



CHAPTER I

MINORITY OF ONE !

“HALLO, hallo, hallo!” roared Bob Cherry.
There was really no need for Bob to roar.

Neither Harry Wharton nor Frank Nugent was deaf; and they were quite near at hand: looking out of the window of No. 1 Study when Bob looked in at the door.

But it was one of Bob's little ways to put on steam when he was in exuberant spirits—his usual state! There was rain that afternoon, which had damped everything except, apparently, Bob's spirits. Judging by his cherry ruddy face, Bob Cherry couldn't have cared less.

It had been a fine summer's morning. It was the rainiest of rainy afternoons. Black clouds had rolled in from the sea. Rain splashed on windows and window-sills. The old elms were weeping. The cricket-ground was doubtless getting more and more like a swimming-pool every minute. Which had a somewhat disgruntling effect on Harry Wharton, the captain of the Remove who had planned a practice game for that afternoon, in preparation for the match with St. Jim's, due in a week's time. The rain washed it out. The hardest cricketer could scarcely have thought of urging the flying ball, with the water coming down almost in sheets.

A day earlier or a day later it would not have mattered. Remove men could grind Latin with Quelch, or French with Mossoo, or maths with Lascelles,

while rain splashed unheeded on window-panes. But a sudden heavy rain-storm on a half-holiday was the limit.

"Blow the rain!" Harry Wharton was saying, as he stared from a wet window into a drenched quadrangle. Nobody was to be seen out of the House. Even Quelch, the Remove master, who faced almost all weathers in his walks abroad, had given it a miss. Undoubtedly the Remove cricketers had to give it a miss also.

"Bother it!" agreed Frank Nugent.

"It would rain on a half-holiday!"

"It would!"

"Looks like cricket, doesn't it?"

"Hardly!"

"Oh, blow!"

"What about table-tennis in the Rag?!" suggested Nugent.

"Blow table-tennis in the Rag."

That duet was interrupted by the hurling open of the study door, and a stentorian voice waking the echoes of the Remove passage.

Wharton and Nugent looked round from the window. The cheery ruddy face in the doorway certainly presented a more agreeable view than the rainy quad without. Frank Nugent smiled. Harry Wharton did not. He was not feeling like smiling.

"Enjoying the weather?" he asked, sarcastically.

"Nice weather for ducks, at any rate!" said Bob.

"Fathead!"

"Thanks! What's the odds so long as you're 'appy?" argued Bob, "Lucky we're getting it this Wednesday instead of next, when we're playing St. Jim's—."

"There's that!" said Frank Nugent, laughing.

"Br-r-r-r!" was Harry Wharton's rejoinder. His thoughts were in the present, not the future, tense.

"Well, what about getting up a game?" asked Bob. "Must do something on a rainy day."

"Nugent's suggested table-tennis," said Harry Wharton, still sarcastic, "Are you going to suggest marbles! Or hop-sotch in the passage!"

"Anything but! What about cricket!"

"In that downpour, ass!"

"No, in this passage."

"Rot!" said Harry Wharton tersely.

"Is the rotfulness terrific, my esteemed Wharton?" Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's dark smiling face looked in over Bob's shoulder.

"Jolly good idea, I think," said Johnny Bull, looking in over the other shoulder, "Can't loaf about doing nothing, like Bunter."

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"We've played passage cricket before!" urged Bob Cherry.

"And a jolly row there was, last time, when Smithy knocked a ball through the landing window," answered Harry.

"Accidents will happen! We'll tell Smithy to be more careful—."

"I can see that hot-headed ass being careful!"

"Well, dash it all, a fellow must do something," said Bob, "Do you want to stick in the study saying things about the weather!"

"Blow the weather!"

"Oh, quite! But that doesn't help! You don't want to frowst in the Rag in an armchair along with Bunter, do you?"

"Ass!"

"Or join Skinner and Snoop in a smoke in their study—?"

"Fathead!"

"Mark Linley's swotting Horace in my study. Like to help him dig up what old Flaccus meant, if he meant anything?"

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

None of those resources, evidently, appealed to the captain of the Remove. He cast a glance towards the window. If he hoped to see a sign of lessening rain, there was nothing in it. Torrents were coming down.

"It won't stop yet awhile," said Bob, following his glance, "We can get up a game. Smithy's found some cracks in the floor for sticking up the stumps—."

"And helped them with his pocket-knife, I expect."

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed Bob, "O.K. so long as they stick up. Come on, old man—don't be a wet blanket—there's enough wet about, without that. There's a dozen fellows keen on it."

"Me for one!" said Johnny Bull.

"And me anotherfully," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Quelch—!" began Harry.

"Oh, he's gone out," interrupted Bob, "Rain won't stop Henry from going on his grind. Anyhow we shouldn't be heard from Masters' Studies. I know it's against the rules: but the rain has washed out everything else, so it may as well wash out the rules, for once."

"Rot!"

"Can't play without our captain," urged Johnny Bull. "Be a sport, old man."

"I happen to be Head Boy of the form, as well as captain. Quelch expects his Head Boy to keep some sort of order in this passage, even on a rainy day."

Bob Cherry made a grimace.

"Oh, all right!" he sighed, "If you're going to mount the high horse, I'm done. Let's wash it out!"

"I'm not mounting the high horse! Quelch gave me a royal jaw last time, and I don't want the mixture as before."

Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent and Hurree Singh, exchanged glances. It was true that Head Boy had responsibilities that were not shared by

the other fellows in the form. But they could not help thinking that the disgruntling effect of the rain had something to do with it.

But the "Famous Five" of Greyfriars always pulled together. If their leader turned down the proposition, the Co. were at least prepared to argue the point.

There was a pause; which was broken by a strident voice from the passage. Herbert Vernon-Smith looked into the study.

"You men ready?" he asked, "I've pitched the stumps up the passage. Single wicket—bowl from the landing. It'll be a game, if it won't be cricket. Come on!" The Bounder of Greyfriars looked round from face to face, "Anything up!"

"Wharton's against it, Smithy," said Bob Cherry, uncomfortably, "Wash it out. Might get up a rag on Coker of the Fifth, instead—"

The Bounder gave Harry Wharton a very unpleasant look.

"Never mind Coker of the Fifth," he snapped, "We're going to play passage cricket. What's the objection, Wharton?"

"Quelch—!"

"Who cares for Quelch?"

"I do, if you don't, Smithy."

"Stick in your study, then, and keep out of it," said Vernon-Smith, "You needn't join up if you funk a spot of trouble with Quelch. You fellows coming—or are you going to sit around being good little dear schoolboys who love their kind teachers like Wharton?"

"Oh, shut up, Smithy!" exclaimed Frank Nugent, sharply; while Harry Wharton's face crimsoned.

"Rot!" snapped the Bounder. "We've got to do something: and a sermon from Wharton won't amuse us. I'm going to play passage cricket, and so are a dozen other fellows. If you're funky, stick here, and keep out of a row if there is one. Better keep the door shut, so that the beaks will know that you were not mixed up in it!" added Smithy, with a sneer: and he stalked out of the study and banged the door after him.

Harry Wharton breathed hard. His friends looked red and discomfited. Johnny Bull gave a grunt.

"We can't stick in here, and let the fellows think we're afraid to get mixed up in it!" he growled.

"Please yourself!" said Harry Wharton, curtly.

"Well, look here," said Bob. "You're Head Boy, and perhaps you ought to keep clear! But we're only common-or-garden chaps, and if there's a row there's no reason why we shouldn't take it like the other fellows—"

"I've said please yourself!" said Harry, dryly.

"Well, if you don't mind—!" said Bob. There was already a tramping of feet, and a buzz of voices, in the passage: and Bob, undoubtedly, was keen to join the crowd.

"How often do you want me to say please yourself?"

"Oh, all right!" he said, "I'll please myself." And he opened the door, and walked out of the study.

