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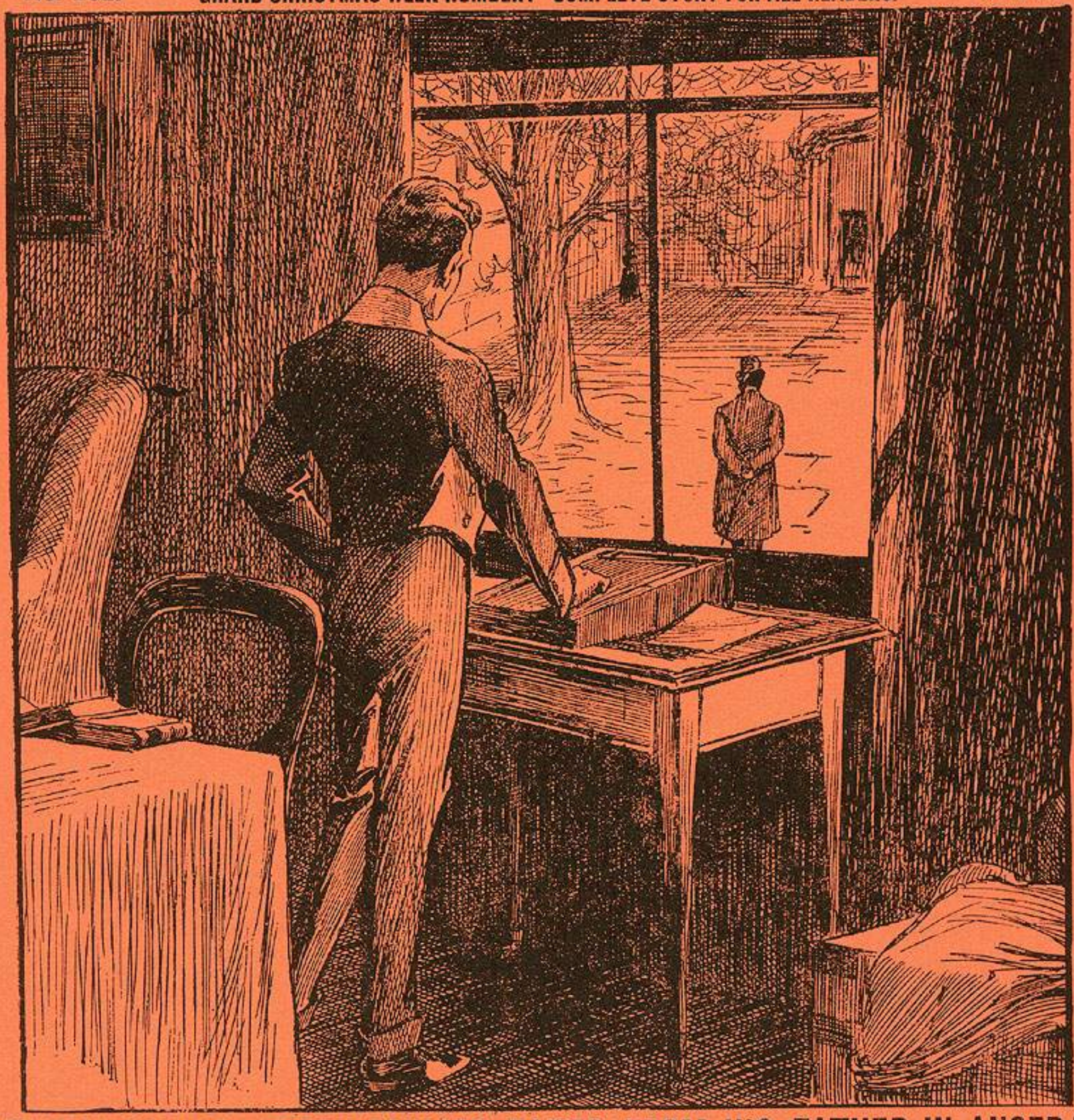

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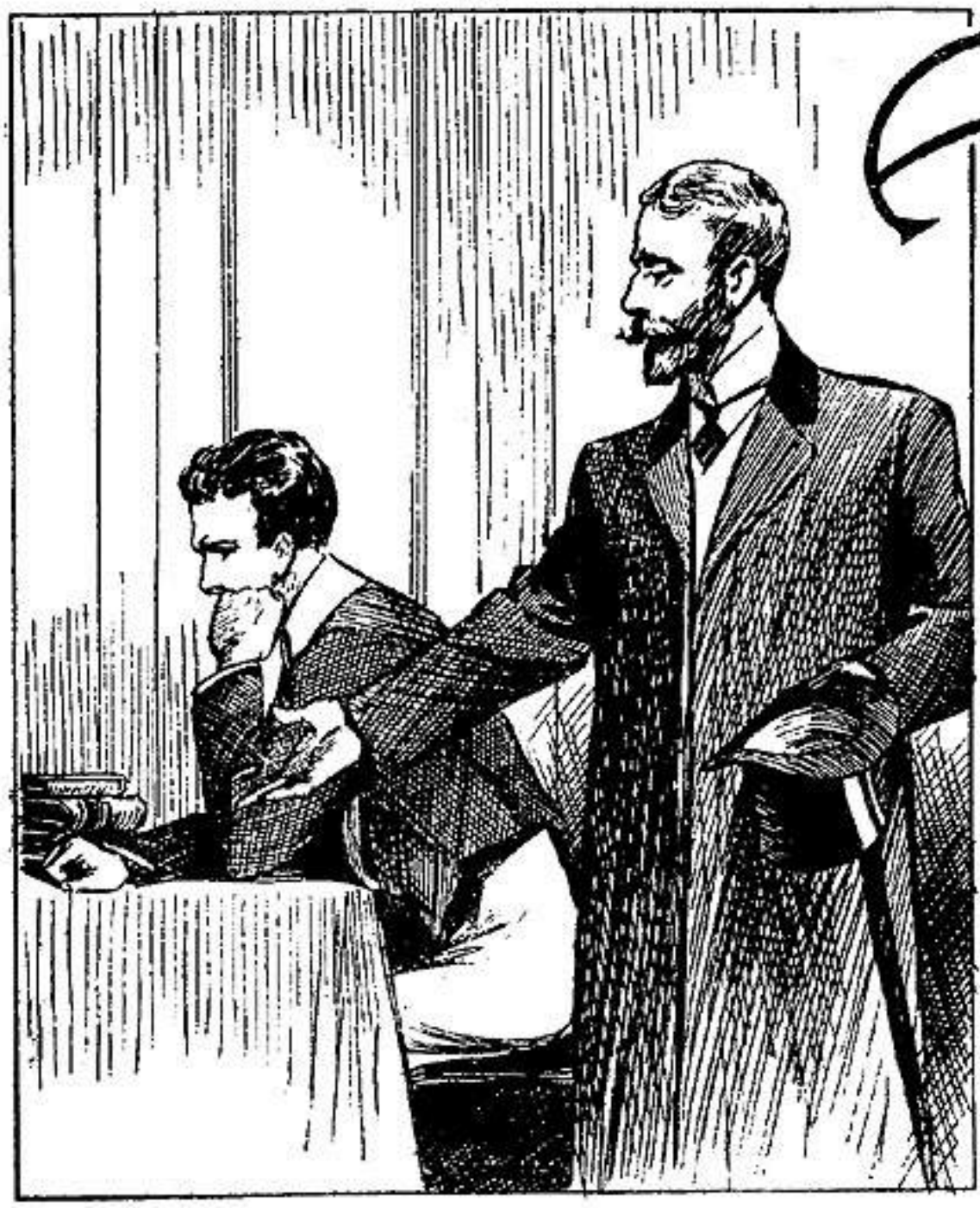


Against his Father's Wish

A Splendid New, Long, Complete Tale of School Life, introducing the Famous Chums, Harry Wharton & Co. of Greyfriars.

By FRANK RICHARDS.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Not Invited.

"IS he coming?"

Bob Cherry looked round the corner of the Fifth-Form passage at Greyfriars.

"No, not yet."

The group of juniors collected at the end of the passage grumbled a little. There were half a dozen of them, waiting there for Talbot, of the Fifth, to come by, and all of them belonged to the Remove Form—the Lower Fourth. There was Bulstrode, the captain of the Remove, and Harry Wharton, and Frank Nugent, and Bob Cherry, and Johnny Bull, and Mark Linley.

Anybody who had seen them waiting there would probably have suspected them of intending some jape upon Talbot, of the Fifth. As a rule, relations were rather strained between the Removites and the Fifth Form. Coker & Co., of the Fifth, were very much "down" upon Harry Wharton & Co., of the Remove, though they certainly could not say that they had had the best of their various little contests with the junior Form.

But, as a matter of fact, the intentions of the Removites were of the friendliest kind. They were "up against" Coker & Co. all the time, but they honoured Arthur Talbot with their esteem. Talbot, as Bob Cherry said, was quite decent, although he was a senior. Only that afternoon, he had chipped in when Coker & Co. were ragging Todd, of the Remove, and had put a stop to their fun with the Duffer of Greyfriars. And Harry Wharton & Co. felt that such exemplary conduct on the part of a Fifth-Former deserved recognition. And their presence in the Fifth-Form passage meant nothing more hostile than an invitation to tea in No. 1 Study in the Remove.

It was not usual, of course, for a Fifth-Former to take tea with a junior party of the Lower Fourth. But the juniors had laid in a really excellent feed, and if Talbot came they were prepared to "do him down" in really splendid style. And Talbot was very kind and good-natured, without an ounce of swank about him, and there was no doubt that he

would come, if he were asked nicely. Asking him nicely was a task which the Removites left, by common consent, to Harry Wharton. Wharton was supposed to have more tact and diplomacy in these matters than the other fellows. But the other fellows were there to back him up if necessary.

"I wish he'd come!" growled Bulstrode.

"He won't be long now."

Bob Cherry looked round the corner again. Talbot was not yet in sight. The position of the Removites was a rather delicate one. Talbot's study was just opposite Coker's in the Fifth-Form passage, and Coker & Co. were "at home." If the juniors went up the passage, there was no doubt that they would be rushed by Coker & Co., which would quite spoil their delivery of the invitation to Talbot. They had to wait till the Fifth-Former came out of his study, and speak to him as he went by. And they had to keep on the look-out, in case Coker & Co. should leave their quarters and come along the passage.

"We've been here five minutes," said Nugent.

"Well, that's not long," said Wharton. "Talbot's just had a letter—I saw Trotter take it up to his study—and he may be stopping to read it."

"Give him a chance!" said Bob Cherry generously.

"Oh, yes, rather!"

And the juniors waited with patience. Talbot was expected to come downstairs, but it was possible that his letter would delay him in his study. Bob Cherry peeped round the corner at intervals, with one eye open for Talbot and the other a little wider open for Coker & Co.

There was the sound of a door opening—opening so violently that it crashed on the wall inside the study.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"That can't be Talbot!"

"Sounds like a chap yanking his door open in a fearful temper," said Nugent. "It can't be Talbot."

Bob Cherry looked round the corner.

"It is Talbot!" he said.

"Seen him?"

"Yes."

"Oh, good!"

The juniors waited expectantly.

As soon as Arthur Talbot turned the corner from the passage, they were ready for him. Heavy footsteps came ringing down the Fifth-Form passage. They did not sound like Talbot's footsteps. Talbot, as a rule, walked quietly enough. Wharton felt a momentary uneasiness. The noisy opening of the door, the stamping steps in the passage indicated that Talbot was in a violent temper. But Wharton had never seen Talbot, of the Fifth, in a bad temper before, and he hoped that he was mistaken.

A handsome fellow, with a well-made, athletic form, came swinging round the corner of the passage. It was Talbot, of the Fifth. He had a letter in his hand, crunched up in his fingers, which were tightly clenched upon it, and his face was pale, his teeth set hard, and his brow darkly frowning.

There was no doubt, after all, that Talbot was in a temper.

He came round the corner very quickly, and almost ran into the juniors. Wharton spoke to him quickly.

"Talbot, old man——"

Talbot stared at him.

"What are you fags doing here?" he exclaimed harshly.

"We—we—came——"

"Get out, at once!"

"Eh?"

"Don't come hanging round this passage!" exclaimed Talbot. "Get out, I say!"

The juniors looked at one another sheepishly.

They had never seen Arthur Talbot like this before.

The best-tempered fellow in the Fifth, the fellow upon whose good-nature they had always felt that they could rely—what was the matter with him?

For the moment they could not speak.

It was pretty clear that the invitation to tea would come very awkwardly now, that the nice little speech Harry Wharton had prepared could not be uttered.

The Removites, taken very much aback, hardly knew what to say.

"I—I say—you know——" stammered Wharton.

"Get out!"

"But——"

"Get out!" roared Talbot, clenching his hand. "Hang you! What do you want to bother for now? Get along!"

Wharton flushed indignantly.

"Hang it all, you might be civil when a chap wants to speak to you!" he exclaimed. "I suppose we're doing no harm here?"

Talbot's face flushed crimson. He was in such a rage—for what reason the juniors could not even guess—that his temper had passed beyond his control. He raised his hand and struck savagely at the junior who was speaking to him. Wharton started back, putting up his hand to defend his face.

"Talbot!" he exclaimed.

"Chuck that!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "You confounded ass——"

"Talbot, you fathead——"

"Look out!"

Talbot ran at the juniors, smiting right and left. They scattered, in amazement, backing away hastily from the angry Fifth-Former. If it had been Coker, or any other senior, the juniors would have piled upon him and bumped him hard. There were more than enough of them to do it.

But with Talbot it was different. They had come there with the friendliest intentions, to ask him to tea, and this was the result! There must be something very wrong with Talbot; that was the only explanation. The juniors retreated, angry and chagrined, but not feeling revengeful.

Talbot glared at them as they scattered, and paused, panting for breath. Then, with a black frown upon his face, he strode away towards the staircase, and went downstairs.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Something Wrong.

"MY hat!"

"Great Scott!"

"What the dickens——"

"What the——"

"Phew!"

Talbot was gone. Harry Wharton & Co. gathered together again, looking red and flustered and amazed. Bob Cherry was rubbing his ear, which was scarlet in hue, and Johnny Bull caressed his nose, which seemed to have increased slightly in size.

The juniors were hurt, but they were more amazed than hurt, and their chief feeling was one of concern for Talbot.

"Something jolly wrong with him, I think," said Harry Wharton.

"Yes, rather!"

"Off his giddy rocker, I should think!" growled Bulstrode, rubbing his head. "Anyway, I've had enough of him. No more Arthur Talbot for me."

"He must be ill," said Mark Linley.

Bulstrode grunted.

"Then I hope he'll be iller!" he said.

"I've never seen him in a fury before," said Nugent, "and I'm blessed if I know why he wanted to get into a rage with us. But I suppose the invitation to tea is off?"

Wharton laughed ruefully.

"Yes, I suppose so."

And the Removites returned disconsolately towards their own quarters. Their expected guest certainly would not come now. As they passed the head of the stairs, there was a quick pattering of feet, and a fat junior came tearing up the stairs and gasping into the Remove passage. It was Billy Bunter, of the Remove. He was running at top speed, and blinking wildly through his big spectacles, and he ran right into Harry Wharton & Co. without seeing them.

Bob Cherry caught him by the collar and stopped him.

Bunter burst into a roar.

"Ow! Leggo! Yah! Leggo! Oh, really—oh!"

"What's the matter?"

"Leggo!"

"But what's wrong?" demanded Bob Cherry, shaking the fat junior till his spectacles slid down his fat little nose.

"Ow! He's after me."

"Who is?"

"Talbot! He's mad!"

"Eh?"

"Ow! Leggo!"

Bob Cherry glanced down the stairs. There was no sign there of Arthur Talbot. He compressed his grip upon the collar of the Owl of the Remove.

"It's all right," he said. "Talbot isn't coming. Now, what's the matter?"

Bunter blinked round towards the stairs, and gasped. He jerked his collar away from Bob Cherry's grasp, and stood pumping in air.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Ow! What's the matter with Talbot?"

"Blessed if I know," said Bob Cherry.

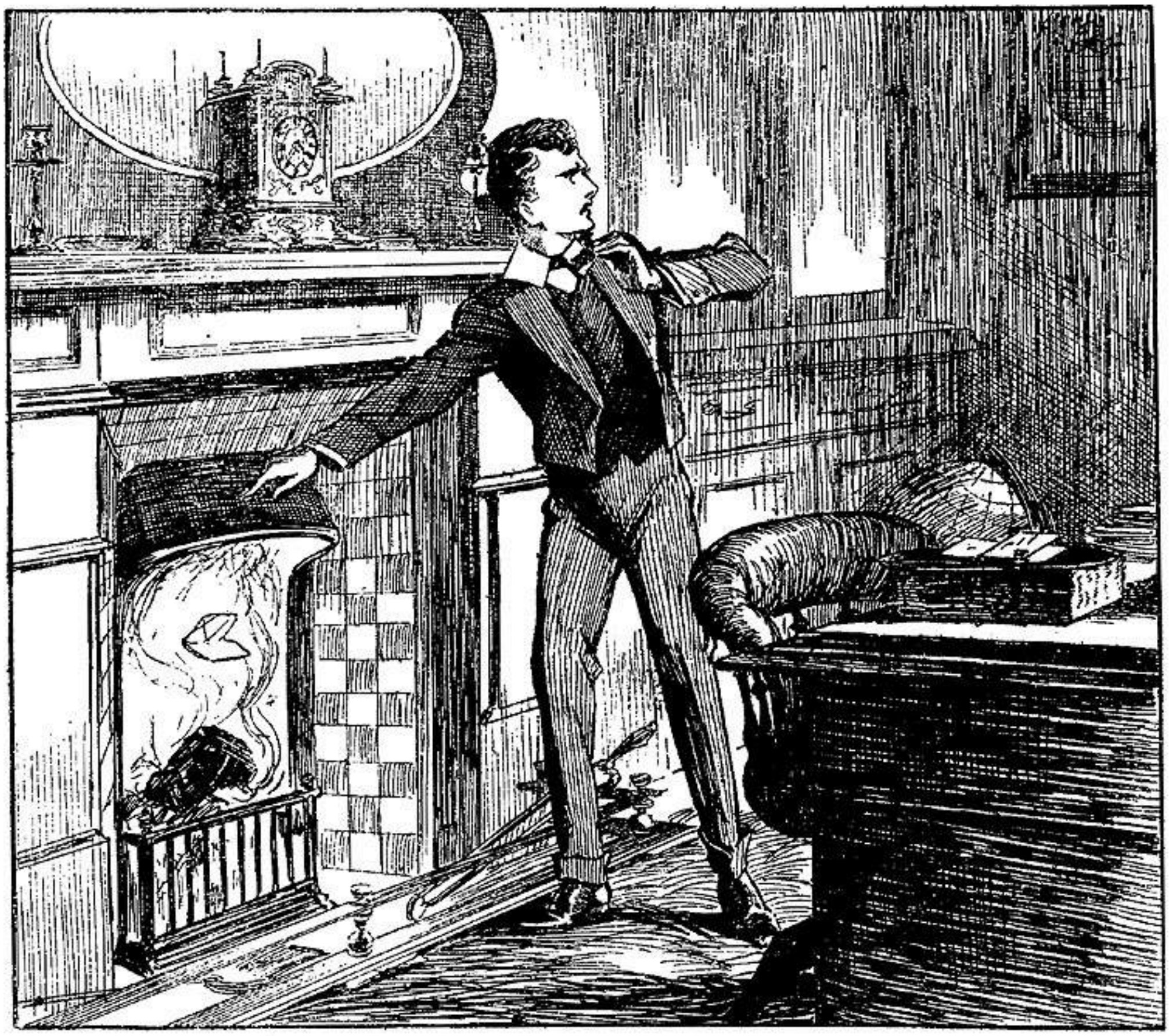
"What has he done?" asked Wharton.

"I—I spoke to him as he came downstairs," Bunter gasped. "I knew he'd had a letter from home, you see; I saw it in the rack before Trotter took it up——"

"How do you know that it was from his home?"

"Oh, it was in his father's hand; I know the fist!" said Bunter.

Bob Cherry sniffed.



Almost mesmerised by the leaping flames in the grate, Talbot picked up his father's letter to the Head. Should he burn it? Almost as the junior asked himself the question, the letter, flung from his shaking hand, fell upon the glowing coals. *(See Chapter 13.)*

"You know a jolly lot too much about other fellow's correspondence," he exclaimed.

"Oh, really, Cherry! I—I thought, you see, that having had a letter from home, he had very likely had a remittance, and—and, you see, as I'm expecting a postal-order this evening——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at," growled Bunter. "As I'm expecting a postal-order, I—I thought he might make me a small advance upon it, as he'd had a remittance. But as soon as I spoke to him, he hit me——"

"Serve you right!"

"Oh, really, Nugent! He boxed my ears right and left, you know, almost before I'd a chance to speak, and—and I bolted. I think he's mad!"

And Billy Bunter blinked nervously down the stairs again. It was evident that he was still in fear of pursuit by the Fifth-Former. Harry Wharton & Co. went into their study in a very puzzled frame of mind. Billy Bunter rolled on down the passage, in his alarm and confusion of mind forgetting even to glance into No. 1 to see whether there was a feed on.

"Talbot does seem to be a bit off his rocker!" said Bob Cherry. "Blessed if I can understand the chap. He may have had bad news from home."

"I don't see why he should lose his temper with us, though, if he has," Mark Linley said thoughtfully.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry abruptly. "Look there! There he goes!"

The juniors crowded to the study window. In the winter dusk in the Close, they could see the athletic figure of Arthur Talbot striding across to the school gates. It disappeared from view in a few moments.

"He's going out!" said Nugent.

"Something disturbing in the letter, I suppose," growled Bulstrode. "Well, he can go and eat coke! Let's have tea."

"Kettle's boiling," said Bull.

The juniors prepared their tea in a thoughtful mood. Bulstrode was feeling angry, but the other fellows felt more concerned. They all liked Talbot, and if he had had some bad news that had upset him very much, they were not disposed to resent very strongly his treatment of them, rough as it was.

But what could have happened to so disturb the fellow who was always known to be good-tempered and considerate? That was a puzzle, and the juniors had to give it up. Tea was ready when there was a tap at the door, and Alonzo Todd, the Duffer of Greyfriars, came in. Todd had a big book under his arm, the cover of which was splashed with mud, and he had a surprised and wondering expression upon his simple face

He glanced round the study.

"Ah, Talbot is not here?" he exclaimed.

"No," said Wharton.

"Is he coming?"

"No."

Todd looked relieved.

"My dear Wharton, upon the whole I am not sorry!" he exclaimed. "Talbot's conduct has been very singular. After his kindness to me this afternoon, I thought over what I could possibly do to show him that I am not ungrateful. My Uncle Benjamin has always impressed upon me the necessity of being grateful for a favour, and Talbot——"

"Have some fried sosses, Todd?"

"Oh, certainly! I—I met Talbot just now in the Close," said Todd. "I had turned the matter over in my mind, and decided that the best thing I could do was to make him a present of this volume. You have seen it before—it is called 'The Story of a Potato,' and is full of valuable information on the subject of that succulent vegetable——"

"Have some tea, Todd?"

