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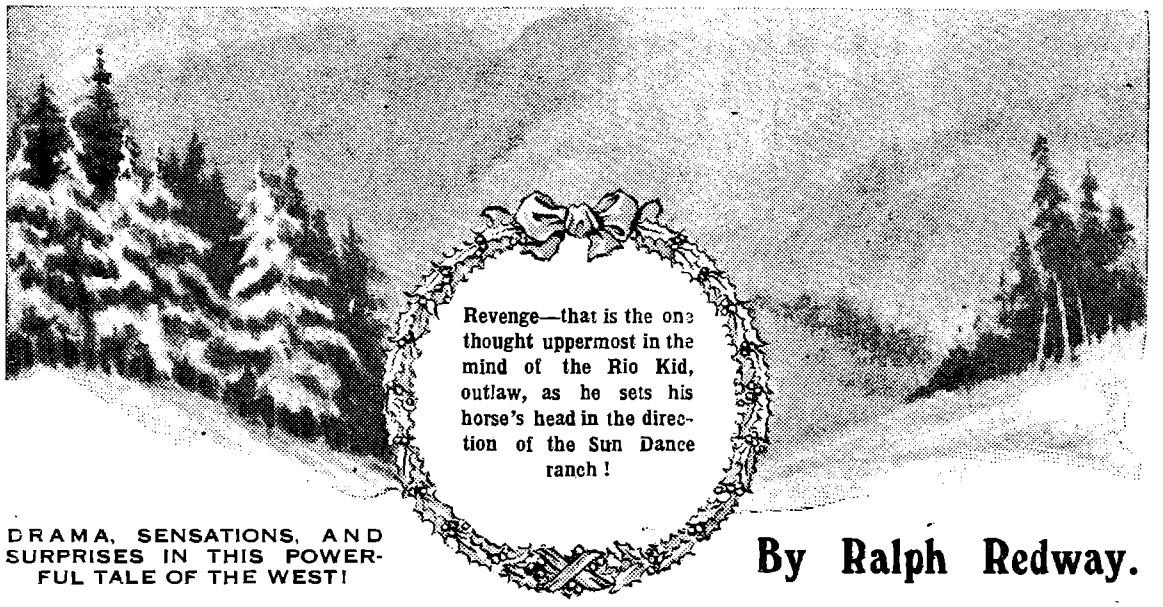
The Rio Kid's Christmas Gift!



DRAMA, SENSATIONS, AND SURPRISES IN THIS POWERFUL TALE OF THE WEST!

By Ralph Redway.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Word of the Kid!

"THE Kid?"

"Sure!"

"Aw! Forget it, sheriff!"

Lester Leigh, boss of the Sun Dance ranch, smiled as he spoke—a smile of amusement, tinctured with contempt.

Sheriff Heenan did not smile.

The burly sheriff of Sun Dance was standing at a window, looking out over the frost-bound ranges. Far in the distance, glimmering in the last rays of the setting sun, the Huecas barred the horizon. The sierra was piled with ice and snow, and snow lay on the ranges of the Sun Dance ranch. Coulees and barrancas were choked with it. It was a hard and bitter winter, and the hardest Christmas Day that any man on the Sun Dance ranch remembered.

Even in the ranch-house, well warmed by central heating, the cold seemed to penetrate. The wind that came from the sierra was laden with whirling flakes.

But through the biting cold and the whirling flakes vehicle after vehicle drove up the muddy trail to the ranch-house. The gate stood open wide. All kinds of vehicles—buggies, and rigs, and even chuck-wagons, rolled up, loaded with cheery-faced guests. For thirty miles round ranchers and their families were gathering at the Sun Dance, and everything that went on wheels in Sun Dance county was requisitioned; and every few minutes horsemen rode in, thickly cloaked against the wind.

Lester Leigh, the fat and prosperous rancher of Sun Dance, expensively dressed in store clothes, with a big diamond blazing in his shirt-front, looked self-satisfied and quite at his ease. Obviously, he did not share the uneasiness of the Sun Dance sheriff.

Jeff Heenan, clad in broadcloth, had a suspicious-looking bulge under his coat. The gun that Jeff generally wore swinging on his hip was out of sight. But it was there. Even in Sun Dance county it was not usual to pack a gun for a Christmas party. But no earthly consideration would have induced Jeff Heenan to part with his six-gun that day. There was a pucker of anxiety in his brow as he looked out in the fading light.

"Forget it, sheriff!" Lester Leigh repeated. "I guess you've got the Rio Kid on your nerves."

The sheriff turned from the window, and his eyes rested gravely on the fat, self-satisfied face of the rancher.

"The Rio Kid will be at the ranch to-night," he said tersely.

"You reckon so?"

"He said so!" answered the sheriff.

"I guess he was blowing off his mouth a few," said the rancher with a laugh. "You're here, sheriff, with half a dozen of your men—and half the county have come to the dance. If the Kid's bonehead enough to put his head into such a trap he won't pull it out again in a hurry."

"I don't say he'll get away again, Leigh," said Heenan slowly. "Leastways, he won't get away alive if I draw a bead on him. But all Texas knows that the Rio Kid never breaks his word, and he said that he would come here Christmas and shoot you up in your own ranch. And I guess he won't let up on it—and wouldn't, if all the Texas Rangers was camped in the shebang, and all the sheriffs in Texas along with them."

"Let him come, then," said the rancher, with a shrug of the shoulders. "Texas will be rid of the most dangerous outlaw that ever rode the trails if he shows up here to-day."

Heenan did not answer. His glance sought the window again, and he scanned the snow-bound ranges in the fading light, as if he almost expected to see the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande riding his grey mustang openly up to the ranch. His gravity seemed to impress the rancher a little at last, and the smile died off his face.

"You sure reckon he'll come, Heenan?" he asked, and there was a trace of anxiety in his tone.

"Sure!"

"But he would be mad! The whole outfit have been warned to watch out for him; and with a hundred guests here, or more——"

"I guess a big crowd don't make it harder for the Kid—it makes it easier," said the sheriff.

"He would be throwing his life away."

"The Kid's got a grouch agin you, rancher, and I guess he don't give a continental red cent for his life agin keeping his word," said Heenan.

"I reckon he's ridden out of this country days ago," muttered Leigh. "He hasn't been seen since the day you nearly got him here. Not a sign of the fire-bug—and he's been well looked for, too."

The sheriff nodded.

"I'm wise to that. He ain't been seen—and he won't be seen till he horns in hyer to shoot you up, boss."

Lester Leigh laughed. But there was a false ring to his laugh. The sheriff's words had their effect on him, in spite of his disbelief.

"You reckon he aims to shoot me up?" he said.

"He allowed that was his game when he sent you his message, by me," said Heenan. "He figures that you double-crossed him, Leigh. And the Kid ain't the galoot to forget it."

The rancher frowned.

"The Kid ain't a malicious cuss," went on Heenan slowly. "I've heered that he saved Mule-Kick Hall's life in a flood in the Mal Pais when Hall was hot on his trail to cinch him. He let me off the other day, when I was riding him down and doing my durndest to shoot him up. He had the drop on me and let me beat it. But what you did at him, Leigh, fairly got his goat, and he gave me that message for you, and meant every word of it. Between ourselves, rancher, it was——"

The sheriff paused.

"He horned in here, and I kept him while I sent word to you," said Lester Leigh coldly. "That was justifiable, in dealing with an outlaw with a price on his head. He came in here, not knowing that I'd bought the ranch from his old pard, Stenson; and it was too good a chance to be lost."

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fooling him that a-way—making out to be friendly while you was sending a Greaser to fetch my men from Sun Dance——"

The sheriff paused again.

The colour flushed into the rancher's face. He knew what his own outfit thought of the trick he had played on the Rio Kid, of his treachery in assuming a face of friendship and hospitality while he was planning the boy outlaw's capture or death. In point of fact, his own conscience, hard as it was, was a little troubled. But he was surprised to find that the Sun Dance sheriff, who would have given two years of his life to rope in the Rio Kid, shared the general opinion. Anger gathered in the rancher's fat, hard face.

"I reckon a galoot can't put his cards on the table in dealing with an outlaw," he snapped.

"Nope!" agreed the sheriff. "But—the Kid's got a big grouch agin you, Leigh, and it ain't no use denying that he's got a reason. Double-crossing the guy like that——"

"You dare——" began the rancher, his eyes flashing.

"Daddy!"

The angry rancher broke off suddenly at the sound of the childish voice in the doorway.

The blaze died out of his eyes and the black frown from his brow. Heenan, looking at him morosely, marvelled to see the softening of the hard, selfish face as he turned to the child. Lester Leigh was a hard man—hard as iron in business dealings, hard and unfeeling to his outfit, hard and cold to all—save his little daughter. In that hard and ruthless heart there was one soft spot.

"Yes, Pet!"

Even his voice was soft as he answered the child. The cold, metallic ring had gone out of it.

"Mummy wants you, daddy," said Pet.

The rancher swung the child to his shoulder and walked out of the room without another word to the sheriff of Sun Dance.

Jeff Heenan looked after him with a strange expression on his face. Then, chewing on an unlighted cigar, he stared from the window again at the darkening landscape.

"He sure gets my goat!" murmured the sheriff. "He's sure the hardest euss in Texas—I guess there's guys in his own outfit that'd be glad to shoot him up. And he sure did play it low down on the Rio Kid, he sure did play a dirty greaser's game, and, outlaw as he is, I guess the Kid is worth a whole team of ornery, double-crossing guys like Lester Leigh. But"—the sheriff's bronzed face set grimly, and his hand stole under his broadcloth coat for a moment to make sure that the gun was ready when wanted—"but I guess if the Kid keeps his word—and he sure will—I'll be on hand. I don't give a continental red cent for Lester Leigh. But the Kid ain't going to shoot up that little gal's daddy—not if this here galoot knows it—and he reckons he do! No, sir!"

And the sheriff, heedless of the gathering company at the ranch, of merry voices and pealing laughter, stared grimly and glumly from the window—assured in his own mind that the Rio Kid would be as good as his word, and that the Christmas festivities at the Sun Dance Ranch would be interrupted by a tragedy.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
A Borrowed Outfit!

"HALT!"

"Sho!" ejaculated Young Tom Harrigan.

Young Tom was taken quite by surprise.

Hold-ups in Sun Dance county were rare; hold-ups at Christmas-tide were unknown. With snow on the frozen ranges, snowflakes whirling on the bitter wind, the hardiest hold-up man in Texas was not likely to be riding the trails.

But it was a hold-up all the same, and the young rancher realised it quickly. He was driving his buckboard at a rattling pace, by a trail that ran through a frosty pinewood, when the horseman on the grey mustang pushed out of the pines and called on him to halt. And a levelled six-gun glimmering in the faint remnant of daylight backed up the order, and Young Tom Harrigan prudently pulled in his horse, and the buckboard stopped.

The horseman rode closer.

"Put 'em up!" he remarked casually.

Harrigan stared at the cool, steady, sunburnt face, the glimmering revolver, the steady eyes that glinted behind it, and put up his hands.

"That's wise," commented the horseman. "I should sure be sorry to spill your juice, hombre, on Christmas Day. I sure should hate to do it. Keep 'em up while I talk turkey, feller."

Harrigan grinned.

"You've sure roped in the wrong cayuse," he remarked. "If you're after

dollars—and I guess you are—you've slipped, feller. Any guy in the county could tell you that Tom Harrigan don't carry a fat roll."

"Forget it," said the rider of the grey mustang. "I ain't after your roll, hombre, fat or thin."

"You've got me guessing, then," said Young Tom. "You ain't halted me on the trail jest to chew the rag, I guess."

"Nope!"

"Spill it!" said Harrigan. "I guess it's freezing too much for a long chin, and I'm due at the Sun Dance."

"Jest what I figured. You're going to the Sun Dance ranch for the fancy-dress hop."

"You've said it."

"And I reckon you've got your glad rags in that buckboard?"

"I sure ain't travelling in them," said Harrigan, with another grin. "The guys would sure stare a few if I drove up to the ranch dressed as Santa Claus, feller."

"Sure!" assented the trail rider. "And I'm telling the world that it's some outfit you've got in that grip beside you, and will look handsome at the dance in the big barn at Sun Dance."

"How do you know?" demanded the young rancher, in surprise. "You ain't seen my Santa Claus outfit that I know of."

The trail rider laughed.

"You didn't notice a guy about my size standing at your elbow in Kelly's store at Sun Dance, when you was buying it?" he said.

"I sure did not," said Harrigan. "I remember there was a Mexican standing there——"

"Feller, that Mexican has washed off his complexion since, and took off his black beard," said the rider, "and here he is talking to you jest this minute."

"Sho!" ejaculated Harrigan.

"I ain't after your roll, feller. Keep it to buy an outfit for your next Christmas party. I'm after that grip with your glad rags in it."

"Shucks!"

"I guess I'm going to borrow that costume, feller," said the rider of the grey mustang pleasantly. "You see, I've a hunch for horning in at the jamboree this evening—seeing as Lester Leigh has asked half the county, and forgotten this infant. You get me?"

"Carry me home to die!" ejaculated Harrigan. "You figure on horning in where you ain't wanted, in my outfit?"

"You get me."

"Then you can forget it," said Young Tom, with emphasis. "You ain't borrowing my glad rags worth a cent."

"Search me!" said the rider.

He pushed his grey mustang a little nearer. The six-gun that covered Young Tom was steady as a rock in his hand, and his eyes glinted over it, though his handsome face wore a smile. Harrigan, staring at him, gave a sudden start.

"The Kid!" he breathed. "The Rio Kid!"

"That's what they call me along the Rio Grande," assented the rider.

Young Tom Harrigan clicked his teeth. He cursed himself for not having packed a gun before he left his ranch. Yet he knew in his heart that a gun would not have helped him when the Rio Kid's Colt was looking at him, with the Kid's finger on the trigger.

"You don't want to give any trouble, feller," said the Rio Kid, in the same pleasant tone. "I guess I'm only going to borrow your glad rags. I guess I'll let you have them back when I'm through—and they sure won't be much the worse for wear. I'm going to borrow your hoss and buckboard, and your fur coat and hat—jest so that the guys won't notice the Rio Kid horning in. You don't want to feel sore over making a guy a loan like that."

"What's your game at the Sun Dance ranch?" muttered Harrigan

The Rio Kid did not answer that question. But the smile died off his face, and his eyes glittered.

Harrigan caught his breath.

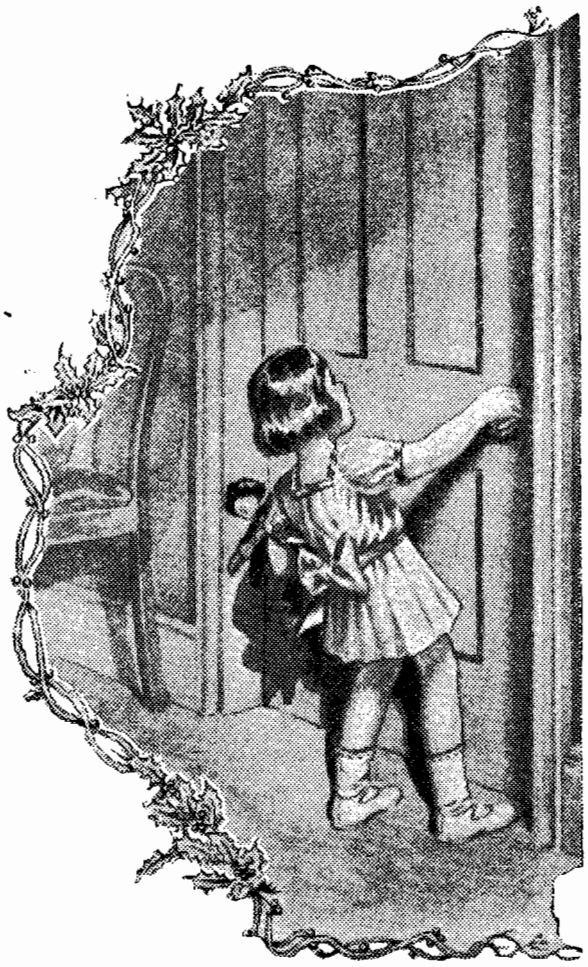
"I've heard that you've threatened to shoot up Rancher Leigh in his own ranch," he said.

"Sure," said the Kid icily. "That's my game, feller. The guy double-crossed me, and I guess it was a close call for me. I guess I told him I'd shoot him up in his own ranch, and all Texas can tell you that I keep my word. That all-fired skunk talked to me fair and friendly—and sent for the sheriff and his men to rope me in—and me his guest, trusting to his word." The Kid's eyes blazed. "I guess a guy like that ain't fit to live, feller. But that ain't your business."

"Ain't it?" said Harrigan between his teeth. "If I'd a gun on me, durn you, I'd try my luck agin your Colt!"

"I guess you'd hit Jordan so sudden you'd be s'prised to find yourself there," said the Kid amiably. "Forget it! Oh thunder!"

Young Tom Harrigan suddenly dropped his raised hands, grasped his whip, and made a desperate blow at the horseman beside the buckboard. He expected the six-gun to roar; he knew that he was taking a desperate chance.



But the Rio Kid did not pull trigger; he hated, as he said, to spill any guy's juice, especially at Christmas-tide. Swift as the blow was, the Kid shifted and eluded it, and the next moment he grasped the young rancher and dragged him from the buckboard.

Young Tom Harrigan went with a crash into the snow that powdered the trail. He sprawled there with spinning brain, and the next moment the Rio Kid was out of the saddle and bending over him, the six-gun jammed to his ear.

"Let up!" said the Kid quietly.

"Dog-gone you!" panted Harrigan. "Shoot if you like, but you ain't using me to horn in at the Sun Dance, you dog-goned firebug."

He strove to struggle up, reckless of the six-gun. Still, the Kid, with a patience strange in a hunted outlaw, did not pull trigger. The long barrel of the Colt rapped on the fallen man's head, and for several minutes Young Tom Harrigan's senses left him.

When he came to himself again his arms were bound behind his back, and he was a helpless prisoner. He lay on the trail, and he saw that his horse had been tied up to a pine. He would have spoken—words of rage and defiance—but he could not speak. A gag was in his mouth, tied safely by a cord that was wound round and round his head. He lay and stared at the boy outlaw in helpless fury.

The Kid smiled down on him.

"You don't want to get your mad up," he remarked, "I ain't going to hurt you none—I guess I'd hate to hurt a good little man like you. I'm jest going to leave you safe while I pay a visit to Lester Leigh at the Sun Dance ranch, and when I'm through you can have your outfit back agin, feller, and no harm done—'cept to Lester Leigh!"

Harrigan writhed in his bonds. But he was helpless, and the Rio Kid lifted him to his feet and walked him off the trail into the frosty pines. Side-Kicker, the grey mustang, followed, and Harrigan's horse and buckboard remained tied up on the trail.

Deep in the depths of the pine-wood the Kid stopped at a little hut, or jacal, built of branches, and covered with snow. Within, a fire burned, smouldering on the earth, filling the jacal with warmth. Tom Harrigan stared about him. His rage was intensified if possible by this discovery that the Kid had prepared for him, taking it for granted that the young rancher would fall a prisoner into his hands. The Kid gave him a smile in return for his savage glare.

"I sure got to make you safe," he

explained, "but I ain't leaving a guy to freeze, nohow. Say, you don't want to get your back up that-a-way; I guess some guys would have tied you to a tree and left you to it. I sure taken a lot of trouble to fix you comfortable while I'm borrowing your outfit. I always was a soft-hearted gink, I allow."

When the Rio Kid left the jacal in the pine wood he took with him young Tom Harrigan's hat and sheepskin coat. But he left the prisoner warm in a thick bearskin rug by the banked fire, though very carefully he left him with his hands bound, a gag in his mouth, and his feet lashed to a peg in the ground, making escape impossible. Harrigan's escape would have meant death to the boy outlaw who was about to horn in at the crowded ranch. In the jacal, the grey mustang remained with the prisoner, and while young Tom Harrigan writhed in his bonds and cursed the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande sat in the buckboard and drove to the Sun Dance ranch.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Santa Claus!

SHERIFF HEENAN, heedless of drifting snowflakes, walked round the wire fence as the last glimmer of daylight died away. Armed men were posted at intervals, and to every one the sheriff spoke a word or two, warning him to be on the watch now that night was coming on, and to shoot at sight if the Rio Kid showed up. He stopped at last at the gate, where Texas Bill and five or six cowmen were on guard, armed with rifles. Lester Leigh, though he doubted whether the Kid would be as good as his word, was not wholly easy in his mind, and he had willingly left the matter in the sheriff's reliable hands, and Jeff Heenan neglected no precaution. Every man on the Sun Dance knew of the Rio Kid's menace to horn in on Christmas day and shoot up the boss of the ranch, and in point of fact, they had little sympathy with the boss whose treacherous dealing with the Kid was, as Texas Bill described it, a low-down greaser's game. But that cut no ice, they were keenly on the watch for the boy outlaw if he came, and ready to carry out the sheriff's orders. If the Kid came, there were few who doubted that he would come to his death.

