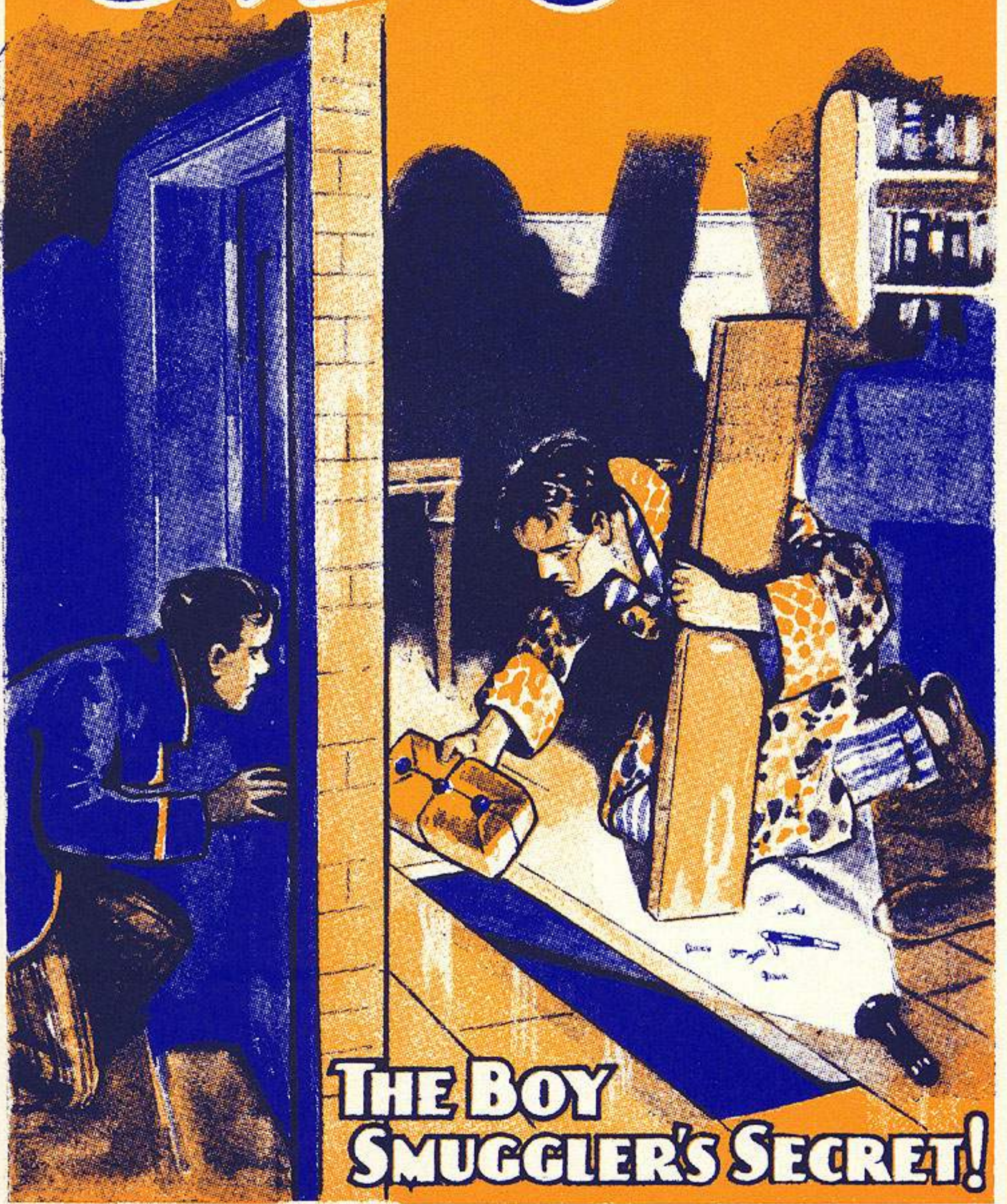


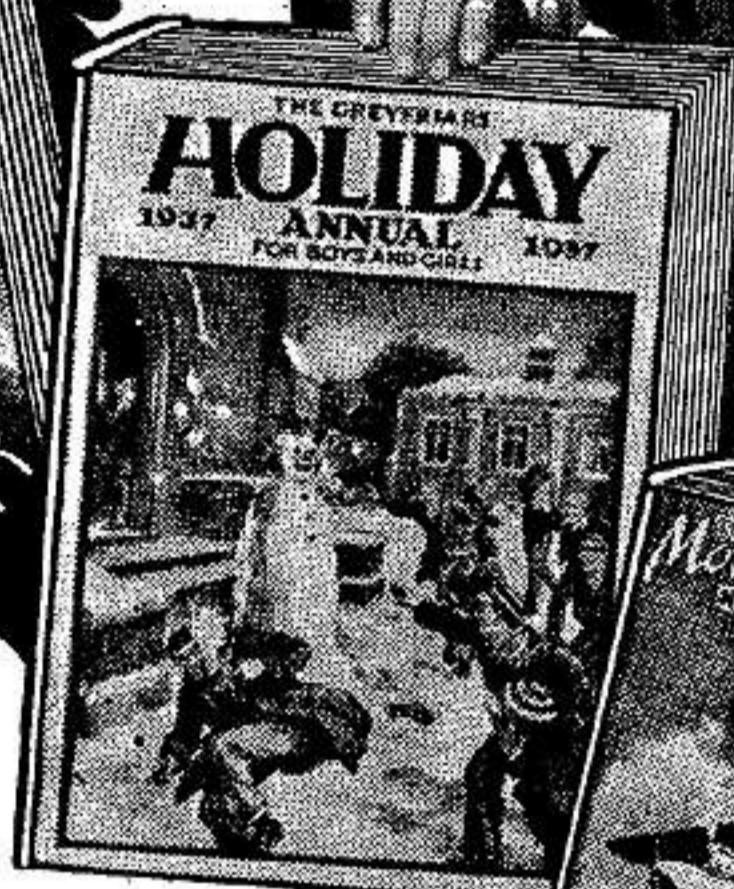
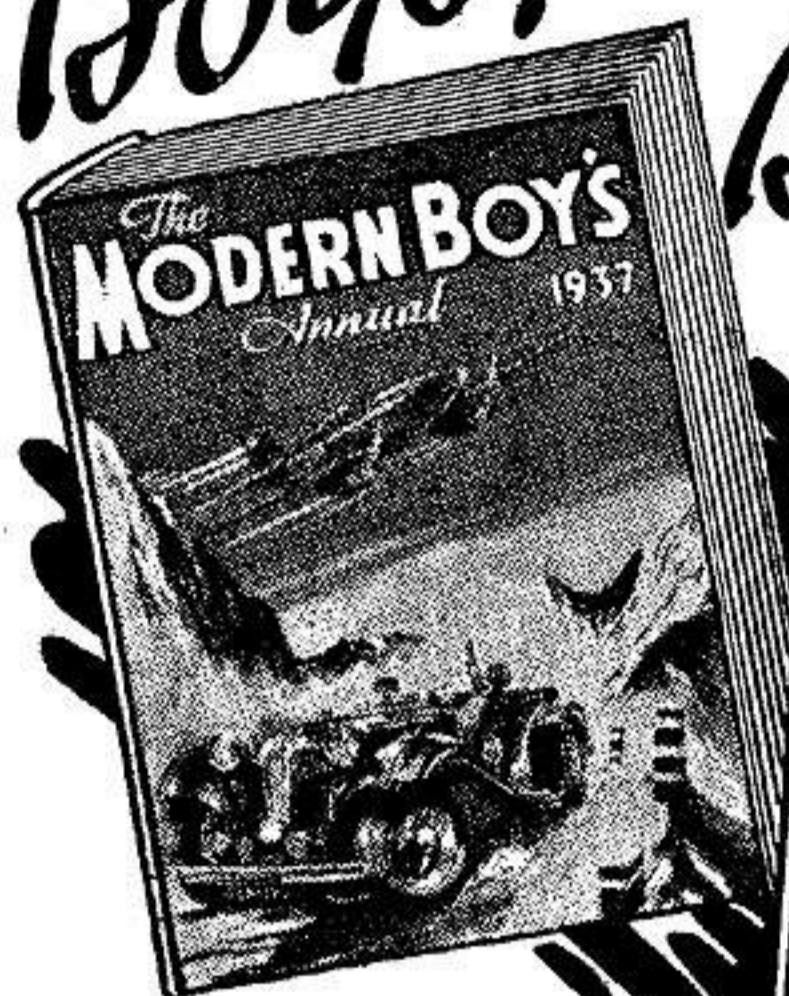
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By
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The influence of Greyfriars makes Valentine Compton want to go straight, but the influence of his uncle, Captain Compton—chief and leader of a smuggling gang—pulls the other way!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Billy Bunter Begs for It!

"THE ass!"

"The fat clump!"

"Bunter—all over!"

Harry Wharton & Co. stared—and grinned. No fellow could have helped grinning. The sight of Billy Bunter, at that moment, was enough to make a stone image grin.

It was morning break at Greyfriars School. December as it was, it was an uncommonly fine morning, dry and sunny. Plenty of fellows were in the quad—among them the Famous Five of the Remove. Bob Cherry had a football under his arm, which the juniors were going to punt about till third school—but they forgot that, in their interest in Billy Bunter and his weird proceedings.

On one of the old benches under the leafless elms, Herbert Vernon-Smith of the Remove had sat down. Sitting there, he had opened a newspaper, no doubt borrowed from the Common-room. Smithy was deep in that newspaper. He had taken a packet of toffee from his pocket, but in his keen interest in what he was reading, he had laid it down on the bench beside him, and evidently forgotten it.

Behind the bench was Bunter!

With the stealthy tread of a Red Indian on the war-path, Billy Bunter crept behind the bench, unseen, unheard, and unnoticed by the Bounder sitting there. That he had felonious designs on that packet of toffee was clear to anyone who observed him. And he was so extremely cautious, so excessively stealthy, that any fellow near at hand could hardly help observing him.

Bunter had eyes only for the toffee, and for the back of Vernon-Smith's head, which he feared might turn at an awkward moment.

He did not see—that the Famous Five saw—that a prefect of the Sixth Form was leaning on one of the old elms, at a little distance—with his eyes fixed on Bunter!

It was Carne of the Sixth, loafing there with his hands in his pockets and his official ashplant under his arm.

While Harry Wharton & Co. watched Bunter from one direction, Arthur Carne watched him from the other—with a glint in his eyes.

"The blithering ass!" murmured Frank Nugent.

"The terrific fathead!" chuckled Hurreo Jamsat Ram Singh.

Grab-raiding was no new thing on Billy Bunter's part. Billy Bunter never could behold tuck without wanting it—and what he wanted, he somehow fancied that he ought to have. Toffee was irresistible to Bunter. How a fellow could lay a packet of toffee down, and forget it, was a mystery to Bunter's fat mind. Smithy had done so, however, inexplicable as it was—and if Smithy did not look round in time, that toffee was going to change owners! And it was like Bunter—just like him—to carry on, right under the eyes of a Sixth Form prefect, without being aware of the fact!

In the Remove, fellows would boot Bunter for snooping tuck, and let it go at that. But the official view of such matters was more serious. Any prefect would have given Bunter "six" for it. And Carne, though perhaps not a very dutiful prefect, was a rather bad-tempered one, and given to a heavy-handed use of the ashplant. The look

on his face, as he watched the fat and fatuous Owl, told of trouble coming to Bunter—if he snooped that toffee. Unless he did so, of course, Carne had no occasion for butting in. A fellow could tiptoe behind another fellow on a bench if he liked. But Billy Bunter's intention was perfectly obvious—and Carne had only to wait a few moments for the snooping act.

Vernon-Smith, generally a very wary bird, was quite oblivious and unsuspecting. The Bounder was reading a newspaper report of the activities of a mysterious smuggling gang, known to be at work on the South Coast, but hitherto undetected by police or Customs officers. What interest such a matter had for Smithy would have puzzled other Remove fellows, but he was neck-deep in it, so to speak, and so far as he was concerned, it was all right for Bunter.

The chums of the Remove grinned. It was undoubtedly funny to see Billy Bunter displaying all this stealthy caution, with a prefect watching him hardly more than ten feet away.

"The howling ass!" said Johnny Bull. "Jevver see a blithering fathead ask for it like that?"

"Hardly ever!" chuckled Frank Nugent.

"Carne's watching him like a cat!" said Bob Cherry. "He will be glad of a chance at Bunter—look at his face! He owes Bunter one! Look here, let's give the fat blitherer the tip!"

"Rot!" granted Johnny Bull. "He jolly well ought to be whopped for snaffling tuck! Let him get on with it!"

"Carne will lay it on jolly hard if he gets an excuse!"

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"Let him!" said Johnny. "May do Bunter good!"

"Um!" said Bob. "Right as rain, Johnny, old man—but I'm going to give Bunter the tip, all the same."

Bob Cherry lifted up his voice. The Famous Five were at rather a distance from that little scene under the elms. But hardly any distance was too great for Bob's powerful voice when he put steam on. He roared:

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Smithy! Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

The roar certainly reached the Bounder's ears. Naturally, the fellows expected him to look round, in which case, Bunter's game would have been up.

But he did not look round.

If he heard, he heeded not. His eyes remained glued on the newspaper, and he gave no sign.

A moment more, and it was too late!

A fat hand whipped over the back of the bench and snatched the toffee-packet. With his plunder in that fat hand, Billy Bunter backed away.

Smithy had seen nothing.

With a happy grin on his fat face, the Owl of the Remove retreated, to get to a safe distance and devour his prey.

But he never got to that safe distance! As he backed from the bench, Carne of the Sixth stepped forward from the elm he was leaning on. With a grim brow, he grasped at Bunter.

"Ow!" gasped the startled Owl, as a grip fell on his fat shoulder. "Ow! Leggo, Cherry, you beast! Oh!"

Bunter jumped almost clear of the ground as he blinked through his big spectacles and saw that it was a Sixth Form prefect who had grasped him. "Oh! Oh! Oh crikey!"

"You young rascal!" said Carne.

"Oh, really, Carne—" gasped Bunter.

"Give that toffee back to its owner at once, you pilfering little scoundrel."

"I—I—I say, it—it was only a j-joke on Smith!" groaned Bunter. "I—I wasn't going to eat it, Carne!"

Carne of the Sixth was not of a trusting nature. And he would have needed to be of a very trusting nature indeed, to believe that statement.

Vernon-Smith looked round, his attention drawn by the voices behind the bench. He stared at the packet of toffee in Bunter's fat hand.

"You fat slug!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, really, Smithy! I—I—I was only going to—to mind it for you!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I wasn't going to eat it, old chap! I—I—I don't like toffee! I—I—I say, old fellow, here it is! Oh lor'!"

The toffee-packet was handed back to its owner. Billy Bunter's eyes, and spectacles, followed it mournfully as it was dropped into the Bounder's pocket. But he soon forgot even the toffee, gone from his gaze like a beautiful dream. Carne swished the ashplant.

"Bend over that bench, Bunter!" he rapped.

"I—I say, Carne—"

"Bend over!"

"I—I—I wasn't—I—I—I didn't—I—I never—"

"I've told you to bend over, Bunter!"

"Oh lor'!"

In the lowest of spirits, the grub-raider of Greyfriars bent over the bench. Up went the ash. Down it came, with a terrific whack on tight trousers. Billy Bunter's yell rang far and wide.

"The rotten bully!" muttered Harry Wharton.

It was really a terrific swipe. If Billy Bunter got half a dozen of the

same, there was no doubt that he was going to suffer severely for his sins. The fact was, that Carne of the Sixth had a score against Bunter, and had been looking out for days for a pretext to pay it off. Now Bunter had given him one—a good one. Evidently the bully of the Sixth was going to make the most of it.

"Ow!" roared Bunter. "Wow!"

Up went the ash again! Down it came! Bunter bounded!

A junior taking "six" was supposed to keep bending until the infliction was completed. That Billy Bunter would have done as a matter of course, had he been taking the six from Wingate, or Gwyme, or Sykes, or indeed any other prefect. But the ash was not supposed to be laid on with this terrific vim. It was more than flesh and blood could stand—Bunter's, at any rate. Bunter heard the swish of the ashplant as it went up—and he did not wait for the terrific whop, as it came down. He bounded away with the activity of a kangaroo. Seldom swift in his movements, the Owl of the Remove was like lightning at that moment. As if moved by a suddenly released spring, he dodged the descending ash.

Crash!

Carne had put as much beef as before into that swipe, expecting it to land on Bunter. Meeting with no resistance, as it swept the empty space where Bunter had been, the cane fairly crashed on Carne's own leg.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The yell that came from Carne of the Sixth was louder than Bunter's. He had got himself fairly on the shin—and evidently it hurt. He yelled, dropped the ashplant, and bounded on one leg, clasping the other with both hands. He hopped, and roared, and danced.

Billy Bunter did not stay to see the performance; he bolted. But from every other fellow who spotted Carne of the Sixth doing his song and dance came a roar:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Doggo!

MR. QUELCH frowned.

Promptly, when break came to an end, the master of the Remove came rustling up the Form-room passage to let in his Form for third school.

When the bell rang, the dutiful Remove were supposed to gather at that door, ready, if not actually yearning, for their Form-master to let them in, for the absorption of more knowledge.

Sometimes a fellow would be a minute late, and would come scooting up the passage, dropping a book or two in his hurry. Mr. Quelch did not approve of unpunctuality. His gimlet eye would glint if a late-comer scooted up as he opened the Form-room door.

On the present occasion he frowned. One member of his Form was not even late and scooting; he was not in sight at all.

The Greyfriars Remove were a rather numerous Form. A beak might really have been expected not to miss a single member out of so many, at a single glance. Quelch did, on the spot. True, the missing member of the Form was one who, when present, rather leaped to the eye—one whose circumference was remarkable and unmistakable. Quelch noticed at once that Billy Bunter was not there. He noticed, too, that most of the other fellows were grinning.

Frowning, he let the boys into the Form-room.

With a tramp of feet, the Remove marched in. Quelch gave a final frowning glance down the corridor. Bunter was not in sight.

The juniors took their places. Quelch's gimlet eye gleamed over them. Nearly all were grinning. He wondered whether the general grin had anything to do with Bunter's absence.

It had!

Billy Bunter had not been seen since Arthur Carne of the Sixth had whopped his own shin, under the elms. While Carne was hopping and howling Bunter had hit the horizon at about 70 m.p.h. It was several minutes before Carne was able to go after him. But when the agony had abated, as Lord Macaulay would have expressed it, Carne had gripped his ashplant and hunted. Leaving a crowd of fellows roaring with laughter, Carne took up the trail, limping but implacable. Nobody was surprised that he failed to find Bunter. Everybody would have been surprised had Carne found him.

If ever there was a time when it was judicious for a fellow to lie doggo, this was such a time. Bunter was keeping doggo, and seemed hidden deep. In the quad, in the Rag, in the Remove studies, in the passages, Carne sought him, and found him not. Bunter seemed to have vanished into space. Right up to the ringing of the bell for third school Carne of the Sixth hunted—in vain! And the Remove juniors, when they went in for class, wondered where on earth Bunter was, and whether he was hidden too deep to hear the bell. In which case he was likely to find Mr. Quelch as dangerous as Carne.

"Wharton!" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"Oh!" The head boy of the Remove ceased to smile. "Yes, sir?"

"Bunter is not present, Wharton. Do you know where he is?"

"Oh! No, sir!"

"Todd! Where is Bunter?"

"I don't know, sir!" answered Peter Todd.

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips.

"Very well. Wharton, you may get out the Large Map No. 4, and place it on the easel."

"Yes, sir!"

Harry Wharton crossed to the wall-cupboard, at the end of the Form-room, where these aids to knowledge were kept. Third lesson that day dealt with Roman history, and the Large Map No. 4 was a rolled-up map of Ancient Italy, which, unrolled over the blackboard on the easel, enabled the Remove to follow the march of Hannibal's army on Rome, with the aid of Mr. Quelch's pointer and Mr. Quelch's valued explanations and elucidations.

Mr. Quelch picked up his pointer ready for business as his head boy went to fetch Large Map No. 4.

Harry Wharton opened the door of the high cupboard to select that rolled-up map from several other rolled-up maps, which were used on other occasions.

But as he looked into the cupboard the captain of the Remove completely forgot Large Map No. 4.

From the dusky interior of the Form-room cupboard a fat face and a big pair of spectacles dawned on him.

He jumped.

It was enough to make any fellow jump to behold the fat, terrified countenance of William George Bunter looming from the dusk when he was reaching into a cupboard for Large Map No. 4.

"Oh!" gasped Wharton.

"Quiet!" gasped Bunter. "Don't tell him! Don't give a chap away! I—I say, shut that door!"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Wharton. He stared blankly at the fat Owl. Evidently Bunter, hidden deep in the Form-room cupboard among the rolled-up maps and other articles, had not heard the bell, and did not know that the Remove had returned to their Form-room. He was not thinking of third school. He was thinking of Carne of the Sixth!

The opening of the cupboard door alarmed him fearfully. He dreaded to see Arthur Carne. It was a relief to see Wharton; but he was anxious to get the door shut again.

He grabbed it and pulled it shut, jerking it away from Wharton's hand. Mr. Quelch glanced round sharply. He did not like to be kept waiting. It wasted the time of the class. It reduced

into the Form-room for him during his hunt. Bunter had heard him. Luckily, Carne had not thought of looking into the cupboard.

"Wharton!" Mr. Quelch came across to the cupboard, frowning. "Why do you not get that map? Why have you not opened the cupboard? Is anything the matter with the door?"

"It—it—it seems stuck, sir!" stammered Harry.

"Absurd!" said Mr. Quelch. "Step aside!"

He took hold of the door-handle and jerked. The door yielded an inch under that sharp jerk, but immediately closed again, as if pulled back from inside. In sheer astonishment Mr. Quelch stared at it.

"Is—is—is someone in the cupboard?"

board. The strength of that pull was too much for Bunter. The door-handle was dragged from his fat hands, and the door flew open—so suddenly that it seemed to take Mr. Quelch by surprise. The door flew, and Quelch flew, fairly spinning.

As he spun away with the captured door, a fat figure darted from the cupboard in full flight. It tripped over one of Mr. Quelch's long legs, stumbled, rolled over, and roared.

