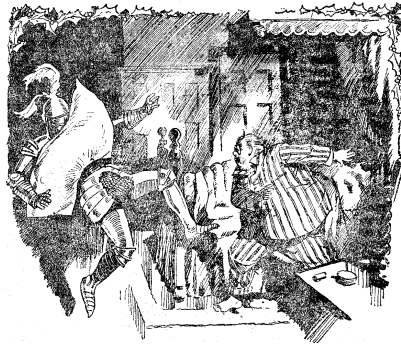


FRANK RICHARDS

Bunter and the Phantom of the Towers,

COVER ILLUSTRATION
BY MARY GERNAT



The fat junior grasped his pillow and made a frantic swipe at the ghost

Slippery!

“COME on, Bunter!” bawled Bob Cherry.

“I say, you fellows—”

“Come on, fatty!”

“I say, seen Mauly?”

“Never mind Mauly. Come on and slide!” called Harry Wharton.

Billy Bunter sniffed.

Sliding did not appeal to Bunter. It was a form of exertion, and exertion was not in his line.

Besides, he had more important matters to think of.

It was only a couple of days now before breaking up for the Christmas holidays, and Bunter’s arrangements for the holidays were not yet made.

That was not Bunter's fault. It was Lord Mauleverer's fault. Bunter had long been willing to fix it up definitely.

There had been a fall of snow, and the old quad of Greyfriars School glimmered white in the December sun shine. In a secluded corner, between the old elms and the school wall, some of the Remove had made a slide.

Harry Wharton & Co. were enjoying themselves, with a dozen other Remove fellows. They spun merrily along the slide, one after another, and tramped back through the snow to start again. The Famous Five shouted to Bunter cheerily to join up. Bunter kept carefully away from the slippery spot.

"I say, you fellows, Mauly came this way. I say, hold on a minute. I want to speak to Mauly rather particularly."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

About six feet from Bunter Lord Mauleverer was standing leaning against an elm, with his hands in the pockets of his overcoat, watching the other fellows sliding. Billy Bunter did not see him for the moment. He blinked anxiously at the churns of the Remove.

"I say, you fellows, there's nothing to cackle at," he said peevishly. "I want to see old Mauly very specially. I hear that he's leaving a day early, and we haven't fixed up about Christmas yet."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lord Mauleverer, grinning, detached himself from the old elm and backed round it. Evidently he was not so anxious to fix up about Christmas as William George Bunter was.

For days and days his lordship had been dodging Bunter.

He was a kind-hearted soul, and hated saying "No" to anybody—even to Bunter.

Besides, Billy Bunter was not the fellow to take "No" for an answer.

"I say, you fellows—"

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

It struck them as comic to see Mauly escaping, just ahead of Bunter. A few moments more and Mauly would have been gone.

Then Bunter blinked round.

"Oh, there you are, Mauly, old chap!" he exclaimed. "I say, where are you going? I say, I'll walk back to the House with you, old fellow. I've been looking for you, you know."

"Oh, dear!" groaned his lordship.

"Caught!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

"The catchfulness is terrific!" chortled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows, I wish you wouldn't butt in when I'm talking to a pal. I say, Mauly——"

"Follow on, Mauly!" shouted Bob Cherry, and he went whizzing along the slide.

Wharton and Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Singh, whizzed after him.

"I say, Mauly!" A fat hand caught Lord Mauleverer's arm as he was about to follow.

"I say, hold on!"

"I'm goin' to slide."

"Look here, you don't want to slide Mauly. You jolly well know you don't. You weren't sliding when I came up. Now I'm here——"

"That's why!" exclaimed Mauly.

"Oh, really, old chap——"

"Let go, old fat bean! I'm goin' to slide."

“Hold on, old fellow! I say, I heard you’re leaving a day before the school breaks up—”

“Yaas.”

“The car’s coming for you from Mauleverer Towers—”

“Yaas.”

“You never mentioned it to me, Mauly,” said Billy Bunter reproachfully. “You might have left me behind. You wouldn’t like that, I suppose?”

“Yaas.”

“Oh, really, Mauly! Here, I say. Hold on! I haven’t finished yet! I say, Mauly!” roared Bunter.

But if Billy Bunter had not finished Lord Mauleverer had. He jerked his arm away, jumped to the slide, and started. No doubt he hoped to escape at the other end.

But Billy Bunter was not to be beaten so easily as that. He did not like sliding. But circumstances alter cases. As Mauly whizzed out on the slide, Billy Bunter made up his fat mind on the spot and whizzed after him.

Bunter was as useful on a slide as anywhere else. He got going at quite a good rate. He whizzed close behind Mauleverer. Then one of his feet, for reasons unknown to Bunter, left the slide, and he proceeded, stork-like, on one leg for a little distance, spluttering.

Then there was a bump as he sat on the slide.

“Yaroooooh!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

By that time, however, Bunter had gathered speed, and he shot onwards, sitting down. He finished on his back, with his fat little legs sawing the air, amid yells of laughter.

“Ow! Oooogh! Yooooop!” roared Bunter. “Oh, crikey! Ow! Stop me! Hold me! Save me! Rescue! Yaroooooh!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Crash!

It was quite an exciting finish.

Billy Bunter crashed into Lord Mauleverer, sent him spinning in the snow, scrambled up, slipped, and rolled over him.

“Oooooo!” came in an agonised gasp from his lordship as Billy Bunter’s extensive weight landed on him.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Ow! Groooogh! Ooooh!” Billy Bunter sat up, on Lord Mauleverer’s waistcoat, and gasped for breath and gouged snow from his crimson, fat face. “Ow! Ooogh! I say, you fellows— Ooooch! Where’s Mauly? Ow!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” yelled the juniors.

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I say I’ve had a bump! Ow! Wow! I say, where’s Mauly?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oooogh! Gerroff!” gasped Lord Mauleverer. “Ooooooh!” He struggled spasmodically under Bunter’s avoirdupois.

Bunter, having cleared his spectacles of snow, blinked down at him, apparently surprised.

“Oh, there you are, old chap! Did you get in the way? I say, wait a minute till I get my breath!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Lord Mauleverer did not wait a minute, or even a second. He made a terrific effort and rolled the fat Owl off.

“Oh, crikey! I say— Groooooogh!”

Lord Mauleverer scrambled up breathlessly. For once his placid lordship seemed excited. He grasped Billy Bunter by the back of the collar and proceeded to rub his face in the Snow.

“There, you silly ass!” gasped Mauleverer. “There, you fat chump! There you benighted walrus!”

“Oooooooooooch!”

“There, you blithering bandersnatch—”

“Gr-r-r-rg! Gug-gug-gug!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Urrrrrrgg!”

“Beasts! Give a fellow a hand up!” yelled Bunter.

“Wharton, you beast, I—”

Harry Wharton, laughing, kindly gave the Owl of the Remove a hand up. Bunter staggered to his feet, puffing and blowing.

“Ow! I say, old chap—grooogh! —I’m going to turn down that rotter, Mauly, now. Oooooogh! I’ll come home with you instead, old bean. I say, Wharton, don’t walk away while a fellow’s talking to you——”

But Wharton was gone, leaving Billy Bunter to waste his sweetness on the desert air.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“I wish you wouldn’t cackle when a chap’s speaking, Toddy. I hear that Mauly has asked Wharton and his lot for Christmas. As they’re my pals we shall make a jolly party—what? I thought of putting in a word for you, Toddy——”

“Fathead!”

“Only, it would hardly do,” said Bunter, shaking his head thoughtfully. “We’re friends here, of course, but you’re hardly the chap I should care to take to a place like Mauleverer Towers, Toddy. You don’t mind my mentioning it? I say, Toddy, wha-a-at are you going to do with that dic.?”

“Guess!” said Toddy.

Bunter did not need to guess, as the dictionary landed the next moment on his podgy chest.

There was a yell in Study No. 7.

“Yow-ow-ow! Beast! Wow!”

“Now shut up,” said Toddy, “and you’d better do your prep. You’ll be here tomorrow, old fat bean. Mauly’s asked me, as a favour, to kick you across the quad if you show up anywhere near his car tomorrow morning——”

“Wha-a-at?”

“I’ve promised to do it. I’m a man of my word. Now shut up!”

“Why, you awful beast——”

“Dry up!”

Billy Bunter dried up. He gave Toddy a glare that almost cracked his spectacles and rolled to the door.

“Prep, you ass!” said Peter Todd. “You’ll have Wingate on your track if you wander about in prep.”

“Blow Wingate!”

Billy Bunter rolled out of the study.

He blinked up and down the Remove passage. It was a prefect’s duty to keep an eye on the Lower Fourth during prep. But there was no prefect in sight at the moment.

The Owl of the Remove rolled along to Lord Mauleverer’s study.

The door of that study was half-open and Bunter heard the voices of the inmates as he

approached—Lord Mauleverer and his relative, Sir Jimmy Vivian.

“I wish you were coming home with me, Jimmy! But you’ll have a good time up in Scotland, with Ogilvy.”

“Yes, rather, Mauly! What time will the car be here?”

“Soon after brekker in the morning.”

“Done your packing?”

“Yaas; the trunk’s in the lobby.”

“Mind Bunter doesn’t get in the car with you, Mauly!” chuckled Sir Jimmy Vivian.

Lord Mauleverer chuckled, too.

“That’s all right. I’ve asked Toddy to kick him if he comes around.”

“I’ll kick him, too,” said Vivian.

“Beasts!” murmured Bunter.

He paused for a moment, to shake a fat fist at the study. Then he rolled on to the open doorway and blinked in.

“I say, Mauly, old chap—”

Lord Mauleverer was stretched at ease on his luxurious sofa, He stared round in dismay at the sight of Bunter.

“Oh gad! Is—is that you, Bunter?”

“Yes, old chap!” said Bunter affectionately. “I say, about tomorrow, Mauly—”

Groan!

“Mauly, old fellow—”

Groan!

“Feeling ill, Mauly?” asked Bunter, in surprise.

“Yaas.”

“What’s the matter?”

“You!”

“Oh, really, Mauly—”

“Run away, old fat bean,” said Lord Mauleverer. “What about prep? You’ve got your prep to do, you know. Wingate may spot you out of your study—”

“Never mind Wingate—”

“Quelch may call on you to construe in the mornin’—”

“Never mind Quelch!”

“You don’t want a lickin’, last day of term, Bunter! I say, you buzz off and do your prep.”

“Never mind prep!”

Lord Mauleverer groaned dismally.

“About the hols—” said Bunter.

Groan!

“I say, don’t be an ass, old chap!” said Bunter. “We’ve got to arrange something definite, you know. Smithy’s asked me to go abroad with him; he’s going on the Continent, with his father—”

“Good egg! Close on it, old bean!”

“I hardly care to go with the Vernon-Smiths—hardly my class, you know. Toddy wants me to go home with him and—”

“That’s right—stick to Toddy!”

“But I’ve declined. Not quite my style, you know. Temple of the Fourth was rather keen for me to go with him, but I told him I was sticking to my old pal, Mauly. I thought I’d speak to you, old chap, before mentioning it to Quelch. I shall have to ask Quelch for leave to go a day early, you know. Now—Ow!”

Bunter broke off suddenly as there was a grip on his fat shoulder from behind. He

blinked round at Wingate of the Sixth.

“What are you doing out of your study?” asked the prefect.

“Ow! Leggo! It’s all right, Wingate. I haven’t any prep tonight, as I’m going a day early. I’m going home with Mauly, in the morning.”

Wingate looked dubiously at the Owl of the Remove. Then he looked at Lord Mauleverer.

“Is Bunter going with you tomorrow, Mauleverer?”

“Oh gad! I hope not!”

“You young ass!” exclaimed Wingate. “I suppose you know whether Bunter is going home with you for the holidays or not.”

“Well, I say he isn’t, but Bunter says he is,” answered Mauleverer plaintively. “I’ve got an awful feeling that he may be right.”

“Oh, really Mauly—”

“I’ve asked Toddy to kick him if he comes near the car in the morning!”

“Look here, Mauly, you beast—” Wingate laughed.

“Come back to your study, Bunter.”

“I—I say, Wingate—I say—yaroo!” roared Bunter, as a finger and thumb closed like a vice on a fat ear. “I say, leggo! Yow-ow-ow-owoop!”

“This way!” said Wingate genially.

“Yow-ow-ow!”

Bunter was led back to Study No. 7. Wingate twirled him into that study.

“Now, if I catch you out of your study again—” he said.

Leaving the rest to Bunter’s imagination, the prefect drew the door shut and departed.

“Beast!” gasped Bunter.

He rolled across to the armchair, and sat down. Toddy and Tom Dutton worked at prep; but the fat Owl did not join them. He sat with a wrinkle of deep thought on his brow—thinking. Billy Bunter had a problem to solve—and he had to solve it before Lord Mauleverer departed in his car the following morning. Bunter had no time for prep.

Mysterious!

“LEND you a hand, Mauly?”

“Oh, dear!”

Lord Mauleverer was alone in the lobby, after prep. He was closing down the lid of a large trunk—a very large trunk. Lord Mauleverer’s trunk was an outsize in trunks, but extensive as it was it did not seem to hold his lordship’s many possessions comfortably. Mauly was exerting himself to fasten the lid when Bunter blinked in.

An offer of help from any other fellow would have been grateful and comforting. But Mauly did not want to see Bunter—very much indeed he did not want to see him.

“I’ll sit on it, old chap!” said Bunter.

“Think the trunk will stand it?” asked Lord Mauleverer, rather anxiously.

“Oh, really, Mauly—”

Bunter sat on the trunk.

The trunk stood it—it was a well-built trunk. The lid snapped shut. Bunter’s weight was not to be resisted.

“Got the key, old fellow?” asked Bunter.

“I believe it’s somewhere,” answered Lord Mauleverer. “But it’s all right—it fastens all right. No need to lock it. Thanks, old bean! Ta-ta!”

“Hold on a minute, old chap! I say, Mauly, about Christmas—look here, you rotter, if

you walk away while a fellow's talking to you— Beast!"

Lord Mauleverer faded out of the picture, leaving Bunter sitting on the trunk.

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

There was a faint chuckle from the distance as Lord Mauleverer vanished into space.

"Beast!" murmured Bunter. "After all I've done for him, too! Talk about the thankless tooth of a serpent's child! I've a jolly good mind to turn him down, only—only I won't! I wonder—"

Billy Bunter was thinking again. He rolled off the big trunk, and stood blinking at it through his big spectacles with a sort of calculating blink. A fat grin spread over his podgy visage. Evidently an idea has occurred to the powerful intellect of the Owl of the Remove.

He measured the big trunk with his eye, and then measured it with his fat hands, and gave a nod of satisfaction.

"Big enough—plenty! And they wouldn't notice the weight getting it on the car. It's not as if I was a heavy chap," murmured Bunter. "Bit of a surprise for old Mauly if I arrive with him after all! He, he, he!"

"Halo, hallo, hallo!" Bob Cherry came into the lobby in time to hear that fat cachinnation. "Enjoying life, old fat bean? What's the jolly old joke?"

"Eh! Nothing!" said Bunter hastily. "I—I wasn't thinking of going home with Mauly without his knowing anything about it, Cherry."

"Eh!" ejaculated Bob. "How the thump could you manage that, Bunter?"

"I—I couldn't, of course. I wasn't thinking of anything of the kind. Still, it would be a pleasant surprise for him, wouldn't it, if I turned up when he got home?"

"It would be a surprise," chuckled Bob. "I don't know about the pleasant."

"Oh, really, Cherry! I say, as you fellows are going to join Mauly for Christmas you'd be glad to find me there, wouldn't you?"

"What on earth put that idea into your head?" asked Bob in astonishment, "How could anybody possibly be glad to find you anywhere?"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter rolled away, disdaining any further remark. He was grinning when he rolled into Study No. 7 in the Remove again. Peter Todd was there, sorting out some of his possessions to pack.

"I say, Toddy, can you lend me a gimlet?" asked Bunter.

"A—a—a what?" ejaculated Toddy.

"Gimlet, old chap."

"What the thump do you want a gimlet for?"

"Well, a fellow would have to breathe, you know," said Bunter.

"Breathe!" repeated Toddy blankly.

"Yes; a chap doesn't want to be suffocated."

"Suffocated!" gasped Toddy. "Are you off your silly rocker?"

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"You want to borrow a gimlet because you don't want to be suffocated." said Peter Todd. "What do you mean, you fat chump, if you mean anything?"

"Oh, nothing, old chap," answered Bunter. "I—I don't want a gimlet. Besides, I can get one out of Bob Cherry's toolchest, as he's downstairs. Not that I want a gimlet, you know—nothing of the sort."

And Bunter rolled out of the study before the astonished Peter could ask any more questions. Peter stared after him in amazement. He really wondered whether the Owl of the Remove was taking leave of his senses—such as they were.

Anybody who had given him a thought would hardly have guessed how he was

occupied. Certainly it never occurred to Lord Mauleverer that the fat Owl, with a gimlet from Bob Cherry's toolbox, was boring a series of holes in the sides and ends of the big trunk in the lobby. His lordship was aware that Billy Bunter was likely to leave no stone unturned to land himself at Mauleverer Towers for Christmas. But Mauly certainly did not dream of the amazing scheme that had been worked out in Bunter's brilliant intellect.

It was nearly bed-time when the Owl of the Remove rolled into the Rag. He looked tired.

Lord Mauleverer, who was reclining gracefully in an armchair by the fire, gave him a rather apprehensive glance. Bunter rolled over to him.

"I say, Mauly—"

"Go away, Bunter!" said Lord Mauleverer plaintively. "Oh, really, old chap! I say, I'm sorry I shan't be able to come home with you tomorrow, after all!" said Bunter, blinking at him.

"Oh, good!"

"The fact is, they want me at home," said Bunter.

"Do they really?" ejaculated Mauleverer.

"We're doing things rather in style at Bunter Court this Christmas," explained the fat Owl. "There'll be a lot of company—all my titled relations, and some of the princes will be coming—"

"Oh, gad!"

"So, you see, I could hardly stay away," said Bunter. "Sorry, and all that, but there it is."

Lord Mauleverer gazed at him.

"I'll see you off if I can when you start in the morning," added Bunter. "But don't be surprised if you don't see me—he, he, he! if I'm not on the spot don't wait to see me before you go."

"I won't!" agreed Lord Mauleverer.

"And mind you don't forget to have your trunk put on the car!" said Bunter earnestly.

"Eh? I shouldn't be likely to forget my trunk."

"Well, you're rather a forgetful ass, you know! Just like you to go off without it," said Bunter. "Look here! You'd better ask one of the fellows to remind you about that trunk."

"You're awfully good to bother about my luggage, Bunter," said his astonished lordship. "You can remind me in the mornin', if you like."

"You ass! How could I remind you, when—"

"When what?"

"Oh, nothing!" said Bunter hastily. "The fact is, I'm going out after brekker. You'd better ask Wharton, or somebody."

"It's all right," yawned Lord Mauleverer.

"That's all very well. But you're a forgetful ass, as I said. Suppose you left the trunk behind?"

"They'd send it on by railway."

Bunter jumped.

"Oh, my hat! You silly ass! Why, that would take days—"

"Look here! I'll speak to Wharton for you, Mauly, if you're too lazy."

"Don't trouble, old fat man!"

"No trouble at all, old fellow."

Billy Bunter rolled away to the Famous Five, who were standing in a cheerful group by the fire. Lord Mauleverer gazed after him in astonishment. Billy Bunter's deep

concern for his luggage was really inexplicable.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

"I say, Mauly, wants you to remind him about his trunk in the morning, in case he forgets it," said Bunter. "It's awfully important."

"We'll remind him," said Wharton. "Gosling won't let him forget it, either. Mauly shells out tips in currency notes."

"I say, you keep an eye on them when they're shifting that trunk, won't you?" said Bunter anxiously. "Don't let them drop it, or anything."

The Famous Five all regarded Bunter.

"What do you mean, you fat ass?" asked Johnny Bull. "What do you care whether they drop Mauly's trunk or not?"

"Well, I might get hurt——"

"I mean, it might damage Mauly's things," said Bunter hastily. "You know what a careless ass Gosling is with luggage. Trotter, too! If they bumped that trunk down the steps, f'rinstance, it—"

"Anything in it to damage, if they do?" asked Frank Nugent.

"Yes, rather! I—I mean, of—of course not! Look here, you fellows! As you're going to stay with Mauly at Christmas, I think you might keep an eye on his luggage for him!" said Bunter warmly.

"If you're anxious about Mauly's trunk, you can keep an eye on it yourself, I suppose?" said Bob.

"He, he, he!"

"What are you cackling at, you fat ass?"

"Oh, nothing!"

Bunter rolled away, leaving the Famous Five staring.

"Ghost story!" said Bob Cherry.

"Hear, hear! "Go it, Mauly!"

Lord Mauleverer yawned.

Lights were out in the Remove dormitory, but nobody had gone to sleep yet. Even Billy Bunter's snore was not heard.

Generally, the fat Owl began his nasal solo a few moments after his bullet head touched the pillow. On this especial night, however, Billy Bunter was remaining awake.

"Go it, Mauly!" said Harry Wharton. "Tell us the story of the jolly old ghost of Mauleverer Towers."

"Oh, yaas!" said Mauly. "I don't think I remember it all, but I'll tell you all I remember, if you like."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Shut up, Bunter!"

"Look here! Don't you fellows keep Mauly awake!" exclaimed Bunter. "Mauly's got a journey tomorrow—"

"That's all right, old fat bean," said Mauleverer.

"Shut up, Bunter!" said a dozen voices.

"Beast!"

"Go it, Mauly!"

"Yaas," said Lord Mauleverer sleepily. "You know, Mauleverer Towers is a jolly old place—parts of it date from the reign of King Thingummy—"

"We haven't had that king in history class," remarked Skinner.

“I mean, King What’s-his-name——”

“That makes it quite clear! Go on.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Well, in the reign of somebody—I forget whom— there was an Earl of Mauleverer, who seems to have been rather a card. His name was—yaw-aw-aw——”

“Is that a family name?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Sorry, dear men, I was only yawning. His name was —was somethin’, I forget what. But he was called the Red Earl, because—because—because he was, you know!”

“Couldn’t be a better reason,” said Vernon-Smith. “I say, this is jolly interestin’, Mauly. You tell a story well.”

“Yaas, I’ve told this story a lot of times, and I suppose practice makes perfect, and all that,” said Lord Mauleverer placidly. “Well, this Red Earl got into some trouble with King what-do-you-call-him——”

“Not King Thingummy—” asked Skinner.

“Shut up, Skinner!”

“I say, you fellows, if Quelch comes round and hears all this jaw going on, he’ll——”

“Shut up, Bunter!”

“I think you fellows ought to go to sleep. I’ve got a journey before me tomorrow—I mean, Mauly’s got a journey before him——”

“What does that fat idiot want us to go to sleep for?” asked Squiff. “Has he got a cake he wants to keep all to himself?”

“Oh, really, Squiff——”

“If you’ve got a cake, Bunter, you jolly well whack it out!” roared Bolsover major.

“I haven’t! I don’t want you fellows to go to sleep, you know! Nothing of the kind. I’m not thinking of going down!”

“What the thump are you going down for, after lights out?” exclaimed Harry Wharton.

“Oh, really, Wharton! I’m not going down—I said so!”

“Somebody left some tuck in his study?” asked Skinner.

“Oh, really, Skinner——”

“Shut up, Bunter! Go on, Mauly, old bean!” There was no reply from Lord Mauleverer, only a sound of gentle breathing from his bed. His lordship had fallen asleep.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! Mauly!” roared Bob Cherry.

“Buzz a pillow at him.”

“Ow! Oh! I’m awake, you men!” gasped Lord Mauleverer. “I—I think I nodded for a moment.”

“Get on with the ghost story, ass!”

“Yaas. Where was I?”

“In the reign of King What-do-you-call-him,” answered Skinner.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, yaas! Well, the Red Earl was wanted for high treason or something, and the king sent his—his thingummies—I mean his—his—what the thump did they call those blokes? It begins with a p——”

“Policemen?” asked Skinner.

“Nunno! It begins with a p—pursuivants,” said Mauleverer, with a mental effort.

“That’s it! His Royal nibs sent his pursuivants to seize the Red Earl, and they arrived on Christmas Day, when the earl was holding high revel at the Towers. There was snow and ice and frost, and so on—all the seasonable things, you know——”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“The what-do-you-call-’ems came tramping through the snow and ice and frost and things, and arrived at the mansion,” went on Lord Mauleverer, “but the earl’s chief thingummy rushed into the hall in the nick of time and warned him of his danger. He drew his sword, and passed it through the body of the king’s chief pursuivant—”

“Well passed!” said the Bounder.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Then he rushed up the winding stair into the turret, and was never seen again,” went on Lord Mauleverer. “The place is supposed to be full of secret passages and things. and it was supposed that the Red Earl had a secret passage, or something, all ready. Anyhow, he disappeared, and they hunted for him and never found him. What became of him was never known, but when the next Christmas came round—I say, though, I don’t want to make you fellows’ flesh creep—”

“The creepfulness is not terrific, my esteemed Mauly!”

“Well, when the next Christmas came round, the new earl was feasting and holding revels, and so on, and there was snow and ice and frost and things—”

“Same bag of tricks as before?” asked Skinner.

“Yaas! Well, in the midst of the feast, a dragging footstep was heard—you fellows feelings scared?”

“Not quite! Get on with it!

“A dragging footstep was heard, and a white figure advanced up the hall, and—and it seems that it was the ghost of the jolly old Red Earl, you know!” yawned Mauleverer.

“It seems that he must have perished, or something, in his secret passage, or somethin’ of the sort, and set out to haunt the place on the proper anniversary. Creepy, ain’t it?”

“Frightfully!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Absolutely uncanny, the way you tell it!” said Skinner. “I can feel my marrow congealing!”

“And ever since the reign of King What’s-his-name,” resumed Mauleverer, “the ghost of the Red Earl sort of creeps around with dragging footsteps—clad in white, you know, as I believe ghosts generally are. He doesn’t seem to have been seen in recent times—”

“Go hon!”

“But whenever that dragging footstep is heard, and the touch of his icy cold hand is felt, it means that the johnny concerned is going to peg out. In the dead of night, you know, when the deadly stillness is only broken by the roar of the wintry storms—”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“When not a sound is heard, but the roar of the wind and the crash of falling branches, and so on,” yawned Lord Mauleverer. “Then the jolly old ghost creeps forth, and—and says his piece, as it were, you know. And the sound of a creeping footstep in the silence of the night— Good gad! What’s that?” ejaculated Lord Mauleverer, breaking off suddenly.

“That” was the sound of a creeping footstep in the Remove dormitory! Several of the juniors sat up in bed.

“What the thump—”

“Who the dickens—”

“Who’s out of bed?”

“I say, you fellows, I’m not out of bed! I’m—I’m fast asleep—”

“Bunter! You fat idiot—”

"I'm not out of bed, you fellows! I'm not going down!" exclaimed Bunter hastily.
"I—I'm asleep, you know! I mean, I'm just going to sleep! I wasn't going down to the lobby—"

"What the thump were you going down to the lobby for?" yelled Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry! I wasn't! I've told you I wasn't!" There was a creak as Bunter plunged into bed again. "I say, you fellows, I wish you'd go to sleep. You'll be awfully sleepy in the morning!"

"You fat chump! Go on, Mauly!"

"Eh! That's the lot!" said Lord Mauleverer. "I hope I haven't made your flesh creep, and given you nightmares and things."

There was a chuckle along the row of beds. The ghost story, as related by Lord Mauleverer, had not made anybody's flesh creep, apparently. Neither was it likely to cause nightmares.

"I say, you fellows, now Mauly's done jawing, I wish you'd go to sleep!" said Billy Bunter.

It was quite a late hour when Bunter sat up in bed and blinked round him in the darkness.

"I say, you fellows!" he breathed. "You fellows asleep?"

There was no reply.

The Owl of the Remove chuckled softly, and crept out of bed. He dressed in the dark, and crept to the door. Cautiously he crept into the passage, and cautiously he drew the door shut after him. Then, on tiptoe, he stole away.

If the Remove fellows dreamed, they certainly did not dream of Billy Bunter's mysterious occupation at that late hour.

Bunter was bending over Lord Mauleverer's big trunk in the lobby downstairs. The lid was open, and Bunter was removing all the articles his lordship had exerted himself to pack. It was rather a laborious task, for the trunk was large, and filled to the brim. But Billy Bunter worked industriously, and the trunk was emptied at last. There were lockers in the lobby, and some of them were roomy. The fat junior proceeded to pack Lord Mauleverer's property out of sight in the lockers, wherever he could find room for it. Shirts and collars and socks, and all sorts of things were mingled and mixed and crumpled and rumped, but that could not be helped, and Bunter did not worry about it.

The last article disappeared from sight, and Bunter, grinning, closed the lid of the big trunk. He chuckled.

"He, he, he! That's all ready now! He, he, he!"

The fat junior crept away.

Bunter crept back to bed. In the dark he butted into somebody else's bed, and there was a startled ejaculation.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's that?"

"Nothing, old chap!" gasped Bunter. "It's not me!"

Bob Cherry sat up and blinked in the darkness.

"Bunter! You howling ass! What the thump are you up to?"

"N-n-nothing! I—I haven't been down—"

"What have you been down for?"

"Nothing, old fellow! I—I heard a noise, and thought it might be a burglar! I mean, I haven't been down at all!"

"You silly owl!"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter found his bed at last, rolled into it, and settled down. And in less than a

minute afterwards, a gargantuan snore was awakening the echoes of the Remove dormitory.

A Trunk Mystery!

CLANG! Clang! Clang!

Snore!

The rising-bell rang out in the dim December morning. But there was one member of the Remove whom it did not awaken. Bunter snored on.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Snore!

Billy Bunter had missed a good deal of sleep the night before. He was making up for it now.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” roared Bob Cherry. “Wake up, Bunter!”

Snore!

“You’ll be late for prayers!”

Snore!

Bob Cherry kindly jerked the bed-clothes off Bunter’s bed. Then the snore was changed for a wild howl.

“Ow! Beast! Grooogh! It’s c-c-c-cold! Rotter! Wow!”

“Turn out, old fat man!” said Bob cheerily. “Feel cold?”

“Ow! Yes! Beast!”

“Think a spank or two would warm you up?”

“Ow! Keep off, you beast!” roared Bunter.

He rolled out of bed. Undoubtedly it was cold, but Bunter did not want to be warmed up in the way suggested.

After brekker, however, Billy Bunter seemed to recover.

A fat grin irradiated his face as he packed away the foodstuffs, and he was still grinning when he rolled out of Hall.

Lord Mauleverer gave him a rather apprehensive glance; but, to his relief, the fat Owl did not even look at him. Apparently, Bunter had abandoned his intention of going home with Mauly, and Toddy would not be required to kick him when the car came round.

Bunter, in fact, disappeared.

He was seen, soon after breakfast, talking in a corner with his minor, Sammy of the Second, and Sammy was grinning.

After which, nothing was seen of Bunter.

The fact was not remarked upon, for nobody of course, had any desire to see anything of Bunter. Anybody who had been interested—which nobody was—might have noticed that the Bunters, major and minor, rolled into the lobby together. and that a little later Bunter minor rolled out by himself, grinning. But nobody, as a matter of fact, noticed either of the Bunters.

It was not till the big car came for Lord Mauleverer that anybody thought of Billy Bunter.

Quite a crowd of Remove men had gathered to see Mauly off. The magnificent car, and equally magnificent chauffeur, drew quite a great deal of attention. Harry Wharton & Co., who were to join Mauly later for the Christmas holidays, came out of the House with him, to see him into the car.

Peter Todd came on the scene, prepared to carry out his promise to kick Bunter if the fat junior turned up. But Bunter did not turn up.