"Oh, certainly! Scarcely had I opened my lips to address Talbot——"

"Good old dictionary!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"My dear Cherry, did you address me?"

"Have some salt?"

"Oh, certainly! Scarcely had I opened my mouth to address Talbot when he pushed roughly by me, and my book was knocked into the mud. Before I could pick it up, he was gone. I regard this conduct of Talbot's as most rude!"

"Awful!" said Nugent. "Have some pepper?"

"Oh, certainly! I said to Talbot that my Uncle Benjamin would have been shocked—nay, disgusted at his action; but he walked away so quickly that he did not hear me. I regard Talbot's conduct as most singular."

"Go hon! Have some sugar in your tea?"

"Oh, certainly!"

And the Duffer of Greyfriars sat down to tea, still evidently in a very puzzled frame of mind. And the other fellows were just as much puzzled as Alonzo Todd. What was the matter with Arthur Talbot?

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Father and Son.

TALBOT, of the Fifth, passed through the old gateway of Greyfriars, and turned into the road to Friardale. The winter evening was darkening over the fields and the leafless woods, and there was a touch of frost in the keen air. Talbot strode down the dusky road towards the village, with a deep line in his knitted brows, and his eyes gleaming hard. In his hand was still grasped the letter that had disturbed him so much. He seemed to have forgotten it. He strode directly on, without looking to the right or the left, and several people who passed him in the road glanced at him curiously, struck by the hard and bitter anger in his white, set face.

As he passed the cross-roads the glimmer of a lamp fell upon his white face. He paused and glanced at the letter in his hand, as if he had suddenly remembered it. A look of passionate anger swept over his face, and he tossed the letter into the ditch beside the road and strode on faster than before.

He entered the old High Street of Friardale, and made his way directly to the railway-station. He glanced up at the clock outside the station, and uttered an impatient exclamation. He was ten minutes early for the train he had come to meet.

He nodded to the porter and passed into the station. Arthur Talbot was known and liked there, as in most places round Greyfriars. He passed upon the platform, and strode up and down the ringing planks with heavy footsteps, waiting for the train to come in. It was a long platform in the little country station, with flower-beds sloping up from one side, and the metals on the other. Arthur Talbot strode up and down, up and down, with set brows and set teeth. The old porter of Friardale looked upon the platform at him, and shook his head.

Talbot was unconscious that he was attracting attention; but his expression could hardly have passed unremarked. The porter was thinking of telling Master Talbot that it was a fine evening, considering the time of year, but he changed his mind, and left the Greyfriars fellow alone.

There was the shriek of a whistle on the line, and a light gleamed through the deep dusk. The train came in with a rush and a rattle.

Arthur Talbot stood with his hands in his pockets, his brows still knitted, regarding it. The doors of the carriages opened, and half a dozen passengers alighted, among them an old gentleman with a brown beard streaked with white, and a kind, grave face. He stood upon the platform, and glanced up and down as if in search of someone.

Arthur Talbot did not make a movement. The old gentleman caught sight of him, and came quickly towards him.

"Arthur, my boy."

"Well, father?"

The old gentleman scanned his son's face keenly. He read there the anger and bitterness with difficulty suppressed.

His own expression grew graver, and a troubled expression came into his kind eyes.

"I am afraid you are annoyed, Arthur."

"Yes, father."

"You have read my letter, of course?"

"Yes."

The boy's tone was curt and hard.

"Come and sit down in the waiting-room, Arthur, and I will talk to you there," said Mr. Talbot. "I must take the next train back—and we have only twenty minutes. I would have come to the school for a longer visit, but——"

He paused, and led the way into the waiting-room. What he had been about to say was that he would have come to Greyfriars for a longer visit, if his errand had not been such an unpleasant one.

Arthur followed his father into the waiting-room. The hard expression upon the boy's handsome face had not relaxed.

Mr. Talbot stirred the fire, shaking a little life into the two lumps of coal which it consisted of, his son standing motionless and silent the while. Then the old gentleman sat down, and motioned to his son to do the same.

Talbot obeyed.

"My dear Arthur," Mr. Talbot began hesitatingly, "I am afraid you are very much disappointed."

"Yes."

"You were very much set on entering for the De Courcy Scholarship."

"I have entered for it."

"I mean, upon passing the examination."

"Yes."

"It will be a great disappointment to you if you have to withdraw?"

"Yes."

"I am sorry, Arthur."

Talbot set his lips.

"Then why do you make me withdraw?" he asked bitterly.

"It is for the best, Arthur. If you had told me that you were going to enter, I should have answered you at once, that I did not wish you to do so."

"I thought it would be pleasant news for you," said his son bitterly. "I looked out the whole matter of the De Courcy scholarship, and I consulted my Form-master as to whether it would be a good idea for me to enter. Mr. Prout considers that I have a good chance. Only one other fellow in the Fifth is entering—Potter—and I think I can beat Potter. The scholarship is restricted to the Fifth and Lower Forms—and I know I can beat all the juniors who have entered, excepting perhaps Penfold. I have a splendid chance."

Mr. Talbot nodded without replying, the troubled look deepening on his face.

"I entered as a matter of course when I found that it was so good a chance, and that my Form-master approved," went on Arthur, with some eagerness in his voice now. "Then I wrote to you, father, expecting that you'd be as pleased as I was. You know we're not rich, and that it will be a bit of a strain keeping me at Greyfriars till I pass through the Sixth. I know that well enough."

"It is a strain I am quite prepared to bear, Arthur."

"Yes, I know—I know; but how much better it would be to win the De Courcy, and get the scholarship—no fees all

the time I remain at Greyfriars, and thirty pounds a year for three years in cash!" exclaimed Talbot.

"It is very tempting, Arthur."

"Wouldn't it be folly to let such a chance slip?" exclaimed the boy quickly and eagerly. "Besides, there's the eclat of winning it. I want to win it! I never dreamed you'd have any objection, of course, or I should have written before putting my name down. I thought it would be a bit of a pleasant surprise to you, father. I thought I'd hit on a way of saving you a lot of expense while I stay at Greyfriars."

"It was very, very right of you, Arthur. But——"

"I couldn't imagine you'd have any objection. I can't guess why now. I suppose I'm entitled to take an open scholarship as much as anybody?"

"Of course."

"If I'm beaten, I'm no worse off than if I hadn't tried," said Talbot. "I can't see any objection at all myself. I thought you'd been just as keen about it as I am, father."

"I am sorry, Arthur."

"I—I thought you'd encourage me, too," said Talbot, his voice faltering a little. "It will be a regular grind for the exam., dad—the Greek paper and the maths. are the hardest, and I shall have to mug them up no end. Mr. Prout has promised me some extra tuition—an hour every evening if I like. He wants a Fifth-Former to take the prize if possible. He is being very good to me about it."

Mr. Talbot nodded.

"You see how rotten it would be for me to withdraw, sir," Talbot exclaimed, thinking that his father was wavering. "It would look ungrateful to Mr. Prout, after his kindness to me. It would look to all the fellows as if I had funked it."

Mr. Talbot was still silent.

"Worst of all, the fellows know I don't fear Potter's competition—they'd think I'd withdrawn because I was afraid of being beaten by a junior."

"I know it won't be pleasant, Arthur."

Talbot's heart sank again. His father's voice expressed regret, but no lack of resolution. His mind had not changed.

"But—but you want me to withdraw my name, father?"

"Yes, my son."

"Why?"

Mr. Talbot frowned uneasily.

"I—I can hardly explain, Arthur. I have reasons—good reasons. Surely you can trust your father's judgment."

Talbot stared at him.

"You won't even tell me your reason, father?" he exclaimed.

"I do not wish to, Arthur."

Talbot compressed his lips.

"Do you mean to say that you order me to get out of the exam., and don't even give me a reason for doing so, father?"

"You must trust me, Arthur."

"Father, it is cruel—inconsiderate! You don't know how much I'm set on winning the De Courcy!" Talbot exclaimed passionately. "Father, I must go in for the exam.!"

Mr. Talbot shook his head.

"It is impossible, Arthur."

"But why impossible?"

"You must trust me."

"But why cannot you explain?"

"It is impossible."

Talbot looked at his father in angry amazement. The old gentleman's face was darkly troubled, and it would have been plain to most observers that he felt his son's disappointment as keenly as the boy himself did. But Talbot did not see it. To him it appeared that his father's action was utterly unreasonable and tyrannical.

"Father, I want to enter for the exam."

"You do not wish to distress me, Arthur, by opposing my wishes?"

Talbot looked sullen.

"I want to enter," he said.

"You cannot, Arthur!"

"If you order me to withdraw my name I suppose I must obey," said Arthur Talbot, in a hard, angry voice. "I shall not do it unless you order me. Then I suppose I have no choice."

The old gentleman coloured painfully.

"I don't think you ought to make me order you, Arthur. When you know what is my wish on the subject you should obey it as cheerfully as you can."

"It is too unreasonable."

"Arthur!"

"I mean it!" said Talbot passionately. "It is tyrannical! If you could give me any reason, any grounds at all for humiliating me like this before the whole school——"

"You should be able to trust your father, Arthur."

Talbot made an angry gesture.

"Do you order me to drop the exam. or not?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then there is no more to be said."

Arthur Talbot rose to his feet. Mr. Talbot rose also, his face very distressed.

"You are leaving me in anger, Arthur."

The boy was silent.

"Very well," said the old gentleman, with a sigh. "I am sorry, Arthur. I know how keenly you must feel this. But some day you will know my reasons, and then you will understand. Good-bye, my dear boy!"

He shook hands with his son—Talbot's hand was like ice. The boy tramped heavily out of the station. Mr. Talbot stood upon the platform, watching him till he was gone, and then he gave a sigh. Talbot, with his brows black with anger and chagrin, his hands thrust deep into his pockets, was tramping savagely back to Greyfriars.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

Coker Knows What to Do.

HORACE COKER, of the Fifth Form, sat in his study. Big, rugged, heavy-handed Coker was frowning and eating roast chestnuts. The chestnuts were very good, and well roasted, and Coker liked them, and in his enjoyment of the chestnuts he forgot several times that he was angry, and grinned instead of frowning. But as his glance wandered to the open door of his study he would frown again. Through the open doorway the passage and the door of Arthur Talbot's study were visible. There was no light in the study opposite Coker's. Talbot had not come in yet.

Coker was not alone. Potter and Blundell and Greene of the Fifth were with him. They were frowning, too.

"It's cheek!" said Potter.

"Rotten cheek!" said Greene.

"My opinion exactly," said Blundell. "What do you think, Coker?"

"Eh?" said Coker absently.

"What do you think?"

"They're jolly good!"

"Eh? Who are?"

"Who?" said Coker. "I'm speaking of the chestnuts!"

Blundell sniffed. Blundell of the Fifth was captain of that Form. He had his own reasons for keeping on chummy terms with Coker, but he had no great respect for Coker's intelligence.

"Hang the chestnuts!" he said crossly.

"Hallo!" said Coker. "What's the matter?"

"I was speaking of Talbot's cheek."

"Oh, yes, certainly!" said Coker. "Awful, isn't it? Never knew such a cheeky cad! Have some more of the chestnuts, Potty?"

"Well, yes, I may as well," said Potter.

"Fancy backing up Remove kids against us—us!" said Coker, frowning again. "Of course, Talbot will have to be told what's what!"

"I should say so!" exclaimed Blundell, with emphasis.

"We'll put it to him plainly," said Coker. "Have some more chestnuts, Greene? They won't hold out much longer."

Greene grinned, and helped himself.

"I think Talbot ought to be jolly well put in his place!" said Coker. "Cheeky cad! Fancy backing up Remove kids against us! Fancy that, Blundell!"

"I don't fancy it!" growled Blundell.

"I've got a jolly good idea for downing him, and making him jolly sorry for himself," said Coker, in a confidential tone. "Bumping a chap is all very well, but I've got a dodge for making Talbot really sorry for himself."

Blundell looked at him inquiringly, but without much faith. He never had much faith in Coker's dodges.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

"I'm thinking of giving him a jolly thorough set-down," said Coker.

"But how?"

"You know he's entered for the De Courcy?"

"All the world knows that!" growled Blundell.

"He's got a good chance," went on Coker.

"He'll get beaten, all the same!" said Potter rather warmly.

Coker shook his head.

"Speaking as a candid friend, Potty, I don't think you'll pull it off against Talbot," he said.

Potter sniffed.

"You can keep the candid-friend bizney till it's asked for!" he replied.

"Now, don't get ratty——"

"Oh, cheese it, and pass the chestnuts!"

"I was thinking of entering myself—not because I want the scholarship, but to make sure of the Fifth Form bagging it!" Blundell remarked modestly.

Coker grinned.

"As a candid friend——" he began.

"Oh, rats!" said Blundell, anticipating what was coming. "What do you know about it, anyway?"

"I thought of entering," Greene remarked; "but, upon the whole, these exams. are too much fag. The exams. we have to go in for are enough."

"Quite right," said Coker. "Besides, you wouldn't have a chance."

"Who says I wouldn't?" demanded Greene warmly.

"As a candid——"

"Oh, rot!"

"Look here, Greeney——"

"What's the wheeze for downing Talbot?" asked Blundell. "If you're thinking of fighting him, Coker, you'd better think twice. He's not nearly so big as you are, but he's as tough as nails, and the best boxer in the Form."

"I'd fight him as soon as look at him," said Coker. "But I wasn't thinking of that. We're going into his study to bump him when he comes in—that's settled."

"Yes, that's settled; but the idea you were speaking of——"

"Guess," said Coker.

"I can't! What is it?"

"I'm going to enter for the De Courcy."

"What?"

Three different voices, in rising tones of amazement, ejaculated the question. Blundell and Greene and Potter stared at Coker in blank amazement. Coker went on eating chestnuts with an air of complete self-satisfaction.

"That surprise you?" he asked.

"Well, yes, rather!" said Blundell, with emphasis. "Suppose you do enter for the De Courcy, what difference will that make to Talbot?"

"It will make a difference to him if I carry off the prize, I suppose," said Coker.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker frowned.

"What are you cackling at?" he demanded.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the three Fifth-Formers, in uncontrollable merriment at the idea of Coker carrying off a prize. "Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

"Look here——"

"Why, you couldn't carry off a Second-Form prize!" yelled Potter.

"Now, don't get ratty about my entering, Potty," said Coker patiently. "I'm not doing it to down you. You haven't an earthly, anyway. It's Talbot I'm going for."

"Talbot!" gasped Greene. "But—but you couldn't get within miles of him. What do you know about Greek?"

"What does that matter?"

"There's a Greek paper!" shrieked Blundell. "And a jolly hard one!"

"Is there?" said Coker indifferently. "Well, a chap can mug these things up, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My aunt will pay any extra toot fees I like to ask for," said Coker. "She's always trying to make me enter for prizes. She'll be glad. I suppose I can have tutors and things to mug up the subject for the Greek paper?"

"You can have tutors, I've no doubt," said Blundell, grinning. "Your aunt can give you tutors, but she can't give you brains."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you fellows," said Coker warmly, "I'm going to do this to down Talbot, and put the bounder in his place. I don't think you chaps ought to be ratty about it. As for Potter, he hadn't an earthly, anyway, as I've said."

"Oh, I don't mind!" grinned Potter. "You haven't made me feel nervous about my chance. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Greene and Blundell.

"Look here, you fellows——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker frowned.

"I've had about enough of this!" he exclaimed angrily. "I don't see anything at all to cackle at, and I'm not going to stand it! If you can't be civil when a chap has a jolly good idea there will be trouble."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, I tell you!" roared Coker.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Blundell. "I don't want to laugh, but I can't help it! Of course, you don't mean to be funny, Coker! Ha, ha, ha! But you are! He, he, he!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Greene and Potter.

The Fifth-Formers seemed to be in danger of falling into hysterics. Coker jumped up.

"Shut up," he bawled, "or I'll jolly well kick you out of the study!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you going to stop it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker said no more. He seized Potter by the shoulders and swung him out of the study, and he fell in a sitting posture upon the lincleum. He sat there helplessly, still laughing. Coker grasped Blundell, and hurled him forth. Blundell staggered against the opposite door, and leaned there, gasping with merriment. Greene came hurtling forth after the others, and he stumbled over Potter's legs and fell with a bump in the passage. But he only roared with laughter.

Coker, breathing heavily, slammed the door of the study with a slam that rang and echoed along the Fifth-Form passage from end to end. But through the closed door came a yell of merriment from his friends of the Fifth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

For full five minutes Blundell & Co. roared with laughter outside Coker's study. Then they tramped away, still laughing, and the last Coker heard of them was a laugh.

A quarter of an hour later Arthur Talbot came in, and went into his study. He did not know how narrowly he had escaped a bumping in the Fifth-Form passage, or that he owed his escape to that brilliant idea of Coker's which had led to strife in Coker's study, and sent Coker's comrades away in a state bordering upon hysterics.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Talbot is Sorry.

HARRY WHARTON looked curiously at Talbot of the Fifth when the juniors came into the dining-room to breakfast on the following morning. Talbot was seated at the Fifth-Form table, and he was looking moody and thoughtful. He glanced at Wharton, and caught his eye, and coloured. It was evident that Talbot remembered the scene in the Fifth-Form passage of the previous afternoon.

"Talbot looks pretty sick this morning," Bob Cherry remarked.

"He does—he do!" said Frank Nugent. "I shouldn't wonder if the exam. for the De Courcy is weighing on his mind."

Wharton shook his head.

"I don't see why that should worry him," he remarked. "Talbot has a first-class chance. The Sixth are barred, and only Potter has entered from the Fifth against him. And I would back up Talbot against Potter any day."

"There's Hoskins of the Shell——"

"He's no good!"

"And Dabney and Fry of the Upper Fourth——"

"No good against Talbot!"

"And three Removites," said Bob Cherry—"Penfold and Leigh and Russell."

"Penfold has a chance," said Harry Wharton. "Mark Linley would have taken it, I believe, if he had entered, but he's barred by holding the Mowbray. Russell might win. I don't think much of Leigh's chance. But Talbot needn't be afraid of junior competition. I don't think it's that that's worrying him. Home troubles, perhaps. You never know."

"Quite likely," said Nugent. "These paters, they are a trouble."

"Terrific, as Inky used to say," grinned Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My dear fellows," said Alonzo Todd feelingly, "I only wish you all had uncles at home like my respected Uncle Benjamin——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Thanks, Toddy!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"My dear Wharton——"

"I say, you fellows," remarked Billy Bunter thoughtfully, "I dare say Talbot's hard up. I don't see how any fellow could have anything else really to worry him. If he's hard up, I should be willing to get up a subscription for him."

"You ass!"

"Oh, really, Bulstrode——"

"If you let Talbot hear you you'll get a thick ear," said Harry Wharton. "Though if you did get up a subscription I don't suppose Talbot would ever hear anything about it, or see any of the tin."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

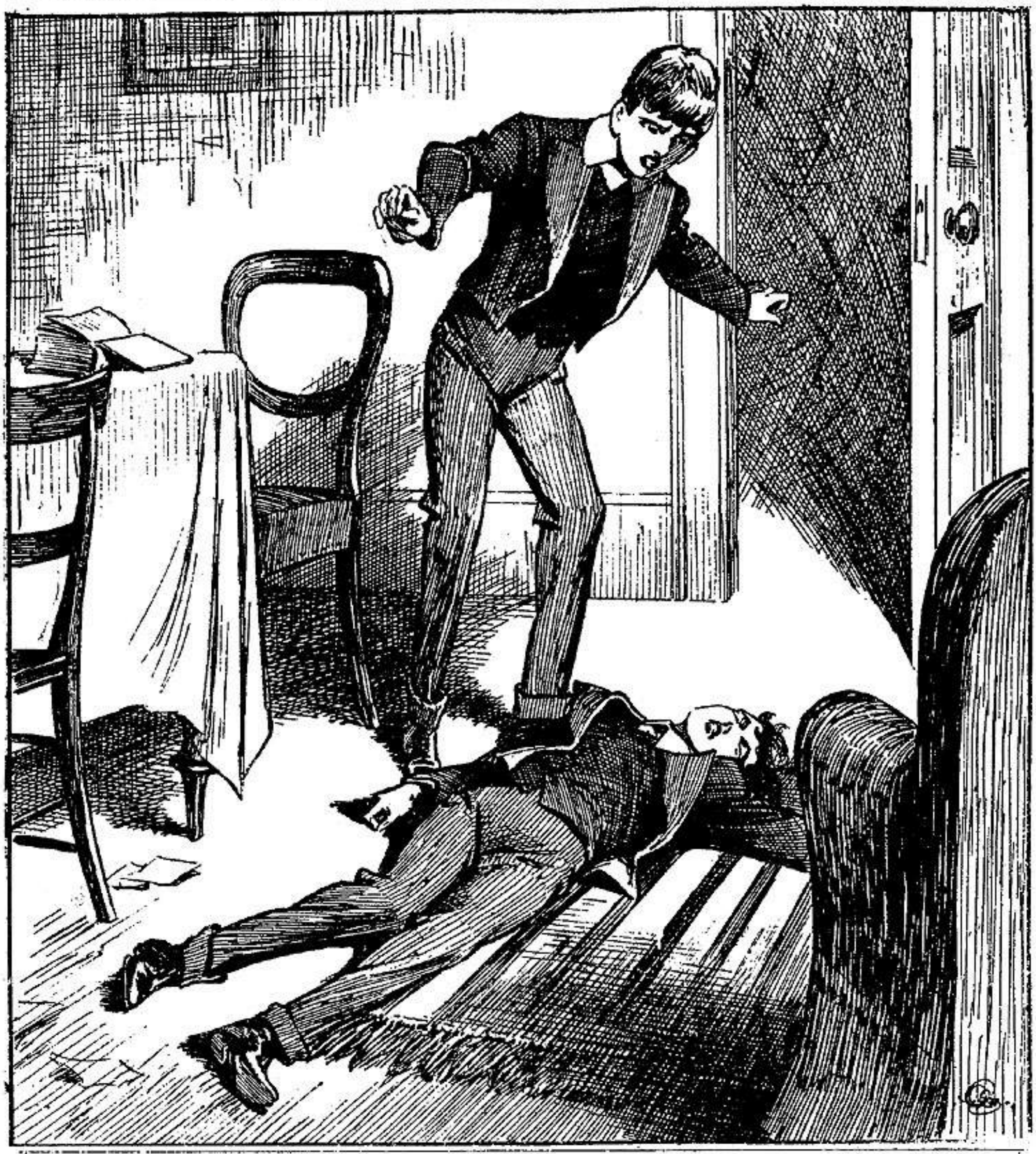
"Ha, ha, ha!"

Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, glanced along the breakfast-table, and the talk and laughter died away. Billy Bunter, however, was looking very thoughtful. The idea of a subscription seemed to impress the fat junior favourably.

After breakfast, as the Remove left the dining-room, Talbot tapped Wharton on the shoulder. Harry turned his head, with a somewhat hostile look. But Talbot was evidently not in a bad temper now.

"I say, I'm sorry for—for what happened yesterday, kid," said the Fifth-Former. "I—I was in a rotten temper, and I'm afraid I cut up rough over nothing."

Wharton's face cleared at once.