Hurree Janset Ram Singh made a step to follow, but paused, with a somewhat perplexed look on his dusky face. Finally he followed Bob. Johnny Bull paused still longer: Johnny was slow and sure, and never did anything in a hurry. But he gave a nod at last.

"I'm going," he said, "I'm not Head Boy, thank goodness: just one of the mob. What's good enough for the rest is good enough for me." And Johnny walked out in his turn.

Only Frank Nugent remained with the captain of the Remove. Wharton's eyes turned on him with sarcastic inquiry.

"Aren't you joining up too?" he asked.

"Not if you don't," answered Nugent, "But—!" He paused.

"Well?"

"Well, I think it's rather rot," said Nugent. "There's always a spot of ragging when the rain keeps fellows indoors. We're not expected to be little tin angels, you know. A fellow doesn't like to be thought funky."

Harry Wharton laughed: not wholly a pleasant laugh.

"That leaves me in a minority of one!" he said. "All right—we'll chance it." He crossed to the corner of the study, where a cricket bat was standing, and picked it up, "Come on."

Nugent followed him from the study. A few minutes later "passage cricket" was going strong. It was not remarkably like cricket, perhaps: but it was lively, and it was noisy—undoubtedly it was noisy. In spite of the rain, most of the Remove fellows were after all enjoying life.

CHAPTER II

TOO LATE!

BILLY BUNTER grinned.
Bunter was amused.

The sight of a group of three angry, annoyed "beaks", standing at the foot of the staircase, exchanging opinions in acidulated tones, was amusing to Bunter.

Generally, sounds from the studies above could not be heard at the foot of the big staircase. But sounds could now be heard—quite loud sounds. Indeed, those sounds were so loud, that they had reached Billy Bunter's fat ears, in an armchair in the Rag, and caused the fat Owl of the Remove to roll forth, to ascertain what was going on.

Something was going on, upstairs. That was only too clear. Innumerable feet could not tramp on old oak planks without noise. A cricket ball could not bounce from study doors without a din. Fellows could not collide in rushing after it without an uproar. Neither could they shout at the top of their voices without waking many echoes. Cricket, really and truly, was not an indoor game. The Remove men were warming to it, and the more they warmed to it, the louder became the din.

"Scandalous!" said Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth. Prout, plump and portly, frowned portentously; "Such a disturbance—"

"The Remove, I think!" said little Mr. Capper, the master of the Fourth, "Yes, the Remove—!"

"Quelch's boys!" said Mr. Hacker, the master of the Shell, compressing his thin lips hard, "Quelch's boys, undoubtedly."

"Such a riot—!" said Mr. Capper.

"Unparalleled!" boomed Prout.

"Quelch should be here," said Mr. Hacker, "I would intervene personally, but Quelch resents any intervention in his form, as you all know—"

"Only too well!" boomed Prout. "Only too well!"

"Probably Quelch has gone out—!" suggested mild Mr. Capper.

"Quelch has not gone out!" answered Mr. Hacker, "Quelch is in his study. He must have heard this din—it is audible all over the House. Yet he takes no notice. No doubt his view is that his form may do as they please."

There was a sudden roar from above.

"Look out—!"

"Get that ball, Squiff—!"

"Oh, my hat! It's over!"

Thud! thud! thud! came from the upper staircase. Apparently the ball, propelled by the bat at one end of the Remove passage, had shot across the landing at the other end: and, eluding the numerous fieldsmen, whizzed over the banisters. Now it thudded from stair to stair on its way down. It was followed by trampling feet on the upper staircase, and a scramble on the middle landing. Even the reckless Removites, perhaps, were rather anxious that it should not escape as far as the ground floor.

"Oh, crickey!" murmured Billy Bunter, blinking at the three beaks through his big spectacles. They looked more thunderous than ever.

"This is intolerable!" exclaimed Mr. Hacker.

"Unparalleled!" repeated Mr. Prout.

Mr. Hacker stared up the staircase. The ball had rolled across the middle landing, and started on a merry descent of the lower stairs. But Herbert Vernon-Smith flung himself after it, and grabbed it just in time—almost tumbling down the stairs himself as he did so.

"Ware beaks!" called out Squiff, catching sight of Mr. Hacker's sour face looking up from below.

The Bounder cast a breathless glance down.

"Only the Acid Drop!" he called back. And he disappeared up the upper staircase with the ball.

Mr. Hacker stood almost trembling with anger. Smithy, perhaps, did not realise that his voice would reach Hacker's ears: or perhaps he did not care. The Bounder was always reckless. Hacker, no doubt, was aware that he was nicknamed the "Acid Drop" among the juniors: but it was not a nickname that could possibly gratify any master.

"Upon my word!" breathed Mr. Hacker. He was aware of a faint smile on Mr. Capper's face, and suspected a twinkle even in Prout's eye. They had heard him called the "Acid Drop". It was the limit. Hacker spun round, with billowing gown. "This is—is intolerable! As Quelch does not choose to come, I shall call him—I shall point out to him that his boys cannot be permitted to riot in the House."



And Hacker, with thin lips set like a vice, billowed away in the direction of the Remove master's study.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Billy Bunter.

Hacker had gone for Quelch! Why Quelch had not arrived on the scene already was rather perplexing, unless he had suddenly become deaf. But there was no doubt that he would arrive now, and promptly: and when he did arrive, it was certain that the thunder would roll. And Billy Bunter, with the kindly intention of warning the Removites that the storm was about to break, rolled to the staircase, circumnavigated Prout and Capper, and mounted. Up he went, somewhat at the pace of a tired snail. He rolled across the middle landing, snailed up the upper staircase, and rolled breathlessly on the upper landing, where Vernon-Smith was about to bowl to Harry Wharton, at the improvised wicket at the other end of the Remove passage.

"I say, you fellows!" gasped Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "You joining up, Bunter?"

"Eh? Oh! No! No fear! But I say—"

"Look out!" came a roar, "Get that ball!" Shouting and trampling of feet drowned Billy Bunter's fat voice.

Smithy had bowled, and the ball came whizzing back, hot from the bat. The fieldsmen in the passage had no luck, and it whizzed out on the landing, where five or six fellows rushed for it. It was rather unfortunate for Billy Bunter that he was in the way: for fieldsmen in a hurry had no time to go round Bunter. The fat Owl of the Remove found himself suddenly up-ended, and he sat down on the landing with a bump that made the old oak planks creak. He sat and spluttered.

"Grrrrrhg! Grooogh! Oh, crickey! Oooogh!"

Nobody heeded Bunter. Bob Cherry just saved the ball before it slipped through the banisters and dropped into space. He returned it with a whiz to Vernon-Smith, who caught it with his left hand, and prepared to bowl again. The fat Owl spluttered unregarded.

"Urrrrrggh! I say—wurrgh! Grooogh! Beasts! Urrrrggh."

"Keep out of the way, you fat ass!" called out Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—urrrggh—!"

"Roll off, barrel."

"Beast! I say—oooooch!" gasped Bunter. "I say, I came up here to—ooogh—woogh—grooogh—!"

Bob Cherry, laughing, cut across the landing to give the breathless fat Owl a hand up. He heaved the fattest member of the Greyfriars Remove to his feet.

"There you are, fatty! Now keep out of the way!" he said.

"Oh, really, Cherry—ooogh—."

"You can't go to your study now, ass—do you want to stop the ball with your face! It would look less like a face than ever if you did."

"Urrrgh! I ain't going to my study!" gasped Bunter, "I came up—grooch—to tell you fellows—ooogh!—that Hacker—"

"Never mind the Acid Drop."

"Urrrgh! He's gone—urrgh—to call Quelch!" Bunter got it out at last. "Quelch will be up here in a tick—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Bob. "Look out, you men—Bunter says that Quelch is coming up—Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles—here he comes!"

It was too late!

CHAPTER III

UNFINISHED GAME

KNOCK!