For it seemed impossible that the Kid could beat the odds that he was up against. With a group of armed and watchful men at the gate, and armed men guarding the fence throughout its circuit, how was even the resourceful Kid to enter the enclosure without instantly drawing fire? And if he succeeded in entering he would find himself among swarming foes.

"Keep your eyes peeled, you guys," said the sheriff to the men at the gate. "Shoot on sight, if you see the Kid! Don't talk to the galoot—jest pull trigger when you see him."

"You bet!" said one of the cowmen.

"I reckon you can bar the gate," said Heenan. "I guess all the folks have arrove by this time."

"Here comes a buckboard," said Texas Bill, as there was a rattle of wheels and harness on the trail, and a vehicle loomed up through the misty gloom.

The sheriff glanced up at the newcomer as he dashed up.

"That's young Tom Harrigan!" he remarked.

"Sure!" said Texas Bill.

The buckboard and the rawboned chestnut horse that drew it were well known The driver, hunched up in a heavy sheepskin coat against the wind, with a hat pulled down over his face, drove up at a rattling speed. Sheriff Heenan stood aside for the buckboard to drive in, and the man in the sheepskin coat waved a hand to him as he passed. The buckboard rattled on towards the corral, and Texas Bill slammed the wide gate shut.

"I guess that'll be the last," said Sheriff Heenan. "Keep your eyes peeled, fellers—and remember that there's a thousand dollars on the Rio Kid, for the guy that gets him."

"You bet!"

Heenan went back to the house. In the wide hallway of the ranch-house, bright with coloured lanterns, Lester Leigh met him. The sheriff shook the snowflakes from his shoulders.

"The Kid ain't horned in yet?" asked the rancher, with a rather sarcastic smile.

"Nope."

"Well, I hope he'll come," said the rancher. "If you're right, and he keeps his word, we'll rid Texas of him tonight."

"I reckon!" assented the sheriff. "Leastways, if he gets away alive I'll allow that Kid's more'n human. But—I reckon I won't feel easy in my mind till sun-up, all the same."

"Forget it," said Leigh.

But there was a shadow on his brow as he moved away. The "hardest cuss" in Sun Dance county had plenty of nerve, but the Rio Kid's menace weighed more and more upon his mind as the darkness drew on. He deserved, and knew that he deserved, the vengeance of the outlaw. he had "double-crossed" the Kid, and he did not expect to be forgiven, if the Kid had a chance of getting back on him.

But what chance, after all, had the Kid, with the ranch crowded with guests and guarded by more than a score of armed men? It was the sheriff's uneasiness that was making him uneasy. Lester Leigh dismissed the matter from his mind, as he busied himself with his numerous guests.

The band, specially imported from town for the great occasion, were tuning up in the great barn. A covered way lighted by Chinese lanterns and adorned with Mexican palms in tubs, led from the ranch-house to the barn. The strains of merry music floated through the frosty air, and already some couples were dancing. All was gaiety and merriment; social entertainments were few in Sun Dance county, and only Lester Leigh gave them on such a scale, and the ranchers and their wives and daughters had gathered to enjoy themselves. A fancy dress dance was rather unique in the section, and all Sun Dance had risen to the occasion.

Lester Leigh, standing in the big doorway of the barn, looked on a merry and motley crowd. The walls were hung with coloured draperies, decorated with holly, and the barn was lighted with innumerable Chinese lanterns swinging from the roof. On a platform at the upper end the Sun Dance band discoursed sweet music; at

a bar at the lower end there were refreshments liquid and solid—chiefly liquid. There was a great space for the dancers, and it was crowded with figures in strange costumes—Indian chiefs, Mexican vaqueros, Spanish cavaliers, pirates, and brigands, though most of the dancers were in simple mask and domino. Prominent among them was a figure in the garb of Santa Claus that attracted many glances; a bright scarlet cloak and hood trimmed with white fur, gave the brightest dash of colour to the scene. Lester Leigh's eyes rested several times on that scarlet figure, and he wondered who was the man inside that striking costume. But that it was impossible to guess, as the scarlet hood completely concealed the face, and unmasking was not to take place till supper-time.

Sheriff Heenan joined the rancher in the doorway, and his eyes, also, fell on the scarlet figure, now whirling in the maze of the dance with a Dresden shepherdess.

"That's young Tom!" said Heenan, with a nod towards the graceful dancer. "He got in late, but he ain't losing time."

"Young Harrigan?" said the rancher.

"Yep! I was in Kelly's store at Sun Dance when he roped in that costume," said the sheriff. "That's how I know. I guess it run him into more dollars than he could afford; but he sure is cutting a dash."

"He's picked up dancing since I last saw him hopping," said Lester Leigh, with a smile, "I ain't seen him treading on his partner's feet yet."

The sheriff grinned.

"You've said it," he assented. "If I didn't know that was young Tom I'd sure allow he couldn't dance that-a-way. But it's Harrigan for sure."

"You're dancing, sheriff?"

Heenan shook his head.

"I guess I'm going to hustle round again, and keep an eye peeled for the Kid," he answered.

Lester Leigh laughed. In the midst of merry company, and with the strains of music in his ears, the rancher was feeling quite at ease, and all his doubts and uneasiness had left him.

"You've got the Kid on your nerves, Heenan," he said banteringly.

"Mebbe!" said the sheriff briefly.

And after another long look at the crowd in the barn the sheriff turned away, to make another round of the gate and the fence, and warn his men once more to be on the look-out for the firebug of the Rio Grande.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Saved From Vengeance!

LESTER LEIGH looked at his watch, detached himself from a group of friends, and went along the covered way that led from the dance barn to the ranch-house. It was half-past eight, and the dance, which had started early, was going strong. The rancher, as he left the merry crowd behind him, was not thinking of the Rio Kid—the boy outlaw and his menace had passed entirely from his mind. It was Pet's bed-time, and Lester Leigh never missed saying good-night to Pet. It was of his little daughter that he was thinking as he returned to the ranch-house. And he did not even observe that the guest in the scarlet cloak and hood had left the crowd, and was following him. But as he came into the house he noticed that Santa Claus was at his heels, and he looked round with a smile on his face.

"You're not tired of dancing, Harrigan?" he asked.

"Say, you know me in this outfit?"

asked a voice, under the scarlet hood that concealed the face of Santa Claus.

"I reckon so," said the rancher.

"I guess I've got something to tell you, Mister Leigh—if you can spare a few minutes."

"Not very many," said the rancher. "What is it?"

Santa Claus glanced round him, his eyes flashing strangely through the eye-holes in the scarlet hood.

"I sure won't keep you long," he said. "But let's get out of hearing. Walls have ears, when the Rio Kid's around."

Leigh started violently.

"The Rio Kid?" he breathed.

"Yep!"

"He threatened to be here at the dance," said the rancher. "But I guess he won't make the grade, Harrigan. You haven't seen or heard anything of that durned firebug?"

"I sure have, rancher, and I guess I'm going to put you wise. Let's get out of hearing."

"Come with me," said Lester Leigh abruptly.

He led the way into the living-room of the ranch-house; quite deserted now. In the light of the swinging lamp he looked curiously at Santa Claus. The man in the scarlet cloak and hood shut the door by which they had entered.

"You figure that the Rio Kid won't make the grade, Mister Leigh?" he asked, his eyes gleaming at the rancher.

"Sure!"

"That's where you miss your guess, feller."

From under the scarlet cloak a hand emerged with a six-gun in its grasp. The long barrel of the Colt was aimed direct at Lester Leigh's startled face.

"Don't give a yaup," said the voice from under the hood. "Jest one yaup, Lester Leigh, and you get yours, sudden."

The rancher staggered back.

His eyes, distended with terror, were fixed on the scarlet figure. He sank heavily into a chair.

"I guess you know me, Lester Leigh?" said the Rio Kid grimly.

"The Kid!" breathed the rancher hoarsely.

"I reckon I allowed I'd be here," said the Kid coolly. "I guess I borrowed this outfit from Harrigan. I'm a man of my word, Mister Leigh. I sure allowed I'd horn in at your Christmas dance, and shoot you up on your own ranch. And I'm here to do it. You got five minutes to get ready, and then you get yours. Make the most of it."

The Kid's eyes gleamed at the rancher over the levelled Colt.

With a face white as death Lester Leigh gazed at him. Within call were a score of armed men—a hundred guests. But he dared not utter a cry. The levelled Colt was ready to spit fire and death at the first call for help. When the rancher spoke at last it was in a husky whisper.

"You—you here——"

"I allowed I'd be on hand," said the Kid.

"You—you're here to—to——" The rancher's voice broke.

"You've said it! You double-crossed me, you pizen skunk—you ain't fit to live!" said the Kid, with bitter scorn.

"You—you can't——"

"Forget it!"

There was a deathly silence; faintly through it came the strains of music from the barn, the echo of merry voices and laughter. The sounds came like a ghastly mockery to the ears of the doomed rancher.

"You got one more minute!" The Kid's steely voice broke the silence suddenly,

The rancher gave a groan, and cowered back in the chair. The deep silence fell again. The revolver in the Kid's hand never wavered; the eyes that looked over the levelled barrel glinted mercilessly.

There was a sound at the door. The handle moved, but did not turn, as if touched by a hand that hardly reached it. Through the silence came a plaintive voice that made the Kid start convulsively:

"Daddy!"

A shudder ran through Lester Leigh.

"Are you there, daddy? Let me in, daddy!"

"Shucks!" breathed the Kid hoarsely.

He bent towards the rancher.

"Say, who's that—what——"

"Pet—my little girl!" groaned Lester Leigh. "For mercy's sake let her see nothing—wait—she doesn't know I am here—she will go—wait—wait till she is gone!" The sweat was thick on his brow. "Wait! I am at your mercy—your gun covers me—wait—wait till she is gone!"

The Kid stood motionless. The grim hardness had died out of his face, the burning fire from his eyes.

There was a soft step in the passage without. Pet was going! A shiver ran through the rancher.

"Wait!" he breathed. "A minute—a few minutes—for mercy's sake! If she should hear——"

The Rio Kid's hand was no longer firm as he thrust the revolver out of sight under the scarlet cloak.

"Stick where you are, rancher!" he said in a low voice; and in a moment more the door had opened, and the Kid was gone.

In the lighted passage a child turned to look at the figure of Santa Claus, with a smiling face and bright eyes. The Kid paused.

"Little one!" The voice under the scarlet hood was soft. "Little one, I guess you know I'm Santa Claus, that brings gifts for little ones at Christmas-time——"

"You're not really Santa Claus?" asked the child.

"I guess I sure am that very guy," said the Kid gently. "And I'm sure handing you a Christmas gift that you'll like a whole heap. You'll sure find it in that room, little one; you go and look—see!"

He pointed to the open doorway.

The child gave him another wondering look, and went into the room.

The Rio Kid hurried away.

* * * * *

Young Tom Harrigan, sore and savage, drove his buckboard back to his ranch at a late hour that night. Sheriff Heenan cursed with a choice assortment of swear-words, at the knowledge that the Rio Kid, in spite of his watchfulness, had come—and gone! Under the waning stars the Rio Kid rode the grey mustang by snowy trails, with no thought of vengeance in his mind now—glad, from the bottom of his wild heart, that a child's voice had stayed the hand of vengeance, and that he had left his enemy his life as the Rio Kid's Christmas Gift.

THE END.

(It is a strange characteristic of the Rio Kid's to "horn" into trouble of other people's concern, and bring upon his own shoulders a whole heap of thrilling adventures. This is the theme of next week's story, which is the first of a series in which the Rio Kid finds himself well in the limelight. Don't miss: "BLACK GEORGE!")

HERE'S A TOPPING SCHOOL STORY FEATURING HARRY WHARTON & CO. OF GREYFRIARS!

The Boy Without a Name!

Ragged Dick—outcast, waif of the roads, a boy without a name or home. That is the strange tattered figure that enters so dramatically into the life of the richest landowner around Greyfriars school!

By Frank Richards.

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
Bunter, Too!

"WAITING for you!" said Billy Bunter.

"Eh?"

"Ready at last—what?" asked Bunter affably.

The Owl of the Remove detached his fat figure from the old stone gateway of Greyfriars School, as Harry Wharton & Co. came along.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What are you waiting for?" inquired Bob Cherry.

"For you, old fellow," said Bunter affectionately. "You didn't think I'd desert an old pal on a half-holiday, did you?"

"No; only hoped so," answered Bob.

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Roll away, Fatty!" said Johnny Bull. "We're going for a jolly long tramp, and you'd crock up after the first mile."

"Oh, really, Bull——"

"The crockfulness would be terrific, my esteemed Bunter," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I suppose I'm as good a walker as any fellow here," said Bunter, with a sniff. "It's all right. I'm coming."

"Don't be an ass, old man," said Harry Wharton. "We're going as far as Compton Woods, up the coast. That's a good six miles, and rough going most of the way."

"Why not have it in Friardale Wood?"

"Eh? Have what?"

"The picnic," said Bunter.

Bunter's eye was on a little bundle that Bob Cherry carried slung over his arm.

The Owl of the Remove, as usual, was after the loaves and fishes. Evidently it was not the fascinating society of the Famous Five that attracted him.

"What's the good of walking that distance?" argued Bunter. "Sheer waste of time. Now, if you have the picnic in Friardale Wood, you can have a nap under the trees afterwards, instead of a long walk home. See? Ever so much better."

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"But we're not going out for an afternoon nap," he explained. "We're going out for fresh air and exercise."

"What utter rot!"

"Every chap to his opinion!" assented Bob cheerfully. "Good-bye, Bunter! Go and take a nap."

"Pleasant dreams!" grinned Nugent.

And the chums of the Remove walked out of gates. They tramped away cheerily in the sunshine up Friardale Lane. There was a patter of feet on the road behind them.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here comes Bunter!"

Bunter came up, panting.

"I say, you fellows, don't walk so fast, you know! Give a chap a chance!"

"Good-bye!" said Wharton.

"The fact is, Harry, old man, I want to have a look at Compton Woods," said Bunter. "I've been going there for a long time, only—only——"

"Only you were too lazy to walk the distance!" suggested Johnny Bull.

"The fact is, it's a jolly good idea to get some fresh exercise—I mean, some fresh air and exercise—on a half-holiday," said Bunter. "This idea of a walk to Compton Woods is simply tiptop. I'm glad you fellows thought of it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's really ripping!" said Bunter. "I shall enjoy it no end! Can I carry the parcel for you, Bob?"

"And do the vanishing-trick round the first corner?" grinned Bob. "No, thanks!"

"Oh, really, Cherry! If you think I know there's a cake in that bundle, you're mistaken. I never looked into the study while you were packing it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's just the walk I want," said Bunter, trotting on cheerily, "and the society of you fellows, you know. I've turned down a lot of chaps to come out with you this afternoon."

"Turn 'em up again!" suggested Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull! I say, Bob, don't you find that bundle a little heavy?"

"A little," agreed Bob, shifting the bundle to his other arm.

"Let me carry it, old chap."

"It would soon grow lighter if Bunter carried it!" chuckled Nugent.

"The lightfulness would soon be terrific."

"I think I'll stick to it," grinned Bob. "Good-bye, Bunter! We're coming to the hill now."

"Think I can't walk up a hill?" snorted Bunter.

"Better chuck it before you crock up. The farther you go, the longer the walk home, you know."

"Rats!"

"Stick it if you like," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Mind, we're not stopping this side of Compton Woods, Bunter. If you get there alive, you're welcome to a whack in the tuck. But it's six miles."

"I could do sixteen."

"Oh, my hat! Stick it, then!"

And the Co. walked on cheerily, and Billy Bunter tramped after them laboriously, breathing in jerks. With the prospect of tuck before him, Bunter felt as though he could walk unnumbered miles. His fat little legs fairly twinkled to keep pace with the strides of the sturdy Removites. To Harry Wharton & Co. it was quite an interesting question whether Bunter would crock up after the first mile, or whether he would last out two. Two, they considered, was his limit.

But Bunter was in a resolute mood.

When the two miles had been covered, Bunter was still fagging along the dusty road, with perspiration streaming down his fat face, and his podgy cheeks growing redder and redder, till they rivalled in hue a freshly-boiled beetroot.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Bunter's Luck!

"I SAY, you fellows——"

"Save your breath, old man!" advised Bob Cherry. "You'll need it for the other four miles, you know."

"I—I say——"

Bunter gasped and halted. More than two miles had passed behind him; two hundred, it seemed to Bunter.

"Stop a minute, you chaps! Let a fellow get his breath!"

The chums of the Remove considerately stopped.

"We'll give you two minutes!" said Harry Wharton.

"I say, I've got a proposition to make," said Bunter, leaning on a tree, and dabbing his damp face with a handkerchief that needed washing. "Suppose we stop here for the picnic——"

"Bow-wow!"

"Let a fellow finish. Let's have this tuck for a snack on the way, you know, and I'll stand you a topping feed at Compton Hall."

"Eh?"

"That's the idea!" said Bunter, blinking at the chums of the Remove. "I've never happened to mention it before, but Sir Henry Compton is an—an old friend of my pater's, you know——"

"We don't know!" grinned Bob.

"Well, you know now I've told you!" snapped Bunter.

"Not at all. We don't know even now you've told us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"They were schoolfellows together at—at Eton!" said Bunter. "I can tell you that Sir Henry will be delighted—overjoyed, in fact—if I come in with a few friends. He—he loves to have bright young faces round him."

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

"I say, you fellows, there's nothing to cackle at!" howled Bunter. "I suppose you can take a fellow's word?"

"Pile it on!" said Bob Cherry. "Make the most of your two minutes, old fat man!"

"We'll have what you've got in that bundle for a snack now," urged Bunter, "and then I'll use my influence with Sir Henry to get you a jolly good feed at the Hall—what?"

"Time's up!" said Harry.

"I say, you fellows——"

"Trot's the word!"

"Oh dear!" gasped Bunter.

The juniors tramped on cheerily, and Billy Bunter tramped after them with lagging footsteps.

By this time he repented him, from the bottom of his podgy heart, that he had joined in the excursion at all.

Every mile seemed at least a league now, and the distance to Compton Woods simply illimitable.

But Bunter kept on.

It was as far back to Greyfriars now as to the woods that looked over the sea near Compton Hall, so it was useless to turn back. Having come so far, Bunter was determined to be in at the death.

"Only a mile now!" said Bob Cherry encouragingly, as the juniors entered a deep, shady lane, along which ran park palings for a great distance.

"That's Compton Park," said Frank Nugent. "There's the gates, Bunter, if you'd like to drop in and see Sir Henry."

Bunter snorted.

"I say, you fellows, let's stop here, and——"

"And call on the giddy baronet?" asked Bob, with a chuckle.

"Nunno! On second thoughts, I'd rather stick to you chaps. I'm not keen on grandeur and all that; I have enough of that at home at Bunter Court," said the Owl of the Remove. "I'd rather camp down by the roadside here, and—and——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My hat! This jolly old bundle is getting heavy," remarked Johnny Bull.

The bundle had changed hands during the walk, all the five taking charge of it in turn. Johnny Bull was the present bearer.

"Let Bunter take a turn with it," said Frank. "We can keep an eye on him."

"Good egg!" said Bob. "There's no turning here; these palings keep right on to the woods we're going to. Bunter can't dodge away with it!"

"Oh, really, Cherry——"

"Here you are, Bunter!"

"Yah!"

Bunter made no movement to take the bundle now.

Under the eyes of the Famous Five he could not venture to open it and devour the contents, and there was no escape for him if he scudded off with it. One side of the lane was bounded by the high park palings, the other by a thick hawthorn-hedge and ploughed fields. So Bunter's desire to carry the parcel had quite departed from him.

But the circumstances which made him unwilling to take his share of the burden made the Famous Five willing that he should take it.

"Here you are!" repeated Johnny Bull.

"Carry it yourself, and be blowed!" said Bunter sulkily.

"Right-ho! But he that will not work, neither shall he eat!" grinned Bob Cherry. "Put on speed, you chaps! Bunter's tired of our company!"

"I say, you fellows!" howled Bunter. "Hold on! I'll carry the bundle! I'm keen on it! I——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Buck up, then, fatty!"

William George Bunter sulkily took the bundle, and tramped on with it on his fat shoulder savagely.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry suddenly. "What's the game? Look at that!"

The Famous Five halted. Bunter, only too glad to halt, leaned on the park palings, breathing hard, and dripping with perspiration. He did not even blink at the scene that had attracted the attention of the Famous Five. Through the clear, sunny air there had come a sharp, loud cry—a cry of pain; and by a gap in the hawthorn hedge Bob Cherry had seen what made him cut quickly across the lane, and dash through the hedge, his chums following him fast.

