonder the cheery shouts from the cricket-field, the merry click of bat and ball, grated on his ear.

He went into the House. It seemed strangely silent and deserted on the sunny afternoon.

There were several fellows in the Remove passage, however, and Mark noted that the Bounder was at home. The Bounder was receiving many polite attentions from his Form-fellows, and from fellows in a higher Form. Fourth-Formers, and even fellows in the Fifth, felt it incumbent upon them to show some civility to Herbert Vernon-Smith under the circumstances.

Mark went on to his study.

He went in, and closed the door, and threw himself into a chair, utterly dejected and unhappy.

He had to reply to his father's letter, and he had to tell his father that he had lost instead of winning the Founder's Fifty.

How was he to tell the old man so—to tell him that the last hope of saving his home was gone?

He drew pen and paper towards him, and began to write.

"Dear Dad——"

There he stopped.

He sat at the table, biting the handle of the pen, staring at the paper before him, till the two words he had written danced before his weary eyes.

He could not go on.

He rose, and walked about the room, thrusting his hands into his pockets, or folding them behind him, unable to still his restless movements.

"Dad could stand it, sick as he is," murmured Mark; "but mother, and Mabel—— Oh!"

He sat down again. His pen ran on over the paper.

"Dear Dad——"

He drove on the pen, forcing himself to write. After all, the letter had to be written; it was a task that had to be done.

"Dear Dad,—I'm sorry to have to tell you that I've been disappointed about the prize. I haven't won it. I shall not get the fifty pounds; and the second prize, even if I get it, is a set of books——"

He broke off, and threw down the pen, and tore the letter into pieces.

"I can't do it—I can't do it!"

He took out his books; he opened Xenophon and his Greek Grammar. As a rule, when he was worried or bothered, he could find relief in work. When the fellows had ragged him in the Remove, when matters had gone wrong in any way, he always had his work to retire to, and he could bury himself in it and forget his troubles.

But now the Greek characters danced before his eyes.

He could not fix his attention upon them; he could make no meaning of the simplest sentence.

He pushed the books away with a groan.

"I can't work! Oh, what shall I do?"

He felt that he must have some occupation, or he would become distracted. He shrank from going out into the sunshine. He knew that his face was haggard, and he did not want the fellows to see it. And the sunny brightness of the July afternoon, the green of the trees, the shimmer of the clouds, seemed to mock him.

The money that Tom Brown had paid him clinked in his pocket as he moved. He remembered it, and took it out and laid it upon the table. He had some work to do as treasurer of the cricket club, and he drew his book from the drawer of the table, and unlocked the box he kept the cricket funds in.

Tom Brown's subscription clinked into the box.

Mark stared at the money.

The clink of the coins seemed to exercise a strange fascination over him. He looked at them dazedly.

Gold and silver—silver and gold!

There were many subscribers to the Remove cricket club, and they had mostly paid up by this time, and little of the money had been, so far, expended.

In the keeping of Mark Linley it was as safe as in a bank—or safer. So, at all events, everybody in the Remove thought. Even Mark's bitterest enemies would not have hinted that his honesty was not beyond question.

Mark gazed at the money.

A few pounds—that was all! But a few pounds was all that was required to keep the wolf from the door at home—all that was needed to save his people. He had hoped to win fifty, but fifty was not required. Ten pounds would have been sufficient; ten pounds would have answered the purpose.

And now, here——

Mark Linley gazed at the money, gleaming and glimmering under his eyes.

His hand stole into the box; he played with coins, clinking them against one another, and then pouring them out on the table.

Money, money, money!

The money he needed!

His for the taking—his if he chose to take it. He would have to leave Greyfriars; but he had to leave Greyfriars anyway, to work. Why should he not save those who looked to him for help?

Thief!

Some strange voice from the distance seemed to whisper the word, and Mark started and clenched his teeth.

Thief!

Yes, that was what he would be if he yielded to this temptation. A thief!

But to save his people—to save those he loved—would it not be justifiable? Surely no lad had ever been exposed to such a temptation before!

Would it not be justifiable?

After all, the fellows would not miss the money much. New nets for the cricket-ground, new stumps—— Pah! What did all that matter, when it was a question of life or death, perhaps, to a sick man, of shelter and food, or of homeless wandering and famine, to a woman and a little girl?

Mark's hand closed on the gold coins.

Surely——

A footstep sounded in the passage—the footstep of someone passing along the Remove studies.

Mark Linley started—started like a thief—and cast a guilty look towards the door.

If the door opened——

The footstep passed on.

The boy breathed again.

But his heart was still throbbing—throbbing as if it would burst. His dazed eyes turned upon the glimmering coins.

Thief!

The horrible word seemed to ring from somewhere, as if it had been spoken. Thief!

But why not a thief, then, if it was to save his father and his mother and his little sister from want? Who should blame him? The dreadful sophistry that is never wanting when temptation comes was sapping away his resistance. Yet all the time he knew that if he stole, if he took what did not belong to him, he would become a moral outcast—he would become a boy who was not fit to breathe in the same atmosphere as a decent lad.

He knew it!

All the time he knew it, yet the temptation tugged at his heart, and his hand still lay upon the glimmering coins.

Mark Linley was at the cross-roads—the cross-roads of life. Upon his decision rested all that mattered to him—upon it depended whether he should go through life with his head erect, fearing to look no man in the face, or whether he should slink through it with drooping head and shamed look—a thief, fit for no honest man to touch.

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.
Taken to Tea.

LOUD voices and the loud tramp of feet. The fellows were coming in after the cricket. They came in ruddy and cheerful, all talking at the same time. Even after the bad start by Mark Linley, the Remove had won; they had beaten the Upper Fourth with wickets to spare. Harry Wharton threw his bat down in a corner of the study, and stirred the fragment of a fire.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry, looking in. "You fellows having tea here?"

Wharton looked round, still poking the fire.

"Yes," he said. "Franky, old man, fill the kettle."

"Right-ho!" said Nugent.

"Much going?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Yes, quite a feed. Will you join us?"

Bob Cherry grinned.

"That's what I was thinking of," he said. "Old Marky's moping in the study, and if you chaps like I'll bring him to tea. He wants cheering up, and the cricket didn't seem to do it."

"He came a mucker at that," said Frank Nugent.

"Well, what could you expect? I suppose that rotten Founder's Fifty meant much more to him than any of us knew," said Bob sagely. "He might have been depending on it to pay for new books, or perhaps the doctor's bill through his pater being crocked. You never know."

"Quite likely. Poor old Marky!"

"Chap can't offer a chap money, or we'd get up a subscription for him," said Bob Cherry. "But we can cheer him up. No good moping. He'll get over it in a day or two; but it's that day or two that's rotten, you know, in a case like this. It's like being crossed in love to fail in an exam. It's all serene when the wrench is over, but the wrench is simply beastly."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Well, I don't know about being crossed in love," he said. "I haven't had all your experiences. I suppose——"

"Oh, don't be an ass!" said Bob. "Of course, that's from hearsay. But about Marky; shall I bring him, and have a cheerful jaw here to liven him up?"

"By all means."

"Trot him in," said Nugent. "We'd kill the fatted calf for him, too, only we're not allowed to suffocate Bunter, much as we should like to."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Cherry went along the passage with his sounding footsteps. He kicked open the door of Study No. 13, and Mark Linley started to his feet.

Bob Cherry glanced at the gold and silver on the table.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" he exclaimed, staring. "Have you come into a giddy fortune, Marky?"

Mark's face was crimson.

He could not answer Bob Cherry for the moment. His lips seemed frozen, and they moved without any word coming forth.

"What's the matter, Marky?"

"Nothing," muttered Mark.

"You're looking awfully upset, old chap," said Bob sympathetically. "I never thought this would cut you so deep, you know."

"It's all right," muttered Mark thickly.

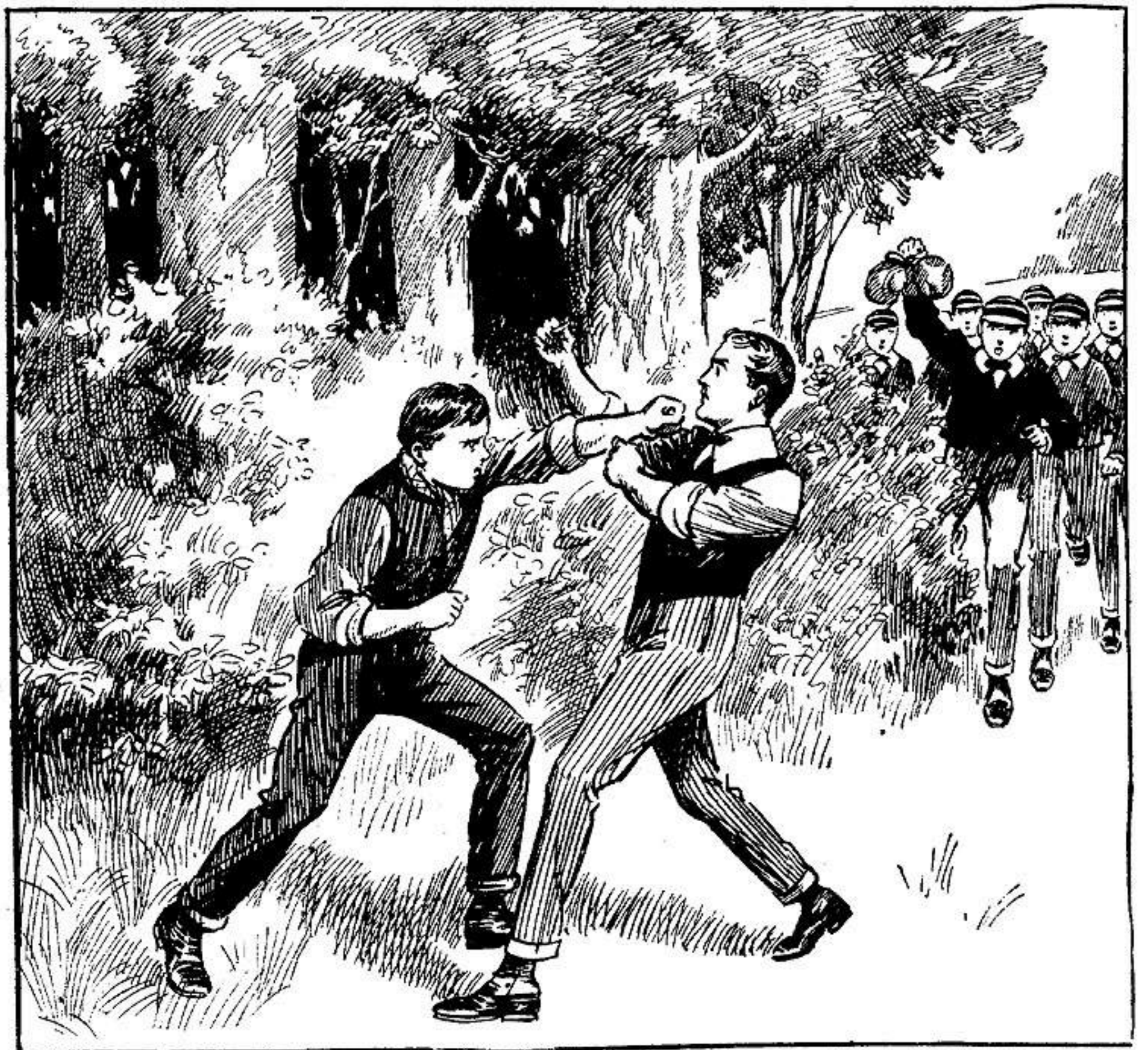
He gathered the money up into the box, and locked it. Bob Cherry recognised the box, and understood where the money came from.

"Oh, the cricket funds!" he said. "You've been doing the club accounts?"

"Yes," said Mark.

"Have you done them?"

"Yes."



This picture illustrates an exciting incident in the splendid, new, long, complete school tale of Tom Merry & Co., entitled: "Under False Colours." This special issue also contains the opening chapters of a stirring new serial story entitled, "The Alliance of Three." Order your copy to-day.

"Well, you are a chap for work!" said Bob Cherry admiringly. "Now, if I felt downhearted, what I should do would be to go and have a terrific slog at the punching-ball, you know, and fag myself right out. I shouldn't ever think of turning to work as a relief. But chaps are different. All the same, it would do you good to slog the punching-ball a bit, Marky. You're beginning to look off colour; you are, really. Your face went quite red when I came in, and flushing is a bad sign of health, you know."

Mark's face went redder still as Bob Cherry made this remark.

"I'm all right, Bob," he said, with an effort. "Don't bother about me. Are you going to have tea in the study, or down in the hall?"

"Neither. I'm going to have it in No. 1, with Wharton," said Bob.

Mark Linley sat down again. Miserable and unhappy as he was, he was glad that he was not to be disturbed. He wanted to be alone.

"Very well, Bob; I'm all right here. If I feel hungry, I'll slip down to hall and get some tea. Don't stop for me."

Bob Cherry grinned again. He had not the least intention of leaving the Lancashire lad to mope alone in the study.

"You're coming with me, you see," he explained. "Come on!"

Mark Linley shook his head.

"I'd rather not," he said. "I don't feel inclined for company just now."

"Rats! Wharton's asked you."

"You could excuse me to him——"

"Yes, I could," said Bob Cherry, with a nod, "but I'm jolly well not going to. You're coming to tea with me, and we're going to cheer you up."

Mark smiled faintly.

"I don't think you can do that, Bob."

"We're going to try. Come on!"

Mark did not move.

"Getting deaf?" asked Bob Cherry pleasantly. "I told you to come on."

"I'd rather not come, Bob—really!"

"Possibly. Come on!"

"Look here, Bob——"

"This way!"

"Bob, old man——"

"I'm waiting for you."

Mark Linley's brows wrinkled a little. He wanted to be alone—alone! Bob Cherry did not understand—he could not understand, not knowing all the circumstances. He wanted to cheer Mark up, but Mark was in a frame of mind that was far past any kindly efforts at cheering up. He was in black spirits, and he wanted to bury them in solitude.

"Look here, Bob, I'd rather stay here. Don't be a worry, old chap. Do go by yourself, and let me stay."

Bob Cherry shook his head decidedly.

"Can't be did!" he said. "I want you to come. You're not going to be allowed to mope. Shake it off, old son."

"I can't shake it off. You don't understand."

"Perhaps not; but if you can't shake it off we'll stand it together," said Bob Cherry genially. "Two heads are better than one."

"I tell you——"

"You can tell me what you like," said Bob, "but you're coming to tea with me. That's settled. Now, are you going to come quietly, or have I got to boost you?"

"Bob, old man——"

"You have a choice of ways—you've got to come. You can walk, or run, or crawl, or be carried—which?"

Mark rose to his feet.

"Now, look here, Bob, don't be an ass! I——"

Bob put his arm through Mark Linley's.

"Come on!"

The Lancashire lad resisted. Bob calmly dragged him out of the study. In the passage Mark made one more expostulation.

"Bob, I tell you——"

"All serene! This way!"

And Mark Linley was marched down the passage. Half laughing, in spite of his trouble, the Lancashire lad was taken to Study No. 1. The fire was spurting up in the cinders of the grate, and the kettle was beginning to sing. Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent gave the Lancashire lad looks of welcome.

"Come in!" exclaimed Wharton. "Glad you've come. I hear that you've got the blues, bad. We're going to cheer you up."

"I'm more likely to give you my blues, I think," said Mark.

"We'll risk that," said Wharton, laughing. "We've beaten the Upper Fourth, and I feel as fit as a fiddle, so it won't be easy to give me the blues."

"Open the sardines, Bobby," said Frank.

"Right you are!"

"I'm going to make toast, if this blessed fire will smile a bit," said Harry Wharton. "You can cut the bread, Marky."

"Certainly."

Mark Linley was soon busy in helping in the preparations for tea, and a cheery chat ran on all the time, but neither occupation nor chat had the effect of enlivening the lad from Lancashire. Sometimes he tried to smile, but the effect was painful and apparent, and even Bob Cherry began to doubt whether, after all, they would succeed in cheering poor Marky up.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.
Not Cheered.

