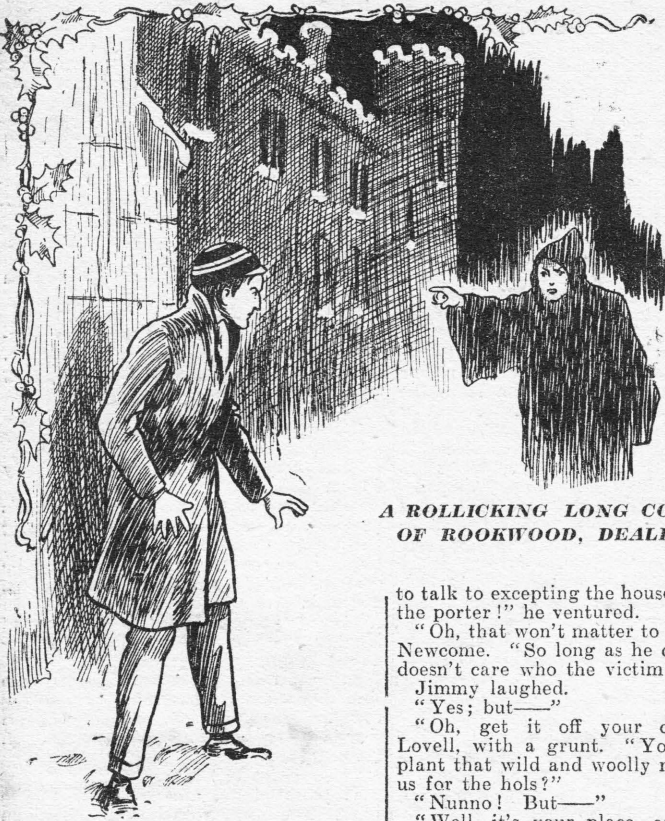


TEXAS LICK'S CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE! Texas Lick is keen to experience a real old English Christmas, complete with a grizzly Yuletide phantom, and Lick's wish is fulfilled in an amazing fashion!



Texas Lick's Ghost Hunt!

By OWEN CONQUEST.

A ROLLICKING LONG COMPLETE STORY OF JIMMY SILVER & CO., OF ROOKWOOD, DEALING WITH THEIR CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS!

THE FIRST CHAPTER. Lick Settles the Point!

WHAT about Lick?" Jimmy Silver asked that question in the end study.

The Fistical Four of Rookwood were discussing the Christmas holidays, close at hand now.

Texas Lick, their new study-mate, was not in the end study just then. The chums of the Fourth were not sorry for it. When Lick was in the study most of the talking was done by Texas Lick.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome did not answer Jimmy Silver's question, but they looked at Jimmy rather expressively.

They did not dislike Texas Lick, but they felt that it was possible to have too much of a good thing—even if Texas Lick was a good thing, which was by no means certain.

"Well, what about him?" asked Lovell, rather gruffly, after a long pause.

Jimmy Silver coughed.

"You fellows are coming home with me for the hols," he said.

"That's settled," said Raby.

"Lick can't go back to Texas for the Christmas vacation," Jimmy Silver remarked, in a casual sort of way.

"I dare say his people knew that when they sent him over here," observed Arthur Edward Lovell, also in a casual sort of way.

Jimmy coughed again.

"A bit rotten for a fellow, sticking at the school through the hols, with nobody

to talk to excepting the housekeeper and the porter!" he ventured.

"Oh, that won't matter to Lick!" said Newcome. "So long as he can talk, he doesn't care who the victim is!"

Jimmy laughed.

"Yes; but—"

"Oh, get it off your chest!" said Lovell, with a grunt. "You want to plant that wild and woolly merchant on us for the hols?"

"Nunno! But—"

"Well, it's your place, and you can ask anybody you like," said Lovell. "It's not for us to say."

"Don't get your back up, old chap!" said Jimmy Silver. "If you don't want Lick, I won't ask him. But—"

"Oh, bother the fellow!" said Lovell restively. "Don't we have enough of him at Rookwood? Have we heard anything for weeks, excepting his voice, talking through his blessed Western nose? Do you want him at the Priory, telling your pater how much better they would manage the place in Amurrica?"

"Well, he's sort of planted on us, being in our study," said Jimmy. "And he's not a bad chap, in his way."

"His way isn't our way!"

Jimmy Silver looked rather uncomfortable. He felt that it was up to him, in a way, to ask the Texan schoolboy home for the Christmas holidays. But it was quite clear that his chums had enough of Texas Lick at Rookwood, and wanted a rest from him during the vacation—which was really not to be wondered at, as Jimmy admitted. Texas Lick had plenty of good qualities. But there was, as Lovell expressed it, much too much of him.

"Well, I won't ask him, then," said Jimmy Silver at last. "I didn't like to think of the chap sticking at Rookwood through the hols, that's all."

"You're too jolly tender-hearted, Jimmy!" said Lovell chidingly.

"You've got a way of taking other people's troubles on your shoulders! A fellow's own troubles are heavy enough to carry, as a rule."

"I must say I agree with Lovell for once," remarked Raby.

And Arthur Newcome nodded assent.

"Hallo! Here he comes!" said Jimmy hastily.

There was a heavy tread in the Fourth Form passage, and Texas Lick, of Texas, came into the study. The cow-puncher schoolboy always seemed to make the study shake when he came into it.