Something evidently was going on in the field; but what it was was of no interest to the Owl of the Remove.

Bunter's eyes gleamed.

He was tired—but he was not too tired for one more effort, if he had time. The chance was too good to be lost.

Like Moses of old, he looked this way and that way—but he realised that flight was vain; he was not the man to win a foot-race, even with a good start.

Then he blinked at the park palings. Here and there the ancient wood was cracked and broken, offering handhold and foothold to an active climber.

Billy Bunter was by no means an active climber; but he was spurred on by the dazzling prospect of enjoying that picnic all to himself, and leaving in the lurch the beasts who had made him walk five miles from Greyfriars.

His fat mind was made up at once.

With a swing of his arm he hurled the bundle over the wall, and heard it drop among the ferns and bracken on the other side. Then he clambered desperately up.

Never had the Owl of the Remove exerted himself so swiftly and energetically. At every second he expected to hear the voices and the footsteps of the Removites on the road behind him.

He clambered with desperate speed, and reached the top of the palings, and rolled over, hanging by his fat hands on the inner side. Then he dropped, and landed with a grunt in a bed of ferns.

He sat there only a few moments to gasp for breath. Then he picked himself up, clutched up the precious bundle, and disappeared among the trees of Sir Henry Compton's park.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Rough on a Ruffian!

"OH! Don't—don't!"

"You rotter!" shouted Bob Cherry.

He burst through the gap in the hedge.

On the inner side, on the strip of grass between the hawthorns and the ploughed field, there was a camp. Three sticks had been set up over a smouldering fire of hedgerow wood, and an iron pot swung there. It looked like the camping-place of some tramp in hard luck.

There were two occupants of that camp—a man and a boy. The man, a thick-set, stubbly-faced fellow, whose face was hardened and coarsened by strong drink, held the boy in a savage grasp by the back of his collar, and with his free hand was laying on lashes with a thick strap. The blows rang almost like pistol-shots.

That was the sight that Bob Cherry had seen from the lane, and that had caused him to rush through the gap into the field.

The struggling boy looked as ragged and unkempt as the man who was beating him.

"Don't—don't! Oh, stop—stop!"

The boy seemed a sturdy enough fellow, but he was helpless in the muscular grasp of the tramp. He struggled in vain as the blows fell hard and heavy on his ragged back.

Bob Cherry did not stop to ask questions. The sight of the hapless lad struggling in the grasp of a ruffian, who was plainly the worse for drink, was enough for Bob.

He came scrambling through the hedge into the field, and pitched himself fairly at the ruffian.

Bob's grasp fastened on the lashing arm as it was falling again, and he wrenched at the man and fairly dragged him away from his victim.

The boy staggered and fell in the grass.

"Why—what—— 'Oo the dickens—— 'Ands off!" yelled the pedlar furiously, turning on Bob Cherry like a tiger.

"You cowardly rotter!" shouted Bob, his honest face blazing with anger. "How dare you pitch into a kid like that!"

"Pitch into him!" gasped the ruffian. "I'll pitch into you first, and 'im arter! I'll——"

He dropped the strap, and grasped Bob Cherry in both savage hands.

But the Co. were already there. As Bob reeled in the strong grasp of the pedlar, they rushed into the fray, and grasped the ruffian on all sides.

Bump!

The man came down on his back.

"Oh!" he roared. "Ow!"

"Sit on him!" gasped Bob.

Johnny Bull dropped heavily on the pedlar's chest. Bob Cherry secured his wrists and held on to them. And as the ruffian kicked and struggled, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh trod heavily on his legs.

The man gasped and spluttered, and a torrent of savage abuse poured from his mouth.

"Chuck that!" said Bob Cherry. "Shove a turf into his mouth if he doesn't chuck it!"

And as the ruffian continued to splutter out curses, Frank Nugent jerked a muddy turf from the ground and jammed it fairly into his mouth, after which the ruffian spluttered and gasped incoherently.

"That's better!" said Harry Wharton.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Stop, you young shaver!" shouted Bob Cherry.

The boy who had been rescued had picked himself up, and was darting away through the hedge.

"Stop!" called out Harry Wharton.

The boy did not heed.

He vanished through the hedge with an active spring, and they heard the patter of his feet on the road as he fled.

"Young ass!" said Nugent.

"He's gone!"

"Well, I dare say he knows his own business best," said Harry Wharton. "If he wants to get away from this brute, we'll see that he has a good start."

"Yes, rather!"

The pedlar spluttered the mud from his mouth.

"You let a man go, young gents!" he panted. Finding himself helpless in the hands of five fellows, the ruffian had changed his tone very considerably. "Don't you let that boy get away."

"Why not?" demanded Bob.

"He'll come to some 'arm," said the pedlar. "He's a bad lot, he is, and I was thrashing 'im for his good, I was."

"Well, if he's a worse lot than you are he must be a real corker!" said Bob Cherry. "You're more than half-drunk, you rotter, and I fancy that's why you were pitching into him."

"P'r'aps I've 'ad a drop," said the pedlar. "It's hard work tramping the roads, an' I've 'ad 'ard luck. And that there Dick wouldn't fetch my dinner for me, so 'elp me!"

Wharton looked at him sharply.

"Where was he to fetch your dinner from?" he asked. "There isn't a shop within three or four miles of this."

The man scowled at him sulkily without answering. Wharton's brow darkened.

"You rotter! Do you mean that you wanted him to beg for you, or to steal something from the farm over yonder? You look like it!"

"You mind your own business!" snarled the pedlar. "It ain't any affair of yourn! Let me go!"

Johnny Bull settled himself more comfortably on the ruffian's broad chest.

"You're not going just yet," he said coolly. "If that kid wants to get clear of you, he's going to have a chance!"

"What-ho!" said Bob Cherry emphatically.

"Who are you?" asked the captain of the Remove, eyeing the man as he wriggled in the grasp of the Greyfriars fellows.

"I'm Pedlar Parker," grunted the ruffian, "and that there boy belongs to me, he does!"

"Do you mean that you're his father?"

Pedlar Parker did not answer that question.

"Ten to one he isn't," said Bob. "The poor kid's a tramp, I should say. I wish he'd stayed and let us speak to him. Whatever he is, he's better off away from this brute."

"Yes, rather!"

"Will you let a bloke go?" muttered Parker, in tones of concentrated ferocity. "You'll only make it worse for Ragged Dick. I'll give him all tho more to make up for this when I find him!"

"Ragged Dick!" repeated Wharton. "What is his name?"

"Name! That whelp hasn't got any name!" said Parker, with a savage jeer. "I picked him up under a hedge, and he's tramped with me for a few months, that's all. Saved him from starving, I did!"

"Yes; you look like a Good Samaritan—I don't think!" said Bob Cherry, in disgust. "Well, if you picked him up under a hedge, as you say, he has a right to clear off if he chooses."

"I'll make him suffer for it!"

"You won't have a chance," said Harry Wharton.

"Give me that strap," said Bob. "I'll fix him."

"Here you are."

With the strap that had been used to beat the hapless Dick the pedlar's wrists were strapped together behind his back and the buckle secured. Then the juniors rose, and left him sprawling in the grass.

"That'll keep you safe for a bit," said Bob Cherry, with a chuckle. "Now, if you swear any more you'll get some more mud in your mouth, so you'd better chuck it—see?"

Pedlar Parker scowled at him, and wrenched savagely at the strap. But it was a good strap, and it held him fast.

"We'll keep an eye on this johnnie for a bit," said Bob. "What about having the picnic here instead of going on to the woods? It would be only decent to give that kid a chance to get right away from that brute."

"Good!" said Harry. "Fetch Bunter. He's got the stuff."

Bob Cherry jumped back through the hedge into the road.

There he stared round for Bunter.

Bunter rushed at the ragged youth, hitting out. Crash! Bunter's blow was hit up and a hard fist was planted on his chest, knocking him back into the summer-house.

But there was no sign of the Owl of the Remove. Billy Bunter had long since vanished.

"Bunter!" bawled Bob Cherry.

"Can't you see him, Bob?"

"He's gone!"

"Gone! My hat!"

The juniors rushed into the road.

Bunter was gone, and the bundle was gone! There was no picnic, after all—or, rather, there was a picnic in some secluded and unknown spot, and William George Bunter was enjoying it all on his lonesome own. Harry Wharton & Co. stared up and down the solitary lane, with feelings almost too deep for words.

In dismal mood, the Famous Five went back into the field. After their walk they were ready for the picnic, but it was clear that there would be no tea till they got back to Greyfriars. Billy Bunter had been one too many for them.

Pedlar Parker scowled at them as they returned.

"Are you going to let me loose, blight you?" he said, between his discoloured teeth.

"Oh, you shut up!" growled Bob Cherry. "It's all your fault that we've

lost our tuck, you rotter! Shut up, or you'll get my boot!"

And the tramp snarled and shut up.

The juniors sat down to rest and to discuss what was to be done. There was no picnic, and it was useless to keep on as far as Compton Woods They would be famished by the time they arrived there, and there would be six miles to walk back to tea. They decided to rest a while—meantime keeping Pedlar Parker a prisoner—and then walk home; and they agreed that when they saw Bunter again they would make him feel that his fat life was not worth living.

Nugent, fortunately, had a packet of toffee in his pocket, and Bob had a bag of chocolates, and these extremely light refreshments were handed round as they sat by the hedge and disposed of, to an accompaniment of savage mutterings from Pedlar Parker. It was not till an hour had elapsed that the pedlar was released from his own strap, and the juniors turned their backs on him and started for Greyfriars.

By that time they had no doubt that Ragged Dick had placed a sufficient distance between himself and his enemy; and Pedlar seemed to be of the same opinion, for instead of taking up a hopeless pursuit, he proceeded to rebuild his fire, and set up his pot again, muttering curses the while as Harry Wharton & Co. walked off.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Bunter's Generosity!

"JUST the place!"

Billy Bunter blinked round cautiously.

He halted by a little summer-house which stood among the trees within the walls of Compton Park. It had been a summer-house long ago, but was fallen into decay, overgrown with creepers, and almost crushed by drooping branches of oaks and elms. It was a secluded spot, and there was a rustic bench inside, and Bunter very much wanted to sit down.

So he pushed his way in through the tangle of creepers, and sat on the old bench with a gasp of relief.

Rapidly he unfastened the bundle.

His fat face glowed with satisfaction.

There were hard-boiled eggs and bread-and-butter and ham sandwiches and a bottle of lemonade and a cake—quite a large and fruity cake, and several other items.

That little feed had been intended for five, and there would have been enough for Harry Wharton & Co. And so there was very nearly enough for Bunter on his own.

Bunter, taken as a whole, was not an active fellow. But there was one part of Bunter accustomed to activity, inured to it by incessant exercise. That was his jaw. Eating was his favourite pastime, but talking came a good second. In one way or another Bunter's jaws were generally busy. Now they plunged into activity at an amazing rate. Probably, had Harry Wharton & Co. started all together on that spread the good things would not have disappeared as fast as they did now.

Item after item vanished, till only the cake remained. By that time even Bunter was slackening a little.

But he started cheerfully on the cake. With so large a cargo already disposed of, it was slow work; but he did not mean to leave a crumb of it.

"This is good!" murmured Bunter.

A footfall interrupted him.

He started, almost choking over the cake. He gave a startled blink at the overgrown entrance of the little shelter.

The dishevelled figure of Ragged Dick stood there.

Billy Bunter's startled glance changed to a stare of contempt.

He had dreaded to see a gaitered keeper, or the tall, formidable figure of Sir Henry Compton. This scarecrow had no terrors for him.

He resumed munching his cake while he stared with blighting disdain at the "scarecrow."

The ragged youth had been about to enter the summer-house, but he stopped half-way in at the sight of Bunter.

His glance went to the cake that Bunter was devouring, with an expression which showed that he was hungry.

Bunter gave a sniff.

"Who the thump are you?" demanded Bunter.

The boy stared at him without answering. He seemed alarmed at having come on anyone in that secluded and solitary spot.

"Can't you speak?" sneered Bunter.

The boy nodded.

"Well, speak, then, you scarecrow! Who are you?"

"Ragged Dick."

"Great pip! Is that your name?" ejaculated Bunter.

The young vagrant nodded again.

"What a name!" said Bunter. "Well, Ragged Dick—he, he, he!—take yourself off! You don't look quite clean enough for a fellow to want your company. Don't you know you're trespassing here?"

"I—I suppose so," muttered Ragged Dick. "I—I dodged into the park to get away from somebody, sir."

Bunter raised a fat forefinger.

"A bobby, I suppose?" he said. "You've been stealing!"

Ragged Dick flushed crimson.

"I haven't! I—I've been beaten because I wouldn't steal chickens. That's why I've cleared off."

"Gammon!" said Bunter.

Ragged Dick backed away; but the cake seemed to draw him, and he stepped in again.

"Hungry?" asked Bunter.

The Owl of the Remove was not much given to considering others; but even Bunter could feel for a fellow who was hungry. It was such an awful thing.

Dick nodded.

Bunter was really touched.

He broke off a chunk of cake, and held it out to the ragged youth.

"There you are!" he said.

Ragged Dick hesitated to take it, hungry as he was. But his grimy fingers finally closed on it.

"Take it!" snapped Bunter. "I don't mind giving you charity if you're only a beggar and not a pickpocket."

Bunter meant this delicate speech to be kind. His kindness seemed rather unappreciated by its recipient, however. Ragged Dick's eyes gleamed at him.

"I'm not a beggar!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, rats!" sneered Bunter. "What else are you, I'd like to know? Trespassing here and nosing after a fellow's grub."

"I'm hungry," said Ragged Dick. "But I wouldn't take anything as a beggar. I'd almost as soon steal. You can take your cake back, sir."

"Likely to, after your dirty fingers have touched it," sneered Bunter.

Whiz!

"Yarooh!" roared Bunter.

The chunk of cake came whizzing at Bunter and it landed fairly on his fat little nose.

"There's your cake!" said Ragged Dick. "Take it, and keep a civil tongue in your head!"

"Yow-ow!" gasped Bunter.

He rubbed his fat little nose furiously and jumped up. Bunter was not exactly a fighting-man, but his nose was not to be assaulted by a ragged fellow who looked as if he had picked himself up from a scrap-heap. The Owl of the Remove clenched his fat fists and advanced on the vagrant.

"You cheeky rotter——"

"Oh, cheese it!" said Ragged Dick.

"I'll jolly well——"

The vagrant backed away.

"Better keep off!" he said. "I don't want to hurt you. But——"

But a retreat was all that Bunter needed to encourage him to the point of heroism. He rushed at the ragged youth, hitting out.

Crash!

Bunter's blow was knocked up, and a hard fist was planted on his chest, knocking him back into the summer-house. He sat down there, with a heavy bump.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter.

Ragged Dick grinned at him.

"I told you it would be better to keep off!" he said.

"Ow! Wow!"

"Keep a civil tongue in your head when you're talking to a bloke down on his luck!" said Dick.

"I—I—I'll have you run in!" gasped Bunter. "You're a trespasser, and a pickpocket, and a ruffian—— Ow! Beast! You come back, and I'll jolly well give you a licking!"

But Ragged Dick was gone.

Billy Bunter picked himself up, gasping for breath. He sat down on the old bench again, and it was some little time before he resumed munching the cake.

It disappeared at last.

The last crumb and the last plum vanished, and Bunter leaned back in his seat, to rest after his exertions. His eyes closed behind his glasses, and he began to snore.

He came out of the land of dreams with a sudden shake, and started up with a vague impression that the ragged youth had returned.

"Leggo, you beast!" he howled. "I'll jolly well lick you! I'll have you run in, you scoundrel——"

"What—what?"

"Oh crumbs!" gasped Bunter.

A tall gentleman in shooting clothes stood before him, with a cigarette in his mouth. The dark, angry, wrinkled face stared down at Bunter; a sinewy hand was shaking him by a fat shoulder. With a quake of terror, Bunter realised that this was Sir Henry Compton, and that the crusty old gentleman had caught him trespassing.

"What? What? What are you doing here?" snorted the old gentleman, shaking Bunter.

"I—I—I'm not here——"

"What?"

"I—I mean—— Leggo—— Ow!"

"You are a trespasser, sir!" thundered Sir Henry.

"I—I—I——"

Shake! Shake!

"Leave my grounds at once! If you are not outside my park gates in five minutes I will give you in charge, by gad!"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I'm going!"

"Go!"

The Owl of the Remove fairly jumped out of the summer-house. He ran into the arms of a man in gaiters, who caught him by the collar.

"Jenks!"

"Yes, Sir Henry."

"See that trespassing young rascal off the estate! Then go up to the house and wait for a telegram. If it comes, bring it to me at once."

"Yes, Sir Henry."

The baronet sat down on the bench vacated by Bunter, and lighted a fresh cigarette. William George Bunter, with Jenks' heavy hand on his collar, was marched away. Jenks opened a gate in the park wall, and, without a word, but with a hefty drive of his boot, helped Bunter into the road.

Bunter sat down there and roared.

The gate closed on him.

"Ow!" gasped the hapless Owl of the Remove.

He picked himself up dismally, and started on a five-mile tramp back to Greyfriars. Long before a mile had passed under his lagging feet, William George Bunter felt that his happy picnic in Compton Park had been hardly earned.

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THE FIFTH CHAPTER.
A Strange Meeting!

RAGGED DICK stirred in a bed of bracken, and shook himself and rose.

The sun was down. In the east, silvery moonlight stole over the sky. Night dews were falling in Compton Park; the youthful vagrant shivered as he picked himself up.

Round him were great trees and deep shadows. In the gloom of the thickly-wooded park many fellows might have been perplexed to find their way. But Ragged Dick was at no loss. For as long as he could remember he had had no home; the fields and woods and lanes had been his home in the summer days; streets and railway-arches in the winter-time. He moved away through the gloomy wood unerringly for the solitary summer-house where he had encountered Bunter.

With silent footsteps, almost like some slinking animal of the night, Ragged Dick drew nearer to the little shelter under the oaks and beeches. As he drew close to it, a faint scent came to his keen nostrils. The scent of tobacco. He halted.

Dark as it was, someone was in the summer-house, smoking. As he peered through the tangled creepers he could see a tiny red glow—the tip of a cigarette. The waif stood, hesitating.

It was not Bunter who was there—he was sure of that. He had seen that Bunter was a schoolboy, and a schoolboy was not likely to linger in the lonely old park after nightfall. But someone was there, and it was no refuge for the outcast after all.

But he was tired—tired and hungry, and in a mood of deep gloom. Used as he was to wandering at all hours of day and night, he was weary of wandering now. He did not move back—he leaned on the thick trunk of an oak, only a few yards from the man, unseen, sitting on the bench in the summer-house—unseen, save for the glowing tip of the cigarette.

He hardly cared if the man found him there—if the man were a keeper or the master of the estate. He was too gloomy and reckless to care. But the man did not move. The scent of tobacco came through the leaves and twigs as the cigarette was smoked away, and the red tip died to a mere spark, and then into blackness.

He heard the unseen man stir then, and quivered back a little farther into the thick greenery round him. If the man was leaving, his refuge would be open to him; he did not want to be seen. But the man did not step out.

Ragged Dick heard a sound from him—a deep, prolonged sigh that seemed to come from a troubled, laboured heart.

He started slightly at the sound. He wondered who it was, hidden in the darkness of the interior, whose heart was so heavy.

Suddenly there was a footstep and a brushing of twigs. Someone was coming to the summer-house.

Dick shrunk a little deeper into the dark greenery.

A voice, deep and resonant, was heard.

"Is that you, Jenks?"

"Yes, Sir Henry."

"Is there a telegram?"

"I have brought it, Sir Henry."

A shadow passed into the summer-house.

"Give me a light."

Dick tore at the old man's collar and freed his throat and then lifted his head. "There's a flask in my coat. Get it!" gasped the baronet.

An electric torch gleamed out in the gloom of the little interior. Through the screen of twigs and leaves Dick saw a brown hand take the telegram.

But the old baronet was in no hurry to open the envelope.

"Leave the torch here, Jenks. You may go."

"Yes, Sir Henry."

The keeper went the way he had come.

There was deep silence as his footsteps died away in the distance.

The little beam of electric light glowed in the gloom. It was several minutes before Ragged Dick heard the sound of an envelope torn open. Then the old man's voice came to his ears.

"Dead!"

The waif's heart throbbed.

The beam of the electric torch, lying on the seat, fell partly on the bowed figure of Sir Henry Compton.

The telegram fluttered to the ground.

"Dead!"

Then, after a long pause:

"Poor boy!"

Ragged Dick—ragged, homeless, hungry—felt a throb of compassion for the wealthy baronet, the master of Compton Hall. It was some terrible news that had been brought by the telegram.

The waif moved silently away.