The Fifth-Former lay extended upon the study carpet. His face, white as chalk, was unconscious. He lay without motion. Bob Cherry looked down at the white, set face in amazement and alarm. "Talbot!" he gasped.

"You jolly well did!" he replied.

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right! I suppose you were bothered about something," said Harry.

The Fifth-Former nodded.

"Yes. I—I had had a letter from home—a letter that upset me fearfully, and—and I was pretty wild. I'm sorry I went for you; though you couldn't help what my father does. I—I mean that it wasn't your fault," said Talbot hastily. He had no wish to confide his family trouble to a junior in the Remove. "I'm sorry for cutting up so rough. It has occurred to me that perhaps you had something to say to me yesterday."

Wharton grinned.

"Well, we had, as a matter of fact," he said. "We came to the Fifth-Form passage to invite you to tea in our study."

Talbot reddened.

"And I treated you like that!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, never mind! We don't bear any malice," said Harry. "I thought at the time that you were worried about something, and it's all right."

Talbot paused a moment.

"Well, I will tell you what it was," he said. "I owe you some explanation. You know I have entered for the De Courcy."

"Oh, yes!"

"My father wrote quite unexpectedly to tell me that I must withdraw from the exam.," said Talbot. "Naturally, I was wild, as I've built so much on it."

"That's jolly rough!" said Harry.

Talbot looked very gloomy.

"It is rough," he said. "I've never lost my temper so

much before. I can hardly believe it of myself now—I've never let myself go like that before." He coloured more deeply. "I'm very sorry! Tell the other fellows so. Only you needn't mention what I've said about my father's command to me. I don't want that to become the talk of the school."

"All serene, Talbot!" Wharton hesitated a moment. "I say, excuse me—does your father know what a big thing the De Courcy is?"

"Yes; I've explained it to him."

"He must have some jolly good reason for making you drop it, then, I suppose?"

Talbot's brows darkened.

"No reason at all, so far as I can make out," he said. "At all events, he won't give me any reason. It's sheer tyranny. And yet he's always been jolly decent to me up till now. I don't think I ever felt any disappointment so keenly."

"And you're going to withdraw your name?"

"I've got to."

"It's rough! I'm sorry, Talbot. Of course I sha'n't say anything about it."

Talbot nodded and walked away. His brow was very gloomy, and he walked in the Close by himself until the time came for morning lessons. He was buried in deep and troubled thought, and the cloud was still upon his face when he entered the Fifth Form-room for first lesson.

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THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Todd the Comforter.

"TODD'S the man!"

Alonzo Todd, the Duffer of Greyfriars, pricked up his ears.

It was Bolsover, the bully of the Remove, who was speaking, and the person he addressed was Hazeldene. The two Removites were standing by the window in the passage, and they did not appear to observe Alonzo as he came along, with his book under his arm, and his head leaning forward in his usual way, somewhat like a tortoise. Bolsover spoke quite loudly enough for Todd to hear, and the Duffer of Greyfriars paused.

"But will Todd do it?" said Hazeldene gravely.

"Oh, yes, Todd's the man! Todd will always do a really kind and generous thing for the sake of others!" said Bolsover.

That remark would have warned anybody but Alonzo that a jape was intended. But it did not warn Todd. Todd had a wonderful facility for falling into traps. The old adage tells us that the net is laid in vain in the sight of the bird; but nets galore might have been laid under the eyes of the Duffer of Greyfriars, and he would have walked into them cheerfully.

"My dear Bolsover——"

Bolsover gave a start.

"By Jove! Is that you, Todd?"

"Yes, indeed, Bolsover. I could not help hearing your remark as I came along," said Todd. "Of course, I did not mean to listen. My Uncle Benjamin has always impressed upon me the meanness of eavesdropping. But, as my hearing your observation was unavoidable, I trust you will allow me to express my gratification at the excellent opinion you have formed of me."

Hazeldene gasped.

"How does he do it?" he exclaimed, in wonder.

Todd looked at him inquiringly.

"What is it that perplexes you, my dear Hazeldene?" he asked.

"How you wind off the long words."

Todd smiled benignly.

"My Uncle Benjamin has largely assisted in the formation of my sense of diction," he said. "Under his instruction, I believe I have learned to express myself in really choice language."

"You have!" agreed Bolsover. "I have never heard a fellow talk as you do, Todd."

Hazeldene suppressed a chuckle.

"Thank you very much, my dear Bolsover. That is indeed gratifying," said Todd. "But do I understand from your previous remark that you have some service you would like me to perform. I am entirely at your disposal."

"That's just like you, Todd!" said Bolsover very heartily. "As a matter of fact, we are rather anxious about Talbot."

"Indeed? I hope he is not ill?"

"No; he's hard up."

"Dear me! I'm so sorry!"

"Now, we think he deserves to be sympathised with," said Bolsover. "We've talked it over with the fellows, and we think that he ought to know that the Remove sympathises with him. He flew into a frightful temper yesterday——"

"Dear me! I remember."

"That was because he's getting doubtful about winning the De Courcy scholarship," Bolsover explained. "If he doesn't win it he will have to leave Greyfriars and go out to work in a—a factory, and his father will have to go to the workhouse."

"How very sad!" said Todd feelingly.

"What we want is some fellow with tact, and—and a good command of language, to express to him the sympathy the Remove feel on the subject," said Bolsover. "He expects something of the sort, I understand, and it would be a shame to allow him to believe that we don't care."

"Quite so, quite so!"

"We want a spokesman. That's why I thought you were the man—with your splendid flow of language, which you have learned from your Uncle Robert——"

"My Uncle Benjamin, my dear Bolsover."

"Yes, I meant to say Benjamin. Will you undertake to represent the Remove on this occasion, and go to Talbot's study and tell him how we feel about it?"

"Most certainly, my dear Bolsover. I shall be very pleased. I can also give him some advice as to bearing his troubles with fortitude," said Todd thoughtfully.

"Jolly good idea! Better go at once—he's in his study now," said Bolsover.

"Indeed I will, my dear Bolsover! My Uncle Benjamin told me to always haste to help the afflicted. I have no doubt that I shall be able to fill up the aching void he must be feeling with some interesting conversation," said Alonzo Todd earnestly.

"That's it!" said Bolsover. "Off you trot!"

And Alonzo trotted.

Although he had only been in possession of the sad news some two minutes, Alonzo Todd was already manifesting all the sympathetic interest of a lifelong friend in Talbot's case. Even Alonzo, in some remote way, realised the old truth that friends are scarce, especially at times of trouble. Coupled with these worthy reflections came a glow of pride in being chosen as the special ambassador of the Remove. Alonzo regarded his present mission as one of those first glorious steps in a great career, to which his Uncle Benjamin sometimes alluded.

Todd's simple face was all triumphant as he knocked timidly at Talbot's door.

"Oh, it's you, Todd, is it?" said Talbot, not very downheartedly, as Alonzo's head insinuated itself into his presence. "Come in!"

"Yes, indeed, my dear Talbot," said Alonzo, advancing. "I have come to express sympathy with your misfortunes on behalf of the Form, you know——"

Talbot looked puzzled.

"The Remove fellows, you know, my dear Talbot," went on Todd. "I am their chosen representative."

"It's very good of you chaps, I'm sure!" said Talbot.

"Not at all, my dear Talbot, I assure you!"

To emphasise his point, Alonzo advanced and seized Talbot's hand and began to shake it up and down as if it were a pump-handle. Talbot responded heartily. Alonzo beamed on him.

"It is extremely unfortunate for you, Talbot," he said. "But you must take heart, you know."

"I'll try hard, Todd!"

"Yes, indeed, my dear fellow!" went on Alonzo, still pumping very hard.

Talbot looked a shade tired of the process. But he was proverbially a good fellow, and he let it continue, making all allowances for Alonzo Todd's peculiar ways.

There is an end to all things, however, and Talbot's patience was no exception to the general rule. After two minutes' steady pumping, he took a firm grip of Alonzo's hand, and the Duffer found the pump working very stiffly. Talbot's stronger arm at length bringing Alonzo's pumping tactics to a standstill, Todd still held his hand in affectionate regard.

"Please tell the fellows that I am very grateful, Todd," said Talbot.

"I will, I will!" cried Alonzo, making great efforts to resume the pumping action.

He was surprised to find that Talbot's arm refused to move.

"Pray, what is the matter, my dear Talbot?" he asked.

"Well, you see, Toddy, old chap, I have only one arm to lose, and you've nearly wrung it off already——"

"Oh, I'm so sorry, my dear Talbot!"

Talbot laughed. He was a very polite fellow, but he began to wish that Todd would go.

"We ought to do something for you, you know, Talbot," said Alonzo, at last releasing his victim. "You are really in an awkward position, aren't you?"

Talbot evidently did not "catch on."

"Oh, I don't know!" he said. "Never say die, you know!"

Alonzo Todd jumped. He had taken the word die literally.

"My dear Talbot, it is not so serious as that, surely? To die would be fearful. I understand you would only have to work in a factory if you did not win——"

Alonzo ceased speaking as Talbot's face manifested several stages of surprise.

"What the dickens is the matter with you, Todd?" he asked. "Are you ill?"

"No, my dear Talbot. I am quite well, I assure you. It is merely anxiety on your behalf. Am I to understand, then, that you will not have to earn your livelihood in a factory?"

"Factory!" said Talbot. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"There appears to be a misunderstanding, doesn't there?" answered Alonzo simply.

"I should say so," said Talbot, not very politely.

The two fellows looked at one another for a moment. Both were at a loss.

"I am extremely sorry if I have offended your susceptibilities, my dear Talbot, but I hoped I had broached the matter in a manner least calculated to hurt your feelings——"

"I say, Todd!" suddenly broke in Talbot. "Won't you go to your own room and sleep it off?"

This appeared to involve the Duffer of Greyfriars in profound mental calculation, but he emerged from it with a smile.

"Your manner is so hopeful, my dear Talbot, that I must conclude that I have been misinformed about the need for you to enter a factory——"

"Yes," replied Talbot shortly.

"How gratifying!" murmured Alonzo Todd. "And your father will not now need to go into the workhouse, will he, Talbot?"

"What!" shouted Talbot.

Alonzo backed away from him hurriedly. Talbot looked savage, as well he might.

"My dear Talbot," exclaimed Alonzo, "I only meant to express sympathy. I am, really, very, very glad your father will not have to go into the work—— Ow!"

Alonzo Todd yelled as Talbot rushed at him and took him by the neck. He was, of course, utterly at a loss to account for Talbot's strange behaviour. He protested with Talbot—it could not be called struggling in a proper sense.

"Outside!" shouted Talbot, flinging the door open.

"My dear Talbot——"

"You cheeky young rascal!"

"But—but I—I only meant to comfort you, my dear Talbot!" gasped Alonzo, in astonishment. "I am truly sorry if your father has to go to the workhouse, and I shall sympathise very deeply if you are driven to work in a factory—— Yowp! I say—— O-o-o-o-o-o-oh!"

Talbot, looking very red and excited, dragged the Duffer of Greyfriars to the door. He had been very patient with Alonzo Todd, but there was a limit, and Todd had reached it.

"Talbot! I—I say, Talbot," gasped Alonzo, as he reached the open doorway, and clung with both hands to the doorpost—"I—I say, won't you let me explain? I—I intended to comfort you in affliction, and my Uncle Benjamin would be shocked at this violence on your part—nay, disgusted! Please listen——"

Talbot did not seem inclined to listen. He jerked the Duffer of Greyfriars from his hold, and hurled him forth into the passage. Alonzo alighted upon the linoleum with a sounding bump, and gasped.

"Ow! My dear Talbot——"

Slam! The study door closed upon the Duffer of Greyfriars, and Alonzo Todd picked himself up, and, after regarding the shut door in amazement and bewilderment for some minutes, limped away, a sadder if not a wiser junior.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.
Bob Cherry Is Surprised.

HARRY WHARTON was puzzled.

The date for the De Courcy examination was drawing near, and so far nothing had been said on the subject of Arthur Talbot's name being withdrawn.

Wharton remembered very clearly what Talbot had said to him. The cause of that sudden outburst of temper, at the time unaccountable to the Removites, was his father's command that he should withdraw his name from the list.

He had said that he had to do it, and Wharton had expected to hear that his name was withdrawn. But nothing had been said on the subject.

The name certainly was not withdrawn. Talbot had spoken about the matter to no one but Wharton, and Wharton had said nothing.

No one but Wharton, of the Remove, knew that Talbot had ever thought of withdrawing. And Wharton was puzzled.

Talbot's words had been clear enough—he had to withdraw; his father had left him no choice in the matter. Yet he had not withdrawn. Was it possible that he intended to persist in competing for the De Courcy, against his father's wish?

It did not seem likely, with a fellow like Talbot. It was possible that his father had changed his mind, but it was not likely. Wharton had seen Mr. Talbot once, and the old gentleman had not impressed him as a man who would change his mind lightly upon a subject so closely affecting the interests of his son. He would not have come to a decision, in the first place, without careful consideration; and, having come to a decision, he would not change it except for very good reasons.

Yet Talbot's name was still in the list.

It was very curious, and Wharton could not help thinking about it. Talbot was attracting a good deal of attention of late from others besides Harry Wharton. The fellow who had been known at all times for his kindness and good temper had become thoughtful, gloomy, almost morose. Some of the fellows attributed it to the hard work for the examination, and there was no doubt that Talbot was working hard. He was taking extra tuition with his Form-master, and Mr. Prout was entering into the matter with great zest.

Mr. Prout shared the general opinion of Greyfriars—that Potter had little chance against fellows like Penfold and Russell of the Remove—and Mr. Prout very much wanted a boy in his Form to carry off the prize. So that, although the Fifth Form-master would in any case have helped a boy in his Form who had entered for an exam., he was particularly zealous about this one, and did his very best to press Talbot on.

And Talbot was more than willing to work. He gave up footer for the time, and devoted every spare hour to study, at the risk of overdoing it, and the result soon became evident in his looks. He had always been a healthy, athletic fellow, but now his ruddy face was "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." And his temper had suffered, and he became gloomy and impatient. He was so popular that fellows bore with him patiently, but they could not help remarking upon the change.

As a matter of fact, it was not only the want of outdoor exercise, and the hard work for the exam., that affected Talbot's temper.

Conscience was at work also.

For his father had not given him permission to go on with the exam. Mr. Talbot imagined that his son had withdrawn his name, as he had been commanded to do, and he had not the faintest idea that Talbot was going on with "swotting" for the De Courcy scholarship.

It was the first time Arthur Talbot had disobeyed his father, and it weighed heavily upon his mind. His father's command had seemed utterly tyrannical and unjust. Talbot could discover no reason, no excuse, for it. He had expected to be backed up, if not praised, by his father for his enterprise in entering for the exam. To be discouraged, and forbidden to compete at all, was galling in the extreme. It would not have been so bad if his father had given a reason. But Mr. Talbot gave no reason. He simply gave a command, and all Talbot's nature was up in arms against it.

At first he had not thought of disobeying. He had simply left speaking to the Head on the subject from hour to hour, and day to day. It had gradually come into his mind that he was not bound to speak to the Head at all. His father had left it to him to withdraw his name, never doubting that he would do it. Unless his father should write to the Head—which was unlikely—or should pay an unexpected visit to Greyfriars, Talbot was safe.

He was disobeying his father, and it troubled him and weighed upon his mind. But the thought of relinquishing the scholarship, which he felt to be almost within his grasp, was too bitter. He could not do it. And, after all, his father would forgive him, when he found that he had won the De Courcy. He could not doubt it.

It was all the easier for Talbot, because he was not writing home now. He had parted with his father in anger, and had not written since. And he had no mother. Talbot's mother had died when he was so young that he could not remember her. There was no communication between Talbot and his home. He had no sisters, and only one brother—an elder, who was away from home. And to that brother he never wrote. He had not seen him for years, and

supposed that he was abroad. To questions on the subject, his father had always returned vague answers, and Talbot had surmised some dispute between Alan and Mr. Talbot.

His father had always been so kind and just to him, that Arthur had believed that, if there had been a dispute, it must have been Alan's fault. But his opinion was changing now. It was possible that his father had been as unreasonably tyrannical to his elder brother as he now was to him—and in that case, it was quite natural for Alan to have resisted.

Talbot's feelings were very bitter now.

He worked hard, hoping against hope that there would be no visit from his father till after the examination. Then, whatever Mr. Talbot thought, it would be too late for him to interfere.

If Talbot won the scholarship, his father could hardly forbid him to accept it.

Once or twice Harry Wharton was on the point of speaking to Talbot on the subject, but he did not. He reflected that it was no business of his, and Talbot was very touchy about his private affairs. His reception of the unfortunate Alonzo's condolences had been decidedly rough; though, of course, Harry Wharton was not likely at any time to approach him in the way the Duffer of Greyfriars had done it.

"Talbot's working too hard," Harry Wharton remarked to Bob Cherry, as he glanced after the Fifth-Former, who had just left Mr. Prout's study after some private "toot." "What he really wants is a good game of footer to freshen him up."

Bob Cherry nodded.

"Yes; or a fight with Coker would do him good," he said.

Wharton laughed.

"Or a tea in a Remove study," he said. "Suppose we have that feed again, and ask Talbot? I know it was a frost last time——"

"It jolly well was!" grinned Nugent. "If you don't mind, I won't be one of the party to take the invitation to Talbot."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It would take his thoughts off that rotten exam. for a bit, anyway," Bob Cherry remarked. "This swotting over rotten books is making a wreck of him. Look here, Mauleverer is in funds, and we can stand a good tea to-day. You chaps go and nobble Mauly, and I'll go and ask Talbot to come."

"Better call to him from a safe distance," said Bulstrode.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good egg!" said Wharton. "Buzz off!"

And Wharton and Nugent went to look for Lord Mauleverer, the fellow in the Remove who was usually rolling in money, while Bob Cherry took his way towards Talbot's study.

Bob Cherry glanced very cautiously down the Fifth-Form passage before he entered it, but Coker & Co. were not in sight. It would not have been safe to meet Coker there. Coker had entered for the De Courcy exam., and the Remove had laughed over it more than the Fifth had laughed—which is saying a good deal.

Coker, although usually slow and good-tempered, had grown quite touchy and wrathful upon the subject, and Coker was especially exasperated with Bob Cherry, who was the author of a limerick concerning the entrance for the exam., in which it was announced that Coker had no more brains than a poker, and that in entering for the De Courcy he must surely have been a joker.

Bob Cherry scuttled down the Fifth-Form passage, and reached Talbot's door. The opposite door, belonging to Coker, was closed; but Bob could hear Coker in his study, so he tapped very lightly and cautiously at Talbot's door.

Tap!

There was no reply from within.

Bob Cherry tapped again, a little more loudly. As there was no reply, he supposed that Talbot was too deeply immersed in his work to hear the knock, and he opened the door and looked in.

He had expected to see Talbot at his table, but the senior was not there. Bob Cherry was puzzled for a moment, and then he uttered a startled exclamation. He had caught sight of Talbot.

The Fifth-Former lay extended upon the study carpet.

His face, white as chalk, was perfectly unconscious. He lay without motion. Bob Cherry stared at him blankly, in surprise and alarm, for a moment. Then he rushed into the study, with a shout.

"Talbot!"

But Talbot did not speak, and did not move!

THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Crocked!

TALBOT was quite unconscious.

Bob Cherry looked down at the white, set face in amazement and alarm. He raised Talbot's head upon his knee. It was heavy and insensible. A feeling of terror tugged at Bob Cherry's heart. He shouted for help. There was evidently something very wrong with Talbot. Coker's door, on the other side of the Fifth Form passage, opened, and Coker came out with Potter and Greene.

"Help!"

Coker looked into Talbot's study.

"What's the row here?" he exclaimed.

"Talbot's fainted."

"Rats!" said Coker incredulously. "Some jape of yours, I suppose, you cheeky fag. Collar the young cad, you chaps."

"Look at him!" shrieked Bob.

"Phew!"

Coker looked down at Talbot's set face in astonishment. There was no doubt that Talbot had fainted.

"My hat! He's fainted, and no mistake!" exclaimed Potter. "I wonder——"

"Unfasten his collar!" exclaimed Greene. "I'll get some water."

Bob Cherry supported Talbot's head, while Greene unfastened his collar. Water was dashed into Arthur Talbot's face.

The lad gave a long, shuddering gasp, and his eyes opened. He stared wildly, and in amazement, at the fellows round him.

"Wh-what!" he muttered.

Bob Cherry gave a gasp of relief.

"Thank goodness you've come to!" he exclaimed.

"What—what has happened?"

"Feel better now?"

Talbot made a movement to rise. His head swam, and he sank back again, with bewildered senses.

"Steady on!" said Bob Cherry. "Don't be in a hurry, Talbot."

"My word! He's got it bad!" said Coker. "What's the matter with the chap? What's made him faint! Blessed if I can understand it! I never faint."

Talbot's eyes opened again.

"What has happened, I say?"

"You fainted," said Bob.

"Fainted! I!"

"I looked into the room, and found you lying here, like this," said Bob. "It gave me a start. I—I was afraid——" He paused. "Thank goodness it's no worse!"

Talbot struggled to a sitting posture, Bob Cherry helping him up. The Fifth-Former sat on the carpet, trying to collect his dazed senses.

Coker sniffed a little.

"Blessed if I understand it," he repeated. "I never faint."

And he walked out of the study, followed by Potter. Greene lingered a moment.

"Anything more I can do, Talbot?" he asked.

Talbot shook his head, and Greene followed Coker and Potter.

Greene and Potter were amazed by the strange occurrence, but Coker was inclined to be contemptuous. Big, strong, rugged, Coker was as strong, almost, as a horse, and he was never ill, and never even seedy, and he could not understand seediness in others. He was inclined to suspect all invalids of malingering, and as for a fellow fainting, Coker couldn't understand it. He never fainted himself.

It was an unusual thing with Talbot. Bob Cherry was little more able to understand it than Coker was. True, Talbot had been working desperately hard of late, and had given up most of his accustomed outdoor exercises. But he was a strong and hardy fellow, and it was strange that study should have so great an effect upon him in the course of only a week or two.

Talbot sat breathing unsteadily for a few minutes, Bob Cherry patiently kneeling and supporting him with his arm.

Then the Fifth-Former struggled to his feet. Bob Cherry held him, for he was staggering as he stood. Talbot sank into a chair.

Bob regarded him anxiously.

"Better, Talbot?"

Talbot nodded.

"What can I do?"

"Nothing. It's all right."

"You're awfully seedy," said Bob Cherry vaguely. "This is what comes of giving up footer, Talbot. A chap should never give up footer."

Talbot smiled slightly.

"I shall be all right now, Cherry. Cut along."

Bob Cherry hesitated.

"I'm all right, I tell you," repeated Talbot.

"Fact is," said Bob Cherry, "I came here to speak to you."

"Very well. Go ahead."

"We want you to come to tea in No. 1 Study."

"Thanks! I don't feel quite up to it now, though."

"No. I suppose you don't," said Bob Cherry ruefully. "Look here, will you come to-morrow, if we put it off till then, Talbot?"

Talbot nodded.

"Yes, I'll come to-morrow, with pleasure."

"Right-ho," said Bob. "Half-past five suit you?"

"Yes."

"Good! I say, Talbot, I don't like to leave you like this. Sure I can't do anything else for you?"