It was not a tap—it was a sharp knock, almost a bang, at the door of Mr. Quelch's study. It caused the Remove master to give quite a jump. His rather bony fingers came to rest on the keys of his typewriter: the click of the keys, which had been almost incessant, died away: and Henry Samuel Quelch stared across at his door, with quite a grim look. He was startled, and he was annoyed.

Quelch had been enjoying that half-holiday. Rain had washed out his usual "grind": but there was still balm in Gilead, so to speak: in the shape of the celebrated "History of Greyfriars" upon which Quelch had been engaged for more years than most Remove fellows could remember. Rain splashed on his study window unheeded. The typewriter clicked merrily. Quelch, deep in his subject, forgot time and space.

He was, perhaps, dimly aware of some unusual sounds in the distance. But he did not heed them. He was concentrated on the work in hand: and perhaps the clicking of the machine, close at hand, helped to dim-out sounds from afar. At all events, Quelch had not heeded those sounds of revelry which had drawn several other beaks from their studies, and even William George Bunter from his armchair in the Rag. He heeded nothing till that knock, or rather bang, came at his door: and then, at last, he sat up and took notice.

"What—what—?" ejaculated Mr. Quelch. He did not want interruptions: but a tap at his door would have been in the normal course. That sharp loud knock was not at all normal. Quelch's brows fixed in a frown as he stared at the door, and ejaculated "What—what—?" If a Remove boy had ventured to give such a knock at his door, that Remove boy was booked for closer acquaintance with Quelch's cane.

The door flew open. It was not a Remove boy who presented himself: it was Mr. Hacker, the master of the Shell, with a very angry face.

Quelch's gimlet-eyes almost bored into him.

"Really, Mr. Hacker!" he exclaimed.

"Mr. Quelch! I am here to apprise you of a riot in your form, of which you are apparently not aware!" rapped Mr. Hacker. "Will you be kind enough, sir, to put a stop to a disturbance which is becoming quite intolerable!"

"I was not aware—"

"No doubt, sir. But you are aware now, I presume! You have only to listen!" snapped Mr. Hacker.

That certainly was the case. Now that the study door was open, the sounds from afar were very much more audible. Subconsciously, no doubt, Quelch had been aware that something must be going on: but he had not heeded. He heeded now.

"Bless my soul!" he exclaimed. "There is certainly an uproar somewhere—I have been busy, Mr. Hacker, and had not noticed it—"

"Now that you notice it, sir, will you have the kindness to step out and speak to your boys!"

Mr. Quelch's face set, and his gimlet-eyes glinted like cold steel. If there was anything calculated to touch Quelch on the raw—to get his goat, as Fisher T. Fish would have expressed it—it was the intervention of another "beak" in matters pertaining to his form. Even Prout, who often bestowed kindly but unwelcome counsel on his colleagues, seldom ventured to do so with Quelch. The Remove master bristled at Hacker's words.

"Certainly I will do so, Mr. Hacker, if the boys of my form are concerned in this disturbance," he rapped. "Have you any reason—?"

"This riot, sir, is going on in the Remove passage, and all, or almost all, of your boys are concerned in it!" retorted Mr. Hacker.

"If you are sure of that, Mr. Hacker—"

"I have not only heard them, but seen them, sir, and one of them, Vernon-Smith, applied an opprobrious epithet to me!" yapped Mr. Hacker. "If your boys, sir, are to be permitted to turn the House into a bear-garden on a half-holiday, they are not, I presume, to be allowed to apply insulting nicknames to members of Dr. Locke's staff."

Mr. Quelch rose to his feet.

The look on his face was almost deadly. Even Mr. Hacker was satisfied, as he saw it, that the Remove would be dealt with faithfully, when their form-master arrived on the scene.

"I will go at once, sir!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

"Very good, sir," snapped back Hacker, and he faded out of the study.

Mr. Quelch picked up a cane. Seldom had the Remove master been so angry. His work was interrupted: his absorption in his "History of Greyfriars", the solace of his leisure hours, had been rudely shattered. His boys were out of hand: and Quelch was a strict disciplinarian. Complaint had been made of his form: and worst of all, the complaint was well founded and justified. Quelch put the cane under his arm, and rustled out of the study after Hacker: and the

look on his face was more than enough to have made the Removites, had they seen it, quite tired of cricket as an indoor game. They were going to see it, soon!

"Oh! Here is Quelch, at last!" boomed Prout. "Quelch, you hear what is going on—you hear—"

"I am not deaf, Mr. Prout!"

"What? what? Really, Quelch, I must say—I am bound to say—I feel compelled to say, Quelch—"

Quelch was gone before Prout could get further. He did not exactly run up the stairs. But he mounted them very quickly, his gown flying behind him. Prout was left to boom unheeded.

Mr. Quelch arrived on the upper landing like a thundercloud. He heard Bob Cherry's voice as he arrived. The news that Quelch was coming would doubtless have caused a general and rapid exodus from the scene, had it come in time. But it had come too late.

A moment ago, hubbub had reigned on the landing. But as that grim figure arrived, with frowning brow and glinting eyes, there was sudden silence. Even the reckless Bounder, about to bowl along the passage to the captain of the Remove at the other end, paused, the ball glued to his hand. Consternation reigned. There was almost a dead silence, as Mr. Quelch swept on the landing.

"Cherry!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" stammered Bob.

"What is all this!"

"Oh! We—we—we—we were playing cricket, sir! I—I hope we—we—we haven't been making much noise, sir!"

If Bob hoped that not much noise had been made, it showed that he had a hopeful nature! Certainly, nobody had intended to make noise enough to draw Quelch from his lair. It had just happened.

As Bob finished stammering, a voice came from the Remove passage. The fellows up the passage had not yet seen Quelch. It was Harry Wharton's voice that called.

"Are you sending down that ball, Smithy?"

"Upon my word!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

He rustled across the landing, and stared up the passage. A silent crowd of juniors, behind him, looked at one another. The Bounder shrugged his shoulders. The other fellows looked dismayed. Undoubtedly there had been more noise than was judicious. A little noise, among a crowd of junior school-boys kept indoors by the rain might have been excused. But the Remove fellows realised that there had not been a little noise. There had been a lot!

Mr. Quelch did not heed the silent crowd behind him on the landing. His eyes fixed on the batsman at the wicket up the passage: no other person than Harry Wharton, captain of the Remove, and Quelch's trusted Head Boy. And if his speaking countenance had been grim before, its grimness now intensified. Head Boy of the form should have been endeavouring, at least, to

keep such rowdiness within bounds. Instead of which, evidently he was taking a leading part in it. Never had Quelch looked so grim. The fabled basilisk could hardly have looked grimmer.

"Wharton!"

"Oh!" ejaculated the captain of the Remove. He stared along the passage at the grim face at the landing end.

He was ready for Smithy to bowl again. But he did not expect Smithy to bowl now. Indoor cricket in the Remove was booked to be an unfinished game. Wharton's face crimsoned. Against his better judgment, he had joined in this noisy "rag": or rather, had allowed himself to be dragged into it. What might really have been expected had now accrued: Quelch had come on the scene. Harry Wharton felt, at the moment like kicking himself: and still more like kicking Herbert Vernon-Smith. His face burned as he met the gimlet-eyes glinting at him from the landing end of the passage.

Quelch's gimlet glance took in the scene: fieldsmen scattered along the wide passage: the stumps pitched in cracks in the floor: cracks that had certainly been helped out, as Wharton had remarked, by the Bounder's pocket-knife. And his Head Boy at that illicit wicket!

"Oh!" repeated Harry, "Yes, sir!"

"Come here!" rapped Mr. Quelch. "All of you."

"Very well, sir."

Harry Wharton leaned his bat on the wall, and came down the passage: followed by the others. And a silent crowd, on the landing, faced their form-master's gimlet-eye: everyone of them doing his best to avoid meeting it.