He was no longer thinking of the summer-house as a shelter for the night. Waif and tramp and vagrant as he was, Ragged Dick had a delicacy of feeling that would not allow him to intrude on a stricken man's grief.

But as he moved away in the darkness there came a strange sound behind him—a strange, gurgling, choking sound. He halted.

There was a fall.

In an instant Dick was springing back.

The old man had fallen to the ground, and choking sounds came from his throat. The blow he had received had been too much for him.

Dick was kneeling beside him in a moment, the electric torch in his hand. He was startled and scared, but his only thought was to help the man in the grip of a sudden seizure.

The old baronet was writhing on the ground, his hands clutching and grappling as if at an unseen enemy, his face crimson and suffocated. His eyes were still intelligent, however, and they gleamed at the boy, bending over him.

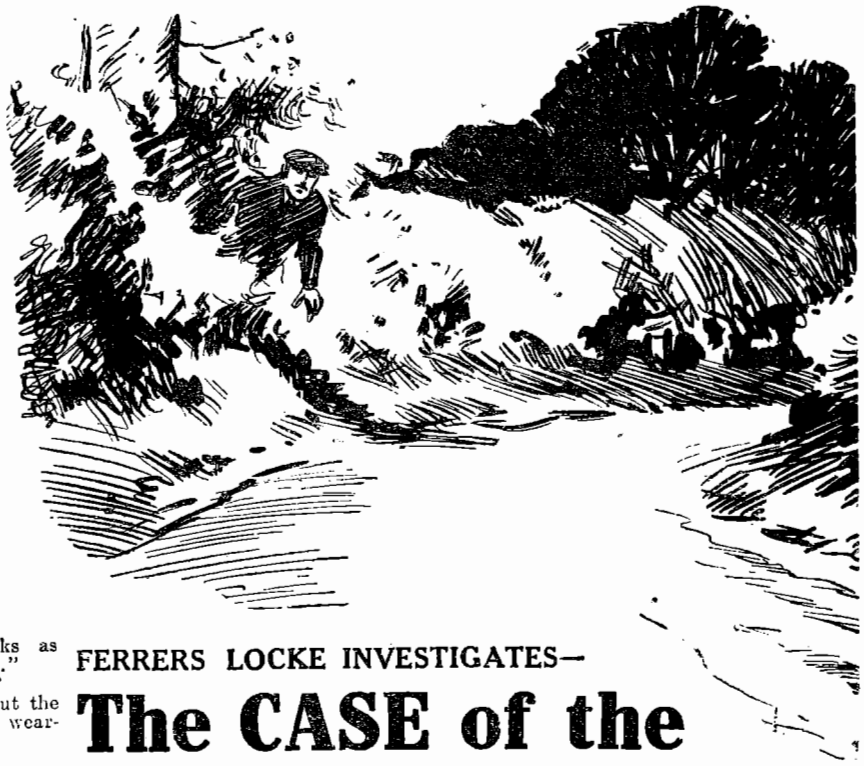
Sir Henry could not speak, but he made a struggling gesture towards his throat, and Dick understood. He tore at the old man's collar, and freed his throat, and then lifted his head and rested it on his ragged knee.

It was all that he could do. There was no help at hand. A terrible fear was in his heart that the old man might die there as he lay—that he was only easing the old man's last moments.

But the struggling breath of the baronet grew more even and calm.

(*Continued on page 28.*)

THE GREATEST DETECTIVE-THRILLER



FERRERS LOCKE INVESTIGATES—

The CASE of the SPECIAL PATIENT!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
By Request!

"HALLO! Is that Mr. Ferrers Locke's house?"

"Yes, Locke speaking, and——"

"My name is Gwendoline Neville; I am speaking from my home, Cranfield Chase."

"Sir Oswald Neville's house?"

"Yes; I am his daughter."

"Ah, I know Sir Oswald quite well! I think I can remember you, Miss Neville, when you were quite a little girl."

"I know that you stayed here once, years ago. Mr. Locke, I am dreadfully worried! My fiance, Mr. Evering Holt, has disappeared."

"Since when——"

"Only last night, but——"

"Oh, he'll probably turn up in a day or two!"

"I don't think he will, Mr. Locke; you——"

"Have you called in the police?"

"Yes, we have; but can you not come up?"

"I am afraid I am rather too busy!"

"But it is so extraordinary, and there is absolutely no reason for it."

"Extraordinary? Why? When did you last see him?"

"We had a dance at my house-party. He left at two o'clock this morning. We found his hat in the park, the ground near is trampled, and it looks as though there had been a struggle."

"Did he arrive at his home?"

"We don't know for certain, but the strange thing is that he can't be wearing any clothes."

"No clothes!"

"Well, his wardrobe is intact, and the suit he was wearing when he left me is in his bed-room. The door was locked on the inside, and the bed has not been slept in!"

"Did anyone see him after he left you?"

"No one, although his valet waited up."

"Have you searched for him?"

"Searched? Everywhere, Mr. Locke! There are m-men d-dragging the river this very minute!"

"Possibly he is playing a joke!"

"It can't be! He isn't that sort of man!"

"Have you had any difference with him?"

"We never quarrel, Mr. Locke. I can't understand it; he was perfectly all right when he left me!"

"Well, wait and see what the police say about it."

"Oh, Mr. Locke, I beg of you! Do come up here! I am sure you can help if you will. Anything may have happened to him! I assure you I wouldn't trouble you if it were not so strange. He wouldn't go off like this of his own accord!"

"Why do you say that?"

"Oh, I know he would not! We were to be married in a few weeks! I am certain there is some dreadful mystery behind it all! You are a friend of my father's, surely you can spare a day or two?"

"All right, Miss Neville, I——"

"You will come? Oh, I am so grateful!"

"Culford is the station, isn't it?"

"Yes; I will send a car to meet you and take you straight to Mr. Holt's house. Thank you so much!"

"Tell them to leave his bed-room alone!"

"Yes; I will instruct the servants not to touch anything!"

"Well, I'll catch the eleven o'clock train to-morrow morning."

"Can you not come now?"

"Impossible! I shall be leaving a lot of important work even then!"

"It is kind of you to come at all! I will have that train met to-morrow. Thank you once more!"

"Give my regards to Sir Oswald!"

"Thank you, I will! Good-bye!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.
Without Trace!

FROM the threshold, Ferrers Locke made a slow and comprehensive survey of the bed-room; its appointments had been chosen by a wealthy man of simple tastes, and gave a good index to the character of the owner.

Jack Drake stood beside his master; and differentially in rear of them was Webb, the missing man's valet. He was a young fellow, with an open, intelligent countenance. The detective had taken an instinctive liking to him, and appreciated his sound, common-sense actions since the disappearance of his employer.

"Have you done anything to this room?" asked Locke, as he stepped forward to the centre of the floor.

"No, sir," replied Webb. "I was out all day yesterday with the gardeners. We dragged the pond in the park, and the river from Hog's Bend to Canfield. When Sir Oswald phoned Scotland Yard and explained things, Inspector Harker said we'd better leave everything as it was. Miss Neville told us that, too."

"Where is Inspector Harker now?"

"He is in the park, sir. There's a place there by the dell that shows signs of a scrap. I found Mr. Holt's cap there. I put hurdles all round the place to stop anyone walking over it."

"I see. Now, you found all Mr. Holt's clothes here? In fact, this room is just as it was when you first entered?"

"Exactly, sir—except that the door was locked on the inside."

"How did you get in, then?"

"Through the window—and it's still just as I found it."

The window was open at the bottom, a gentle breeze billowing the curtains into the room.

"Mr. Holt always has the window open about a foot from the top," the valet went on. "I thought it a bit strange, and that gave me the first hint of anything being wrong."

Jack Drake walked across the room to the dressing-table. On a rack by the side hung a suit of rough tweeds.

"These are his clothes, aren't they, guv'nor?" asked Drake, as the detective moved to his side.

"Yes. You have seen nothing of his shirt, collar, and tie, have you?" asked Locke, turning to Webb.

EVER WRITTEN!

"No, sir. These and his underclothes are the only things missing."

"Well, isn't it posible that he simply changed to another suit?"

"If he did, sir, it wasn't one of his own, because none of his clothes is gone."

"He never went to bed," remarked Ferrers Locke, nodding towards the big oaken four-poster.

"No, sir; and there are his pyjamas just as I folded them."

Drake moved away from the clothes-rack to the dressing-table. He looked at the neat pile of silver coins, and noted their position. He noticed the manner in which a comb was stuck in a military hairbrush, and he lifted a mahogany stud-box from the table. It was inlaid with tiny silver figures; his keen young eyes saw how and where the little characters were polished with use. He lifted and opened the box to verify a conclusion, and found that his fingers did not cover the shiny parts.

"Mr. Holt is left-handed," Drake remarked, turning to the valet.

"That's so," replied the man; and the lad was conscious of Locke's approving smile.

"You must know Mr. Holt's habits," said the detective. "Do you think he came here and took off his clothes, or do you think someone else put them here?"

"Why, I'm sure Mr. Holt did, sir. I know by the way these clothes are on the rack, and the way his change is put on the dressing-table, piled with all the little coins on top, and the half-crowns at the bottom."

"Anything else?"

"Yes; look at this, sir." The valet pointed to the ash-tray that lay near the money. "Mr. Holt smoked a cigarette while he was here, and he always sticks the end up in the tray so that it burns all away—he did it with this one. It's a little way he has, and I've often noticed it."

"Then you feel quite sure that he was in this room?"

"Quite, sir. I waited up for him all night in the hall, but he didn't come in through the front entrance; and, what's more, he never got in by any other door, because I bolted up myself. It's his orders that everybody goes to bed at the ordinary time when he's out; but I stay up to give him a cup of coffee. I think he came in through the window."

Locke went to the window and leaned out. Immediately below was a lead flat over the bay window of the billiards-room. He judged that it would be a simple matter for an active man to climb up from the lawn beneath, and his quick eyes noticed that the flat carried two sets of footprints.

"You came up this way," he remarked, as he drew back into the room.

"Yes, sir. It was about eleven o'clock yesterday morning. I waited all night, and when the other servants got up I went to my room to have a sleep. I told them that he hadn't come in, and we thought he must have stayed that night at Sir Oswald's house; but it seemed a bit out of the way that he didn't phone and tell me like he usually does. Well, one of the housemaids sent me a message that the door was locked and she couldn't get any answer. I came along, and eventually climbed through the window. Here's the room just as I found it."

"So he has been in here, and he must have gone out by the window?"

"Yes, sir. The key was in the lock of the door. I rang up Miss Gwen——"

"The lady who telephoned me?"

"Yes, sir. She was in a rare way, and told me he left at two o'clock and walked down the meadows. He's often done it before, and we have had a couple of bricks knocked out of the park wall, so that he can climb over into the grounds. I walked over to Canfield Chase—that's Sir Oswald's house. On the way I found a place where there'd been a fight by the Dell."

"Miss Gwen and Sir Oswald came back with me, and we couldn't make head nor tail of it, so Sir Oswald telephoned to Scotland Yard late in the afternoon. The commissioner is related to him, I think. Anyway, Inspector Harker got here at six o'clock in the morning. In the meantime, we dragged the pond and the river, just on chance; but, thank Heaven, we didn't find anything."

Locke nodded thoughtfully, and looked to where Drake had gone to the mantelshelf. The youngster lifted a cabinet portrait down, and glanced inquiringly at Webb.

"That's Mr. Holt," said the valet.

Locke took the photograph and studied it. A picture of a clean-featured young man, with clear eyes, a strong Roman nose, and a firmly modelled chin. The poise of the head showed pride—as well it might, for the Evering Holt family was one of the oldest and undoubtedly the richest in the Eastern Counties.

Their line went back to the first Knight's Templars, and an Evering Holt was with Richard Cœur de Lion in the capture of Acre; another was in the siege of Orleans; and one gained fame fighting against Monmouth in the battle of Sedgmoor.

Locke saw that he was fronted with a very pretty mystery that might, after all, have a pretty solution. From what he had learnt of the missing man's character, he considered that Holt would be unlikely to disappear from any frivolous reason, and Locke had an idea that some deep and powerful motive was at the back of it.

That he had gone without a word or message indicated that he had left in a hurry; but the fact that he had time to follow his usual habits in the matter of undressing showed that he was not too hard pressed for time, and Locke thought he could have left some note if he had wished. Because he did not pointed to one of two things—either the reason for his disappearance came after he reached his bed-room; or he deliberately left no word for fear of giving a clue to his whereabouts.

There was a struggle in the park to be taken into consideration. Locke had not yet been to the scene, but it was clear that if Holt was mixed up in it the fight must have taken place before he reached his bed-room. Harker was an excellent man at picking out a story from this sort of thing, and Locke wondered what his conclusions would be.

"Did you send word to Mr. Harker?" he asked of the valet.

"I did, sir. He asked to be informed as soon as you arrived. I also telephoned Miss Gwen that you were here, and she said she would come over at once."

At that moment they heard heavy footsteps in the corridor outside, and Harker stood framed in the doorway.

"Talk of angels!" exclaimed Drake.

"Hallo, Locke!" greeted the inspector, striding forward and gripping Locke's hand warmly. "Miss Neville told me this morning that you were coming down. And how's Drake?"

"All right, thanks!" replied the youngster, as he shook the Yard man's burly hand.

Harker was carrying a pair of brown brogue shoes.

"Are those Mr. Holt's?" queried Locke, pointing to them.

"Yes; I've been nosing round at the Dell."

"Ah! What did you find?"

"Well, I figure he was attacked by three men, but he got away. They had waited a long time for him, because I found about twenty cigarette-ends behind a hawthorn-bush, and the ground was all trampled, where they had been standing or sitting. Will you come down there and see what you think of it?"

"I will presently. I suppose you've been over this room?"

"Yes. Do you know, Locke, I was here at six this morning, and I've been on this ever since, but I can't make head or tail of it, as yet."

"No? You haven't formed any theory, then?"

The inspector put the shoes down by the boot rack before he replied.

"Well, I'm inclined to think that he got away from the men, they followed him here, and kidnapped him."

"I suppose he climbed up to the window and got in that way, for quickness?" remarked Drake. "And then locked the door, so's the kidnapper wouldn't be interrupted."

But the sarcasm was lost upon Harker.

"I don't say he locked the door. They might have done that—just what they would do. I don't know why he came through the window. So far as I can see, there's no proof that he did. Maybe he never came here at all."

"How do you account for his clothes?" Locke demanded.

"The other people might have put them there. If they were conversant with his habits it would have been easy."

"Well," said Locke, rubbing his chin, "I think I could prove that he did come here."

He lifted the brogue shoes from where Harker had set them down and studied the soles for a moment.

"There are two sets of footprints on the lead flat outside. One set belongs to Webb, and the other will just about match these soles."

"Of course!" began the inspector. "That's no criterion."

"I admit it. But I will prove it in another way. Drake, just climb through the window, will you?"

The lad obeyed, and Locke pulled the window down until the top half was open about a foot, which, according to the valet, was the usual position.

"Now," called Locke, "come in again!"

Drake climbed up and pressed the top half of the window down until he could reach the inside portion, and was able to ease it up a few inches. He then bent down on the outside, and, placing his hand in the opening that now showed at the bottom of the two panes, slid them up with a bang to their original place, and climbed inside.

"That's the way Holt might have come in," said Locke, turning to Harker. "I think you'll admit it."

As the inspector nodded Drake stepped forward and pulled the panes down. In a film of dust on the top of the upper pane showed the imprint of two hands—one was Drake's, and it lay on the right. Harker looked at them closely as Locke went on talking.

"You know Holt is left-handed. That's the mark of his hand there, and it's his left hand. You can tell that by the position of the imprint. Do you see? The little finger apart from the others, all the pressure exerted by the index and the second finger, and no thumb marks. The little finger is on the left in this case, and on the right in Drake's mark, proving that a left-handed man first opened the window."

"But that doesn't prove it was Holt," observed Harker, with a slow smile.

"I never said it did. It is too small a thing by itself to be sure about. But putting it alongside the other little things, you get a lot of small facts, all pointing in the one direction. Because his money is piled in a certain way doesn't prove he placed it there, but taken in conjunction with the arrangements of his clothes, the cigarette-butt in the tray, and the left-handed mark on the window, we can safely conclude that he has been in the room."

"And I suppose he's running about the countryside in his shirt?"

Drake grinned, and Locke smiled a little as he said:

"That, of course, remains to be seen."

A maid tapped on the panels of the half-open door.

"Miss Gwen is here," she said, addressing the valet.

Webb looked inquiringly at Locke and Harker.

"I think we'll go down," said Locke.

"I've already seen her," remarked the inspector as they followed the maid downstairs. "We had a little chat this morning. You'll find her very upset, I'm afraid."

They found Miss Neville in a large, well-lighted room at the front of the house. She was a tall girl, with an air of distinction that did not emanate solely from the excellence of her well-cut walking costume. Her cheeks held the glow of perfect health, and her features were cast in a mould of delicate beauty.

As Locke shook her hand he could read in her eyes an emotion that did not show on her face, concern mingled with relief that was a tribute to the confidence she had in his powers.

She had a ravishing smile for Drake that instantly won the lad's heart and doubly increased the interest that he already had in the case.

"It is so good of you to come, Mr. Locke. I suggested to my father that he should ask you in the first instance, but the Chief Commissioner is his cousin, and he insisted on telephoning Scotland Yard. Later in the day, however, I became so worried that I thought no harm could come of it if I consulted you, and so I rang you up. I am sure Inspector Harker does not mind."

"Not at all," said Harker, twirling his bowler hat. "Mr. Locke and I have worked in harness on a good many cases—we're old friends."

"Well, Miss Neville," began Locke, "there are one or two things we should like to ask you."

"Anything I can possibly do to help, I will, Mr. Locke."

"Will you tell me how long you have known Mr. Holt?"

"Ever since we were children—we grew up together."

"Been long engaged?" asked Harker bluntly.

"Just four years. We were—are—to be married next month."

"You remember telling me about the struggle near the Dell. The inspector says he was attacked by three men, and——"

"Three men! I know Webb found his hat there, but I—— Has he—was he——"

"No sign of anything, miss," said Harker gruffly.

"Has he had any trouble with his tenants?" queried Locke.

"None whatever. Everyone on the estate is perfectly contented. He takes a great interest in them, and spends thousands of pounds on their comfort every year."

"Has he got any—er—enemies?" Harker eyed her keenly as he put the question.

"So far as I know he has none," she replied.

"Do you know, Miss Neville," began Locke tentatively—"has he ever been in any sort of trouble?"

She hesitated a moment, and a slight flush mantled her cheeks as she murmured:

"There was a girl once——"

"Not that!" Locke struck in quickly. "Financial trouble—difficulties of any sort?"

"Been dragged into any funny business?" supplemented the C.I.D. man.

"I am quite sure none!"

"Well, will it benefit anybody if he were removed?"

Again it was Harker's pointed question.

She shook her head, and only Drake noticed how Locke frowned at the inspector.

"I wonder," said Locke—and his quiet tone was in sharp contrast to the Yard man's brusqueness—"if you could tell me to whom he would turn if he suddenly found himself in some unexpected complication. Supposing it was something in which you could not possibly assist, or that might only cause you worry—something, let us say, where only a man could help."

"Why, Peter Shaw," she replied at once. "If he didn't go to my father."

"And who is Mr. Shaw?"

"They have always been great chums. He is Dr. Shaw, really—an expert in mental diseases, and he is the chief doctor at the County Asylum, quite near here."

"Where does he live?"

"He has a house on Mr. Holt's estate, about a mile away."

"Do you think he might go to Dr. Shaw if he needed assistance of the nature I suggested?"

"Yes, I think he would. Mr. Holt hasn't so many intimate friends; I am sure he would go to him. I told Mr. Shaw about it all this morning. He seemed surprised, but couldn't offer any explanations."

"Is there anyone else near here?"

"No; he has, of course, lots of friends in the county, but I hardly think he would go to any one of them."

"You are one of their spies!" cried the lunatic, and the next moment he had jumped at Locke, his grasp closing in a vice-grip round the detective's throat.

Locke pursed his lips and looked reflectively out of the window.

"And you are sure that there is nothing in his past that might crop up again?"

"Oh, why do you hint at such terrible things?" she asked, rising from her chair and speaking with passionate appeal. "I am sure—I am certain that

he has never done anything of which he could be ashamed. He is too fine and noble. He is reckless, Mr. Locke, but I know he would never do anything the least questionable."

She bent her head, and Locke guessed it was to hide a sudden rush of tears.

"I am sorry, Miss Neville," he said gently, "but there are some questions one must ask. When a man is rich there are many people who strive to get at his wealth, and it is from these that any danger comes. I haven't the pleasure of Mr. Holt's actual acquaintance, but I am quite convinced from what I have found since I came here that there is nothing in this matter to occasion you the least doubt or to shake your trust in him."