"Yoo-whooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Remove. "Bunter!" gasped Mr. Quelch. He had discovered the missing member of his Form—unexpectedly. He let go the door, transferring his grip to Bunter. That grip, like a steel



As Billy Bunter crept away from the bench, the purloined toffee in his fat hand, Carne stepped forward, with a grim brow. "Ow!" gasped the startled Owl, as a grip fell on his shoulder. "Give that toffee back to its owner at once!" "I—I—I say, it—it was only a j-j-joke on Smithy!" gasped Bunter. "I wasn't going to eat it, Carne!"

the amount of knowledge that his Form might have assimilated. His Form, perhaps, would not have minded that very much. But Mr. Quelch did!

"Wharton! Please bring that map at once!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" stammered Harry.

He grasped the door-handle and pulled. But the cupboard door did not open. A fat hand was grasping the handle inside, holding it shut.

Wharton pulled; Bunter held on desperately. The door came open an inch and shut again. It came open two or three inches, and was dragged back.

"You fat ass!" breathed Wharton. "Come out! It's class! Don't you know it's class, you dummy? Come out of it!"

Bunter did not even hear. He was grabbing the door shut. He grabbed the inside handle with both fat hands, braced himself, put all his weight on it, and held. Evidently he was not thinking of class. The dread of Carne of the Sixth in the offing filled his fat mind, to the total exclusion of every other consideration. Carne had, in fact, looked

he ejaculated. "Wharton, is this some foolish trick? What—"

"I—I—I—" stammered Wharton.

"Go to your place!" snapped Mr. Quelch. "I will get the map!"

Harry Wharton went to his place. The Remove fellows gave him surprised and inquiring looks. That something was "on" they could all see, but they could not guess what it was.

"What's up?" asked Bob.

"Bunter!" answered Harry.

"Oh, my hat! Is that where he is?"

There was a chuckle in the Remove.

All eyes were fixed on Mr. Quelch. With a grim, set face, and a glinting eye, he was dragging at the cupboard door. Twice, thrice, the door gave an inch and jerked back again under the pull from inside. Obviously, someone was inside, trying to hold it shut. If this was a "lark" of some frolicsome fellow, Mr. Quelch was the man to reduce that frolicsome fellow to a state of deep seriousness.

He exerted himself, and pulled as if in a tug-of-war.

There was a gasp inside the cup-

vice, fastened on the fat Owl's collar and jerked him to his feet.

"Yaroo!" roared Bunter. "Leggo, you beast!"

"Wha-at?"

"You rotten bully, leggo!" shrieked Bunter. "Oh, you swab! You cad! You rotten bully! Leggo!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the Remove.

Evidently the terrified Owl was under the impression that Carne of the Sixth had got him.

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Quelch.

"Is this boy insane? Is—"

"Ow! Leggo! Carne, you rotter, leggo! Ow! Leggo!"

"Bunter—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence! Bunter—"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "Is—is—is it you, sir? Oh crikey! I—I thought it was that other beast—"

"What?"

"I—I—I mean, I—I thought it was— was Carne! Oh crikey! I never had Smithy's toffee—never touched it! And it was only a joke! I—"

"Bunter," thundered Mr. Quelch, "is it possible that you were hiding in that cupboard?"

"Oh, no, sir! Oh, not at all!" gasped Bunter. "I—I never snooped Smithy's toffee, sir! And Carne never saw me, and he wasn't giving me six, sir! And—and—and I went to that cupboard, sir, to—to look at the maps! I—I—I'm so interested in—in maps, sir!"

"You will bend over that chair, Bunter!"

"Oh lor'!"

Whack!

"Ow!"

"Now go to your place!" hooted Mr. Quelch. "You will take a hundred lines for being late for class! Silence! Take your place!"

"Wow!"

Billy Bunter took his place. He wriggled as he took it. The pointer had smitten only once, but Bunter already had a pain there from Carne's ash. He wriggled and wriggled.

Mr. Quelch, frowning, unrolled Large Map No. 4, and the Remove followed Hannibal's march into Italy, Billy Bunter without the slightest interest.

For once, it is true, Bunter was glad to be in class. In class Carne of the Sixth could not get on his track, which was a compensation even for having to learn something. But he looked forward with dread to what was going to happen after class. Carne might by that time have recovered from the pain in his shin and got into a good temper; but Bunter doubted it. He doubted it deeply.

In such circumstances, Bunter was not likely to be interested in that ancient war which the famous Carthaginian "cum populo Romano gessere." He was more concerned with Carne's war-like proceedings than Hannibal's. From the bottom of his fat heart, Billy Bunter wished that he had never snooped that toffee. And he had not even had the toffee—he had the reckoning without the feast. The way of the transgressor was hard!

THE THIRD CHAPTER.

Bunter on the Run!

HORACE COKER of the Fifth Form snorted with anger and indignation.

"Those cheeky fags!" said Horace Coker.

Accustomed as he was to the cheek of Remove juniors, Coker of the Fifth could hardly believe his eyes. The neck of it!

After class Coker was standing by the doorway of the games study, at the end of the Fifth Form passage. He was telling Potter and Greene, his friends, that if old Prout fancied that he could rag him in Form just as much as he liked, old Prout would jolly well find out that he was making a mistake. This was a matter of deep interest to Coker of the Fifth.

It was not of such deep interest to Potter and Greene.

They were listening to Coker with one ear, so to speak, and turning the other to the talk that was going on in the games study.

In that apartment Blundell, captain of the Fifth, was talking football—a topic much more interesting to Potter and Greene than Coker's woes and misadventures with Mr. Prout in the Fifth Form-room.

Blundell was talking of the coming Form match between Fifth and Sixth with great glee. In those Form matches

between the two top Forms of Greyfriars, the Sixth generally walked over the Fifth. There were more first eleven men in the Sixth than in the Fifth, and Wingate, the captain of the school, was a tower of strength in himself. But now—

Now that Valentine Compton, the new fellow, was in the Greyfriars Fifth, all that was going to be altered. For that new man Compton was so wonderful a footballer than Wingate had fairly jumped at him for the first eleven. On all sides it was acknowledged that Compton was the best of the bunch, not even excepting old Wingate himself.

In first eleven matches he was indispensable. Wingate had left out Carne to make room for him, but he would rather have left out himself than Compton. But in Form matches, of course, Compton would play for his own Form, the Fifth. In consequence of which, the Fifth were going to beat the Sixth. Blundell declared that there was no doubt of it, and the Fifth Form men agreed that there wasn't—which was a glorious prospect for the Fifth Form men.

This discussion interested Potter and Greene, who were both in their Form eleven. It had little interest for Coker, who wasn't. Coker, heedless of lack of interest on the part of his hearers, said, and said again, that he had stood about as much from that pompous ass Prout as any fellow could be expected to stand.

But Coker's indignation took a new turn, and he forgot even the sins of Prout as a Remove junior cut suddenly across the landing, in such a hurry that he bumped into Coker, and disappeared at a rapid run up the Fifth Form passage.

The neck of it made Coker thrill with indignation. He could hardly believe his eyes as Billy Bunter flashed past.

Juniors were barred in the quarters of the Fifth. Bunter had no business there. And he had bumped against Coker, causing him actually to stagger as he passed in his haste. When these things happened, it was, in Horace Coker's opinion, time for the skies to fall.

"See that?" gasped Coker, appealing to Potter and Greene. "See that fat swab? See him? This school is coming to something—what? Why, I'll spifficate him for his neck!"

"Good egg!" said Potter hastily.

"Go after him, Coker!"

"Give him toco!" said Greene encouragingly.

Potter and Greene edged towards the games study and football jaw. They did not care whether Coker went after Bunter, or whether he went to Jericho or Timbuctoo, so long as he went.

In another moment Coker would have started. But in that moment a Sixth Form prefect leaped from the stairs to the landing, ashplant in hand; and then it was clear why Bunter had been in such a hurry, and why he was seeking quarters not his own.

"Did Bunter pass you, Coker?" rapped Carne.

Instead of answering that question, Horace Coker gave Carne of the Sixth a cold and steely look.

Coker was not going to have questions rapped at him as if he were a fag, even by a Sixth Form prefect. Coker did not think much of the Sixth Form, and least of all of that particular member of it.

And Coker was specially down on Carne, with a very heavy down. Last week Coker had been hacked in the fog by some person officially unknown—but unofficially believed to be Carne of the

Sixth. Nearly all the school believed that Carne had been looking for his football rival to crock him, under cover of the fog, and that, owing to the fog, he had got Coker by mistake. A prefects' meeting had found no evidence against him, but that did not alter the general opinion. So Coker, never over-inclined to civility to the Sixth, had no civility to waste on Carne.

"Do you hear me?" rapped Carne.

"Can't you speak?"

"You spoke to me?" asked Coker coolly.

"You know I did!"

"Well, don't!"

Horace Coker planted his manly form in Carne's way, blocking access to the Fifth Form passage. It was a law at Greyfriars, as at any Public school, that the authority of a prefect was unquestionable by any fellow who was not a prefect. To impede a prefect in the execution of his duty was as serious a matter as impeding a police-constable in the execution of his duty outside Greyfriars. But that was what Horace Coker was proceeding to do.

Carne's eyes glittered at him. He had had to leave Bunter till after third school. But he was leaving him no longer if he could help it. There was a severe pain in Carne's shin, and a worse one in his temper. Only two or three Remove men barging in his way had saved Bunter from his clutch, but he was close behind him when the fat Owl flew up the stairs. Now Coker of the Fifth was in his way, and looked like sticking there.

"Did Bunter pass you?" he hooted.

"Find out!" retorted Coker.

"That means that he's gone into the Fifth. Stand aside, you fool!"

"What do you want Bunter for?" asked Coker sarcastically. "Want to whop him because he spotted you the other day, and let out that it was you hacked me in the fog?"

"If you dare to say—" panted Carne.

"Oh, chuck it!" said Coker derisively. "Everybody knows it was you, and that you meant it for Compton. It wouldn't have come out if Bunter hadn't seen you getting out of your study window. You're not going to whop him for that, if I can help it."

"You meddling fool!" roared Carne. "Bunter's up for six for pilfering."

"Gammon!" said Coker.

"Will you get out of my way?"

"No," said Coker deliberately, "I won't! Here, you men!" Coker bawled into the games study. "Here, come and turn this swab out of the Fifth!"

And at the sight of Carne—the most unpopular man at Greyfriars, and especially in Compton's Form—a crowd of the Fifth came surging out.

Grinning, they bunched in the Fifth Form passage, completely blocking Carne's way. Blundell, perhaps by accident, pushed against him, and he retreated a step. Fitzgerald trod on his foot, and he retreated another step. Coker grinned at him.

From the other side of the landing a crowd of juniors turned up as if by magic. Temple, Dabney & Co. of the Fourth, Hobson and Hoskins of the Shell, and five or six Remove fellows, gathered to look on, with grinning faces.

Carne was almost white with rage.

He was a prefect of the Sixth, with boundless authority behind him—in theory, at least. In theory he could order any of those fellows—even the great Blundell himself—to bend over and take six. But when a prefect was unpopular and despised, theory did not always accord with practice. The big

games men of the Fifth despised Carne, and showed it plainly. They would have laughed had he ordered them to bend over. It was only the fact that he was a prefect that saved him from being booted down the staircase; but it did not save him from open derision and contempt.

Blundell calmly summed it up. "You'd better go, Carne," he said. "You're not wanted here."

"I want Bunter."
"Eh? Bunter's not here."

"He ran up the passage—"
"Did he? Well, I dare say he ran out at the other end! Hadn't you better go?"

"No!" said Carne, between his teeth, with a desperate attempt to stand on his prefectorial dignity and authority. "And if you get in my way I'll report you to the Head!"

"Dear me!" said Blundell. "Well, cut off!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a yell from the juniors across the landing. They rather liked hearing a prefect of the Sixth told to cut off, like a fag of the Second Form.

"Barge him out!" roared Coker.

Nine or ten of the Fifth moved on Carne. They did not boot him or punch him, realising that even with a prefect like Carne a fellow had to exercise some restraint. But they elbowed him, and they pushed him, and they trod on his toes. He was hustled across the landing to the stairs, panting with rage, and certainly he would have toppled over as he was hustled and hustled, if he had not stepped down.

He did step down. It was a humiliating surrender for a Sixth Form man and a prefect; but he had to do it, and he did it. Red with rage, Carne went down the stairs, followed by mocking smiles from the Fifth Formers and loud laughter from the juniors.

On the lower stairs he passed a handsome, athletic figure coming up—Valentine Compton, the new man in the Fifth. The glare of concentrated rage he gave that Fifth Former made Compton stare. Carne clenched his hand and half-raised it; but he thought better of it, and hurried down the stairs, leaving Compton of the Fifth staring.

It was an unexpected and happy respite for Billy Bunter. That fat youth was not seen again till the bell rang for dinner, and then he darted into Hall at the last moment, after the prefects had gone up to the high table. From that high table Carne gave him a look—a look expressive of awful things to come, which the Owl of the Remove was, fortunately, too short-sighted to catch, otherwise it really might have spoiled his appetite for dinner!

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

The Artful Dodger!

"PUZZLE—find Bunter!" said Skinner of the Remove.

And the Removites chortled. After dinner, that day, Bunter escaped by a hairsbreadth. Carne looked for him a minute too late.

A minute was more than enough for Bunter. He had done the vanishing trick again, and some of the fellows guessed that he had vanished into the quarters of the Fifth, having found a safe refuge there before.

Anyhow, he had vanished, and stayed vanished.

Nobody expected to see him till afternoon class. Then it was an interesting question whether Carne would nab him on his way to the Remove-room.

By this time every fellow in the Remove was keenly interested in the hectic career of the fat Owl. Every fellow was ready to lend him a hand in keeping clear of Arthur Carne.

Dodging a prefect in this remarkable way was an unheard-of proceeding, but the circumstances were unusual. Every fellow knew that Carne was down on Bunter for reasons quite unconnected with his duties as a prefect.

"The fact is," said Johnny Bull, "Carne wants to whop that fat clump for spotting him in the fog that day last week when he crooked Coker, taking him for Compton. If Bunter hadn't barged in, Carne would never have been spotted. Carne's been looking for an excuse, and that blithering bloater's handed him one."

"Fat lot he cares whether Bunter snaffled Smithy's toffee!" agreed Bob Cherry. "That's just gammon!"

"The gammonfulness is terrific!" declared Hurreo Janset Ram Singh. "But the absurd Bunter has asked for it."

"There's the rub!" said Harry Wharton. "If Carne had picked on him for nothing, I'd go straight to Quelch and put it up to him. But I can't go to Quelch and say that Bunter doesn't want to be whopped for grub-raiding!"

"Ha, ha!" chuckled Nugent. "Not quite!"

"Anyhow, we'll help him all we can," said Bob. "After class he will be safe

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in the Remove passage. If Carne comes up there, we'll barge him out, the same as the Fifth did this morning."

"Barge a prefect!" said Nugent, with a whistle.

"The Fifth did!" said Bob. "The Remove can do the same. The fact is, that Carne wouldn't be a prefect at all if the Head knew him as well as we do. The other prefects won't back him up much. They all know what he did last week, though they found him not guilty on the evidence. Bunter couldn't identify the senior who jumped out of Carne's window in the fog, but everybody knows it was Carne, and what he was after. He can't throw his weight about a lot now."

"That's so," agreed Harry. "If he starts throwing it about in the Remove, we'll chance it and barge him out like the Fifth."

"And glad of the chance?" grunted Johnny Bull.

When the time drew near for afternoon class there was rather keen excitement in the Remove.

Carne of the Sixth was seen standing in the Form-room passage, with his ashplant under his arm.

Obviously he was waiting there for Bunter.

Bunter had to go into class, and whether he was early or late, it was not clear how he was going to escape Carne.

When the news spread in the Remove that Carne was doing sentry-go in the Form-room passage, the Removites began to gather there very early for class.

Carne scowled at them, and they

grinned back at Carne. It was still ten minutes before Mr. Quelch was expected, and more and more of the Remove gathered. Skinner started a conversation intended for Carne's ears.

"Has it come out who hacked Coker the other day, you men?" asked Skinner.

"Not officially," said Vernon-Smith, "but I hear that it's generally supposed to have been a Sixth Form man."

"Man who was left out of the football, I hear," said Bob Cherry, catching on to the game, as it were, and playing up.

"Some dud who fancied that Wingate ought to have shoved him into the first eleven!" remarked Peter Todd.

"That's it!" said Squiff. "In the fog he took Coker for Compton. Of course, it was Compton the rotter was after."

"Rotten trick to crook a man for a football match," said Hazeldene.

"Oh, absolutely rotten!" agreed Tom Brown.

"From what I hear, the fellow is an absolute rotter, a rank outsider!" said the Bounder.

"Dirty trick!" said Bolsover major.

"Foul!" said Russell.

"I guess it was the outside edge!" said Fisher T. Fish. "I'll tell a man, you guys, it was the elephant's side-whiskers, and then some!"

"I wish the fellow could hear me now!" said Vernon-Smith, "I'd like him to hear that I think he's a sneaking, rotten worm!"

"Yes, rather, a rotten toad!"

"A terrific and preposterous rotter!"

Carne appeared to hear nothing. But the grinning Removites watched his ears growing redder and redder.

As they mentioned no name, Carne could do nothing. He could not assume that they were talking about him.

He moved farther along the passage, to get out of hearing of the cheery juniors. The whole bunch moved along after him. If Carne of the Sixth was going to haunt that passage, Carne was going to hear what the Remove thought of the officially unknown person who had crooked Coker.

For ten minutes, that conversation went on, the juniors "throwing the ball to one another," so to speak; while Carne's ears burned crimson, and his eyes gleamed, and he breathed harder and harder.

Then Mr. Quelch came up the passage, to let his Form into their Form-room. He did not come alone.

By the side of the Remove master's angular figure, trotted a fat form. All the Remove gazed at Bunter. Carne glared at him. There was a general chuckle among the juniors.

Bunter had emerged from his hiding-place, wherever it was, when the bell went. But he had not come direct to the Form-room. He had watched for Quelch to leave his study, and was coming along with Quelch.

He fully expected Carne to be on the watch for him; but under the Remove master's wing he felt safe.

And he was! Any other prefect, with his duty to do, would have explained the matter to Mr. Quelch. Bunter would have got his "six." But he would not have got the tremendous thrashing that Carne intended for him. With Mr. Quelch in the offing, Carne could not lay on the ashplant as he intended to lay it on. Either he had to let Bunter off with the customary flicks, or else he had to postpone the punishment.

Evidently he decided on the latter

course, for he walked away with his ashplant still under his arm.

Bunter, safe in his Form-master's company, rolled into the Form-room with the Remove. The Removites grinned as they went in. They had wondered what would be Bunter's next dodge: and this was it!

Class that afternoon seemed as long as usual to the rest of the Remove: but to Billy Bunter it seemed short. For once, Bunter would have been willing to swallow a bigger dose of Mr. Quelch's instruction. So far he had dodged successfully: but he dreaded what would happen after class. He had had a lot of luck in his present peculiar career as a hunted hare: but he could not expect it to last indefinitely.

However, class came to an end: and the Remove marched out.

Bunter lingered in the doorway after the rest.

"I say, you fellows, is that beast about?" he whispered, blinking anxiously down the corridor through his big spectacles.

There was a chuckle. The Sixth were already out: and Carne could be seen waiting at the end of the passage, by all but the short-sighted Owl.

"There he is, waiting for you, old bean!" grinned Skinner.

Bunter backed into the Form-room, while the juniors walked away.

Mr. Quelch, sitting at his high desk, glanced at Bunter in surprise.

The fat Owl blinked at him.

"If—if you please, sir—" he stammered.

"What is it, Bunter?" asked the Remove master.

"I—I made one or two mistakes in my prose this afternoon, sir—"

Mr. Quelch stared at him.

"You made a large number of mistakes, Bunter!" he rapped. "You were even more careless and inattentive than usual. What do you mean?"

"I—I—I mean, I'd like to do the paper over again, sir, if—if you don't mind," stammered Bunter. "I—I don't like being so backward in my Latin, sir."

Mr. Quelch gazed at him.

If the bust of Socrates that adorned the Form-room had made that remark, Mr. Quelch could hardly have been more astonished.

It was the first time in history that Billy Bunter had ever shown the slightest sign of desiring to improve his knowledge of the Latin language, or of anything else.

"Bless my soul!" said the astonished Remove master.

"If—if you don't mind, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"My dear boy, certainly not!" said Mr. Quelch quite genially. Astonished as he was, he could not help being pleased. This sudden and surprising thirst for knowledge on Bunter's part looked like a sign of grace. It gave Mr. Quelch new hopes of that backward and obtuse member of his Form. "Most certainly you may do the Latin paper over again, Bunter, and I will give you my personal assistance in dealing with it."

Bunter suppressed a groan.

All Bunter wanted was to sit in the Form-room while Quelch was there, and wait till Carne cleared off. He had to have some excuse, and he was prepared to sit and blink at a Latin paper! But to do that Latin prose, with the assistance of his Form-master, was a horse of quite another colour.

Almost at once he decided to chance it with Carne!

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But not quite. Latin prose with Quelch was better than the ashplant with Carne. The hapless Owl made up his fat mind to it.

He was glad of that, when Carne of the Sixth, having seen the Remove march off without Bunter, came up the passage, and glanced into the Form-room. Seeing Bunter at work at his desk, with kindly help from Quelch, he concluded that the fat junior had been kept in, and once more the whopping had to be indefinitely postponed.

When Bunter escaped at last from Latin and Quelch, Carne was no longer in the offing: and in less than a minute after leaving the Form-room, Billy Bunter performed the vanishing trick again.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

Chucked Out!

COMPTON of the Fifth stared. He was in his study after class: the study he shared with Blundell, the captain of the Fifth. Blundell was not there, however: Compton was alone in the study, sitting at the table with Latin books and papers before him.

Great games man as he was, Valentine Compton was a very keen man in class: high in the esteem of his Form-master, Mr. Prout. He had a natural taste for the classics, which Blundell good naturedly regarded as an amiable weakness. A man who played games like Compton, could work if he liked without losing caste thereby. Compton was the only man in the Fifth who had ever asked for library leave: which Mr. Prout had been delighted to grant him. Now, while most of his friends were more strenuously occupied, Compton sat at Latin in his study, and he looked up and stared as the door opened, and a fat face and a large pair of spectacles appeared in the doorway.

He stared blankly at Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl, however, did not observe him there for a moment. He blinked over a fat shoulder, stepped quickly into the study and shut the door after him. On the inner side of the door, he gasped with relief.

"Well!" said Compton. "What's this game, you young ass?"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He jumped.