He gave the Fistical Four a cheery nod.

"Hallo, you guys!" he greeted. "I guess I want to speak to you, Jimmy Silver!"

"No charge!" said Jimmy. "Go ahead!"

"We're just on breaking up for Christmas."

"Tell us something we don't know!" suggested Lovell.

"I guess I've been thinking about it some," went on Texas Lick, unheeding. "I'm a stranger in this little island, and, of course, I've never seen an English Christmas. I reckon I shan't be long in this country—couldn't stand it for long, you know! Sort of suffocates a real live American—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"That's the how of it," said Texas Lick. "But I guess I want to take the chance of seeing a British Christmas before I levant. Savvy? Now, you go in for that sort of thing when you're at home, Silver?"

"Eh—yes! Oh, yes!"

"Father Christmas, and dances, and Christmas-tree, and holly and mistletoe, and, in fact, the whole bag of tricks?" asked the Texan.

"Something of that sort."

"Like me to come with you?"

"Eh?"

"I guess it would be all O.K. for me. Say the word, and I'll come home with you for the holidays."

"Oh!"

Texas Lick sat on the edge of the table, which creaked ominously under his weight, and regarded the captain of the Fourth inquiringly.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome exchanged rather queer glances.

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It could not be said that Texas Lick was fishing for invitations. He came straight to the point; there was no mistake about that.

"Waal, is it a cinch?" asked Lick, as Jimmy Silver did not seem in a hurry to reply. "I guess it will wake up your folks some to have a real live American in the shebang! What?"

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy.

"Well, my hat!" said Lovell. That was all he could say. It was evident that Texas Lick considered that his company at Christmas would be something in the nature of a treat for the captain of the Rookwood Fourth.

Jimmy hesitated, and cast an appealing look at his chums. Raby and Newcome grinned and nodded, implying that they left it to Jimmy. Arthur Edward Lovell grunted.

"Anybody else going with you, Silver?" asked Lick.

"Yes, these fellows." "I guess I'll be glad of their company," said Texas Lick graciously. "They're jays; but everybody in this ten-cent island is a jay, more or less. Is it a cinch?"

Jimmy looked at Lovell. That youth had an inward struggle. He did not want Texas Lick's company during the Christmas holidays. But he was well aware that if the tender-hearted Jimmy did not ask him, nobody else would; and he felt a little compunction at the idea of Lick being stranded at the deserted school for a dismal vacation.

"Do as you like, Jimmy," said Lovell at last.

"Right-ho!" Jimmy turned to Lick.

"I'll be glad if you'll come home with me for Christmas, Lick," he said politely.

Lick nodded. "It's a cinch," he said. "I guess I've told the popper that I'm studying the customs of this queer little country while I'm over here. I reckon I shall make them laugh no end in Texas when I get back. It's settled."

Lick slid off the table, and strolled out of the study. Raby and Newcome chuckled, Lovell frowned, and Jimmy Silver burst into a laugh.

"Well, we're landed with him now!" growled Lovell. "I must say you're an ass, Jimmy! In fact, you're a silly ass! A hurbling ass, if you don't mind my saying so! There never was such a howling ass at Rookwood as you are, Jimmy."

And Jimmy Silver rather wondered whether Arthur Edward Lovell, for once, was right!

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Off for the Holidays!

"THAT'S the Fifth Form brake." "Is it?" said Texas Lick. "Yes, it is." "I guess that cuts no ice with me, all the same."

Texas Lick tossed a bag—a "grip," as he called it, into the waiting brake. There was a cheery buzz of voices all about Rookwood School—a hurrying of feet, a dumping of bags. Rookwood was breaking up for Christmas, and the fellows were scattering to the four corners of the three kingdoms. There was frost in the air and a keen wind, but everybody looked merry and bright.

Texas Lick looked as merry and bright as anyone. He came out with the Fistical Four, in great spirits. There were several brakes—one had already started, loaded over the Plimsol line, as Arthur Edward Lovell expressed it. Some of the fellows were

going by the local train from Coombe—others were going in the brakes direct to Latham Junction; but there were not enough brakes to go round.

"Take that bag out, you cheeky young ass!" called out Hansom of the Fifth wrathfully and indignantly, as he observed Lick's action.

"Oh guff!" said Lick.

"By gad!" said Hansom.

He came at Lick, intending to strew that cool youth in the quadrangle.

But Jimmy Silver & Co. intervened. They were in great spirits, and quite ready for a little rag with the Fifth on break-up day. They collared Hansom, and sat him down hard.

"Now rope in that brake," said Lick.

"But it's booked for the Fifth," said Conroy.

"What does that matter?"

"Oh, my hat! The Fifth think it matters!"

"Blow the Fifth!"

Lick had brought a good many rather lawless ideas along with him from the plains of Texas. As a rule, Jimmy Silver & Co. were busily engaged in checking the lawless propensities of their wild and woolly study-mate. But, for once, his suggestion "jumped with their own inclination. It was quite in accordance with the traditions of the end study to wind up the term with a glorious rag.

"Good egg!" exclaimed Jimmy Silver. "After all, who are the Fifth?"

"Who, indeed?" grinned Mornington. "Mere seniors!" chuckled Putty Grace.

"Collar the brake!" shouted Lovell, catching on at once.

"Hurrah!"