"Quite sure, thanks!"

"You won't tumble over again?"

"No—no."

"But I say——"

"It's all right, Cherry. Buzz off now, there's a good chap."

Talbot had risen to his feet, and taken a towel from his washstand, and was towelling his face. It was evident that he wished to be alone, and Bob Cherry reluctantly left the study. He did not like to leave Talbot just then. The faint had been inexplicable, to Bob Cherry at least, and he was afraid that Talbot might fall into another.

The junior quitted the room, and closed the door. Talbot stood towelling his face with a slow and heavy hand.

He was wondering, himself, and he was a little uneasy. What had caused him to faint? Was it merely the unaccustomed work?

Why should that have had such an effect on him? Other fellows at Greyfriars had "swotted" just as hard, or harder, for exams., and had not felt the effects of it like this. He knew how Linley of the Remove had worked, sometimes,

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THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

[illegible]

(Now go on with the yarn.)

The Arrival of the Cloud King at Sharana.

[illegible]

"It's the bears, sir. They're breaking through in hundreds. You'll miss it if you ain't quick."

[illegible]

"This is butchery!" said Rupert, in disgust.

[illegible]

The Lake—The Dredges Sign that the Race has been Fairly Won—The Arrest.

"What do you make the reckoning, senor?"

[illegible]

The baronet bent over the paper again.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 199.

EVERY TUESDAY, The "Magnet" LIBRARY ONE PENNY.

"This is where we really begin," announced Coker, and, in less time than it takes to tell, the Fifth Former had mounted a chair, and the contents of the treacle-pot were relentlessly poured over Bolsover's head and face. "Grooh! Groo! Chuck it! You cads!" roared the Remove Form bully. (See chapter 6.)

[illegible]

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 199.

[illegible]

There was a chuckle in the study.

harder than he himself had ever thought of doing. But Mark Linley, though he had showed signs of strain, had never knuckled under, and soon pulled round after the exam.

What was the matter with him? He had always believed that he was strong and healthy. Certainly he had always excelled at cricket and football and rowing, and he had never had an illness worse than a cold in the head all his life, so far as he remembered.

What did it mean?

There was a strange feeling of uneasiness and alarm in the boy's heart, as he towelled his face dry, and replaced his collar and necktie.

What had happened just before his faint he hardly remembered. He had an impression that he had been sitting at the table, trying to concentrate his attention upon the pages of Xenophon, when he was overcome by a strange dizziness. He glanced at the table. Xenophon was still there, open. His exercise-paper was there, with his pen lying across it in a big blot. Evidently he had been at work, trying to keep it up after the hour of extra tuition with his Form-master, and the work had been too much for him. It was very strange.

The boy set his teeth grimly.

It would be ridiculous to be overcome like this—absurd! He would never forgive himself afterwards if he knuckled under to a fit of weakness.

He sat in his chair again, and took up his pen. He fixed his eyes upon the open pages of the Greek historian, and tried to concentrate his attention there.

It was in vain.

The Greek characters danced in strange forms before his eyes. A feeling of dizziness came through his head, unfixing, as it were, all his perceptions.

The pen slid from his hand, and he rose to his feet, clasping his head with both hands, a wild look in his eyes.

What was the matter with him?

It was overwork, of course, but—but—— A feeling of half-acknowledged terror gripped him at the heart.

With set teeth, he sat down to the table again, and picked up the book. It came open at the first page, and the old familiar sentence, which has greeted the eyes of so many schoolboys, danced before his eyes:

"Darious kai Parysatidos, gignontai paides duo——"

It had no meaning for him. The Greek characters were no longer letters to him. They were strange forms—whirling, dancing, dancing! Was he fainting again? He dropped the book, and staggered back into his chair, and sat down heavily.

He did not faint.

He sat there, still, his eyes fixed upon the wall before him with fixed but unseeing gaze. He was no longer thinking. Heavy, dull, and dazed, his mind seemed a blank, as he sat there in the darkening study, and stared at the wall.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

On His Neck!

LORD MAULEVERER was in Study No. 1 when Bob Cherry returned there. His lordship was sitting on the corner of the table, swinging his slim legs. He gave Bob Cherry his usual amiable smile.

"Wharton and Nugent are gone to the tuckshop," he remarked. "Is Talbot coming, my dear fellow?"

Bob Cherry shook his head.

"No, he can't come, 'cos he's seedy."

"Begad, I'm sorry."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here they are!" said Bob Cherry.

Wharton and Nugent came into the study, carrying a parcel each. Wharton looked at Bob Cherry inquiringly.

"What about Talbot?"

"Not coming."

"Oh!"

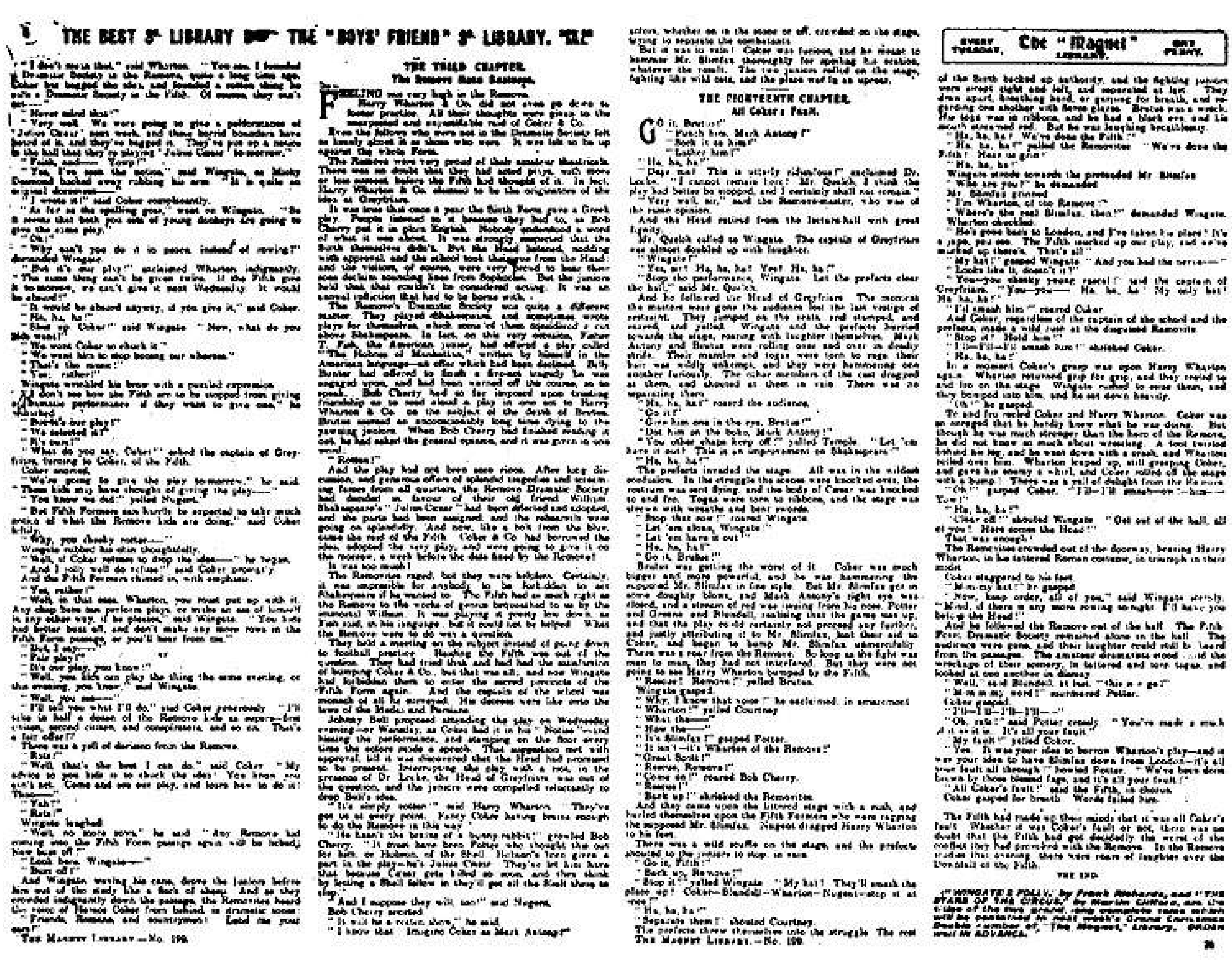
"He's seedy."

"Poor old Talbot! Overwork, of course," said Frank Nugent. "Never mind. We shall have to manage the feed ourselves."

"He's coming to-morrow," said Bob Cherry. "He's promised."

"Oh, good!"

"I say, you fellows——"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THE THIRD CHAPTER.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

THE END.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 199.

THE MAGNET LIBRARY.—No. 199.

"Oh, buzz off, Bunter!"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

The Owl of the Remove did not buzz off. He came cautiously into the study, blinking at the chums of the Remove, through his big spectacles, ready to make a dash for the passage again if a foot was lifted against him.

"I say, you fellows, if Talbot isn't coming, I—I don't mind if I come instead," said Billy Bunter. "If you'd like me——"

"We wouldn't."

"Ahem! I—I want to speak to you fellows on a rather important subject. I'm expecting a rather large postal-order to-morrow——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter blinked at them.

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at," he said irritably. "I'm expecting a pretty good remittance from a titled friend of mine. I was thinking of starting a subscription for Talbot with it."

"What!"

"I suppose you know that Talbot is frightfully hard up?"

"I don't know anything of the sort."

"Well, he is," said Billy Bunter confidently. "He's horribly poor, you know, and if he doesn't get this scholarship he will have to leave Greyfriars. Todd told me. Besides, you can see how frightfully worried he is about it. My idea is that if the poor chap is frightfully hard up, we ought to raise a subscription for him."

"Rats!"

"Oh, really, Cherry! I know you're not a generous and tender-hearted chap like myself, but you might be decent on an occasion like this. I'm not asking you chaps to subscribe so much as I subscribe myself. I start the subscription list with my postal-order—two pounds."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows——"

"You begin with nil, and you will finish with nil," grinned Nugent.

"I think Talbot ought to be helped." Bunter took a little cheap memorandum-book and a stump of pencil from his pocket, and opened the book. "Now, you fellows, what shall I set you down for?"

"You must set us down for asses if you think we're going to hand you any tin," said Frank Nugent.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Begad, yaas, you know!" said Lord Mauleverer.

"Oh, really, Nugent! Look here, shall I put you down at a pound?"

"A pound of what—candles."

"Oh, really! No, a sovereign, I mean."

"My dear chap, is that book your own?"

"Yes, certainly. I gave a penny for it, specially to keep the subscription list," said Billy Bunter. "Your name entered here, is as good as a receipt. Now, may I write your name down, with a pound against it?"

"Sure the book is your own?"

"Yes, of course!"

"Then you may write what you like in it," said Nugent blandly. "It's a free country, and a fellow is allowed to write anything he likes in his own books."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bunter blinked at the laughing juniors in annoyance and indignation.

"Look here, you fellows——"

"Oh, buzz along!" said Bob Cherry. "You'd better take that book back, and see if they will return you a halfpenny on it. It won't be any use to you."

"At a time like this I think the Remove ought to rally round Talbot. I——"

"Well, you can rally," said Bob Cherry. "Perhaps the other chaps will follow your example when they see you rallying. By the way, how do you rally?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Outside!" shouted all the juniors together.

Bunter blinked at them.

"I'm willing to let the question of the subscription drop for the present," he said. "I—I'll cook the eggs for you if you like."

The juniors could not help laughing. If Bunter could not get one thing, he would get another, and he was not to be got rid of while there was anything "going." After all, the fat junior was a first-class cook.

"Very well," said Harry Wharton. "But mind, if you say the word subscription again, you go out of this study on your neck."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"I mean it. Is it a go?"

"Oh, all right! I think——"

"Never mind about thinking now," said Bob Cherry, interrupting the fat junior cheerfully. "Get the eggs cooked."

"Oh, really——"

"Br-r-r-r-r! Wire in!"

Billy Bunter wired in. The cheerful smell of cooking soon pervaded the study, and Bunter forgot even his excellent idea of a subscription in the interesting occupation of frying eggs and ham. It was not till the table was laid, and the tea

was ready, that the fat junior returned to the charge. The juniors were seated round the table, and Billy Bunter had loaded his plate with as much as it would hold, and his mouth—which was a good size in mouths—was full.

"I say, you fellows——" he began.

"Don't!" said Bob Cherry.

"Eh? Don't what?"

"Say!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But, I say, you fellows, about that idea of mine. This is a jolly good opportunity for talking it over," Bunter urged. "Now, my postal-order——"

Wharton held up a warning finger.

"Mind!" he said. "If you say the word subscription, you go out of the study on your neck. That was the arrangement."

"Yaas, begad," said Lord Mauleverer; "and a jolly good arrangement, too. I don't believe Bunter would hand over the money if he collected it. I don't really."

"I jolly well know he wouldn't," said Nugent.

"Oh, really——"

"Rats!"

Bunter devoted himself to ham and eggs for some time, but the subject that was uppermost in his mind would come to his lips.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Br-r-r-r-r!"

"About that subscription——"

The word was out!

In an instant the juniors were all upon their feet, and four pairs of hands grasped the fat Removite and yanked him from his chair. Billy Bunter roared.

"Ow! Leggo! Yarooh! I—I didn't say subscription!"

"Out you go!"

"Yarooh! I never meant——"

Bump!

The Owl of the Remove landed into the passage with a loud concussion. He roared as he rolled over on the linoleum. Harry Wharton slammed the door.

Bunter staggered dazedly to his feet. He knew that if he entered the study again, his ejection would be equally summary for the second time. He snorted with rage. He stooped to the keyhole and yelled into the study.

"Beasts!"

Then he fled down the passage.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

The Last Chance!

"FATHER!"

Arthur Talbot started to his feet.

It was the day following the peculiar attack the Fifth-Former had suffered from in his study, and Arthur Talbot, to all appearances, was himself again.

Morning school was over, and the senior had gone into his study to grind away at the Greek which had baffled him the day before.

There came a tap at his door, and the Fifth-Former had glanced up as it opened, expecting to see one of the Fifth, or perhaps a Removite, with a message from Wharton about the tea that was to come off that afternoon.

The sight of his father startled him.

Mr. Talbot entered the study quietly, and closed the door behind him. His face was very grave and calm.

Talbot looked at his face, and understood. His father knew that he had not withdrawn his name from the list for the exam.

And he had come to see that he did so!

It was clear enough, and Talbot groaned silently. It was all in vain, then—his work, his worry, his weariness! All for nothing!

He stood staring at his father, pale and stricken.

But Mr. Talbot did not look angry.

"Arthur!" he said quietly.

"Father!"

"I have come to see you, my boy."

Talbot drew out a chair. His father shook his head.

"Arthur, my boy," he said, still standing, "have you withdrawn your name from the list for the De Courcy examination?"

Talbot was silent.

"You heard my question, Arthur?"

"Yes."

"Answer it."

The boy gritted his teeth.

"Why are you persecuting me like this?" he exclaimed, in a low voice of concentrated bitterness. "Why can't you let me alone? What have I done?"

A gleam of anger came into Mr. Talbot's eyes. His son had never taken that tone with him before.

"Arthur——"

"It's rotten!" broke out Talbot passionately. "It's a shame!"

Mr. Talbot set his lips.

"Have you withdrawn your name, Arthur?"

Talbot did not speak. His father raised his head, and his frown deepened.

"Answer me! Arthur," he said, with a commanding gesture, "you have disobeyed me!"

Talbot uttered no word.

"I command you to speak, Arthur."

"I have not withdrawn my name," said Arthur sullenly.

"Why not?"

"I thought I might let it stand."

"Against my wish?"

"Yes."

"That is not the way I expect you to treat me, Arthur," said his father sadly. "I think you might have confidence enough in me to know that I judge for the best."

Talbot's eyes flashed.

"Yes, if you gave me a reason. But—but you give no reason. You say merely that I am to drop the exam., which I have set my heart upon. Did you tyrannise over my brother in the same way, and drive him from you?"

Mr. Talbot started, and his face went very white.

"Arthur, how dare you?"

"Well, then, why cannot you explain?" exclaimed Talbot. "Why should I give up a thing I have been thinking about and dreaming about for a long time, when you cannot even give me a reason for doing so? You can force me if you like, but you cannot expect me to take it cheerfully."

"What do you know about—about Alan?" said his father, in an altered voice.

"Nothing. Only that he is away from home, and never writes. And if you treated him as you have treated me——"

"Silence!"

Talbot, in spite of himself, was silenced by his father's tone. The old gentleman stood without speaking for several minutes. When he did speak again, his voice was quite calm.

"Arthur, I am sorry you should think me hard and unjust. But I have no choice in the matter; for your own good you must give up this examination. As you have not spoken to the Head on the subject yourself, I shall do so."

Talbot flushed crimson.

"You are going to the Head now?"

"Yes."

"Father, I—I——"

"It is necessary, Arthur. Cannot you see how grieved I am to disappoint you?" said Mr. Talbot gently. "My dear boy, if you understood——"

"Why cannot I understand? Why cannot you tell me?"

Mr. Talbot shook his head.

"Perhaps—some day—but now it is impossible," he said. "My dear boy, have faith in your father's judgment, and in his care and affection for you."

Talbot's face was white and angry.

"You are going to the Head now?"

"Yes."

"How did you know that I had not—had not——"

"I could not help suspecting that you had not withdrawn your name, Arthur, as I did not hear from you on the subject."

"Leave it to me. I will——"

"It is better for me to see to it, Arthur. I will not place you under the temptation of disobeying me again."

"I—I—I will promise——"

"Better not. If it is to be done, why should I not do it at once?" said his father.

"But—but think it over first!" Talbot exclaimed. "Think of what you are doing—making me utterly miserable for nothing!"

"It is not for nothing."

"Take one more day, at least!" Talbot exclaimed eagerly. "The examination is not until Monday afternoon—and to-day is only Wednesday. Take another day to think it over, and then write to the Head, if you cannot let me have my way."

Mr. Talbot smiled sadly.

"Do you think I have not already thought it over carefully, and weighed the matter thoroughly in my mind?" he exclaimed.

"But—but another day!" Arthur said miserably. "Don't—don't be in a hurry, father. Remember how much this means to me."

Mr. Talbot looked at him with sudden keen anxiety. There was a look of almost fear in his eyes as he gazed upon his son. What did he fear for Arthur?

"Arthur, my boy, you have been working hard for this examination——"

Talbot passed his hand wearily across his damp brow.

"Yes, yes!" he said. "And all for nothing, if——"

"You must stop doing so."

"I suppose I shall stop doing so, if I have to withdraw my name from the list," said Talbot bitterly. "Not otherwise."

"Have you been unwell lately?"

"No."

"No illness—no headaches—dizziness——"

"I was a bit seedy yesterday," said Talbot. "It was nothing. I think it was the worry of knowing that you might drop on me any minute, and stop my entering the exam. that did it. But it passed off."

"Arthur—Arthur, my dearest lad!" the old gentleman exclaimed, in great agitation. "My dear, dear boy! You must give up all thought of this miserable examination——"

"I can't!"

"You must! You must!"

"Father——"

"If it will be any comfort to you, I will allow a day to pass before writing to the Head," said Mr. Talbot. "But I warn you in advance that it will make no change in my resolution."

"Then I shall have to stand it," said Talbot heavily. "But—but think it over, father. Remember how much it means to me."

"My poor Arthur! Do you think that I do not consider your happiness?" said his father. "You must trust me, Arthur!"

The boy's face hardened. It was some time afterwards that Mr. Talbot left him, but Talbot's face was still hard. As the old gentleman held out his hand to his son, Talbot made one more effort.

"Father, you will reflect——"

"My dear lad, I have reflected—but I will think the matter over again, if you wish me to do so," said Mr. Talbot. "I am thinking only of your happiness, and of your good, Arthur."

"But you will think it over."

"Yes, yes; but as I have told you, it will make no difference," said Mr. Talbot. "Good-bye, Arthur!"

"Good-bye!"

The door closed behind the old gentleman. Arthur did not offer to walk to the station with him, or even to the school gates. Bitter anger and resentment were eating at his heart.

He stepped to the window and looked out. His father was crossing the Close towards the gates, and he moved with slow steps, as if heavy thoughts were passing in his mind. His head seemed a little more bowed than was his wont. But Talbot's heart did not soften. The father, whom he had always loved and trusted and respected, appeared to him now in the light of a tyrant—a despot who crushed his dearest hopes without a word of excuse or explanation—and the boy's face remained dark and sullen as he watched his father go.

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Subscription.

"RATS!"

"Oh, really, Bulstrode——"

"Get out!"

"Now, look here, Bulstrode, old man," said Billy Bunter, in argumentative tones, "I'm going to begin the subscription list myself with the whole of my postal-order——"

"Where's the postal-order?" asked Bulstrode.

"Ahem! It hasn't arrived yet," Bunter explained. "It should have been here this morning, but there has been some delay in the post. It will be here by the evening post, I expect. I am going to shove the whole lot into the subscription list. It will be two pounds—it's from a titled friend of mine, you know. I think you might put ten bob to follow my two pounds. At a time like this we ought to rally round old Talbot."

Talbot ran at the juniors, smiting right and left. "Get out, will you!" he roared, and the Removites scattered in amazement, backing away hastily from the angry Fifth-Former. (*See Chapter I.*)

Bulstrode grinned.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said "You say you're going to head the list with a postal-order for two pounds."

"Yes," said Billy Bunter eagerly.

"Well, as soon as you've done so——"

"I've done so already." Bunter held up the memorandum-book. "Look here—'W. G. Bunter, £2.'"

"As soon as I see the postal-order——"

"Eh?"

"As soon as I see the postal-order, I'll shove my ten bob down," said Bulstrode, with a grin.

"Ahem! Better hand it over now, to start the ball rolling. You see——"

Bulstrode raised his hand, and Bunter departed rather hurriedly. The fat junior was blinking discontentedly. Arthur Talbot was very popular in the Remove, and many of the fellows were quite willing to believe that he was hard up, as Bunter said so positively that he was, and as he was known to be working hard for a scholarship. But everybody excepting Bunter understood that money raised by subscription could not be offered to him, and they understood, too, that money in Bunter's hands was not likely to reach anybody but William George Bunter.

Bunter probably understood it as well; but the Owl of the Remove, as usual, was "on the make."

The idea of the subscription had taken firm hold of his mind, and he had strong hopes of raising quite a sum of money that way.

That the fellows did not "rally" enthusiastically seemed simply rotten to Bunter, who was willing to "rally" himself with his hypothetical postal-order.

Bulstrode had been drawn blank, and Billy Bunter walked on with his pencil and his memorandum-book ready, turning over in his mind possible victims. Lord Mauleverer was standing on the school steps, watching some of the juniors punt a footer about. Lord Mauleverer liked watching better than punting. He was not exactly a slacker, but he never exerted himself if he could help it.

He gave a little jump as a knuckle dug into his ribs. He looked round, and saw that the offensive knuckle belonged to Bunter.

"Begad!" he ejaculated. "Don't do that!"

"Oh, really, Mauleverer——"

His lordship looked at the memorandum-book and grinned. The only name and amount entered there, so far, read—"W. G. Bunter, £2."