CHAPTER IV

THE HEAVY HAND!

"WHARTON!"

"Yes, sir!" said Harry, quietly.

"There has been a disturbance here—a most unseemly disturbance. Several of the masters have been disturbed, and complaint has been made to me. I find you taking a leading part in it. That is not what I should have expected of my Head Boy."

Wharton stood silent. He was singled out for the sharpest edge of Quelch's wrath, which was only to be expected. He was Head Boy: and he could not explain that he had been influenced by the Bounder's jeers, and the unreflecting example of his friends. All he could do now was to "take it". He took it in silence.

"We were all in it, sir—!" ventured Bob Cherry.

The gimlet-eye glinted at Bob.

"I am aware of that, Cherry! Every boy present will go into Extra School on Saturday afternoon, for French with Monsieur Charpentier. If this riot should be renewed, every boy will be caned."

The Bounder winked at Tom Redwing, with the eye furthest from Quelch. Really, the "riot" was not likely to be renewed, after Quelch's visit to the Remove quarters. Nothing could have been less likely.

"With you, Wharton, I must deal more severely," continued Mr. Quelch; and Harry Wharton drew a deep breath. Most of the juniors expected to see Quelch slip the cane from under his arm into his hand. However, the Remove master stopped short of that. The cane remained under his arm—for the present. "Wharton! You will go into your study, and remain there till tea-time, and write lines from the first book of the Aeneid. I shall expect two hundred lines by tea-time."

"Very well, sir!" said Harry.

"Vernon-Smith!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" The Bounder started a little. Apparently he too was to be singled out: he did not know why. True, he had been the noisiest and most reckless of the whole crowd, from sheer love of rowdiness, if that counted. He had quite forgotten Hacker's sour face on the staircase.

"Vernon-Smith, you have been guilty of impertinence, indeed insolence, to one of my colleagues!" said Mr. Quelch, sternly.

"Oh!" murmured the Bounder. He remembered Hacker; and realised that the "Acid Drop" must have heard him.

A sullen look came over his hard face. Everyone in the Remove knew that there was no love lost between Quelch and Hacker. In spite of that, or perhaps all the more because of it, Quelch was not likely to allow impertinence from a Remove boy to the master of the Shell to pass unpunished. He had come down heavy on his Head Boy; but it was the Bounder, after all, who was booked for "toco" in its severest form. The cane was slipping down into Quelch's hand now.

"Mr. Hacker informs me that you applied a—hem—an opprobrious epithet to him, Vernon-Smith."

"I haven't spoken to Mr. Hacker, sir."

Mr. Quelch knitted his brows.

"Did you, or did you not, utter a derogatory nickname referring to Mr. Hacker, Vernon-Smith?" he rapped.

"Everyone calls Mr. Hacker the Acid Drop, sir!" said Vernon-Smith, sullenly.

"Indeed!" said Mr. Quelch. "I trust that such disrespect is not usual here, Vernon-Smith. At all events, it is my duty to punish it, with severity, when it comes to my notice. You will bend over and touch your toes, Vernon-Smith."

The Bounder's eyes glittered. He had cared little or nothing whether Mr.

Hacker heard that "opprobrious epithet" when he uttered it. But he had to care now, under Quelch's stern eye, with the cane swishing in Quelch's hand. It was not uncommon for Smithy's recklessness to lead to painful consequences.

Slowly, very slowly, he bent over, and his finger-tips touched his toes—the appropriate attitude for "whops". The cane swished in the air.

Whop! whop! whop!

The crowd of Removites on the landing looked on in silence. That Quelch was deeply angry was evident, for the swipes of the cane rang almost like pistol-shots. Not a sound came from Vernon-Smith. He was as hard as nails: and it was the Bounder's pride, too, to show the other fellows that he could take a whopping without giving a sign. He set his teeth and was silent.

Whop! whop! whop!

It was a full "six". Even the sixth swipe did not draw a sound from the hardy Bounder. But he had to clench his teeth to keep it back.

Mr. Quelch tucked the cane under his arm again. He cast one stern glance round over the silent crowd of juniors, and walked across the landing to the stairs. A far squeak arrested his progress.

"I—I—I say, sir—!"

Mr. Quelch glanced at Bunter.

"You need not speak, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir!" Bill Bunter did not agree with his form-master on that point at all. He simply had to speak. Every Remove boy present was booked for "Extra" on Saturday afternoon: and Bunter was present. But the fat Owl had not been taking part in the rag. He had arrived on the scene hardly a minute before Quelch himself. Bunter was a quite innocent party: justice required that he should be excluded from the general sentence. Bunter wanted to make that clear. It was of the first importance—to Bunter. "I—I say, sir—I—I wasn't—I mean I didn't—I never——"

"That will do, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir! But—but—I wasn't never didn't—" stuttered the fat Owl, "I—I wasn't here, sir—"

"What? You are here, Bunter—"

"Oh! Yes! But I never wasn't—I mean I didn't—I—oh, crikey!"

Mr. Quelch rustled on, unheeding, and disappeared down the stairs: leaving the fat Owl blinking after him, through his big spectacles, in great dismay.

"I say, you fellows." Billy Bunter fairly howled in his indignation. "I say. I wasn't in it—was I? I only came up to tip you fellows that Quelch was coming—I jolly well wish I hadn't now. Me for Extra when I haven't done a thing! I say, Wharton, you're Head Boy—you go after Quelch and tell him I hadn't done anything—I say, Wharton, you beast, don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you!" yelled Bunter.

But Harry Wharton did walk away. He went back to No. 1 Study, followed

by his friends, all of them with glum faces. William George Bunter was left to waste his sweetness on the desert air.

Tom Redwing slipped his arm through the Bounder's, and led him up the passage to No. 4 Study. Smithy's face was set, and his eyes were smouldering. The "six" had told on him, and though his pride kept him silent, he could not resist a painful wriggle. The door of No. 4 closed on them.

In No. 1 Study, five fellows looked as if they were not at their bonniest. Even Bob Cherry, for once, did not seem to be enjoying life. Harry Wharton, in a rather grim silence, sorted out Virgil, and propped that great poet up against the inkstand on the table. The rain was still dashing and splashing on the window, but that did not matter much now to the captain of the Remove: he was booked to spend the remainder of the afternoon in that study, grinding out Latin lines. He sat down at the table, dipped his pen in the ink, and glanced at four glum faces, with a faint smile.

"You fellows had better cut," he said. "Dear old Virgil for me."

"It's rotten, old chap," said Nugent.

"The rottenfulness is terrific!" sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"All our fault," said Bob. "I—I thought Quelch had gone out! But—but I suppose we did kick up rather a row—"

"More than rather," said Harry. "It can't be helped now. If Quelch hadn't been in, some of the prefects would have come up."

"Bother the Acid Drop!" grunted Johnny Bull."

"Better not let him hear you call him that." I fancy Smithy's sorry he spoke, by this time."

"But I say, it's awfully rotten about Saturday!" said Bob. "No cricket to-day, and none on Saturday—and we're playing St. Jim's next Wednesday—"

"After the esteemed feast comes the reckoning which makes Jack a dull boy, and saves a stitch in time, as the English proverb remarkably observes," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, sadly.

"It's all our fault," said Frank Nugent, remorsefully, "we practically chivvied you into it, Harry, and now you've got this—"

"Rot!" said Wharton, lightly. "A Head Boy who lets himself be chivvied into breaking the rules deserves what he gets for it. I've no kick coming."

"Well, I'm glad you look at it like that!" said Bob, relieved. Harry Wharton glanced at him, and laughed.

He was aware that there was a stubborn spot in his temper: and his friends would not have been surprised had he sat down to those lines in a mood of resentment. Fortunately he had also the saving gift of common sense. Quelch had been angry, and he had come down hard: but he had been just, and Harry Wharton was able to see it. Neither was he in the least inclined to reproach his friends for having been the thoughtless cause of landing him in a "row" with his form-master. He blamed himself and no one else. But it certainly was a relief to the Co. to see him taking it so cheerfully.