“Anybody seen Bunter?” asked Toddy.

“Doesn’t seem to be here!” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “He’s turned you down, after all, Mauly.”

Lord Mauleverer grinned.

“Mauly won’t get off without him!” chuckled the Bounder. “Bunter is a sticker!”

“The stickfulness is terrific!”

“Somebody ought to tell him Mauly’s going!” exclaimed Skinner.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“For goodness’ sake, don’t!” exclaimed Lord Mauleverer.

The Removites chuckled. Billy Bunter’s arrangements for the holidays rather appealed to his Form-fellows as a merry jest.

“Rot!” said Skinner. “Let’s tell him! Here, young Bunter, where’s your major?”

Sammy Bunter had rolled out of the House and joined the little crowd.

Sammy chuckled. But he made no answer to Skinner’s question. If he knew where his major was, he was not going to tell.

“Well, good-bye, you men!” said Lord Mauleverer, and he made a step towards the waiting car. Perhaps he was anxious to get off before Billy Bunter appeared in the offing.

“Hold on, Mauly! What about your jolly old trunk?”

“Oh, gad, I forgot! Where’s Gosling?”

“’Ere, my lord!” answered Gosling.

“Mind gettin’ my trunk on the car, Gosling?” said Lord Mauleverer politely. “Better get Trotter to help; it’s rather heavy.”

Trotter was on the spot, ready. He was no more likely than Gosling to be out of sight when Lord Mauleverer took his leave.

The porter and the page went into the lobby. But they did not immediately emerge from the lobby door with the trunk.

A sound of grunting and gasping was heard. Lord Mauleverer looked in at the door. Gosling and Trotter were raising—or, rather, endeavouring to raise—the big trunk between them. But they did not seem to be getting on with it.

“My word! It’s ’eavy!” gasped Gosling.

“’Eavy ain’t the word!” gurgled Trotter.

“Now ’eave it up,” said Gosling.

He heaved up his own end of the trunk. Trotter heaved at his end, and lifted it off the floor. But it landed again.

“By gad! I had no idea it was so heavy as all that!” exclaimed Lord Mauleverer.

“Hold on! I’ll ask the chauffeur to lend you a hand.”

“Which I’ll be glad of it, my lord!” gasped William Gosling. “I’ve ’andled some ’eavy boxes in my time, my lord, but wot I says is this ’ere, this ’ere trunk is a corker, my lord, this ’ere trunk is!”

“’Arf a ton, at least!” gasped Trotter.

“It couldn’t weight more, if there was a bloomin’ hippopotamus in it!” said Gosling, wiping his brow with a horny hand. “Wot I says is this ’ere, ‘ow we’re going to get this blooming trunk on that blooming car I don’t know, and I don’t care ’oo knows it.” There were several steps down from the lobby door. Lord Mauleverer stood on the steps, and signed to the chauffeur, who was standing by the car like a stately graven image.

“Robinson!”

“Yes, my lord!”

“Please give a hand with the trunk!”

“Yes, my lord.”

The chauffeur came in to help. There was a chuckle from the juniors as they gathered round the doorway of the lobby.

Many hands are said to make light work; but there was no light work to be made of that trunk. Gosling was muscular, ancient as he was. Trotter was wiry, the chauffeur was quite a powerful man. But they had to go all out to get the trunk off the floor.

“My word!” gasped Trotter.

“’Old it!” gurgled Gosling. “Oh, lor’! Wot I says is this ’ere—— Ow! I never ’andled a weight like this before.”

“My hat!” ejaculated Skinner. “I say. Mauly, have you packed Bob Cherry’s boots by mistake?”

“You silly ass!” roared Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Lord Mauleverer was gazing at the trunk and its staggering bearers in astonishment. Certainly it had never occurred to his lordship that the trunk could possibly be so heavy as all that, though he had packed it full.

“Good gad! Can you manage it?” he asked. “Can’t make out why it’s so heavy! It’s a giddy mystery!”

“He, he, he!” came from Sammy Bunter, who was blinking on with a fat grin. Sammy seemed entertained about something.

“’Ere, look out!” gasped Trotter.

Bump!

One end of the trunk smote the floor again. Even three pairs of hands did not seem quite able to deal with it.

“We’d better all pile in!” chuckled Bob Cherry.

“Anybody seen a moving job?” chanted Skinner.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Lend a hand, you chaps,” said Harry Wharton.

“I’m dashed if I can understand it!” said Lord Mauleverer blankly. “I know I packed a few things in the trunk.”

“Go it, ye cripples!” exclaimed Johnny Bull.

The Famous Five gathered round the trunk to help. Even then, many hands did not make light work. But the trunk was swung off the floor and carried to the doorway.

“My only hat! It’s really heavy!” gasped Frank Nugent. “What the thump can Mauly have packed to weigh as much as this?”

“The muchfulness is terrific!” panted Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

“All together!” gurgled Johnny Bull.

“Go it!”

“Wot I says is this ’ere——”

“Oh. my hat! Got it!”

The trunk was heaved through the doorway by the combined efforts of Gosling, Trotter, Robinson, and the Famous Five.

The juniors outside crowded back out of the way. The trunk bumped on the top step. Then eight pairs of hands grasped it again, to carry it down the steps.

“Hold on——”

“Look out——”

“She’s going!”

“What-ho, she bumps!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Stand clear!”

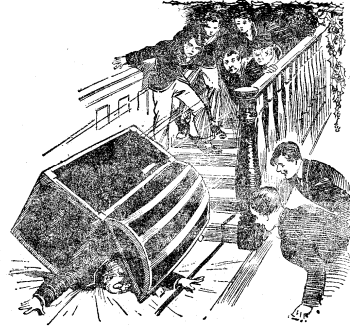
“Oh, crumbs!”

Crash! Bump! Crash! Bump! The heavy trunk had slipped from the grasp of the breathless bearers and rolled down the steps.

It crashed and bumped from step to step. With a final terrific crash it landed on the ground and burst open.

The contents shot out. But it was not an assortment of collars and ties, shoes and trousers, and other such-like things that were strewn on the earth. What was strewn on the earth was a fat figure that rolled and roared.

“Yarooooooogh!”



What was strewn on the earth was a fat figure that rolled and roared

There was a gasp of stupefaction from the onlookers. The terrific weight of the trunk was explained now.

“Bunter!”

“Oh, my hat!”

“Bunter!”

Billy Bunter sat up.

He grabbed at his spectacles, set them straight on his little, fat nose, and blinked round him dizzily.

“Bunter!” shrieked Harry Wharton.

“Good gad!” gasped Lord Mauleverer, staring at the suddenly revealed Owl of the Remove as if he had been a fat ghost.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Bunter!”

“The Bunterfulness is terrific!”

“I say, you fellows—Ow! You’ve broken my back! Wow! My spinal column’s dislocated! Yow-ow! I’m killed! Yooooop!”

“Wot I says is this ’ere!” gasped Gosling, staring at the fat Owl in amazement. “Wot was you doing in that there trunk?”

“Ow! Wow!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” shrieked the Removites.

“Bunter—in the trunk?” gasped Bob Cherry. “Oh, my only summer hat! My only aunt Selina Sempronia!”

“You fat villain!” roared Peter Todd. “So that’s why you didn’t turn up! You—you—you were going in the trunk!”

“Ow! Wow! Ow!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“That’s what he wanted the gimlet for!” gasped Toddy. “Boring holes in the trunk!”
“I—I say, I—I never bored those holes in the trunk! I—I don’t know how they got there.”

“That’s why he went down from the dorm last night!” roared Bob Cherry. “Shifting Mauly’s things out of the trunk so as to make room for his fat carcass!”

“Oh, really, Cherry—”

‘Ha, ha, ha!’

“Oh, gad!” gasped Lord Mauleverer. “Bunter, you benighted chump—”

“Ow! My back’s broken! What did you silly idiots drop the trunk for?” spluttered Bunter. “The spinal column in my left leg’s broken! Ow! My neck’s broken, too, I believe! Wow! You clumsy asses!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Jolly lucky we dropped the trunk!” chortled Johnny Bull. “You were taking Bunter home with you, after all, Mauly!”

“Oh, gad!”

“Bunter, you fat idiot, you—”

“Beast! Ow!”

“Where have you put the things out of that trunk, you fat villain?” roared Lord Mauleverer.

“Ow! Blow the things! Bother the things! Ow! I’m busted all over!” groaned Bunter.

“I say, you fellows, you might give a fellow a hand up. Ow!”

“Here you are, old bean!” said Bob Cherry, and he helped Bunter up with a grip on a fat ear.

“Yarooooooooh!”

Bunter got up quickly.

The Removites were weeping with merriment. Bunter’s wonderful scheme was clear now. He had packed himself up in Lord Mauleverer’s big trunk, to arrive at Mauleverer Towers with his lordship. No doubt his arrival there would have been a surprise to Mauly. A pleasant surprise, Bunter hoped. Hope springs eternal in the human breast!

“Oh, dear!” said Lord Mauleverer. “Now I’ve got to pack the trunk over again! What has that fat villain done with the things? By gad, I’ve a good mind to kick him round the quad! Oh, dear!”

“We’ll all help, old bean!” said Harry Wharton, laughing.

Lord Mauleverer’s property was sorted out of the lockers and packed back into the trunk, after which the trunk, big as it was, was placed on the car without difficulty.

Then his lordship said good-bye to his friends and rolled away in the car, minus Bunter.

But as the chauffeur was tooling the car out of the gates a fat figure detached itself from the gateway, and a fat hand was waved to his lordship in the car.

“Hold on a minute, Mauly!” yelled Billy Bunter.

“Drive on, Robinson!” gasped Lord Mauleverer.

“Hold on! I say, Mauly—”

“Good-bye, Bunter!”

“I say, old chap—”

“Merry Christmas, old fat bean!”

“Hold on, old chap! Stop, you beast! I say, old fellow— Listen to me, you rotter! I say— Beast!” roared Bunter, as the car turned into the Courtfield road and whizzed away.

Billy Bunter blinked after it through his big spectacles, with a dismal blink. Lord

Mauleverer was gone!

The fat junior rolled back into the quadrangle. He blinked morosely at a yelling crowd of juniors. Bunter, at least, could see nothing to laugh at in the failure of his brilliant scheme. He was the only fellow in the Remove who couldn't.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" said Bunter peevishly. "I say, Harry, old chap, you're going home before you go to Mauleverer Towers? Well, look here, I'll come with you—"

"I don't think!" chuckled Wharton.

"Then we go on to the Towers together, see?"

"Not quite!"

"I suppose you want me this Christmas?" said Bunter warmly.

"Something wrong with your supposer, then!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! Mauly will be jolly glad to see me, of course. It's only his fun, you know," explained Bunter. "If I'd got home with him today he would have been overjoyed when he saw me!"

"The overjoyfulness would not have been terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter!" chuckled Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "It would have been a boot on the other leg!"

"Beast! As we shall travel together, Wharton, old chap, tomorrow—"

"If we do there will be a dead porpoise left lying somewhere along the railway line!" answered the captain of the Remove.

"I was going to say I'm sorry I shan't be able to come with you tomorrow, Wharton. I'm sticking to Toddy for Christmas. He hasn't much of a place to ask a fellow to, but I feel bound to give him a turn. I wouldn't be found dead at Wharton Lodge!"

"You'll be found dead, or nearly, if you show up there!"

"Beast!"

Bunter rolled on to the House. The bell was ringing for classes now, and Billy Bunter joined Peter Todd as the Remove went in. He gave Peter a friendly dig in the ribs and grinned amicably as Toddy gasped and looked round.

"I say, Peter, old chap, you can rely on me!" said Bunter.

"I'm sticking to you, old fellow!" said Bunter reassuringly. "After the way that rotter Mauly's treated me, I'm turning him down! There's nothing to cackle at, Peter; and it's rather ill-bred to cackle when a pal's talking to you. Wharton's rather keen on my going home with him; but I've told him it can't be done, old chap, as I'm sticking to you, although you haven't much of a place to ask a fellow to."

"Oh!" gasped Toddy.

"I shan't mind that," said Bunter. "I'm no snob. Peter! Of course, your people are not the sort I'm accustomed to mix with, especially at Christmas. But I've got tact."

"You—you—you've got tact?" gurgled Toddy.

"Yes old chap; trust me to put my inferiors at their ease!" said Bunter. "I know your pater's only a poor solicitor, and your relations will be rather a scrubby lot; but you can rely on me not to tell them what I think of them. As I said, I've got tact; fellows of really good family have, you know. I—I say, Peter, what are you going to do with that?" added Bunter, as Peter Todd stooped and gathered a large handful of snow from the ground.

"I'm going to shove it down a fat idiot's back!" explained Peter.

"I—I—I say yarooooh—stoppit—yoooooop—beast— Oh, crikey! Ow!" yelled Bunter.

"I say, you rotter, I won't come home with you now! I say— Groooooogh!"

Oooooooh!"

Billy Bunter was late for class that morning. It took him some little time to extract the snow from his back. And he had quite given up the idea of going home with Peter Todd. It really looked as if Billy Bunter was booked for home, sweet home!

Homeward Bound!

HARRY WHARTON & Co. were in great spirits the following day. So were most of the Greyfriars fellows. Breaking-up day was rather jolly: in fact, as Bob Cherry declared, it was a jolly old world altogether.

But there was one countenance in the Remove that wore a worried look. That was the fat countenance of William George Bunter.

Everybody else had his arrangements made for Christmas. Most fellows were going home, and glad to go there. Other fellows were going with other fellows. Billy Bunter, apparently, was going home; but, in spite of the unlimited wealth and general magnificence of Bunter Court, he did not seem glad to go there. As the poet has remarked, “ ’Tis distance lends enchantment to the view.” The magnificence of Bunter Court was likely to fade on a close inspection. Attractive as that palatial residence was, it seemed to have no attraction for William George.

He kept a wary eye—and a wary pair of spectacles— on the Famous Five that day. Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull and Frank Nugent were going to their various homes: but Hurree Jamset Ram Singh was going with Wharton— Bhanipur, in far-off India, being too far away for vacations. As Wharton’s people lived in Surrey, and Bunter also honoured that beautiful county with his residence, there was no reason why they should not take the same train, and arrive, if Bunter could manage it, at the same destination. Lord Mauleverer had left him in the lurch, but the fat Owl still had great faith in his sticking powers.

In the crowd that gathered on the platform at Courtfield Station, Billy Bunter’s eyes, and spectacles, were still on the Famous Five. Bob Cherry and Nugent and Johnny Bull departed in their train, seen off by their chums—and Bunter, Wharton and Hurree Singh were going by the next train, and as they waited on the platform Bunter rolled up.

“I say, you fellows——”

“Looking for your minor?” asked Wharton. “I saw him at the other end of the platform.”

“Oh, really, Wharton——”

“The esteemed Sammy will miss your excellent and execrable company, my absurd Bunter,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“I say, you fellows, which train are you taking?” asked Bunter, apparently not deeply concerned about his minor.

“We’re not taking a train,” answered Wharton. “How are you getting home, then?”

“A train’s taking us.”

“You silly ass!” hooted Bunter.

It was no time for frivolous jesting—in Bunter’s opinion, at least.

“Let us walkfully exercise our esteemed legs!” suggested Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“The coldfulness is preposterous.”

“Let’s!” assented Wharton.

“I say, you fellows, don’t walk away while a fellow’s talking to you! Oh, all right, I’ll stroll along if you like.”

“The likefulness is not preposterous.”

“Oh, really, Inky——”

“Hadn’t you better look for your minor?”

“Oh, really, Wharton—”

“Hallo, there’s the train!

A good many fellows were crowding into the train. Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh entered a carriage and the Owl of the Remove promptly rolled in after them. Three seats were available, and Bunter annexed one in the corner.

“Rather jolly to be travelling together, isn’t it, old chaps?” he remarked, as he sat down.

“Oh, frightfully!” said Wharton.

“Have you got a rug, Wharton?”

“No!”

“You might have brought a rug! You jolly well know like one! But that’s you all over—selfish as usual.”

“Sorry, old bean!”

“Beast! I say, Inky, what about a lunch-basket?”

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh looked thoughtful. Billy Bunter eyed him hopefully. In the same train with the chums of the Remove, he had great hopes of arriving, somehow, at the same destination. But his immediate thoughts were fixed on tuck. That important matter was never long absent from Bunter’s fat mind.

“Do you thinkfully opine that there is time to order an esteemed lunch-basket, my ridiculous Bunter?” asked the nabob.

“Oh, lots!” exclaimed Bunter eagerly.

“Don’t be an ass, Inky!” said Wharton. “You’ll lose the train, and we don’t want a lunch-basket, anyhow.”

“You shut up!” exclaimed Bunter indignantly. “You let old Inky do as he likes, Wharton! Inky’s not mean like you! I say, Inky, if you cut off at once there’s lots of time. I’ll keep your place for you.”

Hurree Singh closed one eye—the one that was farthest from Bunter—at his chum. Wharton grinned.

He divined what the nabob was thinking of—not a lunch-basket for Bunter.

“Let us chance it, my esteemed Wharton,” said the nabob. “The absurd Bunter will keep our places for us——”

“Yes, rather!” said Bunter. “I say, you fellows, don’t lose time! I say, I’m hungry you know.”

“I say, you fellows, hurry up!” shouted Bunter from the window; and the two juniors, chuckling, disappeared in the crowd on the platform.

Billy Bunter waited anxiously. He was hungry—he generally was—and the mere thought of a lunch-basket made him hungrier.

“Here’s some places!” Bolsover major of the Remove tramped into the carriage.

“Come on, Skinner!”

“I say, you fellows, those places are taken!” exclaimed Bunter hastily. “Wharton and Inky——”

“They haven’t left anything on the seats!” said Skinner. “They should leave something on the seats if they’ve taken the places.”

“They should jolly well sit in the places if they want them!” grunted Bolsover major.

“I know I’m not getting out again.” And he sat down.

“I say, they’ll turn you out, you know!” expostulated Bunter. “I say, I’m keeping those places for them——”

“I’d like to see anybody turn me out!” said Bolsover major.

“Same here!” grinned Skinner. And he drew the door shut and sat down.

“Well, they’ll jolly well have to stand,” said Bunter. “Serve ‘em right—they needn’t have got out if they’d brought a lunch-basket! But I say, leave that door open, Skinner—they’ll be in a hurry—”

“Keep that door shut!” said Bolsoverer major. “There’s a draught!”

“Oh, really, Bolsover—”

“We don’t want people standing in this carriage, either. There’s room along the train.”

“Look here—”

“Shut up, Bunter!”

“There goes the whistle!” said Skinner, with a grin. “If they’re coming back, they haven’t much time.”

Billy Bunter blinked anxiously from the window.

“The silly asses! They’ll lose the train!” He slid down the window in the carriage door and put his head out and blinked along the platform. “I say, you fellows! Wharton! Inky! Hurry up! The train’s going—”

The train was in motion now, the platform gliding rapidly away. Bunter gave a last blink back. He spotted two laughing faces—and two hands were waved to him from the distance.

“Good-bye, Bunter!”

“Merry Christmas, my absurd Bunter!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Bunter.

He sank back in his seat. His very spectacles gleamed with wrath. He comprehended at last! He was not going to get that lunch-basket! Neither was he going to travel with the chums of the Remove! The train whizzed out of the station, and the last that Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Rain Singh saw of Bunter was a fat fist shaken from the window.

Wharton Lodge glistened white under a mantle of snow. It was a snowy Christmas-tide. Wells, the butler, stood at the open doorway of the Lodge, looking out into the bright, cold, keen December morning. Wells looked plump and comfortable and cheerful.

There were to be no Christmas celebrations at the Lodge, the family being away, and there was an unaccustomed quiet about the old house—unaccustomed at least, in holiday-time. Wells, looking from the doorway, watched a taxi-cab grinding up the drive through powdery snow, and wondered who it contained. And a faint smile crossed Wells’ plump, clean-shaven face when the taxi halted and a fat countenance, adorned by a large pair of spectacles, peered out. He could guess that William George Bunter was unaware that the Lodge was tenanted only by the household staff.

The owner of the fat face and spectacles alighted.

He came up the steps and blinked at Wells. Wells was standing in the middle of the doorway, and he did not move.

Many a time had William George Bunter stayed at the Lodge, and the more he was seen there, the less, somehow, Wells had seemed to like him. Billy Bunter rather prided himself on a way he had of keeping servants in their place. This did not, perhaps, make him popular below stairs. The faint smile on Wells’ face grew rather more pronounced and a trifle sarcastic.

“Er—good-morning, Wells!” said Bunter.

“Good-morning, sir!” said Wells gravely, and still without stirring.

“Colonel Wharton at home?”

“No, sir.”

“Miss Wharton at home?”

“No, sir.”

“I suppose Harry’s here?”

“No, sir.”

“Or Inky—Hurree Singh, you know?”

“No, sir.”

“All gone out?” asked Bunter peevishly.

“Colonel Wharton and Miss Wharton are at Bournemouth, sir,” answered Wells suavely. “They left yesterday, sir.”

“Oh! Away for Christmas?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I suppose that’s why Wharton’s going to Mauleverer’s,” grunted Bunter. “Wharton and Inky gone out?”

“Master Harry and Prince Hurree Singh are not here, sir.”

“They’ll be back to lunch, I suppose?”

“No, sir.”

“When are they coming back, then?”

“I understand that they will be back for a few days at the end of the vacation, sir, before returning to school.”

Bunter jumped.

“Mean to say they’ve gone?” he ejaculated.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, crikey!”

Wells smiled. John, the footman, who had appeared behind him in the hall, gave a little chuckle. Wells glanced at him severely, and John immediately became grave. Billy Bunter blinked at Wells.

“The rotters!” he ejaculated.

“I beg your pardon, sir!” said Wells.

“The beasts!” exclaimed Bunter wrathfully.

“Really, sir—”

“It’s only two days since we broke up at Greyfriars! I thought Wharton would be at home. I asked him specially, and he said distinctly that he would be at home some days before we went on to Mauleverer’s.”

“Two days is some days, sir,” suggested Wells helpfully.

Bunter snorted.

Having spent a couple of days of the vacation at home, Bunter had had enough of the delights of Bunter Court, more than enough of the society of his brother, Sammy, and his sister, Bessie—a feeling that was fully shared by Sammy and Bessie! And certainly he had expected to find Harry Wharton and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh still at Wharton Lodge. Possibly he hoped that they would be glad to see him, after the lapse of a couple of days, ought to have missed him.

“This is jolly awkward, Wells!” said Bunter.

“Indeed, sir!

“You see, I was going on to Mauleverer Towers with Wharton,” explained Bunter, “and—as it happens, I’ve left all my money at home. That wouldn’t have mattered if I’d been travelling with friends. As it is, it’s rather awkward.”

“No doubt, sir,” said Wells sympathetically.

“There’s a pound run up on the taxi,” said Bunter. “I was going to borrow a pound from Wharton when—when I found I’d left my money at home. It’s rather awkward to find nobody here.”

“It must be, sir,” assented Wells.

“In the circumstances, Wells, I think you had better pay the taxi and mention it to Wharton later.”

“I am afraid, sir, that that would be taking a liberty,” said Wells, shaking his head gravely.

“That’s all right,” said Bunter. “I’ll tell Wharton how it was, see? It’s quite all right, Wells.”

“Not quite, I think, sir.”

Billy Bunter breathed hard. He had a suspicion that Wells was being cheeky! Many times at Wharton Lodge he had suspected Wells of suppressed cheek. Now it was not so suppressed.

“Look here, Wells, are you going to pay that taxi?” he demanded.

“No, sir,” said Wells urbanely.

Bunter breathed harder.

He gave Wells a long, long blink. Wells met it with a suave and quite deferential smile. Yet Bunter had an impression that this cheeky menial was laughing up his sleeve.

Slowly the fat junior turned away. It was evident that there was nothing doing at Wharton Lodge! He tramped down the steps to the taxi. Wells, with a sedate smile, watched him enter the taxi and grind away down the drive. Something seemed to be amusing Wells.

The taxi turned out of the gates of Wharton Lodge, and rattled away. Billy Bunter leaned back in his seat, with a wrinkle on his brow.

He had ample food for thought.

He had counted on finding Wharton at home, and upon his good nature and the genial influence of Christmastide. He had felt that a pal could hardly refuse to lend him a pound to pay the taxi. And Wharton was a hundred miles away, in another county. It was quite a problem!

More pressing was the problem of paying for the taxi when he got home. His cash resources were limited to two pennies—one of which was a French one—and neither Sammy nor Bessie could be relied upon to help. They were not so fond of William George as so excellent a brother deserved. Mr. Bunter would have to pay—and if Mr. Samuel Bunter had to pay nearly two pounds for a taxi for his hopeful son, that hopeful son’s life would scarcely be worth living afterwards. Bunter shuddered at the prospect.

Half-way home Bunter made up his fat mind. He realised that a fellow might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. He tapped on the glass, and the driver glanced round and halted. Bunter leaned from the window and blinked at him.

“I’ve missed my friends,” he explained. “They’ve gone on to Hampshire without me I think, on the whole, I’ll go right on.”

“Cost you ten pounds, sir!” said the taximan.

“That’s all right,” said Bunter airily, jingling an English penny against a French one in his pocket. “Get on the Winchester road—Mauleverer Towers is the place—about ten miles from Winchester. I’m going to stay with my friend Lord Mauleverer there, you know.”

“I shall have to stop for juice, sir.”

“Buck up, then!”

Bunter leaned back in his seat.

He had still more food for thought as the taxi ate up the miles westward. Bunter was not accustomed to meeting troubles half-way—or to meeting them at all if he could

help it. But even Bunter could not help feeling that his present proceedings were of rather a risky nature. Still, as there was nothing else to be done, what was a fellow to do?

“The jolly old haunted turret?”

“Yaas.”

“I hope the jolly old ghost’s at home!”

“The at-homefulness is probably not terrific!” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. Harry Wharton held up a lamp, and the light glimmered on walls of panelled oak, black with age.

Mauleverer Towers was an ancient building, some parts of it dating back to Saxon times, some to early Norman. But the residential parts had been modernised, and the ghost of the Red Earl—had that phantom really walked at Christmastide—would no doubt have been surprised and disconcerted at finding itself among electric lights, bath-rooms, garages, wireless installations, and other things that certainly would have made any returning spirit from Tudor times sit up and take notice.

But the haunted turret had not been changed. There was no electric light there, and all was dark and shadowy when the chums of Greyfriars visited it. The old square turret was approached by a winding stair of stone, and it had not been inhabited for centuries, though it was quite near the quarters of Lord Mauleverer’s guests. From the turret there was a wide view over the hills and meadows of Hampshire in the daylight. In the December night it was wrapped in gloom.

“Jolly old show!” said Johnny Bull, looking round the square room, with its tall, pointed slits of windows, and walls of blackened oak that glimmered in the lamplight. “If I were you, Mauly, I should make this my den. But you’d want a few modern improvements put in.”

Lord Mauleverer shook his head.

“This part of the old show is never goin’ to be changed,” he answered. “Sort of historic relic, you know. People trot up here for the view, but it’s never occupied. You can see as far as What’s-its-name, and almost as far as—as What-do-you-call-it on a clear day.”

“Fine!” chuckled Bob. “And I suppose when the visibility’s really good, you can see as far as Thingummy.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Must be jolly old,” said Nugent, looking round.

“Yaas. It dates from Saxon times, or Norman times, or somethin’,” said Mauly, rather vaguely. “I know it dates from some time or other. My uncle can tell you all about it—old Brooke’s got a wonderful memory. But I know it dates from the reign of some king or other, or else a queen—I’m not quite sure which.”

It was their second day at Mauleverer Towers, and they had left it till after dusk to visit the haunted turret—perhaps in the hope of seeing some sign of the historic ghost. That ghost was due to appear at Christmastime, but could naturally not be expected to show up in the daytime—a thing no ghost was ever known to do.

“And this is where the Red Earl disappeared, in the reign of King Thingummy?” asked Johnny Bull.

“Yaas.”

“Well, if it really happened, there must be a secret panel or something,” said Bob. “I dare say there’s a secret door behind this oak, Mauly! Have you ever looked for one?”

“I’ve often been goin’ to,” said Mauly.

“There isn’t one known, then?” asked Harry.

“No, but it’s very likely.”

“You could find it, if it’s there, by having the panelling taken down,” suggested Johnny Bull.

Lord Mauleverer looked at him.

“Oh, yaas!” he gasped.

The idea of having that ancient and historic turret handed over to such vandalism seemed to be a shock to his lordship.

“Might find it by tapping on the walls,” said Bob. “If there’s a hollow place it ought to sound when you tap.”

“Rather a lark to find it,” said Nugent. “Then if the ghost doesn’t walk this Christmas, we could go and look for him. If the mountain won’t come to Mahomet, you know, Mahomet has to go to the mountain.”

Bob Cherry stepped to the blackened oak wall and lifted his hand to tap.

“I—I say—” murmured Mauleverer.

Bob looked round.

“My hat! You don’t really believe in the jolly old ghost, Mauly!” he ejaculated.

“No fear! But, you see, I’ve been brought up on that ghost,” said Mauly. “I believed in it when I was a kid, and—and——”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared Bob. “I believe you half believe in it now, old bean.”

Lord Mauleverer laughed, too.

“Rot!” he answered. “Still, before you tap on the wall I may as well tell you that the ghost ain’t supposed to like it—sort of particular about his private residence, you know. I’ve heard that he was heard to groan when somebody tapped on the wall.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“But go ahead, if you like,” said Mauly, “It’s all rot, of course.”

Bob raised his hand again.

Wharton held up the lamp. Lights and shadows danced round the group of juniors. From without came a faint whine of the winter wind. The place was silent, lonely, eerie, and even the cheery Bob hesitated for a moment before he tapped. Then, with a laugh, he smote.

It was rather a smack than a tap, and it echoed through the turret-room and down the winding stone stair.

“If the jolly old ghost’s there, that will wake him up!” chuckled Bob. “Halo, hallo, hallo! What——what’s that?”

Groan!

The juniors started almost convulsively.

From somewhere—where they could not guess—that deep groan came, in response to the tap on the wall.

It died away, and there was a dead silence.

Harry Wharton & Co. looked at one another.

Lord Mauleverer’s face was a trifle pale. The other fellows looked utterly startled.

“What—what—what was that?” stammered Nugent. “Great pip!” breathed Johnny Bull, staring round him blankly. “I—I say, you heard that—”

“What the thump—”

“Not one of you fellows larking?” asked Bob, looking round.

“No, you ass!”

“Then, what the dickens—”

“Must be somebody larking, trying to pull our leg!” said Harry Wharton at last. But he spoke without conviction.

“There’s nobody in the place at present but ourselves, my Uncle Brooke, and the

servants," said Lord Mauleverer.

The juniors were silent.

They had left Sir Reginald Brooke downstairs in the library when they came to explore the turret. They could hardly imagine that the stately old gentleman was playing tricks. It was even less imaginable that any of the well-trained household staff at the Towers could be doing so. The thing was a mystery.

"Nobody knew we were coming up here, so nobody could have got ready for us, even if anybody knew a secret way up," said Nugent, in a low voice.

"But—but——" stammered Wharton.

The juniors stared at one another blankly. The happening was utterly inexplicable, unless indeed there was a phantom haunting the ancient recesses of Mauleverer Towers. Mauly shivered.

"I say, it's rather chilly up here!" he said. "Blessed if I can make it out," said Bob, and he raised his hand to tap on the wall again. But he let his hand fall without tapping.

In spite of himself, an eerie feeling was creeping over him.

"I—I suppose we didn't imagine it?" muttered Johnny Bull.

"We couldn't all have imagined the same thing!" said Harry. "I heard a groan distinctly."

"The groanfulness was terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But perhaps it was an esteemed echo."