"I say, Mauly——" began Bunter.

"Eh?"

"I say, Mauly, old man——"

"My name is Mauleverer," his lordship explained. "M-A-U-L-E-V-E-R-E-R—Mauleverer. It's quite an easy name."

Billy Bunter was quite impervious to snubbing. He blinked at his lordship as if he did not quite understand.

"Yes, I know how to spell your name," he said. "I say, old man——"

"I am not an old man," said Mauleverer patiently, as if

he were explaining simple matters to a child. "I am quite young—in fact, only a boy so far, begad!"

"Look here, my dear fellow——"

"Eh?"

"My dear chap——"

"What?"

"My dear Mauleverer——"

"Begad, you know, you're awfully kind," said his lordship. "You hold me dear, and I hold you quite cheap. Queer, ain't it?"

Bunter blinked at him.

"I know what a generous chap you are, Mauleverer——"

"Thanks awfully!"

"And I'm sure you will shove your name down in my subscription list," said Billy Bunter. "You see, I've started it myself with a rather decent donation. Bulstrode has practically promised me ten bob. How much shall I put your name down for?"

"Nothing."

"Eh?" said Bunter, affecting to be deaf. "Did you say a quid?"

"No, I didn't."

"Ten shillings?"

"No."

"Five?"

"No."

"How much, then!"

"Nothing at all."

"You are joking, of course," said Bunter, with a feeble grin.

"Never so serious in all my life, my dear fellow," said Lord Mauleverer blandly. "I regard your subscription idea as all rot, you know, begad."

"Now, look here, Mauly——"

"Mauleverer," said his lordship. "M-a-u-l-e-v-e-r-e-r—Mauleverer!"

"You silly ass!" shouted Bunter. "If you are trying to be funny——"

"Not at all. You don't seem to know my name, and I'm instructing you," said Lord Mauleverer, in apparent surprise.

"You rotter——"

"Eh?"

"Rotter—ow!"

Billy Bunter yelped as his fat ear was taken between a slim finger and thumb. Lord Mauleverer did not look as if he had a grip resembling that of a vice. But he had. Bunter gave a squirm of agony.

"Ow, ow, ow! Yow!"

"What did you describe me as?" asked Lord Mauleverer blandly.

"A—a—a jolly decent, generous chap!" gasped Bunter. "That's what I really meant to say."

"Oh, you'd better make your meaning a bit clearer next time, begad!" said Lord Mauleverer, releasing the fat junior. "Will you kindly buzz off now? I should take it as a great favour if you would."

Bunter blinked at him, and rubbed his crimsoned ear. But he did not renew his efforts. There was evidently nothing to be gained from Lord Mauleverer. Bunter frowned, and rolled away, still rubbing his ear. Lord Mauleverer smiled.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

"W. G. Bunter, £2."

"BOLSOVER, old man——"

The affectionate epithet did not seem to please Bolsover particularly. He stared at Billy Bunter with a grim expression. He was talking to Hazeldene when the Owl of the Remove rolled up, probably planning some fresh jape upon Alonzo Todd. Bunter blinked at him in the most propitiatory manner. Bunter was too short-sighted to see the unpromising expression upon the Remove bully's face, and anyway he would have tried his luck.

"Hallo!" said Bolsover grimly.

"You've heard of the subscription we're getting up for Talbot, of the Fifth, of course," the fat junior began.

"I've heard of the subscription you're getting up—or trying to get up," said Bolsover. "Have you taken in any mugs yet?"

And Hazeldene chuckled.

"Oh, really, Bolsover——"

"You can't take me in, at all events," said Bolsover. "Buzz off!"

"I've got my own name down for two pounds," said Bunter. "Bulstrode has promised ten shillings, and Lord Mauleverer thinks it's a good idea. May I put you down for five bob?"

"If you like," said Bolsover.

"Oh, good!"

Bunter wrote the name down carefully: "Bolsover, 5s."

Bolsover watched him write it, winking at Hazeldene the while.

"There you are!" said Bunter.

"Good!"

"I'll take the five shillings now," said Bunter. "This amounts to a receipt, you know."

"What five shillings?" asked Bolsover.

"The five shillings you are going to subscribe," said Bunter, in astonishment.

"Who said I was going to subscribe five shillings?" Bolsover asked, in the polite tone of one asking for information upon an immaterial subject.

"Eh? Why, you did!" howled Bunter.

"Not a bit!" said Bolsover. "I said you could put my name down there if you liked. So you may. You can write it down once or twice or three times, if you choose. You can write it in your memorandum-book or on the title-page of your Latin grammar, or anywhere. I have no objection in the world."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Hazeldene.

"Look here, Bolsover——"

"Well?" said Bolsover, with a yawn.

"Are you going to subscribe five shillings, or are you not going to subscribe five shillings?" yelled Bunter.

"No fear!"

"You—you rotter! Oh!"

Bump!

Billy Bunter sat down with violence upon the floor. Bolsover grinned down at him, and strolled away with Hazeldene. Bunter sat and blinked after them, and set his spectacles straight upon his fat little nose, and blinked again. He rose very slowly to his feet. The subscription list certainly was not prospering.

"Beast!" murmured Bunter.

"Hallo!" said Coker, of the Fifth, stopping to stare at Bunter as he was dusting his trousers. "Hallo! Been in the wars again?"

"I say, Coker," said Bunter eagerly, "would you like me to put your name down here? I'm doing something for your Form—something for the Fifth, you know."

"Eh?" said Coker, in astonishment.

"You know that Talbot is hard up——"

"I shouldn't wonder."

"We're getting up a subscription for him in the Remove," Bunter explained.

"My only hat!"

"Subscriptions will be accepted from members of other Forms, however, as we want to raise as much money as possible," said Bunter. "How much would you like to subscribe?"

"Farthing any good?"

"Oh, really, Coker——"

"I never give less, when it's a public subscription," said Coker.

Bunter blinked at him.

"Now, look here, Coker, as I'm doing this for a member of your Form, you ought to consider——"

"I do," said Coker. "I consider it's like your rotten cheek, and it's rotten of Talbot to let you do it. I suppose he knows?"

"Of course!" said Bunter peevishly. "You see, he's hard up; and, of course, you will beat him in the exam. for the De Courcy, Coker——"

"You know you jolly well don't think so, though!" said Coker. "And for your cheek in getting up a rotten charity subscription for a Fifth Form chap, what you want is a hiding. And I'll jolly well give you one! I—— Come here!"

But Bunter was sprinting at top speed.

Coker grinned, and went on his way. But Billy Bunter did not stop running until he was safe within the shelter of the old Cloisters. Then he paused, panting for breath.

"Ow! Beast!" he muttered. "I never came across such a stingy set of cads in my life! Hallo! Is that you, Todd?"

Billy Bunter blinked at a figure that was seated in the Cloisters on one of the old oaken benches. It was Todd. He had a book open upon his knees, and he was evidently studying the contents with great attention. He looked up as Bunter spoke, and nodded with his usual amiable good temper.

"Yes, Bunter," he said. "I have retired to this quiet seclusion for the purpose of studying this volume. It is a present to me from my Uncle Benjamin, and it is called 'The Story of a Potato.' It traces the history of that excellent vegetable from——"

"Jolly interesting!" said Bunter. "But look at this——"

"I will read it aloud to you, if you like——"

"Just the thing, some—some evening!" said Bunter.

"Look here, Todd, you're just the fellow I wanted to see——"

"In the first place," said Alonzo, "the potato is grown in a field——"

"Go hon!" said Bunter. "I—I mean, that's ripping! But just at present I'm rather occupied, Todd. I'm trying to do a—a good deed."

"My dear Bunter, I am happy to hear you say so. It will be such a change for you," Todd exclaimed innocently.

"Why, you—you—— Ahem! You see, Talbot is hard up, and he's going to leave Greyfriars if—if he doesn't raise some cash——"

"Yes; Bolsover has already acquainted me with those sad circumstances," said Alonzo, with a nod. "I have attempted to console and comfort Talbot, but, I must confess, with little success. He was, in fact, violent."

"But this is a subscription," Bunter explained. "Talbot wants some tin, and we're trying to raise some for him. At a time like this, you know, all a chap's true friends ought to rally round him. Don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do, Bunter."

"I am starting the subscription myself with two pounds," said Bunter. "You see, I've got it down in the book here."

Alonzo Todd blinked at the memorandum-book. There it was, in black and white, as plain as ink could make it—"W. G. Bunter, £2."

"Dear me!" said Alonzo. "I did not know you were such a generous fellow, Bunter. I am very glad to see this change in your character. I always hoped that you had some good qualities hidden away, Bunter, in spite of the appearance to the contrary!"

Bunter glared.

"Well, how much would you like to subscribe?" he asked.

Alonzo sighed.

"I should like to subscribe a very large amount, Bunter," he said, "but straitened means make it impossible for me to do so."

"Every chap is supposed to subscribe according to his means," explained Bunter. "Rich chaps may give quids, but sixpences will not be refused."

"That is a very good idea," assented Alonzo.

"I don't expect everybody to shell out as I'm doing myself," said Bunter. "I'm starting this with a handsome donation to give it a send-off, you see. I should think it all right if you handed over five bob."

Alonzo reflected.

"I should prefer to say ten," he remarked. "For so good an object, I think a fellow should do his very best."

Bunter blinked with eagerness.

"Quite—quite so!" he gasped. "Shall I put your name down for ten?"

"Certainly!"

"Oh, good! That's really ripping of you Todd!" said Bunter. And he hastily pencilled down "Todd, 10s." "There, that amounts to a receipt!"

"Very good!" said Todd. "Though, of course, I should be quite prepared to take your word, Bunter."

"And now the ten shillings!" said Bunter, holding out a fat hand.

"I have no ready cash," said Todd simply.

"Eh?"

"But there is the ten shillings you owe me," Todd explained. "You will remember that I am to have the postal-order which is coming to-day from a titled friend of yours for the ten shillings you owe me."

"Look here, Todd——" roared Bunter.

"You can keep the postal-order, and it will amount to the same thing, won't it?" said Todd, with a beaming smile.

Bunter gasped. For the moment he could not speak.

"You—you—you utter idiot!" he gasped at last.

"My dear Bunter——"

"You frabjous ass——"

"Bunter!"

"Yah!"

Bunter closed the book with a snap, and rolled away. Alonzo Todd looked after him in distressed astonishment.

"Dear me!" he murmured. "I fail entirely to understand Bunter. He was quite rude! Uncle Benjamin would have been shocked at the expressions he used—nay, disgusted!"

And Alonzo Todd sat down again, and buried himself in the history of the potato, absorbing valuable information. Billy Bunter stalked away discontentedly, prowling up and down the Close in search of prey, so to speak. But he found none. He had made three entries in his memorandum-book altogether, but two of them had had to be crossed out. One alone remained unscratched—"W. G. Bunter, £2."

It alone remained.

THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Letter.

ANOTHER day had passed, and it was a day of deep and miserable anxiety for Arthur Talbot. He knew that his father would not change his mind. He knew it—and still he hoped. It was like hoping for a miracle.

There was a chance—a faint glimmer of a chance. Talbot still hoped against hope. Hope was not gone until his father had written to Dr. Locke. When that happened, the Head would speak to him on the subject undoubtedly. And Talbot waited in worrying anxiety for a summons to the Head's study, or for Dr. Locke to stop him in the passage and speak to him.

Talbot watched the arrival of each post. When the late morning post came in, the boy made an excuse to leave the Form-room, and waited in the passage. If there were letters for the Head, they would be taken into his study. If he was there he would receive them at once. If he was taking the Sixth, the letters would remain waiting for him in his study. Trotter came along the passage with four letters on a salver. Talbot looked at them. Some were hidden under others, and he could not see, in a fleeting glance, whether any one was in his father's hand.

Trotter passed into the Head's study, and came out in a few moments. Talbot stopped him.

"Is Dr. Locke there?" he asked.

"No, Master Talbot," said Trotter. "'E's taking the Sixth Form, sir. If you want to see 'im, sir, you'd better go to the Sixth Form-room."

"Thank you, Trotter!"

The page went on his way, without a suspicion.

Talbot did not move till he was out of sight.

He stood in the passage, his face pale, his hands clenched, his eyes gleaming. If his father had written to the Head, the letter was there.

It would be lying in the Head's study, on his writing-table, as usual, waiting for Dr. Locke to return, as Talbot had seen letters lie there many a time.

Had his father written?

Surely there would be no harm in looking into the Head's study to ascertain that fact—whether his father had written or not?

Talbot would not acknowledge the other thought that was at the back of his mind. If his father had written—if the letter that destroyed all his hopes was lying there—— But he would not think of it. At all events, there could be no harm in making sure.

The passages and studies were deserted—all the boys and the masters were in the Form-rooms.

There was no one to observe Talbot as he moved quickly towards the door of the Head's study.

He reached the door, paused for a brief moment, and then opened it, passed in, and closed it quickly behind him.

He stood within the study—white, panting a little.

His eyes travelled at once to the Head's writing-table. There, in a little ivory rack, were the four letters.

With a quick step Talbot reached the writing-table. He picked the letters from the rack with trembling fingers.

His eye devoured the superscriptions. A low groan burst from his lips. The second letter that he looked at was addressed in his father's hand!

There was no doubt about it. The boy knew his father's writing well enough. Mr. Talbot had not relented—he had written the letter!

That letter, now in the grasp of Talbot's trembling fingers, contained the doom of all his hopes.

In the grate a bright fire was burning. Trotter had stirred it while he was in the room, and the coals were glowing, the blaze leaping in ruddy tongues.

Talbot's eyes wandered to the fire

He had only to toss the letter into the flames——

The Head would not know!

Mr. Talbot would not write again. He might be surprised, perhaps, if Dr. Locke did not reply to his letter, but the letter would really require no reply. It was simply a notification that Mr. Talbot wished his son's name to be withdrawn from the list of candidates for the De Courcy scholarship.

Besides, the examination was near at hand now—it would be over soon, and it would be too late for his father to interfere again.

If he burnt the letter——

Talbot stood with reeling brain. He was not quite himself—his mind seemed dazed and bewildered.

The leaping, licking tongues of flame seemed to tempt him, to call to him. The letter crumpled in his hand.

Should he burn it?

A slight sound at the door made him start like a guilty thing, and he turned a blanched face towards the door, dropping the letter upon the table

If the door had opened—if Dr. Locke had appeared—how was he to explain his presence in the study?

But it was only the wind in the passage. The door did not open.

But Talbot realised that he had no time to lose. The Head might return to his study at any time. Indeed, if he expected any important letters, he might come specially for that reason.

What should he do?

Talbot picked up the letter again. The leaping flame in the grate seemed to mesmerise him. Should he, or should he not? The letter burnt, all was plain sailing. He would be disobeying his father, but surely the victim of a tyrant had a right to resist?

Surely he had a right to enter for the examination if he chose—surely?

Against his father's wish!

But his father's wish was so unreasonable—so inexplicable. Why should he regard it? Any reasonable wish, yes; but in this case——

Besides, if he burnt the letter, it would really be only a delay. He could write to his father and beg him for one more chance.

It was sophistry, but in the boy's bewildered and worried state of mind, that thought came as if to save him.

He would burn the letter, and write to his father, confessing what he had done, and beg him to give him a chance. Nothing more simple!

Another creak at the door! The winter wind, which was whirling dead leaves about the old Close of Greyfriars, was muttering in the old flagged passages. To Talbot's strained ears the house seemed full of strange sounds.

Crash!

The letter, flung from his shaking hand, fell upon the glowing coals. It seemed like a crash of thunder to Talbot, as it broke into the red cinders.

The flames leaped and glowed.

The letter was burning—burning before Talbot's eyes! The die was cast. "Jacta est alea"—the words ran strangely through Talbot's bewildered mind.

The last fragment of the letter vanished in white ash.

Talbot gave a groan.

What had he done?

He had hardly realised yet the full import of his act, as he staggered from the Head's study, and drew the door shut after him—in his haste and agitation closing it with a slam.

He hurried down the passage.

He must get back to his Form-room, back to his place, before—he started, with a sudden cry, that he only succeeded in stifling, on his lips. The Head stood before him! Dr. Locke signed to Talbot to stop.

Talbot halted in the passage, with wildly terrified eyes. Did the Head know—did he suspect?

He was too agitated to realise that the Head could know, could suspect, nothing so far. It was Talbot's white and strained face that had attracted Dr. Locke's attention.

"Talbot!"

Talbot tried to speak, but he could not.

"You look ill, my boy," said Dr. Locke, in a tone of genuine concern. "I hope you are not working too hard for the De Courcy examination, my dear boy."

Talbot's heart gave a sudden leap with relief.

The Head did not suspect!

"I—I—I'm all right, sir, I think," the boy stammered, finding his voice at last.

"You do not look all right," said the Head. "If you look like this, Talbot, I think you must see a doctor."

"Oh—oh, no, sir! I—I feel very well."

"It would be better to give up the examination, Talbot, than to suffer in health," said the Head. "Your father, of course, knows best. But you must be very careful."

"Very well, sir."

The Head went on to his study, and Talbot walked slowly to the Fifth Form-room. "Your father, of course, knows best." The Head's words rang in his ears. Talbot could not forget them, hard as he tried to do so. He tried to feel justified in his action, but all the time he felt—he knew—that he had done wrong, and that he did not deserve to prosper in the enterprise he had undertaken against his father's wish.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

Tea in No. 1 Study.

FOR one day, while his uncertainty lasted, Arthur Talbot had slacked down in his efforts. He had made an excuse to Mr. Prout to escape the extra tuition, and he neglected his books. The rest had probably done him good, although there was a heavy worry upon his mind all the time. But now that the danger was over he took up his work again with almost feverish energy. The exam. was close at hand, and there did not seem any chance of interference from home again. Before his father learned that he had disobeyed him, he would have passed the exam.—succeeded in it, he hoped. He was working far harder than the other competitors, and he was older than any of them except Coker and Potter. He did not fear Potter, and Coker's competition was merely a jest. Coker had not the slightest chance of getting any but the smallest number of marks of all the competitors. Only Coker himself took his candidature seriously.

If only he could have felt better, Talbot would have been quite certain of success. That strange dizziness in the head, which had troubled him more or less ever since he began "swotting" for the exam., was growing worse.

But he fought against it—he would not give in. It would pass off as soon as the exam. was over—he had plenty of time to rest then. He worked on, saying nothing about it.

It lay heavy upon his mind and conscience that he had disobeyed his father. He tried not to think of it, but the thought would come, and come again. He resolved at last to write to his father. He had already given up the idea of confessing about the burning of the letter. But he could ask his father to relent, and if he relented, then he could confess what had become of the letter.

He was writing the letter, after school that day, when Bob Cherry, of the Remove, looked into his study with a friendly grin.

Talbot had forgotten all about the Remove invitation to tea, but the Removites had not forgotten. Bob Cherry had come to tell him that it was ready.

The Fifth Former looked up from his letter.

"All ready!" said Bob Cherry.

Talbot looked weary and perplexed.

"Ready?" he repeated.

"Yes, rather!"

"What's ready?"

"Tea!"

"Oh!" said Talbot. "I forgot. I'm sorry, Cherry. Can you wait a minute or two, while I finish this letter?"

"What-ho!" said Bob. "Come along to Study No. 1 when you've finished—or perhaps you'd like me to wait and post the letter when you've finished?"

"Thank you; you may, if you like."

Talbot bent over the letter again.

He had little to say to his father. It was only an appeal to his father to change his decision—to allow the boy to enter the examination before it was too late. Talbot signed the letter and sealed it up, and handed it to Bob Cherry to post.

The junior hurried down to the school letter-box with it, and Talbot paced the study, thinking over what he had written, and what effect it was likely to have upon his father. He could not help thinking that it would be futile. But he had done his best—done all he could to make it possible for him to enter the exam. without directly disobeying his father.

Would he be to blame if he went on, should his father reply with a refusal?

He knew that he would be.

But all the determination, all the obstinacy in the boy's nature was aroused now, and he did not falter in the resolution he had taken.

He would go on!

Talbot was still pacing his study when Bob Cherry came in after posting the letter, and looked into No. 1 Study.

"Talbot here?" he asked.

"No!" said Nugent.

Bob grunted.

"I thought he was coming here," he said. "I'll go and fetch him."

"Is he ratty about anything?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Oh, no; not that I could see. He gave me a letter to post."

"If he doesn't want to come——" began Bulstrode.

"Well, he's got a tongue. He could say so," Johnny Bull remarked.

"Oh, it's all right," said Bob Cherry. "The poor beggar's worried about something—that exam., I think. I'll go round and remind him the grub's ready."

And Bob Cherry looked into Talbot's study again. The Fifth Former coloured as he met the junior's glance. He had forgotten again!

"I'm ready," he said hastily.

"Come on, then!" said Bob cheerily.

And Talbot walked with him to Study No. 1.

Big preparations had been going on there. It was not frequently that the Remove fellows had a Fifth Former to tea. Fifth Formers like Coker & Co. they would have declined without thanks, but a fine fellow like Talbot, who was also a senior, was an acquisition to the study, as Nugent put it. Quite a little crowd of Remove fellows were there to meet

him—Wharton, and Nugent, and Cherry, and John Bull, and Bulstrode, and Lord Mauleverer, and Alonzo Todd. They looked a very cheerful party, and the preparations were worthy of the occasion.

If Talbot had been an epicure, he must have been pleased at the sight of the array of good things spread upon the table.

As a matter of fact, he hardly noticed them. He was thinking of other matters.

"Here you are!" said Bob Cherry cheerfully, placing a chair for the Fifth Former. "Sit down Talbot, old chap."

Talbot sat down.

"You like ham, Talbot?" said Wharton hospitably, taking up the carving-knife.

"Yes, please," said Talbot.

"Fried or boiled?—we've got both," said Nugent, not without a touch of pride.

"Yes," said Talbot.

"Eh?"

"Yes, certainly."

The juniors could not help glancing at one another. Talbot was decidedly absent-minded. He was evidently not listening to what was said to him.

But politeness was the first consideration to a guest at a study feed. Wharton helped Talbot without waiting to ask him what he liked, and the Fifth-Former began to eat mechanically.

As a rule Talbot had a good appetite, but it had gone off of late. He ate slowly, and ate very little. He drank his tea thoughtfully, every now and then rousing himself to make some remark, but evidently the prey of gloomy thoughts that would not wholly be denied.

The juniors looked rather blue. If the feed went on like this, it would be about as cheerful as a funeral, but they were in for it now.

"What do you think of the footer prospects, Talbot?" asked Bob Cherry, thinking that that subject would rouse Talbot up, if anything would.

"Eh?" said Talbot, starting.

"Do you think the First Eleven will beat Woodley on Saturday?"

"I—I don't know."

"Wingate is in jolly good form, isn't he?" said Johnny Bull.

"Yes, I daresay."

"Didn't you see him at practice yesterday, Talbot?" asked Bulstrode

"No."

"It was worth seeing," Harry Wharton remarked. "He was in fine form. He was off colour a week or two ago, but he's picked up wonderfully. I believe the First Eleven will beat Woodley."

"I hope so," said Talbot.

"Are you playing, Talbot?" asked Nugent.

"I? Oh, no!"