"Well, let's get down to the Rag," said Bob. "Might get up some boxing, if that foul rain doesn't stop. Look here, I'll round up Squiff and Browney and Oggy and old Marky, and we'll fix up a four-handed mill, what?" Bob Cherry's thoughts always ran on strenuous lines.

Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh followed Bob from the study. Frank Nugent lingered a moment at the door. It was rough luck on Harry Wharton, shut in his study for the afternoon, with no better company than P. Vergilius Maro.

"If you'd rather I stopped, Harry—!"

Wharton looked round.

"What rot!" he said. "I've got to stick here—you haven't! Cut along and get going with the other fellows. But for goodness sake, not too much row in the Rag—Quelch will be all ears now!"

"Right-ho, then."

Frank Nugent followed his friends. Harry Wharton settled down to lines. Latin ran steadily under his pen. The rain ceased to splash on the window, at last, and a burst of sunshine lighted up the study. Voices floated up from the quad: the Greyfriars fellows were getting out, glad to get out after the rain. But there was no getting out for the Head Boy with whom Mr. Quelch was displeased. He had to remain in that study and write lines till tea-time. He rose from the table, and threw the window wide open, to let in the summer breeze and the sunshine. Then he sat down again, and resumed transcribing the deathless verse of Publius Vergilius Maro: of which the beauties, it is probable, were somewhat lost on him, in the circumstances.

CHAPTER V

BUNTER BEGS FOR IT!

"I SAY, Harry, old chap—!"

"Cut off!"

"But I say—"

"Hook it!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Scat!"

"Beast!" roared Billy Bunter, indignantly. He stood in the doorway of No. 1 Study, blinking at the junior busy at the table, through his big spectacles in indignant wrath.

Harry Wharton did not even look up as he answered. Truth to tell, he was not in the best of tempers: and in no mood to be bothered by the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove.

He was dissatisfied with himself for having allowed the Bounder's jeers to influence him: and for having followed the lead of others when he ought to have given a lead himself. Nor was he quite satisfied with Quelch: who had been just, no doubt, but undoubtedly severe. And he was concerned about the cricket. No games practice had been possible in the rain that day: and all the cricketing fellows were booked for "Extra" on Saturday, the only other half-holiday before the St. Jim's match. And a team had to be at the top of its form to go over to St. Jim's and meet cricketers like Tom Merry and Co.

Added to these troublesome thoughts, the sun had come out after the rain, and was blazing down on the quad, and crowds of fellows were out of doors—while he had to "stick" in his study, grinding lines. It was no use hurrying over them, dashing them off at top speed as fellows often did: for he had been ordered to remain in his study till tea-time: and he had to obey that order, or hunt for more trouble with Quelch. Possibly Quelch's view was that detention in his study would keep him out of mischief: a rather disparaging view for him to take of his Head Boy, and not at all gratifying to Wharton.

Altogether, the captain of the Remove was in a considerably disgruntled state: his brow was clouded, and that cloud did not lift at the dulcet sound of Billy Bunter's fat voice. If Nugent had come up, or if old Mauly had dropped in, it might have been a relief, as a respite from P. Vergilius Maro. But William George Bunter did not come as a relief. Even Virgil's company was preferable to Bunter's.

So he went on with his lines, heedless of an indignant fat Owl blinking at him from the doorway. What Bunter wanted he did not know. Neither did he want to know. His pen scratched on regardless.

But Billy Bunter was not to be ignored like this. His concentrated blink at the top of Harry Wharton's bent head was so expressive, that it might almost have cracked his spectacles. But it produced no effect whatever on the captain of the Remove. Lines continued to run under his pen.

"Look here, Wharton," hooted Bunter. "I can jolly well tell you that I ain't going in to Extra on Saturday, when I never did a thing. See!"

"Buzz off!"

"Not a thing!" said Bunter. "I came up to tip the fellows that Quelch was coming! That's all. I wasn't in it. Tain't fair! You're Head Boy, Wharton, and it's up to you. You go down and tell Quelch that I wasn't in it, see!"

Harry Wharton looked up, at last, impatiently.

"If that's so, go and tell Quelch yourself," he rapped.

"Well, he mightn't believe me!" said Bunter. "Quelch has doubted my word before, as you jolly well know. He might just think that I was trying to dodge out of Extra."

"Very likely," assented Wharton.

"Well, you go and tell him, as Head Boy," urged Bunter. "I want him to know before he gives in the names to Mossos. See? Cut down now."

"You heard Quelch tell me to stick in this study till tea-time!" snapped Wharton.

"Never mind that—"

"Well, I do mind, a little. I'm not looking for another row with Quelch. Now buzz off, like a good bluebottle."

"Well, will you tell him when you take down your lines?"

"Not at all! I was up the passage, and don't know whether you were in the crowd on the landing or not. How could I know?"

"I've told you!" hooted Bunter.

"What difference does that make?"

"Why, you—you—you beast!" gasped Bunter. "Ain't my word good enough for you?"

"Hardly!"

"Beast!" roared Bunter, more indignant than ever.

"Thanks! Now roll away, and let me finish my lines."

"Lots of fellows know!" howled Bunter. "I tell you I came up all these stairs just to give the fellows the tip, when the Acid Drop went to fetch Quelch. Bob Cherry knows—"

"Well, if that's the case, you can ask Bob to speak to Quelch, and tell him so. I can't tell him so, as I don't know."

"You know now I've told you."

"Not in the least."

"Beast!"

"I've heard that one."

"It's up to you as Head Boy. Quelch always takes your word."

"He'd take yours, if you'd give up fibbing."

"Beast!"

"You're repeating yourself, old fat man. Blow away, and shut the door after you." Harry Wharton resumed lines.

Billy Bunter did not blow away. Once more his spectacles were in danger from the concentrated glare he fixed on Harry Wharton's bent head. It was an unfortunate fact that Billy Bunter's word was worth no more than that of Baron Munchausen: indeed, Skinner had been heard to declare that if Bunter said it was raining, a fellow had to look out of the window before he believed him! But, like many persons indifferent to the truth, Bunter did not like his veracity doubted. It made him indignant.

"Well, you beast, if you won't go down to Quelch—!" he hooted.

"No 'if' about it."

"Well, I'll ask Bob Cherry. He jolly well knows I wasn't in the rag, and he ain't an ill-tempered grumpy beast like you."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Leave it at that!" he said, over his shoulder. "Now roll away. If you weren't mixed up in the rag, Quelch will let you off: he's just a beast. Buzz off."

Billy Bunter snorted, and revolved on his axis to roll away. But he revolved again, and blinked into the study once more. There was a gleam in Bunter's little round eyes behind his big round spectacles.

"Look here, Wharton—!" he squeaked.

"Oh, my hat! Are you still there?" exclaimed the captain of the Remove. "Wound up?"

"Quelch told you to stick in this study till tea-time—"

"Yes, ass: I'm going to."

"He will be jolly waxy if you don't!" said Bunter.

"I know that!"

"You'd jolly well get six!" said Bunter. "Might be sent up to the Head. I can tell you Quelch's frightfully shirty. He hates the other beaks butting into his affairs: and he's had to stand it from Hacker and Prout. He will jolly well make an example of you if you get out before tea-time."

"Tell me something I don't know."

"All right!" said Bunter, grinning. He backed away a few paces from the open doorway, and continued, with his disdainful blink fixed on the captain of the Remove, "You're a rotter, Wharton."

"What?"

"And a tick—"

"Wha-a-t?"

"And a good bit of a prig," went on Bunter, happily, while the captain of the Remove stared at him blankly. Satisfied that Harry Wharton would not venture to leave the study in which he had been bidden to remain, and ready to bolt if he reached out, the fat Owl considered himself on safe ground. For once, if only for once, Billy Bunter was free to tell the captain of the form what he thought of him: and he proceeded to do so, with considerable enjoyment. "My opinion of you, Wharton, is that you're a stuck-up prig."