"These old places are full of queer echoes," said Bob. But he spoke very dubiously. Lord Mauleverer looked at his watch.

"Better not be late for dinner!" he murmured. The juniors left the turret-room. They descended the winding stone stairs in silence. The haunted turret was left to silence and darkness again, and the Greyfriars fellows were glad to find themselves back in warmth and light.

Tribulations of a Bilk!

BILLY BUNTER blinked through December darkness and a light, powdery falling of snow. He knew

the great gateway, with the light burning over it, flanked by great pillars surmounted by stone lions. He had arrived at Mauleverer Towers.

It had been a long run. The winter dusk was deepening into darkness when Bunter arrived. He had stopped twice for refreshment on his way—which was not only necessary, but indispensable, to Billy Bunter; but which, indispensable as it was, would have been impossible had not the taxi-man listened to the voice of the charmer. Bunter felt that he had got through the journey well—that he had managed it rather cleverly. Few fellows, stranded as Bunter was, could have managed it so well. He could not help feeling that.

Still, his difficulties were not yet over.

In fact, they were only beginning.

Bunter felt—he could not help feeling—that Lord Mauleverer ought to be glad to see him—that Harry Wharton & Co. ought to rejoice at this fascinating addition to the party at the Towers.

But it was an undoubted fact that fellows did not always feel as they ought to feel!

It was possible, at least, that Lord Mauleverer might kick him out.

It was possible—quite possible—that Harry Wharton & Co. might not rally round him, and urge upon Mauleverer that he, Bunter, was the one thing needful to make

that christmas-party a success. It was even possible that they might add their boots to Mauleverer's in inducing him to take a prompt departure. Obviously, a fellow who arrived for Christmas in the way Bunter was arriving, had to be wary.

Bunter realised that.

During that long run in the taxi he had had plenty of time to think and make plans. And he had decided not to knock boldly at the door, like an expected visitor—being such a very unexpected one. Especially as somebody had to pay the taximan twelve pounds—which Bunter obviously could not do with two pennies, one of which was French.

A better plan, Bunter considered, was to land himself at the Towers, and watch for an opportunity of entering unnoticed. He knew the place—he had been there before—he knew what quarters the Famous Five would be occupying; he knew how to reach those quarters once he—was within the building.

He felt that it was wiser—in the peculiar circumstances—not to let his presence be discovered, if he could help it, until so late an hour that it would be practically impossible to kick him out. Beast as Mauly was, he would have to give him a night's shelter, at least—and once Bunter was landed there for the night, he felt that he could depend on his fat wits to prolong the stay.

Bunter was prepared to sneak in at one of the servants' doors, or even to climb in at a window—indeed, he would rather have dropped down a chimney than have stayed outside. But there were difficulties in the way. Still, difficulties were only made to be overcome.

The first thing, evidently, was to get rid of the taximan. With the sordid selfishness Bunter was accustomed to expect from his inferiors, this man would be thinking about his fare—he would want to be paid. Bunter, of course, wanted him to be paid. Bunter was no bilk. But he could not pay him himself, and so he did not want to figure in the scene. He had done with the man now, and wanted to see the last of him. Having landed him at Mauleverer Towers, the taximan had, so to speak, outlived his usefulness.

“This the place, sir?”

The driver leaned round and asked the question.

“Yes, drive in.”

The great gates stood wide open. An immense drive curved among snowy oaks and beeches towards the distant house. The taxi turned in, passed the lighted windows of a lodge, and ground on up the drive.

Bunter's fat heart palpitated.

The crucial moment had arrived.

Mauleverer Towers stood on high ground, and the drive was rather steep. The taxi went slowly. Bunter had calculated on that.

He opened the door.

With the taxi going slowly, he could jump out and vanish. The driver would arrive at the house with an empty vehicle. What would happen after that was no concern of Bunter's.

But even with the taxi going very slowly, Bunter found, at the last moment, that he did not like the idea of jumping. These things were easier to plan in advance than to carry out when the moment came.

His fat heart fluttered as he stood in the doorway ready to jump, but hesitating to jump.

The driver glanced round at him. No doubt he was surprised. Bunter had intended to

jump out unknown to the driver, but he had hesitated too long. The driver stared hard—very hard—at his passenger, whose proceedings were so peculiar.

“We ain’t half-way to the house yet, sir,” he said.

Bunter started.

“Oh! Yes. No. All right! I—I wasn’t going to jump out!” he gasped.

“What?”

“I—I was just looking at the scenery!” gasped Bunter. “It—it’s rather—rather beautiful, you know! Drive on!”

The driver was not only staring now—he was glaring. Perhaps he had had to deal with bilks before in his career as a taxi-driver.

“Go slow,” added Bunter. “Drive very slowly. I’m not going to jump out, you know. But don’t go fast. I don’t want to break my neck, you know.”

“My eye!” said the taxi-driver.

“Get on!” said Bunter peevishly. “We—we shall be late for dinner! Don’t keep looking round! Look where you’re going!”

“My eye!” repeated the driver blankly.

“Nothing to look round for,” said Bunter. “I’m not going to jump out before you get to the house. Why should I?”

Quite an extraordinary expression was coming over the driver’s face. Even in the gloom Bunter could see it. The man was suspicious! Why he was suspicious Bunter did not know; but he could not doubt the fact. He realised that he was going to have trouble with this man!

It was neck or nothing now. The taxi had almost stopped, and it was Bunter’s chance. He jumped!

Bump!

“Yaroooooh!”

Bunter rolled and roared.

“Holy smoke!” gasped the taximan.

He stopped the car and stared after Bunter. Bunter owed him a pound for the drive to Wharton Lodge, ten pounds for the drive to Hampshire, and another pound that he had borrowed en route. And he was escaping before the house was reached!

The driver jumped down.

“Bilk!” he gasped.

The taximan was not, perhaps, closely acquainted with the manners and customs of the nobility. But he knew that this was not the way a nobleman’s guests usually arrived at a nobleman’s residence.

He had no doubt that he was dealing with a particularly impudent bilk, who had “diddled” him into driving a hundred miles by pretending that Mauleverer Towers was his destination. This made him very anxious that his peculiar passenger should not escape.

Bunter scrambled to his feet.

He blinked round him.

The taximan was rushing towards him. Even in the gloom Bunter caught a deadly glint in the taximan’s eyes.

“Ow!” he gasped.

He bolted.

Barely escaping the clutch of an outstretched hand, the fat junior bolted into the trees that lined the drive.

“Bilk!” roared the taximan. “Bilk! Stop! I’ll have you run in! I’ll knock your blooming nose through the back of your ’ead! Stop!”

If Bunter had been disposed to stop, the prospect of having his nose knocked through the back of his head would have urged him onward.

He fled wildly.

He heard a tramp of heavy feet behind him. Leaving the taxi on the drive, the taximan pursued Bunter.

“Oh, crikey!” gasped the hapless Owl.

He bumped into a tree and yelled, and recovered himself and dashed on. Behind him he heard the tramping feet and a voice raised in wrath. He had not calculated on this. He caught a glimpse of the lighted façade of the great house, shining through the winter dusk. He was tempted to rush towards it for refuge. But he realised that the very worst way to arrive at the Towers for Christmas was running for his life with an enraged taximan at his heels. Such an arrival could not possibly make a good impression.

“Oh! Oh! Wow! Keep off!” gurgled Bunter.

“Gotcher!” gasped the taximan.

But he had not quite got Bunter. The fat Owl dodged desperately and got away again. Where he was running now he hardly knew. He ran for his fat life, panting and puffing and blowing, streaming with perspiration, in spite of the December cold. He had lost sight of the lights of the house, and was barging among trees and drifted snow. He heard a bump and a howl behind him; apparently his pursuer had slipped, and landed in the snow. Bunter tore on. A bank of snow appeared before him, dim in the gloom. He clambered over it desperately, and the next moment, with a yell of terror, he felt himself falling through space.

Billy Bunter yelled.

It was enough to make any fellow yell.

He had clambered over the snow-bank, expecting to continue his wild flight beyond. Instead of which, he had plunged headlong into an unseen and unsuspected opening and shot downwards into the interior of the solid round globe.

Bump!

Bunter landed.

“Oooooogh!”

He sat in thick snow and gasped.

What had happened and where he was, he did not know for some moments. His first impression was that he was killed; but even Bunter’s fat intellect quickly realised that this was not the case. His second impression, swiftly following the first, was that he was half killed, crippled, smashed, and dislocated. But even this proved to be unfounded. And he realised at last that he had fallen into deeply-piled snow, and was not hurt at all, save for the knocking out of all his breath.

And his breath came back.

“Oooooogh!” murmured Bunter.

Having recovered some of his breath and made the happy and interesting discovery that he was not damaged, Bunter blinked about him. He was at the bottom of a circular opening in the earth, of which the sides appeared to be bricked. The top was open to the sky, and the opening was surrounded by a stone wall, covered now with snow, which Bunter, in the gloom, had scrambled over, without knowing what it was. But now he realised what had happened. From a former visit to Mauleverer Towers, he remembered that there was an ancient well, long since dried up, in the grounds, a couple of hundred yards from the house, and it was evidently this old well into which he had pitched.

“Oh, crikey!” murmured Bunter.

He was safe from the exasperated taximan. That was something. But he was aware that the old well was deep—very deep. And he realised, with a shudder, that had it not been half-choked with snow, his fall would have caused him very serious damage indeed.

As it was, the snow had broken his fall. He had dropped upon it almost as softly as on a bed of down, and he was undamaged, though nearly buried. He scrambled up, slipped, rolled over, and found himself in utter darkness, on cold earth that was free from snow.

He sat up and spluttered.

Round him was deep darkness, and a noisome smell of earth and closeness. It was a narrow opening, through which he had rolled, and the snow glimmered outside, almost choking it.

“Oh, crumbs!” murmured Bunter.

He fumbled in his pocket for a matchbox.

He blinked round him in amazement in the flickering light of a match. It was not, as he might have supposed, a gap broken by the passage of time in the bricked side of the old well, into which he had rolled. It was a narrow passage, with bricked walls, leading away into dense darkness.

His little round eyes almost bulged through his big round spectacles in his astonishment.

It dawned upon him that he had, by a strange chance, discovered a secret of Mauleverer Towers that was unknown to the proprietor.

“Oh, crikey!” breathed Bunter.

He struck another match.

Obviously the passage in which he stood led somewhere. It was one of the secret passages that were known to exist at Mauleverer Towers, though all knowledge of them had long been lost.

Billy Bunter’s intellect was not of the brightest. But even Bunter could guess that this secret passage leading out to the old well under the trees could only have been planned as a secret way of escape from the mansion—in the old days when builders put in secret passages in a nobleman’s residence as a matter of course. If that was the case—as certainly it must be—the passage led to the mansion.

Bunter grinned.

He had trusted to luck—and it looked as if luck was befriending him!

Scratching match after match, he trod cautiously along the narrow passage. It was so narrow that the fat Owl scraped the sides as he went.

“Ow!”

He uttered a sudden ejaculation as he banged a fat shin on a stone step.

Holding up another match, he saw a flight of narrow steps winding upwards spirally, disappearing into gloom.

Very carefully he tested the steps before he ventured to mount. But they were as solid as in the ancient days when the masons had laid them—solid as rock.

Slowly but steadily the fat Owl clambered up the steps.

He could have no doubt now that the secret passage led into the house. The spiral stair could mean nothing else.

Up and up he went, puffing and blowing and gasping with his exertions. Bunter did not like stairs; he had too much weight to carry up. But he clambered on manfully. It seemed to him that the spiral stair would never end. He knew that he must have passed beyond the level of the ground—the stair wound on upwards in the thickness

of an ancient wall. Match after match lighted him on his way. Everything has an end, and the spiral stair ended at last. It ended in a small stone cell, and Bunter, gasping for breath, leaned on the wall and rested in the darkness. Silence as of the tomb had reigned round him during his ascent. But as he stood breathing hard and deep, leaning on the wall, sounds came to his ears. He started and listened. It was the sound of voices that reached him. "Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter. Evidently he was within the mansion. A murmur of voices came to him, and then they came more clearly, as if the speakers were approaching. And he grinned as he recognised the tones of the Famous Five. Harry Wharton & Co. were within a few feet of him. "Beasts!" murmured Bunter.



Bunter found a lion's head corresponding to the knob on the other side

There was a wall between him and the juniors. So far as he had seen by the flickering match the walls surrounding him were of solid stone blocks. But it was clear that the sound of voices did not come through solid stone; in some spot the wall was thinner. Bunter did not venture to strike another match lest a gleam of light should betray him. But he felt his way along the wall, and felt an opening in the stone. It was a narrow doorway—or, rather, recess. He groped into it. His fat fingers came in contact with cold, hard wood. This obviously was the way in. And now the voices in the room beyond came clearly to his ears, muffled by the thick oak, but easily distinguished. Bunter grinned as he listened, hearing every word as the chums of the Remove in the turret-room discussed the ghost of Mauleverer Towers and the possible consequences of tapping on the wall. Then came the tap. And Bunter groaned. He gave a deep, hair-raising groan—partly because the beasts jolly well deserved to be frightened, partly because he wanted to frighten them away from the spot while he searched for a way in unseen. He grinned in the darkness as he overheard the breathless discussion that followed that unexpected groan. Then, to his great relief, he heard the sound of receding footsteps and a closing door. They were gone! The Owl of the Remove waited till all was silent. Then he struck a match and examined the recess in the stone wall. He remembered the story Lord Mauleverer had told in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars. That story, he had no doubt, was true; for this was the mysterious way out

of the turret by which the Red Earl had escaped the king's pursuivants in those far-off days. Where there was a way out there was a way in, and Bunter had only to look for it.

By the light of matches he blinked over the thick black oak that closed the recess. He found a large knob.

Grasping it, he pulled.

A panel in the oak came open so suddenly that the fat Owl almost sat down.

"Oh, crumbs!" he gasped.

He recovered himself and put his head through the opening in the wall. The room beyond was dark, only a pale glimmer coming in the tall slits of window from the December dusk without.

Bunter clambered through.

He struck another match and blinked round him. He chuckled. He knew where he was now—in the haunted turret-room.

"Beasts!" murmured Bunter. "If they jolly well knew!" He struck several more matches to examine the panel before he closed it. The old oak was strangely and grotesquely carved, and Bunter found a lion's head, corresponding to the knob on the other side. Evidently this concealed the spring that worked the panel.

Having found the secret—easy enough when the secret door was open—Bunter snapped the panel shut. He knew how to open it again now if he needed to retreat. But he was not thinking of retreat. He would not need to use the panel unless the beasts came back—which they were not likely to do. And he did not intend to leave the turret-room yet. His presence in Mauleverer Towers was not to be discovered until it was too late to kick him out.

Fortunately—with great forethought, in fact—he had expended a couple of shillings out of the pound he had borrowed from the taximan on toffee and a packet of chocolate—deriving considerable comfort therefrom, as well as from the reflection that that unpleasant and disrespectful and suspicious taximan was probably still hunting for him in the snow and darkness.

Where is Bunter?

"MY lord!"

"Yaas, Porson?"

"A—'hem—a—a person desires to see your lordship." Porson coughed apologetically, apparently fully realising how cheeky it was of any "person" to desire to see his lordship.

"Yaas," yawned Lord Mauleverer.

He sat up.

Harry Wharton & Co. were grouped before a crackling log fire, and Lord Mauleverer had stretched his noble and elegant limbs on a settee. The Greyfriars fellows were in an armoury, and which was used by Mauly as a "den"—a rather magnificent den, with trophies of arms on the walls, and suits of armour worn in bygone days by dead-and-gone Mauleverers reflecting the bright glow of the fire.

"Who is it, Porson?" asked Lord Mauleverer. "I'm rather busy just now—in fact, frightfully busy."

Whereat the Greyfriars fellows grinned. Lord Mauleverer was "busy" in taking a rest before dinner. But that, no doubt, was very important.

"The person's name is Brown, my lord," said the butler of Mauleverer Towers. "He is

the driver of a taxi-cab.”

“One of you men ’phoned for a taxi?” asked Mauly.

The Famous Five shook their heads.

“The—the person states that he has driven from Surrey today, my lord, with a passenger who told him that he was a guest of your lordship’s,” said Porson. “He is—’hem! —a little excited. He states that his passenger jumped from the cab in your lordship’s grounds, and, to use his own expression, my lord, bilked him.”

“Oh, gad!” ejaculated Lord Mauleverer.

“The esteemed and ridiculous Bunter!” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The same thought occurred to all the juniors at once. A passenger from Surrey who had bilked the taximan was not likely to be anybody but William George Bunter.

“I have informed the person, my lord, that your lordship can know nothing of any such matter.

But—”

“Show him in,” said Lord Mauleverer.

“Very well, my lord!”

Apparently Porson had done his best to “shoo” away the taxi-driver, but that person had refused to be “shoo’ed” away. His fare had vanished in Lord Mauleverer’s grounds, and no doubt the hapless taximan nourished a hope of collecting his money from somebody.

Porson showed him into the armoury.

Lord Mauleverer rose gracefully to greet him. Cap in hand, with a very red face, the taximan blinked at the schoolboy earl.

“Sorry, sir,” he said. “Sorry to trouble anybody. But a man can’t afford to lose twelve pounds, sir, if he can help it.”

“Hardly,” agreed Mauleverer.

“The bloke had your name quite pat, sir, and your address, too, and I s’pose you know something of him,” said the taximan. “Picked me up at Reigate, in Surrey, this bloke did, and tells me to drive him to Wharton Lodge this morning, sir.”

“Wharton Lodge?” ejaculated Harry.

“Yes, sir. Then he tells me he’s missed his friends and is going on to Hampshire, sir.”

“The fat villain!” ejaculated Bob Cherry.

“I see you know him, sir. Fat he is. Never saw such a cove with so much on his bones, if he’s got any bones. I don’t know his name, but I’d know him again if I see him anywhere. Borrowed a pound off me on the way, he did.”

“That’s Bunter!” grinned Johnny Bull.

“The Bunterfulness is terrific!”

“Yaas,” said Lord Mauleverer, “Fat fellow, as broad as he is long—what?”

“That’s him, sir.”

“With a big pair of specs, and a face like—like—like an over-ripe tomato?” asked Lord Mauleverer thoughtfully.

“I see you know him, sir,” said the taximan. “And if he’s here, sir—seeing as he told me he was a guest here—”

“Not at all! But I’m glad you’ve mentioned the matter,” said Lord Mauleverer. “How much has he bilked you of?”

“There was a pound from Reigate to Wharton Lodge, and ten quid for the drive to this place, sir, and a quid he borrowed—”

“Bunter doesn’t do things by halves!” murmured Nugent.

“That’s twelve pounds, sir,” said the taximan, “and bilked at the finish! If I get ’old of him—”

“You’re not likely to get hold of him, Mr. Brown,” said Lord Mauleverer, shaking his head. “I feel convinced that he will never let you see him again if he can possibly help it. But you need not waste your time looking for him, as I’m sure he hasn’t any money, even if you found him.”

The taximan breathed very hard.

“But if he’s a friend of yours, sir—”

“He isn’t!

“If he’s here—”

“Thank goodness, he isn’t! If he turns up here, I’m relyin’ on my friends to kick him out!”

“Depend on us, old bean!” grinned Johnny Bull.

“The kickfulness will be terrific!”

“I ain’t losing twelve pounds!” said the taximan, showing signs of excitement.

“Certainly not!” agreed Lord Mauleverer soothingly. “That would be rather hard cheese, by Jove! But you’re really not likely to get it out of Bunter, so perhaps you would not object to my payin’ it?”

Lord Mauleverer looked inquiringly at the taximan. The taximan looked at Lord Mauleverer. Really, there was no doubt on the subject, and the inquiry was superfluous.

“You’re a gentleman, sir!” said the taximan.

“Thank you very much!” said Lord Mauleverer urbanely. “I believe I’ve got a wallet somewhere. Yaas, here it is. Let me see. Two fivers and two pound notes—I mean three. That’s right—what? Porson!”

“Yes, my lord?”

“This gentleman has driven from Surrey today. A very long and cold drive in this weather, Porson. You will see that he has refreshment before he drives home, Porson.”

“Yes, my lord!”

It was a happy taximan who followed Porson, though still troubled with a lingering desire to get hold of his late passenger.

Lord Mauleverer sank down on the settee again.

“There’s time for a walk round before dinner,” remarked Bob Cherry, with a glance at his chums.

“Yes, rather!” said Harry Wharton.

Lord Mauleverer grinned, and did not inquire what his guests were going to look for when they walked round.

They looked for Bunter.

Naturally, it did not occur to them that the fat Owl was within the walls of the mansion, biding his time till it was safe to put in an appearance. Had they guessed that, undoubtedly Billy Bunter would have taken a prompt departure, with five boots to help him on his way. As it was, they looked for him in vain.

Snore!

“My hat!”

Snore!

Harry Wharton stared blankly.

Hours in holiday-time were rather later than at school, and so it was past his usual bed-time when Harry Wharton said good-night to his friends at his door and came into his room, and he was rather sleepy.

But sleepiness vanished at that unexpected sound from his bed.

He jumped and stared.

Wharton's room was large and comfortable, with a canopied bed of ancient solidity, and a log fire burning in an ancient grate. For a moment he fancied that he must have mistaken the room as he heard the sound of that deep and hefty snore. But it was his room, obviously already occupied. And as he wondered blankly who could be there, something familiar about that deep snore struck him, it was an old, familiar sound that he had often heard in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars.

"My only hat! Bunter!"

Snore!

Wharton stepped to the bed.

There lay a fat figure, fully dressed. Its eyes were shut and its mouth was open, and round the mouth were many smears of toffee and chocolate.

Harry Wharton gazed at that sprawling figure as if he could hardly believe his eyes—as, indeed, he hardly could.

"B-b-bunter!" he gasped.

The sight of the ghost of Mauleverer Towers could hardly have startled him more. He stared blankly at the snoring fat junior.

Bunter did not awaken. He had not gone to bed—apparently he had lain down to take a little rest, after which, of course, he had fallen asleep. Now he was deep in slumber and snoring away at a terrific rate.

"Bunter! How the thump—" gasped Wharton. He seized the sprawling Owl by a fat shoulder and shook him. "Bunter! You fat scoundrel! What are you doing here? How did you get in, you villain?"

"Groooogh!"

"Wake up, you fat burglar!"

"Oooooogh!"

Billy Bunter's eyes opened, and he blinked at Wharton over his big spectacles. He sat up on the bed.

"Oh! You!" he grunted. "I thought this was your room, old chap. I say, you're jolly late up to bed, ain't you? I'm hungry!"

"How did you get in here?" roared Wharton.

"Oh, I just walked in!" he answered airily.

"Did Porson let you in?"

"Eh? Yes! Exactly!" Bunter chuckled. "Just that, old chap."

"Then I'd better ring for him to show you out again!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"You fat villain! You must have sneaked in somehow without being seen!" growled the captain of the Remove. "Mauly doesn't know you're here."

"Go and tell him, old chap—in fact, bring him here," said Bunter. "I want to see Mauly. I want some supper."

Harry Wharton went to the door. Evidently Lord Mauleverer had to know that his unexpected visitor had, after all, arrived.

Bunter rolled off the bed, grinning. It was too late for him to be turned out, he felt sure of that. Mauly was a beast, but not such an inhospitable beast as that. He was safe for the night, and he relied on his fat wits for the rest. The matter of the most pressing and immediate concern was supper. Toffee and chocolates were all very well; but there was an aching void inside Bunter that a Christmas dinner could hardly have filled.

"Oh, gad!"

He heard Lord Mauleverer's voice.

The schoolboy earl came in, and after him came the Famous Five. All the Co. were amazed by the news that Bunter was there. They stared at him as if he had been the ghost of a fat owl.

"How did the villain get in?" asked Bob Cherry.

"I say, you fellows, glad to see me?" asked Bunter affably. "I've had a nap while I waited for you to come up to bed. But, I say, I'm hungry. Mauly, old man, what about supper?"

"You fat sweep!"

"Oh, really, Mauly—"

"How did you get here?"

"Friend of mine gave me a lift in his car from Surrey—one of my titled relations, in fact," grinned Bunter. "Quite a good run, in my friend's Rolls. What are you grinning at?"

"Your titled relation's stuck Mauly for the taxi fare!" roared Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter started.

"Oh, crumbs! Did that beastly taxi-man come up to the house? What a nerve I—I thought he'd gone. I suppose he's gone now, if Mauly paid him. I'll settle with you after the hols, Mauly. I'm expecting a good many rather substantial Christmas tips—from my titled relations, you know. I say, what about supper?"

"Say the word, Mauly, and we'll sling him out for you," said Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"The slingfulness is the proper caper!"

"Look here. you shut up!" said Bunter. "Mauly was expecting me here for Christmas, weren't you, old chap?"

"Yaas," groaned Lord Mauleverer. "I was afraid so."

"Oh, really, Mauly! If I'm not welcome here," said Bunter, with dignity, "I'll go at once, of course. I hope I'm not the fellow to butt in where I'm not wanted. You've only to say the word, Mauly."

"Oh, good! I'll order the car, then," said Lord Mauleverer, brightening up. "I'll let the chauffeur take you all the way home to Surrey, Bunter."

"Of course, it's too late tonight," said Bunter calmly. "We'll talk it over tomorrow, shall we? What about supper?"

Lord Mauleverer breathed hard and deep.

"Let's kick him out, Mauly," urged Johnny Bull.

"Well, it's rather late," murmured Mauly, "and—and—the car can run him home tomorrow. And—and—I'll tell Porson to fix up a room for you tonight, Bunter, and—and some supper and—and——"

"That's all right, old chap. I don't want much—a cold chicken or two, and some beef, and——"

"Come along!"

"Certainly, old chap!"

The chums of the Remove did not disperse to bed. They were not thinking of bed now—but of Bunter.

The Only Way!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Harry Wharton & Co., seated round the log fire in Wharton's room, glanced round as

Bunter rolled
in.

It was an hour later; but the juniors had not yet gone to bed. And Bunter had been busy. His fat face shone, and his breathing was a little stertorous. Apparently he had done well at supper.

He grinned as he rolled in. He seemed to be in a cheerful and expansive mood—which was not shared by the Famous Five.

“Well, you fat sweep!” growled Johnny Bull.

“I say, you fellows, I’ve had rather a decent supper,” said Bunter cheerfully. “Not like what I should have had at Bunter Court—but pretty decent. Mauly’s not here? Gone to bed, I suppose. I say, Mauly isn’t ill, or anything, is he?”

“Not that I know of,” said Harry.

“I’ve told him I’m sticking to him over the vac,” said Bunter. “He seemed in low spirits about something, though. I say, you fellows, I shall want some of you to lend me a few things. I’ve come here without any luggage. I was going to ask Mauly; but he seems to have gone to bed. I suppose you’ve got some pyjamas I can have, Wharton?”

“Go and eat coke!”

“Oh, all right—I’ll go and wake up Mauly—”

“You can have some pyjamas, fat-head!”

“Thanks! I’ll get my things along later from Bunter Court. I say, you fellows, if my things don’t arrive in time, I suppose I can rely on my old pals? Your evening clothes will fit me, Wharton—you won’t mind if I slit the waistcoat up the back—I’m not bony like you, you know. I can make do with your shoes, Inky.”

“My esteemed idiotic Bunter—”

“I shall want some socks, and ties, and collars, and shirts, and things—but we’ll arrange all that tomorrow—”

“You fat villain!” said Johnny Bull.

“That will do, Bull!” Bunter wagged a fat forefinger at Johnny. “I want you fellows to understand one thing—if you’re staying on here—”

“If we’re staying on here?” repeated Nugent.

“Yes; if you’re staying on here for Christmas, I shall expect you to be civil. I don’t expect a lot from you in the way of manners, of course, but you simply must remember that you’re not in the Remove passage at Greyfriars now. There’s going to be a lot of company here over Christmas, and people will know that we belong to the same school, and so I don’t want you fellows to let me down.”

“Oh, crumbs!”

“Hazeldene will be coming and bringing his sister Marjorie,” went on Bunter. “Some of the other Cliff House girls, too. I don’t want you butting in too much when Marjorie’s here, Cherry.”

Bob Cherry opened his lips, and closed them again. “Marjorie can’t stand you, you know,” said Bunter, blinking at him. “You’d better not get asking her for a dance, or anything like that. I’m going to look after Marjorie, and give her a good time here. The fact is, she’s only coming because I told her I should be here.”

“I’m going to kick him!” growled Johnny Bull. “Shut up, Bull! If you can’t behave yourself here I shall ask Mauly to give you a hint to clear,” said Bunter. “I’m blessed if I quite know what he’s asked you for—I suppose you wangled it somehow.”

“What?” gasped Johnny Bull.

“If there’s one thing I despise it’s a fellow fishing for invitations and shoving himself in where he’s not wanted,” said Bunter scornfully.

“Oh, ye gods!”

“Not my style,” said Bunter. “But you fellows would hardly understand, of course—you’re not sensitive. Trot out those pyjamas, Wharton, and I’ll get to bed—I’m sleepy.”

The captain of the Remove, in silence, sorted out pyjamas, and Bunter put them over a fat arm and departed.

“My esteemed and idiotic chums,” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, as soon as the door closed on Bunter. There was a thoughtful wrinkle in the dusky brow of the Nabob of Bhanipur. “My ridiculous friends, a wheezy idea has occurred to my idiotic brain.”

“Nothing doing!” grunted Johnny Bull. “You can’t think of a way of making Bunter come unstuck?”

The nabob grinned.

“The esteemed Bunter is a terrific funk,” he remarked, “and there is an honourable and ridiculous ghost that haunts this idiotic mansion.”

“Fathead! I jolly well wish there was a ghost, and that he would scare that fat scoundrel into fits. But there isn’t!”

“There are more ways of killing an absurd cat than the chokefulness with cream,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “If the ridiculous ghost should walk tonight—”

“There isn’t a ghost to walk, ass!”

“But an esteemed ghost might be manufactured, my worthy Johnny, for the benefit of the absurd Bunter.”

“Oh!” ejaculated Johnny Bull.

“Good egg!” exclaimed Bob Cherry. “Good old Inky. If the jolly old Red Earl dropped in on Bunter—”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Good!”

“Ripping!”

“We can bag his old suit of armour from Mauly’s den!” exclaimed Bob.

“And the jolly old ghost can walk!” chuckled Nugent.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Clang!

Billy Bunter started in his sleep.

It was past midnight.

The December night was dark and wintry. Round the ancient turrets of Mauleverer Towers the wind howled and moaned. Snow, falling steadily, drifted against the casements, and piled thick on window-sills and ledges, on red old chimneys and creaking, leafless branches.

The ancient building was full of strange sounds—cracking of old wainscot, echoes of the winter wind, thudding of fallen stacks of snow that slid from slanting roofs. But Billy Bunter was deaf to the eerie sounds of midnight. Indeed, in Bunter’s room such sounds were quite drowned by the nasal solo the fat Owl was putting up. Billy Bunter’s snore was going strong.

But when that loud metallic clang rang through Bunter’s room, even Bunter’s snore took a second place.

Clang!

Bunter did not awaken. He was not easy to wake. But he started and shifted in his sleep.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Bunter's eyes opened. He awakened at last.

There was a log-fire burning in the wide, old-fashioned hearth. It was burning low at this late hour, with a deep red glow from the heart of the embers, and occasionally a leap of blaze. It shed a dim light through the room.

Bunter blinked round sleepily.

Something had awakened him. He lifted his fat face from the pillow, and blinked round to ascertain the cause.

Then he gave a jump.

"Ow!" gasped Bunter.

He raised himself on a fat elbow, and blinked. In the red glow a figure in armour appeared, passing with a heavy, clanking stride between Bunter and the fire.