BOB CHERRY helped to make the toast when the fire condescended to burn at last, and he rose from the grate with a ruddy face, grunting. On the table was an enticing array of boiled eggs, sardines, and bloater-paste. Jam and marmalade and biscuits and cake completed the spread, with a whole pineapple. Billy Bunter's eyes would have danced behind his spectacles at the sight of that table, but it did not have the effect of dispelling the gloom from Mark Linley's countenance.

Mark had what Bob called "got 'em!"

And he had "got 'em" bad!

His spirits were down at the lowest level. He was in such a state of mind that life itself seemed like a weary burden to him, and the outlook on all sides was black, unrelieved by a gleam of hope.

He must leave Greyfriars.

Amid many doubts and uncertainties that fact stood forth plainly enough. He must leave Greyfriars and work for his parents.

There was no other way of tiding them over the bad time. For weeks his father would not be able to work. During that time Mark must keep the family, or the family must starve.

The Founder's Prize would have saved the situation, but the Founder's Prize was not to be his.

He must leave Greyfriars, but that was not all. It might be some time before he could get work—in his earlier days he had had bitter experience of that. He knew the problem of the unemployed from the inside.

And in the meantime, what were his people to do? And even when he began to earn money it would only be a small pittance—not much among four.

He needed money—money—money with bitter need.

And the thought of the money in the box in his study was like poison in his mind, tainting every thought.

Money, so bitterly needed, could be his for the taking—he could take it if he chose. He need even fear no punishment, for he would leave Greyfriars, and the Head certainly would not make the matter public, and cause a scandal over a boy who had gone for good.

The possession of the money might mean the difference between life and death for his sick father, perhaps for the others.

No wonder poor Mark had "got 'em!"

With such thoughts in his mind he was not likely to be cheered up by the well-meant efforts of the juniors.

Bob Cherry could not quite understand. He knew that Mark had troubles at school and troubles at home, but he had always seen him bear them with quiet fortitude. This new phase of the Lancashire lad's character astounded Bob.

When Bob found that Mark could not even be interested in the forthcoming cricket match with Courtfield School he was "done."

"You must be ill, Marky," he said.

Mark shook his head.

"He feels seedy, of course," said Nugent. "He looks seedy. As a matter of fact, I dare say he swotted too hard over the exam."

"I'm all right," said Mark.

"Will you have some sardines, old son?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Thank you!"

But the sardines remained untouched on Mark's plate. After they were placed there he did not even seem to see them.

He had barely touched his egg, and the bread-and-butter and the toast remained uneaten. When a chap who had not eaten anything since dinner found himself unable to touch nice buttered toast at tea-time, it seemed to Bob Cherry that there must be something seriously wrong with him.

"Don't you like the sardines, Marky?" asked Nugent.

Mark started.

"Yes—yes, thanks!"

And he ate a fragment.

"Like the toast, Marky?"

"Y—yes!"

"Why the dickens don't you eat some, then?" demanded Bob Cherry.

Mark started again, and coloured.

"Haven't I?" he said confusedly. "I—I'm sorry! It's certainly very nice. As a matter of fact, I—I don't think I'm hungry."

"You don't think!" said Bob Cherry. "Don't you know whether you're hungry or not, sonny?"

"I—I—I'm all right."

"Drink your tea—it will cheer you up."

"Thanks!"

"We shall want you to play in the Courtfield match, Marky," Harry Wharton said.

"Yes. Are you playing Courtfield?"

"My hat! Have you forgotten?"

"I—— Yes! Sorry!"

"Look here, what about the picnic on the island with the Cliff House girls?" said Frank Nugent. "We ought to fix up about that while Marky and Bob are here."

"I suppose you're coming, Linley?" asked Wharton.

"Eh?"

"Are you coming?"

"Where?"

"To the picnic, of course."

"What picnic?"

"My hat! We're thinking of having a picnic on the island, and Marjorie and Clara will be coming."

"Oh, I see!"

"You'll come, I suppose? Saturday afternoon."

"I don't know."

"It will be jolly good," said Bob Cherry. "I'll see that he comes—rather—if I have to yank him along by his ears!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Do you hear that, Marky?"

"Eh?"

"I say you are coming if I have to yank you along by the ears!" roared Bob Cherry.

"Ears?"

"Yes, ears! Do you understand?"

Mark reddened.

"I—I—I'm afraid I don't, Bob. What is it? Excuse me, you fellows, but I'm afraid I wasn't listening to what you were saying. What was it?"

The chums of the Remove exchanged hopeless looks. In the face of absent-mindedness like this their well-meant efforts at distracting Mark's mind from its troubles fell to the ground. There was evidently nothing to be done.

Mark had said that he was more likely to give the chums his blues than to be infected by their cheerfulness—and he was quite right, as it turned out. Under the influence of the Lancashire lad's black depression, the cheery chat in the study died away, and remarks became dull and desultory.

Finally there was silence.

Mark Linley did not notice it. In spite of himself, he was buried deep in gloomy reflection, and he had almost forgotten where he was.

Bob Cherry rose from his seat at last.

"I think we had better be going," he remarked grimly. "Come on, Marky! Sorry you chaps have had such a treat!"

Wharton laughed.

"It's all right," he said. "Don't mind us. I'm only sorry that we haven't been able to cheer poor old Marky up."

Mark's face was darkly clouded.

"I'm sorry I've inflicted my blues on you fellows," he said. "But Bob would bring me. I'm sorry."

"Not at all."

"It's all serene."

Mark Linley went out with Bob Cherry. In the passage, Bob looked at his chum very curiously indeed.

"I'm blessed if I can make you out, Marky," he said. "Can't you make an effort, old chap, and chuck this off your chest?"

Mark groaned.

"You don't understand."

"I suppose I don't," agreed Bob Cherry. "Look here, come and have a slog at the punching-ball. It will do you good."

Mark shook his head.

"Come and have a sprint round the Close, then."

"No."

"Let's go to the Fourth Form-room, and pick a row with Temple, Dabney & Co.," Bob suggested hopefully. "They've been swanking a lot lately."

Mark smiled faintly.

"No, thanks."

"My hat!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Isn't there anything I can suggest to cheer you up?"

"Nothing, I'm afraid. I'm a grumpy brute; better let me alone."

"Oh, rats!"

"You'd better, Bob. Buzz off, and get to the gym."

Bob Cherry hesitated.

"Where are you going?"

"To the study."

"What for?"

"Well, I've got my prep to do, and——"

"But you're not going there to do your prep."

"Well, no."

"What then?"

"I've got to think something out."

"Mope, you mean."

Mark did not reply.

"Well, I suppose I can't do you any good," said Bob miserably. "I've hardly ever felt quite so downhearted before, Marky, old chap. It's really rotten to see you like this."

"I can't help it, Bob. Better let me alone."

And Bob Cherry came to that conclusion, too, at last. Mark Linley went to the study, and Bob Cherry tramped downstairs, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, and his brow wrinkled up in a gloomy frown.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.
Coker Thinks Not.

VERNON-SMITH lighted his eighth or ninth cigarette, and blew out a little cloud of smoke. The Bounder was smiling serenely. Few fellows in junior Forms had been so courted as the Bounder of Greyfriars, just now. There had been one little disappointment—in connection with Marjorie Hazeldene; but by excluding Hazel from the list of the party, Vernon-Smith had indemnified himself for that. And, really, the way the Bounder was planning his little celebration, it seemed likely to be a great success—in its own peculiar way.

The best fellows in the Remove, certainly, wouldn't be there; but then, Vernon-Smith did not want them. He wanted the worst fellows, and he could have them for the asking—and he had them.

Skinner, and Snoop, and Stott, and several other fellows of the same sort, were coming, and two or three fellows belonging to the Fourth Form. The Bounder had been sitting in state in his study, receiving hints for invitations, and inviting whom he pleased. Somewhat to his surprise, Bulstrode had not been to see him. Coker, of the Fifth, came in with Potter, and both of them beamed on the cad of the

Remove. Vernon-Smith was smoking, and he pushed the cigarette box across to the visitors.

"Light up!" he said.

Coker hesitated. He was a reckless fellow, but he did not care about smoking in a study, especially a junior study.

"Thanks, I don't think I will," he said. "Aren't you running a risk here, smoking with the blessed door open?"

The Bounder laughed.

"Oh, I don't see it!"

"You might get reported to the Head."

"What then?"

"The sack!" said Potter.

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

"The Head can't sack me," he said. "My governor's got too much influence for that! He can't kick me out! He'd have done it before this if he could."

"Well, I shouldn't wonder if there's something in that," agreed Coker. "If ever there was a chap who deserved to be expelled—ahem!—I—I mean—the fact is, Smithy, we ran in to congratulate you about the Founder's."

"Thanks."

"Never expected you to beat Linley," said Coker, in his tactless way, though Potter was pulling at his sleeve all the time. "I suppose it was honest Injun, eh?"

"What do you mean?" said the Bounder darkly.

"I mean you really did the exam. paper—no blessed fake," said Coker, with a grin. "No getting a senior to help you, eh?"

"We had to do them alone."

"Yes, I know you had to, but I don't know that you did. However, it's none of my bizney. I thought it might be spoof when I heard that you had beaten Linley, that's all."

"Thanks," said the Bounder sarcastically.

"Not at all," said Coker, still quite obtrude. "Don't mention it. I suppose you feel as if you were rolling in money, with fifty quidlets knocking around?"

"I've had as much before."

"Yes; I hear your governor is a millionaire or something, and makes millions out of corned beef, or sewing-machines, or something."

"My father is the Cotton King."

"Yes, I knew it was something to do with sewing-machines, or mangles, or something," said Coker, with a nod. "Must be ripping for you. I've got an aunt who comes down handsome, but nothing like that. And then, she has tantrums sometimes, and won't shell out for weeks. I always know if she's in a tantrum, by not getting any postal-orders, you know, or registered letters. Does your pater ever get into a giddy tantrum?"

"Not with me."

"Oh, how good! I'd swap my aunt for him any day," said Coker. "Look here, we looked in to—to congratulate you, wasn't it, Potty?"

"That's it," said Potter, "to congratulate him."

"Thank you," said Vernon-Smith, unmoved.

"There was something else," said Coker.

"Oh, go ahead!"

"I think you're having a little celebration with the quids," said Potter. "I hear you are going to blue the lot."

Vernon-Smith nodded.

"Quite correct."

"Well, we shouldn't mind coming."

"That's it," said Coker genially. "I knew there was something else I wanted to say. We shouldn't mind coming—really, we shouldn't mind at all, should we, Potty?"

"Not at all," said Potter.

"In fact, we should be quite pleased to give you a—a sort of a—a leg up, on an occasion like this," said Coker—"shouldn't we, Potty?"

"Exactly," said Potter.

"You can come," said Vernon-Smith.

Coker and Potter coughed. That really wasn't exactly the way to meet the sublime condescension of the Fifth; but Coker checked his desire to tell Vernon-Smith what he thought of him. For he wanted to make one of the party.

"I suppose it's going to be something pretty decent," said Potter abruptly.

Vernon-Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"That depends on what you call decent," he said. "Some of the Sixth are coming—Loder, and Carne."

Coker whistled.

"Those two giddy blackguards!"

"They know how to keep things lively," said Vernon-Smith. "Hobson, of the Shell, is coming, too, and several of the Fourth, and the Remove. I had to have Loder if I could get him, as he's a prefect, and it makes all safe."

"Safe!" said Coker.

"Of course!"

"But—but what's the giddy celebration going to be like?" asked Coker, in surprise.

"What did you think it would be like?" asked the Bounder, with his unpleasant smile

"Well, I was thinking of a big feed, I suppose," said Coker—"something extra special, with pate-de-foie-gras, and kickshaws, you know."

"That's it," said Potter.

"You can have as much pate-de-foie-gras as you like," said Vernon-Smith. "I'm having the grub sent in by a firm of caterers. I'm not depending on the Cross Keys for that."

"The Cross Keys."

"Yes, Cobb's place, you know."

"You don't mean to say that you're standing this feed at the Cross Keys, in Friardale?" Coker exclaimed.

"Did you think I was going to stand it in the Remove dorm?"

"Well, yes, or in a Form-room."

"Well, I'm not. I'm not a fag with a pot of jam to share out," said the Bounder of Greyfriars disdainfully. "I'm giving this celebration at the Cross Keys. Old Cobb has arranged a room for me—big table, two waiters, floral decorations, and so forth."

"My word! You're going to do the thing in style!" said Potter. "But there's one little item you seem to have forgotten."

"What's that?"

"The Cross Keys is out of bounds."

Vernon-Smith laughed.

"I know it is. That doesn't make any difference."

"So you're giving a feed at a place out of bounds—and the lowest hole in Friardale or the district?" said Coker, eyeing the Bounder of Greyfriars grimly.

"You needn't come if you don't want to"

"Ahem! What's the feed to be like?"

"Anything you like to eat and drink. There will be champagne going," said the Bounder, with perfect coolness.

"Champagne!" shouted Coker and Potter together.

"Yes, certainly—Moet Chandon and Hiedsieck," said Vernon-Smith "and cigars and cigarettes. After the feed there will be a little game."

"A little game?" said Coker dazedly

"Yes, poker and nap."

"For money?"

"Well, I'm not likely to spend an evening playing cards for nuts or sticks of toffee," said the Bounder contemptuously.

"My hat!" said Coker.

"I think it will be a giddy success," said the Bounder, "and, having a prefect with us, makes all safe. Prefects have keys to the side gate, you know, and we can get in afterwards quite easily without being spotted."

"But—but at what time are you going to have the feed, then?"

"Start at eleven o'clock."

"At—at night?" gasped Coker.

"Did you think I meant eleven o'clock in the morning?" asked Vernon-Smith, with unpleasant humour.

"Then all your giddy party will have to break bounds at night?"

"Precisely."

"Well," said Coker, "I'd have been glad to come to a feed—especially as my aunt is in one of her giddy tantrums, and cash has run out. But to take part in a low, rotten, blackguardly affair like that —"

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"You ought to be kicked out of the school," said Coker. "Champagne, and cigars, and gambling—and you're not fifteen yet! My only hat! What will you be at twenty, when you get to Oxford?"

The Bounder sneered.

"You're not forced to come if you don't like the programme," he said. "You're a fool if you miss it, that's all."

"I suppose I'm a fool, then," said Coker. "Nobody's ever called me a goody-goody or straight-laced, that I know of; but a chap's bound to draw the line somewhere. I draw it at giddy midnight orgies."

"Yes, rather!" said Potter.

"And look here," said Coker, wagging an admonitory finger at the sneering Bounder, "I warn you that you're going too far. Champagne is jolly hefty stuff for a kid of your age. You'll come home squiffy."

"Well, what about it?"

"Only you'll get sacked from the school."

"The Head can't sack me."

"I don't know about that, of course; but what about the other fellows? Suppose they get run in by a prefect?"

"They must take their chance."

"You mean you don't care?"

"Not a brass button!" said Vernon-Smith, with a yawn. "If a chap can't look out for himself, the sooner he goes under the better."

"Let's get out of this room," said Coker. "I feel as if I were interviewing a convict in a cell. Look here, Vernon-Smith, I can't tell anybody about this—it would be rotten sneaking—but it would serve you right if I did. My advice to you is to drop the idea and try to be decent."

"When I want your advice I'll ask for it."

Coker flushed red.

"You cheeky young sweep!" he exclaimed. "For two pins I'd wipe up the study with you now! You—you unspeakable young blackguard!"

Vernon-Smith pointed to the door.

"Would you mind getting out of my study?" he asked, yawning.

"You cheeky young hound——"

"Perhaps you'd be kind enough to close the door after you?"

"You—you——"

"Good-evening!"

The Bounder's cool insolence was too much for Coker. Coker was not very patient at any time—in fact, he was extremely hot-headed. To be checked in this way by a Lower Fourth boy was a little too much. Coker made a dive at the Bounder, and grabbed him across the table, lifting him out of his chair.

"Oh!" roared the Bounder. "Leggo!"

Coker did not let go. He dragged Vernon-Smith across the table, upsetting a good many articles in doing so, so that the Bounder was sprawled across the table face downwards. Coker's strong grasp held him there, pinned, and wriggling.