"You fat ass—!"

"Yah!"

"Will you buzz off, you fat animal?"

"Not unless I jolly well choose!" retorted Bunter, independently. "Who are you? Think you're the Great Big Panjandrum? Who are you, I'd like to know! Yah!"

Harry Wharton rose to his feet. Billy Bunter, grinning, backed across the passage to the further side. He was ready to bolt: and if the captain of the Remove left the study in chase of him, it amounted to direct disobedience of his form-master's orders! And the wily fat Owl did not doubt that Harry Wharton had had enough trouble with his form-master that day, and did not want any more.

Wharton gave the fat junior a very, very expressive look. Then he shut the study door with a bang, and went back to the table.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

He waited a few moments, and then tiptoed across the passage to the door.

He turned the handle, hurled the door wide open with a crash, and backed promptly across the passage again.

"Oh!" ejaculated Harry Wharton. He gave a jump as the door crashed open, and a blot dropped from his pen—on his lines! He glared round, through the open doorway, at the grinning fat face across the passage.

"He, he he!" cachinnated Bunter.

"You fat lunatic—!" roared Wharton.

"He, he, he!"

"Will you clear, you burbling bloater!"

"He, he, he! Come out and make me!" invited Bunter. "Perhaps you'd like another spot of trouble with Quelch! What? He, he, he!"

Harry Wharton looked at him for a moment or two. He could not leave the study, and chase the exasperating Owl up the passage. But there were other means. He reached out and grasped a cushion from the armchair. Up went his hand, with the cushion in it, and it whizzed—as straight for the target as any cricket ball he had ever sent down to a wicket.

Thud!

"Yaroooooooh!"

Billy Bunter had not been prepared for that. He had not thought of it. Really, he might have: but he hadn't. The cushion thudded on the fattest chin in the Greyfriars Remove, knocking the fattest head in that form backward, with a crack, on the wall. Bunter did not merely roar. He bellowed.

"Oh, oh! ow! wow! Beast! Yarooooh! Woogh!"

"Now cut, you fat ass—!"

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

He rubbed the back of a fat head, his very spectacles gleaming with wrath. Then he clutched up the cushion. With a swing of a fat arm, he sent it whizzing back into the study, aimed at the junior sitting at the table.

Crash!

Bunter was not a good shot. The whizzing cushion did not land, as intended, in the middle of Harry Wharton's features. It swept across the table, carrying away the inkpot, and several written sheets, in its flight. It thudded down on the floor, in company with a streaming inkpot, and most of the Latin lines that Harry Wharton had written during more than a weary hour.

Wharton leaped to his feet. He stared down at the ruin. He had written about two-thirds of his task: and every one of those weary lines had to be written over again: every sheet was splashed, or rather drenched, with ink! Lines could not be taken to Quelch in that state. For a moment, Wharton stared at his inky impot: then he whirled round to the doorway: and the expression on his face was enough—more than enough—for Billy Bunter. Evidently he had quite forgotten Quelch's order to stay in the study—he was coming out—for Bunter! With a squeak of alarm, the fat Owl bolted up the passage: and hot on his track, in the very worst temper ever, hurtled the captain of the Remove.

CHAPTER VI

SMITHY ON THE WAR-PATH

“COMING OUT, Smithy?”

“No!”

“The rain stopped a long while ago—”

“I know that.”

“A spot of fresh air would do you good, Smithy.”

“Rot!”

Herbert Vernon-Smith was standing at the window, in No. 4 Study in the Remove, staring out into a sunny quad. The summer rain-storm had passed over: the sky was blue, the air balmy: rain-drops still clinging on the old elms glistened like jewels. It was a very cheering change of scene since the rain: but it did not seem to cheer the Bounder of Greyfriars. His hard face was dark and sullen.

Dozens of fellows were to be seen in the sunshine. Most of the Remove were out. Temple, Dabney and Co. of the Fourth were sauntering by the elms. Coker and Potter and Greene of the Fifth were heading for the gates. Hobson and Hoskins and Stewart, of the Shell, were chatting in a cheery group. Tubb of the Third was in the very act of snatching the cap off the curly head of Nugent minor of the Second Form, and bolting with it—that being George Tubb's idea of a joke. Old Gosling, at the door of his lodge, was blinking out into the sunshine. Several masters were taking a walk in the quadrangle, doubtless as glad as the younger generation to get out after the rain—the portly Prout was walking with the thin and acid Hacker, deep in conversation—quite possibly on the subject of the Remove, and the obstreperous manners and customs of that form. It was quite a cheerful scene. But the Bounder scowled at it—and his scowl was specially directed towards Mr. Hacker. He was still wriggling from that “six” from Quelch's cane: and it was to the Acid Drop that he owed that six.

Tom Redwing, sitting on the edge of the study table, eyed him, without speaking again. He was accustomed to disgruntled moods in his chum: and he was very patient with them. Smithy had had it hard, and Tom was sympathetic—though the Bounder had little use for sympathy. Smithy chose to stay in the study, till the effect of the “six” had worn off: he did not want any eyes to behold his wriggles. Redwing remained, to keep him company: but the rain had long since stopped, and he would have been glad to make a move. As his chum did not seem disposed to make a move, however, he sat where he was, while Smithy stared moodily from the window. He noted the blackening of Smithy's brow, as the Bounder stared down at Mr. Hacker in the quad,

and it made him a little uneasy. In that savage and resentful mood, no fellow ever knew what Herbert Vernon-Smith might do, or think of doing.

Smithy turned suddenly from the window, came across to the table, and picked up a cricket-ball that lay thereon: the ball that had been whizzing about the Remove passage and landing a short while ago. Ball in hand, he returned to the window, and with his left hand, pushed up the lower sash.

Redwing jumped off the table.

“Smithy! What’s that game! What—?”

Vernon-Smith looked round, a glitter in his eyes.

“You’d better cut, Reddy,” he said.

“I’ll stay in till you feel like coming out—”

“I said you’d better cut.”

Redwing, with a worried face, came across to the window. What was in his chum’s mind he did not know, but he was alarmed.

“Look here, Smithy, what—!”

“You’d better keep clear,” snapped the Bounder. He gripped the cricket-ball, hard. “See him—they’re walking this way—the Acid Drop will be in easy range in a minute or two—”

Redwing looked at him, aghast.

“Smithy! Have you gone crackers? You’re not thinking of buzzing that ball at Hacker—!”

“Just that! I’m going to knock his mortar-board off!” said the Bounder, coolly. “Make him jump, what! Give him something more to do a song and dance about—only he won’t be able to nail me this time.”

“Don’t be a mad ass, Smithy! You’ll land in a frightful row—”

“Think I’m going to stand at the window till he spots me, after I bowl?” asked the Bounder, sarcastically. “He won’t know a thing. Get out of the study, Reddy—I shall be off like a shot after I’ve got Hacker.”

Redwing compressed his lips.

Knocking a beak’s mortar-board off with a cricket ball was an idea that would hardly have occurred to any fellow at Greyfriars excepting the Bounder: not even to the Bounder in a less savage mood. Such a reckless act could not fail to be followed by a most tremendous “row”: with dire consequences to the offender if discovered.

“Smithy, you’re mad,” muttered Redwing. “Look here, come out for a run in the fresh air, and let Hacker slide—”

“After I’ve got him!” said Smithy. “Didn’t he get me six from Quelch? Isn’t he always poking his long nose into things that don’t concern him? I tell you it’s as safe as houses, you fathead—how’s he to know which window the ball came from, even if he knows it was a window at all?”

“It’s a rotten thing to do, Smithy, even if it was safe—”

“Oh, shut up.”