The armour-clad figure clanked on, and disappeared in the shadows. Bunter lay on his fat elbow, transfixed.

Was he dreaming?

He had been dreaming while he slept, but not of the ghost of Mauleverer Towers. He had dreamed of turkeys, of mince-pies, and Christmas pudding—a happy dream, which had caused him to smile in his slumber. Was this a dream, or dreadful reality? With a shaking fat hand he groped for his spectacles, jammed them on his fat, little nose, and blinked again.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

From the shadows by the farther wall the armour-clad figure came clanking back, again passing between Bunter and the red glow of the fire.

His eyes almost popped through his spectacles.

It was the figure of a knight of old, clad in armour from head to foot, the barred vizor closed.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

The old oaken planks of the floor rang to the heavy stride.

Bunter scarcely breathed.

Bunter did not believe in ghosts—not in the daylight, at all events. At midnight, in the gloom and solitude, it was a different matter. Ghosts did not seem so impossible then. But, at the door, it turned and came clanking back. This time it did not pace across the room before the fire. It paced towards Bunter's bed.

"Ow!"

It was a terrified squeak from the fat Owl.

Nearer and nearer came the armour-clad figure, towering over the fat junior as he lay blinking in terror through his big spectacles.

It halted by the bedside.

A gauntleted hand was raised, pointing at Bunter's fat, scared face. To Bunter's horror, the outstretched hand approached closer and closer to his fat nose.

"Ow! Help! Fire! Murder! Keep off!" yelled Bunter. Scarcely knowing what he did, the fat junior grasped his pillow, and made a frantic smite at the ghost of Mauleverer Towers.

Crash!

That sudden action on Bunter's part seemed to take the ghost by surprise.

It staggered back as the pillow landed, slipped, and stumbled over, and there was a terrific crash of armour as it landed on its back on the oaken floor. That terrific crash rang far and wide.

"Ow! Help!" yelled Bunter.

"Ooooooogh!" came a gurgling gasp from within the closed helmet of the ghost.

Bunter did not heed it—if he heard. He leaped from time bed and darted to the door.

Bunter's movements were not often swift, especially after supper. Now he crossed the room at about seventy miles per hour.

He reached the door, tore it open, and dashed out into the corridor.

Crash! Bump! Thud!

"Ow! Oh, my hat!"

"What the thump—"

"Oh, crikey!"

The dusky corridor outside was not deserted, as Bunter had naturally supposed it would be at that hour of the night. Four shadowy figures were gathered close by Bunter's door, and the fat junior hurtled into the midst of them, knocking them right and left.

"Ow! Wow! What the merry thump——"

"Who the thunder—"

"What the terrific dickens——"

"Ow! Oh, crikey!" spluttered Bunter. "Ow! Help! Ghosts! Murder! Fire! Rescue! Help!"

He clutched at a shadowy figure as he stumbled and fell, and dragged it down in his fall. There was a wild howl in Frank Nugent's voice.

"Oh, my hat! Leggo! Ow!"

"Help! Ghosts!" yelled Bunter, "Keep off! Help!"

"Oh, you fat idiot! "

"It's Bunter——"

"Oh! I say, you fellows!" Bunter recognised the voices at last. "I say, gerraway! It's the ghost! I say, help! Oh, crikey! Get a light! I say, don't stop me! Oh, crumbs! Ow!"

He scrambled to his feet, Frank Nugent lay gasping on the floor. Three other fellows were staggering breathlessly. A door opened farther along the corridor, the door of Lord Mauleverer's room, and a light-shone out. The terrific din had awakened his lordship. Mauily, in a dressing-gown, peered out in amazement.

"Good gad! What the dooce—"

"Ow! Help! Ghosts!" yelled Bunter.

"What the dickens—"

"Ow! Save me!" yelled Bunter.

Lord Mauleverer switched on the corridor light, and came hurrying up in amazement. Frank Nugent picked himself up. The four chums looked at one another—expressively. Bob Cherry was not to be seen. Billy Bunter clutched Lord Mauleverer's arm.

"I say, it's the ghost!" he gurgled. "I say, ring for Porson! Order the car! Do you hear? I'm not staying here! I'm going! I—"

"Good gad! But what—"

"I tell you I'm going!" howled Bunter. "I tell you I won't stay in this beastly place another minute! Ow!

I'm going home! You can keep your beastly ghosts! Ow!"

"My dear man, there isn't any ghost!" gasped Lord Mauleverer. "Nothin' of the sort! It's your supper—"

"You silly idiot!"

"The second chicken, you know—"

"I tell you I saw it!" shrieked Bunter. "It's in the room now! I tell you I'm going. Oh, dear! I won't stay here another minute! Ow!"

Bunter blinked round in terror at the open doorway.

Clank! Clank! Clank!

“It’s coming!” yelled Bunter. “Look out! Help!” He dodged round Lord Mauleverer, still clinging to his startled lordship.

“Good gad! What—”

Clank! Clank! It was not the clanking stride of the armour-clad figure, however. It sounded as if the steel-clad ghost was beating a tattoo on the oaken planks.

“But what—” gasped Mauleverer. “Let go, you fat duffer—”

“Help!”

Clank, clank! Clatter! Crash!

“Help! Keep it off!”

“Lend a hand here, you silly asses!” came a half-suffocated voice. “For goodness’ sake lend a fellow a hand!”

“That’s Bob!” gasped Lord Mauleverer.

“Ow! It’s the ghost! Ow! Help!”

Lord Mauleverer reached into the room and switched on the electric light. He stared blankly into the doorway. The sudden illumination revealed quite a strange scene. A figure in complete armour was stretched on the oaken floor. It was making frantic efforts to rise; but in vain. The armour clanked and crashed, and rattled and clattered, as it strove to get on its feet. But, as often happened to knights in ancient days when once they lost their footing, the “ghost” could not get up. Imprisoned in the heavy, cumbrous armour, it sprawled, and struggled in vain to resume the perpendicular.

“Who—who— What—” gasped Mauleverer.

“Ow! Lend a fellow a hand, can’t you?” yelled the ghost. “I can’t get up in these beastly things! Can’t you help a chap, somebody? This blinking helmet is suffocating me! I can’t get it off! I can’t get up! Are you going to leave me like this all night, you dummies?”

It was the voice of Bob Cherry, in tones of considerable excitement.

Clank! Clatter! Bang!

“Oh, gad! Ha, ha, ha!” yelled Mauleverer.

“I say, you fellows—”

The armour-clad figure heaved itself up with a terrific effort. But it slipped and rolled over again, with a terrific crash, There was a frantic yell from the closed vizor.

“Ow! Oh, crikey! Will you help a chap, you dummies? Will you give a man a hand, you fatheads?”

Harry Wharton & Co. exchanged glances. There was a gasp from Bunter—a gasp of relief and comprehension. Even Billy Bunter was not likely to believe that a genuine ghost would talk in that strain and in the well-known voice of Robert Cherry.

Bunter grinned.

“I say, you fellows, ’tain’t a ghost!” gasped Bunter. “It’s that silly ass Cherry, playing the goat—he, he, he!”

The Co. ran to the aid of the ghost. They grasped the armour-clad figure, and, with a combined effort, dragged it up. They got the barred vizor open, and Bob Cherry’s crimson face was revealed in the light. He was gasping spasmodically.

“You silly asses! Why couldn’t you help me up?”

“You silly chump! What did you want to sprawl over for?” demanded Johnny Bull.

“How could I help it, you fathead, when that fat scoundrel biffed me with a pillow—”

“He, he, he!”

Billy Bunter was himself again now. He rolled back into the room grinning.

“But what’s the game?” asked Lord Mauleverer. “What the thump are you doin’ in my jolly old ancestor’s armour, Bob? It’s a bit heavy for walkin’ about, isn’t it?”

“He, he, he!” chortled Bunter. “The silly ass was playing ghost! He fancied that he

was going to frighten me! He, he, he!”

“Oh!” ejaculated Mauleverer.

“Trying to frighten a fellow away!” chuckled Bunter. “Not likely to frighten me! I’ve got pluck—”

He broke off with a yell, as Bob Cherry—safe on his feet once more—made a clanking stride towards him.

“Here, you keep off! Beast! Keep off!” Bunter dodged round the bed. “I say, Mauly, keep him off!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Chuck it, old man!” chuckled Lord Mauleverer, catching Bob by the arm. “I catch on, and I’m much obliged, but chuck it! This way, old bean, and for goodness’ sake don’t tread on my feet.”

The ghost of the Red Earl was led out of Bunter’s room, much to Billy Bunter’s relief. Its clanking stride died away down the corridor. Harry Wharton & Co. gave the fat Owl an expressive look, and followed. Bunter blinked after them from the doorway, grinning.

“I say, you fellows! Try it on again, if you like! He, he, he! I knew it was a jape all the time! He, he, he! You can’t pull my leg, you know! He, he, he!”

Billy Bunter, chuckling, closed his door, and this time he locked it. Then he went back to bed. A minute later his deep snore was once more awakening the echoes of Mauleverer Towers.

Bunter Borrows a Few Things!

BILLY BUNTER stood in his doorway and blinked out into the corridor. Like Moses of old, he looked this way and that way, and, like Moses again, he saw no man. The coast was clear, With a grin on his fat face, Billy Bunter rolled along in the direction of Lord Mauleverer’s room.

Lord Mauleverer had a very extensive wardrobe, which was not likely to be quite so extensive when his charming visitor had done with it.

Bunter needed socks and shirts and ties and all sorts of things. He knew where to look for them.

In such supplies, Lord Mauleverer’s apartments were like unto a land flowing with milk and honey.

Mauly might possibly have raised objections to such a raid had he been at home. But he was not at home, so that was all right. This was, in fact, the opportunity Bunter wanted, and he was not the fellow to let it pass unimproved.

But he was rather cautious as he approached Mauly’s door. Even Billy Bunter did not want to let the servants catch him despoiling his host.

He strolled along the corridor with a casual air—an air so very casual that it certainly would have drawn attention upon him had anyone been at hand to observe.

But there was no one at hand. He opened Mauly’s door and stepped in cautiously, closing the door quietly behind him.

He blinked round Mauly’s room.

There were two other doors to the room—one leading into a bath-room, the other into Lord Mauleverer’s dressing-room. It was towards the latter that Bunter proceeded—on tiptoe.

The servants were downstairs, but it was possible that his lordship’s man might be in his lordship’s room, attending to some duty or other.

At Greyfriars School Lord Mauleverer lived and moved and had his being in the

Lower Fourth, like any other junior, though it was rumoured in the Remove that when Mauly first came to school he had innocently desired to bring his valet to Greyfriars with him. It was said in the Remove studies that Mauly had been quite perturbed by the discovery that Lower Fourth fellows could not have personal attendants at Greyfriars.

At all events, when he was at home at Mauleverer Towers his valet was in attendance, as Bunter was aware.

And with such nefarious designs on Mauly's wardrobe, the fat Owl had a natural disinclination to butt into Mauly's man.

The door of the dressing-room was ajar, and Bunter crossed to it on tiptoe, to peer in before entering.

The next moment he was glad that he had been so cautious.

There was a sound of a movement in the dressing-room. Evidently someone was there, and as Mauly was miles away, it could only be Mr. James Orris, his valet.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter.

He blinked through the narrow opening of the door.

Standing before an open, tall wardrobe, with his back towards Bunter, was a rather plump man.

Bunter could not see his face, but he knew who it was. It was Mauly's man, Orris. The valet had a grey, tweed jacket in his hands—one of the innumerable garments belonging to his master.

Apparently he had, for some reason, taken it from the wardrobe, for he was now replacing it carefully on a hanger, to hang it up again.

Having replaced it, he closed the door of the wardrobe, and Bunter heard the latch click.

The wardrobe door was a mirror, a full length sheet of glass, and as it closed, Bunter saw the full reflection of the valet in it.

He started.

He had seen Orris before, several times. The man had been more than a year in Mauly's service. Bunter rather approved of Orris. He was so quiet and deferential. He had a rather plump, clean-shaven face, good-looking in its way; but as a rule it was almost expressionless. If it expressed anything it was a deferential sedateness.

Now it was quite different; so different that it made Bunter blink through his big spectacles in surprise at the reflection in the mirror.

It was slightly pale. The lips were tightly set, the brows knitted over eyes that had a strange glint in them.

Orris stood for some moments quite still, and Bunter could see that he was breathing hard.

Then he turned away and crossed the room towards the door on the corridor.

Bunter almost gasped with relief.

Had Orris come through the bedroom he could hardly have failed to discover Bunter there at the communicating door.

Fortunately, he left by the door on the corridor, and Bunter was glad to hear it shut behind him.

"Well, my hat!" murmured Bunter. "Blessed if I don't believe he's been up to something! He looked like it! That ass Mauly is ass enough to leave money in his pockets. I wonder whether that blighter has been pinching?"

Bunter shook his head seriously

"Bit thick, if the rotter comes in pinching things while Mauly's out!" he murmured.

"Well, he's gone now, thank goodness. I fancy I'll borrow that tweed jacket— it

would suit me to a T. Most of Mauly's things suit me, luckily."

Orris being safely off the scene, Billy Bunter rolled into the dressing-room. He lost no time in getting to work.

Everything in the room was in perfect order. James Orris was a careful and methodical man; in fact, a jewel of a valet.

Bunter was not long in making a change.

He was rather anxious to get through, before anyone could interrupt him. Orris might come back, and he did not want any cheek from Orris.

He had no time to bother about tidiness. Articles he selected for his own personal adornment, he piled into an armchair. The pile grew larger and larger. Articles he did not require he dropped carelessly. Orris would pack them away again, some time.

What the dickens was a valet for?

The stack in the armchair grew quite mountainous. The floor was littered right and left.

Bunter's selection was very extensive. It included a grey tweed lounge suit—the jacket of which he had seen Orris handling. It was a very handsome, very well-cut, and very expensive suit, and Bunter had no doubt that it would suit him quite well. No doubt it would be a little tight; Bunter had a figure, and Mauly hadn't! But that could not be helped; besides, the waistcoat could be slit up the back.

Bunter blinked at the stack in the chair. His selection was so very extensive that it seemed doubtful whether he could carry all his plunder away in one trip.

He gathered up innumerable articles, enfolding them in his fat arms. He was loaded above the Plimsoll line, as he rolled away with his loot. He opened the door of the corridor and blinked out. The corridor was empty, and Bunter rolled out, heavy laden, towards his own room.

There was a footstep.

"Oh, crikey!" murmured Bunter.

A portly and imposing form turned into the corridor from the direction of the stairs. It was Porson, the stately butler of Mauleverer Towers.

He met Bunter fairly face to face.

Porson was seldom, or never, known to betray emotion of any kind. He was too well-trained a butler for that. Nothing ever startled him. Bob Cherry had declared that if the crack of doom happened while Mauly was at home, Porson would announce with unperturbed calm: "The crack of doom, my lord!"

But Porson, for once in his stately career, was startled, as he beheld Billy Bunter rolling away from Lord Mauleverer's room with his fat arms stacked with plunder.

He jumped! For the first time in his life, Porson jumped. He stared. He stared so hard that it seemed, for a moment, that his eyes would pop out of his head.

"Oh!" gasped Porson.

Bunter blinked at him. He had just room to blink over the stack of plunder piled on his fat chest and enclosed by his fat arms.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "That you, Porson? I—I—it's all right, Porson! I've—I've borrowed a few things from Mauly—" Three or four collars and a necktie and a pair of silk socks fluttered to the floor. Bunter made a hasty grab at them, and a pair of trousers escaped: and as he grabbed at the trousers, the whole cargo shifted and streamed down around Bunter.

He stood in a sea of shirts and collars, socks and pyjamas, shoes, slippers, ties, studs, and all sorts and conditions of things.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I say, Porson, help me pick up these things! Oh, crumbs!"

“Sir!” gasped Porson.

“Come and lend a hand!” hooted Bunter. “Don’t stand there like a stuffed dummy!”

“Oh!” gasped Porson.

Like a man in a dream, Porson helped to pick up the scattered garments and pile them on Bunter. Bunter was a guest at Mauleverer Towers, though a very remarkable guest. What a butler ought to do in such circumstances as this, Porson did not know. He was an experienced butler, but he had never been up against a problem like this before in all his long career in the best houses!

Bunter rolled on to his room. Porson almost tottered away to the stairs, still looking like a man in a dream.

What Porson thought, Bunter did not know. He did not care very much. In his room, he proceeded to make a change that was undoubtedly very much a change for the better; and he surveyed in the glass a tubby figure, that threatened to burst out of an elegant tweed suit, with great satisfaction. And, having smirked at his reflection with a happy and gratified smirk, Billy Bunter rolled out to take a walk before lunch.

“Beasts!” murmured Billy Bunter.

He was feeling rather fed-up.

Mauleverer Towers was a magnificent place; it swarmed with servants, and the food was all that even Bunter could desire. The fat junior was satisfied, so far as that went. In a few days the Towers would be crowded with Christmas company, and Bunter, assured now that Mauly was not going to kick him out, was looking forward to the Yuletide festivities.

Hazeldene of the Remove was coming and bringing his sister Marjorie and some of her friends from Cliff House School, and Bunter looked forward to the pleased expression that would dawn on Marjorie’s pretty face when she saw him there. Billy really was a kind-hearted fellow, and liked giving pleasure to others.

But at the present moment Bunter was feeling fed-up. The beasts—Lord Mauleverer and the Famous Five—had gone off and left him on his own. Mauly’s uncle, Sir Reginald Brooke, and his good lady, had gone out to lunch; not that Bunter was keen on the society of an elderly baronet and an elderly lady. At present there was nobody else at the Towers, and Bunter was a gregarious fellow. His own company was fascinating, of course; still, he liked the company of others.

Next to eating, talking was Bunter’s chiefest delight, though sleeping ran it close. But he could not talk without a listener. Certainly, he liked to do all the talking and had little use for replies; still, he wanted somebody to listen-in when he talked. He really could not talk to himself.

He took a solitary walk before lunch, and when he came in he lunched with nobody but Sir Reginald’s secretary, an elderly gentleman who was a little deaf, and would say nothing but “Hey, hey,” in reply to Bunter’s easy flow of light and genial conversation.

The lunch was all that could be desired, and Bunter, as usual, lunched not wisely, but too well.

After lunch he rolled away to his room for a nap.

Many eyes had lingered on Bunter that morning. He wondered whether the servants recognised the handsome tweed suit he was wearing. Still, Bunter did not care what they thought in the servants’ hall.

That suit had fitted rather tightly when Bunter put it on. It felt still tighter after lunch. The slit up the back of the waistcoat prolonged itself a little, and a button went west. Bunter was used to little things like that, however. It was not the first time by many a

one, that he had strutted in borrowed plumes.

Having napped, and apprised all the Towers of the fact by a far-reaching melodious snore, Bunter came down. There had been a light fall of snow outside, and he was not inclined to go out. The library did not attract him, but he found diversion in the billiards-room for half an hour, knocking the balls about, and cutting the cloth. Then he wandered forth again, feeling more and more fed-up.

It was like those beasts to leave him on his own like this—after all he had done for them!

By this time Bunter had so much conversation bottled up in him, that he stopped Porson in the hall to give the butler the benefit of a little chat.

But household duties called Porson away; or, perhaps Bunter's genial conversation palled on him. He disappeared with a last lingering look at Bunter's handsome tweed suit.

The fat junior rolled away to the turret at last, to see whether the beasts were coming back. Little as he admired Harry Wharton & Co.—having always found them all far below his own high standard—he was rather anxious to see them come in. He was fed-up to his fat chin with his own entrancing company by this time.

Bunter blinked at the secret panel, with the idea in his fat mind of opening it and exploring the recesses beyond to fill up time.

But he shook his head.

It was dark and cold and chilly in the secret passages; and though Bunter did not believe in ghosts—in the daytime, at least—he did not feel disposed to venture alone into the gloomy recesses reputed to be haunted by the Red Earl.

He turned to one of the tall windows and looked out.

In the clear winter sunshine he had an extensive view of the wide acres of the Mauleverer estate, with the fields and woods and hills of Hampshire beyond. Far in the distance a tall spire indicated Winchester. It was a magnificent view, but it did not interest Bunter very much. There was no sign of the big car coming back with the Greyfriars party.

He turned from the window as he heard a footstep on the turret stair. Someone was coming up.

He blinked at a plump figure and a clean-shaven face. It was James Orris who entered the turret-room.

Bunter eyed him curiously. Unless the valet had come up for the view, he could not guess what the man wanted there.

Orris, evidently, was unaware that the room was occupied. He gave a violent start at the sight of Billy Bunter.

Bunter bestowed a genial grin on him.

“You can come in, my man!” he said patronisingly. Bunter was prepared to give Orris the benefit of his conversation till a more worthy victim could be found.

“Thank you, sir!” said Orris, in his quiet, deferential voice. “I was about to look from the turret, sir, to see whether his lordship was returning.”

“The beasts aren't coming back yet!” grunted Bunter.

“Oh, sir!” murmured Orris.

Perhaps he was surprised to hear his lordship's guest refer to his lordship and his fellow-guests as “beasts.”

Suddenly Orris' eyes became fixed on the grey tweed suit.

Evidently he recognised it.

He came quickly towards the fat junior.

Bunter frowned.

It was no business of Mauly's man if he was wearing Mauly's clothes—so far as Bunter could see, at all events.

"Excuse me, sir!" said Orris, evidently perturbed. "May I ask whether you have taken that suit from his lordship's room?"

Bunter gave him a glare.

"I suppose I can borrow a few things from Mauly without asking you!" he snapped.

"Oh, certainly, sir! But—but his lordship intended to wear that suit tomorrow morning."

"I suppose he's got others!" jeered Bunter.

"Oh, certainly! But—but——"

"It's all right, Orris," said Bunter. "You can tell Mauly I've borrowed the things—in fact, he will see me in them."

"But, sir, as his lordship's valet, I am in charge of his lordship's garments, and—and——"

"That's all right," said Bunter. "Mind your own business, Orris! Here, keep off, you silly idiot!" he added, jumping back.

Orris had stepped nearer to him, with a glint in his eyes that Bunter did not like at all. For the moment he had quite ceased to be the quiet, deferential manservant. It really looked for the moment as if the thought was in his mind of marching Bunter down to Mauly's room and making him change out of his lordship's clothes.

Bunter blinked at him in alarm.

"You cheeky rotter!" he gasped. "I'll jolly well ask Mauly to sack you! Go and eat coke!"

And Billy Bunter rolled out of the turret-room, and descended the stone stair rather hastily.

Orris made a stride after him, but paused.

For whatever mysterious reason, he was evidently deeply disturbed at finding that tweed suit adorning the fat person of William George Bunter.

He stood at the top of the stone stair staring after Bunter as he descended, and the look on his hard, clean-shaven face might have alarmed the Owl of the Remove had he glanced back.

"I say, you fellows!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! You're looking swell, Bunter!"

"I say, you fellows," said Bunter. "I've got something to tell you—something that will make you jump."

"Has your postal order come on from Greyfriars?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Where did you get that clobber?" grinned Bob Cherry. "I saw Mauly wearing a suit like that yesterday."

"Oh, gad!" said Lord Mauleverer, staring at Bunter.

"Mauly doesn't mind a pal borrowing a few things!" said Bunter scornfully. "He's not mean like you fellows! By the way, Orris was rather cheeky about it, Mauly, and I told him I'd ask you to sack him."

"Oh, gad!" repeated Lord Mauleverer.

"But that isn't what I was going to tell you," went on Bunter. "It's awfully important—fearfully important! Matter of life or death!"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "Whose jolly old life or death, fatty?"

"Mauly's!" said Bunter impressively.

"Wha-a-at!"

The Famous Five stared at Bunter. Lord Mauleverer blinked at him. The Owl of the Remove had succeeded in surprising the Christmas party.

“So Mauly’s in danger, is he?” gasped Bob Cherry.

“Yes.”

“Mean that you’re likely to bore him to death?”

“No!” roared Bunter. “I don’t, you silly ass!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Well, I don’t see any other danger he can be in,” said Bob, shaking his head.

“Feeling nervous, Mauly?”

“Not frightfully!” grinned Lord Mauleverer.

“I say, you fellows——” Bunter broke off abruptly, as Porson hovered near. He waited till Porson was out of hearing. “I say, I’ve not said anything yet. I haven’t told your uncle about your awful danger, Manly——”

“Good gad!”

“He’s rather an old ass, you know!”

“Wha-aat?”

“And I haven’t told your aunt, either—she’s rather a silly old frump——”

“Shall I kick him, Mauly?” asked Johnny Bull. “No!” gasped Lord Mauleverer. “I’m goin’ to kick him myself! Turn round, Bunter.”

“Oh, really, Mauly! I haven’t said a word yet! I thought of ’phoning up the police——”

“The—the police!” gasped Mauly.

“But I thought I’d leave it till you came in. Better come into your den and I’ll tell you. My idea is to keep it dark till we spot the villain.”

“What villain?” gasped Mauly.

“Is the fat idiot wandering in his mind?” asked Harry Wharton, in amazement.

“Has he any absurd mind to wander in?” asked Hurree Jamset Rain Singh.

“Come on!” urged Bunter. “I can’t tell you here—the servants will hear—some of them may be in the plot——”

“The—the—the plot!” stuttered Mauleverer.

“Yes, Porson may be in it——”

“Pi-pip-Porson?”

“Or Orris——”

“Orris?”

“Or John, or Peter, or George, or any of them!”

“John, or Peter, or George?” repeated Mauleverer, like a fellow in a dream.

“It’s plain enough that it’s somebody who’s got the run of the house,” said Bunter.

“Who is?” shrieked Mauleverer.

“That villain!”

“What villain, you benighted ass!”

“The one I’m telling you about—the one who is going to knock you on the head——”

“Kn-n-ock me on the head?”

“Yes, unless you pay him a thousand pounds.”

“Oh, good gad!”

“Mad as a hatter!” said Johnny Bull,

“Madder!” said Frank Nugent. “I suppose the fat duffer is trying to pull our leg somehow.”

“I tell you I’ve found it out!” hooted Bunter. “I tell you you’re in fearful danger, and I’m trying to shave your wife——”

“Wha-a-at?”

“I mean, save your life! Rely on me to protect you, Mauly! Lucky you’ve got a loyal

and devoted pal with you.”

“Oh, crumbs!”

Lord Mauleverer gazed blankly at Bunter. The fat junior grabbed him by the arm and fairly dragged him away to the old armoury, which was now used as a “den” by the schoolboy earl.

The Famous Five followed in great surprise. Unless William George Bunter had gone off his “rocker,” it was difficult to account for his amazing words and actions—though they had a strong suspicion that the fat Owl was making some egregious attempt to pull their leg.

As soon as they were inside Lord Mauleverer’s den, Billy Bunter carefully closed the door. Then he blinked cautiously about the room—looking behind the old armoured figures that stood by the walls, and into various niches and recesses. The juniors watched him, with growing astonishment. Bunter was apparently taking precautions against being overheard, and he was evidently labouring under deep excitement.

“All serene!” gasped Bunter at last. “Can’t be too careful, with your life at stake, Mauly!”

“You fat ass—”

“Don’t be afraid, old fellow! I’m here to protect you!” said Bunter reassuringly. “You know my pluck. I’m going to watch over you. After all, we’re pals!”

“Are we?” said Lord Mauleverer doubtfully.

“Will you tell us what this performance means, you howling ass?” asked Harry Wharton.

“Yaas, put us up to the game, you know,” said Mauleverer.

“Look at that!” said Bunter.

He slipped his hand into a pocket of the tweed jacket. He drew out a crumpled paper, and, with a dramatic gesture, threw it on Mauleverer’s writing-table.

“What the dooce—”

“Look at it!”

Lord Mauleverer smoothed out the crumpled paper and looked at it. Harry Wharton & Co. looked. They stared blankly at what they read.

Written in capital letters, apparently for the purpose of disguising the hand, was the following startling message:

“LORD MAULEVERER—

PLACE £1,000 ON THE OLD SUNDIAL, OR

PREPARE FOR DEATH!”

Bumps for Bunter!

HARRY WHARTON & Co. stared at that startling message in stupefaction.

Lord Mauleverer opened his eyes wide.

For some moments there was silence, the silence of utter amazement.

Billy Bunter blinked from face to face, through his big spectacles, in eager excitement.

Apparently he expected his thrilling excitement to be shared by the chums of the Remove.

If so he was disappointed.

The juniors were astounded; but not at all excited. They stared at the paper, and then

they stared at Bunter.

Harry Wharton was the first to speak.

“You frabjous idiot—”

“Oh, really, Wharton—”

“What’s this game, you benighted bandersnatch?” gasped Bob Cherry.

“Oh, really, Cherry—”

“Holy smoke!” said Lord Mauleverer. “Is this a jolly old joke? If it is, I don’t seem to get it! What did you write this silly rot for, Bunter?”

Bunter jumped.

“I! You silly ass! I—I didn’t write it!” he stuttered.

“Eh! Who did, then?”

“That villain!”

“What villain, you ass?”

“The one who wants the thousand pounds, of course,” said Bunter. “Can’t you see? It’s a case of your money or your life.”

“You pernicious chump—” said Johnny Bull.

“You terrific ass——”

“I say, you fellows, I tell you that paper was meant for Mauly—” gasped Bunter. “I don’t know who wrote it.”

“Gammon!”

“The gammonfulness it terrific!”

“I say, Mauly, you believe me, don’t you?” gasped Bunter, with an appealing blink at the schoolboy earl.

Apparently the fat Owl had not expected to have to deal with half a dozen doubting Thomases.

“Well, I’ll try, old bean,” said Mauly dubiously. “If this isn’t a little joke of yours, where did it come from?”

“I borrowed this suit from your room, old chap! I knew you wouldn’t mind lending a few things to an old pal, though your valet was rather cheeky about it. Well, going through the pockets—”

“What the dooce did you go through the pockets for?”

“I—I wasn’t looking to see if you’d left any money in them, Mauly—”

“If I found any, I wasn’t going to borrow it to go to the pictures while you fellows were out—”

“Oh, gad!”

“Well, going through the pockets not more than an hour ago,” said Bunter impressively, “I found that letter.”

“My dear man——” murmured Lord Mauleverer. “It was in the jacket pocket,” said Bunter. “Somebody must have got to your room and slipped it into your pocket, Mauly, for you to find there.”

“Oh, my hat!”

“Some awful villain!” said Bunter.

“A fat villain, you mean!” said Johnny Bull. “Beast! You’d have found the letter, Mauly, as soon as you happened to change into these things,” said Bunter. “As I happened to be wearing the jacket, I found it instead. See?”

“Pile it on!” said Bob Cherry.

“I say, you fellows—mean to say that you don’t believe me?” exclaimed Bunter.

“Believe you! Oh, my hat!”

“The believfulness is not terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.”

“Not likely!” chuckled Nugent.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Billy Bunter blinked at the juniors.

Lord Mauleverer was grinning, and the other fellows were laughing. There was no sign of anybody’s flesh creeping.

“I say, you fellows,” almost wailed Bunter, “it’s true! I tell you it’s true!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared the juniors.

Billy Bunter blinked at them, his little round eyes goggling through his spectacles. He had fully expected to thrill and alarm the Christmas party. Certainly, had that extraordinary paper been found by any other fellow, it would have produced a rather alarming effect.

But Bunter was suffering the fate of the boy in the old story who cried “Wolf!” so often when there was no wolf that he was unheeded when the wolf really came.

Instead of being thrilled and alarmed, the chums of the Remove roared with laughter. They were not taking Bunter’s word for it that some desperate scoundrel was seeking to extort money by threats from the schoolboy earl. To their minds, it was simply an egregious attempt to pull their legs, on the part of the Owl of the Remove.

“I say, you fellows,” wailed Bunter, “if you think I wrote that paper—”

“We don’t think—we know!” chuckled Bob Cherry.