Texas Lick's "stunt" spread like wildfire among the merry Fourth-Formers. There was a rush for the brake.

Jimmy Silver & Co. and Texas Lick were the first on board. Mornington and Erroll came next, and Conroy, Putty Grace, Rawson, Townsend, and Topham, Peele and Gower—Tommy Dodd, and Cook, and Doyle—and then a whole swarm of the Fourth, Classical and Modern.

They fairly swamped the brake.

Hansom of the Fifth staggered to his feet, and shouted to them in tones of fury:

"Get out! Get out of that brake! That's the Fifth Form brake! Get out, you young scoundrels!"

But the voice of Edward Hansom was as the voice of one crying in the wilderness. It was drowned by the cheers of the Fourth.

"Here, I say, young gentlemen!" exclaimed the brake-driver, who was standing by his horses.

"Jump up and drive!" shouted Lovell. "Don't do anything of the kind!" shrieked Hansom.

"I guess that guy isn't wanted," exclaimed Texas Lick. "I've drove wagons behind a team of Mexican burros on the prairie. I guess I can handle this hyer old hearse."

He grasped the whip and the reins.

"Go it, Lick!" yelled the juniors.

"Hurrah!"

"Look 'ere—" shouted the driver.

"Stand clear!"

Texas Lick cracked the whip, and the horses moved down the drive towards the gate.

"Stop!" yelled Hansom. "Here, Lumsden, Talboys! Come on! Stop those young villains! They've got our brake!"

Half a dozen of the Fifth rushed after the brake. The big vehicle was in rapid motion now, and Texas Lick was

handling the two rather powerful horses like one born to the task. There were shouts and cheers from all sides as the brake rolled down the drive to the gates.

"Put it on, Lick!" shouted Lovell.

"Mind the gates!" "Look hout, you!" shouted old Mack, the porter, at the gates. "Don't you have a blinking haccident! You—" "Get aside!"

Old Mack jumped out of the way. At a thundering speed, but with masterly skill, Texas Lick toolled the brake out of the gates into the road, with Hansom & Co. of the Fifth panting behind.

"Stop!" yelled Hansom.

"Yah!"

"Go and eat cake!"

"We're off!" yelled Lovell, in high delight. "Good-bye, the Fifth!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Hansom of the Fifth put on a desperate spurt. He reached the brake, and held on behind, his feet dragging on the road.

"Stop!" he panted.

"Sheer off!" shouted Lovell.

"Stop! I—I'll—"

"Let me get at him!" said Putty Grace.

Grace extracted an orange from his pocket and leaned over the panting Fifth-Former as he hung on behind. Coolly and cheerfully he squeezed the orange over Hansom's face and down his neck.

"Ow!" gasped Hansom. "Groogh! You—ouch—you young villain! I—I—I'll—gug-gug-gug-gug—"

Hansom fairly choked, as Putty of the Fourth rammed what was left of the orange into his open mouth. Lovell leaned over and flattened the hat on his head.

"Groogh! Ow! Gug-gug!"

Hansom let go, and sat down in the road. The brake rolled on and left him there, the crowd of juniors sending back catcalls and yells.

"What larks!" chuckled Lovell. "I say, Lick, don't land us in the ditch!"

"I guess we're getting a move on," answered Lick. "We ain't letting the brake ahead beat us to the station."

"That's the Sixth—"

"Who cares for the Sixth?"

"Nobody, on the last day of term," said Jimmy Silver, laughing. "Beat 'em if you can."

"I reckon I'm going to beat 'em to a frazzle!"

The horses were fairly galloping now, with the brake rocking behind. Ahead in the frosty road appeared the brake that had started first—a brake that belonged to the seniors, and had many members of that most important of Forms, the Sixth, on board. Some of the Sixth stared back at the juniors' brake, surprised to see a junior driving, and probably still more surprised by the speed he was putting on.

Texas Lick waved his whip.

"Clear the road there!" he shouted. Knowles of the Sixth stood up in the front brake.

"Pull in, you juniors!" he shouted back.

"Rats!" roared the Fourth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The pursuing brake drew closer. Coombe Lane was not planned for a rush of traffic; there was room for two vehicles to pass another, but only about room. Two big brakes taxed the road's capacity to its utmost. For one brake to pass another at the gallop was asking for trouble. But Texas Lick always was asking for trouble.

He cracked his whip, and the brake rushed on.

"Stop, there!" roared Knowles.

"Stop, you young asses!" shouted Neville of the Sixth.

"Go it, Lick! Beat the Sixth!"

The whole crew of the Fourth Form brake—once the Fifth Form brake—were reckless. Even Townsend and Topham, elegant knuts as they were, waved their hats and yelled. With a roar of voices and a clattering of hoofs, the brake swept down the frosty road, to the wild, incessant cracking of Texas Lick's whip.

The driver of the brake ahead pulled in as close as he could to the roadside. He left the pursuer just room.

"Keep on, driver!" shouted some of the seniors. "Don't let that brake pass!"

But the driver was not a reckless junior of Rookwood; he did not mean

behind; which was, perhaps, just as well, for the remarks that Knowles hurled after the juniors were certainly not wishes for a merry Christmas.

**THE THIRD CHAPTER.
An Old Acquaintance!**

JIMMY SILVER & CO. crowded cheerily into the train at Latcham Junction. They had quite enjoyed the race with the seniors and the drive in the frosty air. The wrath of Fifth and Sixth mattered nothing to them—there was the vacation ahead, and the new term at Rookwood was a long way off.