"Now, then, Potty!"

"What-ho!" said Potter.

Smack—smack—smack!

Potter's right hand was strong and heavy. It rose and fell with machinelike regularity. The dust rose from Vernon-Smith's trousers in great clouds.

Smack—smack—smack!

"Ow—ow! Yow! Ow!"

"Go it, Potty!"

"Ain't I going it?" demanded Potter.

"Ha, ha! You are! Ha, ha!"

Smack—smack—smack!

Vernon-Smith roared, and howled, and struggled; but he could not get away from the grasp of the powerful Coker. He squirmed under the heavy smacks, roaring, till Coker let him go at last.

"There!" gasped Coker. "That's for your cheek, and it's for your rotten caddishness. And if ever you have the nerve to ask me to a party again, I'll wipe up the study with you!"

"Ow!"

"Come on, Potty!"

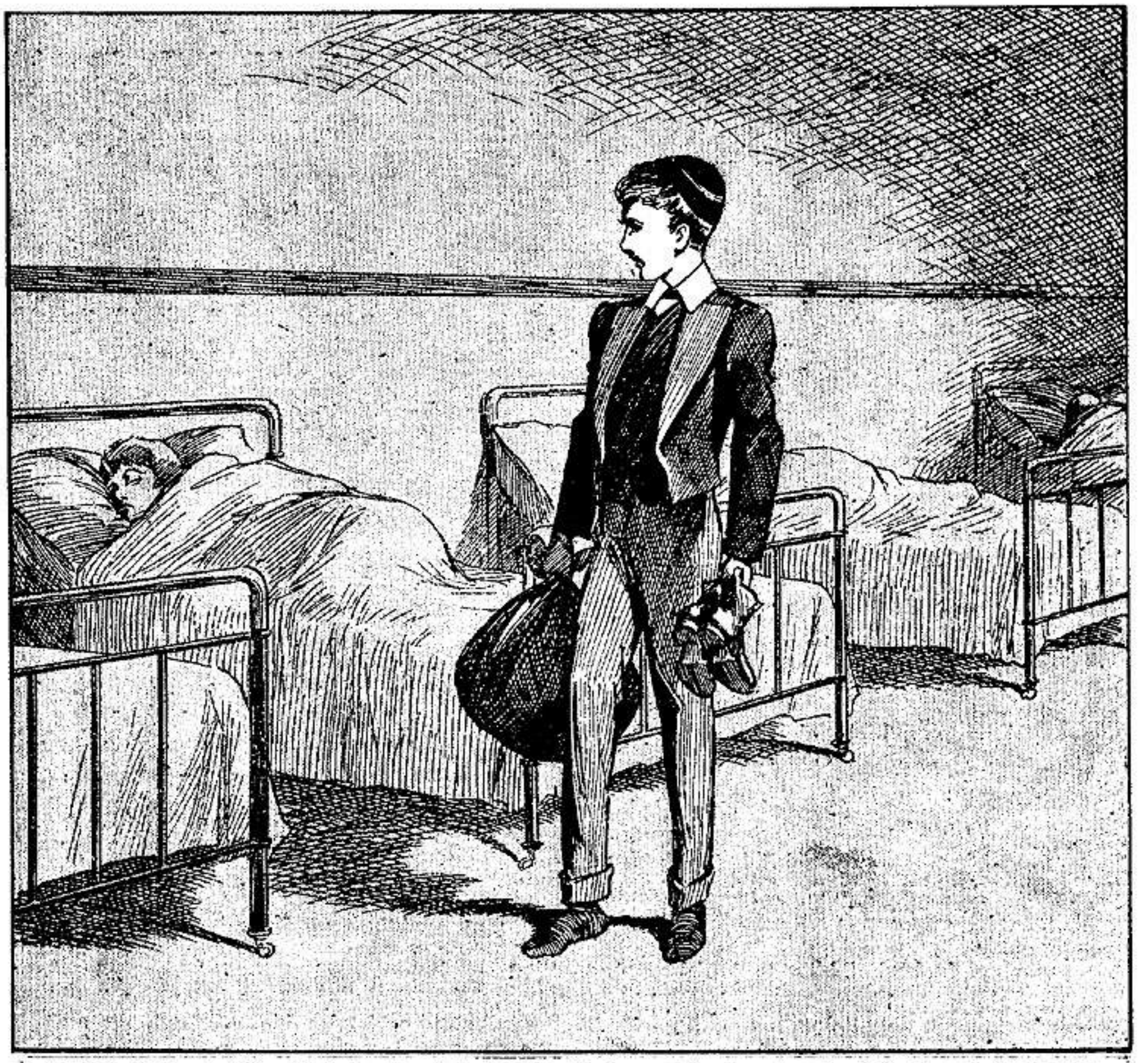
The two Fifth-Formers left the study, and Vernon-Smith wriggled off the table back to his chair. But sitting down was too painful, and he jumped up quite quickly. His face was convulsed with rage.

There was the sound of a chuckle in the passage. Two or three fellows were looking in at the half-open door. The disturbance in the study had brought them along the passage, and they had enjoyed the scene.

Vernon-Smith turned a crimson and furious face upon them.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Bounder caught up an inkpot and hurled it. In his passionate temper, the



As Mark Linley stood, bundle in hand, and took his last look round the dormitory, he felt a strange throb in his heart. It was not resentment now, only grief.

Bounder did not care how much he hurt. There was a quick dodging in the passage, and the inkpot smashed on the opposite wall, sending round a flood of splashing ink.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Vernon-Smith slammed the door with a slam that rang along the Remove passage. Through the keyhole came the sound of persistent chuckling.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.
The Subscription.

SKINNER, of the Remove, wore a pleased smile. Skinner was in the junior common-room. He had a little bag in his hand, and a pleased smile, as we have said, on his face. When Skinner looked pleased it was generally time for somebody else to look displeased, for Skinner's merry smile meant that he had played some trick upon somebody, and Skinner's tricks were usually of the most ill-natured description.

There were a good many other fellows round Skinner, also looking very much amused. Something was evidently "on."

"I think we're ready, now," said Skinner.

"Yes, rather!" said Snoop. "The fellow's in his study. Come on."

"All of you come," said Skinner, grinning. "All the subscribers ought to have a look in."

"Hear, hear!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Surely Linley's in his study?" asked Keene.

"I believe so. Here's Cherry. Ask him."

"Hallo, Cherry! Where's your factory friend?"

Bob Cherry paused as he came into the room. Then he walked straight up to Stott, who had asked the question, with a look upon his face that made Stott wish he had couched the inquiry in some other terms.

"What did you say?" asked Bob Cherry quietly.

"I asked you where Linley was."

"That isn't exactly how you put it, I think."

"Only a little joke," Stott stammered.

Bob smiled scornfully.

"Don't make any more jokes of that sort," he said. "I don't like them. Old Marky's in his study; but he doesn't want to see you. What have you chaps got on here?"

"We're going to stand by Linley," Skinner explained, with a wink to his friends which almost sent some of them into convulsions. "We're sorry for Linley. It was rotten for him to lose the Founder's Fifty, after counting his chickens before they were hatched. So we're going to try to make it up to him."

"How?"

"We've got up a subscription for him," said Skinner, shaking the little bag, which gave forth a metallic clink.

"You see, he expected to get fifty quid. Of course, we couldn't raise anything like that, but we've done our best."

Bob Cherry wrinkled his brows.

"You shouldn't have done anything of the sort!" he exclaimed. "Marky won't take your money."

Skinner sneered.

"I suppose Marky can be left to answer for himself, as far as that goes," he said. "I suppose you're not his father or his uncle, are you, by any chance?"

"Look here——"

"We're jolly well going to present Marky, as you call him, with what we subscribed for him!" said Skinner. "If you don't like it, you can do the other thing. Why, the kids at home may be in want of grub, for all you know; there may be brokers hanging on the backyard wall, and that sort of thing. The old man may be short of beer, or his mother may have to stop taking in washing for want of a bar of soap. You never know!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Cherry's eyes blazed.

"If you don't shut up, Skinner——"

"Well, I was only explaining to you," said Skinner peaceably. "I don't want you to join the deputation. But I suppose Linley can say for himself whether he wants the money we've raised, can't he?"

"Well, I suppose so," said Bob slowly.

"That's all right, then. You keep your oar out of things that don't concern you. You chaps ready?"

"We're ready."

"Come on, then."

And Skinner & Co. marched out of the common-room, leaving Bob Cherry looking very worried and annoyed. But after all, he had no right to interfere. Mark Linley could speak for himself in the matter.

Skinner & Co.—seven or eight of them in all—made their way up to the Remove passage, and tramped along to Study No. 13. Skinner knocked ceremoniously at the door. There was no reply to the knock. Mark Linley was in the study, but he did not hear it.

"What's the trouble?" asked several voices from study doors along the passage.

"Subscription for Linley," said Snoop.

"Oh!"

Skinner opened the door of Study No. 13. John Bull and Fisher T. Fish looked out of the end study—No. 14.

"What's all this blessed row?" asked Bull.

"Subscription for Linley.

"My hat!"

"I guess that takes the cake!" said Fisher T. Fish. "I kinder never thought that Marky was so popular!"

"At a time like this, one ought to stand by a chap," said Skinner loftily. "He's had a big disappointment, you know."

"Yep; but——"

"But you're not the kind of fellow to stand by a chap because he's had a disappointment!" said John Bull, in his blunt way. "You've got some little game on!"

"Well, you can see us make the presentation if you like."

"I jolly well will!"

"I guess I'm on in this scene, too!"

Other juniors were crowding along the passage, curious to see what was taking place.

Skinner & Co. marched into Study No. 13.

Mark Linley was sitting at the window, looking dully out. He did not even turn his head as they came in.

"Linley! I say, Linley!"

The Lancashire lad looked round.

"Well? What do you want?"

"Just a few words with you," said Skinner, with a wink at his friends. "We're all sorry—awfully sorry—you lost the Founder's Fifty. I had entered for it myself, but, bless you, I shouldn't have minded a bit if you had won it instead of the Bounder. We want to express our sympathy."

"Thank you," said Mark quietly.

Neither his look nor his tone betrayed whether he believed Skinner's statement or not. Most probably he did not.

"Then we think it was jolly hard on you to lose the money," said Skinner. "We know you are horribly hard up——"

"That is no business of yours!"

"We're making it our business," said Skinner, unabashed. "We want to help you, because—because we all admire you. Isn't that so, you chaps?"

"Because we all admire him!" said the others, in a kind of chorus.

"Therefore, we have raised a subscription, and we hereby present it to you," said Skinner, holding up the bag.

Linley shook his head.

"I thank you, if you mean it kindly," he said; "but I couldn't possibly accept your money. It is impossible."

Skinner looked very much hurt.

"Well, I think that's very rough, after we've raised the money, out of pure friendship," he said. "I think you might be a bit more decent about it, Linley."

Mark hesitated.

"I suppose you are sincere," he said. "Pardon me, but I cannot help doubting you, Skinner. I know you so well."

Some of the fellows chuckled. They knew Skinner very well; too, and they would not have dreamed of taking his word on any subject whatever. Skinner turned very red. It does not please a deceiver to be called a deceiver.

"Well, if that's the way you're going to put it, I've no more to say," he said. "I think you might have a bit more decency about it. It isn't every chap who'd go round raising ten pounds for you."

Mark started.

"Ten pounds!"

Skinner shook the bag, and there was a clink of coins.

Mark breathed hard.

Ten pounds! It was more than there was in the cricket fund box—more than he had been tempted to make a thief of himself for. More! It was all his people needed to tide them over their difficulties till better times came round—it was enough to save him from leaving Greyfriars.

There was his pride. Could he sacrifice that? Alas! There would be little room for pride in the fight for employment—in the struggle for existence—after he had left Greyfriars. And he had been thinking of sacrificing his honesty for less money—and surely pride should go before honesty.

Involuntarily he stretched out his hand to the bag. John Bull and Tom Brown were looking in, and they were amazed. They had never dreamed that the lad would accept money. They did not know how the poor fellow was driven by the haunting thought of the home that was doomed—of the mother that was to be turned into the street—of the sick father who might have no roof to shelter him.

Skinner winked at his friends.

They suppressed their chuckles with difficulty. Like one in a dream, Mark Linley took the little cloth bag from Skinner's hand. Ten coins could be felt in it, and they clinked softly against one another.

Still, without speaking, Mark Linley loosened the neck of the bag, and poured out the coins upon the table.

Then he started.

There was a roar of laughter from the juniors as they saw the money—and saw Skinner & Co.'s little joke at the same time. From the open bag ten farthings had rolled out upon the table!

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.
Straight from the Shoulder.

MARK LINLEY did not speak.

He looked at the farthings on the table in silence. Skinner & Co. were roaring with laughter, and there was an echo of chuckling from the juniors in the passage.

John Bull did not laugh, neither did Tom Brown, nor Fisher T. Fish. But most of the fellows did. To see Linley open the bag, expecting to find ten sovereigns, and to find ten farthings instead, seemed to them funny.

Mark did not look angry. He was too wounded to be angry. Half unconsciously he had taken the bag from Skinner's hand. If the contents had been as he supposed, would he have accepted them? It could not be known now. In his bitter need, he might have thrown his pride to the winds and taken this charity. But there was no question of that now—it was a hoax, a ghastly, cruel hoax, designed to humiliate and wound him.

Skinner had succeeded in that. Mark was bitterly wounded, and he stood quiet and pale, without speaking—without being able to speak for the moment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The laughter rang through the study and through the passage. To Skinner & Co. it seemed like the joke of the season.

"My hat!" gasped Snoop. "Ten quids! Ten farthings! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, that makes twopence-halfpenny," said Stott, "and that's not to be despised, you know—with the brokers hanging on the backyard wall!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It will get a bar of soap to help the old lady with her washing," Skinner remarked. "Shove it in your pocket, Linley."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Linley did not speak or move. Many of the fellows expected him to break out in rage; but he seemed stricken and conquered

"Or if the old man is short of beer," said Skinner, greatly encouraged by Mark's subdued manner, and pursuing his

brilliantly-witty observations. "If the old man is short of beer and bacey, here's twopence-halfpenny to set him up again. It's enough to make him welcome in any corner pub."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"With a fund like this to fall back on, they can weather the storm till he gets into a job again," said Skinner, "and perhaps another time he won't get tipsy and fall under a tram, or whatever it was laid him up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What I think is—— Yah!"

Skinner did not mean to say that. He said it as Mark's fist crashed upon his jaw, sending him flying backwards.

The Lancashire lad was roused at last.

He had been feeling too utterly miserable and downhearted to become easily angry. But Skinner's cowardly taunts had stung him too deeply at last.

His eyes were blazing. The blow he had dealt had hurled Skinner back among the others, and the cad of the Remove fell to the floor, dragging down Stott and Snoop, whom he had wildly clutched at to save himself.

"Ow!" roared Skinner.

"Yow!" shrieked Snoop. "Leggo!"

"Look out!" yelled the others.

It was time to look out. Mark Linley was rushing at them, with his eyes flaming, and his fists up.

"You cads!" he muttered.

That was all he said.

Then he was upon the deputation, smiting them hip and thigh. Snoop, as he rose, received a right-hander under the ear which sent him spinning into the passage. Stott was felled as he gained his feet; Keene, hitting out feebly, received a crashing blow on the nose which brought a spurt of red from it, and sent him rolling over Skinner.

Then the Lancashire lad was among the others, hitting out fiercely.

Right and left they went—hardly thinking of hitting back—thinking only of escaping the fierce, slogging blows.

"My hat!" gasped John Bull. "I never saw such a holy terror! Go it, Marky—pile in! Go it, old son!"

"Wade in!" shrieked Fisher T. Fish. "Wade in! Give 'em socks! Why, I've never seen harder hitting, even over there!"

Mark did not heed them—he did not hear. The quiet, contained lad had wholly lost his temper for once. He drove the cads of the Remove out of the study under hammering blows, the fellows in the passage hurriedly making way for them.

Then Mark stood in the doorway with flushed face and heaving chest, and his hands still clenched hard.