"Want anything here?" asked the puzzled Fifth Former.

"Oh lor'! I—I didn't know you were here, Compton!" stammered Bunter.

"I—I forgot you were a swot, old chap!"

Compton laughed.

"Not that I really think you're a swot," Bunter hastened to explain. "Of course, a splendid chap like you ain't a swot! I know you're only pulling old Prout's leg, old bean."

"You young sweep—"

"Oh, really, Compton—"

"Well, get out!"

"I—I say, Compton, I—I came here to—to speak to you specially—"

"When you didn't know I was here?"

"Oh! I—I—I mean—"

"Well, what the dickens do you mean, you young ass?"

"I—I mean, I—I—d-d-do you mind if I—I stay here a few minutes?" stammered Bunter. "I—I'm keeping away from Carne."

"Oh!" said Compton. He shook his head. "You can't dodge a prefect in a Fifth Form study, Bunter. Don't be a young ass!"

"You—you see, I—I never did it!" gasped Bunter. "I never bagged Smithy's toffee, Compton, and Carne only jumped on me for bagging it because he wanted an excuse for whopping me. I never touched the toffee, and besides, Carne made me give it back to Smithy—"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"The beast is really after me because I spotted him the other day, when he was looking for you in the fog and crooked Coker," groaned Bunter. "It's just an excuse about that beastly toffee! Lot he cares whether I bag Smithy's toffee, the cad! I—I've been dodging him all day. I—I say, c-c-can I stop here a bit, Compton?"

"You'll have to clear off at tea-time, you young ass—"

"I—I—I'll stay to tea here, if—if you like, Compton," ventured Bunter. "I—I'd like to tea with you. You—you're so nice."

"You'd better clear!" said Compton, laughing. "If you've got six coming, the sooner you get it, and get it over, the better."

"I—I wouldn't mind if it was Wingate or Gwynne," groaned Bunter. "But it ain't just six, you see; it's going to be a fearful whopping—the beast is going to skin me, and pretend that it's just six! Don't I know him?"

Compton made no answer to that. As a matter of fact, he had no doubt that Bunter had it right. Under cover of a licking, which a Sixth Form prefect was entitled to administer, Carne was going to wreak his grudge on the helpless Owl.

There was a quick and heavy tread in the passage.

Bunter quaked.

A door was heard to open, then another door. It was easy to guess that someone was coming up the passage, looking into the studies.

"Oh lor'!" groaned Bunter.

Compton's door opened the next moment. The fat Owl fairly flew across the study and jumped behind Compton's chair.

He had found a safe refuge in the Fifth earlier that day, owing to Coker. No doubt Carne had guessed that he would seek seclusion in the same quarter again. Carne stood in the doorway, looking in, and his eyes glinted as he saw Bunter. The fat Owl's career as a hunted hare had come to an end at last! He was run down and cornered!

"Oh!" said Carne. "Here you are!"

"Oh crikey!" gasped Bunter.

"So you've been hiding here, have you?" said Carne. He slipped his ashplant down into his hand. "Come out of that, Bunter, and bend over!"

"This is my study, Carne," said Compton mildly.

"And you let a junior hide in it when a prefect is looking for him?" sneered Carne. "Come here, Bunter!"

"Oh lor'!"

Bunter remained behind Valentine Compton's chair.

Carne strode round the table, grasped him by the collar, and hooked him away.

The fat Owl yelled with apprehension.

"Now bend over!"

"Yaroooh!"

With an iron grip on Bunter's collar, the Sixth Former bent him over a chair.

The ashplant rose and fell.

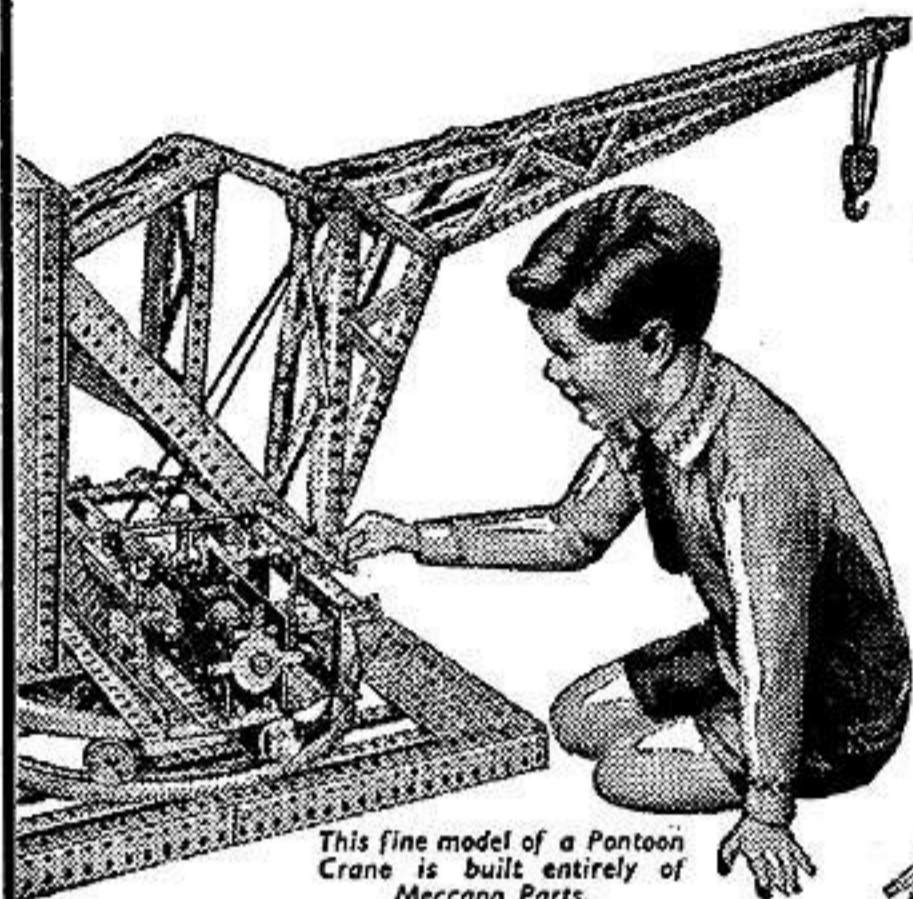
Swipe!

"Whhhhooooop!"

Compton set his lips. His brow darkened as he looked on. A fellow in the Fifth had no right and no power to interfere with a Sixth Form prefect. Carne was answerable to the headmaster

(Continued on page 10.)

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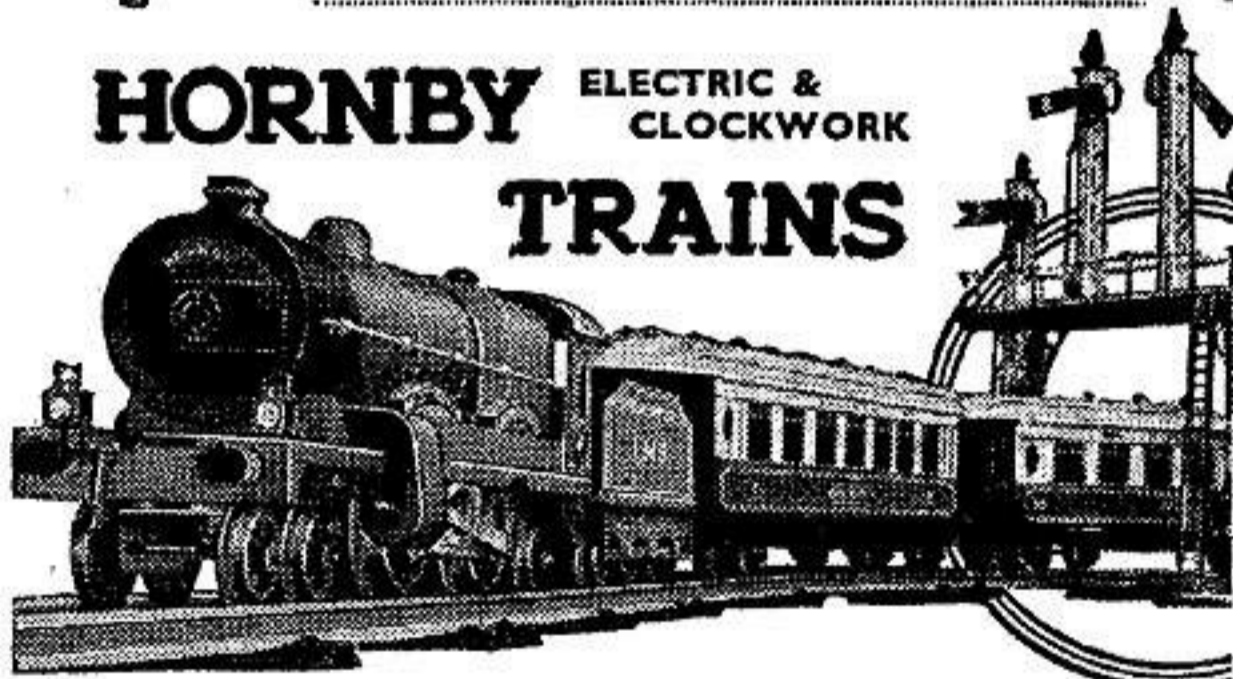
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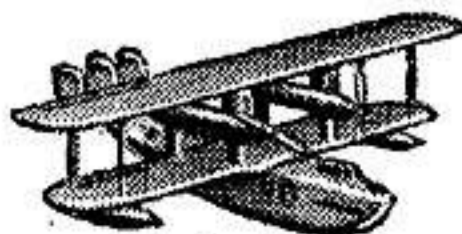


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—and to no one else. But it was perfectly clear that this was not going to be "six" in the ordinary sense. No Greyfriars prefect was supposed to lay on the cane as if he were beating a carpet. No one but a bully and a brute in a bad temper would have laid it on like that.

Swipe!
The ash came down again, almost crashing.

Bunter yelled and howled and roared. But he had no chance of dodging this time; Carne was taking care of that. He kept a grip on the fat Owl's collar with his left, while he lashed with his right.

Swipe!
Bunter fairly shrieked.
"Stop that!" Compton jumped to his feet. "Stop that, Carne! Leave that kid alone! Do you hear?"

Carne gave him a look.
"Are you going to give orders to a prefect, you cheeky cad?" he sneered.
"I've told you to stop it."

"I'll show you exactly how much I'll stop it!" said Carne. And the ash went up again.

Before it could come down Compton stepped closer, caught Carne's arm, and forced it back: then with a wrench he grasped the ash away from the prefect and tossed it out of the open doorway into the passage.

"That's enough!" he said. "You're not going to touch that kid again! Let go his collar!"

"Hands off!" yelled Carne, mad with rage. "Why, you cur, you lay hands on me and I'll take you to the Head to be sacked!"

"I've told you to let go that kid's collar!"

"Ow! Wow!"—from Bunter. "Yow-ow-ow!"

"Will you let him go?" roared Compton.
"No, I won't!"

"Then I'll make you!"
Handling a prefect was a tremendously serious matter. That day the Fifth Form men had hustled and hustled Carne, elbowed him and trodden on his toes; but even Blundell had not gone to the length of actually laying hands on him. Now the new fellow in the Fifth went to that length, and put plenty of beef into it. Whatever the consequences, he would not—and could not—allow the bully of the Sixth to give Bunter any more.

He wrenched Carne away from the fat Owl with a strength that the Sixth Form man could not resist.

Carne went staggering across the study in Compton's grip, and his grasp loosened on Bunter's collar.

Bunter did not lose that opportunity. He made a wild bound for the door and shot out of Compton's study like a pip from an orange.

There was a patter of flying footsteps in the passage, and Billy Bunter was gone.

In the study the Fifth Form man and the Sixth Form man struggled fiercely. Carne was panting with rage.

"You bound!" he hissed, between his teeth. "I'll have you sacked for this! Do you hear? Sacked!"

"Get out!"
"You rotter—you— Oh!"

Swung off his feet, Carne went hurtling through the doorway; he crashed full length in the Fifth Form passage.

He sprawled there, gasping for breath. Compton stood in the doorway, breathing hard, looking at him, his hands clenched.

Carne staggered up. It was clear that the Fifth Form man was ready to

knock him backwards if he came on again, and Carne did not come on; he backed away, gasping.

"You'll go up to the Head for this!" he panted.

"Get out, you cur!"
Compton shut his door.

Carne hesitated a moment or two. He had been thrown out of the study on his neck, and he was boiling with rage, but he realised that it was useless to ask to be thrown out again; he tramped away down the passage to the stairs.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER.

Putting it Plain!

LODER of the Sixth shook his head.

"I wouldn't!" he said.
"I jolly well wouldn't!" said Walker.

Carne stared at them savagely. He was in his study, dusting and brushing, putting himself to rights after that tussle with Compton of the Fifth. Loder and Walker had looked in, with rather sardonic faces, to see him.

That tussle in the Fifth was all over the House now. Three or four Fifth Form men had seen Carne pitched neck and crop out of Compton's study. Billy Bunter had spread the news among the juniors that Compton had whopped Carne. The House buzzed with it. It was a thrilling question what was going to follow.

In ordinary circumstances, handling a prefect meant an interview with the Head, and, in all probability, the sack for the offender. The prefectorial system could not exist unless the headmaster backed up the prefects.

But Carne had made himself so unpopular and so despised that he had quite lost the respect due to his position.

Everybody knew that if he rowed with a good-tempered fellow like Compton, the blame was his. Everybody knew that he loathed Compton for—as he regarded it—bagging his place in the first eleven, and everybody suspected him of having tried to crock his football rival by a treacherous trick. In the present state of affairs most fellows thought that Carne would not have the nerve to refer the matter to the Head—and that he would be a fool if he did!

Loder and Walker of the Sixth were strongly of that opinion.

They were not so pally as of old with Arthur Carne these days. Carne had displeased them first by throwing over smokes and gee-gees in favour of football; then came the affair of the crocking of Coker in the fog, which was rather too "thick" even for the black sheep of the Sixth. Both for bad and for good reasons, they rather barred Carne these days. Still, when he told them that he was going to have Compton of the Fifth up before the Head, they felt friendly enough to give him advice for his own good—and their advice was to let it drop.

"You wouldn't," repeated Carne.
"You'd let a Fifth Form man handle you, and get by with it, Loder? By gum, I'll have him bunked. The Head's bound to back me up, so long as I'm a prefect."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Loder. "But do you think you'll stay a prefect, if the whole thing comes out before the Head?"

"What do you mean, you fool?" snarled Carne.

"I mean that you haven't a leg to stand on," said Gerald Loder. "You've pitched into that fat young idiot Bunter, because he spotted you the

other day; and you're a fool for your pains! Oh, yes, I know you had an excuse; but it doesn't wash! And from what I hear, you've swiped him so hard that Compton had to stop you. Is that the sort of thing you want Dr. Locke to hear? Don't be a fool, Carne!"

"Yes; don't play the goat, old bean!" said Walker. "You're more likely to lose your prefect's job than to get Compton sacked. Have a little sense!"

"Oh, shut up!" snarled Carne. "I'm going to have him up before the Head, I tell you!"

"Then you're a silly ass!" said Loder. "You'll find all the other prefects against you—"

"I don't care!"
"Please yourself," said Walker. "You're an ass!" And Walker and Loder left Carne's study together.

In the passage they passed Wingate of the Sixth, heading for the study they had left.

George Wingate had a grim expression on his face as he stepped into Carne's study. Carne gave him a bitter look. He had no doubt that the captain of Greyfriars had come there to put in a word for Compton. As a highly valued recruit in the first eleven, Compton was a fellow Wingate liked and esteemed. Certainly he did not want him landed in trouble with the Head. Carne's lip curled bitterly. Wingate should see whether he could get the fellow off, after what he had done.

"You've come here to speak about Compton!" he snapped, before the Greyfriars captain could utter a word.

"Yes," said Wingate.
"Well, don't. He's going up to the Head to answer for striking a prefect," sneered Carne. "Sorry you'll lose such a good man from your team if he's bunked."

Wingate gave him a steady look.
"I don't think Compton will be bunked," he said. "I've come here to tell you that if he goes to the Head, I go with him. But if you've got any sense, you'll let the matter drop."

"Shall I?" said Carne, between his teeth.

"You'd better. I've looked into the matter, as head prefect. You've whopped a junior—young Bunter—in a way that would disgrace a hooligan in a slum."

"Take care what you say, Wingate!"
"I've come here to speak plainly. You're to let Bunter alone. If you touch him again, I'll report you to the Head myself."

Carne caught his breath.
"I'm done with Bunter!" he muttered.

"You're done with Compton, too. Take him to the Head, if you like. I shall go with him, and tell Dr. Locke that, in my opinion, he was bound to interfere to prevent a sag being ill-used by a bully."

"Wingate!"
"I mean it—every word!" said the Greyfriars captain. "I fancy Dr. Locke will know how to judge between us, Carne. Put it to the test, if you like."

Carne stared at him, breathless with fury. He had disregarded good advice from Loder and Walker; but he could not disregard this. If Wingate was in earnest, he dared not go to the Head. And it was clear that Wingate was in deadly earnest.

"So—so—so you're standing by that rotter!" he breathed at last. "You back him up in defying the Sixth and attacking a prefect."

"What's the good of that?" snapped Wingate. "The chap's the best-tempered, and the best-conducted fellow in his Form. He's friendly with everybody in the school, except you. He wouldn't have touched you, except that you forced him to. You know it as well as I do. As for calling him a rotter, it's you that's the rotter! I've known him only a few weeks; but I've never seen a fellow so thoroughly decent in every way."

"Because you choose to keep your eyes shut," snarled Carne. "He's good at games—and you don't care for anything else. You keep an eye on Price of the Fifth—never on Compton."

"You're not fool enough to think him anything like that dingy worm Price, I suppose?" said Wingate, staring.

"Well, I'll tell you something," said Carne. "I've found him out. He's taken you in, and he's taken the whole school in; but I've spotted him. He's a fellow with secrets to keep, and I've found him out."

Wingate laughed.

"Well, as head prefect, I'm entitled to hear what awful discoveries you've made," he said. "What have you found out—apart from the fact that he can play your head off at Soccer?"

"He has friends outside the school—acquaintances that he'd never dare mention," said Carne. "What do you think of that?"

"Rot!"

"He gets letters written in a secret code—"

"Mad?" asked Wingate.

"I've seen him reading one."

"You unspeakable rotter!" said the Greyfriars captain. "Are you telling me that you've looked at a fellow's letter?"

"Never mind that! He has letters written in some sort of a queer code that nobody would understand but himself. Do you think he gets them from friends he would care to mention to the Head?" sneered Carne.

"You're making some silly mistake. You can't know anything about his private correspondence. Is that the lot?"

"He smokes in his study—"

"Blundell would heave a Latin die at his head if he did. Don't be a bigger fool than you can help, Carne!"

"I've picked up a packet of cigarettes in his study."

"What were you doing there?"

"A prefect is entitled to look in a study, if he thinks the rules are being broken there. I looked in the day of the Rookwood match. And I picked up a packet of cigarettes."

Wingate looked long and hard at Carne. He did not speak for a full minute. When he did speak, his voice was very distinct.

"I don't believe you, Carne. If that's the truth, the packet was dropped there by some other fellow. But I don't believe you. Take this tip from me. If you're going to carry on your feud with Compton, keep inside the limit. If you found smokes in his study, you're free to report him to Prout. Go and do it; and I'll walk after you, and tell Prout that if you really found smokes in that study, it's my belief that you took them there to find. If that's what you want, get on with it!"

Carne stood dumb.

Without another word the Greyfriars captain left the study.

Carne, still dumb, stood staring at the door that closed after him.

THE SEVENTH CHAPTER.

Two in the Dark!

HERBERT VERNON - SMITH

caught his breath. Strong and steady as the Bounder's nerve was, it was shaken for a moment.

He stood very still in the darkness, hardly breathing.

It was black as a hat on the big landing. Greyfriars School was deep in silence and slumber. It was half-past eleven, and at that hour the last door had closed; the last light was out.

Smithy had believed that he was the only one wakeful in the great building.

The scapegrace of the Remove had been out of bounds after lights out. It was at that late hour that he had returned. He had climbed in at the window of the Remove box-room; trod softly along the Remove passage, and reached the big landing. He had a flash-lamp in his pocket; but he did not need to turn it on, neither would he have ventured to do so. He was stepping across softly towards the upper staircase, to steal back to his dormitory, when a sound came from close at hand in the dark.

Within a few feet of him, utterly unseen in the blackness of the winter night, someone was passing, with a tread almost as stealthy as his own.

Smithy did not think of burglars.

ANOTHER STUNNING SCHOOL STORY—

"Billy Bunter's Christmas Party!"

in next week's

GRAND CHRISTMAS NUMBER!

No burglar who knew his business would want to penetrate into that part of the House. His first thought was of a master or a prefect, who suspected that a young rascal had gone out of bounds, and was watching for him. Which was a good deal more alarming to Smithy than any burglar. For if he was caught out of his dormitory at that hour of the night, obviously returning from a reckless excursion, it meant an interview with his headmaster, and even chances whether the outcome was a Head's flogging or the "sack."

The Bounder had chanced it often enough. And now he wondered, with a throb at his heart, whether he had chanced it once too often.

For the next minute his feelings were not enviable. He waited for the light to flash on, and reveal him to the eyes of authority.

But no light flashed on. And that stealthy step passed, and died away up the Fifth Form passage as his keen ear easily detected.

He breathed hard and deep.

He had not been heard, or seen; he was not suspected! That prowler of the dark, whoever he was, was not concerned about Herbert Vernon-Smith of the Remove. He had quite other business on hand.

And, as he reflected, the Bounder fancied that he could guess what it was, and he grinned in the dark.

The unseen prowler had gone up the Fifth Form passage. Nobody, so far as

Smithy knew, could have any business there but a Fifth Form fellow.

"Compton!" breathed the Bounder.

He had no doubt of it.

In all Greyfriars, only Herbert Vernon-Smith knew Compton's strange secret—and the Fifth Former never dreamed that he knew!

Only Smithy knew that Valentino Compton worked hand-in-glove with the smuggling gang, of which his uncle, Captain Compton, of the yacht *Firefly*, was the chief, and leader.

When he had first made the discovery he had taken counsel with Harry Wharton, who laughed at the idea, as any other Greyfriars fellow would have laughed. Since then the Bounder had said nothing.

Partly owing, perhaps, to the lawless strain in his own nature, partly to his genuine liking and admiration for Compton of the Fifth, he had resolved that no word or act of his should bring exposure and ruin to the schoolboy smuggler.