"But you're in the First Eleven."

"I sha'n't be playing until after the De Courcy exam."

"They'll miss you."

"Yes."

"A match would do you good," said Bob Cherry. "It would buck you up, you know—give you a better chance for the exam. Don't you think so?"

Talbot did not reply.

"Don't you think so, Talbot?"

"Eh?"

Bob Cherry stared. Talbot had not even heard his remark.

"I said that a match would buck you up for the exam., Talbot," he repeated. "Don't you think so?"

Arthur Talbot smiled faintly.

"No, I hardly think so," he said. "I'm afraid you chaps are finding me rather heavy company. The fact is, I'm not feeling quite fit lately. I suppose it's swotting for the exam."

"Of course it is," said Bob Cherry. "It's rot! Better stick to footer."

Talbot laughed a little.

He laid down his knife and fork, and rose from his seat. The juniors looked at him in concern. Tea was not half over yet, from their point of view, at all events.

"Not going!" exclaimed Wharton.

Talbot nodded.

"Yes, I think I'd better get off now," he said. "I've finished, and—and I don't feel much up to talking. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

"Oh, certainly!"

And Talbot, with a nod, quitted the study.

The juniors looked at one another.

"My hat!" Bob Cherry ejaculated at last.

"Queer beggar!" said Bulstrode.

"Jolly queer, begad!" said Lord Mauleverer. "I think

(Continued on the next page.)

the chap must be very seedy, you know. This is what comes of swotting. I never swot, you know."

"I'm sorry," said Wharton. "He is in a rotten state of health, anybody can see that, and he may have a breakdown after the exam. I've known fellows like that. And the De Courcy exam. is a regular twister."

"Poor old Talbot!"

And the juniors finished their tea in a very thoughtful mood.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.
Talbot Is Quite Ratty!

"HERE'S the rotter!"

"Here comes the worm!"

Talbot started.

He had reached the doorway of his study, in the Fifth-Form passage, when the words fell upon his ears.

The door was open, and Coker & Co. were in the study. Coker, Potter, Greene, and Blundell were there, and they were all looking grim. The remarks with which they greeted Talbot were not complimentary.

"Here he is!"

"Now then!"

"You worm!"

Talbot looked at them in anger and amazement.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed sharply. "What are you slanging me for? And what are you doing in my study? Get out!"

Coker shrugged his shoulders.

"Rats!" he replied. "We'll get out when we've done our bizney, and not before. Isn't that so, you fellows?"

"Yes, rather!" said the other Fifth-Formers.

"We're going to give you a lesson about letting down the Fifth, and making us the joke of the lower Forms," said Coker.

"Yes, rather!"

"It's disgraceful!" said Coker.

"Disgusting!" said Blundell.

"Rotten!"

"Caddish!"

Talbot looked astounded.

"What do you mean?" he exclaimed. For one fleeting moment it flashed into his mind that Coker & Co. might have discovered that he had burned his father's letter, and he turned sick at the thought. "What have I done?"

"You don't know what you've done?" sneered Potter.

"I don't know what you're referring to," said Talbot angrily.

"Hard up, ain't you?" said Potter, with a sneer.

Talbot started.

"Hard up! What do you mean?"

"Going round begging for cash, eh?"

"I! I begging for cash!" exclaimed Talbot.

"Yes; you!"

"You worm!"

"You miserable bounder!"

Talbot clenched his hands.

"As for being hard up," he said, "that's no business of yours even if I am. But as a matter of fact, I'm no harder up now than at any other time. It's not specially for the money that I'm entering for the De Courcy, if that's what you mean; and if it were, it would be no business of yours. But what do you mean by begging for cash? When have I done anything of the sort?"

"You don't know, of course?"

"No, I don't!" said Talbot angrily. "And if you don't explain your words, Coker, or else withdraw them, you won't get out of this study without a thrashing!"

Coker grinned.

"I'm quite ready for the thrashing," he remarked. "As a matter of fact, we've come here to give you one, you blessed mendicant!"

"Yes, rather!"

"Will you explain what you mean?" said Talbot, a dangerous gleam in his eyes, and his hands clenched hard.

"Oh, certainly! I'm speaking of the subscription."

"The—the what!"

"The subscription!" said all the Fifth-Formers together.

Talbot stared at them blankly. He had not the faintest idea of what Coker & Co. were driving at.

"What subscription?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know well enough!" said Coker impatiently.

"I tell you I know nothing about it," said Talbot angrily. "Do you mean to say that anybody is being idiot enough to raise a subscription for me? I can't believe it!"

Coker looked at him suspiciously. In spite of himself, he felt Talbot's words carry conviction.

"Then you don't know about Bunter?" he asked.

"Bunter! Bunter, of the Remove?"

"Yes. I'm not speaking of Bunter minor, of the Second. Bunter, of the Remove, and his blessed subscription list!"

"I don't know anything about it!"

"Bunter says you know."

"But what is it?" exclaimed Talbot.

"Bunter says you are hard up, and he's raising a subscription in the Remove to find you some money," said Coker. "He had the cheek to ask me for a subscription. And I think that a fellow who lets his Form down like that, and goes begging of the juniors——"

"Rotten!"

"Caddish!"

"Disgraceful!"

Thus the chorus!

Talbot's eyes gleamed.

"It would be rotten and caddish and disgraceful enough if I did it," he said. "But I knew nothing about it till this moment. I can hardly believe it now. If Bunter has used my name like this, I'll thrash him within an inch of his life, the young cad!"

"Well, he has used it," said Blundell.

Talbot laughed scornfully.

"And you fellows believed his yarn!" he exclaimed. "You ought to have had more sense. Bunter is well known for his dodges in getting money out of people, and this is only a new dodge."

"Phew!" said Coker. "I never thought of it in that light."

"Well, you ought to have done so. You ought to have had more sense," said Talbot.

"Oh, draw it mild!"

"Oh, get out of my study," said Talbot, throwing open the door again, "you make me tired! Get out, for goodness' sake!"

Coker & Co. looked at one another. They had come there to rag Arthur Talbot for his supposed sin against the dignity of the Form, but they could not help believing his statement that he knew nothing about it, and that Bunter had used his name without his knowledge or permission. At the same time, they were not disposed to come there for nothing, and they did not like the tone Talbot was taking.

"Look here——" began Greene.

"Oh, get out!"

"We'll get out when it suits us," said Coker.

"You'll get out now!" said Talbot.

"Look here——"

"Outside, all of you!"

"Not so fast!" said Coker. "Even if you haven't let down the Form as we supposed, you have chummed up with the fags, and lowered the Fifth that way. I believe you've had tea in a Remove study."

"That's true."

"Well, you ought to be bumped for that!"

"Hear, hear!" said Potter.

"Are you going?" asked Talbot.

"No; we are not going!"

Talbot said no more. He picked up a big and heavy cushion from the armchair, and swept it into the air and rushed at the would-be raggers.

"Hallo!" roared Coker. "What are you up to? Look out! Yow! Yaro-o-o-o-o-h!"

Bump!

Coker went down heavily, and the cushion smote Potter on the side of the head, and laid him across Coker. Greene made a spring at Talbot, and caught the heavy cushion full in the face, and rolled over in a dazed state. Blundell dodged towards the door, and caught the cushion behind, and went through the doorway head first, flying into the passage and sprawling upon the linoleum with a wild yell.

Coker struggled to his feet.

As he did so the cushion smote him, and he staggered towards the door. It smote him again, and he flew out into the passage, and sprawled over Blundell.

Talbot turned back panting into the study.

Greene and Potter made a wild rush to escape, and jammed together in the doorway, and the cushion was hurled after them, sending them reeling out.

Talbot slammed the door behind them and locked it.

In the passage four seniors gasped for breath, and picked themselves up, dazed and bewildered.

They had gone into the study to rag Talbot, but they seemed to have received most of the ragging themselves.

"B-by George!" gasped Coker.

"Oh!"

"Ow!"

"Groo!"

"Let's go in and smash him!" roared Blundell.

"He's locked the door."

"Besides, he's in a temper!" said Potter.

"Blow his temper!"

"Yes, but——"

"Oh, leave him alone!" said Coker. "I've had enough! Rats!"

And, as a matter of fact, all four of the raggers had had enough. They did not give Talbot another look in.

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.
The End of the Subscription.

"TODD, old man——"

"Yes, my dear Bunter."

"I want you to help me," said Bunter.

"Oh, certainly! My Uncle Benjamin——"

"Yes, yes. You see, I think some of the fellows don't subscribe to this list because they're doubtful about Talbot wanting the money," Bunter explained. "If I had Talbot's signature to the appeal they would roll up like anything and shove their money down."

"Yes, that is very probable, Bunter."

"Well, what I want is Talbot to sign his name in the book," said Bunter. "I would go and ask him, only—only, as a matter of fact, I've promised Ogilvy to help him with his work just now. Will you take the book to Talbot and ask him to sign it?"

"With pleasure, my dear Bunter!" said Todd unsuspiciously.

"Here you are, then," said Bunter, blinking with satisfaction. "I'll wait for you at the window in the passage here."

Todd stared.

"But you said you have to help Ogilvy with his work, and that is why you cannot go to Talbot now!" he exclaimed.

Bunter coughed. He was always forgetting the old adage that certain persons should have good memories.

"Ahem! I—I meant you can wait for me here when you come out of Talbot's study," he explained.

"Oh, certainly! I shall be very pleased to do so."

"Go it, then!"

And Todd took the little book, and walked away to the Fifth-Form passage. Billy Bunter remained sitting in the deep window-seat at the end of the Remove passage. He had no intention of helping Ogilvy or anybody else with his work. He never did his own work properly, and certainly was not prepared to do any for anybody else. Untruths came very easily to Billy Bunter—indeed, some of the Remove fellows thought that he was too stupid to know really the difference between the truth and what was not true. Billy Bunter had found that subscriptions did not come in, and certainly Arthur Talbot's signature to an appeal would have brought money in from the juniors who liked him. That Talbot would sign such an appeal was impossible, of course, but Bunter would have signed anything to raise money, and he did not believe that anybody had any higher principles than his own. But in case of accidents—in case Talbot should cut up rough for some reason incomprehensible to Billy Bunter—it was safer to send Todd.

And Bunter waited for Todd to come back. If he succeeded, well and good; and if Talbot flew into a temper and kicked him out of the study, it would be rough on Todd, and not on Bunter—which was the important point.

Alonzo Todd made his way to Talbot's study without a suspicion. Talbot was there, settling down to work after the ejection of Coker & Co. The door was still locked, and when Todd knocked Talbot called out to ask who was there.

"If you please, Talbot, it is I," said Alonzo.

"Oh, all right!" said Talbot.

He rose, and unlocked the door.

"Come in!" he said. "What do you want, Todd?"

"If you please, my dear Talbot, I've brought the subscription-book——"

Talbot's eyes glittered.

"Show it to me," he said.

The Duffer of Greyfriars held it out for inspection. Talbot read the entries on the first page—W. G. Bunter, two pounds—and two more that were crossed out.

(Continued on the next page.)

Christmas Conundrums

When are tailors and house-agents both in the same business?—When they gather the rents.

Why are the tallest people the laziest?—Because they are always longer in bed than others.

Who was the fastest runner in the world?—Adam, because he was first in the human race.

Why should a man always wear a watch when he travels in a desert?—Because every watch has a spring in it.

What is the difference between a young baby and a night-cap?—One is born to wed, and the other is worn to bed.

What time should an inn-keeper visit an iron foundry?—When he wants a bar-maid.

Why is "E" the most unfortunate of letters?—Because it is never in cash, always in debt, and never out of danger.

When may a man be said to breakfast before he gets up?—When he takes a roll in bed.

Why is a good actor like a good architect? Because they both draw good houses.

Why is an eclipse like a man whipping his boy?—It's a hiding of the sun.

What word of three syllables specifies the time to dance?—At-ten-dance.

Why is a ploughed field like feathered game?—Because it's part-ridges.

When is an original idea like a clock?—When it strikes one.

When is a silver cup most likely to run?—When it is chased.

Why do pianos bear the noblest characters?—Because they are grand, upright, and square.

Why is coal the most contradictory article known to commerce?—Because when purchased, instead of going to the buyer it goes to the cel-lar.

What is the difference between a tube and a foolish Dutchman?—One is a hollow cylinder, and the other a silly Hollander.

When is a fowl's neck like a bell?—When it is rung for dinner.

Why is Sunday the strongest day in the week?—Because the rest are week days.

Why are some girls like old muskets?—Because they use a good deal of powder, but won't go off.

What can you fill a barrel with to make it lighter?—Holes.

Christmas Crackers

WANTED A CHRISTMAS-BOX.

It was five o'clock on Christmas Eve, and George Grit, the grocer, stood smilingly behind his tins of pineapple and pots of jam.

"Please I've come for mother's Christmas-box!" piped a small voice on the other side of the counter.

"What is your name, my little man?" the grocer asked.

"Rooney, sir!"

"Rooney—Rooney!" muttered Mr. Grit. "I don't believe your mother buys her groceries here, does she?"

"No, sir, she don't," truthfully replied the boy. "But Mrs. Jenkins, who lives next door to us, buys in yer shop, and mother borrows a rare lot of her!"

Stage-Manager (at pantomime rehearsal): "But you laughed in the death scene. You mustn't do that."

Actor: "With the salary you give me, I can only greet death with joy."

AVOIDING A CHRISTMAS TRAGEDY.

The clock chimed seven.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the prospective host, who was in the act of adjusting his tie, preparatory to the mammoth Christmas dinner. "In fifteen minutes they'll be here, and I had almost forgotten!"

Like a frightened deer he bounded down into the hall.

"My dear John!" called the wife, leaning anxiously over the balustrade. "What is the matter?"

"This is no time for questions!" gasped the husband, staggering up again under the burden of a mighty load. "Here, take this lot, and I'll fetch the rest!"

A heap of miscellaneous sticks and umbrellas were dumped unceremoniously on the landing.

"Why, dear!" cried the astonished lady. "What ever is the matter? Are you afraid our friends will steal these umbrellas?"

"No," replied the man, as he descended hastily for his second load. "I am afraid that they will recognise them!"

Parke: "What makes you think your children no longer believe in Santa Claus?"

Lane: "Well, they're beginning to blame me for what they don't get."

"Where did you get this, Todd?"

"Bunter gave it to me, my dear Talbot."

"To bring to me?"

"Yes, certainly."

"What for?"

"Bunter thinks the fellows would subscribe more readily if your signature were down to the appeal," explained Todd.

Talbot set his teeth.

"So Bunter is making an appeal for cash in my name?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are frightfully hard up, you know," Todd explained. "I'm so sorry about it, Talbot, and I think all the fellows are. It is very rough on you, and I do hope that you will win the De Courcy scholarship, and not have to leave Greyfriars, and——"

"Has Bunter told you all that?"

"Oh, yes, and——"

"Where is Bunter now?"

"He is gone to help Ogilvy with his work," said Todd, "but I am to meet him in the Remove passage when you have signed the book."

"I will come with you, Todd."

"You need not trouble, my dear Talbot. You have only to put your signature in the book, to show that the appeal is genuine."

Talbot smiled grimly.

"I shall not put my signature in the book," he said; "I shall come and see Bunter. I want to see Bunter particularly."

"Oh, very well. What are you taking a cane for, Talbot?"

"For Bunter."

"Dear me! I——"

Talbot did not wait for any more. With the precious memorandum-book in one hand and the cane in the other, the Fifth-Former left the study and hurried away to the Remove passage. Alonzo Todd followed him in some distress. He could see that something was wrong, though he could not quite imagine what it was. He spoke to Talbot several times on the way to the Remove passage, but the Fifth-Former did not reply.

Billy Bunter caught sight of Talbot as he came up, with Todd ambling behind. The fat junior blinked to and fro through his spectacles, as if to ascertain whether a way of escape was open in case of need. Short-sighted as he was, he saw the cane in Talbot's hand, and made out the grimly angry expression of the Fifth-Former's face.

"Bunter!"

"Ye-e-es, Talbot."

"You have been trying to get up a subscription for me," said Talbot, in a voice that drew a dozen Removites to the spot at once.

"Ye-e-es, Talbot."

"You have used my name to get in money?"

"I—I haven't got in any money yet."

"You have used my name?" Talbot thundered.

"Ye-es. I——"

"Begging for money for me, as if I were asking the juniors for cash?" said Talbot.

"I—I—I wanted to help you, you know——" stammered Bunter.

"Don't lie!" said Talbot savagely. "You were using my name, but you meant to keep the money if you had obtained any. You would never have had the impudence to bring it to me and say that you had collected it for me."

"I—I——"

"Dear me!" said Todd, in amazement. "I understood that you had requested Bunter to undertake the subscription."

"You are a fool!"

"Eh?"

"Did any of you other fellows think the same as that idiot Todd?" asked Talbot, glancing round at the crowd of Removites who were gathering curiously on the spot.

"Of course not, Talbot!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "We knew it was all rot—only one more of Bunter's tricks to get money."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"Faith, and ye're right!" said Micky Desmond. "We knew that ye wouldn't take the money if he collected any, Talbot darling!"

"I am glad of that," said Talbot more quietly. "You may believe me when I tell you that I knew nothing about this till Coker told me a short time ago. Bunter has used my name without my knowledge."

"Oh, really, Talbot——"

"Isn't that true, you fat hound?" roared Talbot, turning furiously upon the Owl of the Remove. Bunter gave a jump of terror.

"Ye-e-es!" gasped Bunter. "But—but it was really Todd's idea, you know. He——"

"My dear Bunter——"

"I—I mean, it was really suggested by Bob Cherry——"

"What?" roared Bob Cherry.

"I—I didn't see you there, Cherry," stammered the unfortunate Bunter. "What I really meant to say was, it was—was Bolsover's idea——"

"My idea?" yelled Bolsover.

"I—I—a slip of the tongue. I mean to say—— Oh, oh, oh!"

Bunter did not really mean to say "Oh, oh, oh!" He said that as Talbot grasped him by the collar and swung him round, and made rapid play with the cane upon his back.

"Oh! Ow! Yow! Grooooh! Yah! Oh!"

Bunter roared and squirmed.

Talbot, with a set, savage face, thrashed him unmercifully till the fat junior threw himself on the floor shrieking. Then the cane ceased to descend. Talbot tore the memorandum-book in halves, and flung the pieces at the fat junior as he squirmed on the linoleum.

"There!" said Talbot, panting a little from his exertions. "You will not use my name again in a hurry, I think!"

"Ow, ow, ow!"

Talbot turned and strode away. Bunter yelled still, but he received no sympathy from the Remove. In the first place, he was not half so much hurt as he pretended, and in the second place, he deserved much more than he had received.

"Yow-ow!" roared Bunter. "Ow! Help me into my study. Wharton! I'm hurt!"

"Serve you right!"

"Oh, really! I say, you fellows, help me——"

"Rats!"

"Yow! Ow! Oh! Yarooh! Oh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Can't you get up, Bunter?" asked Bob Cherry sympathetically.

"Ow! No!"

"Sure you can't move?"

"Quite sure! Yow!"

"Good! Watch me jump on him, you chaps!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Bob Cherry took a little run. But Bunter did not wait to be jumped on. He contrived to rise, and with wonderful celerity, too, and sprinted down the passage, followed by a roar of laughter from the juniors.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Reason Why.

"MY poor lad!"

It was Mr. Talbot who spoke.

He sat in his dining-room, with a letter in his hand—the letter Arthur Talbot had written at Greyfriars with such hopes and fears.

The letter had just been brought in, and Mr. Talbot had only glanced at the envelope, so far. But he guessed what the epistle contained. A gentleman sitting on the other side of the table glanced across at him.

"From your boy?" he asked.

"Yes, doctor."

"How is he?"

"Well, I think—— According to your advice, I have forbidden the examination, but he has taken it very much to heart."

Dr. Lang nodded.

"That was only natural," he said, "but if he entered for an examination of unusual difficulty, I should say the result might be bad, and this special exam. is a very difficult one, and will necessitate extraordinary application. If your son entered for it, I would not answer for the consequences."

Mr. Talbot nodded sadly.

"You must keep the fate of his elder brother in mind," said Dr. Lang. "Arthur might pass through it safely enough, but there is danger."

"I understand. But to tell him——"

"Impossible! The thought of a mental breakdown would haunt him, and bring on the very evil you wish to avoid, in all probability."

"He is very disappointed. It cuts me to the heart that he should consider me a tyrant, interfering with his dearest wishes from mere caprice," said Mr. Talbot.

"Surely he has faith in his father's judgment."

"Yes, but his heart was so set upon this examination. But it is ended. I have written to the Head of Greyfriars, telling him that it is my special wish that Arthur's name should be removed from the list, and explaining my reason, which, of course, he will not mention to Arthur."

"And that letter——"

"This letter is from Arthur. No doubt a last appeal to allow him to enter the De Courcy examination."

"Poor lad!"

"It is very, very hard upon the poor boy," said Mr. Talbot, "but it is impossible to accede to his wishes Excuse me, doctor!"

He opened the letter.

The contents were as he expected them to be—a last appeal from his son! Talbot wanted to enter for the exam. He hoped his father would think it over once more, and give him permission. Would not his father write and say that he might compete, after all, for the De Courcy Scholarship?

Mr. Talbot read the letter through from end to end, and then read it through again, more slowly.

His face was sad, and his brow lined with painful thought.

He could see from his son's letter how the boy chafed against the prohibition that had been laid upon him—how furious he was at his father's command, which, to him, appeared utterly inexplicable.

And his father could not explain.

That, surely, was impossible!

Only when the knowledge could be concealed from him no longer could Arthur Talbot know that his mother had died from a mental malady, and that Mr. Talbot's whole life had been one long anxiety for his two sons.

Whether the mother's malady would break out in the boys was a question of deep anxiety for Mr. Talbot, and it was answered at last, in the case of the elder son. Alan had broken down in an examination, not of unusual difficulty, and had been laid low by brain fever, and from that he had never fully recovered.

The brother whom Arthur supposed to be living abroad, out of communication with his home, was really a resident in a private asylum, visited there two or three times every week by his father.

But Arthur could not be told, for the same terrible shadow hung over him.

True, he was more robust than his elder brother, less likely to succumb, even if the attack came.

But his father's anxiety was unresting.

The news that Arthur had entered for the De Courcy examination threw the old gentleman into a sudden state of terror.

He knew that the exam. was one of the greatest difficulty, out of all comparison with the usual school exams. which Arthur passed easily enough. But he had thought it over carefully, and consulted the family physician, before dashing Arthur's hopes to the ground.

But that he had been compelled to do.

The exam. was not for Arthur, and he could not be told the reason.

But Mr. Talbot felt the tears rise to his eyes as he read his son's letter, and realised in what light the boy regarded him.

He had always been kind, always just, always affectionate, and now he was compelled to appear in the light of a tyrant.

It was hard upon him.

It was one more trouble added to those which had shadowed his life, spent wholly in the care of his sons, who needed his care so much.

If Arthur had suspected, for a moment, how the truth was, he would have repented that letter. He would have written words of sorrow and repentance at once.

But how could he know—how could he guess?

His faith in his father should have been complete, but it was not. He should have trusted his father's judgment, without asking questions. That would have been the best for his happiness, but he did not.