Arthur Edward Lovell glanced at him and grinned.

"Know that chap?" he murmured.

The Rookwood chums glanced round.

"Bunter!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Billy Bunter, of Greyfriars," said Newcome. "I'd know that podgy chivvy anywhere."

Perhaps Billy Bunter, of the Greyfriars Remove, heard his name. He blinked round through his big spectacles. A look of recognition came over his fat face, and he left his table and joined the Rookwooders.

"Fancy meeting you chaps!" said Bunter. "Quite a pleasure!"



ROPED IN! Texas Lick was cheerfully dragging the hapless Lovell through the snow when Jimmy Silver, Raby, Newcome and Mr. Silver dashed up. "What—what does it all mean?" gasped Mr. Silver, holding up the lamp. "Oh, my hat!" gasped Jimmy. "It's Lovell, and that beast Lick has lassoed him!" (See Chapter 6.)

to gallop at breakneck speed. He was going fast—and he slowed instead of putting on more speed.

The Fourth Form brake came abreast.

"You cheeky young rascals!" shouted Knowles.

Texas Lick flicked with his whip. Knowles' hat was plucked off, and landed in the ditch. There was a yell of laughter from the Fourth.

"Ha, ha, ha!" gasped Knowles.

"I—I—I—" gasped Knowles.

"Go it, Lick!"

The brake thundered on. Some of the seniors shook their fists. A dozen of the juniors groped in their pockets for nuts and oranges and other missiles. A volley whizzed among the great men of the Sixth, answered by shouts of wrath, and dire threats of what should happen next term. Then the Fourth Form brake was past.

Knowles, hatless, furious, stood up and shook his fist after the victors in the race. A bump of the brake made him sit down suddenly, and he disappeared among a jungle of feet. A roar of laughter floated back from the heroes of the Fourth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Good-bye, Knowles!"

"Merry Christmas!"

And the brake rushed on, and Knowles' voice was lost in the distance

There were several changes of trains for Jimmy Silver & Co., and at each change Texas Lick expressed his opinion of British railways—an opinion that was not flattering, but was perhaps justified. He declared that if he had not seen the railway carriages with his own eyes he would not have believed in their existence, and even yet he wasn't sure that he was not dreaming. When they changed at Winchester there was half an hour wait for the next train, and Texas Lick filled in the time with eloquence. It was possible to get tired of eloquence, and the Fistical Four contrived to dodge their companion and escaped into a buffet, leaving Texas Lick hunting for them along the platforms.

It was quite a relief to sit down and discuss hot coffee and buns without the strident tones of Texas Lick ringing in their ears. They only hoped that he would not find them before the train was due.

A fat youth, with a pair of large spectacles, was sitting at a little table near at hand, blinking with a mournful gaze at an empty plate. A trace of jam showed that the plate had held a tart, which now was evidently held by the fat youth. It was gone from his gaze like a beautiful dream, and the fat fellow seemed, like Rachel of old, to be mourning for that which was gone.

"Oh, quite!" assented Jimmy Silver politely, though he did not quite see where the pleasure came in.

The Fistical Four knew Bunter—too well to want to improve the acquaintance any farther.

But Bunter was evidently in a friendly mood. He drew a chair to the Rookwooders' table.

"Waiting for a train?" he asked.

"That's it."

"Same here. I've got an hour to wait."

"Hard cheese!"

"You see, I'm going to call on my old pal, D'Arcy of St. Jim's," said Bunter. "He's got a magnificent place. Lord Eastwood is always keen to see me. That's D'Arcy's pater, you know."

"Noblemen have queer tastes sometimes," remarked Arthur Edward Lovell.

Bunter decided not to hear that remark.

"I've got a couple of days to fill in," he said. "I'm going up to Scotland for the vacation with a Greyfriars party—Wharton and Sir James Vivian, and some more fellows. After that I've got to put in some days at Lord Maule-

verer's place. I'm really a bit puzzled to know how I shall fit in all my engagements this vac. Still, I can manage a few days with you somehow, Silver, if you like?"

"About time our train came in," remarked Jimmy Silver, deaf in his turn. "Yes, let's get a move on," said Raby, feeling that Texas Lick would be a change for the better after the Owl of Greyfriars.

"Hold on, you fellows!" said Bunter. "As I was saying, Silver, I couldn't possibly manage a few days for you. Otherwise I'd be delighted, of course. But the fact is I'm overwhelmed with invitations. It's usually like that in vacation. It comes of being so popular. By the way, if you like to order some coffee for me I shan't refuse. I left my purse at home!"

Jimmy Silver ordered coffee and a cake. William George Bunter, of Greyfriars, was soon too busy even to talk.

"I'll tell you what," whispered Lovell, while Bunter's jaws were busy. "You remember the trick this fat bouncer played on us once, when he came to Rookwood? He's a beastly ventriloquist."

"I remember," said Jimmy Silver. "Texas Lick knows everything in the universe, and some over. But he's never heard that Bunter's a ventriloquist. He's never heard of Bunter at all. What price pulling his Texas leg?"

Jimmy Silver chuckled. It was the boast of Texas Lick—often uttered—that nobody had ever succeeded in taking a rise out of him.