But he was equally resolved to defeat the smuggling game, so far as he could, and already he had caused one consignment of contraband goods to fall into the hands of Inspector Grimes, at Courtfield.

He listened intently.

A few minutes ago the Bounder would have given a term's ample pocket money to be safe back in bed in the Remove dormitory. Now, however, he was not thinking of bed. He was thinking of another move in his peculiar contest with Captain Compton.

He trod softly into the Fifth Form passage.

At a distance ahead of him he heard a door softly open. He could see nothing, but he was sure that it was the door of Compton's study. What other man in the Fifth could be prowling at nearly midnight?

But it was easy to make sure.

The door that had opened closed softly. Vernon-Smith trod along the passage on tiptoe, counting the doors as he passed them in the dark. He stopped at Study No. 5—Compton and Blundell's study. There was a faint sound of a movement within. Certainly, it could not be Blundell there. Who could it be but Compton?

From the keyhole came a glimmer of light. A flashlamp had been turned on in the study.

The Bounder grinned.

Smithy knew why Compton of the Fifth had obtained "library leave." It gave him free and unsuspected access to the library corridor, in which was the secret panel that gave admittance to the underground passage leading down to the sea-cave. And he had not the slightest doubt that the schoolboy smuggler used that underground passage at times, when he could disappear without being missed.

But once, at least, Smithy knew, he had gone at night. Now Smithy had no doubt that he had gone by night again, and had returned with a packet of contraband goods from the sea-cave. The morrow was a half-holiday, and no doubt he would be going out of gates, to hand over the contraband to some confederate, or leave it in a hidden spot to be picked up, as he had done before.

The light in the study appeared, and disappeared, and appeared again, at the keyhole. It looked as if the fellow with the flashlamp was moving about the room in search of something.

That was rather perplexing to the Bounder.

He could guess that the smuggling schoolboy had some secret place in the

study where he hid the guilty goods till he had an opportunity to take them out of the school. But he would have expected him to go straight to it. He did not expect Compton to be more than a few minutes in the study. And after he was gone it was the Bounder's intention to search for what he had left there and to take measures for it to reach the hands of the authorities. He was prepared to dodge away in the dark when the door opened.

But the door did not open.

Minute followed minute, and the light still moved about the room, with the occasional soft sound of a stealthy foot-step, and of some articles of furniture being cautiously moved.

Vernon-Smith grew more and more puzzled.

From what he could see, and what he could hear, it looked as if someone was searching the study.

Compton, obviously, could not be searching his own study. For the first time a doubt smote the Bounder. Was it Compton, after all?

Who else could it be? Unless—

The Bounder suppressed a whistle.

Was there some other fellow who suspected the schoolboy smuggler?

The thought of Wharton came into his mind, but he dismissed it at once. The captain of the Remove had laughed at his suspicion of that splendid fellow, Compton; but, had he shared it, he was not the fellow to act in this secret and surreptitious way. Who else? Carne of the Sixth would have jumped with joy at getting such a handle against his enemy. But Carne could know nothing. How could he?

But when he had stood for twenty chilly minutes in the dark, outside that door, the Bounder could doubt no longer. It was not Compton in the study, but some one who, for whatever reason, was searching the room. Not a master, it was certain. A master would have come openly in the daylight. But who?

The Bounder stooped at last, and peered through the keyhole. He did not like using Billy Bunter's methods; but he had to see who it was in Compton's study. No one who had a right there, that was certain.

The glimmer of the flash-lamp passed, and repassed, his watching eye. He had glimpses of a moving figure, whose, he could not guess. A senior, at all events, from the height. But who?

Whoever it was seemed to be searching the floor—moving chairs and desks and table, even the fender, turning back the carpet, peering and groping. That meant that he was searching for a suspected hiding-place under the floor—a loose board under the carpet. And as the Bounder watched there came a sudden suppressed exclamation within the room.

"By gum!"

Vernon-Smith gave a start. The voice was suppressed, almost husky, but he knew it. It was Carne of the Sixth who was searching Compton's study.

And he had made some discovery. He had the carpet turned back, and he was groping at the floor. Had he found a loose board? If so, the Bounder could guess what he was likely to find under it. The light was set on the floor now, and it gleamed on Carne's face. Smithy saw it clearly—tense, pale with excitement. Evidently he had discovered something. With lips set, the Bounder watched him as he opened a pocket-knife to prise up a section of the flooring.

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THE EIGHTH CHAPTER.

Carne Makes a Discovery!

ARTHUR CARNE breathed deep with excitement and triumph. His eyes blazed.

Little did he dream that a keen, watchful eye was on him at that moment. So far as he knew, he was the only fellow awake in all Greyfriars.

He was doing—or chose to think he was doing—his duty as a prefect. But certainly he would not have liked to be spotted doing it in that surreptitious way, at such an hour of the night. The Head expected his prefects to spot offenders, but most assuredly he did not expect them to use such methods as these.

Neither would Carne have ever thought of using such methods, but for his bitter determination to get his enemy where he wanted him.

Of Compton's connection with the smuggling gang Carne knew nothing, and suspected nothing. It was by chance circumstances that Vernon-Smith had learned of it, and Carne had not the remotest suspicion of anything of the kind. But he knew that Compton had a secret. He had seen the letter, evidently in code, and taken it for granted that it implied some such transactions as his own or Loder's—dealings with a bookmaker! He had picked up a packet of cigarettes in that study, and was quite unaware that Billy Bunter had dropped it there after snooping it from Price's secret store. He might have guessed something of the kind, but, like many others, he believed what he wanted to believe.

The belief was fixed in Carne's mind that his rival, who kept up so fair an outward show, was in secret a black-guard, like himself—worse than himself—screening his dingy rascalities under hypocritical pretences. He was going to find proof of it.

What Wingate had said showed how indubitable the proof would have to be before he could venture to act.

But that packet of cigarettes was, to Carne's mind, a straw which showed the way the wind blew. He had no doubt that a search would reveal more—much more—of Compton's secret escapades. That search could only be made secretly, at night—as Carne was making it now. And he was successful. Long and patient searching had been rewarded.

Under the carpet was a short section of floorboard. It was firm in its place, and any eye falling on it casually would not have noted that it could be moved. It was screwed down.

Anyone looking at it—which no one was likely to do—would have supposed that the old nails had worked loose, and that some fellow had screwed it down to secure it—more secure than before.

But Carne's gloating eyes noted, in the light of the flash-lamp, that the slots of the screws were bright and clean. Untouched, they would naturally have filled with dust under the carpet. Only a searching eye would have noted the fact, but Carne's eyes were very searching, and he knew that a screwdriver must have been recently used on those screws.

He had found the secret hiding-place in the study! He jabbed the strongest blade of his pocket-knife between the boards, to prise open the short section.

But the screws held it fast.

The Bounder heard him mutter an ejaculation of savage annoyance. There were four screws in the board, and they held it down, beyond the power of prising with a knife-blade.

Evidently, the fellow with secrets to keep, was careful in keeping them.

Every time he went to that hidden recess, he had to draw the screws. That must have occupied several minutes at least.

It was a lot of trouble to take for cigarettes, racing papers, or whatever it was the fellow kept there. Still, as he had set up to have a spotless reputation in the school, he could not be too careful. Especially with a study-mate like Blundell, who would have turned him down, and probably booted him out of the study had he known what Carne knew—or thought he knew!

Smokes, cards, racing papers, letters from racing men, perhaps—something dangerous, or it would not be guarded so carefully! Something that meant the sack for Valentine Compton, when it was brought to light! Carne had no doubt about that—though he little dreamed how terribly serious a discovery would follow the removal of that screwed board!

Smithy, with his eye at the keyhole, wondered why the prefect did not prise up the board. But he guessed how the matter stood, as Carne proceeded to use the blade of the pocket-knife as a screw-driver in an attempt to draw the screws.

The Bounder grinned. He could see now that Carne had discovered a section of board that was detached from the rest, but that it was screwed down. And he did not think that the spy of the Sixth would find a pocket-knife very useful for drawing screws.

Carne himself had little hope of success. But he had never dreamed of this, and he had no implement except his pocket-knife.

He tried again and again. The tip of the blade snapped off—but the screw did not stir. He tried the edge, but in vain. He rose from the spot, breathing hard with savage annoyance and disappointment.

The Bounder saw him pick up the flash-lamp, and move about the study again. He was looking for something, and Smithy guessed what. As Compton had to draw those screws every time he went to the secret recess, he must keep a screw-driver at hand, that seemed certain to Carne. He was searching the room for that tool.

He did not find it. Either it was well hidden, or, more likely, the fellow had a screw-driver attachment to a pocket-knife, and carried it in his pocket. Anyhow, Carne had no luck, and after five minutes of angry searching, he stopped again, and flashed the light on the screwed board.

The Bounder waited, and watched, curiously. He was deeply and intensely interested in Carne's investigations. Still more deeply, he was concerned for the schoolboy smuggler. What Carne was searching for, Smithy did not know—but he knew what he was likely to find, if he got that board up.

Suddenly, Carne stooped, and put the blade of his pocket-knife under his heel. Snap!

The blade was broken off short in the middle. Smithy caught his breath. He knew what that meant. Carne had now what he wanted. The blade, broken off sharp in the middle, was practically turned into a screw-driver.

The prefect bent over the board again, his eyes gleaming. In the light of the flash-lamp, he was in full view from the keyhole. Vernon-Smith could watch every movement.

The end of the broken blade was inserted into the slot of a screw. It turned—and turned. The screw was unwinding.

A minute—and Carne laid a drawn screw on the floor. He set to work on



The cupboard door flew open so suddenly that it took Mr. Quelch by surprise. The door flew, and Mr. Quelch flew, fairly spinning. As he spun away, a fat figure darted from the cupboard, in full flight. It tripped over one of Mr. Quelch's long legs, and roared. "Yoo-whoooooop!" "Bunter!" gasped Mr. Quelch.

the next. Another screw was drawn, another and another. All four were withdrawn at last.

Then it was easy to prise up the short board.

Carne jerked it out of place. Vernon-Smith caught the glitter in his eyes as he turned the flash-lamp on the orifice in the floor. The opening was two feet long, six or seven inches wide. How deep it was, Smithy could not see, but it must have been a foot or more.

"By gad!"

He heard Carne's suppressed exclamation. Breathless, he watched him reach into the orifice and grasp at something.

It was a packet that he drew out from under the floor.

Smithy could read the astonishment, mingled with satisfaction, in his face. He had made a discovery—but it was not what he expected.

Smokes, racing papers, letters, something or other of that kind, Carne had expected. What he found was a packet wrapped in thick brown paper, tied with string, and sealed strongly with sealing-wax. It was about twice the size of an ordinary brick. It was, in fact, such a packet as the one that Harry Wharton had picked up on the beach near the Shoulder—such a packet as the one that Vernon-Smith had taken from the hollow oak in Lantham Chase and sent to Mr. Grimes. It was, as the watching Bouncer knew, a packet of contraband goods, of small bulk, though of what nature he did not know. Carne, certainly, did not guess anything of the sort—and he knelt by the opening in the floor, the sealed packet in his hand, staring at it.

"What the thump—" Smithy heard his voice, muttering aloud in amazement. "What the dickens—what is that? Smokes—it can't be—sealed up

like that—or papers—or—or—what the dooce!"

Carne was utterly perplexed. The Bouncer grinned—Carne's muttered words giving him the clue to what the prefect was looking for, and had expected to find!

For several long moments Carne knelt there, staring at the packet. That it was not what he had expected to find, he knew. It could not be! But what was it?

In the name of all that was mysterious and incomprehensible, why did Compton of the Fifth conceal a sealed packet under his study floor?

He rose to his feet at last, and placed the packet on the study table. He was disappointed, puzzled, mystified. That he had been on the wrong track, Carne realised now. But he was on the track of something—what?

It was scarcely possible to suppose that a Fifth Form fellow was in possession of some article of great value, which he hid away so carefully for safety. But what was it—what could it be?

Carne did not know, and could not begin to guess—but he knew that the contents of that packet, whatever they were, would reveal the secret. But Smithy could see that he hesitated to break the seals.

So far, the spying prefect could take the view that he was doing a prefect's duty in unearthing the secrets of a rascally young blackguard. Now he could not pretend to himself that it was anything of that kind. Whatever that sealed packet might contain, it was not smokes, or racing papers, or book-maker's notes—it was nothing that came within the purview of a Greyfriars prefect. If he opened that packet, Carne had to admit to himself that he was acting as a spy. He hesitated—but the

watching Bouncer saw his face harden. He was making up his mind to it.

Vernon-Smith drew a deep breath. Taking hold of the door-handle, he rattled it suddenly.

There was a startled gasp from Carne. Instantly, he shut off the flash-lamp. The study was plunged into darkness, and in the darkness, Carne stood, trembling from head to foot with the fear of discovery.

THE NINTH CHAPTER.

A Mystery of the Dark!

VERNON-SMITH grinned, in the dark.

He could imagine Carne's feelings at that moment!

His grasp was still on the door-handle. Without a sound, he turned it and opened the study door.

From the darkness within, he heard Carne's suppressed breathing. He did not fear that the senior would turn on the light again. The suddenness with which Carne had shut it off showed his terror of being discovered there.

In the darkness, Carne stood, trembling, his heart beating like a hammer. He had not heard the door open—but that rattle of the door-handle, from outside, showed that someone was there.

If he was caught at his spying—the bare thought of it made him feel sick. What would the Greyfriars fellows say if they learned that he had searched a Fifth Form study in the middle of the night? What would the Head say?

Even had he found the evidence he had hoped to find against Compton, it would not have justified such methods. And he had found nothing—only a

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(Continued from page 13.)

sealed packet, of which the contents, for all he knew, might be quite harmless. If he was spotted there—

The sweat trickled down his face as he stood in momentary dread of a light being turned on to reveal him.

Who was it?

Had Compton suspected something, and come down from his dormitory? Had a master turned out in the middle of the night and heard some sound?

Carne could not begin to guess. It might be old Prout, who was known to be troubled with sleeplessness. At the thought of the light flashing on and revealing him to the astonished and indignant glare of Prout, Carne felt his knees knock together. What was he to say?

But no light came.

A long minute—a century long—crawled by. The darkness was unbroken!

Had he imagined that rattle at the door handle? Was it the wind? Was anyone there, after all? Nerves, perhaps.

Then he realised that there was a cold draught from the passage. The door was open.

He had not heard it. It had opened without a sound. But he heard a faint sound now—near him. It was a sound of a hand groping over the study table where he stood. Someone else was inside the study!

Who—what was it? Carne felt as if his head was turning round.

Someone was there! He knew that now. Who—why? A master would have turned on the light at once. Compton would have done so. But if it was neither, who and what was it?

Whoever it was, it was someone as stealthy as himself—someone who chose the dark. He was glad of that, at least; he was still unseen. Indeed, he wondered whether that mysterious someone knew that there was anybody in the room at all.

Someone—he could not begin to imagine who—had crept into Compton's study in the dark. Who—and why?

Another faint sound—this time from the passage. That someone, whoever he was, was gone again, as stealthily and mysteriously as he had come.

He had come and gone in the darkness, and had not seen Carne. The wretched spy breathed more freely, with the relief of his escape.

He stood listening.

But there was no further sound.

The unseen intruder had gone.

But for several long minutes Carne stood there, trembling, breathing irregularly, in a state of suppressed panic. Had he fancied the whole thing? It almost seemed to him that he had.

He moved at last.

The flash-lamp was in his hand. He ventured to turn on the light. With starting eyes he stared round the study.

The door was shut. It had shut as silently as it had opened. If, indeed, it

had opened at all, and the whole episode had not been a nervous fancy!

Carne pulled himself together. His nerves were twittering. Had it been, after all, a fancy, due to his twittering nerves? Then, as his glance fell on the table, he started, jumping almost clear of the floor.

The packet was gone!

Almost stupidly he stared at the place where it had lain. That place was empty. The sealed packet he had taken from the recess under the floor had vanished.

It was no nervous fancy, after all. Someone unseen had actually entered the study in the dark, and taken away the packet. That was the meaning of the groping sound he had heard close at hand.

Was it Compton? Who else could it be? But if it was, why had he chosen to move in the dark?

Why had he come and gone without a sound?

Carne pressed his hand to his brow. The mystery of it was too much for him. The sealed packet was gone. Whatever it contained he would never learn now.

But his chief thought was to go while the going was good—to get away unseen back to his own quarters. There was nothing further to be done in Compton's study, even if he had dared to linger after his alarm.

He stepped to the door.

His glance fell on the opening in the floor. But he dared not linger. Let it be found in the morning. Compton could explain it if he liked.

Carne shut off his light, opened the door softly, and peered into the darkness of the passage. All was dark and silent and still.

He crept away on tiptoe, only anxious to get back to his own quarters before an eye could fall on him. The mysterious prowler of the night, who had taken the packet, might be still up, and at every step Carne dreaded to see the gleam of a light turned on him.

But there was no light, no sound, and he crept across the landing and down the stairs, and almost panted with relief when he reached his study in the Sixth, and crept in and shut the door.

He was quite unaware that a grinning junior listened for the faint sound of that closing door!

Neither was he likely to guess that, assured that Carne was safe back in his quarters, that junior tiptoed a silent way to Compton's study in the Fifth.

In that study, Herbert Vernon-Smith turned on his pocket-torch. He grinned at the opening in the floor, and the loose board and the screws lying beside it.

Smithy was five minutes in the study. When he left the loose board was screwed down in its place, and the carpet replaced over it. There was nothing to meet surprised eyes in the morning, to show that the study had had nocturnal visitors.

The Bouncer was grinning when he crept into the Remove dormitory, and turned in in the dark. In his own study, No. 4 in the Remove, a sealed packet was locked up in his desk, unlikely ever to reach the hands of the associates of the schoolboy smuggler.

THE TENTH CHAPTER.

Smithy is Mysterious!

"I SAY, you fellows, what's Smithy up to?"

"Snuff!" suggested Bob Cherry.

"But I say, he's up to something," declared Billy Bunter positively.

"What about minding your own bizney, old fat bean?" asked Harry Wharton. "Ever thought of that?"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

It was in break the following morning. Harry Wharton & Co. were in the quad, discussing the coming Christmas holidays. When Billy Bunter rolled up they expected to hear him on the same topic, Bunter's arrangements for Christmas not being yet settled. Bunter had been heard to say in the Rag that he hadn't decided which to accept of the many invitations that had showered on him, which, to fellows who knew Bunter, meant that he had not yet succeeded in landing himself on any fellow for Christmas.

But the fat Owl, for the moment, was interested in another matter. The proceedings of Herbert Vernon-Smith seemed to have excited his curiosity—which, as they were no concern of Bunter's, was not surprising.

"It's jolly queer!" said Bunter, blinking at the Famous Five through his big spectacles. "Of course, when Smithy went into the tuckshop I thought he was going for tuck. What would any fellow think? I happened to follow him in—"

"You would!" agreed Bob.

"But he never bought any tuck—"

"And so the poor dog had none!" said Bob sympathetically.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But what did he want a cardboard box for?" asked Bunter.

"Eh? Might be going to send a parcel, fathead! I've asked Mrs. Mimble for a cardboard box before now," said Bob Cherry.

"Yes; but it had to be an exact size," said Bunter. "Smithy had the measurements written down in his pocket-book. He looked over more than a dozen boxes before he found one that would do."

"Wander away, old fat man!" said Bob.

"And then, the string!" said Bunter.

"The what?"

"Smithy wanted string, too. Of course, a fellow might want string to tie up a box, but why a special sort of string?"

"The whyfulness is terrific, my esteemed chattering Bunter!" grinned the Nabob of Bhanipur.

"Mrs. Mimble had to turn out her whole stock," said Bunter. "Smithy looked over lots and lots before he was satisfied with a ball of string. Isn't it jolly queer?"

"Jolly queer for any fellow to care two hoots whether he did or not!" agreed Bob. "Haven't you finished yet?"

"Well, there was the sealing-wax—"

"Sealing-wax?"

"Yes. Smithy sorted over the whole lot that Mrs. Mimble had in stock. He wanted red sealing-wax, but rather dark red. Isn't that jolly queer?"

Harry Wharton & Co. gazed at Bunter. Evidently he had been taking a deep interest in Smithy's proceedings that morning, and was puzzled. Certainly it was rather odd and unusual for a fellow to be extremely particular about the kind of string he bought at the school shop, and the shade of colour in the sealing-wax. But no fellow, except the inquisitive Owl, was likely to be interested.

"I say, you fellows, I asked him what he was up to, and he kicked me," said Bunter. "What do you think of that?"

"I think it was a jolly good idea!" declared Bob Cherry. "And I think we can't do better than follow Smithy's example. Turn round!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter rolled away without waiting for the chums of the Remove to follow Smithy's example.

Herbert Vernon-Smith passed the juniors going to the House. He had a bundle in his hand—apparently his purchases at Mrs. Mumble's shop, which had so surprised and interested the inquisitive Owl. Tom Redwing was standing near the doorway, and Smithy called to him.

"Here, Reddy, old bean—"

"Yes, Smithy?" Redwing turned round to his chum.

"Carry this bundle up to the study for me, will you, old man?" asked the Bounder. "I'm rather pressed for time; the bell goes in a few minutes."

"Certainly!" said Redwing.

He took the bundle and went into the House with it.

Vernon-Smith glanced round the quad. At a little distance Coker of the Fifth was talking to Potter and Greene. The Bounder walked towards them.

Harry Wharton & Co. watched him rather curiously. They could see that there was something "on," and wondered whether it was a jape on Coker. The Bounder was moving to get behind that great man, and Horace Coker did not see him coming.

"A Christmas cruise," Coker was saying as Smithy drew near. "I'd have liked old Compton to come home with me for Christmas—in fact, I've asked him. But it seems that he's going on his uncle's yacht for the vac. You saw that steam-yacht, the Firefly, that was at Pegg a few weeks ago; it belongs to his uncle, Captain Compton, and when I asked him about Christmas he said—'Yaroooop!'"

Coker gave a sudden howl, as his cap was snatched off his head from behind, and he received a sudden whack from it on the back of his neck.

Potter and Greene stared blankly at Smithy.

They had seen him approaching, but certainly without having the faintest idea of his intention.

Coker spun round like a humming top.

"What—who—what——" he stuttered.

Vernon-Smith jumped away, waving the cap and laughing.

"Race you for it, old bean!" he called out.