“But it’s not safe,” said Redwing. “Every pre. in the school will be hunting

for the man. And you'll get it worse than any other fellow—there are too many black marks against you already, Smithy. You'd be sent up to the Head—why, you might be sacked for it."

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders. He was well aware of the truth of what his anxious chum stated. The Bounder was a rebel by nature: he was always a thorn in the side of authority, and prided himself upon it. He liked to let fellows see how little he cared for beaks or prefects. He was, in fact, an old offender: and if such an act as this was brought home to him, it might quite possibly be the finish for him at Greyfriars. Other fellows might get off more lightly: but with the most reckless and troublesome fellow in the Remove, it might prove to be the last drop in the cup, as it were. Nevertheless, he did not think of hesitating for a moment. Even the risk had its appeal for him: and he relied on his luck, which had always seen him through so far.

Unheeding Redwing, he watched the two masters in the quad. They were walking slowly: Hacker accommodating the strides of his long thin legs to the



slower motion of the ponderous Prout. But they were coming along the path that ran within easy range of the study windows above. As soon as they arrived opposite the window of No. 4, the thing was easy. Smithy could handle a cricket-ball almost as accurately as Hurree Jamset Ram Singh: and getting Hacker's mortar-board was a simpler proposition than getting a wicket. Taking no heed whatever of Tom Redwing's anxious remonstrance, he watched and waited.

"Smithy—!" breathed Redwing.

"Pack it up!"

"I tell you, Smithy—"

"And I tell you you'd better get out!" snapped the Bounder. "If you stick here, you might get mixed up in it. Cut before I get going."

"You're not going to get going, Smithy," said Redwing, determinedly. "You're in too many rows, and one more may mean the long jump. Stop it!"

And Redwing, too anxious for his reckless chum to care about his temper, grasped his arm, and pulled him back.

The Bounder's eyes turned on him with a blaze in them.

"You fool! Let go my arm."

"Not till you drop that ball."

"Do you think you can give me orders?" hissed the Bounder.

"I can stop you making a fool of yourself. Somebody might see you at the window—you'd have to go up to the Head! Have a little sense, Smithy! Hacker will be as mad as a hatter—"

"Let him! Leave me alone, you meddlin' fool!"

Vernon-Smith wrenched his arm free. Redwing, with a set face, pushed between him and the window. Seldom did Redwing quarrel with his study-mate, though often he had cause. But he was prepared to quarrel with him now, if nothing else would stop him.

"Get away from that window!" said Vernon-Smith, thickly.

"I won't!"

"You fool! You fool! In two or three minutes it will be too late—"

"That's what I want."

"By gum! I—I—I'll—!" For a moment, it looked as if the enraged Bounder would hurl himself at the junior standing between him and the window. Redwing breathed hard: but he stood like a rock.

But Smithy restrained his fury. He gave Redwing a black look, and swung away to the door. Redwing drew a deep breath of relief. Smithy could fling out of the study in a temper, if he liked: so long as he gave up that mad idea, the rest did not matter.

Smithy's hand was on the door-handle, when there was a sound of pattering feet outside in the Remove passage. Somebody was racing up the passage from the landing end. Another swift patter followed: somebody else, evidently, in pursuit. Both were past by the time the Bounder dragged the door open.

He banged the door after him, and stared up the passage, after the chase that had passed his door.

He had a back view of the fat figure of Billy Bunter, scuttling up the box-room stair at the upper end of the passage, like a frightened fat rabbit: and another back view of Harry Wharton, rushing up the stair after the fleeing fat Owl. Both of them were going strong, and they disappeared the next moment.

“What the thump—!” ejaculated Smithy.

But he was not much interested in that flight and pursuit. The door of No. 1 Study stood wide open, and there was no one in the study, for the moment: nobody to interfere with the Bounder as Tom Redwing had done. It was exactly what Smithy wanted. He had not by any means given up that mad idea of getting Hacker with the cricket-ball. He had not merely flung out of his own study in a temper, as Tom supposed: he hoped there was still time to get Hacker from another window—and after one glance up the passage, he cut into No. 1 Study. The window was wide open, and he ran across to it.

He was in time.

Taking care not to show himself, he peered from the window. Prout and Hacker had reached a point in the path just opposite No. 1 Study. In his own study he would have had to wait a few moments more. Here he was precisely in time—the Acid Drop was just where he wanted him.

Not for a second did he hesitate. One cautious look from the window, and then his hand went up, and the cricket-ball flew. Swift as the delivery was, it flew with deadly accuracy, and there was a loud crack as it struck, knocking the mortar-board from the head of the master of the Shell. Smithy was well back from the window in a split second. From the quad came a loud startled howl, and loud exclamations in other voices. Herbert Vernon-Smith did not stay to listen. Hacker's howl, Prout's astonished boom, the startled exclamations of a dozen fellows in the quad, floated up—through the open window—as the Bounder, grinning, cut across to the door. He cut out of the study, and hurried down the stairs. Reckless as he was, he realized very clearly that his best guess was to establish as strong an alibi as he could: and he did not lose a second in cutting down to the bike-shed and pushing out his jigger.

CHAPTER VII

BY WHOSE HAND?

HARRY WHARTON came back into his study with a flushed face, rather breathlessly. He arrived there less than a minute after the Bounder had disappeared down the stairs. He tramped into the study with an angry brow. He had not even had the satisfaction of kicking Billy Bunter for the damage

he had done. The fat Owl had bolted up to the box-room, and bolted the door just in time before the pursuer arrived. And Harry Wharton, remembering Mr. Quelch's injunction, hurried back to his study, where he had to remain till tea-time. He had been absent only a couple of minutes: but a couple of seconds would have been enough to rouse Quelch's ire, if he learned that his command had been disregarded.

That anyone had entered the study during his very brief absence, naturally did not occur to him. There was no sign of anyone having done so. His thoughts were chiefly on the Latin imposition, wrecked by the fat Owl's antics. He picked up the inky sheets from the floor, and breathed hard as he looked at them. They were smothered with spilt ink: obviously in no state for delivering to Mr. Quelch. The task had to be done over again. And though there had been ample time to finish two hundred lines before tea, with two-thirds done, it was quite a different proposition when he had to begin again at the beginning. This meant quick work and hard slogging, if he was to finish by tea-time.

Seldom had the captain of the Remove felt so annoyed and angry. The mishaps of that rainy afternoon might have given an edge to the most amiable temper: and this final disaster put the lid on, so to speak. With deep feelings, Wharton crammed the spoiled sheets into the waste-paper basket under the table, and prepared to recommence. For some moments he heard, without heeding, something like an uproar in the quad under his window: but as the buzz of excited voices floated up, he crossed to the window, and looked out, to see what was going on outside.

There was quite a crowd, and Harry Wharton stared down at it, wondering what could possibly have happened.

Twenty or thirty fellows at least were gathered there. In the midst of the crowd stood Mr. Prout and Mr. Hacker. Hacker had his mortar-board in his hand, and Prout's plump hand held—of all unexpected things—a cricket ball. Prout was looking thunderstruck: Hacker was almost pale with fury. Fellows of all forms had gathered round them, staring and exclaiming: it was quite an unusual spot of excitement in the Greyfriars quad. Utterly unaware of what had happened, Harry Wharton could only stare down in wonder. Something, it seemed, had happened to Hacker: though what, he could not guess.

Something, certainly, had!

It was an amazing happening: justly described by Mr. Prout as unprecedented and indeed unparalleled!

It was so very unexpected.

Mr. Hacker, walking and talking with the master of the Fifth, could never have dreamed that some missile would suddenly knock the mortar-board from his head: incidentally giving that head rather a sharp tap. But that was what had happened. Hacker could almost have supposed that he was dreaming, when the knock came, and his mortar-board flew. Prout almost gibbered, as the cricket ball, shooting from Hacker's head, tapped his plump

shoulder, and fell at his feet. Hacker had clutched up his mortar-board: Prout had picked up the cricket ball: and a swarm of startled fellows who had witnessed the amazing occurrence, crowded round. Mr. Quelch was coming towards the spot with long strides, having seen the startling occurrence from a distance.