"Good egg!" said Jimmy. "I say, Bunter—" "Mmmmmmmmm!" was Bunter's reply.

His capacious mouth was full of cake. "Have you forgotten your ventriloquism?"

Bunter grunted and consigned the cargo of cake to the regions below.

"Of course not! I'm a splendid ventriloquist! In fact, people rush after me to go to their places at Christmas to entertain the company!"

"Hem! If you've got to wait an hour for your train you could come along a station or two with us—"

"Got a lunch-basket?"

"Oh! We—we'll get a cake and some toffee. We want you to pull the leg of an American merchant who's travelling with us with your silly ventriloquism."

"My what?"

"I mean, your jolly clever ventriloquism."

"I don't mind," said Bunter graciously.

As a matter of fact, Bunter was quite keen to show off his weird powers. He dearly loved any kind of limelight.

"Gee-whiz! Found you guys!" exclaimed the voice of Texas Lick. "I guess I've been trailing you everywhere. Jever see such jays for getting lost?" He stared at Billy Bunter.

"Who's this guy?"

"Greyfriars chap," said Jimmy. "Billy Bunter—Texas Lick!"

"Waal, he beats Tubby Muffin!" said Texas Lick. "How the thunder does he get that waistcoat on?"

Billy Bunter glared at the Texan.

"Let's get along to the train," said Jimmy Silver hurriedly.

And he rose from the table. His comrades followed his example.

"Don't forget the cake!" called out Bunter.

"Oh, all right!"

"And the toffee!"

"Right-ho!"

"That guy travelling with us?" asked

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Texas Lick, as they came out on the platform.

"Only a few stations."

"I guess—"

"Here's the train!"

The six juniors entered a carriage, filling it. Jimmy Silver closed the door. William George Bunter held out a fat hand, and the cake and toffee were passed over to him. Evidently the Owl of Greyfriars intended to look after business before pleasure. As for Texas Lick, he sat and stared at Bunter with an unwavering stare.

Billy Bunter was a remarkable youth in many ways—especially sideways—and he seemed to interest the transatlantic junior extremely.

Cake and toffee were finished at last, and Billy Bunter cleared his throat with a little cough.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.

No Catch!

RRRRRRRRRRRRRR!

That deep, savage growl came—or seemed to come—from beneath the seat of Texas Lick.

So lifelike was it that the Fistical Four all started, for a moment wonder-

HOW DID HORACE COKER GET HIS REMOVE?

How many of my readers, I wonder, can answer that question? How many of you remember the one and only Horace Coker when he was in the Shell Form? And as Coker is such a complete duffer, and always was, why is it that Dr. Locke moved him up into the Fifth Form? Ah! Therein lies a tale, and that tale is told in Frank Richards' own inimitable style in

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ing whether there was a savage dog under the seat of the carriage. If it was Bunter's ventriloquism, certainly he was a very clever ventriloquist; and, looking at Bunter, it was not easy to believe that he was clever in any way.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

The savage growl was repeated.

Then the Fistical Four realised that undoubtedly it was Bunter. They watched Texas Lick.

That youth might have been expected to jump, or, at least, to shift his legs suddenly, with a savage dog growling at his ankles.

But he did not.

He did not seem to hear the growl at all—which was surprising, for it was quite loud and clear, and Lick was not supposed to be deaf.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

"I guess we're going to have snow," remarked Texas Lick, glancing from the window. "Can't say I'm gone on it now, but I suppose it's seasonable. Jever have a Christmas without snow?"

"Oh, yes!" said Jimmy Silver. "But, I say, did anybody hear a dog in the carriage?"

"Dog?" said Texas Lick. "They don't allow dogs to travel in first-class carriages, do they? There ain't any dog hyer, I guess."

Buzzzzzz!

A wasp began to buzz over Texas Lick's head—at least, it sounded amazingly like a wasp. Certainly, although wasps were decidedly out of season, any of the Rookwooders would have moved quickly enough if that buzzing had sounded about their ears, and they had not known that there was a ventriloquist in the carriage. But Texas Lick did not move. He seemed as oblivious of the buzzing wasp as of the growling dog.

"Do you hear something, Lick?" asked Jimmy Silver, more and more surprised.

"I hear you chewing the rag."

"Anything else?"

"The train bumping," said Lick. "What else is there to hear?"

Buzzzzzz!

"Doesn't that sound like a wasp?" asked Newcome.

"Oh, come off!" said Lick. "You don't have wasps around at Christmas-time in this ten-cent island, do you?"

Billy Bunter glared at Lick. His ventriloquism was really good and very lifelike. But, somehow or other, the youth from Texas seemed quite impervious to it.

The train stopped at a wayside station. A porter opened the door and looked in, seeking a vacant seat for a passenger.

"No room!" said Raby.

"Can't you chuck that American image out?" came from the porter—or seemed to come. "What's that object doing on a respectable railway?"

Texas Lick for an instant changed his expression, but only for an instant. Then he was stone deaf again.

The porter seemed surprised. He looked round the carriage, wondering who had spoken. Then he closed the door and passed down the train.

Jimmy Silver & Co. looked at Lick. The supposed remark of the porter ought certainly to have roused his "dander" and called forth a hot reply. But Lick seemed to be quite oblivious.

"Did you hear the porter speak, Lick?" asked Lovell at last.

"Nope."