Coker of the Fifth stood almost petrified for a moment. He was accustomed to all sorts of cheek from Remove fellows, who never seemed able to understand what an important fellow Coker was; but this was the limit. For a Remove fellow to snatch off a Fifth Form senior's cap in the quadrangle and offer to race him for it, like some young ass in the Second Form playing a trick on another fag, was absolutely unheard of. Coker of the Fifth could really hardly believe that it had happened.

But it had. He glared, petrified; then he fairly bounded at Herbert Vernon-Smith.

"Look out, Smithy!" roared Bob Cherry.

But the Bounder was looking out. Waving the cap, he started at a rapid run across the quad, with Coker raging on his track.

"Go it, Smithy!" yelled Bolsover major.

"Put it on!" yelled Peter Todd.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, of all the silly asses!" said Harry Wharton. "It's not like Smithy to play a fag trick like that! What the dickens did he do it for?"

"Oh crumbs! Coker will get him!" exclaimed Bob.

Smithy was keeping well ahead in the chase; but suddenly his foot seemed to slip, he stumbled, and went over headlong.

Even then he had time to jump up and restart before Coker reached him. Instead of doing so, however, he remained where he had fallen. Sitting up, he clasped an ankle with both hands.

The next moment Coker was upon him.

"Now, you cheeky little tick——" roared Coker.

"Keep off, you fool!" yelled Vernon-Smith. "I've twisted my ankle!"

"Serves you jolly well right! I'll jolly well——"

"Rescue, Remove!" roared the Bounder.

But already a dozen Removites were speeding to the spot. The Famous Five arrived first. If Smithy was hurt, as seemed to be the case, it was no time for Horace Coker to wreak his just wrath on the junior who had snatched his cap.

Coker was promptly grabbed and dragged back.

"Easy does it, old bean!" grinned Bob Cherry. "Smithy's crooked——"

"I'll spifficate him!" roared Coker.

"Sit down, old bean."

Coker sat down—suddenly and hard. Two or three fellows helped Vernon-Smith to his feet. He stood on one leg, leaning heavily on Frank Nugent. He gave a groan.

"Hurt, old chap?" asked Bob.

"Oh! Ow! Help me to the House, some of you," said the Bounder faintly.

"Take his other arm, Harry."

The captain of the Remove took Smithy by the other arm; between them they helped him away to the House. Coker scrambled to his feet; but, the fact that Smithy was hurt having penetrated into his rather solid brain, he contented himself with fielding his cap, and went back to rejoin Potter and Greene. The Bounder limped painfully, and clung heavily to Wharton and Nugent as they helped him away.

"Ow! Hold on a minute!" he gasped, as they were passing in front of Mr. Quelch's study window. "Ow!"

Wharton and Nugent stopped, and the Bounder rested between them on one leg; he gave a deep groan. The sash of the Remove master's window shot up, and Mr. Quelch looked out.

"What is the matter, Wharton?" he called.

"Vernon-Smith's had a fall, sir, and twisted his ankle," answered Harry. "We're helping him in."

The Bounder gave a moan.

"Very well, take him in at once," said Mr. Quelch; and the juniors moved on towards the door.

Five or six sympathetic fellows went with them, ready to help if required. Redwing came down the stairs as they went into the House and hurried towards them with a startled face.

"What's up?" he exclaimed. "What has——"

"All serene! Only a bit of a sprain, old chap," said the Bounder. "If you fellows can help me to my study, I'll get some embrocation and rub on it. The bell will be going in a minute or two."

Wharton and Nugent and Redwing helped him up the stairs; Mr. Quelch rustled after them.

Herbert Vernon-Smith was a somewhat troublesome member of his Form, but that made no difference to the Form-master's concern for a fellow who was damaged. Had it been Bunter, Mr. Quelch might have suspected the genuineness of that damage—as class

was nearly due. But the Bounder, with all his faults, was no malingerer, and his Form-master—who suspected him of a good many things—did not suspect him of playing a trick to dodge class.

Smithy sank heavily in the armchair in his study; he gave a moan as he did so.

"Let's have a look at it, old chap," said Redwing.

"Give me the embrocation," said Vernon-Smith. "Ow! It's class in a minute or two; I don't want to be late. Ow!"

"Never mind that," said Harry Wharton. "Quelch knows you're hurt, and he won't mind——"

"I'm not going to be a putrid invalid because I've twisted my ankle. I'm going down to class, if I have to crawl on my hands and knees!" growled the Bounder. "Catch me laying up for a bit of a sprain!"

"Look here, you ass——" said Nugent.

"Oh, rot! I shall be all right in a few minutes. Ow!"

"Nonsense, Vernon-Smith!" Mr. Quelch looked in at the study doorway. "You will remain here and attend to your injury."

The Bounder gave a start and looked round. If he had known that Mr. Quelch was there, he had given no sign of it.

"Oh, sir!" he exclaimed. "If—if you don't mind, I'd like to rest my ankle for a few minutes; it hurts rather."

"Certainly, Vernon-Smith. You may remain in your study until you feel able to walk without pain," said Mr. Quelch.

"Thank you, sir."

The bell was beginning to ring for third school. Vernon-Smith bared his ankle and began to rub it with embrocation.

Mr. Quelch hurried away, and the juniors followed him, leaving the Bounder alone in the study.

When they were gone Vernon-Smith ceased to rub that damaged ankle and corked the bottle of embrocation.

He chuckled softly.

Neither the Remove master nor the Remove fellows suspected him of malingering; that sort of thing was not in the Bounder's line at all. Still less were they likely to suspect the reason he had for cutting third school that morning. The Bounder waited five minutes—till he was certain that Mr. Quelch and the Remove were safe in the Form-room—then he rose from the armchair without a sign of damage!

THE ELEVENTH CHAPTER.

The Bounder's Way!

THE Bounder stepped to the door of his study and glanced down the Remove passage.

Not a fellow was to be seen, or heard. All the Greyfriars fellows were in the Form-rooms; Smithy the only one out of class. Whatever it was that the Bounder had to do, he was free to carry on with it, unobserved and undeterred.

He grinned, closed the study door, and locked it.

He unlocked his desk and took therefrom the sealed packet that Carne had lifted from the secret recess in Compton's study, and which had so mysteriously vanished from that study in the dark.

Laying it on the table, he unfastened the bundle containing his recent purchases.

Billy Bunter had wondered why the

Bounder had wanted a cardboard box of a certain size, and string of a certain kind, and sealing-wax of a certain shade. He was not likely to guess.

The cardboard box was the same size as the sealed packet. The string was the same kind—the sealing-wax the same colour.

The Bounder proceeded to fill the cardboard box with cinders from the grate, and lumps of coal from the coal-locker. Every now and then he paused to weigh it in one hand, and the sealed packet in the other, obviously desiring to make the weight the same.

Satisfied on that point, he put the lid on the box, and wrapped it up carefully in brown paper, taking care to fold the paper exactly as the wrapping on the sealed packet was folded.

This done, he tied it with string, precisely as the string was tied on Compton's packet, strand for strand, and knot for knot.

Then he lighted a candle-end, and started with the sealing-wax. In exact imitation of Compton's packet, he dropped blobs of the melted sealing-wax on the knots of the string.

When his work was done, two packets lay on the table, so exactly similar that Compton of the Fifth certainly could never have told which was the one he had concealed under the floor of his study.

The Bounder grinned at them gleefully.

Taking Compton's packet, he replaced it in his desk, and locked it up. The dummy packet he slipped under his jacket.

Opening the door of his study, he looked out and listened. But there was no one about—there was not likely to be in lesson-time.

He left the study, and walked quietly down to the landing; and went up the Fifth Form passage.

He entered Compton's study, shut the door after him, and locked it. The Fifth were in their Form-room with Mr. Prout. Nobody was likely to come up to the studies for another hour. The Bounder had plenty of time.

He turned back the carpet, took a screwdriver from his pocket, and drew the four screws in the short section of floorboard.

Lifting it from its place, he dropped the dummy packet into the orifice. Traces in the dust within showed where Compton's packet had lain, before Carne took it out. The Bounder placed the dummy packet in precisely the same spot.

Then he replaced the board, screwed it down, and covered it with the carpet. He chuckled, as he rose to his feet.

That Compton of the Fifth had not yet missed the packet, he felt certain. He had no reason for going to the secret recess for it until the time came to take it away from the school. That was likely to be this very afternoon, as it was a half-holiday.

When he went to the hidden recess for it, he would find a packet looking exactly like his own. Knowing nothing of the nocturnal visit to his study, it could scarcely be doubted that he would take it for the same packet.

And the thought of the yachtsman-smuggler, Captain Compton, receiving it, and finding cinders and chunks of coal packed inside, made the Bounder chuckle.

Leaving no sign of his visit, he quitted Compton's study, and went down the stairs.

His work was done now, and it had not occupied half an hour. Smithy was

not tempted to prolong his absence from the Form-room. The minute he was through he headed for the Remove room—remembering to limp as he went in.

Mr. Quelch glanced at him. Had he suspected the Bounder of malingering, he would have dismissed the suspicion now that Vernon-Smith turned up for class, before the lesson was half-through, of his own accord.

"Is your ankle better, Vernon-Smith?" asked Mr. Quelch benevolently.

"Yes, sir, thank you."

"Very well, you may go to your place."

Smithy went to his place.

When the Remove were dismissed, at the end of third school, Smithy limped a little as he went out with the Form. When, about ten minutes later, he went out of the gates, with his overcoat on, he was no longer limping—apparently he had quite recovered by that time.

He walked up the road towards Courtfield Common, with his hands in his overcoat pockets, which was natural enough on a bitter December day. Certainly there was no indication that he was holding in place a packet that was hidden under his coat.

When he came back, in good time for dinner, there was no longer anything hidden under that coat. He walked in, with a grin on his face—which widened as he passed Compton of the Fifth in the quad.

Compton did not even glance at him—he was not particularly interested in Vernon-Smith of the Remove.

No doubt he would have been extremely interested had he known of Smithy's proceedings during third school that morning, and could he have guessed that a dummy packet now lay in the hidden recess in his study, while the genuine packet had been parked in a certain spot, to be found later.

But Compton of the Fifth did not know that—and Smithy was not likely to tell him.

THE TWELFTH CHAPTER.

Coker, Too!

"JUST the thing!" said Horace Coker heartily.

"Eh?"

"I'll come with you, old chap. Ripping!"

"Oh!"

Carne of the Sixth smiled—a sour smile. He fancied he could guess exactly how much Compton wanted Horace Coker's company that afternoon.

Horace, of course, had no doubts. His company was always delightful—Coker knew that. And he liked Compton, and was quite friendly with him. He had started with a row with him, when Compton first came, but that was a trifle light as air. Horace had already forgotten that.

After dinner, most of the Fifth Form men were thinking of Soccer—a final practice before the Form match due on Saturday, when—they hoped—they were going to walk all over the Sixth. Blundell took it for granted that Compton would be playing in the pick-up that afternoon; and he was disappointed to hear that the new fellow had planned to go out on his motor-bike. Coker, on the other hand, was pleased to hear it. Coker was the happy possessor of a stink-bike, on which he was wont to career wildly, to the terror of dogs, cats, and poultry. Generally he careered in solitary state. He was glad to welcome

Compton as a comrade for a spin in company.

The Fifth Formers were talking in a group at the doorway. If any of them noticed Carne in the offing, they took no heed of him. Since the affair of the crocking of Coker, Carne of the Sixth was treated with disdainful disregard on all sides. Even his friends in the Sixth did not want to be seen with him too often, just at present. He stood staring from a window, quite unheeded by the Fifth Formers. But the corner of his eye was on Compton.

Carne had been trying to puzzle it out who had abstracted that sealed packet the night before. He could not make up his mind whether it had been Compton or not. Whoever it was had evidently visited Compton's study, after Carne had left it—he knew that, from the fact that nothing had been said on the subject of the loose board. Someone—evidently that mysterious prowler of the night—had replaced that board, and left the study with its normal appearance—otherwise there certainly would have been talk on the subject.

Whether that unseen prowler had been Compton himself, or some other fellow, Carne could not guess. He was quite mystified.

But, more and more, he wished that he had been able to learn what that mysterious packet contained. The fellow had a secret—a secret that he carefully guarded—but what? Carne could not guess; but he felt sure that if he could penetrate that secret he would have the upper hand of his rival. Whatever it was, it was something that Valentine Compton dared not have known.

That afternoon Carne was keeping an eye on the new man in the Fifth. If he went out of gates, it was Carne's idea to keep him in sight, see where he went, and whom he met, if he met anyone. And he set his lips when he heard Compton tell Blundell that he was going on his motor-bike. That put paid at once to Carne's idea of shadowing him. He wondered, suspiciously, whether Compton had that motor-bike as a means of getting to a distance from the school, without danger of being followed.

If that was so, he could hardly want the company of another fellow who happened to possess a motor-bike. Carne, smiling sourly, listened. If his suspicion was well-founded, Compton would not want Horace Coker's company that afternoon, and would have to shut him off somehow.

Blundell and his friends went off towards the changing-room. Compton was left with Coker. Coker ran on cheerily:

"Jolly idea, what, old chap? We'll have a jolly good spin—let 'em out, what? It's a topping afternoon for a long run. Might hit Brighton, what?"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Compton. "Isn't that out of bounds?"

Coker chuckled.

"Just a few!" he answered. "But that's all right! Anyhow, you could get leave from Prout—he feeds from your hand."

Valentine Compton laughed.

"Well, let's go and get the jiggers ready!" said Coker briskly.

"What about footer, though?" asked Compton. "I'm giving it a miss, but you're awfully keen—"

Snort, from Coker.

"Catch that ass Blundell putting me into the pick-up! He doesn't know anything about a man's form at footer. You know what happened last time I

played in a Form pick-up— What are you grinning at?"

"W-was I? Look here! I'll speak to Blundell, if you like. After all, it's only a pick-up, and a keen man like you ought to have a chance."

Coker shook his head.

"No use," he said. "Blundell's as obstinate as a mule. There was trouble last time—silly asses barging in my way, and making out that I was to blame, and all that. Let's go and get out the jiggers."

"Oh, all right!"

They left the House together, Carne's eyes following them. He grinned sardonically. It had not even occurred to Coker that Valentine Compton was tactfully trying to shake him off. But it was plain enough to Carne, and he knew that the handsome Fifth Former had reasons for going out alone that afternoon.

What reasons! Something in connection with correspondence in code, and sealed packets hidden under study floors. Carne was sure of that—and he was equally sure that Compton would somehow shake Coker off before they had gone very far.

Wingate of the Sixth came along to the door, and Carne stepped into his way.

"Hold on a minute, Wingate!"

Wingate held on, not very willingly.

"Well?" he said curtly.

"Compton's going for a spin on his motor-bike this afternoon."

The Greyfriars captain stared.

"What about it?" he asked.

"Coker's going with him."

"Well?"

"Well," said Carne, with a sneer, "take this from me—Compton doesn't want any Greyfriars man to know what he's up to out of gates, and he's going to shake Coker off, somehow. When they come back you'll find that somehow or other they got parted, and Coker lost sight of him."

Wingate gave him a steady look.

"You're talking utter rot, Carne!" he said. "You're letting your dislike of that chap get on your nerves. You're making a fool of yourself."

Carne shrugged his shoulders.

"Leave it at that—till Coker comes back," he said. "Then ask Coker whether something didn't happen to make him lose Compton on the road."

Wingate gave a snort.

"I'll remember to ask him—just to show you what a silly suspicious fool you are!" he retorted.

And he walked out of the House, evidently having had enough from Arthur Carne.

It was half an hour later that the motor-bikes chugged off. Compton's machine was in apple-pie order, but Coker's fiery steed always required some careful attention before it condescended to go. While Coker was tuning up his jigger, Compton went into the House, and if there was a bulge in his overcoat when he returned, Coker was not the fellow to notice it. They got off, and careered away by the road over the common.

A mile from the school, Compton came to a halt.

Coker shot onward; but, finding that he had left his comrade behind, he shot back again. Compton was bending over his halted jigger. Coker dismounted.

"Something gone wrong with the works?" he asked.

"Well, the old bus seems to have chucked it," said Compton. "Look here! Don't wait for me, Coker! I don't want to spoil your spin, hanging about while I tinker at it. You get on, old chap!"

"No fear!" said Horace. "I hope I'm not the man to leave a pal in the lurch. I'll jolly well wait for you, old fellow!"

"I may be a jolly long time—"

"That's all right," said Coker cheerily.

"I'll wait."

"But—"

"Not another word, old fruit! Look here, let me have a look at it. I know a lot about these jiggers, you know. I dare say I shall put it right in two ticks. What's the trouble exactly?"

"Hallo! I fancy it's all right now—my mistake. Let's get on!"

"Ha, ha!" roared Coker. "I say, you're rather an ass, old chap! You seem to have something to learn about motor-bikes!"

They chugged onward again. Whatever had been the matter with Compton's machine—if anything had been the matter with it—the jigger had quite recovered. They passed Courtfield and Highcliffe School, and roared away by a long lane that led to Woodend.

"Keep to the right for Woodend!" called out Coker, as a fork in the road appeared ahead.

"Right-ho!"

Coker shot on, past the corner, for Woodend. Compton shot on, past the corner, by the road to the left. In a second he was out of Coker's sight, and letting his machine out full blast.

Horace Coker had covered a quarter of a mile before he discovered that Compton was no longer following the same route.

"Well, my hat!" ejaculated Coker. "The ass! That chap's a fathead! First he thinks his jigger's conked out, when it hasn't, then he takes the left, when I told him plainly the right! Of all the benighted chumps—"

Coker careered back to the corner, turned it, and followed the other road, looking for Compton. But he did not find him. Having taken one wrong turning, the silly ass had apparently taken another. Anyhow, Coker saw no more of him, and Coker, after all, had his spin that afternoon on his lonely own.

(Continued on next page.)

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THE THIRTEENTH CHAPTER.

Tact!

"I SAY, you fellows—"

Bob Cherry held up a warning hand.

"If you say 'hols,' you get it!" he said. "Stand ready, you men, and all kick together!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why, you cheeky beast!" roared Billy Bunter indignantly. "I was going to say—no larks, you beast! I was going to say—keep your hoof away, you fathead! I wasn't going to speak about Christmas, you blithering idiot!"

"Oh, all right!" said Bob cheerily. "Anything but that! You can tell us you've been disappointed about a postal order, if you like."

"We've heard that one, but you can cough it up again," grinned Nugent.

"And you can ask us to lend you five bob on it, if you like," added Bob generously. "We don't mind saying no."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sniff, from Bunter.

"The fact is, I'm going out to tea this afternoon," he said. "Smithy's asked me to tea at the bunshop in Courtfield. So yah!"

"Smithy has?" ejaculated Harry Wharton.

"Smithy stands jolly good spreads," said Bunter. "I've accepted—"

"We could have guessed that one."

"Well, the fact is, Smithy's a bit of a bounder," said Bunter. "Naturally, he likes to take a chap of my class to show off at a place like the bunshop in Courtfield. I don't mind seeing him through, you know. I hope they won't take him for a relation of mine, though."

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Bob. "Did you mention that to Smithy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, no! I'm a bit tactful," explained Bunter.

The Famous Five grinned joyously. They were in the doorway of the changing-room when Bunter happened. The Remove were playing the Fourth Form that afternoon, and the Bounder was supposed to be playing in the team. If he was going down to Courtfield, however, no doubt he would be standing out of the football, and no doubt he was coming along to tell his captain so. Anyhow, he was coming along, and the five juniors in the doorway saw him coming.

Bunter, facing them, had his back to the Bounder, and did not see him coming.

Why Vernon-Smith had asked Bunter to a spread at the Courtfield bunshop was rather a mystery. Often and often the Bounder stood lavish spreads at that establishment; but this was the first time he had shown any desire to secure Bunter as a special guest.

As he had heard what Bunter was saying as he came along, the Famous Five had an impression that that invitation would be "off," however.

"A fellow has to be tactful!" rattled on Bunter. "Tact's my long suit, really. What are you grinning at? Fellows of good family are always tactful—they have to be, meeting so many outsiders. It will give Smithy a leg-up to be seen with me, and he jolly well knows it! Still, I shan't mention it to him. Tact, you know."

Vernon-Smith came to a halt. Harry Wharton & Co. fully expected him to deliver a kick, for which the fat junior was favourably placed at

the moment, and which he undoubtedly deserved.

But the Bounder only grinned.

Unaware of his proximity, the fat Owl of the Remove went cheerily on:

"A man has to be tactful. I have to use a lot of tact, with Toddy in my study. Not my class socially, you know, but I never let him feel it. Same with Smithy. In fact, I've been thinking of going home with Smithy for the Christmas vac. His people are rather loud—common, in fact—and Smithy's a bit of a corker; but that's where my tact comes in, you see. I shall put them quite at their ease, if I go home with Smithy."

"If!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"The if-fulness is terrific!" grinned Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

"Well, I haven't decided yet," said Bunter. "I may go with Mauloverer, and I've thought, too, that I might like a Christmas cruise with that chap Compton, in the Fifth! I fancy he would like me to go. Still, Smithy's very pressing, and I may be able to give him a week. You can bet he would be glad to show off a fellow like me among his relations, what?"

Harry Wharton & Co. gurgled. As Smithy was standing about six feet from Bunter, hearing all this, it was rather entertaining.

"But that's not what I was going to say," went on the cheerful Owl. "I say, you fellows, that cad Carne has got his knife into Compton! What do you think I heard him say to Wingate? He said—what the dickens are you grinning at?"

"Carne asked Wingate what he was grinning at?" ejaculated Frank Nugent.

"No, you ass, I asked you that! Carne said that Compton and Coker have gone out on their stink-bikes, and that Compton had something on that he didn't want fellows to know, and that he was going to lose Coker. Fancy that!"

"Carne's a worm," said Bob, "and you'd better not listen to prefects talking, fathead. If you give Carne another chance at you—"

"Oh, that's all right!" said Bunter, with a fat wink. "Carne's let me alone since Compton thrashed him the other day. He doesn't want any more! When I passed him in the quad this morning I turned up my nose at him. I looked at him with utter contempt! He took no notice. I said 'You cad!'"

"You called Carne of the Sixth a cad?"

"Yes, I jolly well did!" declared Bunter. "I said 'You cad!' Just like that, turning up my nose at him. I had a jolly good mind to let him hear me saying it, too—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Still, he's a prefect, and you have to be wary of pre's!" said Bunter sagely. "But I say, you fellows, let's ask Coker when he comes in, and show that rotter up, see? Making out that the chap goes out of bounds, or something of the sort, you know; like Carne himself, or Loder, or Smithy! Carne will look a fool, when it comes out that Compton stuck to Coker all the afternoon, see?"