“The knowfulness is terrific.”

“Pulling poor old Mauly’s leg!” said Nugent. “What beats me is the fat duffer thinking that we should believe a word of it! Did you get the wheeze from the films, Bunter?”

“Oh, really, Nugent—”

“Gentlemen, chaps, and fellows,” said Bob Cherry, “this fat idiot has been trying to pull our leg. I vote that we stuff his jolly old document down his back—”

“Hear, hear!”

“And bump him—”

“Passed unanimously!”

“I say, you fellows! Here, you keep off!” yelled Bunter in alarm. “I tell you it’s true! I found that paper— Yaroooooh!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Billy Bunter struggled frantically in the hands of the Philistines. The mysterious document was soon shoved down his back; then, in the grasp of many hands, he was swept off the floor.

Bump!

“Yoooooop!”

Bump!

“Wow-ow-ow! Help! Yaroooh! Fire!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Hold on, you men!” gasped Lord Mauleverer. “It was only Bunter’s little joke. And we’ll send him home by the next train.”

“Ow! It wasn’t! Yaroooh! And I’m not going!”

Bump!

“Ow, Help! Murder! Fire! Yoooooooooop!”

Bump!

“Oooooooooogh!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Harry Wharton & Co. streamed out of the armoury, leaving Billy Bunter sitting on the floor gasping and spluttering. Billy Bunter’s sins had found him out. His record as an

Ananias was his undoing. Almost for the first time in his fat career, Bunter had told the truth—and nobody believed a word of it!

“Jumpin’ Moses!

Lord Mauleverer uttered that startled ejaculation suddenly.

It was some hours later, and the chums of the Remove had gathered in the armoury, after dressing for dinner. Lord Mauleverer, a handsome and elegant figure in his evening-clothes, stood before the fire, with his hands in his trousers pockets, and a slightly thoughtful expression on his noble countenance. Billy Bunter was in his room—having lost train after train; and as he was cautiously keeping the door locked it looked as if he was going to lose all the trains in the time-table. Harry Wharton & Co. wondered whether even the dinner gong would draw the fat Owl out of his lair. The Famous Five glanced at Mauly, as he uttered a sudden ejaculation. Mauly had drawn one hand from his pocket, and in that hand was a slip of paper. Staring at the slip, Mauly ejaculated “Jumping Moses” in tones of great astonishment.

“Anything up, old bean?” asked Bob Cherry.

“Good gad!” said Lord Mauleverer. “What the thump’s the meanin’ of this? Has Bunter been up to his tricks again?”

He held out the slip of paper.

The Famous Five looked at it. Then they stared. It bore an inscription in capital letters, like the previous paper that Bunter had found—or stated that he had found—in the pocket of the tweed jacket. And the message ran:

“LORD MAULEVERER.
THIS IS THE SECOND WARNING, AND
THE LAST!
PLACE £1,000 IN BANKNOTES ON THE
OLD SUNDIAL TONIGHT, OR DIE!
YOUR LIFE IS IN MY HANDS!”

“Now, what does that mean, you men?” asked Lord Mauleverer. “Is it a new Christmas game, or what?”

The chums of the Remove were too surprised to speak for some moments. They could only stare at the mysterious message. Harry Wharton was the first to speak.

“You found this in your pocket?”

“Yaas.”

“Somebody must have put it there! And it can only have been—”

“Bunter!” growled Johnny Bull.

“The Bunterfulness is terrific.”

“That fat old bean’s keeping it up!” grinned Bob Cherry. “He’s got the idea from the jolly old films, I suppose; and he’s trying to make your flesh creep, Mauly!”

Lord Mauleverer smiled.

“I suppose that’s it!” he said. “I don’t quite get the joke—but it may be Bunter’s idea of fun. The fat chump!”

“Well, it couldn’t be anybody but Bunter playing the goat,” said Nugent. “I suppose there isn’t some awful rascal after your tin, Mauly?”

“Rather not!”

“This was written by somebody who knows his way about here,” said Harry. “The old sundial must be the one near the well, in the grounds. And whoever put it in your pocket must have the run of the house; it was put there for you to find when you

changed for dinner. Either it's that fat idiot playing the goat, or there's some member of your jolly old household after you for blackmail."

"Bunter, of course," said Lord Mauleverer. "But it's queer! Bunter's every kind of an idiot; but a jape like this is really the limit. I suppose he slipped into my room during the afternoon, and put this into the pocket of my bags; Orris had laid the things out ready for me. By Jove! I wish Bunter had caught that train."

"The catchfulness will not be terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Lord Mauleverer compressed his lips a little. The problem of Billy Bunter was one that his lordship had not yet been able to solve.

The fat Owl had remained in his room all the afternoon. He had even missed tea; though, after his uncommon exertions at lunch, probably even Bunter had not missed it very much.

"My lord!"

Porson appeared in the doorway.

"Yaas, Porson."

"Mr. Bunter has rung, sir, and sent down a message to your lordship."

"Oh, good! Is he ready for the car?"

Porson coughed.

"I think not, my lord. He desired me to inform you that he was ill—"

"Ill!" ejaculated Lord Mauleverer; and the Famous Five grinned.

The fat Owl was evidently "trying it on" again.

"Yes, my lord."

"What on earth's the matter with him?"

"He thinks it is pneumonia, my lord. He desires your lordship to step up and speak to him."

"Very well, Porson."

Lord Mauleverer sighed, as the butler retired. He glanced round at the grinning faces of the Famous Five.

"If he's really ill!" he murmured.

"If!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

"The if-fulness is terrific!"

"Well, let's go and speak to him," said Mauleverer. "A fellow doesn't want to be suspicious, of course; but I can't help thinkin' that perhaps Bunter isn't really ill, you know."

"Go hon!" grinned Johnny Bull.

The juniors went up to Bunter's room. They found the door still locked; apparently Bunter had talked to Porson through the door. Lord Mauleverer tapped, and a faint voice answered.

"Is that you, Mauly, old man?"

"Yaas."

"I say, Mauly, I'm ill!"

"Well, let me in."

"I don't think I can move! I've fearful pains in my legs, owing to those beasts bumping me so hard. I've something like a burning dagger in the spinal column of my ribs."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle, you beast! I can't get off this bed! As for catching a train, that's absolutely impossible. I say Mauly, you'll have to send my dinner up to my room."

"And pass it through the keyhole?" chuckled Bob. "if you can't get off the bed, you can't open the door."

“I—I think I could manage to get as far as the door.”

“Well, get as far as the door, and unlock it, you fat fraud!” said Lord Mauleverer.

“I say, no larks, you know!” said Bunter. “I’m too ill to move! I mean to move out of the room! I’ve got galloping plumbago, I think—”

“Open the door, ass.”

“I say, it’s pax, isn’t it?” said Bunter. “I’ll catch a train in the morning, Mauly! I may be well enough to move then. I’m not sure—but I’ll try. See?”

“Look here, Bunter—”

“Well, you look here, Mauly! I’m not the fellow to stay where I’m not welcome, I hope! But I’m simply too ill to move. Am I staying tonight or not?” demanded Bunter categorically.

“Yaas. Now let me in.”

There was a sound of movement in the room. The door opened, and the juniors entered. Billy Bunter blinked at them with a pathetic blink. He did not look ill. But whether he was ill or not, he was hungry. Now that dinner was at hand, something had to be done.

“I say, you fellows, there’s nothing to cackle at,” said Bunter. “I’ve got fearful pains—”

“Too ill to eat any dinner?” asked Nugent.

“I think perhaps a meal might bring me round a bit. I don’t feel like eating—I never do, really—but I’m going to try to take a mouthful or so.”

“Oh, my hat!” said Bob. “If you take a mouthful, Bunter, there goes the whole dinner! What about us?”

“Ha, ha. ha!”

“Beast!” roared Bunter.

Bunter’s mouth was capacious; but really it was not so capacious as all that.

“Now, look here, Bunter,” said Lord Mauleverer. “I’m sorry, and all that; but you’re the jolly old limit, you know, and you’re catchin’ the mornin’ train. And if you play any more tricks like this”—he held out the slip of paper—“I’ll have you bundled headfirst into the car and buzzed away. See?”

Billy Bunter blinked at the mysterious message with a startled blink.

“Oh, my hat! That’s the same villain again!” he ejaculated.

“Don’t be an ass! You sneaked along to my room, and put this into my pocket, you fat ass!”

“I didn’t!” roared Bunter.

“Fathead!”

“I haven’t been out of the room since I came up!” howled Bunter. “I’ve kept the door locked all the time.”

“Then who put this in my pocket?”

“How should I know, you fathead?” hooted Bunter. “It’s the same villain who put the other paper in your pocket, of course!”

“And we jolly well know the villain!” chuckled Bob. “A fat villain—a podgy villain—”

“Oh, really, Cherry—”

“Look here, Bunter, what are you playing these idiotic tricks for?” demanded Wharton. “Are you ass enough to think that you can frighten Mauly with such rot?”

“I didn’t!” yelled Bunter.

“What’s the good of telling whoppers, when we know that you did?”

“If you can’t take a fellow’s word, Wharton—”

“Oh, crumbs!”

Lord Mauleverer tossed the paper on the bedside table. "You can have it back, Bunter," he said quietly. "And I warn you to chuck it. If my uncle or aunt saw that they might think it was serious and get alarmed. I tell you plainly that if I find any more of these idiotic messages you go neck and crop into the car to be driven home, ill or not."

"I say, Mauly—"

Lord Mauleverer walked out of the room without waiting for Bunter to finish.

"Beast!"

Bunter picked up the slip of paper and blinked at it.

"I say, you fellows, the villain means business this time," he said. "He says that if Mauly doesn't shell out the money tonight, you know—"

"Keep it up!" said Nugent, laughing.

"You can see from this that he's jolly desperate," said Bunter. "I can tell you that he will look on the sundial tonight, and if the money isn't there, what do you think he will do?"

Harry Wharton & Co. gazed at Bunter. Really, they might almost have believed that Bunter was speaking the truth if they had not known him so well.

"Mauly's in danger!" said Bunter impressively. "Some awful villain is after his money. There's a villain in this house, you fellows!"

"And he's talking to us at the present moment," grinned Bob.

"You silly ass!" hooted Bunter. "Do you think I wrote this stuff for a lark?"

"We jolly well know you did."

Bunter blinked at the juniors in intense exasperation. Really, it was hard to be doubted like this when he was telling the truth—almost for the first time in his life!

"Can't you fellows see that Mauly's in danger?" he gasped. "His uncle ought to be told—"

"If you try to scare old Brooke, you fat idiot, Mauly will kick you out on the spot. That's a tip!"

"The police ought to be told—"

"Oh, crumbs! They might run you in for trying to pull their leg."

"I say, you fellows, let's sit up and keep watch tonight," said Bunter; "or you fellows can keep watch and call me if there's danger—"

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

"Blessed if I can see anything to cackle at! Look here—"

"I can see us sitting up and keeping watch!" chuckled Bob. "I can see us having our legs pulled to that extent by a fat, frabjous owl!"

"I tell you—" yelled Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the jolly old dinner-gong! Better buck up and get well, Bunter. There's turkey for dinner!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Famous Five went down. Billy Bunter, as it turned out, was well enough to eat his dinner—quite a large dinner. His illness, in fact, was not needed till the time came to catch his train in the morning. So the fat Owl postponed it till the morning.

Bunter on the Watch!

MIDNIGHT!

Mauleverer Towers was buried in silence and darkness.

The winter wind rustled in leafless branches, shaking down snow on the frozen earth, and wailed among the ancient chimney-pots and round the tall turret, haunted—or not

haunted—by the phantom of the Red Earl.

Lord Mauleverer slept the sleep of the just. Harry Wharton & Co. were slumbering, dreaming of Christmas festivities.

The morrow was Christmas Eve, when many guests were to arrive at the Towers, among them, Marjorie and her friends. Yuletide was going to be nobly celebrated, and it was going to be a good time. And the chums of the Remove certainly were not dreaming of danger to their noble host, or of giving the least heed to the strange message he had found in his pocket.

That, to their minds, was only a fatuous jape on the part of the egregious Owl, and they would have been surprised, could they have been aware how Bunter was occupied while their own heads lay peacefully on soft pillows.

Bunter was not asleep.

Bunter had been thinking.

This was unusual; but the fat Owl Undoubtedly had food for thought.

Bunter—and Bunter alone—knew that those mysterious warnings, written in capital letters, on strips of paper, were genuine—threats from some unknown and mysterious enemy of the schoolboy earl.

But for Bunter's presence at the Towers those warnings would have fallen into Lord Mauleverer's hands, and he would have known how matters stood. But the first had fallen into Bunter's hands: and not one of the fellows doubted that he had produced it, and followed it up with the second. Only Bunter knew the truth.

After dinner that evening, Bunter had slept. He needed sleep, for he was going to remain awake all night!

While the other fellows were buried in slumber, Bunter was sitting, fully dressed, in an armchair before the fire in his room. He had put the electric light out. He did not need a light; and besides, a light would have alarmed the unknown "villain." On a table beside Bunter was a large dish, containing an immense stack of mince pies. These were Bunter's comfort while he sat awake. From moment to moment he gobbled a mince pie, and was comforted.

But as the hour grew later, Bunter forgot even the few remaining mince pies and listened intently and anxiously.

The later the hour grew the less Bunter liked his vigil.

If danger threatened Mauly that dark winter's night and Billy Bunter weighed in to the rescue, it was absolutely certain that he would not have to catch that dreaded train in the morning.

But, to do Bunter justice, that was not his only motive. He thought of himself first, second, and third; but he really was concerned for the unsuspecting Mauly, too.

Bunter pictured himself watching over the safety of poor old Mauly, of grabbing some stealthy villain by the throat. It was quite a fascinating picture, and it bucked the fat Owl to think of it—until the hour grew late and the house silent and still. After that, it was not so attractive.

Bunter was always prepared to face the deadliest danger, so long as it was not in the offing. When the time came to be weighed in the balance, he was likely to be found wanting.

As the dark night grew older, Bunter grew more and more uneasy.

Grabbing a stealthy villain by the throat was an easy thing to plan—a few hours ahead!

But when the time came, the actual grabbing was quite a different matter!

The stealthy villain might grab back—in fact, he was pretty certain to do so—and the idea was not attractive at all.

Bunter felt a palpitation In his fat heart at the thought of it.

His plans were cut and dried. At a late hour he was going to creep along the corridor and keep watch outside Mauly's door in the dark. Then he would be on the spot, ready to grab the villain when, and if, he came.

But though the time to take up his watch had come, and gone, Bunter was still in his armchair before the dying fire.

He did not admit to himself that his fat courage had failed him, and that he dared not step out of his room into the shadowy corridor. Bunter was not the fellow to admit that, even to himself.

He decided that, all things considered, he might as well stay in his room, and keep watch there!

So he stayed!

Midnight chimed out from somewhere in the distance, and Bunter gave a start, and shivered a little, as he listened to the deep strokes dying away.

The wail of the wind, the snapping of old wainscots, came with an eerie effect in the silence of midnight, as well as the recollection of the ghost that was said to haunt Mauleverer Towers at Christmas-time.

Bunter was strongly tempted to plunge into bed, draw the blankets over him, and forget the whole affair in sleep. And, in spite of a generous allowance of sleep during the day, he was drowsy.

But he nobly resisted.

In fact, he was now reluctant to stir, even to get into bed. He had long ceased to help himself to mince pies, or to drop logs on the fire, which was burning very low. He had set his door a few inches ajar, so that he could hear any stealthy sound from the passage. Now he wished that he hadn't; but it was too late; he had a strong disinclination to approach the door or to move at all. The fact was that, in the silence and stillness of the December midnight, all Bunter's courage, such as it was, had oozed out at his fat finger-ends, and he was in a state of hopeless funk.

He sat in the armchair, quite still, in thickening darkness, as the fire died out, and palpitated with nervous dread.

W. G. Bunter, as a matter of fact, was not of the stuff of which heroes are made! Too late he realised it.

Suddenly, and involuntarily, he gave a violent start, and his fat heart almost leaped into his mouth.

There was a sound from the corridor.

Bunter's heart beat like a hammer. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles. He hardly breathed.

No sleeper could have heard that faint, stealthy sound.

Even awake, Bunter would not have heard it had not his door been ajar and his nerves on the strain.

But he heard it—and there was no mistaking it! It was a soft, creeping, stealthy footstep!

Bunter could have groaned from sheer terror.

But he made no sound, only listening, with straining ears and throbbing heart.

Anyone desiring to reach Lord Mauleverer's room had to come along the corridor from the stairs, as the passage was a "blind alley," ending in a tall window with no outlet. And that stealthy, creeping footfall came from the direction of the stairs.

It seemed to Bunter, in those terrifying moments, that the unknown who was creeping down the passage must hear the thumping of his heart and take the alarm!

The stealthy creeping passed his door. It died away down the passage; the unknown

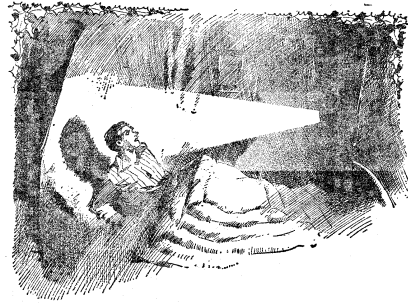
had gone on.

That was a relief, at least! But he—whoever he was— had gone on to Lord Mauleverer's room! That was certain! The mysterious danger that threatened the schoolboy earl was close upon him now.

Still Bunter sat without motion, glued by terror to his chair.

His plans, cut and dried with care, were forgotten.

Bunter would no more have followed that creeping figure, and grabbed him by the throat, than he would have tracked a tiger to his lair in the jungle. His fat limbs would have failed him if he had made the attempt!



From behind the gleaming beam the voice muttered, "silence!"

Minutes passed—while Bunter quaked with horror, too terrified to move; terrified of drawing the unknown wretch's attention upon himself.

What was happening to Lord Mauleverer?

That thought, at last, spurred Bunter into motion. With an effort, shaking in every limb, he dragged himself from the chair. Slowly, as if his feet were of lead, he dragged himself across to the door. There he listened, shuddering. There was no sound—and at length, with another effort, he put his head out. A dim glimmer of snowy starlight fell in at the high window at a distance. The corridor was vacant. Billy Bunter pulled himself together, taking his courage in both hands, as it were, and made a frantic rush across the passage to Harry Wharton's room, tore open the door, and bolted in. And once inside, he yelled, with a yell that woke nearly every echo of Mauleverer Towers.

"Help! Help! Help!"

Lord Mauleverer opened his eyes.

He blinked.

A touch had awakened him. And as his eyes opened, a beam of bright light dazzled them.

It came from an electric-torch held in an unseen hand.

He blinked dazedly.

With the dazzling light in his eyes blinding him, he could see nothing. From the blackness behind the gleaming beam came a muttering, husky voice.

"Silence!"

"Oh, gad!" gasped Lord Mauleverer.

He made a movement to disengage himself from the bedclothes, and sit up, utterly amazed and confounded. But before he could do so a grip was laid on his throat, pinning him down.

He gurgled.

"Silence!" repeated the voice. "One cry and you will never utter another. I am a

desperate man!”

The light was shut off.

Lord Mauleverer stared dazedly into the darkness. He was dimly aware of a dark form that bent over the bed.

His heart thumped and throbbed. He could not speak. The grasp on his throat was like iron; it choked him into silence, and it seemed to him that it would choke out his life.

He gurgled for breath.

“Listen to me.” The voice was a husky whisper. “Utter a cry to alarm the house and it will be your last! Do not attempt to struggle—you are an infant in my hands! There is a chloroform pad within a foot of your head—once it is placed over your face you will never know anything again! Take warning!”

The schoolboy earl lay still.

He was too dazed and amazed to think clearly, but he was aware that he was in desperate hands.

Faintly, a sickly odour came to him. He knew that the unseen assailant had spoken the truth. It was the smell of chloroform.

The grip on his throat relaxed.

“I have warned you!” came the husky whisper. “Take care! Speak in a whisper, or you will never speak again.”

“Good gad!” gasped Lord Mauleverer.

He collected himself a little, but he did not attempt to stir. The grip on him was that of a powerful man, and he was well aware that he had no chance in a struggle. And the sickly scent of the chloroform was very near.

“Who—who are you?” he breathed. “What—what’s this game?”

“Never mind who I am! You have received two warnings from me—and you have not heeded them.”

Mauleverer started violently.

“What? What do you mean? What do—”

“You have not placed the money on the sundial! You have defied one who holds your life in his hands.”

“Good gad!” breathed Mauleverer.

He stared upwards in dizzy amazement. Dimly he made out the shape of the half-seen figure; and he could discern that the face looming over him was covered by a black mask.

Slowly he realised the truth.

“You understand?”

“Oh, gad! I—I thought it was a silly trick of that fat ass Bunter, and—and it was—”

“This is your last warning!” went on the husky whisper, as Mauleverer’s voice trailed away. “I am a desperate man! You are rich—richer than you need be. A thousand pounds is the ransom of your life.”

“Oh!” gasped Mauleverer.

“Place a thousand pounds, in banknotes, on the old sundial, and you will never hear of me again. Do this tomorrow. And give me your word of honour to leave the sundial unwatched. You understand?”

“Oh, quite!” said Lord Mauleverer.

He was cool again now.

“You consent?”

“No fear!”

He caught a glitter of the eyes from the eye-holes of the mask that loomed shadowy over his upturned face.

“Take care!” came the whispering voice. “You are in desperate hands. You should realise that.”

“I know it,” answered Lord Mauleverer quietly. “I don’t know who you are, you scoundrel, but I know you must be a precious villain. But if you think you can frighten me, you are mistaken. Go and eat coke!”

He heard the deep breathing of the man leaning over him. The grasp on his throat tightened a little.

“You refuse?”

“Yaas.”

“Your life—”

“Oh, can it!” said Lord Mauleverer. “You don’t dare! You’ve got only one neck, and I fancy you know how to take care of it.”

There was a pause.

Lord Mauleverer made no movement. He was at the mercy of his unknown, half-seen assailant. But he was cool as ice. And he was aware that his coolness startled and surprised the unknown. He knew that the man had expected to see him trembling. Whoever he was, if he knew Mauleverer, he had not judged him well.

“You are right,” came the whisper, at last. “I have, as you say, only one neck, and I shall not place it in the noose. But there are other means.”

He paused again.

“You will disappear from your home,” came the voice again. “You will be secured in a safe place, and neither food nor drink will pass your lips till you come to my terms. Your training has not fitted you to endure an ordeal like that, Lord Mauleverer.”

“You won’t get away with it easily, whoever you are,” answered Lord Mauleverer coolly. “I’ll take the chance. But if I were sure you could do as you threaten, I wouldn’t give you a penny piece. Do you think I’m a coward, you scoundrel?”

He heard a hissing breath from the unknown.

“That is your final answer?”

“That’s it!”

“Then you leave me no alternative. When you have starved in the darkness for a few days—”

The stronger scent of the chloroform warned Mauleverer that the hand that held the pad was approaching his face.

He had no chance, and he knew it, but he was not the fellow to submit tamely. He made a sudden, fierce effort to rise, at the same time attempting to utter a shout for help.

But no sound left his lips. Something soft and clinging was jammed down over nose and mouth, and he sank back helplessly. For a few seconds his senses whirled, and then came unconsciousness.

He knew no more.

He did not know that he was lifted from his bed and wrapped in a dressing-gown: that he was raised on a strong shoulder and borne to the door. He did not hear the sudden, startled exclamation that broke from the masked man as a sudden din of yelling came ringing along the dark corridor from a room farther on.

“Help! Help! Help! He’s got Mauly! I say, you fellows, wake up! Wake up! Help! Murder! Help!”

There was a curse between gritted teeth. From an open doorway up the corridor a light flashed, as it was turned suddenly on. It streamed out into the passage. The wild yelling went on.

“Help! Help! Help!”

“What the thump—”

“Help! Murder! Mauly! Help!”

The insensible schoolboy earl was dropped to the floor. The masked man raced down the corridor.

He had to pass the open, lighted door to escape, and he had not a fraction of a second to spare. He ran like the wind, but as he ran a figure appeared from the lighted doorway, and he crashed into it.

The Man in Black!

HARRY WHARTON came out of the land of dreams with a jump.

He was not a heavy sleeper; but had he slept like Rip Van Winkle the frantic yelling in his room would have awakened him.

“Help! Help! Help! Murder! Mauly! I say, help!” Bunter was yelling on his top note. Wharton started up in bed.

Bunter, fumbling blindly for the electric switch, turned it on, and the room was flooded with light.

Wharton sprang from the bed.

“Bunter, what the thump—”

His first impression was that the fat Owl was in the grip of nightmare. Bunter’s face was white, his eyes starting behind his spectacles, and he yelled and shrieked frantically. In his wild excitement he grasped Wharton by the arm, and with the other hand pointed to the open door, fairly jabbering.

“Mauly—Mauly! Go and help him! Murder! Mauly!”

“What utter rot! What—” gasped Wharton.

“Help him! He’s got him! I heard him! For Heaven’s sake—” groaned Bunter.

Whether it was nightmare or not, the fat Owl was wildly excited and alarmed, almost gibbering with terror. And Wharton, leaving him to gibber, ran to the door. Obviously it was wisest to ascertain whether anything was happening to Mauly without losing time.

He rushed out into the passage, turning in the direction of Lord Mauleverer’s room.

Crash!

A running figure coming down the corridor like the wind came past the doorway as he ran out, crashing into him, and bowling him over like a ninepin.

Wharton sprawled helplessly.

The figure stumbled over him, and fell.

But it picked itself up again instantly. Wharton, staring, had a glimpse of a figure in black, with a black mask drawn closely over the whole of the face, leaving only the eyes visible.

But it was only an instant’s glimpse.

The man in black raced on, vanished round the corner of the passage towards the stairs, and was gone.

“Oh!” gasped Wharton.

He staggered up breathlessly.

He made one step after the fleeing man, stopped, turned back, and ran up the corridor to Mauly’s room. He knew now that it was not a false alarm. That glimpse of the fleeing figure in black was proof enough for that. What had happened to Mauly?

Bunter’s wild yells were still ringing. Every member of the Co. had been awakened, and lights were flashing on, and doors opening.

Harry Wharton reached Mauleverer’s door, and stumbled over a form that lay half-in

the doorway, half-out in the passage.

“Mauly! Is that you, Mauly?” panted Wharton.

With a strange dread at his heart, Wharton dropped on his knees beside the still form, dimly seen in the dark.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” came Bob Cherry’s startled voice. “What’s the jolly old row?”

“Turn on the light!” shouted Wharton.

The electric light in the corridor was switched on. “Mauly—Mauly, old man!”

The sudden light revealed Lord Mauleverer lying on the floor, his face white, set, lifeless.

“Mauly!” panted Wharton.

The fearful thought was in his mind for a second that Mauleverer was dead. There was no sign of life in the still face with its closed eyes.

But the schoolboy earl’s heart was beating as Wharton pressed a hand to his chest.

And at the same moment he became conscious of a faint, clinging, sickly odour.

Mauly was living, but he was completely insensible, under the influence of chloroform.

“What the dickens—”

“My esteemed chum—”

“What the thump—”

“It’s Mauly! Something’s happened to him!” said Wharton huskily. “He’s been attacked—chloroformed!

Help me get him back to bed!”

“Oh, crumbs!”

“But who—”

“Help me with him.”

The insensible Mauleverer was lifted and carried back to his bed. He lay there, inert as a log.

“But who—who—what—how——” stuttered Nugent. “I saw the man just for a second. He’s got away!” said Harry. “A man with his face covered. Bunter woke me up—”

Bunter was still yelling. Footsteps could be heard now. The house was alarmed.

Porson, half-dressed, came hurrying up the corridor, followed by several menservants.

Harry Wharton ran out into the corridor.

“Bunter! Shut up, Bunter! It’s all right now. Porson, Lord Mauleverer has been attacked. The man ran down the stairs. He must be still in the house. Search for him!”

“H-his lordship attacked?” stuttered Porson.

“Yes, yes!”

“I say, you fellows—”

“It’s all right, Bunter. Dry up now, for goodness’ sake!”

“Oh, really, Wharton—”

“His lordship attacked!” gasped Porson, as if he could scarcely believe his ears. “His lordship attacked in his own mansion!”

“Some of you call Sir Reginald Brooke!” said Wharton. “Here, Orris, go and wake Sir Reginald!”

Orris was coming up the corridor at a run.

“What has happened, sir?” he exclaimed.

“Lord Mauleverer has been attacked!”

“Good heavens!”

“Call Sir Reginald at once!”

“Very good, sir!” said Orris, and he hurried away. Porson entered Lord Mauleverer’s

room, and stood staring blankly at the insensible form on the bed.

“He is not—not—not——” stammered Porson. His plump face was as white as chalk. “No, no! It’s chloroform. Call all the servants, and search for the man!” rapped out Wharton. “A man dressed in black, with a masked face. I saw him as he ran. He got away down the stairs.”

“Good gracious!”

The portly butler hastened from the room. Sir Reginald Brooke, in dressing-gown and slippers came hurrying on the scene, startled and amazed. The whole house was in an uproar by this time, lights flashing from almost every window, stairs echoing to hurried footsteps, voices calling and shouting.

“Herbert, my boy!” gasped the old baronet, as he gazed in horror at Lord Mauleverer’s still, colourless face. “Herbert!

“I say, you fellows, is he alive?” gasped Billy Bunter.

“Yes, you ass!” grunted Johnny Bull.

“Well, if he’s alive, I’ve saved his life!” said Bunter. “I say, Mauly, old man, lucky I was keeping watch—what? Why, what’s the matter with him, you fellows?”

“Chloroform, fathead!”

“Oh, crikey!”

“But what—what—what——” gasped Sir Reginald. “He’s coming to,” said Bob Cherry, dabbing Lord Mauleverer’s face with a sponge dipped in cold water.

“He’s all right!”

“But what—what—— Wharton, tell me what has happened. Who has done this?” exclaimed the old baronet.

Wharton hurriedly explained, as far as he could, Sir , Reginald listened in utter amazement.

“I will remain with him,” he said. “Go and help search for the wretch who has done this. Tell Porson to telephone to the police and for a doctor!”

The juniors were eager enough to join in the search for the schoolboy earl’s assailant, but they had been unwilling to leave Mauleverer. Now that his uncle was present, however, they hurried from the room. Billy Bunter rolled after them as far as the doorway, and stopped.

“I say, you fellows, I’ll look after Mauly!” he called out. “Rely on me to protect him!” And the fat Owl remained in Lord Mauleverer’s room, though whether he was thinking of Mauly’s safety or his own was perhaps doubtful.

“That’s the way he went, sir,” said Orris.

“Gone!” said Wharton, between his teeth.

Porson was at the telephone, spluttering into the transmitter in wild agitation.

Innumerable menservants were searching the great building for Lord Mauleverer’s assailant. It was Orris who discovered the open window.

It was a casement window on the ground floor in a room adjoining the library used by Sir Reginald Brooke’s secretary, Mr. Dyer. It was wide open, letting in the keen December wind, which fluttered snowflakes into the room.

Harry Wharton leaned out and stared into the winter darkness.

Snow was falling in light, powdery flakes.

The light from the window streamed out on spotless snow, which covered the ground like a white mantle. There was no sign of footprints on the snow. But the feathery flakes were falling fast, and footprints were not likely to remain uncovered.

Wharton set his teeth.

He had had little hope that the mysterious assailant of Lord Mauleverer would be

captured. Obviously, the man, whoever he was, would lose no time in seeking safety once the alarm was given. A minute would have been enough for him, and he had had many minutes while the juniors were looking after Mauleverer.

“He must have got in this way, sir,” said Orris, in his quiet, deferential tones. “You can see that the catch of the window has been forced. And he went the same way.”