The tears were gone with his words, and a smile illumined her features as she raised her head. At that moment a knock came at the door, and in reply to her call Webb entered.

"Will you see Dr. Shaw, Miss Gwen?"

"I think we will, if you don't mind, Miss Neville," said Locke; and a few moments later Dr. Shaw entered the room.

A thick-set man of middle height, with his hair greying at the temples, he had sharp brown eyes that flashed from one to the other of the occupants of the room, and he bowed stiffly in response to Miss Neville's greeting.

"This is Inspector Harker—Dr. Shaw," she said, introducing the Yard man.

The doctor smiled affably, and gave Harker a quick handshake.

"This is Mr. Locke." He had the same affable smile for the detective until Miss Neville added: "Mr. Ferrers Locke."

Evidently Locke's full name carried something that his simple surname lacked. Although the smile remained on Shaw's lips, it lost its quality of sincerity, and Locke, looking into the man's eyes, saw there an expression that was akin to fear.

He connected the man's alarm with the reason for his visit, and he could not help forming a suspicion in his mind that Shaw knew his reputation, and that he had something to conceal.

The expression passed in a moment, and he watched the doctor intensely as he talked with Harker. But there was no embarrassment in his manner, only a courteous ease, and he readily answered the Yard man's questions, except one.

"Then you've seen nothing of Mr. Holt since the afternoon that he went to Sir Neville's house-party?"

"My dear sir, if I had shouldn't I have come to you at once?"

A pleasant smile accompanied the equivocal reply, and Locke reflected that there are many ways of telling a lie. He concluded that a quiet chat with Dr. Shaw would be interesting.

They conversed for some time, but nothing new came to light, and later in the afternoon Locke and Drake went with the C.I.D. man to the Dell.

There were bare patches in the grass near a narrow and hardly discernible path, and the inspector deserved a good deal of credit for the astute manner in which he pieced the story from the light footprints that could be but indistinctly seen. That his deductions were correct was quickly evident to Locke.

Once, while Harker was explaining how he had arrived at his conclusions, Locke seemed to lose attention, and stood gazing fixedly at the brushwood on the other side of the Dell. But his apparent abstraction soon passed, and he resumed his interest in what the Yard man was saying.

Harker still stuck to his conviction that Holt had been kidnapped by three men; but a search throughout the whole of the ground and on the lawn below the window disclosed nothing further.

It was Drake who brought what might or might not be a clue.

He had been prowling around on his own account, and came with the intelligence that on the night Holt disappeared one of the gardeners lost a coat and waistcoat, stolen from the cottage in which the men lived.

There were three rooms to the cottage, and the outer door was never more than latched. The garments had been hung in the sitting-room when the gardeners turned in, but were gone in the morning.

Locke sat a long while that night over his pipe in the rooms that had been prepared for him and his assistant. If Drake's discovery had any bearing on the case, it solved the problem of how Holt was clothed when he left the house; but it did not show why he should take the clothes It only added to the mystery.

The motive of the affair was beyond Locke. And when he knocked out his pipe, it was with a keen anticipation of the morrow, for he intended paying Dr. Shaw a visit, and he promised himself that, unless his knowledge of human nature was at fault, there would be some interesting developments.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
At Grips with a Madman!

THE next morning Harker went to the local police station, where he intended to make certain inquiries. He had not had the same opportunities as Locke of seeing that alarmed look in the doctor's eyes, but it is open to question if he would have deducted anything from an expression so transient and fleeting.

The Yard man saw things as they were, and there is no doubt that his ideas were restricted to routine work and the fact that he was part of a machine; powerful and efficient though that machine might be, the training it gave was not conducive to a clear appreciation of subtleties of an affair such as this.

The circumstances under which Evering Holt disappeared pointed in an unmistakable fashion to foul play, and this fact Harker made the starting-point of an examination on regulation lines; he looked for the three men who made the attack in the park, and his visit to the station was the beginning of his search.

Locke did not communicate his idea of Dr. Shaw's complicity. The only clue he had was a look in the man's eyes, a clue so intangible that only the criminologist's keen mentality could have read its meaning.

Acting on his overnight decision, Locke and Drake set out for Dr. Shaw's house. Contrary to Drake's expectation, his master did not cut across the park about Holt Grange, but took to the road, which lengthened their walk by some three miles.

"What's the idea, guv'nor?" demanded Drake.

"It's a nice morning," said Locke, "and I thought a stroll would do you good."

TREASURE
worth a King's Ransom
STOLEN!
See next week's vivid detective-thriller.

Locke's excuse was an excellent one, borne out by the bright sunshine, clear sky, and the freshness in the air. But the quick-witted youngster scented some other reason.

"I had enough running about yesterday——" he began tentatively.

"Now, Drake, you're as fit as a fiddle. Surely you don't mind a little walk?"

"It isn't the walk, guv'nor; it's not knowing why."

"I told you—it's a nice morning," remarked Locke, with a smile.

ANOTHER TRIUMPH

for the Master-Detective, FERRERS LOCKE,

next week!

"But it isn't the morning that's the reason?" Drake challenged.

"No, you're right, my lad. It's an experiment. Give me that little concave mirror you have," said Locke, pulling his handkerchief from his cuff.

Drake passed the mirror to his master. Concealing it in his palm, and under pretence of blowing his nose, Locke gazed at the reflection of the road behind them. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction, and returned the glass to Drake.

"I've got a job for you," he said. "Did you notice anything when we were in the park yesterday?"

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I had an idea that someone was watching us."

Drake stared.

"Watching us?" he repeated incredulously.

"Yes, and—don't look round—we are being followed at this very moment. When we get a little way beyond this next bend, you can look for yourself. The man is concealed in the hedge now."

They walked along the winding, country road, and, at a word from his master, Drake did a little juggling with the mirror in his handkerchief.

"And very nice, too," he murmured. "He looks an ugly customer, so far as I can make out at this distance, doesn't he?"

"He certainly does! Now, when we get to Dr. Shaw's house I want you to nip off and see what sort of chap he is; but you mustn't let him——"

"All right, guv'nor. I know what to do."

"I'm not sure that you do, Drake. There are probably two others about somewhere, so you want to look out for them as well."

They walked on, and presently saw a small, ivy-covered house just off the road. A broad drive ran through massive rhododendron bushes to the entrance.

"You do a sprint after the next turn," suggested Drake. "He can't see you because of the hedge, and I'll fade away. When he comes round the bend he won't see either of us, and he'll think we've both gone into the house—if he doesn't think he's lost us."

"Good lad! As soon as you've found out what you can, come over to the house and wait for me in the drive."

"Right-ho!"

When they came to the bend Drake slipped away, and Locke sprinted the two hundred yards to the house. He walked quickly up the drive and pressed the bell-push. He gave his name to the maid who opened the door, and asked for Dr. Shaw. The girl showed him into a cosy little sitting-room, and presently the doctor came in. He was perfectly cordial, and shook hands warmly.

"Ah, Mr. Locke! Come to make some inquiries? I don't know that I can give you any help, but I'll do my best."

Locke's first object was to verify his impression that the doctor had something to conceal. Sensing a certain uneasiness beneath his hearty manner, he put a very pointed question.

"Thank you, doctor! I am sure I can rely upon your assistance." And his eyes met the other's as he spoke. "I suppose Mr. Holt hasn't approached you in any way, or suggested to you that he would be likely to disappear?"

The doctor's gaze wavered and fell.

"I don't know why—why you should ask——" he began hesitatingly.

Locke's features became a little more firmly set as the doctor broke off, and he asked an even more direct question.

"Then I may take it that you saw nothing of your friend immediately prior to his disappearance?"

There was a little stress in the final words of the query that the doctor must have noticed. It was almost identical with the question that Harker had asked him the previous afternoon, and Dr. Shaw made a similarly ambiguous reply.

"Do you think, Mr. Locke, that if I had I should keep the knowledge to myself?"

And the doctor forced a laugh.

Locke was satisfied now that his deductions were correct. He could see that the man was considerably disturbed, and for a moment he was tempted to force home his advantage and frankly accuse him. But that might bring a flat denial instead of a confession, and the detective decided to adopt more subtle methods.

After that Shaw must have thought that the first two questions were merely accidental, for Locke made some very trifling queries, and was guilty of a number of foolish and obvious blunders. The result was that the doctor regained his confidence, which was exactly what Locke wished him to do, for his conversation became easy, and he did not look for traps.

"I suppose you never keep patients here?" remarked Locke, reaching for his hat.

"Not unless a case has some special interest. As it happens, I have a patient here now."

"Ah! What is wrong with him?" asked Locke, gazing fixedly at the lining of his hat.

"He's a paranoiac."

"That's rather beyond me."

"They are not common cases. A paranoiac is a patient who suffers from delusions. He thinks that everyone is plotting to torture, ruin, or afflict him in some way. Sometimes the obsession is harmless, but often they are very dangerous."

"Is this man dangerous?"

"Oh, no! We have had no trouble with him as yet."

"Perhaps you have not had him long?"

"No. He only came the day before yesterday. But as he was such an interesting case, I had him brought here."

Locke's expression did not alter in the least, yet the doctor's words gave him a mental start, and his brain worked quickly.

The lunatic had arrived on the day that Evering Holt disappeared.

"I should like to see him," said Locke slowly.

And Dr. Shaw smiled in a superior manner.

"Certainly, Mr. Locke! Perhaps you will come this way."

Locke was a little surprised at the doctor's ready acquiescence, and he wondered if it was bluff. He followed him upstairs to a back room at the end of a passage. An attendant in a white uniform stood up at their entrance, and the paranoiac rose from a seat by the window.

Ferrers Locke studied the outside of the window closely. "It was not a difficult job for our man to climb in this way!" he said.

He was a short, stocky man, and his face was thin and drawn; there was a deep furrow between his heavy eyebrows, and he instantly fixed Locke with a deeply mistrustful stare.

"Mr. Roper," said the doctor, addressing the man, "a friend of mine—Mr. Locke."

The lunatic nodded sharply.

"Is he a friend of mine?" he asked meaningly.

"Oh, quite, Mr. Roper!"

"Ah, you know what they are, sending their spies to see me! I'm sorry, sir," he went on, addressing Locke. "But I

have to be so careful. I never know when they might be at me; they're so cunning. I have to have a bodyguard." He indicated the uniformed attendant. "If it wasn't for him I should be murdered in my sleep."

And he turned, with a sigh, to look out of the window.

"Very strange, isn't it?" whispered Shaw. But Locke was thinking swiftly, and did not reply for a few moments.

"Dr. Shaw, I want to speak with this man alone."

"Impossible, Mr. Locke!" exclaimed the doctor, biting his lip.

"I think not."

"I couldn't possibly permit it! Really, I—I——"

"Supposing I insist, Dr. Shaw?"

"But you—you——"

He looked at the detective's grim countenance, and stopped. Perhaps he saw that further argument was useless, for he motioned to the attendant, and then left the room.

The paranoiac was still gazing out of the window, and Locke looked round the room. Evidently it had been hurriedly converted for the occupation of the lunatic.

He judged from marks on the wall that an overmantel had been but recently removed from a place above the firegrate. It was plain to see where

A SEARCH FOR CLUES!

pictures had been taken down from the walls. The floor was still covered with a heavy carpet.

Moving over to the man, he asked:

"When did you come?"

"The day before yesterday," replied the lunatic, gazing at Locke with fierce eyes.

"Where did you come from?"

"What's that to you?" came the suspicious reply.

"Were you not to go to the asylum?"

"To the where? You don't think I'm mad, do you?"

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Locke hastily. "But you did not intend coming here, did you?"

"No. I was going for protection to the county barracks; you can see them from here." And he pointed out of the window to where the roofs of a group of big buildings showed above the trees a mile or so away. Locke knew that these belonged to the asylum, and he hid a smile as the man went on. "But it was decided that the place was too open, and offered too many opportunities for spies, so I came here."

"You came from London, didn't you?"

"Oh, no! From Ipswich. Things were very bad for me there. The town is overrun with spies. But I don't think they can find me here, do you?"

"No; I am sure they can't. Your Christian name is George, isn't it?"

"No; Arthur John—Arthur John Roper. I've thought of changing it several times; but I don't think it would be any good, because they would soon find out."

"I expect they would. Well, I must——"

"Why did you want to know my name?" asked the lunatic, peering up at him.

"I confused you with——"

"I believe you're here to find something out!"

"Don't think that. I——"

"You've been sent here to find out where I am!" said the man, following Locke closely as he moved to the door. "You're one of their spies!"

And he jumped for the detective's throat.

The man's frenzied grip was like steel, and Locke could not break it. For all the pain he endured, he was loath to hurt the man. He wrenched at his arms, but could not move him. He tried to pull his hands away, but they were locked fast.

The man's fierce eyes glared into his own, and his breath came in short gasps through his clenched teeth. The situation was growing desperate, and there was a heavy drumming in Locke's ears; he was unable to shout, and was forced at last to hurt the man.

Drawing back his fist, he swung a half-arm jolt at Roper's jaw. The blow jerked the lunatic's head, but it had no other effect, and Locke was convinced of what he had already realised.

A lunatic at the height of his madness has no sense of pain, and Locke's blow meant nothing to Roper.

The madman swung all his weight forward and kicked Locke's heels from under him. The detective went down, and as they fell together it was a natural effect that Roper's hold should weaken.

Locke took full advantage of it. He cut at the man's wrists with the side of his palm, thrust his left arm between the other's, and, getting a leverage on one forearm, broke his hold. Locke tried to call, but his voice was gone, as an effect of the grip on his throat, and he had to concentrate all his attention to prevent the man repeating his hold.

Locke was a kindly man, and had no wish to harm his demented opponent, and, with the detective's knowledge of every form of wrestling, it was not difficult for him to break free.

He thrust both arms over Roper's shoulders, locking his hands on the man's back. Then, pulling the lunatic's head down on to his own chest, he thrust upwards with his knees.

It was a quick movement, and well executed. He jerked himself clear as Roper's body crashed over, and sprang to his feet.

He opened the door, to see Dr. Shaw and the attendant standing at the other end of the corridor and gazing out of the window. Both turned at the sound of the opening door, and he beckoned to them.

Dr. Shaw gazed at his disordered attire in astonishment, and ran forward.

"Good heavens, Mr. Locke! What is the matter?"

But Locke could not speak as yet; he could only point to the prone form of the paranoiac and to his own throat.

The attendant bent over Roper and made a quick examination.

"He's had a bad turn, sir," he said. "Shall I get him to bed?"

"Do, please! Come this way, Mr. Locke," said Shaw, gripping the detective's arm. "Did he try to strangle you?"

Locke nodded grimly.

"I'm sorry! I hadn't the least idea."

He took Locke to his study, and, removing his collar and tie, set to massage his neck with oil.

There was magic in the doctor's fingers, and soon Locke could swallow comfortably, and had regained his voice.

"Don't put your collar on again; I'll get you a scarf. Your throat must be badly bruised."

"I'm pretty tough, doctor. I hope I haven't hurt the man."

"Don't bother about that," replied Shaw quickly. "His unconsciousness is quite a natural effect. I feel I am to blame for——"

"I don't think so; it must have been something that I said which alarmed him."

Locke had now more reason than ever to suspect that Dr. Shaw had some hand in Holt's disappearance. On the day that the young aristocrat was missed Roper was due to go to the asylum, instead of which the doctor had put him in a room in his own house. The fact that the lunatic was "an interesting case" was a very thin excuse, and it was apparent that the doctor did not usually keep patients, because no proper accommodation was arranged, as the state of the lunatic's room showed.

Was it possible that Holt had taken Roper's place?

Dr. Shaw's concern for the detective's hurt was so wholeheartedly genuine that Locke was not yet convinced that he was a party to any nefarious designs.

They shook hands warmly on the doctor's doorstep.

"Take care of that throat, Mr. Locke!" he called, as the detective walked down the gravel drive.

Locke waved his hand in reply and smiled. His collar and tie were in his pocket, and in their place he wore the silk scarf that Shaw had given him.

Drake stepped out from behind a rhododendron bush at the entrance to the drive.

"Hallo, guv'nor! Where's your collar?"

"In my pocket, Drake." And as they

walked down the road he explained what had happened, concluding with: "What luck have you had?"

"I've seen 'em; three of 'em! One's as big and ugly a brute as you'd find anywhere. Two are following the one who was after us. They've got a gig and a groggy old nag."

"Doesn't this first man know he's being followed?"

"Oh, yes; they're all in the gang! It puzzled them nicely when you disappeared! The gig came up, and they had a conference. I couldn't get near; but apparently they decided that we'd gone into the house, and set themselves to wait."

He pulled the mirror from his pocket, hid it in his hand, and spent a long time scratching his forehead.

"Yes, that chap's coming along all right, guv'nor."

"H'm! I think we'll stop and have a chat with him."

"That's the stuff!" exclaimed Drake.

"We'll have to stop them, anyway, because we're going to take Mr. Holt back with us for lunch."

The lad's astonishment was too great for any expression beyond a whistle; and Locke went on:

"Supposing you had some reason for wanting to hide, Drake—where would you go?"

"I'd lie low in a dosshouse in the East End."

"You could do that; but your accent would give you away."

"It would want some thinking out, guv'nor."

"Well, how about a lunatic asylum?"

"Phew! That's an idea—if you could get in!"

"Bear it in mind, my lad, because we're now going to see someone who has done it."

"Not Mr. Holt?"

"Yes. And if I'm not mistaken, the three fellows behind us are following because they want to find him and they think we shall get him first. When we get round this bend, run and hop over the first gate you come to, and we'll nip out behind that man."

A couple of minutes later they had the satisfaction of seeing their shadower pass the gate near which they were concealed at a troubled half-trot. He was a tall, sparse man, dressed in a shapeless, brown suit, and wearing a peculiarly cut, greasy cap. Undoubtedly he was out of his environment on that fresh country road, for the flat-fronted cap and his round-shouldered slouch stamped him as a town-bred hooligan.

Locke vaulted over and caught the man by the collar; and Drake grabbed one of his arms.

"Now," said Locke, "what's the game?"

"What game? What are you playing at?"

"You've been following me all the morning!"

"I ain't!"

Locke wanted to give the gig time to come up so that he could see the others, and he engaged the man in what he knew was a fruitless argument.

A couple of minutes later they heard the sound of wheels, and the vehicle came round the bend.

"Here's that massive brute," murmured Drake.

A big man climbed from out of the back of the carriage. He was well over six feet in height, and had the cut of a one-time prizefighter. He had a heavy jowl and thick eyebrows bent in a fearsome scowl. The other man remained in the gig.

"What's up, Peel?" growled the big man as he moved towards the little group.

"This bloke 'ere says I've been followin' 'im. I ain't, 'ave I?"

"No; you ain't been followin' 'im!" He came close to Locke. "Made a mistake, ain't yer, mister?"

Locke let go the man's collar, and Drake released his arm.

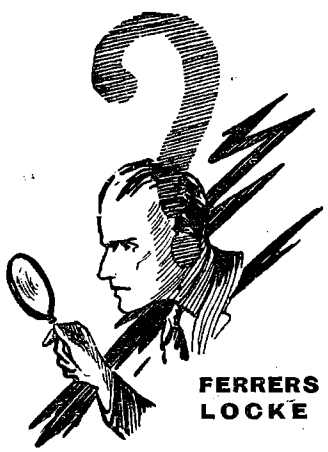
"I don't know that I have."

"Don't yer? Well, you find out!" said the man. Then added, meaningly: "We ain't got no quarrel with you."

"You have with someone else. Is that it?"

"That's our business. I know 'oo you are, but you don't want to think I'm afraid of Mr. Ferrers Locke, 'cause I ain't!"

WHERE ARE THE HOLT HEIRLOOMS?



SETS OUT TO SOLVE

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DETECTIVE-THRILLER!

Locke eyed him steadily, but made no reply.

"Come on, Peel," said the man, turning away. The two climbed into the gig, and the driver swung round, but the big man had a parting shot.

"And if you do start interferin', Mr. Ferrers Locke, you'd better bloomin' well look out!" Then they whipped the old horse into a trot, and the gig rattled off in the direction from which they had come.

"He's a nice customer, isn't he?" said Drake, as they resumed their journey.

"All fat and talk, I expect," replied Locke. "I'm glad we had a look at them. We shall probably learn what part they have played in this affair when we see Mr. Holt. It will be time enough to deal with them then."

"Did you say we were going to the asylum, guv'nor?"

"Yes; we're not far away now."

A few moments later they were walking up a broad drive to the big asylum gates. Locke consulted a board outside, and saw that the chief warden was a Mr. Charles Guthrie.

He rang the bell-pull, and the gate was opened by a porter.

"I want to see Mr. Guthrie."

"Yes, sir. Straight along the walk there till you come to a sign, 'Chief Warden.' You'll find his office there."