"You cads!" he said. "Come back again, if you like—I'm ready for you!"

"Ow!" groaned Skinner, picking himself up in the passage. "Ow! He's a horrid wild beast! He's not safe! Ow!"

"Groo!"

"Yow!"

"Ow!"

"Aren't you coming back?" roared John Bull. "Ha, ha, ha! Marky's got plenty of that on tap, haven't you, Marky?"

"Ow!"

"Yow!"

"Oh, my nose!"

"Groo—my eye!"

"Yarooh! Oh!"

Skinner & Co. went limping and grunting down the passage. There were seven or eight of them, but they did not care to tackle Mark Linley again in his present humour. They preferred to retreat from the scene.

Yells of laughter followed them, but the laughter was all turned against Skinner & Co. now.

They hardly heeded it. They all had discoloured eyes, or swollen eyes, or swollen noses, or aching jaws, and they were feeling too utterly "used-up" to care for anything just then.

Mark turned back into his study.

There was a clink on the floor of the passage as ten farthings were flung out in a shower.

Then the study door closed. Mark Linley was left alone.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.
Skinner Eats His Words.

HARRY WHARTON laid down his pen and looked out of the window of Study No. 1. For some time past he had heard unusual noises in the Close, and he wondered what was happening. From the Close came a sound of shouting.

"Something's on," said Harry, looking at Frank Nugent, who was baking chestnuts at the fire.

Nugent nodded.

"Yes, I heard a row," he said. "I shouldn't wonder if it's Skinner & Co. up to some little game. They were ragging Linley in his study some time back—a rotten trick. He seems to have given them a warm time."

"Serve the cads right!" said Harry, frowning.

"Quite so. I expect this is something more of the same sort."

"Look here, Frank, if the cads are ragging Linley, we're going to interfere;" he said. "We're not having anything of the sort."

"Wait till I've finished the chestnuts."

"Oh, blow the chestnuts!"

Nugent rose with a grunt. Bob Cherry looked into the study from the passage with a somewhat excited expression upon his face.

"You fellows heard the row?"

"Yes, we were just going down," said Harry. "What is it? Linley in trouble again?"

"No; he's still in his study. But I believe it's in connection with him—they're shouting out his name, guying him in some way, I suppose."

"The rotters!"

"I'm going to chip in, I think," said Bob. "You fellows can come down and see fair play, if you like."

"What-ho!"

The chums of the Remove hurried downstairs. There was quite a large crowd of juniors in the Close in the sunset light. And there was evidently some very great excitement toward.

Skinner & Co. had not taken their licking "lying down." They had been rendered savage and revengeful by the lesson they had had. But the boldest of them did not venture to pay another visit to Mark Linley's study.

Skinner's present device seemed to be causing a great deal of amusement. There were roars of laughter from the fellows in the Close—fellows who hardly knew Linley, and cared nothing about him one way or the other.

"What is it?" exclaimed Nugent.

"Looks like a procession of some sort!"

"Look! Oh, the cads!"

Skinner & Co. came walking by, and several of them were bearing a banner, with the inscription:

"No Hands Wanted!"

It was a parody, of course, of the notice frequently seen at the gates of factories, where no labour was required.

But there was a double meaning in Skinner's little joke. He intended it to convey that factory hands were not wanted at Greyfriars.

As the cads of the Remove caught sight of Harry Wharton & Co., they burst into a simultaneous shout.

"Down with factory cads!"

Bob Cherry clenched his hands hard.

"I'm going to charge them," he said. "You fellows can follow if you like."

"What-ho!" said Harry.

Bob Cherry was already rushing on.

"Line up!" yelled Skinner. "Look out!"

But Bob was upon them in a moment, hitting out furiously.

Harry Wharton and Nugent were only a few seconds behind him, and John Bull and Tom Brown and Bulstrode followed them fast.

The procession was knocked to pieces in a moment.

With wild yells the processionists scattered, and the banner came down to the ground, enveloping the unfortunate Skinner in its folds, and keeping him a prisoner.

As Skinner struggled in the banner, and the others fled, Bob Cherry turned his wrathful eye upon the leader of the procession.

"Get up!" he roared.

"Ow!" gasped Skinner.

"I'm going to lick you! Get up!"

"Yow!"

The juniors dragged the torn banner off the fallen hero. Skinner sat up and gasped; but he showed no desire at all to get upon his feet. Perhaps he thought that Bob Cherry looked too dangerous.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Are you going to get up?" roared Bob.

"Groo! I can't!"

"I'm going to make you eat your words," said Bob Cherry. "You've said enough things about old Marky; I'm going to show all Greyfriars that you're a coward and a rotter!"

"Why can't you mind your own business?" exclaimed Vernon-Smith. "Mark Linley's old enough to take his own part, I suppose."

Bob turned on him in a flash.

"So you must shove your oar in!" he exclaimed. "Do you want to take it up for this cad? If you do, put up your fists!"

The Bounder backed away.

"I don't want to fight you," he said. "But——"

"Then you'd better shut up! You'll jolly well fight me whether you like it or not, if you give me too much jaw," said Bob.

"Look here——"

"Oh, get out! I'm fed up with you," said Bob savagely. "Now then, Skinner, you're going to eat your words! Here you are!"

He dragged the banner towards Skinner, and wrenched off the part of the cloth that bore the inscription daubed in thick ink. Skinner stared at it.

"W-w-what do you mean?" he gasped.

"I'm going to make you eat it," said Bob Cherry; "as much as you can hold, anyway."

There was a roar of laughter from the juniors crowding round. This novel way of making a fellow eat his words appealed to their sense of humour.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it, Cherry!"

"Pile in, Skinny!"

Skinner gave a wild glance round for help. But there was no help for him. His friends had fled far, only too glad to escape.

"L-l-look here," gasped Skinner—"look here! I—I'm not going to, you know. Don't be an ass! I'll say I'm sorry!"

"You'll be sorry, whether you say so or not, by the time you've finished," said Bob Cherry grimly. "Eat away!"

"Yow! I won't!"

"Then I'll cram it in, with my knuckles behind it to make it go down," said Bob Cherry.

"Groo! Ow! Help!"

"I guess this is the proper caper," said Fisher T. Fish. "Pile in, Skinner; you may get to like the flavour in time—some."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! I won't! Yow—gr-rr-r—rrrrooo—oh!"

Skinner's open mouth was crammed wth inky cloth. Bob Cherry rammed it in, till Skinner gasped and squirmed for breath.

"Gr-r-r-r-rrrrooorrr—r-r-r-rooooch!"

That was all that Skinner could say.

Streams of ink were running out of the corners of his mouth as the thick lettering on the cloth melted on his tongue. He gasped and choked, and choked and gasped, amid yells of laughter.

"Buck up, Skinny!" howled Ogilvy. "How do you like the flavour?"

"Gr-r-r-r-roooh!"

"Bite at it, you ass!"

"Gr-r-r-r-roooh!"

Bob Cherry turned away from the gasping, writhing cad of the Remove.

"If that isn't enough lesson for you, I'll see that you get another!" he exclaimed. "I advise you to let Mark Linley alone."

And Bob walked away with his friends. Skinner staggered to his feet, and spat out the cloth and the ink, spluttering with rage. Loud laughter all round him showed how little sympathy he had to expect.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Skinner staggered away. Under the fountain in the Close he washed out his mouth, stuttering and sputtering with fury.

"But I'll make that factory hound sit up for this!" he muttered again and again. That was his only consolation.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Raggers.

BILLY BUNTER put his head into Mark Linley's study.

"Linley, old man!"

Mark looked round wearily.

"Well, what do you want?"

"Wharton wants you. He's in the Form-room, and he wants you very particularly," said Billy Bunter. "That's all."

And the fat junior vanished.

Mark Linley rose to his feet. He did not want to leave his study, but he would not refuse to oblige Harry Wharton.

He descended the stairs. Billy Bunter had already disappeared; but he looked from a window recess, and grinned as Mark went on his way to the Form-room.

"Beast!" he murmured. "You couldn't advance me a few bob on a postal-order, that has been delayed in the post. I hope they'll rag you bald-headed, that's all."

And Bunter chuckled softly.

Mark Linley walked on to the Form-room without a suspicion. He opened the big, heavy door and went in.

As he entered the room, there was a sudden rush of feet, and hands fell upon him from all sides.

He was swept off his feet, and brought with a bump to the floor, and fellows sprawled all over him.

Mark gasped.

"Here, hold on!" he exclaimed. "What's the game? Wharton! Wharton! What are you up to, you silly asses?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Collar him!"

"Pile on him!"

"Wharton's not here, my dear chap," said Skinner mockingly. "That message was a little fraud, you see. He's not here—and won't be!"

"You cad!"

Skinner laughed gleefully.

"We've got you," he remarked.

"Got him!"

"Keep the cad down!"

Mark Linley struggled desperately. He understood now that Bunter had brought him a false message to induce him to venture into the Form-room alone, where Skinner and Co. were waiting for him.

He had fallen blindly into the trap.

Perhaps at another time he might have been more on his guard; but he was too worried and bothered now to be as keen as usual.

But now that he was in the hands of the enemy, he fought hard for his freedom. Stott and Snoop both rolled over, yelling with pain, as the Lancashire lad got his hands free and hit out.

But the odds were too great. Nine or ten juniors were piling on the lad from Lancashire, and he was forced down and overcome by sheer weight.

"Got the rope, Keene?" howled Skinner.

"Here you are!"

"Roll him over, you chaps, while I fasten his hands!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mark Linley, still struggling, was forced over with his face on the floor, and his hands were bound together behind his back.

Then a length of rope was fastened round his ankles, securing his legs together.

Then the juniors, panting, released him. Mark lay helpless on the floor, gasping for breath, and with his eyes gleaming with rage.

"You cads!" he said hoarsely. "You cowards! Let me up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No jolly fear," said Skinner. "It's too much trouble to get you down."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You cowards——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Keene. "We're going to give you a lesson. We warned you that there were no factory hands wanted, and you would come."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now we're going to give you the ragging you've been asking for."

"Go it!"

"Rag him!"

"Down with the factory cad!"

Mark Linley was dragged to his feet. With his legs tied together, it was only with difficulty that he was able to stand up. But he would have hurt himself considerably if he had fallen, as his hands were tied, and he made an effort to keep an upright position.

Skinner jammed a fool's cap on the Lancashire lad's head—a proceeding that was greeted with howls of laughter from the others.

Mark stood red and furious.

But he was helpless now to resist. He could only summon all his courage to endure the ragging of the Removites.

He was placed in the middle of the Form-room, with the blackboard beside him; and Skinner chalked an inscription on the blackboard.

Skinner had a peculiar sense of humour, and his inscription evoked roars of laughter from the raggers.

"What-ho! The Clever Factory Cad! How He Didn't Win the Scholarship!"

And Skinner proceeded to draw ridiculous figures, supposed to represent Mark Linley.

Mark stood silent and indignant.

In the miserable state of mind and nerves that he was in, he did not need this proof of his unpopularity with a section of the Remove. If they had known how deep down in gloom he was, they might have refrained from adding this last straw to his load.

But those who were not vindictive were careless and thoughtless; and it was generally considered a good joke to rag the "factory cad."

"Now," said Skinner, "we're going to make him repent of his sins! Linley, stand to attention!"

"Cad!" said Mark.

"Ahem! You've got to say you're sorry that you ever came to Greyfriars, and that you're very sorry you've disgraced the old school in this way."

Mark's eyes flashed.

"I shall say nothing of the sort," he said.

"You will! Otherwise, we shall have to use methods of persuasion. Anybody got a pin?"

"I have," said Snoop eagerly.

Jamb it into him if he won't repeat what I say to him."

"Certainly!"

"Here, I say!" exclaimed Trevor. "That's a bit too strong, you know."

"Rats!"

"Mind your own bizney, Trevor!" exclaimed half a dozen voices.

"Now then, Linley!" went on Skinner victoriously. "Look here, you've got to repeat after me—'I'm sorry I came to Greyfriars——'"

"I will not!"

"'And I'm sorry I've disgraced the school!'"

Mark set his lips.

"Now then, speak up!"

"I've nothing to say."

"I've told you what to say!" said Skinner threateningly. "If you own up you're a rotten bounder, we may let you off with a frog's-march round the Form-room! Otherwise, you will have a high old time! That's a fair warning."

"Own up, you cad!"

"We're waiting!"

Mark Linley was silent. His eyes flashed scorn at the raggers, but that was all.

"Now then, we're waiting!" said Skinner.

Linley did not speak.

"Obstinate beast!" said Stott. "Jamb the pin into his leg, Snoopey!"

Snoop obeyed at once.

A sharp cry burst from Mark.

"Oh! You coward!"

"You'll get some more of it, and thicker, if you don't do as you're told!" said Skinner. "We don't allow factory cads to get their ears up here, I can tell you."

The door of the Form-room opened, and Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, looked in. The din in the room had drawn him to the spot. The Remove-master seemed petrified at what he saw. He was so astounded that he stood quite still, gazing at the scene, and the excited raggers did not see him or hear him.

"Now then, are you going to own up, you factory cad?" shouted Skinner.

"I have nothing to say!"

"Bump him!" said Stott.

"Good! We'll give him a jolly good bumping, and then —— Oh!"

Skinner broke off as Mr. Quelch, recovering from his surprise, strode into the Form-room with rustling gown.

"Stop this at once!"

"My hat!"

"Cave!"

The juniors backed away in blank alarm. Some of them edged towards the door, but with a wave of the hand Mr. Quelch warned them back.

"Now, what does this mean?" he exclaimed sternly. "Skinner, you seem to be the leader. What does this mean?"

Skinner's tongue clove to his mouth.

Mr. Quelch bent a frowning glance upon him. He knew that he had interrupted a rag of unusual severity, and he grimly intended to make the occasion a lesson to the raggers.

"I am waiting for your answer, Skinner!"

"I—I—I——"

"Kindly explain yourself!"

"It's a j-j-j-joke, sir!" stammered Skinner at last.

Mr. Quelch smiled grimly.

"Oh, it's a joke, is it?" he exclaimed. "You have tied up Linley in this manner for a joke, Skinner?"

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!"

"And that ridiculous ill-natured inscription on the blackboard—is that a joke, too, Skinner?"

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!"

"And the fool's cap on Mark Linley's head—that is a joke?"

Skinner stuttered.

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!"

"I am afraid, Skinner, that your sense of humour is overdeveloped!" said Mr. Quelch. "I shall have to give you some instruction on the subject, Skinner! Release Linley at once!"

"Ye-e-e-es, sir!"

Skinner seemed to be unable to say anything but that. He unfastened Mark Linley's bonds. Mr. Quelch, meanwhile, took a cane from the desk, and tested it by swishing it in the air. This proceeding was watched with considerable apprehension by the raggers. Mark Linley stood free.

"I am sorry this has happened, Linley," said Mr. Quelch. "You may go! These boys will stay until I have given them their due!"

Mark coloured, and turned to the Form-master.

"If you please, sir——"

"Well, Linley?"

"If—if you please, sir," stammered Mark. "I—I'd rather they weren't punished on my account, sir, if—if you don't mind, sir! It was only a rough sort of joke, sir, and—and they didn't mean any real harm!"

Mr. Quelch's face was a study as he looked at Mark Linley. The Lancashire lad stood silent, not knowing whether his request was to be granted, or whether he was to be punished for impertinence. Mr. Quelch's face gave no clue to his feelings, excepting that his frown indicated wrath.

Skinner eyed the cane and eyed Mark Linley, and wished most devoutly that the Lancashire lad's request would be conceded. Even Skinner could not help feeling that it was generous of Mark to speak up in this way, after what he had gone through, and he felt a momentary flicker of kindliness towards the Lancashire lad.

Mr. Quelch broke the silence at last.

"Linley, these boys have treated you very badly, on the day, too, that you have suffered a cruel disappointment!"

"I don't mind what they've done, sir."

"And you ask me to pardon them?"

"I—I would like you to, sir. I don't want anybody punished on my account."

Mr. Quelch laid the cane down on the desk.