“Looks like it,” said Harry.

“Don’t see any footprints,” said Johnny Bull.

“The snow is falling, sir,” said Orris. “It would cover up his footprints very quickly.” Johnny Bull looked puzzled.

“He must have made pretty deep footprints, jumping from this window,” he said. “I hardly believe the snow would cover them up so quickly without leaving a sign.”

“But he’s gone!” said Bob.

“Well, I don’t get it,” said Johnny, in his slow, thoughtful way. “I don’t believe footprints made by a man jumping down could get covered out of sight so soon. There isn’t a trace. I—I suppose he can’t have opened this window for a trick while he’s dodging about somewhere else?”

“Well, it stands to reason that he got out of the house as quickly as he could,” said Nugent. “Why should he open this window, fathead, and then go and look for another way out?”

“Well, I suppose he wouldn’t,” agreed Johnny Bull. “All the same, I don’t understand no sign being left if he got out this way.”

Harry Wharton started. Johnny’s remark had put a new and alarming idea into his mind.

“Is it possible that this is a trick, and that he’s hiding somewhere in the house—to get at Mauly again?” he exclaimed.

“Oh, my hat! That may be it!” said Nugent. “Mauly mustn’t be left alone for a minute. His uncle’s with him, but—”

“I will go to his lordship at once, sir!” said Orris.

“Good!”

The valet hurried away.

“Mauly will be all right with his uncle and Orris, not to mention Bunter,” said Bob Cherry. “Let’s go on rooting round the house. If the villain’s still here, we’ll jolly well nail him!”

Wharton was about to close the window, but he stopped. “Better leave things as they are for the police,” he said. And, leaving the window open, the juniors rejoined the numerous searchers who were still rooting through the house.

There was no more sleep in Mauleverer Towers that night.

Before long the doctor’s car came grinding through the snow, and Porson led the medical gentleman up to Mauleverer’s room. A few minutes later another car honked through the night, with an inspector and a constable from Winchester.

By that time the search had been given up. It was clear that the mysterious assailant was not to be found within the Towers. Even Johnny Bull no longer had any doubt that the wretch had escaped by the window of the secretary’s room.

Inspector Rymer was a very puzzled gentleman as he listened to the account of the strange happening. Lord Mauleverer was in the doctor’s care, and could not yet be questioned. But Sir Reginald came down to the library to see the inspector, and Mr. Rymer questioned the Famous Five, and then Orris told how he had found the window open, and the inspector proceeded to examine the open window.

Harry Wharton gave the best description he could of the man he had glimpsed, but he could only describe a figure in black with a masked face. The inspector rubbed his

chin thoughtfully.

“You say you were awakened by Bunter?” he said. “I must see Master Bunter at once. Has he explained how he knew what was going on?”

“No,” said Harry. “I haven’t asked him. I only know that he came yelling into my room and woke me up.”

“Let Bunter be called at once!” said Sir Reginald. “I sent him back to his own room, as he fell asleep in Herbert’s room.”

“I’ll get him!” said Harry.

He hurried out of the library and scudded up the stairs. Bunter was in his own room, as a deep and resonant snore announced when Harry Wharton arrived there.

He turned the door-handle, but the door did not open. Bunter was not taking risks. The door was locked.

Wharton thumped angrily on the panels.

“Bunter! Bunter, you fat idiot!”

Snore!

Thump! Thump! Bang! Kick!

“Bunter!” yelled Wharton.

“Oh! Wharrer marrer? I say, you fellows, has he come back? Yaroooh! I say, keep him off!”

“You fat chump!” roared Wharton. “You’re wanted!”

“Oh!” gasped Bunter. “Is that you, old chap? All right! I say, wharrer you waking me up for? I’ve been awake nearly all night! Can’t you let a fellow have forty winks?”

“Open the door!”

“ ’Tain’t light yet!” hooted Bunter. “ ’Tain’t breakfast-time, you ass! I’m not getting up yet!”

“You frabjous chump, the police have come, and the inspector from Winchester wants to see you!”

“Oh!” gasped Bunter.

Wharton heard him roll off the bed. The door was opened, and the fat Owl blinked out.

“Come on, you dummy!” growled Wharton.

“Beast! I’m coming!”

Bunter followed Wharton down the stairs, sleepily blinking behind his big spectacles. But his manner was very important as he rolled into the library. Bunter was, so to speak, the goods for once in his fat life! He was the fellow who mattered!

“This is Bunter, Mr. Rymer,” said Sir Reginald. “Bunter, explain to the inspector.”

“Certainly!” said Bunter cheerfully. “I know all about it, sir—know the whole thing from start to finish!”

“Indeed!” said Inspector Rymer very dryly. To Bunter’s surprise, the Winchester inspector glared at him instead of being properly impressed. “In that case, Master Bunter, a great deal of trouble will be saved.”

“Talk sense, you fat ass!” whispered Nugent.

“Oh, really, Nugent, don’t butt in!” said Bunter.

“It seems that it was you who gave the alarm, Master Bunter!” rapped the inspector.

“Yes, rather!” said Bunter. “You see, I was keeping watch. Mauly being my best pal, I stayed awake to watch over his safety. I’d do more than that for a fellow I really like. As for the danger, of course I never gave that a thought. Not my style.”

Mr. Rymer stared at Bunter. The fat Owl of Greyfriars seemed to be a new experience to him.

“Do you mean to imply that you knew that an attack was to be made on Lord

Mauleverer?" he exclaimed.

"Of course I did! That's why I kept watch," said Bunter. "I told Mauly and all these fellows, and they wouldn't take any notice."

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"You see," said Bunter, blinking cheerfully at the amazed inspector, "there's a villain after Mauly for his money. He's written messages warning him to put the money on the sundial—"

"You fat ass!" hissed Johnny Bull. "Haven't you sense enough not to spin that yarn to a police inspector?"

"My esteemed idiotic Bunter—"

The fat Owl gave them a lofty, disdainful blink.

"I say, you fellows, you shut up!" he said. "Don't you butt in! You leave this to me! Look here, sir!"

And, to the consternation of the juniors, Billy Bunter produced the two mysterious missives—the one he had found in the pocket of the tweed jacket and the one Mauleverer had found in the pocket of his evening "bags"—and threw them on the table before the Winchester inspector.

The Vindication of W G, Bunter!

INSPECTOR RYMER stared blankly at the two papers! Sir Reginald Brooke jammed his eyeglass a little tighter into his eye and blinked at them. Both were utterly astonished.

Bunter grinned.

Harry Wharton & Co. looked on in silence.

They had almost forgotten those mysterious missives, and had never dreamed of any connection between them and the strange happenings of the night. They had looked on those menacing messages as a fatuous prank of the fat Owl of the Remove. Even now they could only wonder at Bunter's nerve in producing them for a police officer's inspection.

"What the dooce—" ejaculated the old baronet. "What—what—what is all this? What does it mean?"

Inspector Rymer knitted his brows over the papers.

"LORD MAULEVERER—
PLACE £1,000 ON THE OLD SUNDIAL, OR
PREPARE FOR DEATH."

"That's the first," said Bunter, indicating it with a grubby finger. "That was found in Mauly's jacket pocket."

"Who found it?" rapped the inspector.

"I did. I borrowed the jacket," explained Bunter. "These silly asses thought it was a jape, so did Mauly. Made out that I was spinning a yarn, you know!"

"So you were, you fat idiot!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"And the other paper?" asked the inspector quietly.

"LORD MAULEVERER,
"THIS IS THE SECOND WARNING, AND
THE LAST!"

PLACE £1,000 IN BANKNOTES ON THE
OLD SUNDIAL TONIGHT, OR DIE!
YOUR LIFE IS IN MY HANDS!"

"Good gad!" said Sir Reginald. "if that was written by the man who attacked my nephew, his motive is clear."

"But was it?" said Inspector Rymer. "Where was this paper found, and by whom?"

"Lord Mauleverer found it in his trousers pocket," said Wharton. "We all thought it was a jape. As we thought that Bunter had written the first paper, we supposed he'd written the second—"

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"So he jolly well did!" grunted Johnny Bull.

But the other fellows were looking dubious now. It was dawning on their minds that they had jumped to a conclusion rather hastily. What had happened in the night let in a flood of new light on the strange affair.

"You supposed that this was some sort of a practical joke?" asked the inspector, tapping the papers with his finger.

"Yes," said Harry. "Bunter's such a howling ass—I mean—well, he's such a blithering idiot—"

"Look here—" hooted Bunter.

"But—but now it looks—" stammered Harry.

"Was it because of these messages that you remained awake on the watch tonight, Master Bunter?"

"Yes, rather!" answered Bunter. "You see, in the second message the villain says 'tonight,' so I jolly well sat up to watch. And I jolly well heard him creeping past my door. And—and I was just going to—to rush after him and—and collar him, but—but I thought I'd call one of the fellows first, because—because——"

The inspector smiled faintly. Perhaps he could guess the reason why Bunter had not rushed after the villain and collared him.

"Well, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry blankly. "Is—is it possible that Bunter was telling the truth all the time?"

"Esteemed wonders will never cease," murmured the Nabob of Bhanipur.

"I asked these fellows to sit up and watch," said Bunter. "They wouldn't. Funky, you know!"

"You silly Owl!" snapped Wharton. "We thought it was all your fatheaded nonsense. If we'd dreamed that Mauly was in danger—"

"Any excuse is better than none!" jeered Bunter.

"You piffling porpoise—"

"Well, I jolly well kept watch, and you didn't!" said Bunter. "I've jolly well saved Mauly's life, anyhow! Haven't I?"

"His lordship's life does not appear to have been threatened," said Inspector Rymer dryly. "I understand that he was chloroformed and removed as far as the door of his room. That, Sir Reginald, would indicate that there was some intention of taking him away, which was, fortunately, frustrated by Master Wharton—"

"Me, you mean!" said Bunter warmly.

"It was fortunate you gave the alarm, at all events," conceded the inspector, and he turned to Sir Reginald again. "No doubt his lordship will be able to let in some light on this matter when he can speak. Perhaps you will ascertain whether—"

"Certainly!" said the old baronet.

He left the library. Inspector Rymer sat with his eyes fixed, under his knitted brows,

on the two papers.

Billy Bunter gave the Famous Five a vaunting look. Bunter was vindicated now! The Winchester inspector, it was clear, was taking the threatening messages seriously. In view of what had occurred, it was scarcely possible to do otherwise. Harry Wharton & Co. had to admit as much.

There was a tap at the door, and Orris entered, with his silent step. His eyes went quickly and curiously to the thoughtful face of the inspector.

“His lordship can see you now, sir,” said Orris.

Inspector Rymer followed the valet at once. Billy Bunter rolled after them; and Harry Wharton & Co., after exchanging a glance, followed. They were very anxious to hear what Mauly had to say.

Lord Mauleverer was sitting up in bed. His face looked very white against the white pillows. Lady Brooke was at his bedside now, her kind old face troubled and perturbed. Mauly gave his friends a faint smile and a nod as they followed the inspector in.

“If your lordship can make a statement now—” said the inspector.

“Certainly, sir!” answered Mauleverer. “I’m all right—right s rain! Bit of a headache, that’s all.”

“Then please tell me what happened, so far as you know, my lord.”

Quietly and succinctly Lord Mauleverer told what he knew. The inspector made notes, while the juniors listened in silence.

“Then it was kidnapping that was intended!” said the inspector, when the schoolboy earl had finished. “There seems no doubt about that—kidnapping with intent to extort money!”

“Looks like it,” assented Mauleverer. “You did not know the man?”

“Not in the least.”

“You cannot identify him in any way?”

“Sorry—no.”

“Was his voice familiar to you at all?” Lord Mauleverer shook his head.

“He spoke in a sort of hoarse whisper,” he answered.

“I couldn’t say what his voice was like.”

“You do not think you had heard it before?”

“I imagine not!” said Lord Mauleverer, a little surprised. “I’m not likely to have come in contact with the rotter”

Inspector Rymer pursed his lips.

“That is by no means certain, my lord. His words to you prove that he was the writer of the threatening letters that were found in your pockets.”

“Yaas,” assented Lord Mauleverer. “But—”

“The man evidently knows his way about the interior of this house, my lord, and it appears that he has access to your rooms, as he placed his messages in your pockets, to be found when you put on the clothes.”

“Yaas,” said Mauleverer slowly.

“The inference, my lord, is that the man has a confederate in your house, or may actually be an inmate of the household himself.”

“Impossible!”

Lord Mauleverer spoke with the utmost decision. Sir Reginald Brooke shook his head decidedly.

“There is no one in the household in whom you have not absolute trust?” asked the inspector.

“No one,” answered Lord Mauleverer. “My uncle will say the same.”

“Assuredly!” said Sir Reginald. “Porson is responsible for engaging the servants, and Porson is a very careful man.”

“Well, at all events, the matter will be very carefully investigated,” said Inspector Rymer, and he left Lord Mauleverer’s room, a much puzzled man.

“I say, Mauly——”

“Herbert must sleep now,” said Lady Brooke.

“I’m all right, auntie—right as rain!” protested Mauleverer. “Look here, you’re jolly well not goin’ to make an invalid of me!”

“You must rest!” said his aunt firmly.

“I say, I dare say it would do Mauly good if I sat with him a bit and cheered him up,” said Billy Bunter.

“I—I think I’ll rest, after all!” said Mauleverer hastily. And Harry Wharton & Co. gently, but firmly, extracted Billy Bunter from the room, leaving Mauleverer to rest. The next day Marjorie Hazeldene and her friends arrived to spend Christmas with Lord Mauleverer and in the jollity which went with the celebration of Christmas the mysterious man in black was forgotten.

Billy Bunter yawned, and awoke. He yawned again, and set his spectacles straight on his fat little nose and blinked around him. It was dusky in the old oak-panelled hall of Mauleverer Towers. Outside the winter wind was wailing, and feathery flakes floated on the wind and dashed against the windows. The glowing log-fire cast a ruddy gleam through the dusky old hall. Bunter yawned a third time, and sat up. Then he became aware of Orris standing only a few feet from him, looking at him.

Bunter, as it happened, knew more about Orris than any resident at Mauleverer Towers. Bunter had his own ways of getting information on all sorts of subjects that did not concern him.

At the present Orris was not looking his usual smooth and deferential self. His eyes were fixed on Bunter’s face, with a glitter in them which indicated a very profound distaste and dislike for the ornament of the Greyfriars Remove. Orris’ feelings, perhaps, were not surprising, for Bunter had his own way with servants, and it was a way that did not make him popular with them.

But as Bunter’s sleepy blink turned on him Orris assumed at once his customary manner. The expression of smooth, silky, deferential respect for his betters came over his face like a mask.

He was moving away, with his silent step, when Bunter called to him.

“Here, Orris!”

“Yes, sir!”

The valet came quietly back.

“Where’s Mauleverer?”

“His lordship has gone out with his friends, sir. They will be coming into lunch,” said Orris.

“Well, I’ll trot out and meet them,” said Bunter. “Fetch me a fur coat.”

“Certainly, sir!” said Orris. “May I ask, sir, where I am to find the coat?”

Bunter blinked at him suspiciously. He scented impertinence under that smooth question.

All the servants at Mauleverer Towers knew that Bunter had arrived for Christmas without baggage. That was not unusual for Bunter, though it was rather unusual for a guest at the Towers.

Bunter gave him a severe blink. Bunter was not the fellow to stand impertinence from servants.

He wagged a fat forefinger at James Orris.

“I don’t want any cheek from you, Orris!” he said sternly.

“Oh, sir!” murmured Orris. “I was merely asking for information, sir! I will fetch your fur coat with pleasure, sir, if—”

“There’s a fur coat in Mauleverer’s room!” said Bunter. “Fetch that. That’s the one I mean.”

“I am afraid sir, without instructions from his lordship—”

“Fetch that coat!” rapped Bunter.

“Without instructions from his lordship, sir—” said Orris, shaking his head.

This was distinct cheek! There could be no doubt about it! This impertinent manservant was making out that Bunter’s word was not law to him!

The fat Owl sat upright in the chair and fixed his eyes, and his spectacles on James Orris with stern severity. There was just the trace of a lurking grin on Orris’s smooth face, which naturally aroused Billy Bunter’s ire.

“Now, look here, Orris,” said Billy Bunter. “I’ve said that I don’t want any cheek! You’ve cheeked me before!”

“Oh, sir!” murmured Orris.

“I’ve advised Mauleverer to sack you for your dashed impertinence!” said Bunter warmly.

“Indeed, sir!” said Orris. “Very kind of you, I’m sure, sir!

“And if he jolly well knew what I could jolly well tell him, he would sack you fast enough!” exclaimed Bunter, more and more irritated. “You haven’t forgotten that letter of yours that you dropped on the ice, and that I picked up. Mauly refused to look at it or hear a word about it, but I jolly well know what was in it, see?”

“I am sure of that, sir,” said Orris. “It is, indeed, what I should have expected of you, sir.”

If this was not cheek, Bunter had never heard cheek! His fat face became almost crimson.

“You—you cheeky sweep!” he gasped. “Mean to make out that I’d look at your rotten letter—a servant’s letter, by gum!”

“Oh, no, sir! No doubt you learned what was in my letter without looking at it, sir!” said Orris.

This, undoubtedly, was sarcasm!

“I happened to see it—I mean, as Mauly’s friend it was my duty to look into your shady goings on!” said Bunter, with dignity. “And that letter was from a firm of ‘bookies,’ Orris, and it said that you owed them two hundred and fifty-six pounds you’d lost on backing horses, and asked you to square—which I jolly well know you can’t do! I’d like to know where a dashed valet is getting two hundred and fifty pounds from! And if Mauly knew—”

“His lordship would hardly listen to a person who told him what he had read in a private letter, sir!” said Orris. “He would naturally despise such a person, sir.”

Bunter gurgled with wrath. There was no doubt now that Orris was cheeky! There was not a shadow of a doubt about it.

“Well, if you want me to tell Mauly—” he gasped.

“I think you would have told his lordship already, sir, if his lordship would have listened!” said Orris. “Neither should I admit, sir, that the letter contained what you state.”

“Why, you jolly well know it did!” said Bunter, staring at him.

Orris shrugged his shoulders.

“Mean to say you’d tell lies about it?” gasped the fat junior.

Like many untruthful persons, Bunter was always surprised and shocked at untruthfulness in others.

“Well, I remember the name of the bookie firm—Topham & Tuke,” said Bunter. “You’ve been backing horses, Orris, and got into debt—debt you can’t possibly pay in your position—and I fancy you must have made those bookies believe you’re something better than a manservant here, to let you run an account to that tune. If Mauly knew—”

“I fear, sir, that my duties call me away, and I cannot stay to listen further to your very kind and pleasant conversation, sir,” said Orris.

“Stop!” hooted Bunter.

Orris was turning away, but he stopped again.

Billy Bunter rose to his feet, his eyes gleaming wrath through his spectacles.

It was no doubt true that had Lord Mauleverer learned that his valet, outwardly so very respectable and well behaved, was secretly a reckless and desperate gambler on horse races, Orris’s days as his lordship’s valet would have been numbered.

But, as Lord Mauleverer had refused to listen to a word of what Bunter had found out surreptitiously, no doubt he felt safe enough.

“Fetch that coat!” said Bunter.

“Without his lordship’s instructions, sir—”

“Will you fetch that coat?”

“In the circumstances, sir, I regret to say—no!” And with that Orris glided away.

Bunter gasped.

“Cheek! A blinking valet! My hat! I’ve a jolly good mind to go after him and kick him! I’ll jolly well get him sacked—if that silly ass Mauly would listen to a fellow!” Bunter stretched a fat hand to a bell. But it occurred to him that Porson likewise might refuse to fetch his lordship’s fur coat without instructions from his lordship.

With an angry grunt Bunter rolled away to the stairs to fetch the coat himself. And he was feeling deeply annoyed, and extremely indignant, when he rolled at last out into the frosty air and the feathery, falling snowflakes, enveloped in Lord Mauleverer’s handsome and expensive fur coat.

“Gammon!” said Miss Clara.

“Oh, Clara!” murmured Marjorie.

“Gammon!” repeated Clara decisively.

“Honest Injun!” said Bob Cherry.

“You were dreaming, old bean,” said Clara.

“Nerves!” yawned Hazeldene.

Bob glared at Hazel.

“You silly ass—” he began. He checked himself suddenly. “I—I mean—”

Hazel chuckled.

“Go it!” he said. “You needn’t mind Marjorie!” But Bob Cherry did mind Marjorie. In the Remove passage at Greyfriars he would have told Hazel what he thought of him in the plain language of the Lower Fourth. But with Marjorie present at Mauleverer Towers the plain language of the Lower Fourth was out of place.

“But it’s really a fact, you know,” drawled Lord Mauleverer. “I can’t account for it—but there you are!”

“Rot!” said Hazel politely.

“But what happened exactly?” asked Marjorie. Lord Mauleverer and his guests were gathered in the old armoury, which was Mauly’s den, after tea. The early darkness of the last days of December had fallen, and the log fire glowed brightly and cheerily in

the old armoury, glistening on ancient armour and trophies of weapons on the walls. The talk had turned on the haunted turret and the ghost of Mauleverer Towers.

"It did happen, you know," said Lord Mauleverer. "We went up to the turret-room, and I told Bob that the jolly old ghost was given to groanin' if a fellow tapped on the wall. Well, Bob tapped—and there was a groan."

"We all heard it," said Harry Wharton.

"The hearfulness was terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh solemnly.

"Fancy!" said Hazel.

"Gammon!" said Miss Clara.

"Of course it wasn't the ghost!" grunted Bob. "We don't think it was. But it was jolly queer. The groan followed the rap on the wall."

"He, he, he!" came from Bunter.

"If you really heard it, it was somebody playing a trick," yawned Hazel. "Bunter, very likely!"

"Bunter wasn't here then!" said Frank Nugent.

"He, he, he!"

Hazel glanced round at the grinning face of the fat Owl.

"He seems jolly amused about something, anyhow," he remarked. "Did you have a hand in it, Bunter?"

"He, he, he!"

"Bunter couldn't have had a hand in it," said Johnny Bull. "He wasn't here, I tell you! It was the night he came—but he hadn't got here then."

"He, he, he!" cachinnated Bunter. "I say, you fellows, you were jolly frightened, weren't you? Lot of funks! He, he, he!"

"We weren't frightened, you fat owl!" growled Johnny Bull. "You'd have been scared into fits if you'd been there!"

"He, he, he!" gurgled Bunter.

"Look here, let's go and explore the jolly old turret now," suggested Miss Clara. "If there's a giddy ghost we don't want to miss him—do we, Marjorie?"

"Good egg!" said Bob. "Let's!"

Marjorie glanced at Lord Mauleverer. His lordship rose immediately.

"Yaas, let's!" he said. "I don't suppose it will happen again—"

"He, he, he!"

Lord Mauleverer stared at the fat Owl in the arm chair.

"What's the jolly old joke, Bunter?" he asked. "Oh, nothing! He, he, he! I say, you fellows, you'll be frightened again!" chuckled Bunter.

"Fathead!" said Bob Cherry.

"Better get your coats," said Lord Mauleverer. "It's frightfully chilly in the old turret. We shan't catch a ghost, but we might catch a cold."

"I'd rather catch the ghost, old bean," said Miss Clara. "I've never seen a ghost yet, and it would be frightfully thrilling. Come on, Marjorie!"

It was a bright and merry party that prepared to explore the haunted turret. Coats and scarves were donned, and electric torches sorted out. Bob Cherry missed his electric torch, and there was some delay while he looked for it—without finding it. It was not surprising that he failed to find it, as it was in the pocket of William George Bunter, who had borrowed it for reasons of his own. Bunter was not with the party, but nobody missed Bunter. Whilst the rest were getting ready for the expedition Billy Bunter rolled away by himself.

The haunted turret was reached by a stone staircase, near the corridor where the Greyfriars juniors had their quarters. While the others were getting ready Bunter was

puffing and panting up that stone staircase.

Harry Wharton & Co. did not miss Bunter; but had they missed him they certainly would not have guessed where he was. It was not likely to occur to them that Bunter had gone ahead of them to the haunted turret on his lonely own.

But that was exactly what the fat Owl had done.

He reached the high turret-room, from which in the daytime there were glorious views over the hills and meadows of Hampshire. Now it was wrapped in black darkness, and the wind wailed in through the tall slits of windows, innocent of glass.

Bunter turned on the light of Bob Cherry's torch in the turret-room. He blinked over the oak-panelled wall, and found the grotesquely carved lion's head which hid the spring of the secret moving panel.

He chuckled as the panel opened.

In a moment he had passed through and closed the panel behind him. It clicked as it shut.

The fat junior was standing in a small stone cell, formed out of the thickness of the ancient wall.

Bunter flashed the light of the torch round the stone cell, and blinked with distaste at the opening of the spiral stair, remembering the terrific exertion it had cost him to mount it.

On the other side of the cell was another opening—a narrow passage, less than two feet wide, leading away into darkness in the thickness of the stone wall.

Where it led Bunter had no idea—neither did he want to know. It was one of the secret passages which honeycombed the ancient building, all knowledge of which had long been lost.

Bunter had not come there to explore. He remained close to the panel, which covered a recess in the stone wall, and listened for sounds from the turret-room on the other side.

There was a sound of footsteps at last.

Bunter shut off his light, and stood in darkness. He grinned as he listened.

The oak panel was, thick and solid, but he could hear footsteps, and the murmur of voices through the oak. And he prepared to deliver a deep and hair-raising groan as soon as he should hear a rap on the wall.

“Here we are!” said Bob Cherry.

“Chilly!” said Marjorie.

“The chillfulness is terrific, esteemed and beauteous miss!” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shiver.

“Creepy!” said Miss Clara.

Half a dozen electric torches flashed round the dusky old turret-room. It was dark and cold and windy, and far from inviting. The gleam of the lights shone back from the old blackened oak walls.

Miss Clara peered about her with interest. Excepting for an old oaken bench, the turret-room was unfurnished. It was many a long century since it had been occupied.

“No ghost so far!” commented Miss Clara.

“The ghost-fulness is not preposterous,” remarked Hurree Singh. “But the rapfulness is the proper caper to disturb the esteemed spectre.”

“Go it, somebody!” yawned Hazel. “Ten to one in doughnuts that we don't hear a jolly old groan!”

“We heard it last time!” said Johnny Bull.

“Who was playing a trick then?”

“Nobody, ass; there was nobody here but ourselves.”

“Let’s tap and see!” interposed Lord Mauleverer hastily. “The proof of the jolly old pudding is in the eating—what? Somebody rap!”

“Here goes!” said Harry Wharton.

He lifted his hand and dealt a resounding smack on the oaken wall. It rang almost like a pistol-shot through the turret, echoing eerily.

“Now listen!” grinned Hazel. “Why, what—what—” He broke off with a startled jump.

Groan!

“What the merry thump—” exclaimed Miss Clara.

Silence followed.

The juniors and the Cliff House girls looked at one another, with startled faces.

From what direction the sound came it was difficult to say, except that it seemed to proceed from somewhere behind the oaken walls.

But the sound had been unmistakable! It was a groan, and it had followed the knock on the wall, in strict accordance with the legend.

“Look here, it’s all rot!” muttered Hazel, breaking the startled silence. But his face was a little pale. “It—it must be some queer sort of echo. These old places are full of queer echoes.”

“Try again!” said Nugent.

Harry Wharton struck on the wall again. Again the echoing knock rang through the turret.

Groan!

“Oh, gad! “gasped Lord Mauleverer.

“I—I say, it—it’s horribly uncanny!” said Nugent. “It must be some queer echo, as Hazel says, but—”

“It can’t be anything else,” said Wharton. “But it’s jolly creepy! Like another knock, or are you fed-up?”

“I’m fed-up, for one,” said Hazel, staring round him uneasily. “I’ve had enough of this. Let’s get out!”

Both the girls were looking rather pale. It was eerie, uncanny, almost bloodcurdling, to hear that muffled groan from behind the solid-looking walls. It could scarcely have been an echo; but if it was not, there seemed no other explanation but a supernatural one.

“Had enough?” asked Lord Mauleverer. “Come on, then.”

A few minutes later a panel in the old blackened wall clicked open, and a grinning fat face appeared through the aperture, and Bunter flashed his light round the room.

He stepped out and closed the secret panel, and chuckled.

Cautiously the fat junior crept down the stone staircase. But his caution was needless; Lord Mauleverer and his guests had gone back to the armoury and there was no eye to see Bunter.

There was a cheery grin on Bunter’s fat face as he rolled into the armoury.

The juniors and the schoolgirls were gathered in a group before the glowing log fire with unusually grave faces. Billy Bunter blinked at them, grinning.

“I say, you fellows—”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” Bob Cherry’s cheery voice seemed to lack a little of its usual ring. “Why didn’t you come with us, Bunter? We’ve heard the jolly old ghost groaning in the haunted turret.”

“He, he, he!”

“Catch Bunter going there!” said Hazel.

Billy Bunter sniffed.

“I’ll go there fast enough!” he retorted. “I’m not so easily frightened as you fellows, I can tell you. Have you had a scare? He, he, he!”

“The scarefulness was not terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter!

‘Frightened out of your wits—what?’ chuckled Bunter. “I say, Hazel, you’re looking as white as a sheet. He, he, he!”

Hazel glared at him.

“You took jolly good care not to go!” he sneered.

“He, he, he! I’ll go now, if you’ll come along with me,” said Bunter.

“Rats!”

“I’ll Jolly well go alone if you like!” said Bunter. “Dash it all, I don’t want Marjorie and Clara to think that Greyfriars men are all funks.”

“Who’s a funk?” roared Johnny Bull.

“You lot are!” answered Bunter coolly. “Look here, I’ll go to the haunted turret and rap on the wall—”

“You’ll go somewhere else and say you’ve been to the turret!” snapped Hazel. “Can it!”

“You can come and watch me!” said Bunter. “I’ll go into the room alone, and bang on the wall as often as you like.”

“Rats!” grunted Bob Cherry.

“Funk!” retorted Bunter cheerily. “I say, Marjorie, jevver see such a lot of funks? They’re afraid to go to the turret, even if I go with them?”

“You fat, frabjous cuckoo!” said Johnny Bull, breathing hard. “You’re too funky to go anywhere near the turret, and if we started you’d dodge away.”

“The dodgefulness would be terrific!”

“Any excuse is better than none!” jeered Bunter. “If I go alone you’ll say I haven’t been, and you’re funky of coming with me.”

“My hat! I’ll jolly well come!” snorted Johnny Bull. “And I’ll jolly well hold your arm all the way to the turret, and shove you into the room, and kick you if you try to dodge away!”

“Yah! Anybody else coming?” asked Bunter. “Give a fellow a chance to show the girls that we’re not all funks at Greyfriars!

The Famous Five glared at the fat Owl as if they could have eaten him. If there was a funk present the name of that funk certainly was William George Bunter. Not one of the party believed that the fat Owl really intended to enter the haunted turret, little dreaming of the fat junior’s secret.

“Look here, we’ll go and keep him up to it!” said Harry Wharton.

“Yes, rather!”

“The ratherfulness is terrific!”

“You’re for it, old bean!” said Miss Clara.

“Think I’m afraid?” grinned Bunter. “Come on, all of you! I want you to see me do it. Pluck’s my long suit, you know!”

“Oh, crikey!”

“You can all stand outside and see me go in alone,” said Bunter. “I’ll rap on the wall as often as you like— what?”

“We’ll see you do it, you blithering fathead!” growled Johnny Bull, and he linked his arm in Bunter’s. “I’m jolly well seeing that you do!”

“Come on, then!” said Lord Mauleverer.