Locke nodded his thanks, and they followed the porter's directions. The walk led them past flower-beds and green lawns; everything was neat and fresh. There were well-trimmed bushes, and carefully-gravelled paths running between the lawns, and presently they passed some bowling-greens and tennis-courts. The asylum fronted on to grounds that were worthy of any country mansion, and the building itself lacked any sign of occupation by mental defectives.

"Not a bad place this, Drake."

"I always thought asylums were a sort of prison."

"They used to be, but they're not now. Ah, here's Mr. Guthrie's house!"

The chief warden received them in a comfortable little office. He was rather startled at the sight of the detective's card, and after a few preliminaries, Locke came to the point.

"I think you have a man here named Arthur John Roper, a paranoiac from Ipswich. He arrived two days ago."

"That's correct, Mr. Locke," said the warden, turning to a file. "A patient specially under Dr. Shaw's care. Are you acquainted with Dr. Shaw?"

"Yes, I am. Did he give any particular instructions about this man?"

Guthrie consulted a sheaf of papers.

"Well, I see he is to have a special diet at the doctor's expense. Rather extravagant feeding, in fact, and he has been placed in a private ward—also at the doctor's expense."

Locke smiled slightly.

"I particularly want a few minutes' conversation with this man," he said. "I suppose you have no objection to that?"

"Er—it is a little unusual; and Dr. Shaw said most particularly that Roper was to have no visitors. It is marked here in red ink."

"H'm! Well, I must see the man. Suppose I ring Dr. Shaw up and get his permission?"

"Of course, it would be all right then. We have a house telephone here. I'll ring him up." And the warden reached for the telephone.

Soon he passed the receiver to the detective, who was smiling as he spoke into the mouthpiece.

"Is that Dr. Shaw? This is Locke speaking. Yes, from the asylum. Will you tell the warden that I may see your patient, Arthur John Holt—er—I mean, Roper? I can tell him? Thank you! What's that?"

And the doctor's voice came over the wire:

"Tell him, Mr. Locke, that I did my best, but you're too dashed clever for me."

THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
The Treasure!

BECAUSE Locke expected an awkward meeting with the man whom he was going to see, he left Drake in the warden's office. He had an idea that Evering Holt would have something to tell him, and might feel embarrassed if a third party were present. So Drake made himself comfortable, and was soon trying to interest himself in a pile of stale magazines.

"The private wing is quite isolated," remarked Guthrie, as Locke and he left the office and went out into the park-like grounds.

They passed along the front of the asylum to a small detached building at the end. There were no inmates to be

seen, and Locke learned that there were other grounds in rear of the asylum where patients exercised during the morning.

"Roper," the warden continued, "is still under close observation; and I must say, from the daily reports, he is quite a remarkable case. His delusions seem to be extraordinarily wild and baseless. Usually a paranoiac has some more or less stable grievance."

"I have no doubt that he is rather strange," commented Locke, concealing a smile.

"You will be able to judge for yourself shortly. I don't want to pry into your business, Mr. Locke, but I would suggest that you try not to excite him."

"I don't think you need have any fear of that. By the way, Dr. Shaw will probably be over soon. Ask him not to interrupt me."

The warden threw him a sidelong glance.

"I will mention that to him, Mr. Locke," he said diffidently. "You will have no objection to one of the attendants watching you through a grille, I suppose?"

"No, as long as the man can't overhear."

The private wing was little more than a beautifully-kept house, with polished parquet flooring, well-furnished rooms, and quiet corridors.

As Locke entered he glimpsed some of the patients. Beyond a little eccentricity in dress or expression, they showed no sign of any derangement.

Many were playing table games, others were reading, and some were smoking and chatting. Only the presence of the ubiquitous uniformed attendant gave any indication that the building held anything more than a house-party, for there was no locked doors or barred windows.

Guthrie tapped at a door on one of the upper corridors, and an attendant opened it. Locke noticed that a grating was let into the door a little more than half-way up. The room was neatly and sparsely furnished. Distempered walls, mats on the floor, and an absence of movable articles other than a couple of light tables and some cane chairs.

From the photograph he had seen in the bed-room at Holt Grange he recognised the young man who sat reading near the window as Evering Holt, and the man's appearance in the flesh did not alter the estimate that the detective had formed from the portrait. He was not so immaculate now. His hair was somewhat tousled, and he was wearing a very cheap serge suit, and had no collar or tie.

"Mr. Roper," said Guthrie, "I have brought a gentleman to see you—Mr. Locke."

The young man rose aggressively.

"I thought the doctor said I was to have no visitors?"

"There is an exception in——" began Guthrie.

But Locke checked him with a gesture.

"Leave him to me," he whispered.

Upon which the warden beckoned to the attendant, and both withdrew.

Locke stepped forward and lightly gripped the other's arm.

"Mr. Holt, my name is Ferrers Locke. I was commissioned by Miss Gwendoline Neville to find you. I think I have succeeded.

Holt's expression was a study in surprise.

"I suppose Shaw——"

"No; Dr. Shaw told me nothing actually. You must not blame him. He even preserved his silence in the face of Miss Neville's distress," said Locke gravely.

"Was she much upset?" asked Holt quickly.

"Don't you think it natural that she should be?"

Holt looked out of the window at the vista of green lawns and flowers. A worried frown creased his forehead, and he did not speak for some moments.

"So you are Ferrers Locke," he said at last, turning towards the detective. "Evidently there has been a lot of fuss about my disappearance. Well, I don't know how you found me, because I made Peter Shaw promise that he would not give me away, and I have never known him to break his word. I expected the police to investigate, but I didn't bargain for you." He paused for a moment, and then exclaimed helplessly: "I suppose I've been a fool."

The young man rose aggressively at the sight of Locke in the doorway with the warden. "I thought the doctor said I was to have no visitors?" he snapped.

"Doubtless you have some very good reason for this?"

"I have, Mr. Locke—I have! Do you think for one moment that I would have caused Gwen so much uneasiness——"

"I think that it would be best for you to get away from here as soon as possible. Of course, I don't know why you are here at all, but if you have any occasion to hide——"

"I shall have to make a clean breast of it, Mr. Locke."

"That's the wisest course," said the detective.

And he thought that perhaps, after all, this mad escapade was but the outcome of some folly.

"I am not sure that I ought to leave here yet, though. If I tell you everything, do you think you could help me?"

Locke looked into Holt's troubled face.

"You can rely on my giving you any assistance in my power, Mr. Holt."

The detective felt his hand clasped in a firm grip, and the young man's gratitude could find verbal expression only in a simple:

"Thank you!"

A little silence followed, then he asked:

"Have you the time, Mr. Locke? They have taken my watch away."

"Yes. It's just one o'clock."

"Well, have lunch with me—it is due now—and I can then tell you my story."

"I was hoping to take you back to the Grange for luncheon."

"I would much rather tell you everything before I leave here. Then perhaps you will advise me as to my best course."

"Certainly, if you wish it," said Locke. "But I have an assistant. I don't know if you have ever heard of a lad named——"

"Drake? Yes, I've heard of him."

"He is down in the warden's office."

"Ask him to come, too, please. I should like to meet him," said Holt eagerly.

"And I expect Dr. Shaw will be here soon, if he hasn't already arrived!"

"We'll have him as well. I certainly owe him an apology and an explanation. Evidently he's been an absolute brick."

"I can assure you that he did his utmost to keep your secret," said Locke. "I'll go and get Drake, then, and I think I'll telephone Miss Neville and let her know that you are all right—unless you would prefer to do that?"

"I would sooner leave it to you," replied Holt. "Just tell her you know where I am, Mr. Locke, but don't say where. I am very anxious to speak to her, but I—really——"

"As you please." And Locke moved to the door.

He found Dr. Shaw, with furrowed brow, waiting with the warden.

"I'm sorry about this, Mr. Locke," said the doctor quickly. "I don't know how you——"

"Dr. Shaw, you will find Mr. Holt in there. I think he would like to see you. Don't attempt to apologise to me, because I rather admire you for what you have done."

Drake was a little distrustful about lunch in a lunatic asylum, but in the lunch that Holt gave his three visitors there was nothing to dissatisfy the most fastidious critic.

Locke telephoned Miss Neville, and a few minutes later he and Drake joined Holt and Shaw in the private wing.

Lunch was almost over before Holt cleared up the mystery of his voluntary disappearance, but he first addressed himself to Dr. Shaw.

"I'm sorry, Peter, that I couldn't tell you everything when I dragged you out of bed that night—or, rather, that morning. But when you have heard what I am going to tell you, I think you will agree that there was some reason for it." He turned towards Locke and added: "I did not tell Dr. Shaw one solitary thing about my reason for wanting to disappear; he just took my word that it was a strong and honourable one. He arranged to substitute me for Roper. The man was coming from Ipswich that day, and it must have caused him an awful lot of trouble to fix it up. Peter, old man, I can't thank you enough!" He leaned over the table, and the two friends clasped hands.

When Holt had resumed his seat he began his story.

"The reason goes back to the wedding day of my father and mother, thirty years ago. As you know, my estate is about the largest in the Eastern Counties, and that is because my mother was the last of the Verneys. The Verney Estate stretched between my father's and Colford Heath. The marriage merged these two estates, and what is more to the point at the moment, the heirlooms of both families were combined."

"I suppose," observed Locke, "they must be very valuable."

"I can give you only a rough figure. My father once told me that eighty thousand pounds would not buy them in the market. But there is more than monetary value attached to them; there is what one might call sentimental value that nothing else could have for me.

"Well, it is a tradition in our family that the Holt Heirlooms should pass to the eldest son when he marries, and they are always a wedding-gift from his parents. A superstition exists, too, that without this the alliance will be a failure. The jewels are displayed with the wedding-presents in the ordinary way, the whole of our own and the Verneys'. My maternal grandfather followed our precedent in this respect.

"On the night of the ceremony the heirlooms were stolen by a man named Adams, and, in making his escape, he killed a footman who was guarding them. Adams was caught three days later while he was trying to get to London. He was tried for murder, but the death sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. The point that effects me is that the jewels were never recovered, and the man refused to say anything about them.

"After months of fruitless searching my father came to the conclusion that they had been passed by Adams to a confederate, broken up, and sold; but, twenty years later, he had a letter from the man. You shall see it, Mr. Locke, if you wish."

Locke nodded, but did not speak. And Holt went on.

"Adams was dying in the prison hospital, and in his letter he expressed absolutely no regret for his actions, but only hoped that the jewels might do someone else more good than they had done him. He went on to say that he had hidden them during the three days between the murder and his arrest, and that he had told another man in the hospital where they were. The second man's name was Robert Dent, and he had to serve two sentences that ran concurrently, one for manslaughter and the other for burglary, making a total of fourteen years, of which he had at that time served four.

Dent was interviewed, but he would not give any information unless my father brought about his release. Whether this was possible I do not know, but my father absolutely declined to make any move in this direction, and it was on his return from this visit that he told me what I have told you. My parents both died seven years later, which is three years ago now, and since their death I have as far as possible kept Dent under observation. "He is in Portdown Prison, by the way."

"Ah!" exclaimed Locke. "I know the new governor—Colonel Arden."

"That's right, Mr. Locke. Well, a few days ago I had advice that Dent was shortly to be released—the day after to-morrow, in fact. Hard upon this information I was approached by three men. Apparently they knew as much about the whole affair as I did, and they threatened that unless I let them have a clear field with Dent upon his release—which was tantamount to giving them the jewels—they would reveal to Miss Neville certain of my—er—youthful indiscretions."

"I think we've seen those chaps," remarked Drake dryly. "Was one of them a massive brute?"

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"Yes," replied Holt, with a smile; "a huge, ugly man."

"That's him."

"We will tell you about them later," interjected Locke. And Holt went on:

"As it happens, Miss Neville already knows everything in my past that might—well, might—er——" He broke off.

"I don't think we need bother about that," said Locke.

"Anyhow, their threat had no strength, and very foolishly I let them see this. I can appreciate now that I might have pretended to agree with them. However, that is past now. Nothing more happened until the night I went away. As you know, I went to a house-party at Canfield Chase—Miss Neville's home. This developed into an impromptu dance, and I did not leave until two o'clock the next morning.

"On my way through the park I was attacked by three men, whom I recognised as my visitors of a few days before. I was fortunate enough to escape, and remembering a gig that I had seen on the road before I climbed the park wall, I drew my own conclusions.

On the way home through the park Holt was suddenly attacked by three mysterious men.

"You will understand, I am sure, that when we discovered that the secret of our heirlooms was held by a criminal we guarded the information very carefully, and I had always thought I was the only one who knew anything at all about it. How these men gained their information I cannot imagine, but I thought that they would appreciate the necessity of keeping it quiet, and I guessed that I was the only bar to their getting the jewels.

"When they attacked me, and I remembered their gig, I realised that kidnapping was their game, and that they were determined to get me out of the way so that I could not interfere between them and Dent."

"You could have gone to the police," suggested Dr. Shaw.

"I thought that if I did they would at once take the matter out of my hands, and I feared their handling of the convict would be none too gentle, and would in all probability upset the man, and I knew it was going to be a very delicate business to persuade him to tell what Adams had told him. He had evidently hoped that his knowledge would, some way or other, bring his release, and having served his full time and kept his secret for ten years, he would not be likely to reveal it to anyone who had any connection with the police."

"Well, why didn't you go away?" asked the doctor. "Right out of the country—Scotland, or somewhere like that?"

"Because I saw that my assailants were desperate men, and with a chance of restoring the family heirlooms to their proper place I was not disposed to take any risks. I thought that, with so much at stake, they might follow me, and the risks in travelling with three such men on my track were many.

"When I came to you, Peter, I had no settled plan. I just told you what I wanted to do, and asked your advice. It was you who first hit upon the idea of sending me to the asylum instead of Roper, and nothing could have suited me better. I am sure Dr. Locke will agree that it served my purpose admirably."

"I must admit," said Locke, "that it was just as good a thing as you could have done in the circumstances."

"There is another point," Holt went on. "I am not very superstitious; but, to be frank with you, I have delayed my marriage with Miss Neville so that she might have a chance of wearing the Saracen's Ring at our wedding. It is part of the stolen heirlooms, and every Holt bride has worn it since it was brought back from the third Crusade.

"One of my ancestors was at the capture of Acre, and in the battle he killed a Saracen named Kezra, a leader in Saladin's army. Kezra was malformed, for he had a withered left hand. It was useless to him in battle, and he conceived the idea of wearing on it a heavy gold band encrusted with jewels—five rubies and three sapphires. In close combat, and when opportunity offered, Kezra used to dash this into an opponent's face, and so he turned his withered hand to some account.

"The Saracen's Ring, as it was called, has become our talisman. Originally made for Kezra, it is quite small, and is always worn by the bride on her left hand during the ceremony. I want my bride to wear it, and I want that ring more than the whole of the jewels put together. It is only a superstition, I know, but it does weigh with me. I think you will understand now why I decided that it was best to put myself beyond reach of these men. When Dent was released I intended being on hand to try to persuade him to do what was right."

No one spoke for a few moments, then Locke observed:

"You laid your plans well."

"I have no doubt you could tell me my next movements," said Holt, smiling.

"Yes," replied Locke; "I think I can. You took a suit from the gardener's cottage—the one you are wearing now, in fact—climbed to the flat roofing above the billiards-room, and then to your bed-room. I noticed that you left absolutely all your property there, and came away with merely the clothes you stand up in. I

(*Continued overleaf.*)

THE CAROL OF THE GUNS!

Through the dull booming of the guns is heard the old Christmas Carols, coming from those cheery heroes in the mud-filled trenches facing No Man's Land!

THUMPS and bumps, and a rattling and clattering as of millions of fireirons being flung into millions of fenders . . . and the company humorist strikes up "'Ark the 'erald——" but a united howl from a hundred dry and hungry throats stifles his unmusical efforts at birth. That's the only thing that is dry about that swarming collection of men—throats.

The thumps and bumps are the response of wet, perishingly cold ground to the bulky packs and haversacks being dumped —with freely expressed thanksgivings—from weary and stiff shoulders and hips. The rattling of ironmongery is the music of the rifles being unshipped from shoulders blister-worn by the chafing of rifle-straps over many aching miles of slippery Flanders roads.

The time is 11 p.m., Christmas Eve, 1917. The scene is a collection of once-upon-a-time labourers' shacks and farm buildings, now represented by crazily leaning walls, with here and there a suspicion of roof—now the duly appointed temporary billets of a battalion of the line moving up to the front line trenches.

Moving up as thousands and thousands of other British Tommies had moved up before them; some to a "Blighty" wound, very many to the doing of deeds of almost incredible heroism, some to a resting-place that is nameless now and utterly unknown.

THE ORDER TO MOVE!

For the World War has been "on" now so long that it seems to have been a tragedy born soon after the Flood . . .

There isn't a Tommy among all that battalion that isn't wet through, and stiffened with cold, and tired to the marrow, and hungry enough to make rapid work of the least appetising kind of food—if it were there to make rapid work of.

But there'll be no more rations served out until after dawn on Christmas Morning. So, packs and equipment and rifles, and all the other heterogeneous collection of oddments that form the infantryman's equipment, conveniently dumped, the men stretch themselves on the soggy ground and prepare for sleep.

And so, this Christmas Eve, they settle down to sleep, scarce heeding the confused rumbling roar of the great guns blazing away "up there," where comrades are standing in mud-filled trenches carrying on as though Christmas Day were 363 days away instead of coming with to-morrow's dawn.

But the rumbling is becoming louder and more persistent as the minutes pass, and presently there is one great, devastating, soul-shattering boom that tells of something other than a mere artillery bombardment.

A half-hour passes, and then comes the word to stand-to. Every man—still with boots on, for you don't remove those items of clothing when you lie down in not-quite-frozen mud —leaps up. The word is passed round "Get dressed!" and with the usual cheerful grumbling those ton-weight (it seems) packs and haversacks and rifles are slung across chests and shoulders again.

Three minutes later comes the command "Fall in!" and with innumerable ejaculations of "What's up now?" the men form up. More words are barked, and in an incredibly short space of time the battalion is marching in column of fours along the road that leads to—War!

A SONG ON THE MARCH!

They had expected to remain in those lop-sided billets for at least another day. But you might just as well spend Christmas in the firing line, they reason, as in a dilapidated sort of knocked-down workhouse. For hours the march continues, with the inevitable sing-song that helps the feet of worn out men to keep moving when every nerve and fibre in their bodies is uniting to urge them to lie down.

Presently a trench is entered—a communication trench leading through one that runs at right-angles, parallel with the firing line. The latter is reached at last, and the new-comers "take over" from the remnants of the trench's garrison.

Remnants! Yes. For the noise of the guns that were heard way back in those cock-eyed billets had been more than real to the men whose places are now being taken by the fresh troops.

The one great devastating boom heard way back also was the noise of the exploding of an enormous mine out in No Man's Land, by German engineers. The fresh troops have been brought up to "take" that colossal hole in the ground, as soon as daylight—and Christmas Day—comes . . .

CHRISTMAS DAY!

Taken it is, at the price of a hundred and fifty lives. But the rest of Christmas morning passes without very many more casualties. And, strangest of all, the Tommies are doing their utmost to pretend that it is Christmas indeed.

For haven't they been promised a Christmas dinner—a real hot one? The battalion cooks way back at the transport lines have been doing miracles with bully beef and onions and potatoes, the mixture smelling quite savoury in great dixies.

At four-thirty on Christmas afternoon the Christmas dinner arrives, in the self-same dixies, half of it spilled and the remainder stone-cold and with an added flavour of Flanders mud. They are heroes who have brought it up, under shell-fire, over miles and miles of awful country . . .

And they are heroes who eat it—thankfully, with cheer in their hearts, and on their lips snatches of the old Christmas carols at home . . . though the great guns are barking a continuous mocking refrain.

---

suppose you did not go through the hall because of your valet who was waiting up for you, and under the circumstances you naturally wanted to make your disappearance as mysterious as possible?"

"That's right. There is another thing. I doubt if I could have got away in any other fashion, because I found that the men were watching the house from three different points, and I feel certain that if they had got hold of me my life would have been forfeit. I am not sure that the danger is passed even now."

Locke looked thoughtful.

"Dent is to be released the day after to-morrow," he observed. "Harker is after the three men now; but if they manage to keep out of his way for a couple of days they may get at Dent even yet."

"Well, Mr. Locke," said Holt, "will you give me your help and advice?"

"Of course I will. I have already promised you. I won't criticise what you have done, although I am sure you need not have resorted to such extreme measures."

"There is just one thing more," said Holt, rising from his chair. "My father issued a reward of ten thousand pounds for the recovery of the jewels. That money has been lying at the bank ever since, and has never been touched.

"Find me the jewels, Mr. Locke, and the money is yours. But be sure of my active co-operation. I think I can foresee a little excitement with our friend the big fellow, and I want to be in it as well as you."