"Well, my hat!" murmured Lovell blankly.

The train rattled on. Billy Bunter sat and glared, and Jimmy Silver & Co. looked puzzled. Before that day Lick had never heard of Billy Bunter's existence, so he couldn't possibly have known that there was a ventriloquist aboard. So what did it mean?

At the next station Bunter jumped up.

"I shall have to get out here or I shall lose my train at Winchester," he grunted, and he alighted from the carriage.

Jimmy Silver & Co. felt that the cake and toffee had been a sheer waste. Certainly Texas Lick's leg had not been pulled as anticipated.

"Goin', fatty?" asked Lick agreeably, as he reached out to shut the door. "Good-bye! Try again another time."

"Wha-a-at?"

"Some ventriloquist—I don't think!" said Lick derisively, and he slammed the door.

The train glided on, leaving Bunter standing on the platform with quite an extraordinary expression on his face.

Jimmy Silver & Co. blinked at Texas Lick. His farewell to Bunter had almost taken their breath away.

"You—you—you knew he was a ventriloquist?" stuttered Lovell.

Lick grinned.

"Just a few!" he answered.

"How did you know?" roared Lovell.

"Oh, we're smart on the other side," said Lick. "You'll have to get up very early in the morning to catch Texas Lick, I guess!"

There was silence, which Texas Lick broke, after a few minutes, with a chuckle.

"Next time you fix it up with a fat galoot to pull my leg, in a station buffet," he remarked, "just figure it out that I ain't around within hearing. It will come easier."

"Oh!" gasped the Fistical Four.

They understood at last. Texas Lick, somewhere in the buffet at Winchester, had overheard the little arrangement with Billy Bunter. It was all clear now.

After that there was silence in the carriage. But Texas had the narrowest escape in his life of being collared by four indignant japers and having his Transatlantic head rubbed on the carriage floor.

THE FIFTH CHAPTER.

The Ghost of the Priory!

"GHOSTS?"

"Yes."

"Oh, guff!"

Apparently Texas Lick did not believe in ghosts. Neither did

"Guff!" said Lick. "I guess you 'uns must be pretty soft if you swallow that guff. Come off!"

"Lots of people say they've seen it," grunted Lovell.

"Lots of jays, you mean!"

Lovell closed one eye at Jimmy Silver.

"What price Lick going out and walking along the terrace where the giddy ghost walks?" he asked. "As he doesn't believe in the jolly old phantom—"

"Good egg!" grinned Jimmy Silver. "I guess it's a bit too cold and windy—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look hyer, if you guys figure it out I'm skeered—"

"Oh, no, not at all!" grinned Raby.

"Certainly not!" said Cousin Phyllis, but she smiled.

"The hour is getting late," observed Mr. Silver. "I think you young people had better be off to bed."

And the young people obeyed the hint, and with cheery good-nights cleared off to their sleeping-quarters.

Lovell and Raby and Newcome came into Jimmy Silver's room for a chat before going to bed. There was a cheery fire in the room, and the Fistical Four of Rookwood drew their chairs round it. Texas Lick looked in, and Jimmy politely pulled up a chair to the fire for him.

waiting for him in the corridor, with an electric torch in his hand.

"Ready?" whispered Jimmy.

"Sure!"

"Come on, then!"

Jimmy Silver led the way downstairs. All lights were out, all doors and windows fastened. From somewhere in the deep shadows there came a creak, and a low, groaning sound.

Texas Lick started.

"What's that?"

"Was it anything?" murmured Jimmy.

"I guess it was something like a groan!"

"Oh, come on!"

Jimmy led the way in the gloom to the window on the terrace. Carefully and quietly he unfastened it, and opened the casement. Texas Lick, muffled up to the ears in a thick overcoat, looked out, and shivered a little. The haunted terrace ran the whole length of the house, dim and dark in the december night, thick with snow, swept by the keen wind. It was not an inviting prospect.

"You drop out here!" said Jimmy.

"I guess I'm ready!"

"Go it!"

Texas Lick climbed out of the window—slowly, perhaps incommoded by his big overcoat. He dropped into the snow under the window.

"It'll take you five minutes to walk



Jimmy Silver & Co., of course! Yet there was something in Texas Lick's derisive chuckle that irritated them.

Lick was installed at the Priory, Jimmy Silver's home, for Christmas. Mr. Silver sometimes regarded the Texan junior rather curiously; Mrs. Silver did not quite know what to make of him. Cousin Phyllis seemed interested in him, somewhat as if he were a new and curious kind of zoological specimen.

But Lick was enjoying himself.

Christmas festivities were quite enjoyable at Jimmy Silver's home, and Lick was having a good time, as he freely admitted. Also, he was studying the manners and customs of the amusing little island in which he found himself, which was so immensely inferior to anything on the other side of the "pond."

There had been a heavy fall of snow, and the woods and fields round the Priory were banked with white. The keen December wind howled round the rambling old building, and shrieked among the chimney-pots, and wailed in the wide old-fashioned chimney under which a fire of great logs crackled and roared. Outside was snow, and cold, and deep December darkness—within all was bright and cheery. The hour was growing late, and ghost stories had been told; and then came up the topic of the ghost of the Priory. Texas Lick was interested—and derisive. The story of the phantom prior who haunted, at Christmastide, the scene of his earthly sojourn, made him grin.