And once more the Christmas party ascended the stairs and mounted the stone steps to

the turret. Billy Bunter rolled in advance, with Johnny Bull's grip on his fat arm. But, to the general surprise, Bunter showed no desire whatever to dodge away. They reached the landing outside the doorway of the ancient turret-room. There the party stopped.

"Now go it, you fat fraud!" growled Johnny Bull.

And with a rather vigorous shove he sent Billy Bunter rolling into the turret-room.

"Ow! Beast!"

The fat Owl rolled half across the turret-room before he came to a halt. The rest of the party remained on the landing, looking in through the low, arched doorway of the turret-room. They fully expected to see Billy Bunter come charging out in a great hurry from the dark and

shadowy interior of the haunted room.

But he did not. Either Billy Bunter had more pluck than was generally supposed in the Greyfriars Remove, or else he had his own reasons for knowing that there was nothing to fear in the haunted turret. Three or four of the juniors flashed in the light of their torches after him, the beams of light revealing the fat junior, apparently quite cool and collected.

"Now knock on the wall, you fat fraud!" called out Johnny Bull. "You fellows look out, or he'll bump you over when he comes bolting out!"

"Catch me bolting out!" retorted Bunter disdainfully.

"My dear chap, I've got pluck. Not like some fellows I could name!"

"Well, get on with it, fatty!" said Bob Cherry.

Bunter approached the farther wall of the turret-room, the party watching him through the low doorway. He was at quite a distance from them, half-hidden by shift in shadows, half-revealed by the glimmering torches. He lifted a fat hand to smite the wall.

Knock!

It was a loud, ringing knock, and Bunter dealt it with a firm hand.

The juniors listened for the ghostly groan to follow.

Had it materialised there was no doubt that Bunter would have come scuttling out of the haunted room like a frightened fat rabbit. But it did not materialise. Bunter, indeed, had the best of reasons for knowing that it wouldn't! And it didn't!

The echo of the knock died away, and there was deep silence, only broken by the whine of the wind.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob Cherry. "The jolly old ghost's gone on strike!"

"He, he, he!" came from Bunter.

"It's jolly queer!" said Lord Mauleverer, in perplexity.

"We certainly heard it last time, you men."

"The hearfulness was terrific!"

"Nerves, you know!" chuckled Bunter. "Just funk, old beans!"

"You cheeky fat idiot—" growled Johnny Bull.

"Try again, Bunter," said Lord Mauleverer.

"Oh, I don't mind!" grinned Bunter. "Nothing funky about me, I hope. if there s a ghost there I'll wake him up all right! He, he, he!"

Knock!

Again the party listened intently.

But there was no ghostly groan! Evidently the ghost of Mauleverer Towers was off duty!

Billy Bunter rolled out of the turret-room grinning triumphantly. The fat Owl felt that he had scored, and the other fellows had to admit that he had. He had demonstrated

his uncommon pluck. He had gone alone into the shadows of the haunted room and defied the ghost, and the other fellows and the girls had watched him do it. Harry Wharton & Co. looked at him, and looked at one another. Marjorie gave him a smile, and Miss Clara bestowed an approving smack on a fat shoulder.

“Good man!” she said.

Bunter smirked.

“You see, I’ve got pluck!” he explained. “That’s where I come out strong. Not like these fellows, you know!”

“Oh, my hat!” said Miss Clara.

In the Dead of Night!

HARRY WHARTON & CO. lingered at Lord Mauleverer’s door that night to say good-night to the schoolboy earl, feeling not quite easy in their minds. They could not help remembering the events of a few nights before, and wondering whether the unknown, desperate rascal who had marked Mauly as his victim might not make another attempt.

Sir Reginald Brooke shared their uneasiness, for he came up and looked through Mauly’s rooms with his own avuncular eye, to make sure that all was well. The juniors still lingered after the old gentleman was gone.

There was a cheerful smile on Lord Mauleverer’s face. The schoolboy earl was incapable of fear, and he was not feeling in the least uneasy.

“Look here, Mauly! What about one of us camping in your room?” asked Harry Wharton.

“My dear man, I wouldn’t spoil your night’s rest for anythin’. I’ve agreed to have Orris in the dressin’-room, to please my uncle. Orris says he doesn’t mind.”

“Lot I’d care if he minded, if he was my valet!” grunted Billy Bunter.

Lord Mauleverer did not seem to hear that remark. Billy Bunter rolled off to his own room, and the juniors heard him lock his door. Bunter was not likely to emerge before daylight.

“Well, we’ll wait till Orris comes up!” said Bob Cherry. “You’ve got to be careful, Mauly.”

“Oh, yaas!” assented his lordship carelessly.

“You’ll lock your door, old chap?” said Nugent.

“I dare say Orris will. I’ll tell him if I remember to.”

“I’ll jolly well tell him, fathead!” said Wharton. “You’re not going to be mopped up under our noses, Mauly. That scoundrel, whoever he is, means business. He’s chucked writing threatening letters—but he’s tried to get hold of you. And the next time he may pull it off, if you don’t take care. His game is to get you away and hold you to ransom. It would have been safer to let Inspector Rymer leave a bobby here.”

“Oh, bosh, old bean!” said Lord Mauleverer. “I shall be all right! Here comes Orris! Orris came up the corridor, with his silent tread.

“Mind you lock the doors on the corridor, Orris!” said Bob.

“Certainly, sir!” said Orris.

“Well, good-night Mauly!”

“Good-night, old beans!”

Lord Mauleverer went into his room, followed by Orris, The door closed, and the juniors heard the key turn in the lock. They waited till they heard it turn also in the adjoining dressing-room, which had a door in the corridor.

“Well, Mauly will be safe enough if that blighter butts in again,” said Johnny Bull.

“Both doors locked—and Orris in the dressing-room. I don’t see how he can get at Mauly now.”

And the juniors, feeling easy in their minds at last, went to their rooms and turned in. They were soon asleep. But sleep was not so swift in visiting Lord Mauleverer. For some little time Mauly lay awake, thinking of the attempt that had been made the night before Christmas Eve. He gave little thought to danger, but the problem of the identity of his unknown enemy perplexed his mind.

He rejected, and, indeed, rather resented, Inspector Rymer’s surmise that the mysterious rascal might have a confederate in the household. Yet it was clear that the “man in black” was well acquainted with the interior of the mansion, and had been able to pick out Lord Mauleverer’s room without trouble.

Who the man was, and what had become of him, nobody knew—the police had found no clue to him. On the occasion that an attempt had been made a window downstairs had been found forced open; but that was all the trace that the mysterious prowler had left behind him.

But, whoever he was, it was certain that he was a desperate and determined man, and it was probable enough that he would make another attempt.

Mauly was not feeling uneasy, however. He closed his eyes at last, and dropped into slumber.

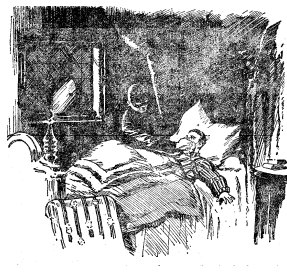
He slept peacefully as the night grew older. Midnight chimed out, and the winter wind wailed round the old roofs and turrets of Mauleverer Towers, but Mauly did not hear. One o’clock struck, and two, and the schoolboy earl lay deep in slumber. It was a few minutes after the stroke of two had died away that he awoke suddenly.

He awoke with a sudden start, to feel a hand pressed over his mouth. A shiver ran through him.

“Silence!” came a deep, husky whisper in the darkness.

A nightlight had been burning in the room, but it was out now. The log fire had died down, shedding only the merest glimmer. In the deep gloom Lord Mauleverer’s startled eyes made out a dark form that leaned over his bed, and discerned the gleam that came strangely through the eye-holes of a black mask.

He shuddered.



The pad of chloroform was jammed across Lord Mauleverer's face

It was the secret enemy! Locked doors had not kept him out, and either he knew nothing of the valet in the adjoining dressing-room, or cared nothing.

A faint, sickly odour came to Mauleverer. He knew what it was—the reek of the chloroform pad that was ready to be clapped over his face.

“Silence!” repeated the husky whisper. “I am here again, Lord Mauleverer, and the chloroform is ready, if you attempt to call out. Do not think that you will receive aid from your servant in the next room—the chloroform has already done its work with him, and he will not wake till morning.”

“You villain!” breathed Mauleverer.

“Did you think that a locked door would keep me away? I have keys that will open any door. I am here—for the last time, my lord. The price of your liberty is a thousand pounds. You are rich—you will not miss the money. Give me your word to place a thousand pounds in notes on the old sundial near the well; to leave the place unwatched, and I will go and leave you. I can trust your word?”

“Scoundrel!”

“You consent?”

“Never!”

“Then this is all that remains.”

The soft, clinging pad, impregnated with chloroform, was suddenly jammed over Lord Mauleverer’s face. For a few moments he struggled, and then he knew no more.

Lord Mauleverer’s eyes opened.

He blinked round him dazedly. His head was dizzy, his eyes dazed; for some moments it seemed to him that he was in the grip of a nightmare.

He had been in his bed in his handsomely appointed room in Mauleverer Towers, when he had lost his senses under the chloroform. But his surroundings were strangely different now.

Cold stone walls surrounded him. He lay on a heap of sacking, on a floor of stone flags.

He was in a room not more than ten feet by twelve. On one side was a narrow opening—a doorway without a door. Beyond the opening was darkness.

But the stone-walled room was lighted by a single candle stuck in a crevice of the wall, dripping grease, and casting a flickering light.

“Oh, gad!” gasped Mauleverer.

He raised himself on his elbow, staring round him dizzily. Then he made the discovery that an iron chain was locked round his wrist, the other end secured to a staple in the wall. He was a chained prisoner.

The rusty chain chinked as he stirred.

“You’ve come to?” said a voice.

By the opening in the wall stood a strange figure, eerie in the flickering light of a candle. It was that of a man clad in black from head to foot, his face concealed by a black mask, from the eyeholes of which his eyes glittered at the schoolboy earl.

Mauleverer rose rather painfully to his feet. His head was dizzy, and he leaned on the chilly wall where the chain was attached to the staple.

“You villain!” he said faintly. “You’ve got me! Where am I?”

“Where you will never be found,” answered the man in black coldly. “Your schoolboy friends and your police inspector from Winchester will never dream where to look for you, Lord Mauleverer.”

Mauleverer stood silent. He could not help realising that the man in black spoke the truth. Where he was he had not the faintest idea himself.

“You are in my hands,” went on the muffled voice under the mask. “You are a chained prisoner in this room—not the first who has been chained here, my lord. In ancient days that chain has held others in your place—by the order of your ancestors.”

“I understand,” said Lord Mauleverer quietly.

“When I first discovered this place, my lord, that chain held a skeleton,” said the masked man. “Your ancestors had a high hand, my lord. Look!”

He pointed to a shadowy corner, with a black-gloved hand Lord Mauleverer’s eyes

followed the pointing finger and he shuddered at the sight of a heap of bones. Centuries ago—many centuries, perhaps—some hapless prisoner had perished in that hidden room.

“Your fate may be the same, my lord,” said the masked man. “Some ancestor of yours chained a prisoner here, and left him to die. The sight of those old bones would show you how little you have to hope for rescue.”

Lord Mauleverer’s lips curled.

“You can’t scare me!” he added contemptuously.

“We shall see. Do you imagine that you will be found here?” sneered the man in the mask. “You have already guessed that you are in one of the secret, hidden recesses of your own mansion—this very room is mentioned in one of the legends of Mauleverer Towers—”

“I know it. I had guessed that much!” said Mauleverer quietly.

“The secret has long been lost—many have sought it, but never found it. You, yourself, have sought it—have you succeeded?”

“Do you think your friends will find it? Do you think they will even suspect that you are within the walls of Mauleverer Towers?”

Mauleverer was silent again.

“A window will be found open—some tracks will be found in the snow—something belonging to you will be picked up at a distance from the house—the search will take a direction far away from here. This secret is known only to me.”

Mauleverer breathed hard.

“You’ve found it—others may find it,” he said.

The masked man gave a scoffing laugh.

“They will not have the clue that I had,” he answered. “An old parchment fell into my hands, my lord, in which this room was described. Even then it was not easy to discover the secret panel that gives admission to this secret passage.” He pointed to the opening in the wall. “But I hunted and hunted till I found it. Without the clue in the parchment, I should never have succeeded. And that parchment has been burned.”

Lord Mauleverer fixed his eyes hard on the masked face. He listened intently to the husky, muffled voice from under the mask. But there was no familiar tone in it to his ears. The man was disguising his voice, and he was disguising it successfully. But Lord Mauleverer realised now that Inspector Rymer’s suspicion must have been well-founded.

Only an occupant of the Towers could have made this discovery of the secrets of the ancient mansion. Either his enemy had a confederate in the household, or he was himself an actual member of the household. But if the latter was the case, Mauleverer could not even begin to guess at his identity.

The scoffing laugh came again from under the disguising mask.

“I read your thoughts, my lord. But you will never know with whom you have to deal. If you pay your ransom, you will be taken back to your room in the dead of night—unconscious. If you refuse to pay it, you will remain here till you perish, and your fate will never be known. Your skeleton will bleach here in the darkness, like that of the victim of a Mauleverer of former times.”

He made a gesture towards the heap of bones. “Take the lesson to heart, my lord.”

“I will not pay you a single penny,” said Lord Mauleverer quietly. “I do not believe that you will dare to leave me here to die; but if I believed it, I would die a thousand times before I would give in to threats. You’ve got me in your hands; but you’ve had your trouble for your pains. You’ll get nothing from me.”

“You may change your mind after twenty-four hours in the cold and darkness, without

food or drink," said the masked man.

"Never!"

"Well, we shall see. It rests entirely with your lordship," said the man in the mask.

"You will find it cold and chilly here, my lord—you, accustomed to every comfort and t luxury—"

There was a contemptuous sneer in the husky voice.

"Leave me here, then," said Lord Mauleverer quietly. "You will see whether I shall give in, you rascal!"

"I shall return in twenty-four hours—when you have had time to reflect. I shall not bring you food or drink. I shall bring you pen and paper, to write to your guardian. You will urge Sir Reginald to pay the ransom, to save you from death by hunger."

"I shall not write a line!"

The masked man shrugged his shoulders.

"I think I shall hear a different tale tomorrow night!" he said. "I am willing to wait! In twenty-four hours you will learn whether you have a chance of being found."

"What you have found others may find," said Lord Mauleverer steadily. "I have heard of this room, though I have never seen it before; the secret has been lost. But I can guess this much—what you have found is the secret way out of the haunted turret, by which the Red Earl escaped hundreds of years ago. I've always known that there must be a secret passage behind the walls of the turret-room."

The masked man gave a slight start, which did not escape Mauleverer.

"I've guessed right, I think," said Mauleverer; "and when I get out of this I'll have the secret found, by gad, if I have to have every inch of the oak walls taken down to find it."

"When you are out of this, my lord, you may do as you please," said the man in the mask. "But you are not out yet! It is true that if you strip the old oak from the walls of the turret-room you will find the secret—why should I not admit it? There is a stone cell behind that ancient wall, my lord, and on one side of it is this secret passage— on the other side a spiral stair that leads away into the depths of the earth. Where it leads I do not know—I have never taken the trouble to explore it; I had no use for it.

Perhaps it is the way by which the Red Earl escaped in days gone by. You may have the pleasure of exploring it—if you do not break your neck on the crumbling stairs— when you are out of this! But it will cost you a thousand pounds to have that pleasure, my lord."

He paused.

The candle was guttering low. Strange lights and shadows danced in the hidden prison-room.

"For the last time, my lord! No light reaches you here—but it is very near to morning! I cannot linger! I offer you a chance—will you write at my dictation, now?"

"No!"

"You will come to heel after twenty-four hours of cold and hunger," said the man in the mask. "I would spare you that if I could."

"You will see!"

He heard a muttered oath under the mask. The man in black came closer to him, his eyes glittering.

"Make no mistake, my lord! I mean business! You will ransom your life or perish here! No danger will follow for me—your fate will never be known! Make no mistake about that."

"I've heard that before," said Lord Mauleverer coolly. "You're repeatin' yourself, old bean."

The man in black clenched his hand, as if the temptation assailed him to drive his fist into the cool, defiant face of the schoolboy earl. But he restrained his rage.

“Remain, then, till hunger brings you to your senses!” snarled the man in the mask; and he blew out the remaining fraction of the guttering candle.

Black darkness fell in the prison-room.

In the darkness, Lord Mauleverer heard the footsteps of the masked man dying away along the secret passage.

Silence followed.

Kidnapped!

KNOCK!

Harry Wharton, half-asleep, heard the sound along the corridor. The early glimmer of a wintry

sun was creeping in at the windows. The last day of the Old Year was dawning on Mauleverer Towers.

Knock! Knock!

Wharton sat up in bed. Someone was knocking at a door along the corridor, in the direction of Lord Mauleverer’s room. It was too early an hour for Mauleverer to be called; and Wharton wondered who was knocking and what it meant. With the thought in his mind that something had, perhaps, happened in the night, he leaped out of bed, hurried on a dressing-gown and slippers, and stepped out into the corridor.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Porson, the butler, was standing at Lord Mauleverer’s door, knocking. His face wore an alarmed and troubled expression.

Wharton ran along the passage.

“What’ happened, Porson?” he exclaimed.

“I cannot make his lordship hear, sir!” answered the butler. “A door was found open downstairs by the maids, and it seems to have been open a long time during the night, as snow has drifted in. I came up at once to call his lordship, but—”

Wharton rapped quickly on the door with his knuckles.

“Mauly!” he shouted.

There was no answer from within the room.

“Is Orris down yet?” asked Harry.

“No, sir.”

Wharton turned the door-handle. As the door had been locked on the inside overnight, he did not expect it to open, but it opened to his hand. Porson stared as it swung back.

“Surely his lordship’s door was locked?” he exclaimed. “It was locked last night,” answered Harry. “I stopped here till I heard Orris lock it from inside. But something must have happened—”

He ran into the room.

“Mauly!” he gasped.

The bed was empty. The bedclothes were thrown back roughly, as if the occupant had been dragged bodily out. But the bed was cold; it was long since Mauleverer had been there.

Harry Wharton stared blankly at the empty bed. Porson, with wide eyes, stared over his shoulder.

“Where is his lordship?” gasped Porson.

Wharton did not reply. He ran to the communicating door of the dressing-room. It was open, and in a moment more he was looking down at Orris.

The valet was stretched in bed, his eyes closed, apparently fast asleep. A sickly odour floated round the bed.

Wharton sniffed at it; he knew the sickly scent of chloroform. The same scent had hung over Mauleverer's bed.

He stooped over the valet and grasped him by the shoulder, shaking him vigorously. There was a low murmur from Orris. He stirred uneasily, but did not wake.

"Good heavens!" breathed Wharton.

Porson had followed him in, his plump face pale with horror.

"What—what—what——" stammered the butler.

"He has been chloroformed," said Harry. "You can smell the stuff. That villain has got in somewhere, in the night—chloroformed Orris and taken Mauleverer away!"

"Oh, sir!" gasped Porson.

"He must have picked the lock of Mauleverer's door—it was locked safely enough last night!" Wharton gritted his teeth. Again he shook Orris roughly. "Oh, he's coming to."

Orris' eyes opened.

He blinked up at the schoolboy and the staring butler.

His hand went to his forehead, and he gave a low moan.

"What—what has happened?" he muttered.

"Pull yourself together," said Harry. "Lord Mauleverer is gone—he has been kidnapped!"

"Oh!" gasped Orris. He struggled to a sitting posture. "His lordship gone! And I—I was here to guard him—and I slept—"

"You needn't blame yourself," said Harry. "You seem to have been chloroformed while you slept—the place reeks with the stuff. You did not wake in the night?"

"No, sir! Oh, how my head aches!" muttered Orris, pressing his hand to his forehead.

"You are sure his lordship is gone, sir?"

"He is not in his room—the bed's cold and the door was unlocked. That scoundrel has got him at last!"

Wharton hurried back to the bedroom, followed by Porson. The valet turned out of bed at once. Porson went to call Sir Reginald Brooke; and Harry Wharton took a hasty survey of the schoolboy earl's room. But for the lingering reek of the drug there was no clue to what had happened in the silent hours of the night, so far as the junior could discern.

With a clouded face and a heavy heart he went along the corridor to call his friends. The chums of the Remove were soon up and dressed, and had gathered, with grave faces, in Mauleverer's room by the time Sir Reginald Brooke arrived there. Across the corridor the snore of Billy Bunter was heard rumbling: Wharton had not troubled to call the Owl of the Remove.

"Herbert—gone!" breathed the old baronet, as he stared down at the empty bed.

"Good heavens!" His face was white and lined. "But—but what—Orris, did you hear nothing—see nothing?"

"No, Sir Reginald," answered Orris. "I blame myself very much; but—but Mr. Wharton, sir, will tell you how he found me."

"Orris had been chloroformed," said Harry. "He must have been drugged in his sleep. He was unconscious."

"And my nephew—my dear boy—"

Porson appeared in the doorway.

"I have telephoned, Sir Reginald. Inspector Rymer is coming over in a car; he will be here very soon."

“Very good, Porson! See that the room is not disturbed in any way; the police may find some clue that we cannot see. Do not touch anything here, my boys.”

The old baronet left the room. Orris went quietly away, his hand still pressed to his forehead. Johnny Bull looked after him rather grimly as he went.

“That fellow was here to guard Mauly!” he grunted. “Lot of good he was!”

“Well, if he had a chloroform pad dabbed over his face while he was asleep he couldn’t do much!” said Bob Cherry. “He looks as if he’s been through it, poor chap!”

“But how the thump did anybody get in, with the door locked on the inside?” said Nugent.

“Must have picked the lock from the outside. I dare say the police will find traces of that,” said Harry. “I—I wish old Mauly had let one of us stay with him. Still, I suppose we should have been put to sleep like Orris. Let’s get down.”

The Famous Five went down, Hazel joining them on the way.

“I’ve seen Orris. Is Mauly really gone?” asked Hazel.

“Yes; kidnapped by the scoundrel, whoever he is! We’re going down to see the way he was taken out of the house,” answered Harry.

The door that had been found open by the maids was still standing open. It was the door of the secretary’s room adjoining the library, and it gave on the terrace. Snow had drifted in on the wind, and flakes lay scattered over the floor.

Outside snow was still falling. It had fallen all through the night, covering up any tracks that might have been made.

“No chance of picking up the villain’s tracks!” said Nugent.

“The chancefulness is not terrific,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “But the tryfulness is the proper caper.”

“Let’s see if there’s anything to be picked up, anyhow,” said Bob.

The juniors hurriedly donned coats and hats, and went out on the terrace. It was carpeted with snow, and not a single track was to be picked up; long ago the falling flakes had obliterated all sign. But as they went down the steps from the terrace to the gardens Bob Cherry uttered a sudden exclamation:

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!”

He stooped and picked up an object from the snow, and held it up. It was a handkerchief, frozen almost stiff.

“That’s Mauly’s!” exclaimed Nugent.

He pointed to the crest and the letter “M” in the corner of the handkerchief. There was no doubt that it belonged to Lord Mauleverer.

“Must have dropped that while he was getting Mauly away!” said Bob. “It proves that this was the way the villain went—if we needed proof.”

“Better leave it here for Inspector Rymer,” said Harry.

“Let’s get on; we may pick up some clue farther on. I can’t imagine how the brute got Mauly away, unless he had a car waiting on the road. But that’s a good distance; he must have carried Mauly a long way. Let’s get on.”

The juniors pressed on down the long avenue, between lines of leafless trees that led to the distant gates. The earth was carpeted with snow, and the fast-falling snow obliterated their own footmarks almost as soon as they were made.

There was no hope of picking up a trail; but they searched hopefully for signs, all the same. From the mansion to the gates on the Winchester road was a distance of a quarter of a mile; and, so far as they could see, the kidnapper must have carried his victim the whole distance.

Half-way to the gates Johnny Bull pounced on an object covered by snow, and dragged it out. It was a silk muffler, which they knew belonged to Lord Mauleverer.

“He came this way!” said Bob.

“The brute must have allowed him to put this on before bringing him out of the house,” said Harry. “He couldn’t see anything that he dropped in the dark, of course! Most likely he carried him away in a hurry, anyhow. We may find something else.” But nothing else was found, and the juniors returned at last to the house in a troubled and dismal mood, as Inspector Rymer’s car came grinding through the snow up the avenue.

Billy Bunter rolled into the breakfast-room, grunting, with a frown on his fat brow. Bunter was annoyed.

Bunter had not yet breakfasted.

It was rather a late hour for breakfast, and the fat Owl expected to find that the rest of the party had finished long ago, and gone.

Rather to his surprise, he found them all in the breakfast-room. Marjorie and Clara were sitting at the table, with grave and preoccupied faces, Hazel was making a good breakfast—the only fellow there who was—and the Famous Five were standing.

Neither Sir Reginald Brooke nor Lady Brooke was to be seen. Harry Wharton & Co. were making a desultory meal without sitting down to it.

Bunter blinked at them.

“I say you fellows—” he began.

Nobody answered Bunter. Nobody, indeed, seemed to notice that he had come into the room at all. In that hour of trouble and dismay nobody had any attention to waste on Bunter.

“I say, you fellows!” hooted Bunter.

“Oh, dry up!” snapped Johnny Bull.

“What’s up, I’d like to know?” snorted Bunter. “I’ve rung a dozen times for my brekker, and nobody’s answered the bell! I’ve had to come down to brekker!”

Bunter’s voice fairly thrilled with indignation.

“Nice way to treat a guest!” he went on. “Where’s Mauly? I shall speak jolly plainly to Mauly about this! If Mauly can’t get his servants to answer bells—”

“Oh, shut up, you ass!” growled Bob.

“Nice manners!” sneered Bunter. “You might remember that you’re not in the Remove passage now, Cherry, and that there are ladies present. Don’t mind him, you girls; he can’t help being a bear.”

“Oh, don’t be an ass!” said Miss Clara tartly.

Bunter blinked at her.

“Eh?” he ejaculated. “What?”

“Don’t bother now,” said Marjorie. “Something has happened to Mauleverer, and we’re all worried.”

“Oh, is that it?” grunted Bunter. “The whole place seems upside down—the servants like a lot of cackling geese—not even bringing a fellow’s breakfast up to a fellow’s room! Everything at sixes and sevens! This isn’t how we manage things at Bunter Court, I can tell you!” Bunter sat down. “Shove that dish this way, Wharton, will you?”

“Go and eat coke!”

“Not even a servant waiting at table!” said Bunter. “My hat, this wouldn’t do for Bunter Court! Don’t scoff all the kidneys, Hazel!”

Bunter reached round and helped himself, as nobody seemed disposed to help him. He waited till his mouth was full before he spoke again.

“I say, you fellows, what’s happened to Mauly?”

“Kidnapped, fathead!” snorted Johnny Bull. “Now shut up!”

“Beast!”

Bunter glowered and ate. No doubt he was sorry to hear that Lord Mauleverer had been kidnapped. But breakfast was a more important consideration. A fellow had to eat!

The Famous Five, having snatched a late and hurried breakfast, went out again.

Marjorie and Clara went with them. Hazel remained to finish his breakfast.

From Hazel, Bunter learned of the happenings in the night. Hazel was sorry for what had happened to his kind and hospitable host; but it had not affected his appetite.

Still less did it affect William George Bunter’s.

He was still going strong when Hazeldene went out, and he remained long enough to clear the table of everything in the shape of eatables. Then, with a fat and shiny and contented face, he rolled out to look for the other fellows.

Inspector Rymer, from Winchester, was in the hall, with Sir Reginald Brooke. The inspector had a grim expression on his ruddy face, the old baronet looked worn and worried. Bunter blinked at them, strongly disposed to join in the consultation and offer his advice; but the look of neither gentleman was encouraging, and Bunter gave up that idea. He spotted Orris in the distance, and rolled up to him.

“Where are they all gone, Orris?” he asked.

“The young gentlemen have gone into the grounds, sir, with the young ladies,” said Orris.

“It’s still snowing,” grunted Bunter.

“I think the young gentlemen are looking for—ahem!—clues to his lordship, sir,” said Orris.

“What rot!” said Bunter.

“Indeed, sir!”

Bunter wagged a fat forefinger at the valet.

“It’s you that’s to blame for this, Orris!” he said. Orris started.

“I, sir!” he ejaculated.

“Yes, you!” said Bunter accusingly. “Why didn’t you take proper care of poor old Mauly?”

“I was drugged in my sleep, sir—”

“More likely funking,” said Bunter cheerfully. “I jolly well shouldn’t have been drugged in my sleep if I’d been looking after old Mauly. He was rather an ass not to ask me to look after him; but poor old Mauly always was a silly ass. If I were old Brooke, Orris, I’d sack you on the spot for letting Mauly be bagged under your nose.”

“Perhaps you will kindly make the suggestion to Sir Reginald, sir,” said Orris urbanely; “but I must beg you, sir, not to allude to my master’s guardian as ‘old Brooke’, in speaking to me. It savours of impertinence, sir—indeed, I may say, insolence.”

With that remark Orris glided away, leaving Billy Bunter snorting with indignation.

“My hat!” murmured the fat Owl. “The cheek of these blinking menials—Mauly spoils ’em!”

Having encased his fat person in Lord Mauleverer’s fur coat—which by this time seemed to have become Bunter’s fur coat—the fat junior rolled out into the falling flakes to join the other fellows.

The snow was falling more lightly now; but it was still coming down. Billy Bunter spotted the juniors and the girls in the distance, and rolled away to join them.

“Found anything?” he asked.

“No,” said Harry curtly. “You’re not likely to, either,” commented Bunter. “Fat lot of good you fellows trying!”

“Better than doing nothing, fathead!” growled Johnny Bull.

“It’s not much good, I suppose,” said Harry, with a clouded brow. “Poor old Mauly is far enough off by this time. Goodness knows where that scoundrel has taken him.”

“There will be news sooner or later,” said Nugent.

“It’s Mauly’s money that the rotter is after—he’s been kidnapped to be held to ransom.”

“No doubt about that. But—”

“Might have murdered him!” suggested Bunter brightly.

“Wha-a-at?”

“Might have pitched him into the lake. Let’s go and see if there’s a hole in the ice!” suggested Bunter.

“You howling idiot!”

“Oh, really, Cherry—”

“You frumptious chump!”

“Oh, really, Bull——”

“Shut up, you frabjous ass!”

“Well, if poor old Mauly’s been murdered, we might as well look for the body,” argued Bunter. “You see—”

Yaroooh!”

A snowball landed on Billy Bunter’s fat face, suddenly cutting short his cheerful remarks. Bunter sat down suddenly. “Ow! Whoop! Beast! Grooogh!”

He sat in the snow and roared.

Marjorie glanced round; Miss Clara ran back to help Bunter. She took hold of his fat ear to help him.

“Yaroooh!” roared Bunter, as Clara pulled. “Ow! Wharrer you up to? Leggo!”

“I’m helping you—”

“Whooooop!”

“Oh, Clara!” exclaimed Marjorie.

“Come and lend me a hand, old thing,” called back Miss Clara. “Take one of his ears.”

“Yooooop! Leggo! Whooooop!”

“You want to be helped up,” said Miss Clara. “I’m helping you. Some people are never satisfied.”

“Beast! I mean—cat! Leggo!”

Miss Clara did not let go. She pulled hard, and Bunter scrambled up. Then, having successfully helped Bunter, Miss Clara ran after her friends, leaving the Owl of the Remove rubbing his ear and snorting.

After which Billy Bunter rolled back to the house, feeling that his fascinating society was wasted on the Cliff House girls and the Greyfriars fellows. For the rest of the morning he left them severely alone—which probably did not add appreciably to their troubles.

Under the Shadow!