Mr. Talbot looked up from the letter.

"It is as I supposed," he said. "Arthur begs me to allow him to enter for the exam. He cannot understand why I refuse."

"He must not understand," said Dr. Lang.

"No, no."

"You must refuse."

"Yes, it is inevitable," said Mr. Talbot, with a sigh.

And, later that evening, he wrote a letter to his son—a letter couched in the most affectionate terms; but there was the iron hand in the velvet glove. It contained a distinct and unmistakable refusal to accede to Arthur's dearest wish. Mr. Talbot urged his son to have faith in his father's judgment—to trust his father to know what was the best for him.

But Arthur's face was dark and gloomy when he read the letter on the following morning in his study at Greyfriars.

The affectionate words passed by him unheeded. All he noted in the letter was the refusal to allow him to do what he had set his heart upon doing.

"No—no again! Well, we shall see."

He burnt the letter, and went into class that morning with a pale face, but a firm resolve in his heart.

His name was still down for the De Courcy exam., and he would not withdraw it.

It wanted but a couple of days to the exam. now, and his father had no suspicion. That letter home, indeed, would disarm any suspicion he might have had.

And Talbot's resolve was taken!

He turned a deaf ear to the voice of conscience. His resolution was fixed. He would enter the examination, against his father's wish!

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

Coker's Programme.

"FEELING fit, Talbot?"

Harry Wharton asked the question.

It was the morning of the De Courcy examination. In the afternoon the examination was to be held, in the presence of Mr. Quelch and Mr. Prout. Wharton had looked out for Talbot as soon as he came down that morning, wondering how he was. For Talbot had been showing very plain signs lately of the strain put upon him by working for the exam.

Harry looked at the Fifth-Former as he asked him if he was feeling fit. He couched the question in cheerful terms on purpose. If he had spoken as he thought, he would have said: "By George, how seedy you look!" But he was not likely to be tactless enough to say that to a fellow about to enter a difficult examination.

Talbot certainly did not look fit.

His cheeks were pale, his eyes hollow and restless, and he had a tired and almost dazed look about his face.

Wharton had seen more than one fellow look like that, when working up for an exam., but never quite so much as Talbot.

But the Fifth-Former nodded cheerfully in reply to Wharton's question.

"Oh, yes. I'm all right," he said.

"Good! Go in and win."

"I mean to," said Talbot, standing on the steps, and breathing in deep draughts of the keen, frosty air of the Close. "I mean to! I shall be glad when it's over, kid."

"Jolly heavy strain, I should think."

"Yes, horrible! I've had headaches for days," said Talbot restlessly. "It's rotten!"

"Yes."

"A fellow gets such queer fancies, too."

"Fancies!" said Wharton.

"Yes. Over-work, I suppose—strain on the brain."

Wharton looked at him rather oddly.

"What sort of fancies?" he asked.

Talbot hesitated.

"Oh, it's all rot," he said. "But—but a chap fancies things. When I was working in my study last night, I stayed up late, you know—past twelve, going over the whole business once more. Well, I fancied——"

He paused.

"Yes, Talbot?"

"I fancied things, that's all," said Talbot evasively. "Of course, it was all rot. It was impossible for anything of the kind to get in at my window."

Wharton started.

"In at your window," he repeated.

Talbot nodded.

Wharton felt a strange creeping of the flesh. For a moment he was a prey to a deep alarm for Talbot.

"But what did you fancy got in at your window?" he asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"You fell asleep, perhaps, and dreamed it," Wharton suggested uneasily.

Talbot shook his head.

"I was wide awake," he said. "There it was, sitting on the other side of the table, staring at me, and its eyes never moved."

"Talbot!"

"Oh, of course, it was only fancy," said Talbot hastily. "But it was odd, wasn't it?"

"Yes, indeed," said Wharton, in a low voice.

Talbot bit his lip restlessly. He seemed to realise that he had talked too freely. He gave Wharton a short nod, and strode out into the Close.

Harry Wharton looked after him in wonder and real concern.

What was the matter with Talbot?

Wharton had heard of fellows who "swotted" too desperately, breaking down, and being laid up with brain fever, and things like that.

Was something of the kind coming upon Talbot?

It really looked like it. His strange fancies showed that he was in the last stage of mental exhaustion and depression.

"Well, it will be over to-day," Wharton said to himself. "I hope Talbot won't be ill. Poor old Talbot!"

Wharton could not help thinking about it. He had a great regard for Arthur Talbot, and he was concerned about it.

But he could not have spoken to Talbot on the subject again, even if he had wished. The Fifth-Former avoided him, evidently feeling that he had said too much, and not wishing any further allusion to be made to the matter.

The contrast between Talbot's looks and Coker's was very striking. Coker did not show any signs of brain fag. Indeed, many of the fellows said that he hadn't any brains to fag.

Coker looked as strong and ruddy and powerful as ever, and he was walking with a strut, as if he had no doubts whatever on the subject of the exam. Perhaps he hadn't. As Bob Cherry remarked, there really wasn't any doubt about Coker's chance—he hadn't one!

But Horace Coker evidently thought differently. Indeed, it was said that he had already planned to get a motor-bike with the cash part of the prize.

Penfold, of the Remove, was far more quiet about it than Coker. Penfold showed some signs of hard work, and he was very quiet and very determined. If Talbot did not win, most of the fellows felt that Dick Penfold would take the De Courcy. And many of them wished him luck; for Penfold was the son of very poor parents, and he was at Greyfriars upon a Town scholarship which lasted only one year, and his only chance of staying at the school was by winning another.

There were six competitors for the De Courcy altogether, but it was generally allowed that the real chance lay between Penfold, of the Remove, and Talbot, of the Fifth. As for Coker, his entrance into the matter was a joke.

The six competitors were allowed freedom from morning classes that day, and they spent the time as they liked. Talbot and Penfold spent it in looking over their work for the exam., and Coker in lounging about the Close. Coker said that he'd work better after taking a rest. He paid a long visit to Mrs. Mimble's little tuckshop, and pleased that old lady very much by expending three or four shillings there, and quite spoiling his appetite for his dinner.

After morning lessons, the keenness of the half-dozen competitors for the De Courcy was very marked.

They could not help looking anxious, with the exception of Coker. There was no anxiety in Coker's ruddy face.

Potter, of the Fifth, slapped him on the back when the Fifth came out of their Form-room.

"Right up to the mark?" he asked.

"What-ho!" said Coker.

"Going to win, of course?" said Blundell, with a grin.

Coker nodded.

"Of course!" he assented.

"Good egg!"

"Must get it for the Fifth, and Talbot has no chance against you," said Greene, with great solemnity.

"Just what I was thinking," said Coker, as Blundell and Potter turned away to chuckle. "Talbot looks quite done in. A chap ought to keep himself fit for an exam."

"Yes, rather!"

"I'm going to get a motor-bike with the money," said Coker. "Of course, I sha'n't be able to pay for it all down, but I can pay in two instalments."

"Oh, good!"

"It's worth while grinding through rotten exam. papers for a whole afternoon to get a motor-bike," said Coker.

"Ha, ha, ha! I should say so! He, he, he!"

Coker stared.

"What are you cackling at, Greene?" he demanded.

"I—I was thinking how ripping it will be buzzing round the country roads on that motor-bike," said Greene.

"Oh, good!" said Coker, with satisfaction. "Of course, I shall let you fellows have it when you like."

"Thanks, old man!"

"If this turns out all right," said Coker, "I shall look out some more exams. with money prizes, and get some more quids in."

"Ripping wheeze!" said Potter.

"Yes, I think it's rather good," said Coker modestly. "I'll share out, too. Of course, you fellows could do the same, only—well, as a candid friend, I don't think you could pull off an exam. like this."

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Blundell and Greene and Potter together.

"Eh? Where's the joke?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly asses!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you fatheads——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Coker drove his hands into his trousers' pockets, and tramped away angrily. He left the three Fifth-Formers yelling. They could not help it. They did not want to offend Coker, but they really could not help it.

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked Potter. "Don't you chaps fancy yourselves buzzing round on that motor-bike?"

"I don't think!" gasped Greene.

"We'll name it the De Courcy——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good old Coker! Of all the asses——"

"Of all the chumps——"

"Of all the fatheads——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Which showed in exactly what estimation Horace Coker was held by his friends in the Fifth Form. Potter & Co. had no expectation of ever seeing that motor-bike buzz in the Close of Greyfriars.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.
The Blow Falls.

THE room was very still and quiet.

Sometimes a scratch of a pen, or a slight sound as a pen was clicked into an inkwell, broke the silence.

Occasionally a restless movement.

But, for the most part, a heavy stillness brooded over the room.

Even the master present seemed silent-footed, phantom-like in his quietness.

The examination was in progress.

The boys were in their places at the desks, a considerable space apart, working—grinding away for the De Courcy!

Talbot was bending over his task, deeply set upon his work; but though the exam. had been in progress for an hour, Talbot's paper had little written upon it.

He was working, but he was working slowly. It was as if an invisible brake had been put upon the powers of his mind.

What was the matter with him?

He did not know. He did not feel ill. He did not feel specially tired. It was simply as if his brain was running down like an exhausted engine.

His pen crawled over the paper. Yet the work he did was good—correct. If he filled in the papers as he had started, his chance was good. But he was compelled to drive himself, as it were, every inch of the way; and once or twice he stopped work altogether, and remained staring blankly at the paper, not even thinking—his mind a blank!

What was the matter with him? he wondered dully.

Penfold was working steadily, methodically, sedately. He was getting his work done at a fair speed, and would probably finish just about finishing time. The other fellows were working away industriously, excepting Coker. Horace Coker had stuck at the first question.

He had pondered over it for some time, and then he had become interested in the proceedings of a spider which was crawling over the ceiling above. Coker leaned back and watched the spider, and his paper—and his mind, too, for that matter—remained a beautiful blank.

Coker certainly could not be said to have a winning chance.

Talbot glanced round once.

He saw Coker idling, and the other fellows working. He glanced at the patient master; and then his eyes returned to his paper.

An hour and a quarter gone!

He must get on.

He dipped his pen in the ink again, and bent over his paper. He must work—work! This heavy, idle dulness that was creeping over him, he must fight against it. It would be too rotten to enter the exam. against his father's wish, and to go out of the examination-room with his paper unfilled.

What was the matter?

His brain seemed like a jaded horse that had to be whipped and whipped to make exertion. And after each exertion it sank down again to heavy dullness.

The pen was idle in his hand.

A feeling of fear—fear of the unknown—was creeping over Arthur Talbot.

What was the matter with him?

Perhaps he had been a fool to enter into this exam. after all. Perhaps his father had been right—the old man might have known best.

What was that strange, swimming dizziness that was rising in his head, and seemed to float there, turning all his thoughts into vague mist?

He laid down his pen.

He could not work any longer, he knew that. He had filled in two questions upon the paper, and he knew that he could fill in no more.

He had failed.

He knew that, but it did not give him a pang now. The De Courcy scholarship had faded from the boy's mind. He was trying to think—trying to think of something, but his faculties seemed jammed, arrested, like a lock that would not turn.

What was the matter?

He leaned his elbows upon the desk, and rested his head in his hands. It felt easier so. That eyes were upon him he did not know or care.

Mr. Quelch looked at him very oddly.

He had been watching Talbot for some time, wondering.

The Remove-master came towards Talbot's desk.

"Talbot!"

The boy did not answer.

Mr. Quelch looked alarmed. He stepped closer to Talbot, and laid a hand upon his shoulder.

Talbot did not move.

The other boys looked round. Even Dick Penfold forgot his paper for a moment. All eyes were turned upon Talbot.

Mr. Quelch raised Talbot's head, gently enough. The boy looked at him with unseeing eyes. His eyes were open, but they saw nothing. There was no consciousness behind them.

Mr. Quelch raised the boy from his seat, and led him to the door. Talbot walked with him—he was able to walk. But he did not speak; he glanced neither to the right nor to the left—he stared straight before him, unseeingly.

He was no longer thinking.

It was as if a heavy and paralysing blow had been dealt, and the boy's faculties had been stunned by it.

He walked quietly beside Mr. Quelch, the Remove-master holding his arm, and they emerged into the passage.

Mr. Quelch walked with Talbot to his study. The boy walked on like some cunningly-contrived mechanism, without volition of its own.

"Talbot, my dear lad!"

No answer.

Mr. Quelch did not speak again. He placed Talbot in the armchair, and the boy sat there without movement.

Then the Remove-master left the study.

In a few minutes he re-entered with the Head. Dr. Locke was very anxious, and his kind old face was pale. He stopped before Talbot and examined him.

"He is ill—very ill!" said Dr. Locke. "You must telephone for a physician at once. Ask Dr. Short to get here as quickly as he possibly can."

"Yes, sir."

"We will wait till we hear his report before we telegraph to the boy's father. But—but I fear that it will be necessary to telegraph for Mr. Talbot. This unfortunate boy is in a very serious state."

Talbot remained wordless, motionless. What passed round him he did not know—he did not know that little, fussy Dr. Short arrived from the village and examined him and was very much puzzled, and that a telegram was sent to Mr. Talbot, calling him to his son's bedside—he knew nothing. He seemed neither to see nor to hear.

THE TWENTIETH CHAPTER.
The Punishment!

IT was dark before Mr. Talbot arrived. He had lost no time. He had hurried away as soon as he received the Head's telegram, telling him that his son was ill. That was all he knew so far. But his face was pale and anxious as he arrived at Greyfriars, and his hands were trembling as he was shown into the Head's study.

Dr. Locke shook hands with him very gravely.

"My son?" almost whispered Mr. Talbot.

"Thank Heaven, he is no worse!" said the Head.

"But—but what is it?"

"He has broken down—through the examination work, I suppose——"

"The—the what?"

"The De Courcy examination," explained the Head. "In the middle of the examination he—— Good heavens! What is the matter, Mr. Talbot?"

The old gentleman had staggered back.

"The De Courcy examination!" he gasped.

"Yes—this afternoon."

"But—but he was not entered?"

"Indeed, he was! You were aware——"

"Yes, yes! But—but my letter to you——"

"Your letter?" said Dr. Locke, in his turn astonished. "I do not understand. I have received no letter from you."

"You—you did not get my letter?"

"Certainly not. What was it about?"

"Telling you that Arthur must not be allowed to compete, because his state of health—and the medical man's warning—made it impossible."

The Head looked very distressed.

"My dear sir, I am sorry; but I had no letter! You are sure it was sent?"

"Quite—quite sure!"

"I did not receive it!" said Dr. Locke simply.

"Good heavens!"

"But I do not quite understand. You must have told your son that he was not to enter. Or did you leave it to me to tell him?"

"I—I told him."

"But he entered."

"He disobeyed me," said Mr. Talbot miserably. "He entered against my wish. I—I feared that he might, and I wrote to you to make it impossible for him to do so. The foolish, foolish boy! I could not explain to him—I could not tell him that the shadow of idiocy hung over him. How could I blacken his life with such a fear? And he would not trust me! My poor, foolish boy!"

The Head looked greatly distressed.

"This is terrible!" he said. "If I had known——"

"Let me see him," said Mr. Talbot, in a low voice.

"Follow me."

Dr. Locke opened the door of the room in which Talbot lay quietly. Mr. Talbot stepped in on tiptoe. He moved silently to his son's bedside. Arthur lay there, white and still, with fixed eyes strangely staring.

"Arthur! My son!"

But Talbot did not speak.

The old gentleman leaned upon the mantelpiece, and his kind old face dropped into his hands. The tears ran between his white fingers.

Dr. Locke stepped out of the room, and closed the door.

. . . . . .

Arthur Talbot lay under the shadow for days—long days and nights.

While he lay there the result of the examination was made known, and it was known in Greyfriars that Dick Penfold of the Remove had carried off the De Courcy scholarship.

Penfold received many congratulations, especially from Harry Wharton & Co.

Talbot, careless enough of scholarships now, lay upon his bed in the school sanatorium, white and still.

His father watched over him, keeping down the bitter anxiety that was eating at his heart, growing white and haggard with anxiety and with watching, but thinking only of his son—of the boy who had disobeyed him, and who was paying so terrible a price for his disobedience.

Would Talbot recover?

For more than a week that was a question that could not be answered. His life was in no danger. But more than life was at stake. For of what use was existence dragged out within the walls of an asylum?

But Talbot did recover. Care and watching and unfailing affection did their work, and Talbot mended.

It was a glad day for Mr. Talbot when his son looked at him again with eyes that had recognition in them.

"Father!"

"My dear, dear boy!" said Mr. Talbot, the tears running down his lined cheeks.

"I have been thinking while I've been lying here," said Talbot, in a scarcely audible voice. "Was this the reason you forbade me to enter the exam.?"

Mr. Talbot nodded—he could not speak.

"I understand now. I am subject to this—this sort of thing?"

"Only—only if you should put yourself under great stress and strain, Arthur——"

"As I have done."

"Yes."

"Did this happen to Alan—my brother?"

"Yes."

"And he did not recover?"

"No."

"Oh, father!"

"I have been a fool," said Talbot, after a long pause. "I am recovering; I am stronger than poor Alan was. Father, I disobeyed you——"

"Never mind that now, Arthur. You must not talk."

"But I must tell you. I—I found your letter to the Head and burnt it."

"Arthur!"

"I have been a fool—a wicked, disobedient fool," said the boy. "Father——"

"Do not speak of it now, Arthur," said his father, pressing his hand. "You are recovering. Heaven has been merciful to both of us. In a few days now you will be well enough to leave Greyfriars and travel for your health; no more work for some months, Arthur."

"As you like, dad. Who won the De Courcy?"

"Penfold of the Remove."

"I'm glad of that."

And Arthur was silent again.

Greyfriars received with glad relief the news that Arthur Talbot was on the mend. And when he was up again and well enough to leave the school, though still looking very weak and white, all Greyfriars assembled to see him off.

It would be a long time probably before Talbot returned to the Fifth Form at Greyfriars—his punishment was not yet over. But he had learned his lesson, and his disobedience was likely to be a thing of the past; he would never again rebel against his father's wishes.

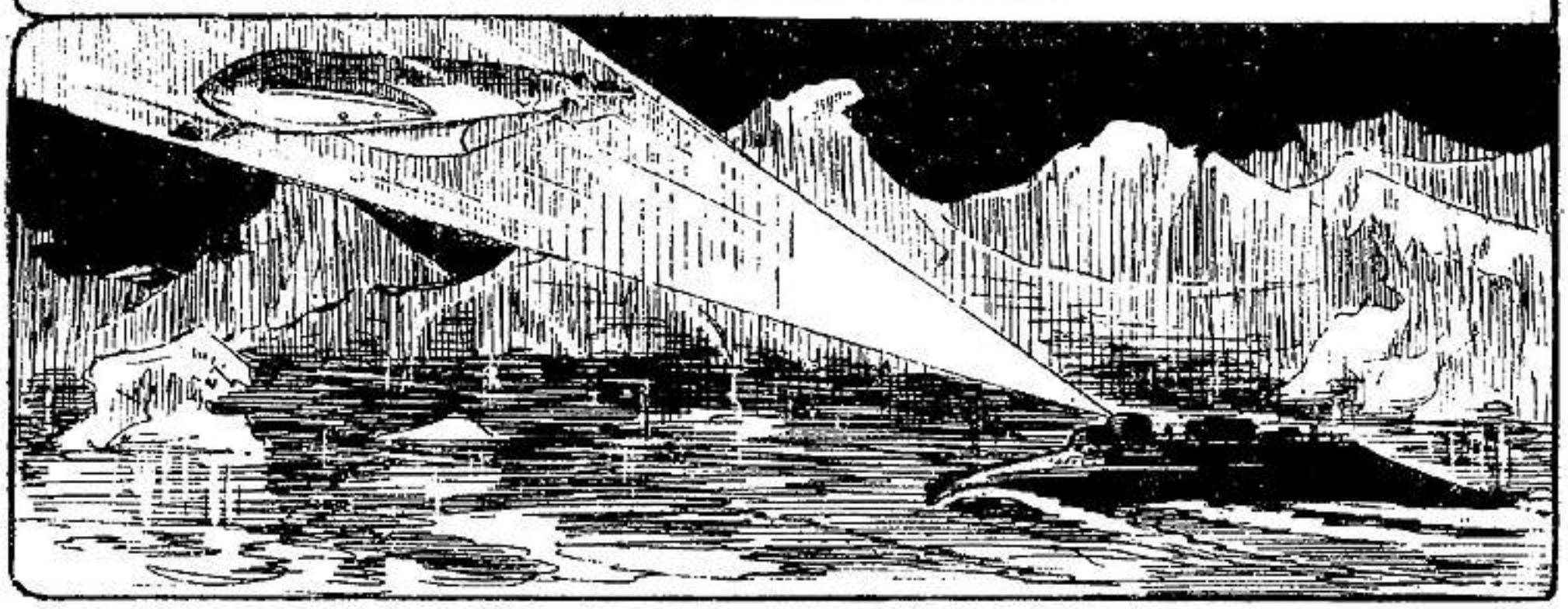
THE END.

(Another grand, long complete School Tale of Harry Wharton & Co., next week, entitled: "BY ORDER OF THE FORM," by Frank Richards. Order your copy of "The Magnet Library" well in advance. Price 1d.)

"BEYOND THE ETERNAL ICE!"

A Thrilling Story of the Amazing Adventures of Ferrers Lord, Millionaire, Ching-Lung, and Rupert Thurston.

By SIDNEY DREW.



THE OPENING CHAPTERS.

When Professor Hugley, the renowned American scientist, startles the world by announcing that he is off to find the North Pole in his wonderful air-craft, the Cloud King, there is only one man who dares to enter the lists against him on behalf of Great Britain, and that man is Ferrers Lord, the famous millionaire and inventor. Lord pits his wonderful submarine, the Lord of the Deep, against the Cloud King in the most amazing race the world has ever seen; the goal is the North Pole, and the prize a million pounds!

The preliminaries are soon settled, a judge is appointed to accompany each of the competitors, and the great race commences.

With Ferrers Lord are Ching-Lung, Rupert Thurston, and Gan Waga, an Eskimo, while Hugley is accompanied by Paraira, a Cuban, and Estebian Gacchio, a huge negro. These latter soon show themselves in their true colours, and the Cloud King no sooner reaches the region of ice than Hugley, and such of the crew as are loyal to him, are murdered, and Paraira and Gacchio assume control of the airship.

Ferrers Lord reaches the Pole through an underground tunnel which he discovers, and finds there a beautiful city called Shazana. They are welcomed by Vathmoor, the king. The Cloud King arrives at the Pole exactly twenty-four hours twenty-eight minutes after the Lord of the Deep, and the papers, certifying that the race has been fairly won, are signed, in the presence of Vathmoor. Ferrers Lord arrests Estebian Gacchio for murder on the high seas. Gacchio escapes and makes off in the submarine's launch, taking with him as prisoner, Ching-Lung. He manages to signal to his comrades on the Cloud King, and is taken aboard. As the airship rises, Gacchio sees, for the first time, the refuge where Paraira, who is stricken with fever, is kept.

(Now go on with the story.)

The Madman of the Cloud King.