"I will grant your request, Linley, and I hope it will enable these thoughtless and ill-natured boys to see that they have done you a wrong. You may all go."

The raggers crowded out of the Form-room. In the passage Trevor touched Mark Linley on the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Linley!" he muttered.

Mark nodded.

"It's all right!"

Mark Linley went to the stairs. Not a hand was raised against him now. Even Skinner was ashamed, and for the time, at least, there was likely to be nothing more heard against the factory lad.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.
The Right Path.

VERNON-SMITH was grinning quietly to himself when he went to bed that night with the Remove. The Bounder of Greyfriars was in great spirits. All the arrangements were made for his little party that night. Excepting in the case of Coker and Potter, all the intended guests were in high good-humour, and all anticipated a rare old time. Vernon-Smith had been very careful in his selection of guests. All the brightest spirits in the Remove, the Fourth, the Shell, and the Fifth—two or three from each Form—had been selected for the little party at the Cross Keys. The catering had been arranged for, and as Vernon-Smith spent money like water, all was likely to be successful. The Bounder of Greyfriars intended to "blow" the whole of the fifty, and as his credit was good, he was able to blow it before he received it.

It was really a stroke of genius on Vernon-Smith's part, getting Loder, the prefect, as a member of the party. Loder was the biggest blackguard in the school, with the possible exception of Ionides, the Greek.

Vernon-Smith knew his little ways, but it was not easy to get a Sixth-Former in a junior party. But Vernon-Smith had contrived it.

The loan of a five-pound note to gamble with dazzled Loder, and the prospects of a big feed with champagne was very attractive to him. And with a prefect in the party, Vernon-Smith felt safe.

True, his father's influence over the Head was strong enough to save him from being expelled—at all events, he firmly believed so. But the other fellows had more risk to run, and Vernon-Smith did not want them to "funk" at the last moment, and leave him with a guestless table. He wanted his little party to be a success, and Loder's presence would help to make it so, by giving all the fellows a sense of security. If there were any trouble, the prefect would have to get them out of it; and as the prefects had keys to the side gate, there would be no difficulty in getting in and out of the school for the occasion.

Vernon-Smith and Skinner and Snoop and the others grinned at one another anticipatively as they went to bed. They were to rise at eleven, and make their way to the lower box-room, where the members from the other Forms were to meet them, with Loder and Carne, of the Sixth.

The party were to set out together, and all of them were looking forward to it very much. It was to be the time of their lives, the Bounder of Greyfriars had promised them. Vernon-Smith & Co. were not likely to sleep much before eleven.

There was another fellow, quite ignorant of the Bounder's plans, who was not likely to sleep, either.

It was Mark Linley.

When the Remove went up to bed Mark Linley was not with them. He was still in his study, and he had forgotten bedtime.

The Lancashire lad was alone. Bob Cherry and Wun

Lung had respected his desire to be alone, and they had done their prep. that evening in John Bull's study. Mark Linley himself had done no preparation at all.

It was the first time he had failed to do his regular work. But he was in no mood for it now, and what was the use? He had to leave Greyfriars.

There was no doubt about that. The unhappy lad paced his study, and thought of it again and again till his head seemed to be bursting.

It could not be helped. His people needed him—without him they must starve—he must leave Greyfriars, and go home and work for them!

It was his duty!

At whatever sacrifice to himself, he knew he must do it. The path of duty lay straight before him; if he did not follow it, his conscience would give him no rest.

"I must go!" groaned the junior.

The career he had hoped for—the honourable position in life which would have enabled him to provide for the old people comfortably—all must be abandoned. He had to provide for the present now—for the passing hour.

And to go home empty-handed—to add one more mouth to those waiting to be fed. It must be so till he could get work.

To tell his people that he had been disappointed about the prize—that he had nothing—nothing but his two hands to devote to their service. That they must starve till he obtained work.

Mark Linley opened the drawer where the box of money reposed, and looked at it. He had made up his accounts fully, and left them in perfect order for the committee to see. But—but the money!

He opened the box mechanically. The glimmer of gold and silver in the gaslight struck strangely on his weary eyes.

"Oh! What shall I do?" he muttered.

He thought of the anxious, pinched faces at home—of what this money would mean to them. Then again that strange fancy came to him—from somewhere an echo seemed to ring in his ears:

"Thief!"

The boy started.

Had a real voice spoken, or was it simply the voice of conscience—that inward voice that Providence has given for our guidance?

He drew a deep breath.

All seemed to become clear to him in a moment. Whatever happened, whatever might chance, it was wrong to steal—and out of evil good could not come! Whatever Fate might hold in store for him, it was best to face it with a clear conscience and clean hands.

Mark Linley had decided.

At the cross-roads of life he had chosen the right path. He locked the box, and packed it away in the drawer. From that moment he never looked back, and the terrible temptation ceased to haunt him.

It was finished!

There was a step in the passage. Harry Wharton knocked at the study door and opened it, and looked in.

"Oh, here you are!" he exclaimed. "It's bedtime, Marky. Old Wingate's waiting."

Mark started.

"I forgot!"

"Buck up, then."

Mark Linley hurried up to the Remove dormitory with Wharton. Wingate, of the Sixth, the captain of Greyfriars, was waiting inside the doorway, and he gave the junior a grim look.

"Didn't you know it was bedtime?" he demanded.

"I—I forgot," Mark stammered. "I'm sorry."

"Well, tumble into bed," said Wingate, with gruff good-nature.

And Mark Linley tumbled in.

But he did not sleep. Wingate turned out the light, and retired, closing the door of the dormitory. Mark lay awake, his eyes staring into the darkness, thinking.

He had to leave Greyfriars!

He would go with hands clean, his conscience unspotted. But he had to go; there was no doubt about that.

It was his last night at the old school!

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Caught!

HALF-PAST ten chimed from the tower.

Mark Linley sat up in bed.

The Remove dormitory was dark and silent. Round him boys were sleeping soundly.

Some were nodding and dozing, one or two were awake. Among the latter was Herbert Vernon-Smith. He was waiting for the hour of the expedition, and sleep did not visit his eyelids.

He heard Mark move in his bed, and listened. Mark stepped out quietly, and found his clothes in the dark.

There was a glimmer of moonlight in at the high windows—light sufficient for the Lancashire lad.

Vernon-Smith looked at him from his bedclothes, and gave a grunt. He saw that it was a junior dressing himself, but in the dim light he could not recognise whom it was.

"It's not time yet," he said, in a low voice.

Mark Linley gave a great start.

He had imagined that all the dormitory slept, with the exception of himself; and Vernon-Smith's voice, suddenly in the darkness, was startling.

"Who spoke?" asked Mark, looking round.

"I did," said the Bounder.

"Smith! What do you mean?"

"It's not time yet; that was only half-past ten, and we do not get up till eleven."

Mark looked at him greatly puzzled.

"I don't understand you," he said.

Then it was Vernon-Smith's turn to start, as he recognised the voice of the lad from Lancashire.

"Who's that?" he exclaimed. "Is that you, Linley?"

"Yes."

"What are you getting up for?"

Mark did not reply.

"You're not coming with us," said Vernon-Smith, in surprise. "I don't see what you're getting out of bed for."

"I am certainly not going anywhere with you," said Mark drily.

"Then what's the game?"

"That's my business."

"Are you going out?"

"Yes."

"Breaking bounds, hey?"

"Yes, I suppose so," said Mark quietly.

Vernon-Smith whistled softly.

"Blessed if I knew you were that sort!" he said. "You've kept it jolly dark up till now, anyway. Look here, Linley, if you're really the right sort, you can come to my little party if you like."

Mark's lip curled.

"I'm afraid I'm not what you would consider one of the right sort," he replied. "I should be very unsuitable for your little party. Besides, I've no time to spare."

"Where are you going?"

"I have nothing to tell you, Smith."

The Bounder yawned.

"Oh, just as you like," he exclaimed; "I don't care! I suppose you are up to some lark; but it's your own bizney. Say nothing about my little larks, and I'll say nothing about yours; that's fair."

Mark made no reply. He had several things to do before he left. He made up his few belongings into a little bundle. His books and other things would be sent after him later, when he was home.

Mark had thought it out, and he felt that it was better to leave in this way. He could leave a note in his study explaining to the Head.

He had to go, and it was better to go quietly in the night, without his enemies in the school rejoicing at his going, without having to face the sympathy, harder to bear than enmity, which his friends would feel.

Better to disappear quietly from Greyfriars, as if he had never entered the place; better to go without a word.

He knew that his friends would understand. As for his foes, they would be deprived of their last chance of ragging the departing junior.

It was better so.

Yet as Mark Linley stood, bundle in hand, and took his last glance round the dormitory, he felt a strange throb in his heart.

He had had many troubles at Greyfriars; he had had an uphill battle to fight there. Yet it had grown very dear to him.

He loved the old place—every grey old stone in the walls, every clustering trail of ivy, every old arch and red roof in the place.

It had all grown very dear to him.

His friends, too, sleeping quietly without knowing that he was going. Even his enemies—they were at least familiar faces—whom he would never gaze upon again.

There was no resentment in his heart now: only grief.

It was only for a few moments, however, that Mark stood looking along the dormitory at the rows of quiet beds, the sleeping juniors.

Then he turned with a firm step towards the door.

It wanted but ten minutes to eleven now, and he had no time to lose if he was to catch the last up train from Friardale Station.

He quitted the dormitory, and closed the door quietly behind him. He made his way along the densely dark passage.

Suddenly he started.

His hand, stretched out before him to feel the way, had come into contact with a human body. The Lancashire lad started back in amazement and alarm.

There was a voice from the darkness.

"Who's that?"

Mark was relieved. He had naturally thought of burglars, but the voice was the voice of Hobson, of the Shell.

"Hobson!" he exclaimed.

"Yes. Who's that?"

"I'm Mark Linley."

"You ain't one of us, then?" said Hobson, endeavouring, unsuccessfully, to peer through the gloom at the features of the Lancashire lad.

"No," said Mark.

"Where's Smithy?"

"Still in bed, I believe."

"Oh! I'm going to the box-room to wait for him," said Hobson. "I don't know what you're doing out, Linley, but if you ain't coming to the party, you'd better get back to bed."

And Hobson groped on his way.

Mark stood still in the passage. He began to understand what was going on. Vernon-Smith was going to celebrate the winning of the Founder's Fifty by some jollification out of the school bounds at a late hour. If Mark held to his original plan, and went on to the box-room, he would probably run right into the rendezvous of the jolly party.

It was almost as easy to leave the School House by a lower window. There was a window at the end of the Sixth Form passage that gave upon a rainpipe, clustered with ivy.

Mark Linley turned his steps in that direction.

There was a glimmer of light in the passage from the big window at the end. From the rooms as he passed Mark heard sounds of slumber, a most decided snore from Walker's room. The Sixth at Greyfriars had separate bed-rooms, which were their studies during the day. Mark Linley trod very lightly as he passed the door of Wingate's study. There was a light still burning there, showing that the captain of Greyfriars had not yet gone to bed.

Eleven!

The strokes came booming out from the clock-tower.

The door of Loder's study, next to Wingate's, opened, and Loder, the prefect, came stepping quietly out. He stepped very quietly, because he knew that Wingate was not yet gone to bed, and he had to be very careful not to let the captain of Greyfriars get upon the scent of the intended jollification at the Cross Keys.

But it was unfortunate for Loder, under the circumstances. For Mark Linley was also stepping along very lightly, and as neither made a sound, they crashed together without the least warning, just outside Loder's door.

Bump!

Loder staggered back with a sharp exclamation. Mark Linley reeled against the wall, gasping. The bundle fell from his hand, falling with a crash upon the floor of the passage.

There was a movement in Wingate's study.

Loder gritted his teeth.

Before he could retreat to his own room, or decide what to do—before Mark Linley could make a movement to escape—Wingate's door was thrown open, and bright light streamed out into the dusk of the passage.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.
Quite Off!

WINGATE stepped out of his study in surprise. The light showed Mark Linley and Loder, and the bundle lying on the floor, with several articles scattered from it in the fall.

Wingate looked from one to another of them.

"What on earth's the matter?" he exclaimed. "What are you doing here, Linley—at this time of the night, too? What does this bundle mean?"

Loder turned quite pale for a moment.

In his mind's eye he could see himself reported to the Head, deprived of his prefectship, if not expelled from the school; for if the whole matter came out, and there was an inquiry by the Head, there was no doubt that some of the juniors concerned would betray all the circumstances of the planned jollification. It was not safe to depend upon fellows like Snoop and Skinner, for instance, to show a fastidious sense of honour. And the heaviest punishment would fall upon the prefect who had lent his authority to such an outrageous breach of the rules.

But Loder's brain was quick to work. Nothing was known to Wingate yet, and, if he was careful, nothing need be known. There was a scapegoat already provided in the person of Mark Linley.

"It's this young whelp," he said thickly. "I've caught him."

"Caught him! Linley!"

"Yes. I—I heard somebody sneaking along the passage, and came out quickly to catch him," said Loder, recovering his nerve, as he realised how extremely plausible his false-

hood sounded. "I guessed it was one of the Remove going to break bounds."

"I'm jolly glad you caught him, then," said Wingate unsuspiciously. "He passed my door, I suppose; but I never heard him. Linley, where were you going?"

Mark Linley did not reply. He was inclined to make a bolt for it; but it would hardly have done. Besides, Wingate blocked the way in one direction, and Loder in the other.

Wingate's brow grew very stern.

"You had better answer me, Linley," he said. "You are fully dressed, and going, I suppose, to the window yonder. Were you going out?"

"Yes," said Mark.

"Then you were breaking bounds?"

"In a sense, yes."

"I am surprised at this in you, Linley. I never dreamed that you were that sort of a boy," said the Greyfriars captain.

Mark smiled faintly.

"And I am not, either," he said. "I was not going down to the Cross Keys, Wingate."

"Where were you going, then?"

There was no help for it. Mark had to make a clean breast of it or else have a much worse construction placed upon his actions.

"I was going to the railway-station," he said.

Wingate stared at him.

"The railway-station! What for?"

"To catch the last up-train."

"What—what! You were running away from school?" exclaimed the Greyfriars captain, in utter astonishment.

"Not exactly. I was leaving Greyfriars, and I wanted to leave quietly. I've got to go," said Mark dully.

"Why?"

"Because I've lost the Founder's Fifty, and I've got to work."

Wingate's face softened.

"I'm sorry if things are like this, Linley. It's hard cheese on you. But you cannot go in this manner. I understand your feelings, but you cannot do it. You must see the Head in the morning, and explain the situation to him."

"He wouldn't understand," said Mark drearily. "He doesn't know what poverty is—he would never see. But——"

"You cannot go without permission."

"Yes, but——"

"Come, you must get back to your dormitory," said Wingate. "I'll see that you do. Pick up those things you've dropped. It's all right, Loder; I'll look after this."

"Right-ho!" said Loder indifferently.

But as he turned back into his study he ground his teeth with rage, for he knew that the expedition was over for that night.

He could not very well raise any objection to Wingate's going to the Remove dormitory, but if Wingate went there he would find the Bounder and his friends either up and dressing or already gone. It was already nearly ten minutes past eleven, and then all would be up.

Wingate, quite unconscious of anything of the sort, marched the Lancashire lad back to the Remove dormitory. Mark Linley went quietly. It would have been useless to resist, and he would never have raised his hand in any case against Wingate, the most popular fellow in the college. At the same time, he was bitterly disappointed. He had longed, with a longing that will be easily understood, to get out of the school, since he had to go, without general attention being fixed upon his going. Poverty was no crime, but Mark did not like dragging it out in the public light for pity and contempt.

But he could not help himself now. Wingate opened the door of the Remove dormitory and switched on the electric light.

"Get to bed, Linley," he said. "In the morning you can see the Head, and if you seriously wish to go—— My hat!"

Wingate broke off in astonishment.

The sudden turning on of the light had revealed half a dozen juniors out of bed, most of them very nearly dressed, and all of them finishing dressing.

They stood dumbfounded, taken utterly by surprise at the sudden discovery.

Even Vernon-Smith, cool as he was, was taken utterly aback. He stood with his collar and tie in his hand, staring blankly at Wingate.