A DEEP gloom overhung Mauleverer Towers that snowy day, the last of December. Lord Mauleverer’s Christmas party was still there; but Mauly himself was gone, and every face was dark with anxiety. The schoolboy earl and his friends had planned to see the old year out and the new year in; but no one was thinking of festivities now. The servants had grave faces; Mauly had been liked by all; even Porson so far forgot his professional impassivity as to look distressed, Sir Reginald Brooke was silent and

grim; Lady Brooke looked almost the ghost of her usual kind and cheerful self. Even Billy Bunter felt the effect of the general gloom and anxiety, and allowed his thoughts to wander once or twice from his fat and important self.

Inspector Rymer had done all that, so far as anyone could see, could be done. He had followed up the clues of the handkerchief and the silk muffler that the juniors had found, and which seemed to indicate the way Lord Mauleverer had been taken by the kidnapper. His search had been diligent and active. That the kidnapped peer had not been taken out at the great gates, was certain—the gates had been closed and locked during the night, and the lodge-keeper had heard and seen nothing. But Mr. Rymer had discovered a spot where the snow had been brushed away from the park fence, indicating that something had been dragged over it, and a rope was found lying under the snow outside the fence, in the road.

No doubt was entertained that Lord Mauleverer had been carried off at that spot. It was surmised that the kidnapper had had a car in waiting; but the incessant snowfall had obliterated any traces that might have remained. Inspector Rymer had left the Towers at last, to carry on his search farther afield, and the anxious household waited for news—which did not come.

It was certain that the schoolboy earl had been kidnapped for ransom, and it seemed likely that the next move would be on the part of the kidnapper. Sooner or later, it was concluded, a demand would be received from him, and it was possible that this might furnish a clue. But if that was the wretch's intention, he was in no hurry to act.

Since the discovery of the traces left on the park wall, Harry Wharton & Co. had little hope of picking up any clue to their missing chum. It seemed certain that Mauleverer had been hauled over the park wall into the road, and likely enough that a car had been used to get him away—in which case he might be a hundred miles distant.

Old Sir Reginald hovered incessantly by the telephone, hoping for a ring from the police, to announce that they were on the track of his kidnapped nephew. But no call came.

The chums of the Remove had nothing to do but to wait idly, with heavy hearts, anxious for news. But they agreed that any form of exertion, even if it led to nothing, was better than that.

After lunch they stood by a window in the hall, looking out into the whirling flakes, and discussed the matter.

"No good hanging about doing nothing!" said Bob Cherry restlessly.

"What can we do?" asked Hazel.

"Well, it looks as if that villain must have had a car to get Mauly away—how else could he have done it? Somebody may have seen or heard last night along the road—there are cottages and farms—"

"The police will be looking that up."

"Well, yes; but—"

"We might take a walk and look round," said Harry.

"We might pick up something from somebody."

"Better than doing nothing!" said Nugent.

"I say, you fellows!"

Billy Bunter joined the thoughtful group at the window. Bunter had had a good lunch, and a happy nap afterwards.

No doubt he was concerned for Mauly; but, if so, he was bearing up remarkably well.

"I say, you fellows, no good looking like a lot of moulting fowls!" said Bunter cheerfully. "Keep your pecker up, you know."

“Fathead!” grunted Johnny Bull.

“I’m keeping cheerful!” said Bunter. “Still, it’s no good moping! Keep a stiff upper lip, like me. What about going to the pictures?”

“You fat chump!”

“Oh really, Wharton——”

“Shut up, Bunter!” said Bob. “Give us a rest!”

“Beast! I’ll take the girls to the pictures, then,” said Bunter. “One of you fellows can lend me a pound note. You’ll come?” he added, blinking at Marjorie and Clara through his spectacles.

“Thank you, no,” said Marjorie dryly.

“Don’t be an ass!” said Miss Clara.

“Oh, really, Clara——”

“Let’s get out!” growled Johnny Bull. “If we don’t pick up any news of Mauly, we shall get a rest from Bunter, at least.”

“The restfulness from the esteemed Bunter will be a boonful blessing,” remarked Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

“Well, I’ll come,” said Bunter. “I’m not going to be left alone in this dismal show—everybody with a face like a funeral! Pretty sort of a New Year you fellows are going to give me, I must say! Selfish, as usual—lot you care about me!”

“Come on!” said Harry.

“Wait for me!” hooted Bunter. “I’m going to get my fur coat. Look here, where’s that coat? If that cheeky cad Orris has taken my coat back to Mauly’s room——”

The party did not wait for Bunter to get his fur coat. Possibly they were not anxious for the fat Owl’s enlivening society. They donned their coats and hats, and started, leaving Billy Bunter still inquiring for “his” fur coat.

Bunter snorted as they went. That expedition was a sheer waste of time, in Bunter’s opinion, which might have been much better spent at the pictures. And Bunter was prepared to stand treat all round, if somebody would lend him a pound note!

Bunter rang for the butler.

It was some minutes before Porson appeared; but he appeared at last.

“Where’s my fur coat?” demanded Bunter. Porson looked at him.

“If you refer to his lordship’s fur coat, sir, I think you had better inquire of Mr. Orris,” he said.

“Send Orris to me.”

Porson looked at him again.

“Mr. Orris is in his lordship’s room,” he said.

“Go and fetch him.”

Porson did not seem to hear that. He departed—not in the direction of his lordship’s room.

Billy Bunter breathed hard with indignation.

“Cheeky menial!” he muttered. “Putting on airs now that his master’s away, I suppose. Mauly spoils these flunkeys!”

And Bunter rolled away to the staircase and puffed and blew his way to his lordship’s room.

“Look here——” hooted Bunter.

Orris glanced up.

The valet was in Lord Mauleverer’s dressing-room, occupied in brushing a coat—the very coat of which the indignant Owl was in search. It needed some attention, after Billy Bunter had worn it.

He gave Bunter one careless glance and resumed his occupation. The Owl of

Greyfriars fixed his eyes, and his spectacles, on him, with a devastating blink. It seemed to produce no effect on James Orris, however He brushed the coat quietly and methodically, heedless of Bunter.

“Help me on with that coat, Orris!” said Bunter, breath in hard. “I’m going out.”

“Without instructions from his lordship, sir——” said Orris, shaking his head.

“I’m giving you instructions.”

Orris brushed the coat.

Billy Bunter rolled nearer to him, his very spectacles glittering with wrath.

“If you’re going to be cheeky, Orris——”

“Oh, sir!” murmured Orris deprecatingly.

“The minute Mauly comes back, I shall ask him to sack you!” said Bunter. “Mind that!”

“Thank you, sir!” said Orris.

“What?”

“You’re very kind, sir.”

There was no doubt that the man was cheeky! There was absolutely no doubt about that! Bunter breathed wrath. He had no use for sarcasm from a manservant.

“You’d be sacked already if Mauly would have listened to me,” he said. “If he knew you’d been backing horses, and were being dunned by bookmakers for hundreds of pounds, you wouldn’t stay here long!”

Orris looked up again. There was a smouldering glimmer in his eyes as they fixed on Bunter.

“I’ll jolly well make Mauly listen to me, see?” snorted Bunter. “In fact, if you don’t mind your p’s and q’s, I’ll go to old Brooke about it. Make him jump if he knew that a servant here was in debt to the tune of hundreds of pounds to a bookie.”

“I hardly think that Sir Reginald would take any notice of such a statement, sir!” said Orris, but there was a curious expression in his eyes as they lingered on Bunter.

“We’ll jolly well see!” snorted Bunter. “I’m fed-up with your cheek, Orris! I never stand cheek from a servant, see? I keep ’em in order at Bunter Court, I can tell you! I’ve a jolly good mind to tell old Rymer! How would you like that?”

Orris started.

“I scarcely suppose that Inspector Rymer would be interested in my affairs, sir,” he answered.

“Wouldn’t he?” sneered Bunter. “Old Rymer’s got it into his head that there’s somebody in this house who’s had a hand in kidnapping Mauly. He might like to hear of a servant who was head-over-heels in debt from backing horses!”

Orris stood very still.

He did not speak, but his eyes remained fixed on Bunter, with a very strange expression in them.

Bunter blinked at him.

The veiled impertinence was quite gone from Orris’ manner. Bunter had the impression that he was bringing the fellow to his senses.

“Better mind your p’s and q’s, my man,” he said loftily. “I’m not the fellow to stand any nonsense, I can tell you!”

Orris drew a deep, hard breath.

“Surely, sir,” he faltered, “you do not imagine——” He broke off. His eyes were glued on Bunter’s fat face.

It seemed as if he was striving, by the sheer force of his gaze, to read the thoughts behind that fat and fatuous countenance.

But there was, in point of fact, nothing to read.

Bunter's words, which had startled James Orris to the extent of driving the colour from his cheeks, had been uttered only from irritation and annoyance.

As for actually suspecting Orris of complicity in the kidnapping of Lord Mauleverer, that had never entered Bunter's mind at all. His fat intellect moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform.

Inspector Rymer might certainly have turned his attention to Orris had he known that the valet was deeply in debt from reckless gambling. That would have been very discomfiting for Orris. And that was all that Bunter was thinking—so far as he thought at all.

He was far from realising the effect of his words on Orris.

"You see, it will pay you to be civil, my man!" said Bunter.

"I am sure, sir, that it was not my intention to be uncivil," said Orris humbly.

Bunter grinned.

He felt that he had put the fellow in his place at last.

"That's better," he said. "Now help me on with that coat."

"Certainly, sir!"

Bunter's fat face wore a complacent smile, as Orris held the coat and he squeezed his fat person into it. He had brought Orris to heel!

"Anything more, sir?" asked Orris.

"Get my gloves and hat."

"Very good, sir!"

In a state of complete satisfaction Bunter rolled away. He flattered himself that he knew how to handle servants when they were cheeky.

Orris looked after him as he went, with a singular expression on his face. Bunter would have been startled could he have guessed the thoughts that were passing in the valet's mind.

But the fat Owl, having gained his point, dismissed the matter. Orris had been taught manners, and he was worthy of no more of Billy Bunter's lofty consideration.

The fat junior, comfortably encased in Lord Mauleverer's fur coat, rolled out into the thickening December dusk and the falling flakes.

Harry Wharton & Co. had long been gone, and Bunter rolled down the long, winding avenue to the gates after them.

He grunted discontentedly as he trudged through thick snow.

The pictures would have been ever so much better. Still, he did not want to hang about the dismal, shadowed house by himself. As he tramped along in the thickening winter dusk he thought he heard a footstep behind him, and blinked round. But if there was anyone else coming down the long avenue between the rows of leafless, frosty trees, Bunter did not see him.

He rolled on.

About half-way down the avenue he glanced through an opening of the trees at a mass of snow at a little distance from the drive.

It was the old well, into which Bunter had tumbled on the night of his arrival at Mauleverer Towers.

The well was surrounded by a stone wall for safety; but the wall and the ground adjoining, were piled with snow, thick and white, and looked like a mound in the dimness. Bunter glanced towards it carelessly. As he did so, he heard the footsteps behind him again—and now it was the step of a man running.

He blinked round again. It was Orris, coming on at a rapid run. He panted for breath as he joined Bunter.

The fat junior eyed him superciliously.

“Well, what do you want?” he asked.

“Only a word with you, sir!” said Orris, and even Bunter, unobservant and obtuse as he was, was startled by the smouldering gleam in the man’s eyes in the dusk, and was vaguely alarmed. “You were pleased to make a remark, sir, in his lordship’s room a short time ago—”



The grasp of his captor relaxed, and Bunter shot down the well

I

“Well, what about it?” asked Bunter, backing away a step instinctively, though even yet his fatuous mind did not realise danger.

“I could not pursue the matter there, sir,” said Orris. “But as you were going out, I thought I would follow, sir, and speak to you here. I have hitherto regarded you, sir, as an absolute fool, from whom nothing could possibly be feared. I find that I was mistaken.”

Bunter stared.

“Why, you cheeky rotter—” he gasped.

“I find, sir,” said Orris, still speaking in the smooth, silky manner, which was strangely at variance with the words he uttered. “I find that it is from you, whom I have considered only a fat and harmless fool, that I have to anticipate danger.”

Bunter blinked at him, speechless now.

“Whether you actually suspect me or whether your stupidity is beyond my power of plumbing, I cannot say for certain!” continued Orris, in the same low, smooth voice. “But I know that I cannot take the risk. There is too much at stake for that. Your words, repeated to other ears, would certainly draw upon me suspicion which could have only one end. I must thank you, sir, for having warned me in time to save myself.”

Bunter jumped back.

Even his obtuse mind understood now, and a terror that was like ice froze his very blood.

But even as he moved, the man was upon him.

One faint squeak escaped the hapless Owl, shut off instantly by a grasp of iron on his throat.

The next moment he was dragged from the avenue among the dim trees.

He struggled feebly. His fat senses whirled, as he was dragged bodily through the thick snow. He hardly knew what was happening in his terror and amazement, but he made one more effort at resistance as he was dragged over the snow-piled parapet of the ancient well.

He had a glimpse of the valet’s face, not smooth and deferential now, but fixed, savage, ruthless. Then he slid in falling snow, over the verge, and only Orris’ grasp

held him for a moment from falling into the well. That grasp was relaxed, and he shot downwards.

Thud!

He landed in the thick snow that was piled far below.

Dizzily he blinked up.

Snow was falling after him in great masses.

In the darkness above, Orris was working fast and hard. Mass after mass of snow was piled into the well from above, till it was filled almost to the brim. Ten feet of snow, and more, piled over the hapless junior whom the ruthless rascal had hurled to death. Orris ceased at last. He wiped his brow, which was streaming with perspiration in spite of the freezing cold. He stared for some moments at the choked well. But he was safe now. Danger of which he had never dreamed threatened him from the least-expected quarter. That danger was buried deep!

No one would be surprised, when it was learned—after many days, perhaps weeks—that the short-sighted junior had tumbled into the well in the dark, and perished there of cold, buried by falling snow. With a white face, but a cool head, James Orris stole away from the spot in the darkness and the falling flakes.

Bunter Makes a Discovery!

OH, crikey!”

Billy Bunter, like the heathen of old, sat in darkness, and he gasped and spluttered as he sat. Above him the old well was crammed and choked with snow. But the fat junior was not, as Orris believed, buried under the snow.

“Oh, crikey! Beast! Oh, lor’!” gurgled Bunter.

The fall had knocked most of the breath out of him, but he was not damaged otherwise, for he had fallen on a soft thickness of snow. Now he was completely shut into the tunnel by the snow piled in the well. That, however, did not worry Bunter in the least. He had been through the secret passage before, and knew where it led, and he knew that he had only to follow it to reach safety.

But he was shivering with terror, as well as with cold.

There was no mistaking Orris’ intention and his motive! That was clear even to Bunter’s obtuse brain.

He had been hurled into the disused well to perish there! Orris, piling in the snow, believed that he was burying him beyond chance or hope of rescue.

“The awful villain!” groaned Bunter.

He shuddered, and his teeth chattered. In his fatuous self-satisfaction he had, as he supposed, brought a cheeky servant to heel, never dreaming that his idle words had inspired the fear of discovery in the heart of a desperate and remorseless malefactor. And but for the secret passage from the old well, and Bunter’s accidental knowledge of it, what he knew—or, rather, what he had made Orris believe that he suspected—would have been buried from all human knowledge.

The fat Owl picked himself up at last.

He was in dense darkness, and, in spite of Mauly’s fur coat, the cold chilled his fat limbs. He groped in his pockets for Bob Cherry’s electric torch, which he had borrowed the day before when playing ghost in the haunted turret. He turned on the light, and blinked round him.

The snow blocking up the opening of the tunnel rather relieved him; it shut him off from the murderous rascal above. James Orris undoubtedly believed that he was buried under ten feet of snow, doomed to inevitable death; and even in his terror

Bunter grinned at that thought. James Orris was going to discover later that he was still alive—very much alive!

Flashing the light of the torch before him the fat junior picked his way along the underground passage.

He reached the spiral stair at the end of it, and clambered up—slowly, and with many a grunt and gasp.

Endless seemed the stone steps to Bunter, winding up and up, as they had seemed on the previous occasion when he had mounted them.

But he reached the top at last.

Now he was in the stone cell, behind the thick wall of the turret-room, where he had stood hidden to utter ghostly groans when the juniors and the girls were exploring the haunted turret.

His fat hand glided over the oak panel in the recess, and found the knob which moved the hidden spring.

All he had to do was to open the panel and re-enter Mauleverer Towers by way of the turret-room. Orris, if he had come in, would doubtless be very much surprised to see him. Not that Bunter intended to let Orris see him if he could help it. His idea was to creep quietly to his own room and lock himself in there, and wait in hiding till Harry Wharton & Co. returned, when he would be safe. And the thought of the news that he had for them made him grin.

He grasped the oaken knob, and turned, or, rather, tried to turn. The knob did not move.

“Oh, crumbs!” murmured Bunter.

He strove again and again. On previous occasions the knob had turned easily and the spring had moved, the panel opened. Now it refused to move.

Bunter blinked at it in dismay.

Either it was jammed, or it had, somehow, been secured on the other side! It could hardly have jammed; it had worked perfectly before. It had been secured on the side of the turret-room.

Who could have done it? Who, besides Bunter, knew the secret of the moving panel in the turret-room?

Bunter could not guess. But he realised that his escape, on which he had counted as a certainty, was cut off. The thick oaken panel barred him off from the haunted room, and it was now immovable.

“Oh, lor’!” groaned Bunter.

He raised a fat hand, but he lowered it again. The turret-room was too far from the occupied parts of the mansion for knocking to be heard from it. But that was not all. If any ears, by chance, heard knocking from the haunted room they were as likely to be Orris’ ears as anyone else’s. And the bare idea of being caught by Orris in that lonely spot, defenceless, made Bunter’s blood run cold.

His teeth chattered.

For a long, long time the hapless Owl stood irresolute. He turned away from the locked panel at last.

He flashed the torch into the narrow passage that led out of the stone cell on the opposite side from the spiral stair.

He had not taken the trouble hitherto even to blink into it; the dark passage winding away into obscurity had had no attraction for him. But now it was a case of any port in a storm.

It was possible, at least, that there existed some other way into the Towers, apart from the panel in the wall of the turret-room. And the fat Owl resolved to explore it, in the

hope of discovering some way of escape.

With the light of the torch gleaming before him, he followed the narrow passage in the thickness of the ancient wall.

Step by step he advanced, feeling his way, and peering before him through his big spectacles.

Clink!

“Ooooooh!” gasped Bunter.

From the darkness ahead of him came the sound of a clinking chain!

Bunter stopped dead.

The thought of the ghost of Mauleverer Towers rushed into his mind. He stood trembling in every limb.

Clink, clink, clink!

There was a sound of movement, with the clinking of the chain. Bunter’s fat knees knocked together, and the torch sagged in his shaking hand. His teeth clattered like castanets.

Clink, clink!

“Is that you, you rascal?” came a voice from the darkness. “Or is it help? Who is there? If it’s a friend, speak, for mercy’s sake!

Billy Bunter almost fell down in his amazement.

The voice that came from the darkness was the voice of Lord Mauleverer!

Lord Mauleverer strained his eyes in the darkness from the prison-room.

He stood with the chain clinking round him as he moved, his eyes fixed on a spot of gleaming light in the blackness.

How long he had been a prisoner, in cold and darkness, the schoolboy earl did not know. It seemed like days and weeks; indeed, it seemed to him that centuries of blackness and solitude had passed since the kidnapper had left him there. Yet he knew that most probably it was less than a day, for the man in black had said that he would return in twenty-four hours, and Mauleverer had no doubt that he would keep his word.

As he saw the gleaming light advancing along the dark passage his natural thought was that it was his enemy who was coming. Nevertheless, hope leaped up in his heart. He heard a gasp from the blackness behind the light. It had stopped; but now it came on again. And from the unseen person who carried it came a voice that—not musical in itself—was music to the kidnapped schoolboy.

It was certain that the voice of Billy Bunter had never fallen so gladly on human ears before.

“Is that you, Mauly?”

Mauleverer almost staggered.

“Bunter!” he gasped.

“Yes, old chap!”

“Bunter! Good gad!”

The light came onwards. The voice of Lord Mauleverer had banished Bunter’s fears at once; and he knew that he had found the kidnapped schoolboy, though the discovery utterly amazed him. He peered over the torch as he came into the stone-walled prison-room that ended the secret passage. His eyes opened wide behind his big spectacles at the sight of Lord Mauleverer, standing in the clinking chain that secured him to the wall.

“Mauly!” he gasped.

“Bunter! Bunter, old man, you’re a prize packet!”

Mauleverer’s white face glowed. He could have hugged William George Bunter at

that moment. "Oh gad! How did you find me, Bunter?" He caught at the fat junior's plump arm, as it to make sure that the apparition was real. "Bunter, old bean, are the other fellows coming—what?"

"Eh! No."

Bunter peered at him.

"Fancy finding you here!" he gasped. "Have you been here all the time, Mauly?"

"Yaas. That villain drugged me and brought me here.

It seems like weeks ago, or years—"

"It was last night!" said Bunter.

"I suppose it was. He said he would come back in twenty-four hours, and he hasn't come yet. But it seems—"

Bunter jumped.

"Oh, crumbs! Is he coming back? I—I say, I—I think I'd better go! I—I don't want him to find me here."

"Hold on, you ass!" Mauleverer looked at his wristwatch, in the light of the torch.

"It's not five yet—and he won't come till the house is asleep—lots of time yet. He wouldn't risk it."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "All—all right then! I—I mean, of—of course I wouldn't desert you, old chap."

Mauleverer grinned.

"But how did you get here, old bean? Did you find the way in here from the turret-room? That villain knows it."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "Then that's why the panel's locked on the other side—he's locked it after sticking you here. How did Orris find it out, I wonder?"

"Orris!" repeated Lord Mauleverer blankly.

"Didn't you know it was Orris?" asked Bunter, blinking at him.

"Are you mad? Orris, my valet—what do you mean?" exclaimed Mauleverer.

Billy Bunter grinned.

"I've found him out," he said. "It was Orris—"

"What utter rot!"

"And he jolly well tried to murder me, to keep it dark——"

"Oh, rot!"

"Oh, really, Mauly—"

"Orris!" repeated Lord Mauleverer. "Impossible! You're dreaming, Bunter. Don't be an ass, you know."

"You'd have known the kind of man he was, if you'd listened to me, when I wanted to tell you about that letter of his that I saw," grunted Bunter. "He owes bookmakers hundreds of pounds."

"Nonsense!"

"He pitched me into the well because he thought I'd found him out—I mean, because I had found him out—" hooted Bunter. "He chucked down snow on me, and he thinks at this very minute that I'm buried under it, at the bottom of the well."

Mauleverer gazed at him.

"Tell me how you got here," he said quietly.

And Bunter told him; the schoolboy earl listening in utter amazement. Mauleverer drew a deep, deep breath, when the fat Owl had finished.

"So that's it!" he said at last. "And that's how you got in the night you came, you fat fraud! You've known of that secret panel in the turret-room all the time you've been here! It was you that put up the groaning when we were looking for the ghost in the

turret-room—”

“He, he, he!”

“You fat spoofer—”

“If that’s how you thank a chap for rescuing you at the risk of his life, Mauly——”

“Oh! Ah! Well, never mind,” said Lord Mauleverer. “You ought to have told me about that secret panel at once, you fat bounder. What were you keeping it dark for? Oh gad! Was it to get in again if you were booted out?”

“Oh, really, Mauly——”

“Well, never mind,” said Mauleverer. “Thank goodness you’re here, anyhow. I’m dashed if I should ever have believed that I should ever be glad to see you; but it’s always the jolly old unexpected that happens.”

“Look here, you beast——”

“That villain has the key that locks this chain,” said Mauleverer, unheeding. “You can’t get me loose. And if he’s locked the panel on the other side, you can’t get out and get help. We’ve got to think this Out.”

“I—I say, Mauly——”

“Don’t interrupt! Look here, that villain isn’t likely to come back till after midnight; but he will come. He’s counting on my giving in, after twenty-four hours of this, and writing a letter to my uncle to fix up about the ransom.” Mauly set his lips. “He mustn’t find you here, Bunter.”

“I should jolly well say not!” gasped Bunter. “No jolly fear!

“He will come by the panel in the turret-room,” went on Mauleverer. “He knows nothing of the way you came in, from the old well. You’ll be out of sight, Bunter——”

“Yes, rather!” agreed Bunter, with emphasis.

“You’ll hide on that spiral stair you’ve told me about. You won’t let him spot you when he comes through from the turret-room——”

“What-ho!”

“He will come along here—and then you’ll nip through the panel into the turret; it won’t be locked on the other side while he’s here, see?”

“Good!”

“Then you’ll get to Wharton, and the other fellows, and tell them. They’ll root me out of this fast enough when they know where I am. Only—take jolly good care that that villain doesn’t spot you when he comes through.”

“Rely on me for that, old chap!” said Bunter earnestly. And Lord Mauleverer grinned. Billy Bunter was not in many ways a very reliable youth. But Mauly had no doubt, not the shadow of a doubt, that he could rely on him for that.

At Last!

THE hour was late.

Long since, Marjorie and Clara had gone to their rooms. Hazel had stayed up a little later, but he

had gone to bed at last. But the Famous Five, sleepy as they were, were not thinking of bed. They had returned unsuccessful from their expedition; not that they had really hoped for any success. Now, added to their anxiety for Mauleverer, was the fact that Billy Bunter was missing.

Where the fat Owl was they could not imagine. Orris had informed them that he had helped Bunter into his lordship’s fur coat, and that he had followed them out. Porson had seen him leave the house. That was all they could learn. They had no doubt that

Bunter had missed his way somewhere in the dark, and would come rolling home late. But at midnight he had not rolled in, and they wondered rather uneasily whether some accident had befallen the fat and fatuous Owl.

Midnight was past now. All the servants were gone to bed. Orris had lingered latest, but he had disappeared at last. The great house was plunged into silence, broken only by the wail of the wind, and the crackle of the fire in the great fireplace, piled with logs. It was the last day of the old year, and Mauly's Christmas party had intended to sit up and see the old year out and the new year in. But this was very different from what the Christmas party had anticipated. They sat up with heavy hearts and anxious minds.

"I say, you fellows!"

Every member of the Famous Five jumped at that whispering voice, coming suddenly from the silence.

"Bunter!"

A fat figure, in a fur coat, came on tiptoe from the staircase. The Famous Five stared at Bunter blankly. Sir Reginald Brooke screwed his eyeglass a little tighter into his eye, and stopped his restless pacing, to stare at the fat junior.

"How the thump—" began Wharton.

The juniors had expected to hear Bunter at the door sooner or later. They were amazed to see him come from the staircase within. And the look on his face amazed them still more. His fat cheeks were white, his little round eyes bulging behind his spectacles and he breathed in gasps.

"I say, you fellows!" Bunter's voice was a husky whisper. "I say—quick—quick—come on, all of you— quick—" he gasped.

"What does this mean, Bunter?" asked Sir Reginald Brooke quietly.

"I've found him, sir——"

"Found him! What—who——"

"Mauly, sir!" gasped Bunter. "Come on, quick! That villain's with him now! He passed only a couple of yards from me. It was him all the time. He was only spoofing when he made out that he was chloroformed like Mauly, you know. If he'd seen me he would have— Oh, crikey!"

The juniors gazed at Bunter, dumbfounded. Sir Reginald grasped him by a fat shoulder.

'Explain yourself—quick!'

Bunter babbled it out. In utter amazement the old baronet and the juniors listened. But as, soon as they understood, no time was lost. The baronet and the Famous Five followed Bunter up the staircase; Bob Cherry lingering a moment to catch up one of Sir Reginald's golf clubs from a bag in the hall, with the idea that it might be needed. Breathless, with gleaming eyes, the juniors reached the old stone stair to the turret, and hurried up. They entered the shadowy turret-room. Bunter flashed on his light, groped for the carved lion's head on the secret panel, and the panel clicked open.

"I say, you fellows, you—you go first," whispered Bunter. "I—I've got to—to tie up my shoelace——"

Without heeding Bunter, the old baronet and the five juniors passed through the aperture into the stone cell beyond.

Far in the distance, at the end of the narrow passage that opened before them, was a glimmer of light.

Silent, grim, they passed along the secret passage.

The prison-room was before them, lighted by a flickering candle stuck on the stone

wall. They saw Lord Mauleverer, standing with the chain locked on him, his face white in the candle-light. And they saw a figure in black facing the schoolboy earl, his back to them as they came. The sound of a husky, disguised voice reached their ears.

“There is pen and paper, my lord. I am waiting!”

“You can wait!” answered Mauleverer.

Looking past the man in black, Mauleverer discerned the six figures that came quietly up the passage. But not a muscle of his face quivered. He gave no sign to warn the man in black.

“You have been here twenty-four hours, my lord! Think—before I go! You are cold—frozen—starving! What will you feel like in another twenty-four hours? Write as I dictate—”

“I will write nothin’!”

There was a muttered oath under the mask.

“I will wait a quarter of an hour longer, my lord! I will give you time! Then, if you refuse—”

The man in black broke off suddenly. Mauleverer’s face betrayed nothing, but some faint sound from behind him caught his ear. He spun round, “Scoundrel!” shouted the old baronet.

The masked man uttered a panting cry.

His eyes gleamed through the eyeholes of the mask like those of a cornered wild animal. He gave one glare round him, but there was no way of escape, save by the secret passage—blocked by the baronet and the juniors behind him. In utter desperation the man in the mask made a rush.

“Seize him!” gasped Sir Reginald.

The old baronet reeled over under the rush of the man in black. The next moment a golf club swept through the air, and the masked man staggered under the blow and fell. And as he went down, the Famous Five piled on him like one man.

“Got him!” gasped Harry Wharton.

“The got-fulness is terrific!”

Harry Wharton tore the mask from the struggling rascal. It was the face of James Orris, white with rage and despair, that was revealed in the flickering candle-light.

“Herbert—my boy!” exclaimed Sir Reginald. “My dear boy!”

“Jolly glad to see you, nunky,” said Lord Mauleverer cheerfully. “That villain’s got a key to this chain, you men.

Get it off him—”

A minute more and the manacles were unlocked and Mauleverer was free. Orris, still resisting feebly, was safely held. There was a cautious step in the passage, and a fat face and a large pair of spectacles glimmered in the candle-light. Orris gave a convulsive start at the sight of Billy Bunter, his eyes almost starting from his head as he saw the fat junior whom he had believed buried under the snow at the bottom of the old well.

“I say, you fellows—got that beast safe? I say, you might have waited for me. Sure you’ve got him safe?”

“Safe as houses, old bean!” chuckled Bob Cherry.

“The safefulness is——”

“Terrific!” chortled Bob.

Leaning on his uncle’s arm, the schoolboy earl left the prison-room, the Famous Five following with their grasp on Orris. Billy Bunter led the way, with a happy grin of anticipation on his fat face. Ten minutes later, Billy Bunter was seeing the New Year in—with the help of a cold turkey and a Christmas pudding.

Marjorie gave Billy Bunter her sweetest smile the next morning. Miss Clara smacked him on the back. Sir Reginald and Lady Brooke made much of him; Mauly was really pally; Harry Wharton & Co. quite chummy; and even the stately Porson waited on him with eager attention. Everybody, for once, was pleased with Bunter; excepting, no doubt, Orris, who left the Towers in the custody of Inspector Rymer, and who could not be expected to feel pleased. Still more was Bunter pleased with himself. Indeed, he swelled so much with importance that he seemed really in danger of sharing the fate of the frog in the fable, and bursting. Not once, but many times, did Bunter explain to the other fellows that he, William George Bunter, was the goods—the genuine goods! And for once Billy Bunter was allowed to spread himself to his fat heart's content, and nobody said him nay. For was it not due to Billy Bunter that it was, after all, a happy New Year at Mauleverer Towers?