"Hear, hear!" agreed Bob.

"Good egg!" said Harry.

"I thought I'd tell you," said Bunter. "Compton's a decent chap; look at the way he walloped Carne, and pitched him out of his study, because the brute was pitching into me. Risky, you know, walloping a prefect! I like old Compton, and I'll jolly well go on his yacht with him at Christmas, if—if he asks me. I'm telling everybody

what I heard Carne say, showing the cad up, you know. Well, I'd better go and look for Smithy! He'll be feeling a bit anxious, I expect, and fancying that I'm letting him down."

"Didn't you say he was standing a spread?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Eh? Yes!"

"Then he won't fancy you're letting him down, old fat man! He knows you wouldn't let down a spread."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, to tell you fellows the truth," said Bunter seriously, "it's the spread I'm going for."

"Not really!" gasped Bob.

"Yes, really, old chap! I don't care much for Smithy's company, bit too loud for me! People may think we're friends, and even relations, seeing us together. That would be rather awkward, wouldn't it?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked the Famous Five.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" said Bunter, staring at them.

"What's the joke?"

"You are, old fat man!" gasped Bob. "I'm beginning to think that that spread may not come off."

"Oh, that's all right!" said Bunter cheerfully. "Smithy won't lose a chance of showing off."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Vernon-Smith stepped forward. The Famous Five concluded that he had decided that it was time to kick Bunter; they really could not understand why he had not booted the fat and fatuous Owl already.

But Smithy did not boot Bunter. He addressed Harry Wharton, taking no notice of the fat Owl.

"Leave me out this afternoon, Wharton," he said. "You won't want me in a game with Temple's footling crew. Give Redwing a chance."

Billy Bunter jumped as if he had been electrified at the sound of the Bounder's voice. He spun round in dismay.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Smithy!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Famous Five.

"Oh crikey! I—I say, Smithy, I—I wasn't saying—oh lor'!" Billy Bunter saw the prospect of that spread at the bunshop fading away like a mirage of the desert. Not for the first time the fat Owl wished that he had not talked so much.

But Vernon-Smith did not heed him. For some reason, inexplicable to the Famous Five, he had no intention of giving Bunter what he had asked for, and what he deserved so richly.

"What about it, Wharton?" he asked.

"Right-ho," said the captain of the Remove, "I'll be glad to give Reddy a chance, if you want to cut."

"I've got a rather important engagement, you see!" explained the Bounder. "Bunter has consented to come to tea with me at the bunshop. It's the best place in Courtfield, and naturally I rather want to show off there. Having Bunter with me will give me a leg-up! Come on, Bunter!"

Bunter blinked at Vernon-Smith with an utterly amazed blink. This was not at all what he had expected.

"I—I say, Smithy," he stammered.

"Come on," said Smithy, "you're not going to let me down Bunter, after promising to let me be seen with a fellow of your class in the bunshop!"

"N-n-n-no!" stuttered Billy Bunter. "C-c-certainly not! I'm coming, old fellow! Rely on me."

And Bunter rolled away with the Bounder. Harry Wharton & Co. gazed after them, almost dumbfounded.



As Bunter stooped to pick up the toffee, Vernon-Smith gave the log a shove with his foot, and it rolled. Bump! "Yoo-hoop!" roared Bunter, as the log rolled from under him, and he sat down on the hard, unsympathetic earth. "You silly ass, playing silly tricks on a fellow! I'm jolly sorry I came with you now! Ow!"

"What the dickens," gasped Bob Cherry. "I never knew Smithy was so jolly good-tempered before! We shall see him sprouting wings soon at this rate!"

"What the dickens is he pulling Bunter's leg for?" asked Johnny Bull. "Oh!" said Bob. "I suppose that's it! But why?"

"Goodness knows! But that's it! I suppose he's going to jape the fat ass somehow! Serve him jolly well right!" "Hear, hear!" grinned Bob.

Obviously the Bounder had some reason, not stated, for his amazing forbearance with the fat Owl. What it was, the chums of the Remove could not guess. But football claimed them, and they very soon forgot the fat existence of William George Bunter.

THE FOURTEENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter's Find!

BILLY BUNTER blinked rather curiously and rather uneasily at Herbert Vernon-Smith, as they walked down to the gates.

But Smithy was quite good-tempered and cheerful, and the fat Owl was reassured.

Evidently, to Bunter, the Bounder really was keen on showing off so extremely creditable a pal, in so fashionable a spot as the bunshop at Courtfield. True, he seemed never to have thought of it before. But there could hardly be any doubt of it now, as he was marching Bunter off to that spread, after hearing the fat Owl talking out of his hat. It was like Billy Bunter to swell with importance when he had an impression that he was really wanted. Outside the gates, he halted. "Walking it?" he asked.

"Yes, come on."

"What about ringing for a taxi?" asked Bunter.

"I'm walking."

"Well, look here, Smithy, it's a jolly long walk to Courtfield across the common!" objected Bunter. "And I'll tell you what, as you're standing the spread, I'll stand the taxi. That's fair. You can lend me the money—"

"Are you coming?"

"I'm not walking!" said Bunter firmly. "Miles and miles! If you want my company, Vernon-Smith, you can do the decent thing. I'm willing to tea with you at the bunshop, and let people think we're friends; but I'm not walking miles and miles, and that's that." "Please yourself!" said Smithy.

He started walking.

Billy Bunter blinked after him. Then he cut after him. Keen as the Bounder seemed on his company that half-holiday, he did not seem keen enough on it to stand a taxi. Billy Bunter wanted to spread himself, and display his fat importance: but still more, he wanted the spread.

"I—I say, I don't mind walking, if you're keen on it, Smithy!" he gasped as he overtook the Bounder. "I say, let's walk as far as the corner, and pick up the motor-bus, what?"

"You can pick up all the motor-buses you like!" agreed the Bounder. "I'm walking."

"Well, look here, I'll take the motor-bus, and wait for you at the bunshop, what?" suggested Bunter.

"Do!" said Smithy. "If I don't turn up—"

"Eh?"

"If I don't turn up—"

"My dear chap, I'm not taking the bus! I—I'd rather walk!"

"Come on, then!"

And they walked.

At the corner of Oak Lane, instead of

waiting for the motor-bus from Red-clyffe, as Bunter ardently desired, they left the road to take the short cut over Courtfield Common.

The Bounder walked on briskly by the footpath over the frosty grass. Billy Bunter puffed and blew after him.

When Bunter had done half a mile, Bunter needed a rest. When he had done a mile, he felt that if he did not have a rest his little fat legs would collapse under him. He grunted, he panted, he gasped, and he gurgled for breath. A deep frown wrinkled his fat brow, and he gave Vernon-Smith inimical blinks through his big spectacles.

"I say, you beast, stop a bit!" gasped Bunter at last. "We've got plenty of time! I'm not going to walk my legs off to please you!"

"Oh, all right!" said the Bounder. "I know where there's a log, a bit farther on—you can sit on it and rest."

Bunter snorted! He did not want to walk a bit farther on, but on the other hand, he did not want to sit on damp grass. He plugged onward.

They followed the track through frozen bracken and brambles, skirting the pond on the common. Near the pond was a log, as the Bounder had said, and Bunter almost tottered to it, and sat down.

"Ooooooogh!" he gasped.

"Tired?" asked Smithy.

"Beast!" was Bunter's reply.

The Bounder laughed, and stood with one foot resting on the log, while Bunter sat there and gasped.

There was a sardonic grin on Smithy's face. Any fellow but Bunter might have guessed that the Bounder had some reason of his own for bringing the fat junior there—but it did not occur to Billy Bunter's podgy intellect. Cold as the day was, the perspiration trickled

down Bunter's fat face, and his mind was fully occupied with the fatigue of his podgy limbs and the awful prospect of the other mile that had still to be walked.

"Too tired to eat any toffee?" asked the Bounder.

Bunter sat up and took notice at once. "No fear! Got any?"

The Bounder grinned, and took a packet of toffee from his pocket.

"Catch!" he said.

He tossed the toffee to Bunter. It missed Bunter's fat hand—as perhaps Smithy intended—and dropped.

"Clumsy ass!" said Bunter.

He stooped to pick up the toffee. As he did so, the Bounder gave the log a shove with his foot, and it rolled.

Bump!

"Yoo-hoop!" roared Bunter, as the log rolled from under him, and he sat down on the hard, unsympathetic earth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Bounder.

"Ow! Beast! Wow!" roared Bunter. "You silly ass, playing silly tricks on a fellow! I'm jolly sorry I came with you now! Ow!"

The Bounder stood laughing.

Billy Bunter, crimson with wrath, scrambled to his feet.

Wrathy as he was, however, he did

not forget the toffee, and he stooped to pick it up.

Then he gave a jump.

"Oh crikey! What's that?"

In a hollow of the earth, revealed by the moving of the log, lay a packet—wrapped in brown paper, tied with string, and sealed.

Bunter blinked at it in amazement.

Vernon-Smith did not seem to have noticed it. Which was rather odd, as the Bounder was blessed with very keen eyesight. But it was the short-sighted Owl who spotted it.

He picked it up, blinking at it through his big spectacles.

"I say, Smithy, look at this!" he exclaimed in great excitement. "Look!"

"Eh?" drawled the Bounder. "Found something?"

"Look, you ass! I say, it's sealed with sealing-wax—the same colour wax as that you were getting from Mrs. Mimble this morning! I say, Smithy, I fancy there's something jolly valuable in this—look at the way it's sealed up!" exclaimed Bunter.

Vernon-Smith glanced at it carelessly. Billy Bunter sat on the log again with the sealed packet on his knees. He

started sucking toffee—even in the excitement of that strange find, Bunter did not forget the toffee.

But he was extremely interested in that sealed packet. It did not occur to Bunter that Vernon-Smith had ever seen it before. Certainly it was not likely to occur to him that Vernon-Smith had placed it there that morning, and had specially brought him along in the afternoon to find it!

"I say, Smithy, I found it, you know!" said Bunter.

"It must be something valuable, sealed up like that! Findings keepings, you know!"

"Let's have a squint at it!" said the Bounder.

"It's mine, you know!" said Bunter firmly. "I saw it first—you never saw it at all till I picked it up. Don't you get making out that you had anything to do with finding it, Vernon-Smith. You hadn't."

"It must have been hidden under the log," said the Bounder gravely. "If I hadn't moved the log, you wouldn't have spotted it, I fancy."

"Well, I did spot it!" said Bunter. "And you didn't move the log exactly, either—it rolled over when I stooped down. If you're going to make out—"

"That's all right, fathead—I had nothing to do with it!" said the Bounder. "But I wouldn't advise you to keep it."

"Findings keepings!" said Bunter.

"You fat ass! It must have been hidden under the log—left till called for," said Vernon-Smith. "And it looks to me a jolly good deal like that packet that Wharton found on the beach, and that turned out to have smuggled goods in it. You may land yourself in pretty serious trouble, Bunter, if you don't hand it over to the police at once."

"Oh crikey!" gasped Bunter.

"By gum, if it's really smuggled goods, old Grimey will jump when you take it into the police station," said the Bounder. "No end of credit for you, Bunter—you'll be seeing your name in the newspapers over this."

"Think so?" gasped Bunter.

"Look here, perhaps you'd better hand it to me—"

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"If there's any reward—"

"Why, you beast!" roared Bunter, indignantly. "Catch me handing it to you! I found it, didn't I? You had nothing to do with it! You never even saw it, till I picked it up and showed it to you. If there's any reward, I'm jolly well going to put in for it. If you start making out that you had anything to do with finding it, Smithy—"

"Look here—"

"Beast! You had nothing to do with it!" hooted Bunter. "You just happened to be with me, that's all." Bunter rose from the log. "I'm jolly well going to take this to the police station at once."

"Like me to come with you?"

"No, I jolly well wouldn't! You keep out of it!" snorted Bunter. "I found it, didn't I? You don't come into it at all. Jolly mean, I call it, making out that you had anything to do with it because there may be a reward."

The Bounder grinned.

"I'm jolly well going to walk straight across to the road, and pick up the motor-bus into Courtfield!" declared Bunter. "You needn't come! You can walk, as you're so fond of walking."

"Oh, all right!" said Smithy. "Go ahead! After all, you found it."

"Of course I did!"

"See you at the bun-shop later, then," said the Bounder.

And Billy Bunter, with the sealed packet under his arm, rolled away, making a direct line for the Courtfield road, where he waited for the next motor-bus coming along from Redclyffe, boarded the same, and rolled on into Courtfield.

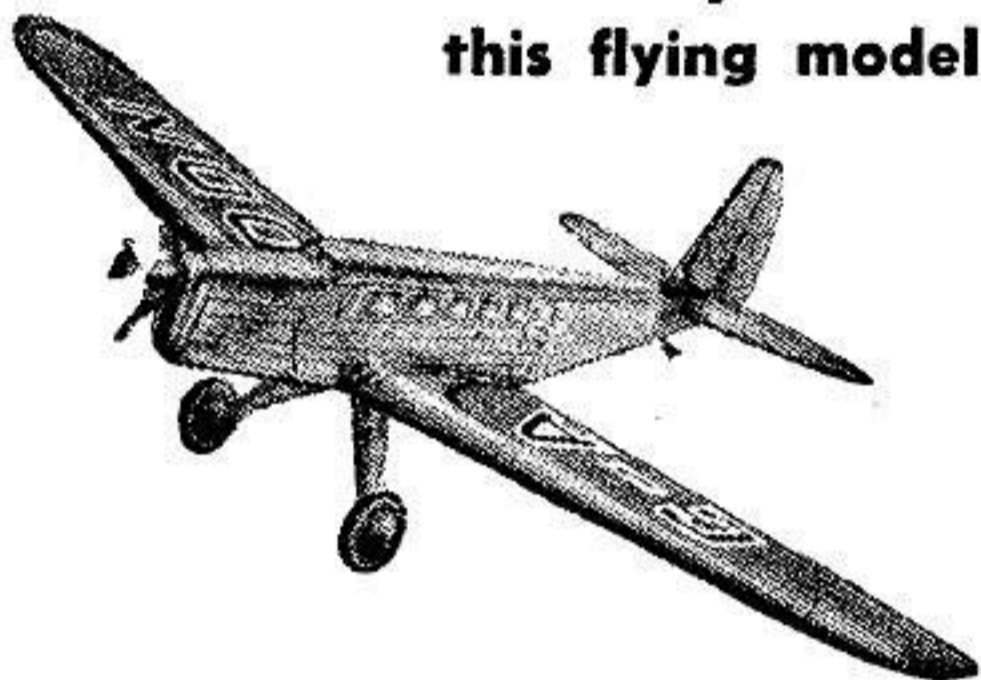
Herbert Vernon-Smith sauntered away, his hands in his pockets, a grin on his face. That packet, which Carne of the Sixth had rooted out from under the floor in Compton's study, was on its way to Inspector Grimes, at Courtfield, without the Bounder appearing in the matter at all. And Compton, on his motor-bike, was carrying away the dummy packet Vernon-Smith had put in its place—he had no doubt of that. His only regret was that he would not be able to see the face of Captain Compton, the yachtsman-smuggler, when he opened the dud packet, and found the cinders and lumps of coal inside.

THE FIFTEENTH CHAPTER.

The Smuggler!

CAPTAIN COMPTON, in those very moments, was seated at the window of a private room in an inn, a few miles on the farther side of Lantham.

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From the window, the captain of the Firefly was watching the road, in the clear frosty sunlight of the December afternoon, evidently in expectation of an arrival. His eyes fell on a motor-cyclist coming up the road—a handsome, athletic fellow, whose pleasant boyish face bore a distant, fleeting resemblance to the captain's own bronzed, hard-bitten visage.

Compton of the Fifth ran his machine into the inn yard, and a few minutes later a waiter tapped at the door of the captain's room, and showed the Greyfriars fellow in.

Valentine Compton came in, and shook hands with the captain, as the waiter closed the door and retired.

Not till the man was gone did he slip his hand under his overcoat and draw a packet from a hidden pocket.

Captain Compton's eyes glinted as he glanced at it. Compton laid it on the table, and his uncle immediately threw a newspaper over it.

"No mistake this time?" he said.

"No!"

Valentine Compton's manner was abrupt. He stood by the window, looking out, and the captain, resuming his seat, gazed at the handsome profile.

"Wind up?" he asked, with a faint sneer.

"No!"

"What's the trouble, then?"

Compton of the Fifth did not answer. His brow was moody, and Greyfriars fellows, who always saw him smiling and cheerful, would have been surprised if they could have seen him now. There was a black and bitter depression in his handsome face.

"It's not so safe a game as we fancied at first," said the captain, speaking in a low tone, his eyes still keenly on the boy's averted face. "When we found out the secret passage from the sea-cave to Greyfriars, it looked like absolutely plain sailing. It was a natural proceeding to place my nephew at my own old school. If you exercised common care, there was no room for suspicion—the thing was fool-proof. What have you done to arouse suspicion?"

"Nothing."

"I tell you," said the captain, "that you are suspected—as I warned you in my letter in code the other day. Someone at the school knows."

Compton made no answer.

"The packet you placed in the hollow oak at Lantham disappeared before it could be collected!" went on the captain. "The hollow oak, of course, cannot be used again. Some other place must be found. We must not meet too often, even at a distance from the school. That packet was taken by someone at Greyfriars."

"How is it possible?"

"It is a fact! I tell you, I rang up your Form-master on his telephone, to ask to speak to you; and someone else answered—I believe it was a boy's voice, but I cannot be sure. Whoever it was, knows!" said the captain savagely. "He told me that he had taken the packet from the hollow oak! Whoever he was, he must have been in Mr. Prout's study, and he took my call—and you can guess my feelings when he made such a statement. Have you found out who it was?"

"No."

"Have you an enemy in the school?"

"One!"

"Who?"

"A fellow named Carne, in the Sixth Form."

"Then it was he!"

Compton laughed harshly. The captain's eyes glinted at him.

"Is this a laughing matter, you young fool?" he snapped.

"If Carne knew, all the school would know, and the authorities, too!" said Compton. "Carne suspects me of something—I hardly know what! He came to my study and said so—last week—and for the moment I fancied he knew. But he does not, and cannot! I believe he suspects me of breaking some rules of the school, on which he might be able to nail me, as a prefect." He laughed again. "But he knows nothing of the truth."

"How can you be sure?"

"Of course I am sure!" snapped Compton. "He loathes me—he would stop at nothing in his malice. He is in disgrace now for having tried to crock me for a football match, and getting the wrong man. If he knew this—if he even began to suspect it—he would shout it from the housetops."

"Someone knows."

"It is not Carne, and cannot be."

"Have you any other enemy?"

"None!"

The captain gnawed his lip. His talk on Mr. Prout's telephone with the Bounder of Greyfriars had puzzled, alarmed, and utterly mystified him.

"From what you say, someone knows!" said Valentine Compton. "But I have no enemy except Carne—who does not know. Neither is the man who knows, my enemy. If he were, why should he keep silent?"

"That is what puzzles me—perplexes me—beats me!" said Captain Compton. "Whoever he is, he acts both as an enemy and a friend! He must have watched you place the packet in the hollow oak in Lantham Chase, or he could not have taken it away. Yet, with such proof in his hands, he has said nothing. The packet was sent by parcels post to the police from Lantham—by him. So far, he was acting on the side of the authorities. Yet he keeps the secret. Valentine, what does it, and what can it, mean?"

The Fifth Former of Greyfriars shook his head.

"It is no use asking me," he said. "I can't begin to understand it!"

"You've kept your eyes open?"

"Naturally."

"You have spotted no one watching you, taking an interest in your actions or correspondence?"

"Only the fellow I've mentioned—Carne! He is a spying kind of fellow. But he knows, and can know, nothing."

"Nothing has been said in the school?"

"Nothing."

"There is no hint—no rumour—no whisper?"

"None!"

"And yet," said the captain, "there is one who knows! He has set himself to defeat you, that is clear from his actions. Yet he has not spoken! Can he be waiting and watching for conclusive proof? Is that it?"

Compton shrugged his shoulders.

"You do not seem to care a great deal!" snarled the smuggler.

The Greyfriars Fifth Former turned towards him, and looked him in the face. His own face was set and bitter.

"No," he said, "I don't care much! I'm sick of it! It's wrong—it's wrong and rotten—and I'd be glad to throw up the whole thing! And—and I shouldn't be sorry if I had to throw it up!"

THE SIXTEENTH CHAPTER.

Not the Goods!

VALENTINE COMPTON flung out the words in a passionate outburst. He stood silent after he had spoken—and the captain did not speak.

For a long minute there was silence. But dark, grim anger was gathering in the bronzed face of the captain of the Firefly. His deep-set eyes were fixed on the boy's face—and Compton turned away his head at last, and looked out of the window again, at the road, and Lantham in the distance.

The captain broke the silence at last.

"You young fool!"

"Fool, if you like!" muttered Compton. "Better a fool than a rogue! And this is roguery! Breaking the laws of the country we live in!"

"What harm does it do a soul to bring a silk dress, or a diamond ring, into the country we live in?" sneered the captain. "Who is a penny the worse for it?"

"I don't know. But—"

"But you have been getting new, and foolish, ideas into your head," said the captain. "Not long ago, you were keen on the game."

"I was a fool then, as you have called me now," said Compton moodily. "It seemed to me an adventure—a risky sort of adventure—us against the Customs officers—a battle of wits, and no harm done! But—"

"I've asked you, where's the harm?"

Compton made a restless gesture.

"It's breaking the law! It's not a crime, I suppose; but—but if every man broke the laws that didn't suit him, what would happen? A man ought to toe the line, and stand by the laws of his own country—like a fellow in a football team playing for the side."

"What about unjust laws?" said the captain sardonically. "Some of the heroes of history have set themselves up against unjust laws—you can read of them in your school books."

"I know! But—but they weren't after profits, I suppose," said Compton. "Are you doing this because you think protective laws are unjust?"

The captain did not answer that.

"A man ought to stand for the law!" went on the schoolboy. "So long as human nature's imperfect, some laws will always be unjust. Do you think a farmer ought to be allowed to shoot the tithe collector, because he's convinced that the tithe laws are unjust? We've got to take the rough with the smooth, and play up according to rules! Besides, I—I've thought it over, and—"

"And what?"