"My—my only hat!" Wingate ejaculated. "What on earth does all this mean?"

Snoop made a dive back to bed. The others stood still, staring at the captain of Greyfriars.

"What does it mean?" thundered Wingate, advancing into the room. "I needn't ask you, Vernon-Smith, if you're the leader—I know you are."

The Bounder caught his breath.

Punishment or no punishment, the expedition was "busted"

for that night, at least, and Vernon-Smith was furious. He glared at Mark Linley, whom he regarded—unjustly enough—as the cause of the discovery.

"Will you explain, Smith?" asked Wingate ominously. "I suppose you were not all going to run away from school, eh?"

The Bounder grinned a little.

"No," he said.

"Where were you going?"

"We had an idea of a—a sprint round the Close to keep us fit," said the Bounder coolly. He had quite recovered his nerve by this time, only a minute or so as it was. "We are in want of exercise, you know."

Wingate gasped. The cool effrontery of such an explanation took his breath away. Some of the other fellows chuckled—they could not help it.

"Don't tell absurd falsehoods, Smith," said the Greyfriars captain sternly.

Vernon-Smith shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I've explained," he said.

"Will you tell me the truth? If you will not, it makes no difference—you were certainly going to break bounds. I shall make a note of all your names and report you to your Form-master in the morning."

"Oh!" said Skinner.

"You will all be caned," said Wingate; "but you may be glad that I have caught you. If you had succeeded in breaking bounds, you might have been expelled for it. And I shall keep an eye on you in future now that I know you all."

The intended celebrators could only gaze at him in dismay. Most of the fellows in the dormitory had been awakened by the turning on of the light and the sound of voices, and even Bunter was sitting up in bed.

The fat junior groped for his glasses, and put them upon his fat little nose, and blinked reprovingly at Vernon-Smith.

"I say, you fellows," he exclaimed, "now you're bowled out, you know, you ought to remember what I told you all along. You remember how I cautioned you against goings-on of this sort, Smithy?"

"Liar!" said the Bounder.

"Oh, really, Smithy! You must remember how I came into your study and begged of you, with tears in my eyes, not to make up this party to go to the Cross Keys——"

"Shut up!" whispered Skinner savagely.

"Oh, really, Skinner——"

"The Cross Keys, eh?" said Wingate, with lowering brows.

"Oh, that's Bunter's imagination," said Vernon-Smith. "I suppose you know what a liar Bunter is?"

"Oh, really, you know, Smithy——"

"I shall take no notice of what Bunter has said," replied Wingate, "but I shall certainly report to your Form-master that you boys were up and dressed, preparing to go out, at a quarter-past eleven at night. He will deal with you as he thinks fit. Now go to bed, all of you. I shall lock the dormitory door on the outside to-night."

The intended celebrators turned in. There was no help for it—the expedition was evidently "off." Wingate grimly watched them to bed, and turned off the light, and closed the dormitory door. The juniors within heard the key turn in the lock.

"My word!" murmured Skinner. "What about the other chaps? They'll be waiting in the box-room for us, Smithy."

Vernon-Smith gritted his teeth.

"Let 'em wait!" he said.

"It's a bit rough on them."

"Oh, hang them!" said the Bounder.

"And Loder, too—he'll be wild—and Carne."

"Hang them!"

The Bounder scowled into the darkness. Gladly enough he would have ragged Mark Linley for being the inadvertent cause of the discovery, but there were plenty of fellows in the Remove dormitory to take Linley's part if it came to that. The Bounder scowled himself to sleep.

In the box-room several youths of various Forms waited for the Bounder to come—and waited in vain. Loder never gave them a thought, and nobody was able to get out of the Remove dormitory to speak to them, even if inclined to do so. Fellows of the Shell, the Fourth, and the Fifth—gay dogs who had been going to "keep it up" at the Cross Keys at Vernon-Smith's little party—waited and waited, and said things.

They got tired at last. They crept back to their various dormitories, vowing vengeance upon the Bounder. They could only conclude that Vernon-Smith had been japing them, especially when Hobson crept to the Remove dormitory and found the door locked, and no key there. He did not know that the door was locked on the outside, and the key in Wingate's pocket.

The disappointed roysterers crept back to bed, promising Vernon-Smith all sorts of things on the morrow, and some of the promises were kept.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.
Great News!

MARK LINLEY slept little that night.

His attempt to leave Greyfriars quietly without attracting attention had been prevented, but that he had to go all the same was clear.

Most of the night the Lancashire lad lay awake, thinking of the gloomy prospect before him, turning over in his mind his plans for the weary future.

To go home—to work—to do his duty by his parents—that was evidently the path of duty, and Mark never thought of shrinking from it.

But it was hard!

Morning light gleamed at last into the windows of the Remove dormitory, and Mark Linley rose before the rising-bell clanged out. He had packed his box, and made all his preparations for leaving Greyfriars, before the other fellows were up.

He went downstairs at the same time as the rest of the Remove. Wingate met the juniors in the Lower Hall.

"Vernon-Smith, you are wanted in Mr. Quelch's study—and the others," he said. "He is going to attend to you before breakfast."

And the Bounder & Co. went into their Form-master's study, and were "attended to" for their escapade of the previous night, and they came out of the study with their hands tucked under their arms, squirming in all sorts of attitudes indicative of anguish

"You are to go in and see the Head before school," said Wingate to Mark, and the Lancashire lad nodded without replying.

Wingate laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"I hope it won't be necessary for you to leave Greyfriars, Linley," he said. "You are doing well here, and it would be a great pity."

"Thank you!" said Mark.

"What's that?" exclaimed Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry together, as the Greyfriars captain walked away. "What's that? Leave Greyfriars?"

Mark nodded.

"I've got to go," he said.

"Why?" asked Bob. "You—you sha'n't go! I won't let you! Hang it all, what do you want to leave Greyfriars for, you ass?"

"I don't want to, Bob."

"Then why are you going?" Harry Wharton demanded.

"I can't help it."

"Look here——" began Bob.

"It's through losing the Founder's Fifty," said Mark wearily. "My father's sick and out of work; I've got to get back and work for the family. Don't tell the other fellows; I'm explaining this to you, that's all. I don't want you to think I want to leave—I've got to."

"Poor old Marky!" said Bob Cherry softly.

"I don't want to be pitied by a crowd of fellows," said Mark, feverishly. "I wanted to get away quietly last night, but Wingate stopped me. I've got to see the Head now; but I shall go to-day."

"Oh, it's rotten!" said Harry Wharton. "I say, can't anything be done?"

Mark shook his head.

"Nothing."

Before morning lessons, Mark Linley presented himself at the Head's study. The doctor was waiting for him. He had a letter in his hand, and he fixed a most peculiar look upon Mark as he came in.

"Ah! It is you, Linley!" he said. "I hear from Wingate that you tried to leave the school last night."

"I wanted to get away without any fuss, sir," said Mark. "I'm sorry, but I shall have to go all the same. I'm wanted at home."

"Why are you wanted at home?"

Mark hesitated.

"You can speak quite frankly to me, my dear lad," said the Head kindly. "I have some idea how matters stand."

"Somebody's got to keep the wolf from the door," said Mark desperately. "Father's laid up, and mayn't be able to work for weeks—perhaps months. You don't understand our position, sir. We're poor people. We only have something to live on so long as father's in work. When that fails, everything goes. It doesn't take long for a poor family's savings to run out when there is sickness and unemployment in the house."

"I quite understand, Linley. And if you had won the Founder's Prize of fifty pounds, it would have saved the situation?"

"Yes, sir."

"That would have tided your family over their present difficulties?"

"More than that, sir. My father intended to place half

the money in the bank in my name, to be reserved for my expenses when I pass into a higher Form here. Half of it would have been enough to save my people. But——"

"Then I think I have some good news for you, Linley."

Mark flushed scarlet.

"If—if you please, sir, I—I hope you won't offer me anything. I—I couldn't accept charity, sir!"

"I was not going to offer you charity, Linley."

"Excuse me, sir. I—I'm so rotten just now, I hardly know what I'm saying. But—but I don't see what the good news can be."

"It's about the Founder's Prize."

"Oh! Perhaps I've won the second prize, sir," said Mark "Books. I should be glad to have it, but——"

"You have not won the second prize. You have won the first prize," said the Head quietly.

Mark Linley started.

"The—the what, sir?"

"The first prize. As you know, the name of the winner only was sent to me by wire, and fuller information was to follow by letter, which reached me by the first post on the morning—this morning. I find that, owing to an error on the part of the clerk who sent the telegram, the name of the winner of the second prize was given instead of the name of the winner of the first prize."

"Oh, sir!"

"The winner of the second prize was Herbert Vernon-Smith. I am sorry for him, as it will be a great disappointment to him to learn that he is, after all, the winner of only the second prize. The winner of the first prize is Mark Linley."

"Oh, sir!"

"I congratulate you, Linley! And I may say, now, that I expected this result all along," said the Head. "I was surprised when I found that you had been beaten by Vernon-Smith, and I think most of us were. I congratulate you!"

And Dr. Locke held out his hand.

Mark Linley shook hands with the Head like a fellow in a dream.

He had won after all!

He had won the Founder's Fifty! He had won the money that was necessary to save his family! He remembered how near he had been to becoming a thief, and shuddered. He had chosen the right path; and how thankful, how grateful to a merciful Providence he was now that he had chosen it!

He had stood at the cross-roads of life, and he had made the right choice; and so long as he lived he would be glad of it!

"The money will be paid to you to-day," said Dr. Locke. "I am quite satisfied with the mode of expending it you have suggested. Some should certainly be kept for your own future use; but some, certainly, should be devoted to your people. I know it cannot have been easy for them to send you here, even with the aid of your scholarship, and they are entitled to benefit by your success. I congratulate you, Linley! And I congratulate your parents on their son!"

Mark Linley left the Head's study with his head in a whirl, and his heart beating almost to suffocation.

He need not leave Greyfriars! That fact stood out clear to his mind at once. The stress was over now—the sun was breaking through the clouds!

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry were waiting for him in the passage. They looked in surprise at his beaming face—so different from what it had been like when he had gone into the Head's study.

"What's happened?" exclaimed both, in a breath.

Mark burst into a happy laugh.

"It's all right!"

"But what——"

"There was a mistake in the telegram! The wrong name was given! It's I who've won the Fifty, and not Vernon-Smith!"

"My hat!" ejaculated Bob.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"It's jolly lucky for the Bounder that his little party was knocked on the head last night," he remarked. "He was going to stand that out of the Fifty. It was a bit of luck for him."

"Yes, rather!" grinned Bob. "And you've won the Fifty, Marky?"

"Yes."

"And you won't have to leave Greyfriars?"

"No."

"Hurray! Hip—pip—pip—hurray!" roared Bob Cherry.

In his study the Head heard Bob Cherry's enthusiastic roar, but he only smiled.

Mark Linley was marched to the Remove Form-room between Harry and Bob, with linked arms, all three of them in the highest of spirits.

The sun was shining at last for Mark Linley. The clouds had passed over, and all lay bright before the lad who had chosen the right path when he stood at the cross-roads!

THE END.

A NEW ADVENTURE TALE OF ABSORBING INTEREST!

LION AGAINST BEAR.

A Thrilling Story of the Further Amazing Adventures of

FERRERS LORD, MILLIONAIRE.

By SIDNEY DREW.

READ THIS FIRST.

Rupert Thurston, friend of Ferrers Lord, the millionaire, and commander of the latter's wonderful submarine, the Lord of the Deep, receives mysterious orders to sail for the Chinese seas. He reaches his destination, Shanghai, and at the time arranged goes ashore to meet Ferrers Lord. Here, to his surprise, he learns that Ching-Lung is Prince Tu-Li-Hoan, and owns a vast territory in Northern China. Ferrers Lord, Ching-Lung, Thurston, Maddock and Prout, two of the crew, and the Norwegian boy journey northward on the outbreak of the war between Russia and that part of China owned by Ching-Lung. They reach Kwai-Hal—the capital—and are besieged by the enemy. Towards the end Ching-Lung and Lord leave the fort to get fresh food for Thurston, who has been severely injured, and on the way to the town capture a despatch-bearer, from whom they learn that General Yang, Ching-Lung's ally, is marching to their relief.

(Now go on with the story.)

Ching-Lung's Great Victory.

"Your news is good," said Ching-Lung. "You may go. I am Ching-Lung."

A few swift knife-cuts freed the man. He bowed low, and vanished into the darkness.

"To the palace!" said the Chinese boy. "The tide has turned!"

They raced up the hill and entered the palace. The sentries were slumbering beside their watch-fires.

"The lazy hounds!" said Ching-Lung. "Sound the great gong, Lord!"

Ching-Lung had taken command. Ferrers Lord paused irresolutely, and a shadow crossed his face.

"One of your sentries might do that!" he said drily.

Ching-Lung laughed, and held out his hand frankly.

"I'm sorry, old chap" he said. "But I'm infernally excited, and I didn't know I was ordering you about! If poor Yes-Kiang hadn't been winged, I'd have put him in command of the little cavalry we've got. You are in sole command, of course, and I'll take on the cavalry. I'm sorry I was so gruff."

The millionaire took the proffered hand, and gave it a real British squeeze.

"Don't mention that!" he said. "All I want to know is what we are going to do?"

Ching-Lung sent a man to sound the war-gong, and beckoned the millionaire to follow him to the stables.

"Take your pick of the horses, Lord. We have a chance of doing ourselves and Yang a good turn. The news of his approach must have reached Kwai-hal, and the rebels are certain to try and stop him. I intend to swoop down upon them in the rear. If we can take and fortify the town, we can laugh at the Cossack army and Chan-So."

The millionaire's eyes sparkled. He selected a magnificent grey horse, and a groom led it out. The booming of the gong which brought the drowsy soldiers yawning from their sleep was answered by a crack of rifles as Yang's advance column drove in the Chinese pickets. As we have said, Yes-Kiang and Kennedy had drilled the troopers in European fashion. The bugles sang "Boot and saddle!" and the men sprang to their horses.

The infantry formed up behind.

"Load!" cried Ferrers Lord.

Rifle-locks clicked, and the great iron gates were flung open.

"Quick—march!"

Yes-Kiang had dragged himself to the window to watch the departure of the troops. The sight, the tramp of feet and rattle of arms, made him forget his wound. He bellowed for his horse, buckled on his sword, and galloped after the cavalry. Ching-Lung bestrode a shaggy Tartar pony, as wild and savage as the wastes on which it was born. Kennedy, on a monstrous charger, rode beside him.

All along the north of the town firing sounded.

"Somebody must get through to tell General Yang our plans," said Ching-Lung to the Irishman. "Pick out a couple of your trustiest and best-mounted men. I'll give a hundred taels to the man who reaches him first."

Word was passed to make no noise. Half-way down the hill the infantry turned to the north-east, while the cavalry went at an easy canter in the opposite direction to cross the railway and gain the flat land beyond.

Kwai-hal had been roused from its sleep, and the rebels were pouring out to meet Yang. Chinese, when fighting against Chinese, show a reckless bravery which they seldom evince when facing civilised troops, and it was on this recklessness that Ching-Lung and Ferrers Lord relied.

Even with double the force he commanded, it would have been almost impossible for Yang to drive the rebels out of Kwai-hal, where they could barricade the narrow streets and fire on the invaders from the houses. Their wild yells rang through the night air; tom-toms and drums rattled and boomed.

"Halt!" said Ching-Lung.

The word was passed, and the troops came to a standstill on a low hill beyond the Tower of Silence. They could see the flash of rifles beyond the dark shadow of the town. Ching-Lung was burning with impatience. Unless General Yang received his message in time, it would cost hundreds of lives to take the town.

The message was a simple one. It advised the general to make a pretence of falling back in order to lure the rebels out on to the level ground. If the ruse succeeded, Ferrers Lord's infantry would creep up the low hill on the north-east, while Ching-Lung and his cavalry would sweep round, bringing the rebels under three fires, and cutting off their retreat. Three rockets fired in quick succession would tell that General Yang understood the scheme.