"Meanwhile," broke in Dr. Shaw, "I can foresee a little excitement in the matter of explaining to the asylum authorities here how the wrong man came into their custody."

"I'm really very sorry if it's going to get you into trouble, Peter," said Holt; "but you——"

"Oh, never mind that!" said the doctor. "Anything to oblige. I expect I can fix matters up all right, and get Roper transferred over here this afternoon. Forget it. You'll be able to do as much for me some day."

THE END.

(With even more thrills, mysteries, and weird adventures, next week's extra-long DETECTIVE-THRILLER heads the list of stories in next week's issue. In: "THE HOLT HEIRLOOMS MYSTERY!" Locke is called upon to bring all his knowledge, pluck, and resourcefulness to bear upon the most amazing case in his career!)

YOU'LL ENJOY CHRISTMAS WITH THE FISTICAL FOUR OF ROOKWOOD.

NO LUCK for LOVELL!

By OWEN CONQUEST.

To be landed with a crusty old uncle at Christmas is not a bright outlook for the Merry Chums of Rookwood. But their effort to alter the prospects, however, meets with disastrous results!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.
The Wet Blanket!

"WHO'D have thought it?" Thus Arthur Edward Lovell, in dismal tones.

"Nobody!" said Jimmy Silver in answer to the question.

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome looked, as they felt, sympathetic.

It was, as the Rookwood fellows expressed it, hard cheese.

Lovell's worst enemy, if he had had one, would have admitted that it was exceedingly hard cheese.

Nobody would have thought it. Nobody could have foreseen it. Certainly Arthur Edward Lovell hadn't. But nobody could have.

It was just one of those hapless things that happen, and cannot be helped.

It was all the more unfortunate that it should happen at Christmas-time, when Lovell was home for the holidays, and had brought his three chums home with him.

That, so to speak, put the lid on.

"Was I to blame?" demanded Arthur Edward, appealing to his chums.

Three heads were shaken at once.

For once, Lovell was not to blame.

Generally, when Arthur Edward found himself in a scrape, the fellow at the bottom of all the trouble was Arthur Edward himself.

On this occasion, however, it could not be denied that Lovell of the Fourth was more sinned against than sinning.

"Who'd have thought it?" repeated Lovell. "We got into the giddy train to come home for the Christmas holidays—the most disagreeable old blighter in the wide world gets in along with us—he rags us and nags us, and we give him tit for tat—and then—it turns out that he's my Uncle Peter, who I hadn't seen for years—coming here for Christmas along with us. Oh dear!"

"Horrid!" said Jimmy.

"Where is he now?" asked Raby.

"Goodness knows—gone out, I hope!" said Lovell. "It isn't like home with him in it. He's worried you fellows a lot through the hols."

"Oh, no!" said Jimmy. "A bit snappy, that's all."

"A trifle tart," murmured Raby. "But there must be some good in him somewhere, Lovell. Your mater's fond of him."

"Well, he's her brother," said Lovell. "He may have been a good brother; but I can't say much for him as an uncle. I've got a lot of uncles, you know, and I've been pretty well broken in to stand 'em; but Uncle Peter really is the giddy limit. I thought he was going to clear right out of the house when he found that the chap who had cheeked him in the train was his blessed nephew. Wish he had!"

"Yes, rather."

"But he didn't," mumbled Lovell. "He stuck on. He never sees me without glowering at me. It worries the mater. The pater doesn't like it, either. I've tried to be jolly civil. You fellows have been jolly decent. But he's a thumping wet blanket, isn't he?"

"Oh, let him rip!" said Jimmy Silver cheerily. "We're having a good time here, Lovell. And every chap has one or two rusty and crusty relations who make life a worry. If we're jolly nice to him he may come round before the hols are over. And he may pat you on the head and give you his blessing when you start for Rookwood again."

Lovell grinned.

"Not jolly likely!" he said.

"Keep smiling, old chap!"

As a matter of fact, Jimmy Silver & Co. were in a cheery mood, in spite of Uncle Peter in the role of wet blanket at the Christmas gathering at Lovell Lodge.

Arthur Edward Lovell and his Christmas guests were tramping home for lunch, with their skates dangling over their arms. They had been down to the frozen stream at Froode for skating, and had enjoyed their morning, three of them, at least, having forgotten the existence of Mr. Peter Wilmington.

But a thoughtful shadow might have been discerned on the brow of Arthur Edward Lovell.

Lovell, evidently, had been thinking that frosty morning, as well as skating.

"When Uncle Peter was a boy he was a good chap, according to the mater," said Lovell. "She gave me a long jaw about it last night. He went out to India as a young man for his people's sake. You see, they were rather short of money, and there were a lot of sisters and only one brother, and he stayed single all his life to look after them. That's pretty decent, you know, especially as it's made him such a rusty, crusty old card."

"I knew he'd got some good in him, or your mater wouldn't think so much of him," said Jimmy Silver. "Let's all be as nice to him as we can."

"He put in twenty years in India and came home rich," went on Lovell. "According to what the mater tells me he was a sort of earthly providence all the time. Well, that's jolly decent. The mater's very fond of him, or, of course, she wouldn't be bothered with such a hunks at Christmas-time. And the pater has a lot of respect for him, though I don't see how he can possibly like him. Well, the mater would be no end bucked if Uncle Peter came round and forgave me and took a liking to me. I'm going to please the mater, if I can."

"That's right!"

"The question is—how?" said Lovell.

"That question wants a bit of answering," remarked Raby. "Uncle Peter may have a good heart, but he's got a dashed bad temper. And, as for his manners——"

Raby left his remark unfinished.

"Well, I've got it," said Lovell. "I've thought of a way. No good being civil to him; he only snaps at a fellow. No good asking after his health; he only snorts. But according to what the mater says, he has—or had—a good heart. I'm thinking of appealing to his gratitude."

"His which?" ejaculated Newcome.

"Gratitude," said Lovell.

"My only hat! How?" asked Jimmy in wonder.

Lovell smiled, the smile of superior wisdom.

"I've thought it all out," he said. "Uncle Peter was attacked in India once by footpads—he calls them dacoits. He carries a lot of money about him—I've seen a wad of bank-notes in his purse when he's opened it. He's never got over those dacoits, and he's always ready to be pounced upon by footpads—nerves, you know. You fellows may have noticed that when he goes for a walk he always takes a big knobby stick

with him. It's no good telling him that there are no dacoits in Somersetshire—he knows better."

The Rookwooders grinned.

"Well," went on Lovell, "Mr. Wilmington would never be surprised at being attacked by footpads. And since the War, of course, there have been a lot of footpads about and so there would be nothing really surprising in a gang of them setting on Uncle Peter one night."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"That's the idea," said Lovell. "Three ruffians set on Uncle Peter and get him down and begin robbing him. I rush in——"

"You rush in?" repeated Jimmy Silver dazedly.

"I rush in," assented Lovell. "Knocking the scoundrels right and left, I rescue him."

"Oh, my only summer bonnet!"

"Raising him from the ground, I help him back to the house," continued Lovell, evidently greatly taken with his wonderful idea. "He thanks me in broken tones—realises that his nephew is the goods, after all, as it were, and tells the pater and the mater how mistaken he has been in me. In fact, the giddy clouds will roll by, and everything in the garden will be lovely. That is, if old Peter has any gratitude in his composition at all."

Jimmy Silver & Co. stopped and stared at Lovell.

In the end study at Rookwood they had often heard weird schemes propounded by their chum—often and often. Generally they had sat on those schemes. But of all the weird schemes that Lovell ever had propounded, this struck his comrades as the weirdest.

"Not wandering in your mind, are you, old chap?" asked George Raby, with an air of solicitude.

"Look here, Raby——"

"The question is, has the poor chap any mind to wander in?" murmured Newcome.

"Look here, Newcome——"

"Patience!" said Jimmy Silver. "If this is a sudden fit of insanity it's no good arguing with Lovell. We shall have to help him home and send for a doctor."

"Look here, Jimmy Silver——" roared Lovell.

"If it's a joke——" went on the captain of the Rookwood Fourth.

"It isn't a joke, you frabjous ass!" hooted Lovell. "I've thought it out, and I've got it. It's a tremendous wheeze."

"But if you're not potty, and it isn't a joke, what the thump do you mean?" demanded Jimmy Silver. "Do you think that a gang of footpads are going to pile on to old Peter just when you want them to, and let you knock them right and left just as you like? More likely to knock you on your silly head."

"Shall I put it into words of one syllable?" asked Lovell, with deep sarcasm. "You might possibly understand it then. You fellows are going to be the footpads."

"Eh?"

"Us!"

"Oh, scissors!"

"That's the stunt!" said Lovell. "Something like a stunt—what?"

"Oh dear!" said Jimmy Silver. "Yes, something like a stunt—but more like the wanderings of a giddy lunatic!"

"You silly ass! It's a regular catch! I suppose you fellows can blacken your faces."

"Blacken our faces!"

"Yes. Footpads do that so that they won't be recognised. You can hide in a hedge and wait for old Peter to trot by and rush on him."

"Rush on your Uncle Peter!"

"Yes, and mop him over."

"Mum-mum-mop him over!" stuttered Raby.

"That's it! If he gets a bump or two it won't matter. It will make it all the more realistic."

"Oh crumbs!"

"And what about his big stick?" demanded Newcome. "You've been talking about the big stick he carries around for footpads."

"You may get a lick or two," said Lovell, with a nod. "But if you handle him short and sharp, he won't have time to get in more than one whack or so."

"You—you—you frabjous fathead!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "Do you think that we want even one whack from Uncle Peter's big stick?"

"I hope you're not a funk, Jimmy."

"You—you—you——"

"Look here! You jolly well rush him, Lovell, and take the whacks from his big stick and we'll rescue him!" said Raby.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly owl, what would be the good of that?" demanded Lovell. "I've got to get into his good graces, not you. I'm his giddy nephew. You won't see him again after this vac. I may have him landed on me every vacation now that he's settled down in England."

"Oh, my hat!"

"It's a tremendous stunt—tremendous!" said Lovell impressively.

Arthur Edward Lovell was evidently not to be reasoned with. So his comrades gave up the hopeless attempt to reason with him, and they went in to lunch.

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

Cut and Dried!

LUNCH at Lovell Lodge that day was not the brightest of functions.

Uncle Peter was cross.

The dictatorial old gentleman, too much accustomed to having his own way and regarding himself as monarch of all he surveyed, did not seem to consider it necessary to conceal the fact that he was cross while a guest in his brother-in-law's house.

The Rookwood juniors were very quiet and sedate at lunch. Lovell was very uncomfortable.

It was really rotten that his friends from school should have to stand the cross temper and Hunnish manners of a relation of his. Lovell felt it keenly.

Teddy Lovell had gone away to stay with some Third Form friends over the remainder of the vacation. On the day he had departed Uncle Peter had been almost amiable. No doubt he would have been quite amiable had Arthur Edward departed also.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome were very circumspect. They felt for Lovell, and understood his discomfort.

All the juniors were glad when lunch was over and they were able to get away from the grim countenance of Mr. Wilmington.

Lovell seemed in rather low spirits.

The tremendous stunt he had elaborated should, in his opinion, have set matters right—carried out loyally by his comrades. But the three juniors had made it clear that they were not going to carry out that tremendous stunt. It was rather too tremendous for their liking.

Lovell regarded it as the last word in diplomatic strategy. His comrades regarded it as the maddest wheeze that had ever been thought of outside the walls of Colney Hatch.

This was a difference of opinion that was not easily reconciled.

According to Lovell, everything was certain to go well if his comrades carried out his instructions to the very letter. According to his comrades, nothing was likely to go really well if Arthur Edward Lovell had a hand in the planning of it. This was another serious difference of opinion.

Had Lovell insisted in his usual high-handed way—which bore a distinct resemblance to the manner of his Uncle Peter—his chums would probably have remained firm.

But Lovell, though he somewhat resembled his Uncle Peter, had had his manners formed at Rookwood School; not among khidmutgars and punkah wallahs on the banks of the Hugli. He was aware of what was due to guests under his roof, and he respected the strong disinclination of his chums to enter into his wonderful scheme. Lovell at home was a little different from Lovell in the end study at Rookwood School.

But a total surrender on the part of Arthur Edward naturally had its effect on his chums. In the fable of Æsop, when the north wind competed with the sun to deprive the traveller of his cloak, the fierce gusts of the wind made the traveller draw his cloak tighter about him, while the smiling radiance of the sun induced him to throw it aside. So it was with Lovell and the Co. Surrender effected what lofty insistence could not have done. Jimmy Silver & Co. began to wonder whether, after all, there might not be something in Lovell's wheeze, and whether they might not, after all, help him out with it.

"You see, it's the pottiest idea a silly ass ever thought of—even Lovell!" Raby remarked—out of hearing of Arthur Edward, of course. "But old Lovell seems keen on it."

"After all, if it leads to more trouble with his jolly old uncle, he has a right to have as much trouble with his uncle as he wants!" Newcome suggested.

Jimmy Silver grinned.

"It beats even Lovell's record as a fatheaded stunt," he said. "But, of course, there's a possibility that it might work."

"Lovell may be right," said Raby. "Miracles have happened before. Why not again?"

"If the old chap's keen on it, let's pile in and do as he wants," said Newcome. "After all, there would be a certain amount of satisfaction in bumping over that ferocious old Anglo-Indian."

"Something in that!" agreed Jimmy.

"We'll bring him down wallop in the snow," said Newcome, evidently looking forward to that. "A terrific wallop! That will make up for having to stand his scowling and growling. If Lovell wants us to handle his jolly old uncle, why not?"

"Then Lovell can butt in with his rescue stunt," said Raby. "If it works, all right! If it doesn't—well, it's Lovell's bizney."

"That's so!"

Jimmy looked inquiringly at his chums.

"Is it a go?" he asked.

And Raby and Newcome answered together:

"It's a go!"

The three chums sought Arthur Edward. That youth met them with a curious mixture between a reproachful frown and a hospitable smile. As a fellow who was, as he considered, left

(*Continued at foot of opposite page.*)

FOOTBALL MEMORIES!

The old veteran player recalls some very famous sportsmen who have represented their country both in football and cricket.

We were sitting, as usual, in our big armchairs before the bright fire in Tiny's cosy study, and our talk had ranged away from Soccer and flowed into other games as well.

"By jove!" said I. "But a man must be a grand athlete to represent his country at two games, say, football and cricket! Did you ever know anyone who did, Tiny?"

I had struck the right chord! Old Tiny sat up alertly.

"Know anyone? Lad, I know plenty! Well, hardly plenty, because, as you say, a man has to be a wonder to be picked as an international at any game, so when he's picked for his country at two games—well! Sit ye back, and I'll tell ye of some double internationals I knew!

"Poor R. E. Foster was one of the greatest I knew. 'Tip' died when he was only thirty-six, just before the War! Lad, we lost a grand athlete!

"Oxford, Worcestershire, and England at cricket; Oxford, Corinthians, and England at soccer!

"'Tip' was one of the most dashing batsmen who ever walked to the crease. There was no fiddling about for him—he just went for the bowling and knocked the stuffin' out of it—but he did it so gracefully, lad, it made you weep with joy!

"He got the second highest score ever made in the University match—171 in 1,900, followed that up a fortnight later by two centuries at Lord's against the Players, 102 not, and 136. And two years later he made the highest score ever made in Test matches, 287 against Australia, at Sydney!

"But he was just as good at soccer. Beautifully built and fast, he was a dashing forward, who could shoot like lightning, and dribble—well, like a Corinthian! Tip played for England five times, and was a success every match. A great athlete!

"Another fine batsman and footballer was William Gunn, of Notts. The crowd used to chaff Billy about his height—he stood 6 feet 6 inches, lad—but he was just as clever and graceful with the leather as he was with the willow! Of course, he was a bit better known at cricket than at soccer—what a batsman he was, to be sure!—and whereas he only played twice for England at football, he earned eleven caps against Australia at cricket.

"Still another great double international was C. B. Fry. You don't need me to tell you of how he skippered England and kept the Ashes in 1912! Well, he played soccer for England, too, at full-back."

The old-timer drew at his pipe.

"I suppose Charles Fry was the greatest all-rounder of all times! Cricket, soccer, rugger, athletics (he was long-jump champion of the world too, son!); everything came alike to him.

"Harry Makepeace—Everton at footer, Lancashire at cricket—was a great fighter at both. Solid Old Harry, I used to call him, and it was just as easy to pass him at football as it was to get a ball past his bat at cricket! Many's the time he saved his side in the old days!

"Let's see, he got four caps for football, and four, too, for cricket! And he scored 117 at Melbourne, against Australia, in 1921.

"Two curious double internationals, son, are Andy Ducat, of Surrey, Aston Villa, and Fulham, and Wally Hardinge, of Kent and Sheffield United!"

"How do you mean, 'curious,' sir?" I asked.

"This way, lad. Funnily enough, they were both born in February, 1886, and both got their first soccer caps the same day, against Scotland, in 1910, and both got their first cricket caps the same day against Australia, in 1921. Coincidences, what!"

Old Tiny chuckled.

"However, I think both of 'em will agree they did a bit better at soccer than at cricket! But they're grand chaps, and at forty-three, they're as fit as fiddles to-day!

"Then, we mustn't forget Patsy Hendren! He was a fine little footballer just after the War for Brentford, and he got his cap all right, but, of course, cricket has bigger claims on him—and rightly! What a batsman he has been for Middlesex and England! The cricket field always seems a cheerier place to me, when I see Pat scooting after the ball to the edge of the field, or getting up to some little lark out there in the middle!

"Now there's one thing I want to impress on ye with all these men, laddie, and that is—they kept fit! Some chaps train for one game and some for another, but all these 'doubles,' Foster, Gunn, Fry, Makepeace, Ducat, Hardinge, and Patsy—they keep fit all the year round. That's the great thing in life.

"I'll just tell ye another story of a great footballer-cricketer, although he wasn't a 'double.' G. O. Smith is the man I mean—the greatest centre-forward England ever had! A tall, slight chap, always in good humour, never a cross word, and never unfit, he could sway and dribble and feint his way through any defence that ever breathed! And his shooting and his headwork—well, they were wonderful! I know!

"Well, he played for Oxford. But this is how he earned his cricket 'blue.' Just before the great match at Lord's, Oxford were playing Sussex. G. O. had to go in to bat the next day, so—off to bed early he went. Next day, turned out fit as a fiddle, with a good night's rest behind him—and scored a great century!

"And that got him his 'blue'—at the eleventh hour! And, lad, off he went to Lord's—and scored another century—against Cambridge! And it practically won the game.

"Yes, son, a man who can wear the blue blazer trimmed with red and yellow, and at the same time earn a few of those little velvet caps there in the glass case—well, you can take it from me, son, he's fit, and he's a man!"

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in the lurch by his pals, he was reproachful; as a host, he was bound to be hospitable and smiling. It was a mixture of feelings that produced quite a curious expression on Arthur Edward's speaking countenance.

But his mind was speedily set at rest.

"We're playing up, old man," said Jimmy Silver. "Mind, we think it's a fatheaded wheeze. But we'll play up if you like."

"It's a potty stunt," said Newcome. "But rely on us."

"It's simply idiotic," said Raby. "But we'll all be silly idiots if you really want us to be, Lovell. Can't say fairer than that."

Lovell grinned cheerily

"The wheeze is all right," he said. "It will work like a charm if you fellows play up. Have a little sense, you know."

"Oh!"

"I'll make all the arrangements. You fellows will only have to carry them out. Don't try to think for yourselves, you know."

"Oh!"

"Then it will be quite all right," said Lovell.

"H'm!"

"Old Peter is going down to the village after tea," went on Lovell. "We've got a chance of working the oracle to-day—a splendid chance! He's calling on the vicar about a blanket fund. He's standing blankets for the poor—he finds England jolly cold after India, and I suppose it makes him sympathetic. Well, there's only one way he can walk back from the vicarage, and it will be dark, of course. Three fellows with blackened faces rush out on him and collar him—money or your life, and all that——"

"Ye-e-es!"

"As it happens, I happen to have walked out to meet him on the way home," said Lovell. "See? I've got it all cut and dried. I catch sight of him at the physiological moment——"

"The psychological moment!" murmured Jimmy Silver.

"Any old moment," said Lovell cheerily. "I mean just when he's downed by the giddy footpads. I rush in and rescue him, knocking you right and left——"

"Not too much of your giddy knocking right and left," said Raby. "We're not blinking skittles."

"You mustn't mind a thump or two, to give the thing a touch of realism," said Lovell.

"Then we'll jolly well give you a thump or two back!" said Raby warmly. "Real footpads would!"

"Look here, Raby! If you are going to play the goat——"

"Order!" said Jimmy Silver. "It's all right, Lovell. We're on. We'll jolly well get his stick off him at the first rush—that's rather important——"

"Jolly important!" said Newcome, with emphasis.