"Ghosts!" grinned Lick. "Still talking ghosts?"

"What about that trot on the terrace?" grinned Lovell.

"I ain't skeered to do it."

"Well, do it, then," suggested Lovell. "You don't believe in ghosts, you know. And you've got more pluck in your finger-tips than anybody in this little island in his whole body. Isn't that so?"

"Sure!"

"Only it's too cold and windy!" grinned Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Texas Lick reddened.

"I guess I'm going!" he exclaimed, jumping up.

"Bow-wow!"

"Real business," said Lick. "Your popper's locked up the house, though, Silver—how's a galoot to get out?"

"I'll show you a window on the terrace," said Jimmy. "But—"

"I'm on."

Jimmy Silver shook his head. "Better chuck it," he said. "There might be a ghost, you know—"

"Oh, can it!" said Texas Lick. "I guess I'll walk from one end of the pesky terrace to the other. You can't skeer a galoot from Texas with your pesky ghosts."

"Better put a thick coat on," said Lovell.

"I guess I'll do that!"

Texas Lick went to his room. After he was gone there was some whispering and chuckling among the juniors in Jimmy Silver's room. When Lick came out of his room he found Jimmy Silver

to the end and back," whispered Jimmy Silver, from above. "If you see the ghost—"

"Oh, guff!"

"If you get scared, run back to this window, and I'll help you in."

"I guess no pesky ghost could scare me!"

The window closed.

Texas Lick was left alone in the snow and the darkness. He blinked round him, and started along the dark terrace, his footfalls making scarcely a sound in the carpet of snow.

From the December darkness came the howl of the wind and the groaning of the trees. Mingled with those sounds there came another sound—a groan deeper than that of a tormented branch.

Groan!

Texas Lick started convulsively.

But he set his teeth and strode on firmly, further and further away from the inhabited portion of the rambling old building, nearer and nearer to the ruined wing, the haunt of bats and owls. Suddenly from the darkness there came a strange gleam of light.

A dim, phosphorescent glow made itself seen, and Texas Lick came to a dead halt as he beheld it before him.

By that dim glow he made out a dark figure of which he could barely discern the outlines—a figure draped in a long, dark, flowing robe.

A ghastly face, white as the face of the dead, glimmered in the midst of the phosphorescent glow—a face dim, shadowy, deathlike.

Lick stood motionless.

Round him the wind howled, and the flakes of snow dropped on him unheeded.

As if rooted to the terrace he stood, while the spectre figure advanced on him, with the right arm stretched out under the dark robe, a finger pointing at the motionless junior.

Still Texas Lick did not move—he seemed frozen. Only his right hand slid under his coat and seemed to grasp something there, as, with a low, wailing groan, the phantom figure bore down upon him.

THE SIXTH CHAPTER. Laying the Ghost!

"HE'S seen it!" Raby breathed the words. Three Rookwooders were clustered at a window looking over the haunted terrace. Jimmy Silver, Raby, and Newcome pressed their faces to the panes and watched, thrilling with excitement. Arthur Edward Lovell was not with them.

In the darkness without, broken by the gleaming of the snow, the three juniors could see little. But they discerned the phosphorescent glimmer, and they followed breathlessly the gliding motion of the phantom. And, faintly in the shadows, they made out the figure of Texas Lick, standing motionless as if frozen with terror, his eyes fixed on the dread form that was gliding towards him.

"Lick doesn't seem quite so bursting with swank just now," murmured Newcome.

Raby chuckled softly.

Jimmy Silver's brow clouded.

"I—I wish we hadn't done it!" he muttered. "I say, it's really a fool's trick, you know, playing ghosts. A fellow with nerves might be really clobbered by a fright!"

"Lick doesn't believe in ghosts," grinned Raby.

"It serves him right," said Jimmy. "But—but—I say, I think we'd better chip in. I'll call out to him."

Jimmy reached toward the window.

At the same moment there came a sudden movement outside, a swishing sound, and a fearful yell.

Crash!

Yell followed yell in the darkness. The phosphorescent glow had vanished; Lick had disappeared into the darkness. What was happening the three Rookwooders could not guess, but they thrilled to the very heart as the wild yells rang out from the night.

"Good heavens!" panted Raby.

"What—"

"Get the window open—quick!"

gaspd Newcome.

Jimmy Silver, his face pale with alarm, dragged the casement open. He plunged out headlong into the haunted terrace.

Wild howls and yells followed.

A light flashed in the house. Mr. Silver, in dressing-gown and slippers, came hurrying down the stairs. He switched on the electric lights as he came.

"What is it?" he shouted.

Newcome had tumbled out of the window after Jimmy Silver. Raby was following, when the old gentleman caught him by the shoulder.

"You—Raby! What does this mean? Who is calling for help?" exclaimed Mr. Silver breathlessly.

"Lick, I suppose," groaned Raby.

"Lick! Is he not in bed?"

"He—he—went out to walk on the haunted terrace—"

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"The foolish boy! Then he has fancied he has seen something!" exclaimed Mr. Silver.

"He—he hasn't fancied it!" gasped Raby.

"What?"

"We got Lovell up as the ghost of the Priory!" groaned Raby. "It—it was a jape on Lick, to take him down a peg or two."

"Good heavens! What folly!"