Wedged in among the four ice peaks was an enormous mass of rock that must have weighed thousands of tons. How it got into its wonderful position was an unfathomable mystery. It hung eight hundred feet above the ground, held up by the glistening ice pillars, like some giant's table with legs of crystal glass.

Tents had been erected upon it, and three fires were burning. It needed clever steering to bring the aeronef down; but Jose did his work well. The winged vessel slowly sank, and touching the surface of the rock without a quiver, rested there.

Gacchio cast a glance at Ching-Lung. He was unconscious still.

"Put him in irons, Jose. He cannot escape from this place without wings."

"Si, senor. At once."

The negro dropped lightly over the rail and raised the flap of the largest tent. A hurricane-lamp was hanging from the tent-pole. He saw Gomez Paraira lying on a small iron bedstead. There was not even a blanket over him, though the spirit-stove Jose had placed there gave a little warmth.

The Cuban's eyes were closed, and he tossed about, muttering and groaning in his delirium.

"Gomez," cried the negro harshly, "pull yourself together!"

The eyes opened. They glowed with the madness of fever.

"Who are you?"

"I am Estebian. Don't you know your friend?"

"Caramba, you lie! Estebian is dead! You lie—lie—lie!"

"Delirious!" muttered the negro. "And the fools have forgotten to disarm him!"

He seized the Cuban's revolver, and tried to seize the jewelled hilt of Paraira's knife.

A fierce blow between the eyes sent him reeling back. With a shrill, mad cry, the Cuban leapt from his bed. The knife flashed from its sheath.

Gacchio had dropped the revolver. He saw the madman rushing at him, and bent to snatch it up.

He was too late!

Twice the knife was buried to the hilt in his shoulder. With a groan he sank to his knees, covered with blood, and fell forward upon his hands. Just before his strength failed he seized his revolver and fired at his assailant. The shot missed, and the bullet dashed splinters of ice from the peak behind the tent.

Brandishing the blood-stained knife, shrieking, laughing, and dancing like a fiend, Gomez Paraira went out of the tent. Two of the men lay sleeping by the fire. The murder mania was upon him. He rushed at them.

His knife was already poised over the heart of one of them, when a blow from Jose's clubed rifle felled him.

"Malediction!" gasped the Spaniard, with a shudder. "It's all drink, death, murder, and madness! The whole expedition is accursed! Will any of us live to tell the tale?"

The Fatal Marks—Back to the Lord of the Deep—False Lights—Despair—Ferrers Lord Gives His Orders, and Sets Out on a Lonely and Perilous Quest.

Ferrers Lord stood spellbound.

The circle of white-robed warriors, with naked swords, glittering spears, and flaring torches, closed in round him silently. Behind him hung the negro's cap and coat, craftily fastened to the tree.

The millionaire's haggard eyes were fixed on the ground. The ferns were trampled down, telling of a struggle. And there gleamed the heavy revolver with its burnished barrels and gold-mounted handle—the revolver Ching-Lung always carried.

That and the trampled ground told their own tale. The man who never quailed, who never shrank at any peril or any odds—Ferrers Lord, the man with the heart of steel, bowed his head upon his hands, and groaned aloud.

Ching-Lung had grown now to be a part of his life. He loved the lad as if he had been his own son. His heart was like lead. Estebian Gacchio would not spare, Paraira was as cruel as a wolf, the crew of the Cloud King were like blood-thirsty tigers.

For a moment he remained crushed and stunned. Then he raised his head. His handsome face was deathly pale, but his chin was squared grimly, and his eyes were flashing below his knitted brows. He strode on with a firm, unflinching step.

It was easy enough to follow the tracks. They led direct to the water's edge. They found one of Ching-Lung's slippers there, and saw the huge footmarks of Gacchio in the soft mould.

But the launch was gone.

Without a word or sign the millionaire turned away, and began to pace up and down. His hand was quite steady when he looked at his watch. Twenty minutes must pass before the Lord of the Deep would rise to watch for his signal according to orders he had left with Thurston. Twenty minutes! It was a veritable eternity of time.

He paused, and, folding his arms, looked out over the dark seas. Did Ching-Lung, the brightest gem of all the Chinese race, lie there, lie silent for ever, under its gloomy surface? The thought was like a knife stab to his heart.

He stood like a statue. His eyes alone told of the turmoil of grief that was raging in his bosom. Vathmoor's warriors watched him in silence. They understood that he had lost his comrade. Even a child might have read the story trampled in the mould and ferns of the king's garden.

Again he looked quietly at his watch.

In his brief stay, Ferrers Lord had learnt more of the language of the Shazanas than any other linguist would learn in a stay of twenty times that length.

His marvellous knowledge of Sanscrit, the language from which nearly every tongue takes its root, helped him immensely. When he was lost for a word, a gesture was generally sufficient.

He lifted his yachting-cap, and took a torch. He seemed living his life over again in that horrible twenty minutes.

The laggard hand of the watch neared the half hour at last.

"Torches out!" he cried sharply.

They beat the flaming sticks of resinous wood on the ground. His own torch was the only one that remained alight. The half hour had come at last.

He screened the flame with his cap, and then withdrew it for a moment before screening it again. Three times it was exposed. A single flash answered it from the gloom.

"A galley!" said Ferrers Lord.

There were numbers of galleys chained beside the palace steps. Had Ferrers Lord, instead of Vathmoor, been king of Shazana, they could not have obeyed him more quickly. In five minutes the creaking and splashing of the sweeps were heard, and a large galley sailed into sight.

Ferrers Lord sprang aboard. Sturdy arms sent the galley swinging seaward. The solitary light still gleamed through the night.

"Who goes there?" It was Prout's voice.

"Friends," said Ferrers Lord.

He dashed through the wheelhouse, and sprang below. The signal had relieved Thurston from duty. Van Witter was so much better that he had asked Thurston to play a game of billiards. The door was open, and the millionaire could hear the click of the balls.

He paused in the doorway. Sir Clement Morwith was at the scoring-board.

"Gentlemen," said Ferrers Lord quietly, "put up your cues."

"What's wrong?" asked Thurston, in surprise.

"Only that we have a more serious game to play. Estebian Gacchio has escaped, and Ching-Lung has disappeared."

It was like a thunderbolt. Van Witter let his cue fall.

"Ching-Lung vanished—disappeared!"

Thurston's voice did not sound like his own.

"Disappeared! How—where?" repeated the Yankee hoarsely.

"That is the game we have to play," said Ferrers Lord, "to find him. There were signs of a struggle, and the launch was gone. The lad may be dead—he may be a prisoner." He bowed to the baronet, while they stared at him in dismay.

"Sir Clement," he continued, "you have decided to take no part in our little war, and I do not wish to persuade you to do so, for every man is free to act as he chooses. I wish to say that this vessel is no longer a safe refuge for you. We are going to take every risk, to face every danger, to rescue Ching-Lung, or avenge his murder. A galley is waiting, and Vathmoor, for my sake, will give you a hearty welcome. Shazana, however threatened, may live longer than the Lord of the Deep."

Sir Clement's pale face flushed.

"Do you think they have murdered him?"

"I pray not."

"And, presuming he is a prisoner, do you think they will murder him?"

"I do," said the millionaire. "Have you known them to draw back at murder?"

"Then, by Heaven, Lord, I am with you, body and soul!" cried the baronet.

The millionaire extended his hand. It was steady and firm.

"I did not doubt you," he said. "Gentlemen, on this earth we have only life. Sir Clement knew Ching-Lung least of any of us, and yet he is willing to risk it. I need not ask you, Rupert, you Van Witter, my true friend, or any man among the crew. We all love the poor lad. Do not whisper a word to the men as yet."

A few minutes later he was on deck, giving his orders calmly. Barrels, weighted so that they would not turn over, were carried up. A mop handle, forced tightly into the bung-hole, formed a mast for each, and lanterns were tied to the masts.

The first was dropped overboard, and the vessel raced ahead for a mile. Prout brought her up, and they eagerly scanned the glimmering light.

It was an ancient ruse. In the old days many a merchantman chased by a privateer, and, in times less remote, many a slaver pursued by a man-of-war at night, has played the game of dropping a false light overboard, and then made off on another track, eluding its pursuer.

Ferrers Lord's plan was to locate the Cloud King. If she were in the neighbourhood, and kept any watch at all, she could hardly fail to see the light and pounce like an eagle. But there was no buzz of wings, no sound of a shot.

The light was only timed to burn ten minutes. It went out, and the Lord of the Deep went two miles to the south. A second barrel was dropped overboard here.

"It won't work, Ben," said Prout. "They've either turned tail, or gone to roost for the night."

"Seems so!" growled Maddock. "It's only wasting candles. P'r'aps they're too old to be caught wi' chaff like that."

Prout turned the vessel in response to the millionaire's gesture. Van Witter and Thurston had kept in the shadow, lest their faces should reveal the news. Prout leaned forward anxiously. It had begun to dawn on him that there was something wrong.

"Seen Ching?" he asked.

"No," answered the bo's'un.

"That's odd."

Prout looked round him. He remembered now that the millionaire had returned alone. He could bear the suspense no longer. It was seldom that Ching-Lung was absent when there was anything going on.

"Take the wheel, Ben," said the steersman huskily. "There's summat here as din't right!"

He strode to where the millionaire stood searching the sky with his night-glasses. Prout pulled off his cap.

"Beg pardon, sir."

"Yes, Prout?"

The steersman shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, and cleared his throat.

"Please, sir," he stammered, "his 'Ighness—er—his 'Ighness—oh, sir, nothink ain't happened to 'im?"

Ferrers Lord knew Prout's devotion, and he looked at the brawny sailor kindly.

"I fear he is in Paraira's clutches, Prout, or, at any rate, in Gacchio's, unless——"

"Not dead, sir!" groaned Prout, his heart sinking.

"I trust not. The launch was stolen by the negro. No doubt he has managed to signal to his accomplices. I suppose it is useless to try and keep the secret from the men? Oh, this wretched darkness!"

Prout reeled back to his post with the unsteady step of a drunken man.

"Gacchio's got him, Ben!"

The bo's'un stared at him aghast. His red face turned suddenly white, but he did not speak. The news was passed to the crew that their idol was either prisoner or dead. There was a hoarse, threatening murmur. Woe betide Paraira, Gacchio, and the hang-dog crew of the Cloud King! There would be no quarter for them now.

But the intense darkness robbed them of all hope, and crippled all action. They could only wait until the four suns rose again above the peaks.

They began to despair.

All caution was forgotten. The vessel sent her searchlights flashing over the sea. It was in vain.

Time passed wearily. And then, over the water came the report of distant firing. It was Gacchio's revolver, but it was impossible to locate the sound. Some said the shots were fired in Shazana, some from a boat floating to the south, some from under the peaks, for sound plays queer pranks on water.

They must wait for dawn. It came at last, grey and ghostly, revealing their haggard faces. The Lord of the Deep was barely a mile from the peaks, which rose against the sky like spectral sentinels.

With tropical rapidity the dawn flashed into day. The four suns seemed to leap over the cliffs, turning the sea, dark a few minutes before, into a lake of purest sapphire, and whitening the towers of Shazana.

The chill of the night vanished, and they could smell the perfume of the flowers. Birds woke and skimmed the placid surface, uttering their shrill cries. It was a glorious morning.

"Look—the launch!"

Maddock had seen it first as it lay high and dry on the shingle. Ferrers Lord drew Thurston aside.

"Rupert," he said, "I intend to go and find out what has

happened to poor Ching-Lung, if it is within man's power to do so. I may be away hours—I may never return."

"Don't say that, old chap!" groaned Thurston.

"One never knows," said the millionaire, with a strange smile; "but I fancy I am quite capable of looking after myself. I shall not say good-bye to the others. Try and cheer them up. Play the usual tactics. Just keep your conning-tower above water, and watch the sky. I have often seen a wounded duck baffle a dozen sportsmen and dogs by clever diving. And you have a double advantage over the duck, for you are not wounded, and you can stay below water as long as you like.

"If the Cloud King comes near you, dive run half a mile under water, and come up again. She will soon tire of the chase. I will push the dinghy off when I land, and, if possible, pick her up as well as the launch.

"And watch for a signal from the shore. I will flutter my handkerchief. As the launch has landed there, I hope to find some trace or clue that will tell us the best or worst. And now good-bye, old chap! If I do not return, my last words to you are to get back to England as soon as you can. Here is the key of my private desk in the state-room. All my papers are in order, and you will find that I have not forgotten any of my friends."

He smiled his strange smile, and pressed the young man's hand. Thurston's eyes were dim.

"Good-bye!" he said hoarsely.

Ferrers Lord struck a match and lazily lighted a cigar. He was as cool and impassive as ever.

"Launch the dinghy, lads," he cried cheerily, "and keep your hearts up! You all know that Ching-Lung is a hard nut to crack. Come, be smart! A rifle and ammunition, Maddock, and a flask of brandy!"

"Ay, ay, sir!" said Maddock. "Now, you lubbers, bestir yourselves! This is a ship, not a circus, and you came here to work, not to sit down and stare at the performers! Two rifles here, and a keg of water! Always put water into a boat, if she's only going a mile! Out of the way, Gan, you hulking mass! Shall we need a sail, sir?"

"No," said the millionaire.

The davit chains rattled, and the boat touched the water. The millionaire dropped lightly into her, waving his hand to Van Witter and the baronet.

"A thick woollen jersey!" he said.

"Two thick woollen jerseys, Joe!" said Maddock.

They were dropped into the boat, and Ferrers Lord fitted the oars into the rowlocks. Maddock scrambled down noiselessly behind him, quite convinced in his own mind that he was going to accompany his chief.

The oars dipped into the water, and the boat glided away. Anxious eyes watched him as he examined the launch. He saw the broken piston-rod and the tangled machinery, but he little guessed the cause of it.

"Strange, sir," said Maddock. "And 'ow did they get her up here? It takes me an' Ben all our time to get her nose ashore, and we ain't exactly children."

Without a word, but with a lightening of heart, Ferrers Lord found a half-filled cigarette-case. It was made of gunmetal, with Ching-Lung's monogram set in diamonds. It had been his own present to the prince.

Either Gacchio had robbed his prisoner after murdering him, or else he had brought him across in the launch.

The first assumption was absurd. Villain as he was, Gacchio was not a cut-purse or a thief. That was out of the question. And if he had brought Ching-Lung from Shazana, as the finding of the cigarette-case seemed to prove, Ching-Lung must have been alive, for Esteban would hardly have cared to hamper himself with a dead body.

Then Ching-Lung must either be a captive on board the Cloud King, or else held captive by the negro till he could find some opportunity of rejoining his comrades.

There was another point which the millionaire shrank from contemplating. They might have done him to death already.

"Put your shoulder here, Maddock!" he said quietly.

They strained at the boat. It began to slide slowly down the shingle, and at last floated.

"Make her fast to the dinghy!"

Maddock obeyed.

"And now tow her back to the ship!"

Maddock sighed meekly.

"Ay, ay, sir!" he answered.

Ferrers Lord shouldered his rifle, and glanced back at the solitary vessel. All eyes were fixed on the solitary figure.

They saw him wave his cap. Then he turned on his heel, and vanished behind the gleaming hummocks of ice.

He had set out alone on his quest—a quest so fraught with peril that he would let no man share it with him.

(To be continued next week.)

My Readers' Column

Our next grand, long, complete tale of the chums of Greyfriars is entitled:

"BY ORDER OF THE FORM."

In this first-class story, Frank Richards relates how the famous Remove Form are visited with an attack of what is commonly known as "swelled head," and usurp an amount of authority which staggers the rest of Greyfriars. After a troublous time, in which Wun Lung, the cute Chinese junior, plays his part, disaster overtakes the bold Removites, who are compelled to admit ruefully that they have, in their own words, "bitten off more than they can chew!"

Don't forget to order

"BY ORDER OF THE FORM"

in advance.

Our Novel Competition.

From the numerous letters I am receiving by every post from delighted readers, I am very pleased to find that Our Grand New Competition is going to be a huge success. Everyone likes the cute little Miniature Pages of the good old MAGNET, apart from the fact that, owing to the large number of Cash Prizes, every reader has a fair chance of "making a bit" on his or her Miniature MAGNET. Your Editor is inclined to flatter himself that, in the matter of real interest and novelty, the Miniature MAGNET Competition will be hard to beat. One word more. There will be a great run on your favourite paper for the next six weeks at least, so please make a point of ordering your newsagent in advance to reserve you a copy weekly.

Helping Your Editor.

Many loyal readers are constantly devising fresh ways and means by which they can lend a helping hand to their Editor, and increase the popularity of their favourite paper. Here is the kindly and ingenious scheme employed by a staunch chum of mine. Master William Castleton, aged 13, of Aldeburg-on-Sea, Suffolk, writes me as follows:

"I am an ardent lover of THE MAGNET, and have been a constant reader for two years. I have been trying to advertise your highly-esteemed paper by printing a large advertisement, and nailing it to a wall opposite my house.

"By this method I have secured several new readers, who now delight in your enjoyable tales."

You have my best thanks, Master Castleton. I hope that your excellent idea will inspire others of my loyal chums.

A Reader's Record.

Here is a letter I have received from a chum of mine in Preston. His letter speaks for itself, so I will publish it just as it stands.

"Preston.

"Dear Editor,—I really must write you a line to thank you for the great pleasure which I get every week from reading THE MAGNET and "The Gem" Libraries. They are simply grand. There is no other word for it!

"I know which is the best way to express my gratitude in a practical form, and that is to get new readers for your two fine books. I am pleased to say that I have been doing this as much as I possibly can by lending the books to different friends each week, and by talking of them wherever I go. I have this way got you eleven new regular readers in the last six months. I feel I am doing my friends a kindness by telling them to read the good old MAGNET and "Gem." With best wishes for the prosperity of yourself and grand papers.—From

"F. J. (a staunch reader, age 15)."

Good for you, Master F. J.! Were all my readers as appreciative and thoughtful as you, my lot would indeed be a happy one. It just shows what can be done by a little missionary work of the right sort. I wonder how many more of my loyal chums can show a record like yours?

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"THE RUNAWAY SCHOOLBOY" is the title of the grand, long, complete school story, by Martin Clifford, contained in this week's number of our splendid companion paper, "THE GEM" Library, the cover of which is reproduced below. Order "THE GEM" Library to-day. Price 1d.

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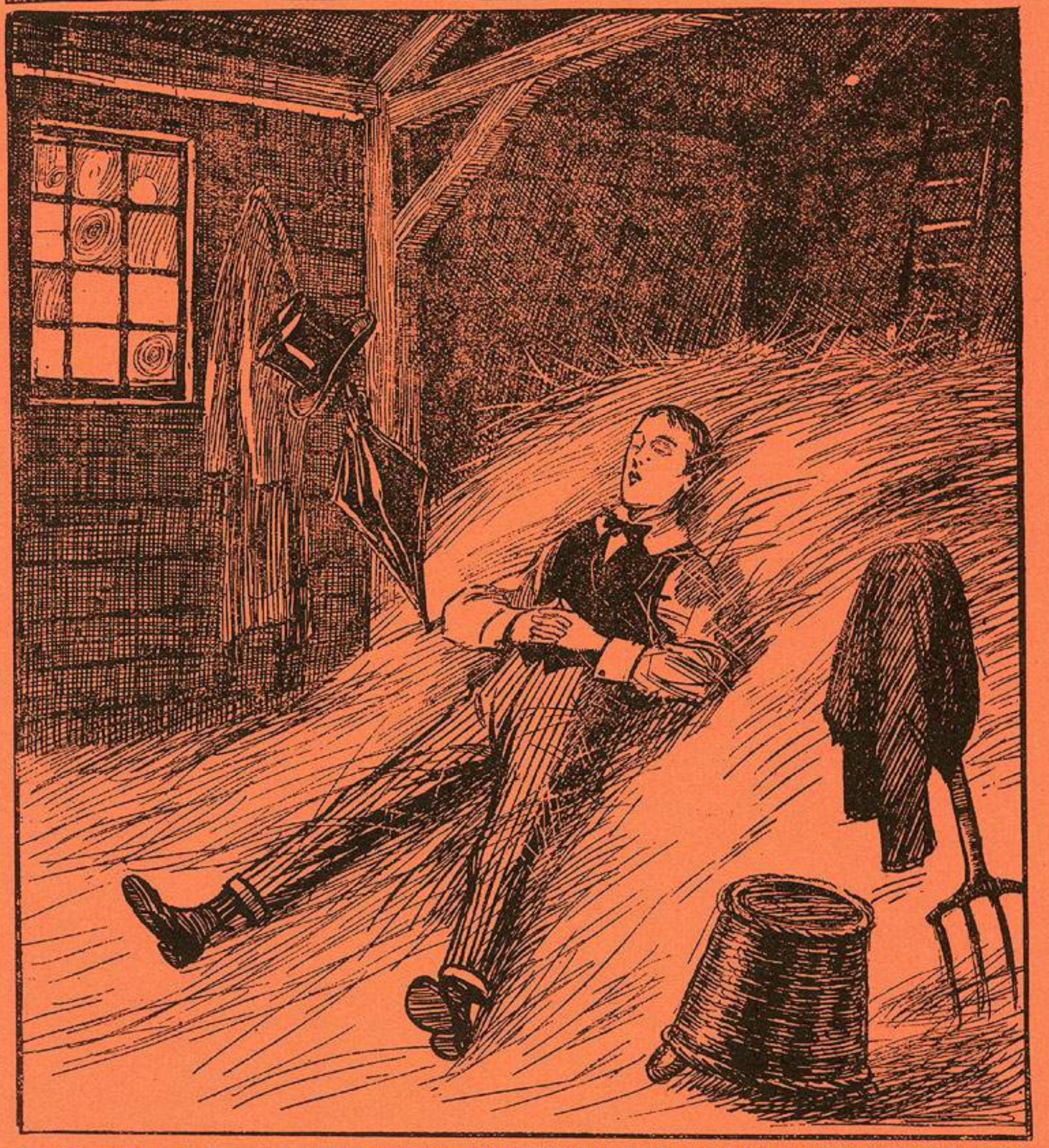

THE SWELL OF ST. JIM'S RUNS AWAY FROM SCHOOL! (See the long, complete story contained in this number.)

PRESENTS!

In next Thursday's simple competition you can choose any one of the following prizes:

Penknife, Fountain-Pen, Mouth Organ, Box of Chocolates, Brooch, Pencil Box, Magnetic Compass, Scout Billican, Scout Knife and Fork, Scout Semaphore Flags, Scout Haversack, Jar of Sweets, Cigarette-Card Album, Picture-Postcard Album, Cuff-Links, Telescope, Nail Scissors, Electric Torch, Stamp Album, Hatpins, Photographic Dark-room Lamp, Photograph Album, Dog Collar, Dog Whip, Clothes Brush, Hairbrush, Story-Book, Box of Paints, Kite, Steam Vertical Engine, Doll's Tea-Set, Harmless Pistol, Amusing Game (taken from a large assortment of novel table games), Box of Draughts, Set of Chessmen, Bicycle Bell, Bicycle Repair Outfit, Bicycle Oilcan, Bicycle Lamp, Fishing-Rod (three joints), Spirit Level, 2ft. Four-fold Boxwood Rule, Hatchet, Fretwork Saw, Cricket-Ball, Serviette-Ring (with initial engraved).

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