"Then we'll roll him over and give him hands-up and money-or-your-life!" said Jimmy. "You rush in, and we clear. And—and—we'll hope for the best. It may turn out all right."

"It may!" murmured Raby.

"It will, if you fellows don't make a muck of it," said Lovell confidently.

"You've simply got to have a little sense and do exactly as I tell you!"

"Oh!"

"Then it's all cut and dried," said Lovell, with great satisfaction.

And his comrades agreed that it was.

Arthur Edward's face was very bright; he had no doubts. Jimmy Silver & Co. had a good many doubts; but they hoped for the best. At all events, it was settled now, and all cut and dried.

THE THIRD CHAPTER.
Not According to Plan!

"WHAT a game!" murmured Raby.

"Oh dear!"

"Keep smiling!" groaned Jimmy Silver.

Really, it was not easy to keep smiling, in the circumstances.

In the deep winter dusk the three Rookwood juniors lurked in a gap of a frozen hedge at a little distance from the gate of Lovell Lodge.

It was cold, and a freezing wind came down from the Mendip Hills. But the chums of Rookwood were warmly wrapped up against the wind; they did not mind that very much.

It was the task they were engaged upon that dismayed them. They had agreed to play up, under Lovell's masterly lead. Lovally they were keeping to their word But they were dismayed, they were dubious, they were worried. The enterprise was so very extraordinary; the stunt was so exceedingly tremendous.

It might work. If it worked, it might have the results expected so confidently by Lovell. But——

There was a "but." In fact, there were an infinite number of "buts." The objections to the scheme were as innumerable as the stones on the Mendip Hills.

But the trio were "for it" now, and they meant to do their best. The rest had to be left to the fickle goddess Fortuno.

So far, the task had been accomplished without hitch. The four juniors had gone out to look at a valley by moonlight. That excited no suspicion on the part of the old folks at home.

In a secluded spot behind trees and bushes, three of the juniors had carefully blackened their faces to disguise their identity, in the approved style of footpads.

Certainly, with their blackened faces, they were not recognisable. Their own parents would not have known them. Uncle Peter was absolutely certain not to recognise them. Moreover, Lovell had sorted out some old clothes in the way of overcoats and mufflers and boots, which altered their usual appearance almost as much as their blackened faces.

Lovell gave the finishing touch to the decoration of his chums, and then left them and went back towards the Lodge.

He was to remain in cover till the attack took place. Then he was to happen to be within hearing, and to rush in to the rescue. Like Cæsar of old, he was to come, to see, to conquer.

With blackened faces and old dark mufflers drawn round their necks and up to their ears, the three juniors lurked in the shadow of the hedge and waited and watched for Uncle Peter

"How long?" mumbled Newcome at last.

"Oh dear!" groaned Raby. "That ass Lovell——"

"Suppose we chuck it and go and look for Lovell and give him a jolly good hiding?" suggested Newcome. Arthur Newcome's temper seemed to be deteriorating.

Jimmy Silver grinned ruefully.

"Stick it out!" he said.

"Suppose the old Hun stays for supper with the vicar?" groaned Raby. "It would be like him. We know he's every kind of a beast."

"Oh, my hat!"

"Suppose——" went on Raby, in a deeply pessimistic mood.

"Hush!"

Raby's suppositions were interrupted by a heavy tread in the snow, coming up the lane.

Jimmy Silver peered through the gap.

"It's old Wilmington!" he whispered.

"Good!"

Uncle Peter was coming up the lane, on his homeward way to Lovell Lodge. The juniors watched him, with sinking hearts.

Certainly Mr. Wilmington had no suspicion that three Rookwooders were hidden behind the hedge ready to pounce upon him. He couldn't possibly have had any suspicion of the kind. But he was a wary old bird. He had his stick in his hand, prodding the snow with it as he came along, and his sharp glinting eyes were well about him, scanning the shadows of trees and hedges as he came. Obviously the old gentleman had never forgotten the lesson of caution impressed upon him by his ancient adventure with dacoits in the Indian jungle.

It did not look as if it would be easy to take him by surprise. But the Rookwooders were for it now; it was neck or nothing.

"Ready?" whispered Jimmy Silver.

"Ye-e-es!" muttered Newcome.

"Oh dear!" murmured Raby.

"Follow your leader!" said Jimmy desperately. "We've got to go through with it now!"

"Oh, all right!"

Uncle Peter was almost abreast of the gap in the hedge. Jimmy Silver, taking his courage in both hands, so to speak, leaped desperately through the gap and rushed at him.

Raby and Newcome scrambled after him. Unfortunately Raby caught his foot in a trailing root of the hedge, and went headlong into the snow. Newcome, following him, sprawled headlong over him.

Jimmy Silver reached Uncle Peter alone.

Doubtless the rush of three sturdy juniors, all at once, would have bowled Uncle Peter over. Jimmy's rush didn't.

"What—stop—who—highway robbery, by gad!" spluttered Uncle Peter as the black-faced, muffled figure rushed on him.

Uncle Peter was cross-tempered, surly, and had the manners of a bear—a bear whose education has been neglected. But he had plenty of courage; he was not in the least dismayed. He swung up his big stick and made a terrific swipe at the black-faced assailant.

Had that swipe landed on Jimmy Silver's head he would have seen more stars than ever seen by an astronomer, and of larger size than dreamed of in the wildest astronomical visions.

Fortunately he dodged it. But the stick swiped again, and Jimmy Silver rushed in under it and closed with Uncle Peter. That was the only way to escape the swipe unless he took to his heels.

"Help! Robbery! Murder! Help!" roared Uncle Peter.

He roared for help, but, in point of fact, he did not need much help. Jimmy Silver was grasping him, but his arms would not go round Uncle Peter's portly figure wrapped in a huge fur-lined overcoat. He held on to Uncle Peter a good deal like an Alpine climber holding on to the Matterhorn.

"Back up, you chaps!" gasped Jimmy.

It was unprofessional language for a footpad. But Jimmy was seriously in need of help—much more in need of it than Uncle Peter, who was roaring for it with a voice that showed that age had not withered his vocal powers.

Newcome and Raby scrambled up breathlessly.

They rushed into the fray.

Jimmy Silver had seized Uncle Peter, but he had caught a Tartar in that hefty old gentleman. Uncle Peter had seized Jimmy by the back of his collar with his left hand, and held him as in a vice. With his right hand he brandished the big stick. It swept round in a circle, and Raby and Newcome jumped back in hot haste, just in time to escape its sweep.

"Come on, you scoundrels!" roared Uncle Peter. "Help! Help! Come on! Robbery with violence, by Jove! Help!"

"Ow!" gasped Jimmy, almost suffocated, as Uncle Peter's grip held his head almost buried in the huge overcoat. "Wow! Help!"

There was a rush of footsteps. Down the snowy lane came Arthur Edward Lovell at top speed, rushing to the rescue.

It was Jimmy Silver who needed rescuing. But Arthur Edward, of course, was not there for that purpose. He attacked the footpads.

"Yaroooh!" roared Raby, as Lovell's fist took him under the car.

"Whoop!" yelled Newcome, sprawling in the snow under Lovell's left.

It was realistic; there was no doubt about that.

It was too realistic for the Rookwood footpads. Newcome and Raby scrambled up, breathing vengeance, and fairly hurled themselves at Lovell.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Lovell, as he went spinning in his turn and crashed down into the snow.

"Arthur! My nephew!" exclaimed Mr. Wilmington. "Great gad! Stick to the villains, my boy! I can help you!"

He plunged forward, dragging Jimmy Silver after him by the collar, the hapless Jimmy struggling in vain to escape from a grip that was as hard as that of an iron vice.

He flourished the stick in his right hand, and Newcome and Raby just dodged it. Lovell sat up in the snow.

He shook a furious fist at the footpads. It was time for them to run—high time! They had forgotten their role for the moment under the exciting influence of Lovell's overdone realism.

However, they remembered it now, and bolted through the gap in the hedge into the snowy field. They supposed that Jimmy Silver would follow, and Lovell supposed so. But Jimmy Silver, gladly as he would have followed, was not in a position to do so. The grip on his collar held him fast.

Mr. Wilmington brandished his stick after the fleeing footpads.

"Come back, you scoundrels!" he roared.

They vanished.

"Robbery with violence, by gad!" gasped Mr. Wilmington. "Thank you for coming to my help, nephew!"

"I—I heard you!" gasped Lovell.

"I've got one of the rascals!"

"Eh?"

Lovell staggered up.

"I've got one of the scoundrels! Help me to get him to the house, and your father will telephone for the police. He shall be given into custody

and charged," said Mr. Wilmington, with great satisfaction. "He will get three years for this! By gad, I'm almost glad that it happened, as I've got one of the scoundrels, and he can be made an example of!"

Lovell simply gasped. He did not share his uncle's satisfaction at having captured one of the scoundrels; and no words, in any language, could have done justice to the feelings of the unhappy scoundrel whom Uncle Peter had captured.

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THE FOURTH CHAPTER.
Not a Success!

JIMMY SILVER could have kicked himself. Knowing his old pal Lovell as he did he was well aware, from experience, that any wheeze propounded and planned by Arthur Edward was practically bound to end in disaster.

But, in spite of experience, he had let himself in for this!

"Let us have a look at the scoundrel!" said Mr. Wilmington; and he held Jimmy at arm's length, as if he had been an infant, heedless of his wild wriggles, and turned his face to the moonlight. "The scoundrel is disguised—blackened his face, by gad! A young fellow for this kind of work, I fancy—hardly more than a boy. Young reprobate!"

Lovell tried to collect his senses.

"Shall—shall I hold him, uncle?" he gasped.

Jimmy Silver had a gleam of hope.

But Mr. Wilmington shook his head.

"No, you could not hold him, Arthur. He is a very muscular young scoundrel; he would get away from you. I have him safe enough."

"Oh, my hat!"

"I wish we could have caught the other rascals," said Mr. Wilmington. "But the police will soon be on their track. You acted very bravely in coming to my help as you did, Arthur."

"Oh!" gasped Lovell.

"I think much more of you now, Arthur—very much more! I shall try to understand you better. It was plucky, by Jove! And very fortunate, too, as you are really responsible for the capture of this miscreant. We shall be better friends after this, my boy."

Lovell suppressed a groan.

It was the object of his tremendous stunt to become better friends with his formidable uncle. But he could not suppose that that desirable result would accrue when Uncle Peter recognised his prisoner.

While he was speaking Uncle Peter was marching at a great rate towards Lovell Lodge.

Jimmy Silver, wriggling hopelessly, was marched on in his iron grip. When he did not walk he was ruthlessly dragged; he had to go. Lovell followed in a dazed frame of mind.

A wild idea came into his head of charging his uncle from behind, and thus giving the prisoner a chance of escaping. But he realised that that desperate expedient would make matters worse rather than better.

Something had to be done; he knew that. But what was to be done was a hidden mystery. Long before Lovell's dazed brain could even begin to solve that mystery the lights of Lovell Lodge gleamed through the winter darkness.

Mr. Wilmington hurled open the gate and marched his prisoner up the gravel drive to the house.

Lovell tottered after him.

He dared not think of what was going to happen now. It was only clear that his tremendous stunt was not going to be a success.

Mr. Wilmington rang a terrific peal on the bell, and then banged on the knocker with his free hand. His other hand never relaxed for an instant its grip on the prisoner he had captured.

The door opened.

The parlourmaid who opened it stared, and gave a little shriek at the sight of the black-faced prisoner wriggling spasmodically in Mr. Wilmington's muscular grip.

Uncle Peter strode in, dragging his prisoner with him.

"Call Mr. Lovell!" he rapped out.

"Upon my word! What—what is this?" Mr. Lovell came out into the hall in amazement. "What—who——"

"Goodness gracious! What has happened?" exclaimed Mrs. Lovell.

"I have been attacked by footpads!" thundered Uncle Peter.

"Peter!"

"My dear fellow!"

"Arthur came to my help—most gallantly to my help," said Mr. Wilmington. "He showed great courage, and by his intervention enabled me to capture one of the gang—a desperate young rascal! Look at him!"

Mrs. Lovell gave her son a look instead of looking at the prisoner. Arthur Edward ought to have appeared extremely bucked. Praise from Uncle Peter was praise indeed. Instead of which he seemed to be sunk into the very depths of dejection.

"Look at this scoundrel!" continued Mr. Wilmington, holding Jimmy Silver at arm's length in the lighted hall. "A mere boy, from his build, but a desperate young villain. There were two others, but they got away. He is disguised with a blackened face—a regular footpad dodge. The dacoits use the same trick in India. But we will see what he is like before he is handed over to the police, Lovell."

Jimmy Silver gasped.

"I will telephone for the police," said Mr. Lovell, staring blankly at the wretched prisoner.

"Let us see what the young scoundrel is like first, so that we may identify him on another occasion," said Mr. Wilmington. "It appears to be soot that is rubbed on his face. A sponge and a little hot water——"

"Certainly! Certainly!"

Jimmy Silver shuddered.

He was not recognised yet; but evidently he was going to be recognised. Not that it made much difference, for he would have had to reveal his identity before the police were called in. Matters could not possibly be allowed to proceed as far as that!

He had a faint hope of getting loose from the iron grip of Uncle Peter, of bolting upstairs, and escaping by a window. But Mr. Wilmington took no chances with his prisoner. He did not relax his grasp for a moment; and he was still gripping Jimmy's collar, when a maidservant brought a basin of hot water with a sponge floating in it.

Mr. Wilmington grabbed the sponge and rubbed it unceremoniously over the prisoner's face.

"Grooogh!" gasped Jimmy.

Arthur Edward Lovell leaned on the wall, feeling quite giddy. What was going to happen now?

With a heavy hand, Uncle Peter rubbed the sponge over Jimmy's face, and the soot came off, blackening the water, and leaving Jimmy's unhappy countenance whiter.

"Now look at him," said Mr. Wilmington, to his brother-in-law. "You may know the young scoundrel by sight, Lovell; he may be a native of these parts. Do you know him?"

"Bless my heart and soul!" said Mr. Lovell faintly.

He knew him!

Mr. Wilmington threw the sponge into the basin, and fixed a deadly glare on Jimmy's washed, flushed face. Then he jumped.

"Silver!" he exclaimed.

"Jimmy!" said Mrs. Lovell blankly.

Uncle Peter stared at the Rookwood junior as if he could scarcely believe his eyes, as indeed he scarcely could.

"Silver! James Silver! A friend of your son's, Mabel! By gad! A Rookwood boy taking to highway robbery—a guest in this house attempting to rob another guest by violence! Upon my word! Why, the hardened young rascal is actually grinning! Grinning, by gad! You young miscreant, have you no sense of shame?"

Mr. Lovell gasped.

"I—I hardly think the attack can have been seriously intended, Wilmington," he said. "It is some schoolboy hoax, I should imagine."

"What?"

"You say there were two others—now that I recognise Silver, I can hazard a guess at their identity——"

"What! Three Rookwood boys engaged in highway robbery!" thundered Uncle Peter. "Three guests in this house conspiring to rob another guest! Good heavens!"

"It was a lark!" yelled Jimmy Silver. "Can't you understand that it was only a lark?"

"I don't believe it!" hooted Mr. Wilmington. "Your own friend, Lovell, came to my rescue; he could not have suspected——"

Arthur Edward Lovell staggered forward. The time had come to own up. Lovell realised that.

"I—I—I——" he stuttered.

"Well?" snorted his uncle.

"I—I—I was in it!" gasped Lovell.

"What?"

"It—it—it was a stunt," groaned Lovell. "I—I thought it might make us better friends, Uncle Peter——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" roared Uncle Peter. "I see now that it was a disgraceful—a ruffianly practical joke, and that you were a party to it, Arthur. It confirms the opinion I have hitherto held of you—a silly, impertinent, worthless young rascal!"

"Peter!" pleaded Mrs. Lovell.

"A worthless young rascal!" roared Uncle Peter.

"Wilmington!" exclaimed Mr. Lovell sharply. "It was a foolish practical joke—foolish and thoughtless—quite unjustifiable, but—— Let my son explain. Why did you play this extraordinary trick, Arthur? Such disrespect to your uncle——"

(Continued overleaf.)

Read "The Thriller"— It's a Wow!

"I—I meant it for the best," groaned Lovell. "The mater wanted Uncle Peter to like me better, and—and I thought he would if I rescued him from footpads. That's all, father."

Mr. Lovell stared blankly at his son. Then, as the full egregiousness of Arthur Edward's wonderful stunt dawned upon him, he burst into a roar of laughter. He could not help it; he laughed till the tears ran down his cheeks. Even Mrs. Lovell could not help smiling.

But Uncle Peter did not smile.

He snorted.

"A laughing matter, by gad! A laughing matter—what—what? Great gad! I am attacked and insulted, and made a fool of—and it is a laughing matter! Good gad! Oh, good—very good indeed! Huh!"

"Peter——"

"Wilmington——"

"Very good—oh, very good!" snorted Uncle Peter. "I leave this house to-morrow. I will not stay here to be insulted! Huh!"

"Uncle——" gasped the dismayed Lovell.

"Mr. Wilmington——" exclaimed Jimmy Silver.

Uncle Peter turned on them. He grasped Jimmy again with one hand. Lovell with the other. He brought their two heads together with a resounding concussion.

Crack!

"Ow!"

"Wow!"

Uncle Peter tramped up the stairs and disappeared.

. . . . . .

That was the happy state of affairs when Raby and Newcome—with washed faces and many misgivings—came sneaking in later at a back door. Uncle Peter had not been placated, that was clear; he had not learned to love his nephew Arthur, that was clearer! All the fat was in the fire, that was clearest of all. By the wildest stretch of imagination, Arthur Edward Lovell's wonderful stunt could not be called a success.

THE END.

(With Uncle Peter still at the Lodge, what chances are there of a bright Christmas vacation for the chums of Rookwood? In spite of all this, however, Jimmy Silver & Co. are determined that THEIR holiday, at all events, is not going to be spoiled. See next week's topping story: "BY LUCK AND PLUCK!")

THE BOY WITHOUT A NAME!

(Continued from page 11.)

Minutes that seemed like hours crawled by, and then the old man spoke in faint, gasping tones.

"There is a flask in my coat. Get it."

"Yes, sir," breathed Dick.

He groped in the pockets and found the flask.

"Open it."

Dick unscrewed the stopper.

"Give it me."

Sir Henry Compton sipped from the flask; and then, at a gesture from the old man, Dick drew it away.

He waited, still supporting the heavy head on his knee. The baronet was recovering now.

"Help me to the bench," he said at last.

Dick helped him up silently. The master of Compton Hall was a heavy weight, but the waif was strong and sturdy. Sir Henry was seated on the bench at last.

He sat there, leaning back, breathing hard and deep

Dick hesitated.

"Shall I go for help, sir?"

"No."

"But you need——"

"I know best what I need."

Dick was silent. The old man was recovering; his masterful will was as strong as ever. Sir Henry Compton was almost himself again now.

Dick backed out of the summer-house. But the deep voice of the old baronet followed him.

"Stop!"

Dick turned back.

"Who are you?" asked Sir Henry Compton, peering at him in the gloom from under his grey, wrinkled brows. "You have helped me when I needed it. But who are you, and how did you come here?"

"I am a tramp."

"You are young for tramping the roads," said Sir Henry. "Have you no home?"

"No."

"Your name?"

"Dick."

"What else?" snapped the old man impatiently.

"Nothing else," said the waif quietly. "I've been called Ragged Dick. That's all."

"Have you no parents?"

"No."

"Or relations?"

"No."

"How do you live?"

"Tramping, picking up jobs—all sorts of things."

"Begging and stealing among them I have no doubt."

"No," said Dick quietly.

"And you are homeless, ragged, tattered, doubtless hungry!" The old man seemed to be speaking to himself. "Yet you live—and my grandson, with all that wealth could provide for him, has died. He is dead—and this starving vagrant lives!" He broke into a bitter laugh. "Dead—and the Compton lands must pass to an idle, dissolute waster, a shame and disgrace to his name—and this homeless wretch lives to haunt the roads and starve and steal!"

There was a long silence after the muttered words, and Ragged Dick stood uneasily, longing to go, yet held by the authority of the old man's command. Sir Henry rose at last from the bench. The torch flickered out. A match was struck, and Sir Henry lighted a cigarette.

"May I go now, sir?" muttered Dick.

"No!" The voice was hard and grim. "You have assisted me, and I do not choose to be under an obligation. It shall be for your benefit that you trespassed on my land."

"But——"

"Silence! Come with me!"

There was command in the old autocrat's voice that was not be gainsaid. He strode away, a tall, grim figure in the gloom, and the little waif obediently followed him, little knowing what difference in his life that chance meeting was destined to make.

THE END.

(In what way will Sir Harry Compton reward the waif of the road for that good turn he did him in the summer-house? That question will be answered in next week's rousing long story of the Greyfriars Chums.

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