"You made me think as you do; but—but you're wrong," said Compton. "You can call smuggling free trade, if you like; but—if others have to pay the tariff, and you don't, you get a mean advantage over them. That's where your profit comes in, in fact. It's rotten and mean! It's not playing the game!"

"Did they teach you this at Greyfriars?" asked the captain sarcastically. "You did not think like this on board the Firefly."

"I thought as you did, I suppose, and only since I've been away from you I've begun to think for myself. On the Firefly it seemed more like a risky adventure, too. But at the school—keeping secrets—sneaking down a secret passage in the dark—hiding things under the floor of my study. I've made friends in the school, and feel sometimes that I

dare not look them in the face. It's different, somehow, at Greyfriars."

"So it seems!" sneered the captain. "This is my reward for placing you at my old school!"

"I'm not ungrateful," muttered Compton, "but—"

"I think you are. Who stood by you when you were a small kid, left by your father without a bean? Your father went ivory hunting in Central Africa, and disappeared there, leaving you on my hands. Did I stand by you, or not?"

"I know you did."

"I've never been a rich man. You've had a full share of all I had—the best of everything, so far as I could contrive it. You've spent half your time at sea—half on shore in good circumstances. I hear that you're making your mark in football at your school. Who gave you the chance? Would you ever have been a member of a football club if I had run a tramp steamer instead of a smuggling yacht?"

Compton did not answer.

"You say you'd be glad to throw it up—"

"I would!" said Compton stubbornly.

"It's rather late to think of that. Where do I come in?"

No answer.

"You'd turn me down—now that the time has come for you to make yourself really useful to me."

"No; but—"

"What do you mean, then?"

"If you sailed a cargo tramp I'd sail with you, and prefer it to the Firefly. I should be able to look decent fellows in the face."

"Hardly. How many would you meet, in tarry trousers and a dirty jersey, on a cargo tramp?"

"I shouldn't care for that. I—"

"I think you would when the time came. I've stood by you, Valentine, when you had no other help, and now it's up to you to stand by me."

"Was that why you stood by me, then—to make use of me later?" asked the Greyfriars fellow bitterly.

The sea-captain compressed his hard lips.

"Leave it at that!" he said, in a low, bitter tone. "Throw me over if you like. If you don't believe as I do, if you want to strike out for yourself, leave it at that. I'm a hard man, but I'm not hard enough to hold you if you want to steer your own course. Leave it at that."

Compton looked at him.

"You've been good to me," he said, in a low voice. "I owe you everything. If you'll chuck it, uncle, I'll chuck it, too, and be glad of it. I'll work like a nigger on a cargo tramp, if—"

"It's a long time since I was at Greyfriars," said Captain Compton, with a sour smile. "Perhaps I've forgotten what I learned there. No, I'm not chucking it—no cargo tramping for me, Valentine. But stand out of the game. I shall stand by you just the same. I shan't let you down. Keep on at Greyfriars. Go your own way, while I go mine. After all, it's a risky game; you're better out of it."

Compton's eyes flashed.

"Do you think I care for that—that I've given it a thought?" he exclaimed. "It's not that—it's not that!"

"Whether you've thought of it or not, it's a risky game," said the captain quietly, "and twice as risky for me, without your help. But I'm not holding you. Go your own way."

Compton breathed hard.

"Your way is my way," he said. "Goodness knows, I'd face anything if

you'd throw it over. If you won't, I'm standing in with you."

"Then talk sense," said the captain, "and no more nonsense!" He dismissed the matter with a gesture. "Keep to business. You've got to find out who it is that has spotted you at the school. He cannot be sure of what he has found out, or he would have given you away. That's the only conclusion I can come to, though I admit I'm puzzled. You've never been followed to the sea-cave?"

"No."

"You must have been watched that day at Lantham. Did you notice any Greyfriars fellow there?"

"Half the school was there, to watch a football match."

"Another time you will take care to see whether you are shadowed. This afternoon, for example."

"A fellow in my Form came out on a spin with me. I dropped him a few miles from the school—on the other side of Greyfriars. I've covered forty miles, round about, to get here. That's all right."

"The hiding-place you speak of in your study—is that safe?"

"A loose board under the carpet. I've screwed it down, and I draw the screws every time I use it."

The captain laughed.

"That should be safe enough. And you leave nothing there long?"

"I have to pick my time to get through the secret panel. It's out of bounds, of course. But nothing's ever in my hands for more than twenty-four hours."

"Safe enough, I should say. But you must keep on the watch. We cannot afford to lose another lot, as happened at Lantham that day." Captain Compton tapped the packet under the newspaper on the table. "This means a thousand pounds, Valentine—nothing less than that. I've been uneasy about it. I did not feel sure of it till you handed it to me. After what happened last time—"

"You've never told me what's in it."

"No need for you to know," said the captain. "The less you know, the better, in case of trouble some day."

"If there's trouble, I shall stand by you to face it."

"Not if I can leave you out, Valentine. I repeat, that the less you know, the better."

"Oh, I'm not curious!" said Compton. "I know it's contraband. I don't want to know more than that. That's more than enough!" he added bitterly.

And he stepped closer to the window, and deliberately turned his back as the captain rose to examine the parcel.

Unheeding, he heard the sound of unwrapping paper. But he turned suddenly as he heard a gasping cry of rage and amazement.

"What—" exclaimed Compton.

He stared at the sea-captain.

Captain Compton was bending over the opened packet on the table, his bronzed face almost white, his eyes starting, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a snarl like a wild animal.

The Greyfriars senior stared at him blankly.

"What—" he repeated.

He started at the furious look the sea-captain turned on him.

"Fool! Dolt!" hissed Captain Compton. "Look, fool—look! What is this? What does this mean?"

Valentine Compton looked into the open packet. He gave a jump as he saw a collection of cinders and coal. It was the sight of that startling assortment that made the captain's face livid with fury.

"The packet has been out of your hands!" hissed the captain.

"Not for one moment!" said the Greyfriars Fifth Former. "I got it from the cave, unseen. I stacked it under the floor of my study, and screwed down the board. It was there when I fetched it before I started out this afternoon. No one has seen it, or touched it."

"Fool!" almost shrieked the captain. "I packed the packet with my own hands on the Firefly before it was run into the cave. This is not the same packet. Look at it! Cinders and coal, packed into a chocolate box! Do you fancy I used a confectioner's box? Do you imagine that I packed cinders and coal?"

"It is the same packet!" said Compton, bewildered.

"It is not, fool! The packet has been taken. This has been left in its place. So much for the safety of the hiding-place in your study! Who has played this trick? It looked the same. I had no doubt when you handed it to me. It has been deliberately made up to look the same, to weigh the same, but it is not the same packet."

Valentine Compton did not answer that. Amazing as it was, it was evidently true. It was not the same packet that he had brought up secretly from the sea-cave and hidden under the floor of his study in the Fifth. Its appearance had been the same—till it was opened. But obviously it was not, and could not be, the same packet!

Amazement held him dumb.

A stream of savage words poured from the enraged smuggler.

But Compton did not speak. He could only stand and stare at the packet, feeling as if his head was turning round in his bewilderment.

THE SEVENTEENTH CHAPTER.

Bunter is Bucked!

"HALLO! Hallo! Hallo! Bunter looks bucked!"

Bunter did!

Every fellow who observed Billy Bunter roll into the House observed that Billy Bunter looked bucked.

Harry Wharton & Co. were feeling rather bucked themselves, having walked all over Temple's team at Soccer. But their bucked state, compared with Billy Bunter's, was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine. The fat Owl of the Remove seemed to be walking on air.

"I say, you fellows—" chirruped Bunter.

"Had a topping spread?" asked Nugent, with a chuckle.

"Oh, not bad!" said Bunter. "I found time to tea with Smithy at the bunshop, as I said I would. But I've been rather busy. I say, you fellows, what do you think?"

"I think you'd better wash that jam off your face before you go in to calling-over," said Bob Cherry.

"Eh? Is there any jam on my face?" asked Bunter. "I had a few tarts. I must say Smithy wasn't mean about the spread! Of course, he was rather bucked, having me with him to show off—"

"You howling ass!" said Harry Wharton. "What the dickens did Smithy take you out to tea for?"

"Eh? Swank, of course!" said Bunter. "Showing me off—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I say, you fellows, what do you think? Those jolly old smugglers—"



"Fool! Dolt!" hissed Captain Compton. "What is this—what does it mean?" Valentine Compton looked into the open packet. He gave a jump as he saw a collection of cinders and coal. "This is not the same packet I had on the Firefly. Who has played this trick?" Valentine Compton could not answer—amazement held him dumb!

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Smugglers!"

"I've done them in the eye!" grinned Bunter.

"You have?" gasped Bob Cherry.

"Yes, rather! Smithy had nothing to do with it. I didn't even mention his name at the police station. Why should I? He had absolutely nothing to do with it. I found the packet."

"What packet?" howled Bob.

"The contraband packet!" grinned Bunter. "Like the one you found on the beach, Wharton, weeks ago. Remember? Like the one old Grimey got by parcels post. You remember he came here about it, because he'd found out it was a fellow in a Greyfriars cap posted it at Lantham. Well, this was just the same—hidden under a log on Courtfield Common, you know; and I found it."

"Oh, my hat!"

"You see, I'd sat down to rest—that beast Smithy would walk, though I offered to stand a taxi. Well, I sat down on a log, near the pond, and it happened to shift when I moved, and there was the packet, sealed up with a lot of sealing-wax. I took it straight to the police station at Courtfield. Smithy didn't suggest it. I thought of it at once. You should have seen old Grimey's face when I handed it over!"

Harry Wharton & Co. gazed at the fat Owl.

"He thanked me!" said Bunter, with dignity. "He said it was a public service. So it was! But he only grunted when I asked him if there would be a reward."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows, it looks as if the smuggling gang are busy round these parts!" said Bunter. "Fancy hiding contraband goods under a log on the common, you know! All ready for some

of the gang to pick up, of course! I advised Inspector Grimes to have the spot watched for them, and he—"

"Pulled your ear for your cheek?"

"Oh, really, Wharton! He said he was very busy, and a man showed me out," said Bunter. "I was rather pressed for time myself, as I was going to the bunshop. But, I say, you fellows, don't you think there ought to be a reward?"

"The consciousness of having performed a public service should be sufficient reward, my dear boy!" said Bob Cherry solemnly.

"Well, that's all right, of course, but I think I'd like something in hand, too!" said Bunter. "Anyhow, if there's any reward, it's mine! Smithy had absolutely nothing to do with it. It was lying right under his nose, and he never spotted it. I did the whole thing. He wanted to come barging in at the police station with me, you know, making out that he had a hand in it; but I wasn't standing that. I never even mentioned him."

Billy Bunter rolled on, to tell his startling story to many interested hearers. It was seldom that anyone in the Remove wanted to hear Billy Bunter talk. But he found plenty of hearers now. This was the third time that a packet of contraband goods had turned up in the neighbourhood of Greyfriars, and, naturally, the matter had been a good deal talked about. Bunter, for the present, had the limelight, as the fellow who had found the goods; and limelight was a thing that Bunter dearly loved.

Harry Wharton left his friends and went out into the quad, with a wrinkle of thought in his brow. He was looking for the Bounder, and he found him sauntering in the quad, his hands in his pockets, and a cheery grin on his face. That grin widened as Wharton came up. "Seen Bunter?" drawled Smithy.

"Yes. Did he really find anything on Courtfield Common?"

"Quite!"

"It's true, then?"

"You've got it."

Wharton looked steadily at the Bounder's mocking face.

"What does this mean, Vernon-Smith? I know jolly well that it was you found that packet at Lantham and sent it to Grimey by parcels post. Did you find this one, too?"

"Bunter found it," said the Bounder airily.

Wharton made an impatient gesture.

"I wondered why you were taking him to tea at Courtfield. I know now. You took him there to find that packet because he's ass enough to have the wool pulled over his eyes."

"Think so?"

"Well, it's pretty clear. I can't make out how you've done it, but if you know anything about the smugglers—and it seems that you do—" Wharton paused. "What game are you playing, Vernon-Smith? What's the big idea in keeping yourself in the background?"

"Modesty!" explained the Bounder. "Haven't you noticed that I always was a bit of a shy violet? My shrieking nature jibs at publicity."

"Oh, don't be an ass! If you know anything about a smuggler it's your duty to go straight to the police and tell them!" said Wharton bluntly.

"I asked your advice once, old bean, and you advised me to hold my tongue. The responsibility's yours."

"That was when you were talking about your idiotic suspicion of Compton of the Fifth!" said Wharton gruffly.

The Bounder laughed.

Harry Wharton gave a start. He caught the Bounder by the arm.

"Smithy! You can't mean—you don't mean to say—"

"I don't mean to say anything!" said

the Bounder deliberately. "I was in doubt at first, as any fellow might jolly well have been. I asked your advice, as my Form captain, and Quelch's head boy, and you advised me to hold my tongue. I took your advice—and I'm still taking it!"

The captain of the Remove drew a deep breath.

"Compton's as straight as a die!" he said. "I've never said a word of what you said on that subject. I'm not going to, and if you still think the same you're a fool for your pains!"

"Leave it at that!" said the Bounder lightly.

Wharton gave him a hard look; but there was only mockery to be read in the Bounder's face. But in Wharton's, as he turned away, there was a cloud of troubled thought. He did not, and could not, believe that a splendid fellow like Compton of the Fifth would do a shady and unlawful thing. The Bounder's belief seemed to him absolutely fantastic. And yet—

He passed some Fifth Form men as he went back to the House. Coker of the Fifth was speaking to Potter and Greene.

"Hasn't come yet? Blessed if I know where he's got to! That man Compton's a jolly decent chap, but he's rather a fool! Fancy a man taking the wrong turning, when I yelled at him which one to take! What?"

"Then you missed him?" grinned Potter.

"He missed me!" said Coker. "I went after him, but never found him, and haven't seen him since. Bit of an ass—what?"

Potter and Greene grinned. Perhaps they suspected that Compton had tired of the entrancing company of Horace Coker, and had taken that wrong turning for that reason.

But Wharton felt something like a weight on his heart. He had not forgotten what Billy Bunter had said, of Carne's words to Wingate.

Carne of the Sixth had said that Compton would lose Coker on that spin and clear off by himself, for his own reasons. Bunter had told twenty fellows, at least, and every one of them had put Carne's words down to Carne's envy, and malice, and suspiciousness. What would they say now? Evidently Carne had been right; he had foreseen that Compton would lose Horace Coker out of gates, and Compton had lost him.

"Hallo, Coker!" Wingate of the Sixth came up. "Where's Compton? Wasn't he with you this afternoon?"

"The silly ass turned the wrong corner before we'd been out half an hour," answered Coker. "Nice chap, but a bit of a fool!"

"Oh!" said Wingate.

Wharton noticed the perplexed expression on Wingate's face as he walked away. Evidently the Greyfriars captain had been struck by the curious circumstance that Carne's prediction had been verified.

Wharton went slowly into the House. In the Rag he found Billy Bunter going strong. Quite a crowd was listening to the fat Owl.

"I say, you fellows, I did the whole thing! If Smithy makes out that he had anything to do with it don't you

believe him! The fact is, I rather suspected that there might be something hidden under that log, and I—I turned it over to look, and there it was! Smithy had nothing at all to do with it. Never saw it at all till I picked it up. Blind as an owl, you know! It was me—and Smithy doesn't come into the picture at all!"

Evidently the Bounder had shown his usual sagacity in selecting Bunter to make that discovery if he wanted to remain in the background. Bunter was not the man to let him come into the foreground.

THE EIGHTEENTH CHAPTER.

Kind Invitation Accepted!

"ABOUT Christmas!"
"Chuck it!"
"I was going to say——"
"Don't!"

"Christmas——"
"Ring off!"
"At Bunter Court——"
"Wha-a-at?" ejaculated the Famous Five with one voice.

Bunter had made an impression, at least.

On Saturday most of the Greyfriars fellows were thinking of the Form match that was booked for the afternoon—Fifth against Sixth.

Form matches, as a rule, did not draw crowds, or interest many fellows outside the Forms concerned, but this particular Form match was as big a draw as a school match. With the help of that wonderful new man, Compton, the Fifth were going to beat the Sixth—at least, they had no doubt that they were. Any game in which Compton played was sure to draw a crowd; fellows would go in swarms merely to see him in a practice pick-up. Harry Wharton & Co. had decided to put all other matters off that half-holiday to watch the seniors, and so had most other Greyfriars fellows. Nearly everybody was looking forward to the afternoon, and as a topic that Soccer match quite banished the Christmas holidays, near as break-up was.

Billy Bunter, on the other hand, was not wasting a single second of his valuable time thinking about such a trivial matter; Bunter's fat thoughts were concentrated on the "hols."

Lord Mauleverer had declined, without thanks, the fat Owl's company for Christmas. He had, so to speak, had some, and did not want any more. Smithy, who was going abroad with his millionaire pater for the vacation, not only declined Bunter as a fellow-traveller, but heaved a cushion at him when Bunter suggested it—having, apparently quite recovered from the desire to swank by showing off Bunter as a pal. Harry Wharton & Co.—after all Bunter had done for them!—would not even allow him to raise the subject, but were ready to boot him if he persisted in so doing. Which was a state of affairs that gave Billy Bunter plenty of food for thought, and left him little time to think about such trifles as football matches.

In break on Saturday morning he ran the Famous Five down and restarted, but he restarted on quite a new line.

"At Bunter Court!" he repeated firmly. "Did you fellows think I was going to propose coming along with you for Christmas? I hope I'm not the fellow to fish for invitations. Hardly in my line, I think."

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"Ye gods!" murmured Frank Nugent. "I'm asking you men for Christmas," said Bunter, with dignity. "If you don't want to accept my invitation, you can say so, I suppose. But I think you might be civil about it."

"What sort of gammon is this?" asked Johnny Bull, staring at him.

"I really mean it!" said Bunter. "We're having rather a gorgeous time at Bunter Court these hols—Christmas parties on rather a large scale; a good many titled people; and perhaps one of the princes—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Chance for you fellows to mix in a little really decent society, for once—what?" said Bunter agreeably.

Harry Wharton & Co. looked at one another; they thought that they knew their Bunter pretty well, but he had surprised them this time.

They were prepared for the fat Owl to put up any amount of wangling to land himself on some hapless victim for the hols, and the nearer break-up day came the more desperate grew Bunter's wangling; but they were not prepared to hear him issue invitations on this lavish scale. Neither did they quite see how Bunter Court was going to accommodate so many visitors—as Bunter Court, on close inspection, diminished to a detached villa, not of imposing dimensions.

But the fat Owl seemed in earnest; he was blinking at them with owl-like seriousness through his big spectacles and waiting for their answers.

"Well," said Harry at last, "if you're not gammoning, Bunter—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Much obliged, old fat man, but the kind invitation is declined, with very many thanks," said the captain of the Remove gravely.

And Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Frank Nugent nodded assent. If Billy Bunter was in earnest they certainly wanted to be civil, though they had a suspicion that this was some new form of wangling that they could not quite catch on to. They could rather imagine the expression on Mr. Bunter's face if his hopeful son arrived home for Christmas with five fellows to be accommodated for the holidays. Still, an invitation was entitled to a polite refusal, and they refused politely.

Bunter looked hurt.

"You won't come?" he asked.

"Thanks all the same!" said Nugent.

"All right," said Bunter, "if you won't, you won't. What I'm particular about chiefly is that we should all be together this Christmas. That's the important thing, from my point of view. I want you to come home with me; if you won't, I'll come with you."

"Oh!"

"I mean it," said Bunter.

The Famous Five gazed at him. They had suspected some new variety of wangling; now they saw. The cat was out of the bag now.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Wash it out, old fat man! Run away and play!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"I wondered what he was after," said Johnny Bull. "That's it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" said Bunter warmly. "I've turned down a good many fellows for you. Compton of the Fifth would ask me on a Christmas cruise, if—if I gave him any encouragement. Temple of the Fourth would jump at the chance of taking me home with him. Smithy would like to show me off as a pal, as he did at the bunshop the other day, as you fellows jolly well know, I've

turned them all down for you. I've asked you, fair and square, to come to Bunter Court for Christmas. The invitation's still open."

"You fat fozzler—"

"Hold on, you men!" said Bob Cherry. He winked at his friends with the eye that was farthest from Bunter. "If Bunter really feels that he can't part with us for Christmas, I—"

"That's it, old chap!" said Bunter eagerly. "Pals like us, you know—"

"Even Bunter's entitled to the benefit of the doubt," declared Bob. "If Bunter really feels that he can't part with us, it's up to us to play up. If we don't go home with him, he will come home with us."

"Exactly, old fellow!" said Bunter.

"So I vote for accepting his invitation," said Bob.

"Eh?"

"What?"

Bob's friends stared at him. It was perfectly plain to the whole Co. that that invitation to Bunter Court meant one thing, and one thing only—another artful wangle on the part of the artful wangler of the Remove, to land himself for Christmas. Bob, however, did not seem to see it.

"Speaking for self and friends," said Bob, "the invitation is accepted, Bunter. Bank on us for Bunter Court."

Johnny Bull opened his mouth. He closed it again, and grinned. The Co.

It will be

YOUR LOSS

if you miss

Next Saturday's

BUMPER CHRISTMAS

NUMBER!

had caught on by that time. They all grinned.

The expression on Billy Bunter's face, as he listened to Bob's cheery acceptance of his kind invitation, was enough to make any fellow grin. It was enough to bring one more smile to the face of that ancient king who never smiled again.

Bunter blinked. His jaw dropped. He gasped, almost like a fish out of water. A full-rigged ship, with all sails set, suddenly caught in a tempestuous head wind, could not have been more thoroughly taken aback.

Bunter fairly goggled.

Obviously he had taken it for granted that his invitation would be refused, and that he would then have a sporting chance, at least, of working it in reverse order. And his invitation was accepted.

Grinning, the Co. played up to Bob Cherry's lead.

"Well, come to think of it, why not Christmas with Bunter?" said Harry Wharton. "Thanks, old man!"

"Tip-top idea!" said Nugent heartily. "Count on us, Bunter!"

"All together—what?" grinned Johnny Bull. "Might telephone to your pater for the Rolls to carry us home—what, Bunter?"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "Yes! Oh lor! I—I mean—yes! Rather!"

"The delightfulness to accept the honorific invitation is preposterous!" declared Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"I—I say, you fellows—"

"That's settled, then," said Bob briskly. "Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the bell!"