The waning moon peeped dismally through the clouds. Half an hour dragged away, and yet no rockets shot up into the sky. Half a mile away the rebels' rifles were flashing, but they were firing at long range, and at an invisible foe.

"I am afraid our messengers have gone astray," said Ching-Lung impatiently.

"Bedad, I hope not, yer Highness! I sent the best men. Yang is a crafty old warrior, and, faith, he knows his business! I'd stake me last shillin' on Cho-Tung to get through!"

They waited on, and the moon shone out.

"Yang for ever!" said Kennedy, with a chuckle. "Look there, sir!"

Away beyond the roofs of Kwai-hal on the low plain the moonlight flashed silver on naked swords. A troop of light horsemen were galloping madly towards the rebels.

"A bait!" said Ching-Lung excitedly. "Bravo, Yang!"

Behind them came seven or eight hundred infantry at a double. A mad, triumphant yell broke from the rebels as they poured in a deadly volley. The horsemen wavered, turned, and fled, the infantry opening to let them pass. Then, in a compact, howling rabble, five or six hundred strong, the rebels rushed madly on the little band. Just then three rockets shot up into the sky.

"Charge!"

As his troop thundered forward, Ching-Lung glanced towards the gloomy hill, where Ferrers Lord lay with five hundred riflemen. Its dark ridges suddenly blazed into flame like a volcano in eruption. Panic-stricken, the rebels turned.

"Ould Oireland for ever!" roared Baby Mike. "Erin-go-Bragh!"

They were among the rebels, cutting, hacking, slashing. Their front was assailed by Yang's cavalry, their flank by

the ambushed infantry. The infantry sprang to their feet at the word of command, and dashed madly towards the unguarded town. They swarmed through the main gate, and scrambled to the ramparts. Then, seizing a bugle, Ferrers Lord sounded the cavalry "Retire!"

Ching-Lung's cavalry swept round, having done their work, and galloped towards the gate. Many saddles were empty, and wounded horses were shrieking and snorting. The gate was closed, and from the ramparts the infantry were firing steadily upon the rebels.

By Ching-Lung's orders, doors were chopped up, and huge fires were laid ready on the ramparts, the dry wood soaked with oil. The rebels, realising at last how they had been outwitted, were rushing back to attempt to force the gate. Then came a roar and a thunder of hoofs.

Goaded and lashed to a frenzy, pricked with sword-points, the herd of the half-wild Tartar cattle, which General Yang drove before him to feed his little army, tore into sight. The madness of the stampede was on them. With lowered horns and glaring eyes, they emerged from a cloud of dust. As a scythe cuts through grass, they cut through Chan-So's rebels. Hundreds of the brutes, blind with pain and terror, plunged into the moat that surrounded the walls of Kwai-hal until a bridge of living flesh was formed.

Behind them Yang flung forward his whole strength. It was sauve qui peut! The rebels were a flying rabble, each man for himself.

"Light the fire!" said Ching-Lung.

A great blaze leapt up along the ramparts, and the gate was flung open. Sounds of firing still sounded as the cavalry pursued the flying rebels. Attended by his aide-de-camp, General Yang galloped to the gate. In the glare of the fires, and unattended, Ching-Lung waited on his pony to meet him.

The general saluted.

"Great Scott!" said Ben Maddock. "And is that General Yang—that little yaller-faced chap? Why, he don't look big enough to fight a spider!"

"Bedad, he ain't big enough, is it?" chuckled Baby Mike. "I reckon they put good stuff in little parcels, darlint! What about our 'Bobs'?"

There Is some Grumbling About the Food Supply—Baby Mike has an Adventure with a Pig—The New French Envoy turns out to be an Old Acquaintance.

With an army of over thirty thousand men in Kwai-hal, General Yang, Ferrers Lord, and Yee-Kiang put their heads together, and passed some stringent resolutions against looting. Provisions were scanty, for, in his forced retreat, Yang had been compelled to abandon his waggons. Half a pound of tough meat and half a pint of rice formed the daily rations of each man. Under pain of death, each soldier was ordered to bring anything in the shape of food to add to the common store. There was some grumbling, and Baby Mike grumbled more than anyone, for he had an enormous appetite.

Prout, Maddock, and Kennedy were billeted together in a deserted house. Kennedy had appointed himself cook, and Prout swore that he devoured more than twice his share during the culinary operations.

"Look here," roared the Irishman on the second day, "this is what the blackguards call a meal for three hungry men!"

"Scandalous!" said Maddock, looking into the saucepan. "Why, it wouldn't keep a cat alive!"

"Disgustin'!" growled the steersman. "Me inside's as holler as a drum!"

"I won't stand it!" said Kennedy. "I'm going on the loot, av I get murdered for it. Let's tell Mr. Ferrers Lord."

Prout looked up.

"Don't be a fatheaded idiot!" he wailed. "What's the good o' goin' ter the chief? He'll only laugh!"

Kennedy clenched his big fists angrily.

"Ye always stick up for him!" he growled. "But, bedad, I say he's a thafe! Oi can't starve, and Oi'm going on the loot! Ye can both do as ye loikes. Lend me some carthridges, Ben."

Baby Mike was determined, and looked it, and the others had no idea of abandoning their comrade. Though the penalty for looting was death—without such a penalty there could be no such thing as order in Yang's wild army—they armed themselves and went out. They had hardly emerged into the narrow street, when there was a wild chorus of shrieks and a terrific squealing.

"Bedad!" howled Kennedy. "A pig hunt! Come along!"

They turned the corner at a run. A dozen of Yang's warriors, armed with every conceivable kind of weapon except firearms, were pursuing an ancient black-and-white boar.

"Hi, mind your good looks, Mike!" shouted Maddock warningly.

He dodged nimbly aside; but Kennedy, who was not quite so agile, was too late.

He tripped over the flying porker, and fell upon it with the whole power of his fifteen stone.

The pig yelled, and so did Baby Mike. Then the crowd yelled, too, as the enraged Irishman seized the animal by the hindleg, and the energetic pig returned the compliment by fastening its teeth in Kennedy's belt.

"Hold him tight!" roared Tom Prout.

But it was no ordinary, everyday pig by any means, and it soon began to show it.

It was a powerful brute, too, and the harder Kennedy clung to its leg the harder it kicked and squealed.

Suddenly it wriggled from under the Irishman's body, and, with one unearthly shriek, made a bolt for freedom, and valiantly the Irishman kept his hold.

The street was almost as steep as the side of a house, and a heavy fall of rain had converted the dust and garbage that covered it into oily mud.

Though it could only travel on three legs, the pig started down the hill at an astounding pace, taking Kennedy, who lay on his back, with it.

Howling with laughter, slipping and stumbling, and shouting encouraging remarks in Chinese and English, the rest followed.

"Leave us a lock of yer 'air, Mike!" yelled Maddock. "'Ere, come and kiss me, sweetheart, afore yer goes!"

"Oh, you rude, vulgar man," shouted the steersman, "to leave us so sudding, and not say good-bye!"

"P'r'aps he seed the income-tax collector a-coming," suggested the bo'sun, "and that's why he carn't stop!"

Baby Mike did not condescend to answer. He was starving, and he had found something eatable, so he decided not to let it slip.

As a matter of fact, he was doing all the slipping himself, for the street was as slippery as a greasy pole. He felt the wet and filth of the street penetrate his clothes, but he did not mind that.

Kwai-hal contained clothes in plenty, but very little pork. Kennedy did not often make up his mind, but when he did he made it up properly.

"Here, whoa, me darlint!" he bellowed. "And be aisy wid ye now!"

Evidently the pig didn't understand anything except Chinese, for it only squealed the louder.

It was gaining on the mob behind, and the street grew steeper and steeper. A dozen voices shrieked out warnings that Kennedy failed to hear, and the Irishman realised his danger.

The street ended abruptly in a short flight of stone steps. Kennedy let go, but not in time.

Man and pig, both uttering unearthly howls, went thudding down the steps together.

The steps led to the eastern gate, one of the side gates of Kwai-hal. At that very instant a group of Chinese and French soldiers were half-way up. The Chinese were carrying a gorgeous litter, with curtains of blue silk. At the echoing chorus of shouts and yells, a flushed, frightened face was thrust from the litter.

"Oh, mi!" wailed a voice. "Vat is zis out-r-rage? Sacre, ect ees a pig and a man! Stop zem, for mercy sake, or I am dead!"

They might as well have tried to stop a rifle-bullet with tissue paper.

The litter-bearers dropped their burden, and sprang like monkeys up the bank that towered above the steps.

Then, like a half-spent cannon-ball, the pig crashed into the litter, and Kennedy followed it.

The pig broke through, and continued its journey, but not so the Irishman. He had found something soft to fall on at last.

And then a choked, gasping voice wailed:

"Oh, mi! I am flatten, cr-rush, pulp! Oh, get off me, pig, or I die! Ze agony ees too terrific! I choke—I gasp!"

Kennedy felt the soft thing he had fallen on wriggle, but he was too dazed and breathless to move.

"Bedad," he thought, "it seems aloive! Why, it's talkin'!"

And the soft thing was. It said:

"Oh, horreur, zat I should die at last by ze hand—I mean ze tusks—of a miserable pig! Ah, my belle Fr-vance, I shall zee you nevaire more! Ze breff ees gone from my heart! Oh, mi—oh, mi, I feel ze hydrophobia steal through my veins! Helus—helus! In ze moment of ze triumph, I die! Ah, Lisette, my loved sweetheart, shed a tear on ze gr-rave of ze bravo Pierre, and tell ect not zat he was slain by a pig!"

Rather frightened, but still unable to control their laughter, Prout and Maddock bounded to the rescue. The litter, much

damaged, was wedged across the narrow steps. They dragged Kennedy up. The next moment their jaws dropped.

"I'm blind," gasped the boatswain, "or else mad! It ain't—tell me it ain't—Ben! Smell 'is 'air!"

"It ain't—no, I mean—well, by Jove, it is! I know the 'air-oil 'e uses."

It was Monsieur Pierre Bovrille, chief cook of the Lord of the Deep. His moustache was out of curl, his rich uniform crumpled and dirty, and his face thick with mud.

He lay on his back, kicking convulsively, and panting a good deal. Maddock rubbed his eyes, and so did Prout; but the amazing vision did not vanish.

Pierre Bovrille was in Kwai-Hal, and he had brought his hair-oil with him. Though his face was too muddy to be recognisable, they knew him by his hair-oil. It was the took.

The report of a rifle-shot drifted up from the gate, sounding the death-knell of the pig. The sound seemed to electrify Monsieur Pierre. Though apparently dead, he sprang with a scream to his feet.

"Oh, mi, I am shot! I am dead!"

"And a bleesed good riddance, Froggy!" roared Tom Prout. "Wot the dickens are you doin' 'ere—eh?"

Monsieur Pierre wasn't in a fit condition just then to give a lucid account of himself. Two very fierce Frenchmen, with pointed moustaches, ferocious beards, and very big swords, clambered down the bank, trying very hard to look as if they had merely climbed up there to examine the view, and not to escape the pig. Their uniforms were glaringly new, and they wore white military gloves.

"Great Jupiter!" said Maddock. "Why, there's three of 'em just alike, all but the dirt and whiskers!"

Prout gasped, and stared.

"Triplets!" he murmured. "Well, I'm blessed! Think of three Bovrilles, Ben! Oh, dear!"

"Let's 'ope they don't use the same brand o' 'air-oil!" moaned the bo'sun. "It 'ud be wusser than bad drains!"

While they stared at the chef and his two companions, monsieur cleared some of the mud off his face, and groaned pitifully. Baby Mike was performing a similar operation, but he did not groan. He swore a good deal instead.

Suddenly the assembled Chinese broke into a cheer, and a vigorous kick from behind sent Prout sprawling head foremost into the litter. Bristling and boiling with rage, he leapt up, intending to inflict summary vengeance on the author of the outrage. He thought better of it, however, as he heard the stirring shout: "Ching-Lung! Ching-Lung!"

Surrounded by his bodyguard, the Chinese boy then approached. Prout rubbed his eyes as he saw Ching-Lung bow low before the dazed and mud-stained cook. But Ching-Lung had changed the whole expression of his face beyond recognition.

"Welcome, Monsieur Bovrille," he said, in honied tones, "welcome to Kwai-hal. The message from Pekin announcing your departure only reached me yesterday. I regret to see you have had an accident. I hope you are not hurt."

"Oh mi, I am dead, your Highness. I am flatten!"

"Dear me," said Ching-Lung, "you surprise me. You don't look it!"

Monsieur Pierre sighed, and waved his hand to his companions. Like a couple of automatons, the two Frenchmen bowed.

"His Highness Prince Chan-So; my unworthy bruthaires, Alphonse and Jules," said Monsieur Pierre.

Prout nudged Maddock with his elbow.

"Wot's it all about?" he whispered. "I believe I've got a bad dream, Ben. Kick me, old chap, will you?"

To their Intense Disgust Prout, Maddock, and Kennedy are Put Under Arrest, but Not For Long—Rupert Thurston Sees a Sight That Does Him More Good Than Fifty Doctors—Pierre Starts for the Palace.

Monsieur Pierre, to the intense amaze of Prout, Maddock, and Kennedy, had been given the best house in Kwai-hal. They could not understand it. Ching-Lung had bowed and scraped before the man whose dirty plates he had often washed, and Ching-Lung was a prince. The more they discussed the mystery, the deeper it became.

"It licks me ter fits," said Prout. "I can't grasp it. 'Ow did 'e get away from the ship, and where did he steal his togs?"

"Dunno!" answered the bo'sun. "It's a knock-out! I'm sure he didn't know us properly when he seed us. That pig and Mike dusted him up too much. Did yer 'ear him call Ching Chan-So?"

Prout nodded.

"There's something in the wind, I'll wager! Hallo! Walk in!"

An oily Chinaman entered, and, with a salaam, handed a note to the steersman. Prout read it aloud:

"Third Officer Thomas Prout, Boatswain Benjamin Maddock, and Sergeant Michael Kennedy, of Yes-Kiang's Light Horse, will consider themselves under arrest until further notice.—Signed, YUNG."

The steersman gasped, Maddock rubbed his eyes, Baby Mike whistled.

"Well, I'm jiggered!" Prout said. "What 'ave we done?"

No one seemed in a position to answer the question. The Chinaman grinned, and pointed to the door—a couple of sentries with fixed bayonets were standing there. Kennedy got up slowly, and, seizing the messenger by the nape of the neck, calmly pitched him into the street. Then, with the sigh of a man who had eased his mind of a heavy load, he sat down again.

"Be jabers," he said, as he lighted his pipe, "we can't shtand this! Never a bit ov harrm have we done, and yit that blaggardly yaller-faced, pigtailed general has put us undher arrist! I'm goin' to know the raison why, or I'll mutiny."

Prout took careful aim at a fly that was crawling on the ceiling, and pulled the trigger of his revolver. He wanted to do something to relieve his pent-up feeling; but he did a little more. The two sentries, alarmed by the report, rushed upon him as he lay on his back, and brandished their weapons unpleasantly close to his chest, evidently thinking the prisoners were trying to escape.

In their excitement, and reckless of the consequences, Kennedy and Maddock hurled themselves upon the sentries, who shouted lustily for aid. Armed men swarmed into the room, and in a few moments the three struggling men were overpowered and bound. Almost before they realised it, sacks were thrown over their heads, and half stifled and completely blindfolded, they were being hustled roughly along the narrow main street of Kwai-hal towards the palace.

. . . . . .

In the palace, reclining on two large heaps of cushions, with champagne and cigars within easy reach, His Highness Prince Ching-Lung and his friend and ally, Ferrers Lord, were amazingly merry, considering that Chan-So's rebel army, strengthened by Russian levies, was creeping towards Kwai-hal.

"It's too atrociously funny for words!" laughed the millionaire, "and certainly Scaroff has arranged it all. What do you intend to do?"

Ching-Lung balanced the lighted cigar on his snub-nose, and giggled with unholy joy.

"I can't keep it up, Lord," he answered. "I want to howl every time I think of it. I've put Prout and Maddock under arrest to keep them out of the way, but I've a good mind to disguise them and give your cook a state reception. I'll let them into the plot."