Mr. Silver rushed away to a door that opened on the terrace. Two or three half-dressed servants had turned out now. Lights gleamed all over the house, and voices were raised in alarm. From the terrace there came the sound of wild, incessant yells.

"Oh, help! Groogh! Oh! Ooch!"

There was a scuffling and scraping sound—a sound of rolling and scraping, mingled with the frantic yelling.

Mr. Silver threw open the door and rushed out. Raby followed him fast. They rushed bareheaded into the wind and snowflakes.

Crash!

"Oh! What—"

"Great Scott!"

"Jimmy!" gasped Mr. Silver.

Jimmy Silver sat up on the snowy terrace and spluttered. Newcome staggered, and clutched hold of Raby. In the darkness the two, rushing out of the doorway, had collided with the two rushing along the terrace.

"Oh! You, dad!" spluttered Jimmy.

"Where is Lick?"

"Ow! Oh!"

"What has happened to the boy?" shouted Mr. Silver. In his anxiety and excitement he seized Jimmy by the collar, and jerked him to his feet and shook him. "What has happened?"

"I—I don't know!" gasped Jimmy. "I just got out to see—by the window! They seem to have gone along the terrace! Then you bumped into me—"

Wild yells rang further along the terrace, but the darkness hid everything from sight. Windows above opened, and lights flashed down and voices called. The butler, half-clad, came running out with a lighted hurricane-lamp.

"This way, Jenks!" exclaimed Mr. Silver.

"Here, sir—"

"Show the light this way!"

Mr. Silver caught the hurricane-lamp from Jenks' hands, and hurried along the terrace, his slippers almost buried in snow. After him hurried Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome. Loud yells, muffled, but wild and loud, guided them along the shadowed terrace.

What was happening they had no idea—unless Lick had gone mad with fright. From the bottom of their hearts the juniors repented of the practical joke played on the Texan. They realised—rather late—that playing ghosts was a dangerous game.

"What—what—what is that?" gasped Mr. Silver.

A struggling form lay in the snow on the terrace—wriggling, wriggling, struggling, gasping, yelling. It was smothered by the snow thrown up in its own struggles.

Mr. Silver held the hurricane-lamp over it.

"Who—what—"

"He's in a fit!" gasped Raby, his face white. "It—it's Lick, of course, and he's been frightened into a fit!"

"Yow-ow-ow! Help!" yelled the struggling figure in the snow.

"That's not Lick!" panted Jimmy Silver. "It's Lovell!"

"My hat! What—"

The struggling figure suddenly glided

away under the eyes of the astonished onlookers. It did not go of its own volition. It was as if a giant's hand had suddenly plucked it away. Behind it trailed the dark cloak that had been used to disguise the junior as the phantom prior. Struggling and yelling, the hapless Lovell glided away through thick snow.

"What—what—what—" gasped Mr. Silver, dumbfounded.

"There's a rope!" yelled Raby.

"A—a—a rope?"

"Yes. Oh, my hat! It's lovell, and that beast Lick has lassoed him!"

"Great pip!"

The writhing rope could be seen wriggling in the snow. It was the rope that was dragging Lovell away.

Jimmy Silver & Co. sprang on the rope and grasped it. They put on a strong pull all together, and there was a shout from the darker end of the terrace.

"Gee-whiz! Let up on that rope, you guys!"

"Lick!" yelled Jimmy.

"I guess I'm hyer!" chuckled the Texan.

"Lick!" shouted Mr. Silver. "Lick, come here at once! What—what does this mean?"

Texas Lick came tramping up through the snow. His grinning face appeared in the radius of light from the hurricane-lamp.

He coiled up the lasso as he came, and, stooping, released Lovell's struggling form from the noose.

"I guess it's all O.K.!" drawled Texas Lick. "That guy played ghost on me, and I reckon he figured it out that he had me fixed with fright. And then I roped him in!"

"Roped him in!" gasped Mr. Silver.

"Sure!"

"You—you had your lasso with you!" ejaculated Jimmy.

Texas Lick chortled.

"Yep—some! When I went to put my coat on I put the lasso under it. You see, I froze on to the little game. I reckoned one of you guys was going to play ghost on me, and I was ready to give him socks!"

"You—you—" gasped Raby.

Arthur Edward Lovell sat up in the snow. He was smothered, he was breathless, he was wild with rage.

"Ow! Ow! Oh! Ow! Groogh!"

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Silver.

"This—this— Get indoors at once! Bless my soul! We shall all catch cold! I—I supposed that it was you crying out with fright, Lick—"

"Catch me!" grinned Lick. "I guess a real ghost wouldn't scare me any!"

"Let me get at him!" gasped Lovell, scrambling up.

Jimmy Silver & Co. collared Lovell just in time to prevent a serious case of assault and battery. Mr. Silver lighted the party indoors, and bade them to go to bed in a rather stern voice. Jimmy Silver & Co. went rather sheepishly upstairs; Texas Lick grinned from ear to ear.

"Good-night, you 'uns!" grinned Lick at his door. "Let me know next time you're goin' to take a rise out of me and skeer me outer my boots! Ha, ha, ha!"

And Lick went in to bed. Jimmy Silver & Co., after an eloquent look at one another, followed his example. The ghost did not walk again that night at the Priory—nor any other night of Texas Lick's Christmas.

THE END.

(You'll enjoy reading "Lick Takes the Lead!" next week's topping story of the chums of Rookwood.)