The Famous Five walked away to the House, grinning.

Bunter blinked after them, with the blink of utter dismay. He had wangled, not wisely, but too well. How he was going to get out of this was rather a problem to the fat Owl. The thought of marching five fellows in at the Bunter villa, and meeting his father's astonished stare, made him feel quite faint. He had to get out of it somehow. But how? That was an awful problem to Billy Bunter—but quite an entertaining problem to the Famous Five.

"We'll jolly well keep it up to the last minute," chuckled Bob, "and watch him wriggle—what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter made a sudden rush after the five.

"I—I say, you fellows!" he gasped. "I say, I forgot to mention one thing! If—if my pater happens to—to have one of his attacks of gout, I'm afraid it will have to be off. In that case, you know—"

"In that case, old chap, we'll help you nurse him," said Bob.

"Eh?"

"Yes, rather!" said Nugent. "Look after him, and cheer him up!"

"But—"

"Not a word, old fellow," said Bob; "rely on us."

In third school that morning, Billy Bunter had an extremely thoughtful expression on his fat face. But if Mr. Quelch noticed it, and fancied that Bunter was thinking about his lessons, he was mistaken. Billy Bunter had something much more worrying than lessons to think of.

THE NINETEENTH CHAPTER.

Sticking to Bunter!

"GOAL!"

"Compton!"

"Bravo!"

Harry Wharton & Co. shouted with a hundred others. There was a swarm on Big Side in the frosty afternoon watching the Form match. And Blundell's prediction that the Fifth were going to beat the Sixth this time, looked like coming true. First goal came to the Fifth before the game was ten minutes old, kicked by the wonderful new man.

"Carne looks pleased," grinned Vernon-Smith.

"He do—ho does!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

Carne was in the Sixth Form team. Plenty of fellows doubted Wingate's judgment in playing a man who was believed to be capable of crocking a football rival. But that charge had been, at any rate, "not-proven," and the Greyfriars captain firmly took the view that a man was innocent, unless he was proved guilty. And he was glad to give Carne a chance in the game, as some sort of compensation for being dropped out of the first eleven. Arthur Carne was playing up well, too—perhaps with some faint hope of displaying such form that he would recover what he had lost.

If so, it was a delusive hope. Any fellow on the field could see that he was nowhere near Compton's form—indeed, Carne had to realise it himself. It was from Carne's toe that Compton took the ball, to slam it in

the Sixth Form goal, beating North of the Sixth in his citadel with ease. And the savage, black look that Carne gave his rival made some of the fellows shrug their shoulders, and others chuckle.

All eyes were on Compton of the Fifth. The Bounder watched him more curiously than any other fellow. He knew that there must be a weight on the schoolboy smuggler's mind, uneasiness in his heart. The changing of the packets on Wednesday must have mystified him, and left him no doubt that his secret was known to at least one person in the school. Yet, in his looks and his manner, there had been no sign of it. Now he was at the top of his form—all matters but Soccer evidently dismissed from his mind. The fellow had pluck, and nerve, and self-command—qualities the Bounder greatly admired. Never had Smithy liked and admired him more than now.

At half-time, the Fifth were two up. Carne was biting his lip, but Wingate was looking remarkably pleased, for a skipper with defeat ahead. The Greyfriars captain cared little for the result of a Form match; he was looking on Compton as a first eleven man, and his goals pleased Wingate of the Sixth almost as much as Blundell of the Fifth.

In the second half, Wingate put the ball in. But that was the only score by the Sixth. Twice again the leather went in for the Fifth, before the final whistle blew, and Blundell was grinning from ear to ear, and seemed to be walking on air when the sides came off—the Fifth winners by four goals to one. And Wingate was seen to clap Compton on the shoulder as the footballers went to the changing-room.

"Blundell's pulled it off!" Bob Cherry remarked when the Famous Five went in to tea after the match. "He said he would, and he has."

"Compton has, at any rate!" said Wharton. "He bagged three out of the four."

"I say, you fellows——" "Hallo, hallo, hallo! I didn't see you on Big Side, Bunter!" chuckled Bob Cherry. "You've missed a treat."

"The—the fact is, I've been rather busy on the phone," said Bunter. "I say, you fellows, I'm sorry——"

"Nothing to be sorry about, surely!" said Bob, in surprise. "I thought you'd be feeling fearfully bucked, with five nice fellows like us coming home with you for Christmas."

"The buckfulness ought to be terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter."

"What I mean is," said Bunter, blinking at the smiling five uneasily, "I got my pater on the phone, to—to tell him about it, and—and——"

"And he jumped for joy?" asked Bob.

"N-n-no——"

"Well, he will, when he sees us! Of course, he doesn't know how nice we are, till he sees us."

"He—he said that—that there's going to be—be—be—decorations——"

"We'll help with the Christmas decorations!" said Bob, heartily.

"Yes, rather!" agreed Nugent.

"The ratherfulness is terrific."

"I—I don't mean Christmas decorations," gasped Bunter. "I—I mean, he's going to have the decorators in, and—and in the circumstances, you fellows would hardly care to be there—so I think——"

"Painting, and paper-hanging, and all that?" asked Bob.

"Yes, old chap!"

"We'll lend a hand! I can paint, and all the fellows know how to hang paper! Make ourselves useful, as well as ornamental, what, you men?"

"Certainly," said Harry, with a nod.

"Nothing would suit me better!" said Johnny Bull.

"But—but I say, you fellows——" stammered Bunter.

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"That's all right, old chap! Next time you get your pater on the phone, tell him it's all right—right as rain! We're coming."

And the Famous Five walked on. "Beasts!" breathed Bunter.

Bunter was a stickler himself, and generally his victims found it difficult to make him come unstuck in holiday-time. Now Bunter, for the first time in his fat career, was experiencing that difficulty himself. A hint seemed of no more use with these fellows than it had ever been with Bunter! They had got that invitation out of him, and they were sticking! Owing up that he couldn't possibly have them for Christmas was a last, a very last resource. But how else he was going to make them come unstuck was a painful problem to the fat Owl.

He had to think out another move—and he was quite unaware that the Famous Five, with great hilarity, were wondering what that next move was going to be! Whatever it was, they were prepared to put "paid" to it. Billy Bunter's wriggles were entertain-

ing, and not till break-up day was he going to be allowed to wriggle out!

It was the following morning, when the chums of the Remove were going out for their "Sunday walk," that the next move came.

Billy Bunter caught them at the gates.

"I say, you fellows——" he squeaked.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Come on, Bunter!" said Bob. "Like a walk? You can tell us about the great preparations at Bunter Court! Which prince is coming?"

"I don't want a walk!" grunted Bunter. "I was going to say, I had a letter from my pater this morning——"

"Oh! Have they started Sunday morning deliveries again?"

"I—I mean, I—I had a letter last night," gasped Bunter.

"Not much difference," agreed Bob.

"And your pater said how pleased he was to hear——"

"Oh! No! He—he said that owing to measles in the house, I'd better call it off," said Bunter. "The—the butler's got measles——"

"Oh crikey!" The butler?"

"Yes, in both feet——"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And—and it's catching, you know," said Bunter. "So, in the circumstances, with pneumonia in the house——"

"As well as measles?"

"I—I—I mean measles! Just measles! It would be too jolly risky for you fellows——"

"Now, I don't take that kindly, Bunter!" said Bob Cherry. "Think we're the fellows to care for risks? You're going home to face the deadly microbe in his lair—think we're the fellows to let you face the danger alone? Not likely! We're backing you up, and seeing you through."

"But——"

"Measles or no measles, rely on us!" said Bob. "You fellows all say the same?"

"Yes, rather! Rely on us, Bunter! We're not afraid of measles!"

"But——"

"We're sticking to you, old chap!"

"The stickfulness is terrific."

And having given Bunter that assurance, the Famous Five started on their walk—leaving Bunter at the gate, glaring after them with a glare that nearly cracked his spectacles!

THE END.

(Next week's ENLARGED CHRISTMAS NUMBER of the MAGNET will contain, in addition to other Yuletide features, another grand yarn of Harry Wharton & Co., entitled "BILLY BUNTER'S CHRISTMAS PARTY!" Make sure of this splendid treat by ordering your copy early. EXTRA PAGES—usual price!)

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THE HAWNTED HEADMASTER!

Opening Instalment of a Rollicking
Fine New Christmas Serial,
By **DICKY NUGENT.**

Pop! That soft, sinister sound, echoing across the snowbound old quad at St. Sam's, was followed by a dull thud and a feendish howl.

Wallop! "Yaroooooo!" It was Doctor Alfred Birchermall, the revered and majestic headmaster of St. Sam's, who rolled back, shrieking, into a snowdrift at the side of the drive.

Anyone passing mite easily have thought the Head had been bombarded by cannon-balls. As a matter of fact, however, the cause of his collapse was not a salvo of cannon-balls, but one solitary snowball, heeled with unerring aim by a junior who took cover in the bushes as soon as he had let fly!

Doctor Birchermall sat up in the snowdrift, clasp- ing his nose, which had received the full force of the attack.

"Ow, by Jose!" he groaned. "I'll slawter the yung raskal that did it!" Then he gave a sudden start and bellowed "Fear- less!"

The Head had just caught sight of Frank Fearless of the Fourth, and promptly jumped to the conclusion that he was the culprit.

Fearless, who was as innocent as a babe, grinned all over his dial as he spotted Doctor Birchermall.

"Having a snowbath, sir?" he asked. "If you are, it's a wonder you didn't think to put on your Sunday worst for it instead of your weekday best!"

"You cheeky yung welp!" snorted the Head. "You've got a nerve and no mistake, flooring me with a snowball and then being sawy to me! Touch your toes!"

"But I'm innersent!" protested Frank Fearless. "That's right enuff, sir," chimed in a new voice at that moment; and Jack Jolly appeared, with Merry and Bright at his heels. "We saw the snowball hit you on the boko, sir—and Fearless didn't do it!"

"Ratts!" snorted the Head. "You're all in the plot, that's what it is!"

Then, as Fearless showed no sign of touching his toes, the Head grasped him by the scruff of the neck and started dusting his trowsis with the vigger of a professional carpet-beater!

It was lucky for Fearless that a fresh interruption came before the Head had got properly into his stride. Miss Molly Birchermall, the Head's fair dawter, was the interrupter. She came from the direction of the Head's house, her cheeks flushed with egg- sistent and her eyes flashing with anger.

"Stop, pop! Stop!" she cried, in her tinkling,

mewsical voice. "Fearless is innersent! I saw who throw the snowball my- self. It was Snarler!"

"Bless my sole!" eggs- claimed the Head, lower- ing his birch. "Just to prove it, pop, here he is!" trilled Miss Molly, triumphantly; and her dainty thumb and fourfinger closed over the ear of someone who was hearing behind one of the bushes beside the drive. It was Snarler, the cadd of the Fourth!

"So!" snorted the Head. "It was you all the time, Snarler! You had the disportinence to snowball your headmaster, and to make matters worse, you calinly watched another boy birched for your crime!"

"Mersy!" wined the cadd of the Fourth.

"A fat lot of mersy you showed to Fearless when he was suffering on your account!" said the Head. "You may stand aside now, Fearless; consider yourself not birched!"

"Oh! Thanks, sir!" said Frank Fearless, rather rewfully. "Molly, my dear, you had better withdraw from this panel scene," said Doctor Birchermall, grimly. "Snarler! Bend over!" And, while Miss Molly tripped daintily back to

the Head's house, the Head's birch began dust- ing Snarler's trowsis even more vigorously than it had dusted those of Fear- less previously.

MISS MOLLY'S CHRISTMAS POODING! "Getting on all right with that Christmas pood- ing, my dear?"

Doctor Birchermall craned his ostrich-like neck round the door of the kitchen, as he asked that question.

Molly Birchermall looked round from a large basin filled with Christmas pood- ing mixture.

"Fine, thanks, pop!" she trilled. "It's going to be a ripping pooding. You won't half like it!"

"There's not the slitest doubt about that, my dear!" grinned the Head, whose mouth was farly watering, as he watched his dawter's preparations. "Christmas pooding is one of my favourite dishes— especially when you make it! When will it be ready?"

"You can have it for supper, pop, if you're good!" rippled Molly Birchermall. "Like to give it a stir for luck?"

"With plezzure, my dear!" And the Head seized the girl's wooden spoon and began stirring

the contents of the basin for all he was worth. In fact, he put so much vigger into it that his first turn sent about half-a- pound of pooding mixture flying across the table, to land right in the middle of Miss Molly's face.

"Thwack!" "Oh, oh! Gug-gug- grooooo!" shrieked Miss Molly.

The Head wiped his dawter's face with the tafe of his gown; and then left her to get on with her pooding-making.

"Mind you have it ready by supper-time!" he admonished from the doorway.

"I shan't disappoint you, pop!" tinkled Miss Molly. Then the Head tramped off, and his dawter applied herself once more to her cookery, humming blithely as she did so.

If Miss Molly had known that a pair of cool, hard eyes were watching her from behind a curtained recess, she would not have gone about her work so happily. Unknown to her Snarler of the Fourth had sneaked in while she wasn't looking, bringing with him a bag of plaster of Paris.

The black sheep of the Fourth blamed Miss Molly for the wacking he had had out in the quad; and he was bent on vengenz of a very pekuliar kind. What Snarler had de- cided to do was to empty the bag of plaster of Paris into Miss Molly's Christ- mas pooding mixture, when her back was turned— thus ensuring that the finished pooding would be as hard as solid rock! In this way Snarler hooped to kill two birds with one stone and revenge himself on both the Head and his dawter.

It wasn't long before his chance came. Miss Molly found that she was short of spice and had to run across to the Skool House kitchen to get some.

Snarler seized his opportunity with both hands. Creeping out of his hiding- place, he upended the plaster of Paris into the pooding mixture and gave it a hurried stir. Then, like a thief in the nite, he sneaked off, chuckling gloatingly.

Not till he was back in his study did Snarler realise, with a start of

Jamay, that his pearl tie- ty was missing and that it must have dropped into the pooding mixture! But by that time the pooding was bubbling away merrily in the pot on the kitchen stove and it was too late to do anything about it.

SUPPER FOR THE HEAD!

"By Jove! This is something like!" Doctor Birchermall fare- ly unknocked his lips as he spoke. It was supper-time and he had returned to his study with a terrifick appetite.

To fag for him during his supper he had brought along Jolly and Merry and Bright and Fearless.

Whenever there was some- thing special on the menu, the Head liked to have a few juniors nooking about in the role of waiters. On this occasion he had selected the heroes of the Fourth—Jolly to pour out the custard sawce, Merry to sprinkle the sugar, Bright to hand him his table-napkin and Fearless to serve the ginger-pop.

The Head's grin stretched from hero to hero, as Miss Molly tripped into the study, carrying a grite steaming pooding on a plate.

"Here you are, pop!" trilled Molly Birchermall, as she set down the tempt- ing-looking dish before him. "I've had it boiling for hours, so it ought to be done to a turn!"

"It looks spiffing, my dear!" grinned the Head. "I'll make a start right away while it's hot. Here goes!"

So saying, the Head grabbed his fork and spoon and made a dive at the pooding.

Then he received a shok. Instead of sinking into the mixture, his fork and spoon stopped on the surface with a hard, metallick "clink!"

Doctor Birchermall jumped.

"Bless my sole!" He made another on- slawt—but with no better success. He picked up his carving-knife and tried to stab the pooding; but the only result was that the knife snapped in two!

The Head's grin van- ished. A fierce scowl appeared in its place. "Jolly! Fetch me the

coal-hammer!" he wrapped out. "But, pop!" pro- tested Miss Molly. "It can't be hard; I made it eggsactly as the cookery- book said and—"

"Pray do not distract my attenshan when I'm engaged in serious bizz- ness," growled the Head, whose affection for his dawter seemed to be cool- ing even more rapidly than the pooding.

Miss Molly cultered few- riously as her father took the coal-hammer from

flounced out of the room. And the Head was so an- noyed over his supper that he didn't even trubble for the moment to say her neigh!

HAWNTED! Bonk! It was the first stroak of midnite, crashing out from the old clock tower at St. Sam's.

Fourteen more stroaks followed, for the skool clock was liable to go off the rails a little in cold weather.

Jolly and lifted it high above his head. Then he brought it down with terrifick force on the pooding.

Bang! The plate shattered into a thousand pieces and bottles of pop bounced on the table like jumping crackers. But apart from a slite split in the top, Doctor Birchermall made no impression on the pooding.

With a roar like that of a lion cheated of its prey, the Head lifted the pood- ing in his hands and made a savvidge bite at it. Something snapped. But it wasn't the pooding; it was Doctor Birchermall's false teeth!

"Pop, how dare you!" cried Molly Birchermall, indignantly. "You are trying to yewmiliate me!"

"You mean you are trying to yewmiliate me!" stormed the Head. "Call yourself a cook! Why, a stonemason could have made a more tender pooding than this!"

"I refuse to lissen to another word!" trilled Miss Molly, with a stamp of her dainty foot. "You've insulted my Christmas pooding, pop—and I'm not staying an- other minnit under your roof!"

With these words, Molly Birchermall turned and

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FOOTBALLERS SNOWBALLED BY FED-UP FANS!

Amazing End To Form Game

The Remove v. Upper Fourth game, which was played on Little Side after a fall of snow last Wednesday, would prob- ably have been a jolly tenner hadn't arrived!

But Smithy's tenner did arrive—and, as the season's first batch of mince-pies had also arrived in the tuckshop at the same time, the inevit- able happened. Smithy trotted both teams across to the tuckshop and stood Sam. The day was cold and the pies were hot, and the chaps waded in with a will.

Back they all trooped to the footer-pitch, and even at that stage it was noticed by competent observers that there was a tendency for the players to droop a little.

But it was when the game started that the effect of too many mince-pies was really seen. Keen forwards, whom the crowd were used to seeing fly down the field like the wind, staggered and reeled about at not more than a couple of miles an hour. Half-backs and full- backs held on to each other for support, and goalies slept quietly against their respec- tive goalposts.

The fans who had come to watch a breathlessly ex- citing game and to cheer on their favourites to red- hot victory stood it for five minutes. Then, as if moved

by a common impulse, they started scraping up hand- fuls of snow. One snow- ball flew across the field. Then another and another and another, and it wasn't long before the air of Little Side was thick with flying snowballs!

You might imagine that this amazing development would have spurred on the teams to action. But it only spurred them on to making a dash for the pavilion! First one went and then another and eventually only the two goalies and three of the backs were left.

Volunteers invaded the pitch and carried these survivors to a snowdrift, where they were buried with great ceremony—and in spite of their protests!

We sincerely hope that this is the last time that well-meaning millionaires like Smithy will regale our star footer players with mincepies just before the start of a game!

SMITHY'S SETTEE

Vernon-Smith has just bought a settee with a col- lapsible side which turns into a temporary bed. Fears are now expressed that the Bounder may be tempted to follow Mauly's example and spend "halfers" in dream- land. Our feeling is that, when required on the play- ing-fields, Smithy will still never "let the side down"!

GREYFRIARS CHRISTMAS BALL SCORED BULL!

Says FRANK NUGENT

If you happen to be one of those who think that no he-man worth his salt ought ever to be seen in a ball-room, you should certainly have turned up to our Junior Christmas Ball.

Every tough baby in the Remove turned up and they all looked so much at home in their surroundings that it was quite hard to realise they didn't spend most of their spare time doing fox-trots, tangos and rumbas!

Of course, I don't say their move- ments would necessarily have won whole-hearted approval from the best dancing instructors. Bols- over major, for instance, reminded me of a performing elephant, while Johnny Bull had a long, raking stride rather like that of a drome- dary. But none of them showed a scrap of nervousness or self- consciousness.

The Cliff House girls were the guests of honour and there was a big rush to book dances with Marjorie and Barbara and others who are well known to the Greyfriars fellows. In fact, there was such a rush of Remove chaps that Temple and his pals of the Upper Fourth got completely crowded out. Temple was so peeved about it that he actually threatened to punch Wharton on the head and some of the girls got quite alarmed. But Temple soon got over it and one or two Remove martyrs swapped bookings with Upper Fourth—and everything in the garden was soon lovely again.



partner-swapping. When the music gave the signal to grab partners the dance looked rather like a Rugger scrum for a few seconds. But although hard knocks were given and taken, it was all good-humoured and voted great fun.

There was another rush at refreshment-time. Bunter won the race by a short head from Stott, but stewards de- prived him of his advantage by run- ning back to the starting-post again and, as a result, Bunter managed to consume not more than ten times as much as any other guest.

The hit of the evening was the Paul Jones dance, with plenty of opportunity with both hands. Creeping out of his hiding- place, he upended the plaster of Paris into the pooding mixture and gave it a hurried stir. Then, like a thief in the nite, he sneaked off, chuckling gloatingly.

Not till he was back in his study did Snarler realise, with a start of

partner-swapping. When the music gave the signal to grab partners the dance looked rather like a Rugger scrum for a few seconds. But although hard knocks were given and taken, it was all good-humoured and voted great fun.

Altogether a great evening! Some of the chaps looked a bit moony the next day, but they'll soon get over that! Here's to the next merry hop!

The GREYFRIARS HERALD

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With these words, Molly Birchermall turned and

TEMPLE'S BIG BLUNDER NOT MY FAULT!

Declares WILLIAM WIBLEY

I call it rank injustice for Temple to blame me for what happened the day after the Ball.

Considering the scene he made over some of the girls being booked up, he might have expected Miss Bulli- vant to turn up next day to give him a ticking-off.

Yet, when she did so, armed with an umbrella and a very determined look on her face, Temple immediately con- cluded that it wasn't Miss Bullivant at all.

Anyone with a grain of gumption would have made a few discreet inquiries to settle who was who and what was what first. But Temple was content to march the Bull up to his study without doing a thing to find out whether or not he was on the right track!

Having got her into his

study, Temple turned round, wrenched the gamp out of her hand, and yelled: "Now, you cheeky young spoofer, we're going to put you through it!"

It was only when he grabbed her by the hair—and the hair didn't show the least sign of coming away from the head—that Temple made the horrible discovery that it really was Miss Bullivant!

Now he's trying to blame the impot and lecture he got from the Head all on to me. Just because he says he heard me planning to jape him by dressing up as Miss Bullivant!

I'm downright certain that any fair-minded fellow will agree that Temple's big blunder may be any- body's fault—but it cer- tainly isn't mine!

(Don't miss next week's screamingly funny instal- ment of Dicky Nugent's great Christmas serial!)