"As you like, madman," said Ferrers Lord, with a smile. "While you play I'll work. Five or six guns need mounting yet."

What Ching-Lung said to the prisoners need not be repeated. They went back to their room grinning like three Cheshire cats. Here, to make up for the dinner the prince had stolen, an excellent meal was brought them. Prout was triumphant. All along he had championed his friend Ching, and, filling his glass with rum, he called for three cheers for the prince. Three cheers were given lustily, amid great laughter, and then Maddock began to shave.

Then two Chinese entered, carrying bundles, and the laughter increased.

The bundles contained the disguises, and Ching-Lung followed the bundles, to show them how to dress. He started with Maddock.

"You goin' to be a lily gal," he said. "Dat's why I tellee you to shavee, savvy?"

Maddock began to see, and roared with laughter. He wore wide, baggy trousers of blue silk, a crimson blouse that fell to his knees, a tall, black wig filled with pins, and wooden shoes with yellow soles. A couple of clever slashes with blue paint gave his eyes a slanting look, a touch of yellow finished his complexion, and he was—Lalla-Loo.

Kennedy lay down and shrieked; so did Prout.

Thurston laughed, and asked what it was all about.

"By Jove," he said, when Ching-Lung explained, "you must keep me posted. I'd like to see the fun."

"I think we can manage that," said the Chinese boy. "We carry you down, and screen you up with curtains, so that you can see, and not be seen. We'll have some fun out of Bovril to-day. Now, then, boys, fetch a litter."

The whole palace was in a bustle of preparation for the reception of the French envoy. The stern-faced General Yang was the only one who did not enter into the spirit of the joke. He thought Ching-Lung was acting too frivolously, and, with a grave shake of his head, he joined Ferrers Lord on the ramparts.

When Rupert was snugly ensconced in a curtained alcove,

Ching-Lung summoned Chew-Choo-Chew, the Lord High Executioner, and Mr. Thomas Prout, who was now known as Bang-Bang, Chan-So's Lord Chamberlain.

"Now, look here, Thomas," said the prince. "You have to go and tell old Bovril that Prince Chan-So is ready to receive him. Talk to him in broken English. You know what to do."

Bang-Bang winked.

"Don't I just!" he murmured. "Are you ready, Chew-Choo-Chew?"

Kennedy was, and so was the escort. Amid an unearthly beating of drums and shrieking of whistles, the procession started. It had taken Monsieur Pierre some hours to get over his accident, and a good deal of sticking-plaster to patch up his face. Aided by Jules and Alphonse, he was just curling his moustache when an unearthly din outside so startled Jules that he jerked the curling-tongs into Pierre's mouth.

They were ready at last, which was a lucky thing for Prout and Kennedy, who were almost exploding. Looking very dejected, very frightened, and excruciatingly funny, the steersman marshalled them to the door. Cheers greeted them, strong hands seized them, and placed all three of them together on the back of a raw-boned, saddleless horse.

It is Told how Monsieur Pierre and his Comrades Reached the Palace of Kwai-hai, and What Happened to Them There—A Sudden Interruption.

Monsieur Pierre was beginning to realise that China was a most topsy-turvy kind of country, and also that the horse he was mounted on was a very topsy-turvy kind of animal. Its backbone was like a saw, and, instead of walking decently, it began to trot. He flung his arms round the brute's neck. The tom-toms banged, the cracked bugles blared, the crowd cheered enthusiastically, and the terrible Lord High Executioner winked at the Lord Chamberlain, and said:

"Tom, me jooil, how d'yer feel? D'yer think yer'll bust?"

"I do," said the Lord Chamberlain. "Tickle the old hoss again, Mike.

Mike prodded the Arab steed with the butt-end of his battle-axe, and the steed tried to stand on its head. The sudden gymnastic performance cannoned Alphonse against Jules, and Jules against Monsieur Pierre. Monsieur Pierre shrieked, and shot over the horse's head, followed by the other two, who fell upon him. The horse stopped to sniff the wriggling heap, and the stolid Chinamen howled with delight.

Bang-Bang and Chew-Choo-Chew hurried to the rescue, and a couple of Chinamen caught the horse. But Monsieur Pierre absolutely refused to mount it again, and Jules and Alphonse stoutly backed him up. They swore they would die a thousand deaths and suffer unknown tortures rather than that. Bang-Bang shook his head.

"Den off gooe youl nobblers," he said. "De plince tellible quickee to chopee off nobblers."

"Vat ees dat?" moaned Monsieur Pierre.

"Aha, tell it quickly!" said Alphonse.

Bang-Bang explained. He said, in pidgin English, that, unless they followed the Chinese custom, the murderous Chan-So would certainly have their lives. Chan-So loathed foreigners. If they would not ride the horse, there was one other alternative that didn't hurt much. He swore that, whether they liked it or not, he had taken such a strong fancy to them that he was determined to save their lives. Then he waved his hand, and a Chinaman came forward with a bamboo-pole.

The three Frenchmen were on the point of tears, but they had to submit. The bamboo-pole was thrust up monsieur's right sleeve, across his back, and down his left sleeve. Alphonse was threaded on next, and Jules last; then, as they stood, with arms outstretched, like three scarecrows, Bang-Bang gave the order to march.

The street being very narrow, and the pole a long one, the three Frenchmen had occasionally to walk sideways. But all things come to an end, and they reached the palace at last. There was a deafening report of rifles as they entered the courtyard that nearly caused them to faint. Ching-Lung's troops were drawn up to receive them, and they plucked up courage when they discovered that the report was only a salute of honour. Bang-Bang pulled out the pole.

"Welcome, illustrious Flenchy chappies!" he said. "De plince waitee fol you. Dis way—savvy? Me tink he be in a velly good tempel, for he just been watching fifty lebels having deir heads choppy off. He always pleasantee aftel seeing dat—savvy?"

The Frenchmen groaned in chorus and shuddered, and Alphonse looked faint. They fervently wished they had never left happy France.

Suddenly Bang-Bang threw open a massive door, and shouted:

"His Highness waits! In you gooe!"

The crash of the door behind them sounded like a death-knell. They were in a large room lighted from the top, and thickly carpeted. The dreaded Chan-So was seated on a dais smoking a clay-pipe. Beside him sat a very stout Chinese lady, also smoking a clay-pipe. A few soldiers stood about armed to the teeth.

"Who are these foreign dogs, Bang-Bang?" thundered the prince. "What want they in sacred Kwai-Hai?"

"Dey blingee youl Highness lettels," said the Lord Chamberlain.

"Oh, yes, I forgot! Here is one. Read it aloud, slave!"

Bang-Bang read the letter. It merely stated that Monsieur Pierre Bovrille was commanded to convey the sincerest expressions of good-will from the French Ambassador at Pekin to the illustrious Prince Chan-So, to wish him a complete victory over his rebel subjects, and to beg his gracious acceptance of a humble present.

"Welcome, messieurs!" said Ching-Lung. "Lalla-Loo, kiss my Lord Bovrille! Come, don't be shy, sister mine!"

"Who's shy, silly?" snapped the princess. "Not me, you betee! I'm only looking for a clean place on his ugly——"

A crack of guns made his voice inaudible. Lalla-Loo tore off the wig. Chew-Choo-Chew whipped off his helmet. The guns cracked again.

"Hurroo!" shouted the Lord Chamberlain. "Here's more fighting, Ben! Help me to uncurl me whiskers, sonny. Fetch the rifles, Jim, and off with yer tin trousers. Good-bye fer a bit, Bovrille, my boy! Sorry ter frighten yer!"

"Am I mad," gasped Monsieur Pierre, "or ces it Prout? Ma foi, it ees Prout! I—I——"

Again the echoing crack of guns. The rebel army was at the gates. Headed by Ching-Lung, the men dashed out, leaving Pierre, Jules, and Alphonse in a stupor of perplexity.

"Bovrille," said a kind voice, "come here and speak to me. I think they've been too rough on you."

Pierre looked up. The curtains were parted, revealing the pale, handsome face of Rupert Thurston.

Ching-Lung Sets Out on a Perilous Expedition—In the Foe's Camp.

The sounds of firing which had put an abrupt end to the reception of Monsieur Pierre was explained the moment Ching-Lung reached the ramparts. Flying rebels had carried the news of defeat to Chan-So, and he had sent forward a troop of mounted infantry to inspect the town, and, by drawing the fire of the garrison, to make a guess at its strength.

Ching-Lung raised a pair of powerful field-glasses, and examined the retreating troop. Far away the plain was dotted with tents and waggons, telling that the army had bivouacked there beyond the river.

"Well," said the deep voice of Ferrers Lord, "do you think they will attack us?"

"Not yet," said Ching-Lung. "They may worry us a bit

with shells from long range, but they won't try an assault until the Cossacks come up. I wish we could entice them across the river. We could make a few sorties then."

"There's no chance of that," answered Ferrers Lord. "We can only hold out as long as possible, which isn't saying very much. If old England doesn't wake up very quickly, it's odds on Russia taking China at one big swoop. But she'll wake up, never fear; and whatever France may do, Germany will have something to say. We have food enough for several weeks, and a lot may happen in that time. Hallo, they've got a prisoner—someone of importance, too!"

It was the leader of Chan-So's scouts, whose horse had been shot under him. Ching-Lung had given orders that no prisoners were to be butchered, as is usually the way. The man was carried past them on a stretcher—a mere lad, but wearing an insignia of high rank. Ching-Lung sat down on the trail of a gun to light a cigarette.

"By the way," drawled the millionaire, looking after the retreating stretcher, "the prisoner seems somebody of importance. I think I'll send Kennedy to find out who he is."

"Don't trouble," said the Chinese boy. "I'm off to the palace to sit with Thurston, and I'll walk into the hospital and send you word. Did you notice whether he was hit?"

"I don't think so. I put a bullet into his horse, and the brute rolled on him. Remember me to poor old Rupert."

Ching-Lung nodded, and, mounting the pony held by a servant, galloped away. He found the prisoner lying on the bare floor quite unattended and uncared for. The two flat-faced Chinese doctors were too interested in their game of fan-fan to worry about patients. A shower of knocks on the head from the butt of Ching-Lung's revolver ended the game with painful suddenness, and they fled.

The eyes of the young Chinaman opened as the prince bent over him. Then, with a choked cry, he struggled to his elbow, staring wildly at the jewelled brooch that pinned the peacock's feather in Ching-Lung's cap.

"The prince!" he gasped. "Ching-Lung!"

"Yes, I am Ching-Lung. Who are you?"

"They told me you were dead! They told us all you were dead! Chan-So swore it!"

"Then he lied! Who are you? Let me help you up."

He stretched out his hand. The prisoner seized it, and raised it to his lips. He had merely been stunned by the fall, but no bones had been injured.

"I am Sin-Tuan," he said, "nephew of Yung. Chan-So misled us all when we followed his banner. Scores of us would abandon him if they knew you were alive. I have forfeited my head. Strike!"

Ching-Lung stood erect, his arms folded, his forehead knitted. He knew that General Yung would have no pity for his rebel nephew if he learned he had been taken prisoner. He laid his hand on his revolver, and a look of fear crept into the lad's eyes. The prince closed the door, and drew a flimsy paper blind over the unglazed window.

"How many of the chiefs would leave my brother if they knew I was alive—if they saw me?"

"A dozen at least, and ten thousand men would go with them."

Ching-Lung paced the room like a cat, noiselessly, silently. His eyes were flashing.

"Come!" he said sharply. "I will give you a chance of life!"

He lifted the blind, and glanced out into the sunlit street.

The street was empty, except for a couple of donkeys being driven towards the ramparts with ammunition. Ching-Lung waited until they had passed, and then he bent over the prisoner and whispered something in his ear. Sin-Tuan staggered to his feet.

"It is madness," he said, "but I must obey!"

"You will save your head," answered Ching-Lung.

When night came the blazing fires of Chan-So's rebel army crimsoned the sky. Just at dusk Yung's outposts filed through the gate and crept, like ghosts, across the plain, to guard against any advance. Yung feared that, under the cover of darkness, the rebels would attempt to bring their guns across the river, and throw up the first line of trenches. He watched the men move out and vanish into the gloom, Kennedy in command.

They marched at first in quarter-column through the thick grass. Then the word was given, and they scattered and sank out of sight, to watch and wait. Two of them did not halt for long. Crawling like snakes, they moved nearer and nearer to the river, which shone red in the glow of the fires. A few gaunt willows edged the bank. The two men rose to their feet at last.

"Where is the ford, Sin-Tuan?"

"A quarter of a mile below us. It will be guarded."

"What matter, if we have the countersign? No treachery, I warn you! I have a bullet ready!"

"If I play you false, prince, I ask no better. Follow me silently. You are Ching-Lung, my prince, and my life is yours."

The river was in half flood, and roared between its banks in a foaming torrent. They pushed their way through a bed of tall reeds, sinking ankle-deep in mud and ooze at every stride. The reeds gave place to osiers, and then reeds came again. The noise of the river increased as it raced over the shallows, and, parting the rushes, Ching-Lung looked out across the ford.

He could have tossed a pebble into the very heart of the rebel camp. There was a sudden shouting, and a sound of galloping hoofs, and a drove of horses thundered down to drink. They seemed mad with thirst after the tiring march. Snorting and tossing their heads, they splashed into the river. Howling drivers, armed with whips, followed them, and a dozen men tried to turn them in vain.

The uproar roused Yung's outpost, and bullets, fired at about a thousand yards' range, began to hiss towards the river. Soldiers dashed out into the stream to drive back the horses, fearing a stampede.

"Our chance has come!" said Ching-Lung sharply. "Keep close behind me!"

He dashed into the stream, and, waving his arms, drove back a few of the animals that were almost across. The next moment they were in the thick of the mingled mob of men and horses, unnoticed and unchallenged. They struggled through. In the excitement no one looked at them, for the whole camp was alarmed. Without waiting for orders, hundreds of Chinese grasped their weapons, and emptied their rifles at the distant flashes.

"They'll soon discover it's a false alarm," said Ching-Lung, wringing the water out of the long cloak he wore. "What time will the meeting of the chiefs take place?"

"At midnight," answered Sin-Tuan.

"Then we have plenty of time to spare. Let us look over the camp."

They wandered about unchallenged. No one even glanced at them. The firing ceased at last.

"I fancy," said Ching-Lung, "there would be some slight excitement if they knew who was here. I must amuse myself somehow. Let us go to Chan-So's tent."

Sin-Tuan turned pale, but he was afraid to protest. The tent of the usurping prince stood on a grassy knoll surrounded by a cordon of sentries. Huge fires were blazing before it. Ching-Lung boldly approached, and there was a sharp challenge. For answer, he flung off his cloak, displaying the yellow dress of a mountebank, embroidered with uncouth dragons and demons. All Chinamen love juggling, and the sentries lowered their guns.

"Go forward, illustrious Sin-Tuan," said Ching-Lung, loud enough for all to hear, "and crave that Man-Hoo, the Wizard of the South, may display his wonders before the serene Prince Chan-So."

(Another splendid instalment of this grand serial next Tuesday in THE "MAGNET" LIBRARY.

Printed and published by the Proprietors at 23, Bouverie Street, London, England. Agents for Australia: Gordon & Gotch, Ltd., Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, and Wellington, N.Z.; for South Africa: Central News Agency, Ltd. Cape Town, and Johannesburg; Canada: 371, Queen Street West, Toronto. Subscription, 7s. per annum. Saturday, July 22nd, 1911.

POPULAR NEW BOOKS FOR HOLIDAY READING

"THE BOYS' FRIEND"

3d.

COMPLETE LIBRARY.

NEW NUMBERS

NOW ON SALE.

No. 160. TRAPPER AND REDSKIN.
A NEW, Long, Complete Tale of Jack, Sam, and Pete. By S. CLARKE HOOK.

No. 161. ACROSS SIBERIA.
A Thrilling Tale of Adventure. By W. MURRAY GRAYDON.

No. 162. THE CAD OF ST. CORTON'S.
A Grand, Complete Tale of School Life. By DAVID GOODWIN.

Ask always for

"THE BOYS' FRIEND" 3d. LIBRARY.