"Amazing!" Prout was booming, as Harry Wharton looked down. "Unprecedented! A cricket ball—!"

"Flung at me!" said Mr. Hacker, in tones of concentrated acid. "Flung at my head!"

"Unparalleled!" boomed Prout.

"But who—?"

Hacker's sharp eyes roamed over the surrounding crowd. He did not, for the moment, think of looking up at the windows.

Someone had "buzzed" that cricket ball at his head: or at least at his hat. Hacker was aware that he was not popular in his form. His glinting eyes sought the faces of Shell fellows in the crowd. Hobson, Hoskins, Stewart, and several others in the Shell, were there: and they tried hard to avoid catching Hacker's gleaming eye. Certainly, they knew nothing about the buzzing of the cricket ball: but Hacker was looking positively dangerous.

"An assault—an assault upon a member of the Staff!" Prout was booming again. "Who threw this cricket ball at Mr. Hacker?" Prout's rather bulging eyes wandered from face to face.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Harry Wharton, at his study window. What he now heard enlightened him as to what had happened.

He smiled faintly. He had no sympathy to waste on Mr. Hacker. Hacker had a heavy hand in his form: and if some Shell fellow, in a wildly reckless moment, had knocked off his mortar-board, Harry Wharton certainly hoped that that misguided youth would not be spotted.

Mr. Quelch came up, and the fellows in the quad made way for him. The Remove master's face was very stern. Wharton, as he noted it, wondered for a moment what was the matter with Quelch. He had no concern with what might go on in Hacker's form. Then it flashed into his mind that it was not, perhaps, a Shell fellow who had buzzed that ball at Hacker: but quite possibly a Remove man, as a reprisal for the Acid Drop's interference that afternoon. He gave a soft whistle. If that was it, Quelch might have seen it all, as he was walking in the quad when it happened. In that case, there was bad trouble in store for some man in the Remove.

"Mr. Hacker—!" Quelch's voice was like the filing of a saw. Evidently he was very angry. Hacker interrupted him.

"You saw what happened, Mr. Quelch—!" Hacker almost choked.

"I did!"

"Did you see who threw the ball, Quelch?" boomed Prout. "The boy must be here—he cannot be far away."

"The ball was thrown from a window!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh!" exclaimed Prout.

"Oh!" repeated Mr. Hacker, like an echo.

All eyes swept round to the windows. Harry Wharton, staring down from the open window of No. 1 Study, was the cynosure of all those eyes.

"You saw it, Mr. Quelch!" Hacker almost hissed. "You saw who threw the ball—"

"I did not see who threw the ball, Mr. Hacker—it happened so very suddenly and unexpectedly. I saw the ball shoot from a window, but whoever threw it must have backed away instantly, for I did not see him." Mr. Quelch set his lips hard. "But there is, I fear, no doubt on the subject: and I can only express my deepest regret, Mr. Hacker, that a boy in my form should have perpetrated so disrespectful an act."

"A Remove boy!" breathed Mr. Hacker. "I am not surprised—a Remove boy!"

"A Remove boy!" echoed Mr. Prout. "Neither am I surprised! Really—really—Mr. Quelch—!"

"The offender will be adequately punished, Mr. Hacker: you may be assured of that," said Mr. Quelch, taking no heed of Prout. "I have little doubt—or rather no doubt—of his identity." Quelch's gimlet-eyes were fixed on the face at the window of No. 1 Study, and he raised his voice, "Wharton—!"

Harry Wharton started, a little.

"Yes, sir," he called back.

"It was you who threw that cricket ball at Mr. Hacker."

Wharton jumped.

"I, sir!" he stuttered.

"You, Wharton—!"

"No, sir!" gasped Harry, blankly. "Certainly not, sir! I—I never knew that anything had happened till I looked out of the window."

Quelch's eyes glinted up at him.

"Come down to my study, Wharton."

"Yes, sir! But—!"

Harry Wharton broke off, as Mr. Quelch turned away. Evidently there was no doubt in his form-master's mind. The captain of the Remove drew a deep, deep breath, and left the window, and the study. His brow was dark, as he went down the stairs. Why Quelch had picked on him, he could not fathom: unless, as he bitterly reflected, Quelch was glad of a chance to pick on him, again, after what had occurred that afternoon.

"So it was Wharton!" said Mr. Hacker, through compressed thin lips. "Now I think of it, the ball certainly struck from above—from a window—"

"From the window of Wharton's study!" said Mr. Quelch, "and Wharton undoubtedly was in the study, as I had given him orders to remain there till tea-time. You may rely on me to deal with the matter, Mr. Hacker."

"Thank you, sir!" said Mr. Hacker, not very cordially. Quelch, certainly, looked as if the offender was going to be sorry for himself: he was not the man to permit such an outrageous act to pass without due punishment. But it was not likely that his ideas of punishment accorded with Mr. Hacker's. Hacker, just then, would hardly have been satisfied with anything short of something lingering with boiling oil in it!

Mr. Quelch walked away to the door of the House, to lose no time in dealing with the offender. Hacker replaced the mortar-board on his head, at last, and resumed his walk with Mr. Prout: to an accompaniment of indignant booms from the master of the Fifth. The crowd were left in a buzz. Sad to relate, many of the fellows seemed to see a comic aspect in the matter, and there were grins on many faces after the masters' backs were turned. The serious aspect from the junior point of view, was that the fellow who had buzzed the ball was going to get "toco" from his beak.

"Rough luck on young Wharton!" said Hobson of the Shell, commiseratingly.

"Young ass!" said Stewart.

"Well, he couldn't know that his beak had an eye on his window just at the moment, you know! What a nerve—knocking the Acid Drop's tile off!"

"Some nerve!" agreed Hoskins.

"Cheeky young ruffian!" said Temple of the Fourth. "He knocked my hat off the other day. Now he's knocked off Hacker's. These Remove kids are the limit."

"Oh, rather," said Dabney.

"Game kid, though," said Fry. "Lots of chaps would like to knock Hacker's hat off—or his head, if you come to that! Rotten luck for him that his beak spotted him!"

"It can't have been Wharton!" Bob Cherry was the speaker. "Wharton wouldn't be such a mad ass!"

There were four fellows in the crowd to whom the incident brought despondency and alarm. Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh were deeply dismayed.

"He wouldn't!" said Nugent. "He couldn't! That kind of thing is in Smithy's line—not Wharton's."

"Quelch might have been mistaken about the window!" said Johnny Bull. "He couldn't have been looking at it specially—just happened to see the ball—"

"Um!" said Bob. "Quelch doesn't make mistakes like that. He wouldn't pin down a Remove man if he could help it. He hates to let Hacker score over him: and this will be the talk of Common Room for days."

"The mistakefulness of the esteemed Quelch was not terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head. "That absurd ball came from Wharton's window. But somebody else—"

"But Wharton was there!" said Bob. "He had to be there—you remember Quelch bunged him in his study till tea-time—"

"If it was somebody else, Wharton ought to have stopped him, as he was there," said Johnny Bull.

"He would have—!" said Frank: but he did not finish that remark. It was hardly possible that Harry Wharton would have allowed so reckless a prank to be played in his study by another fellow. But if that was not it, who but Wharton himself could have "buzzed" the ball?

"Bother Hacker!" said Bob. "It wouldn't have happened, if he hadn't dragged Quelch out of his lair to rag us this afternoon. But—but—but—if it was Wharton, he's up for a fearful row!"

"The rowfulness will be preposterous!" sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The esteemed Quelch is terrifically infuriated."

"I—I suppose he's with Quelch now!" muttered Frank. "Let's go in and wait for him."

They went rather dismally into the House, to wait for Harry Wharton to emerge from his form-master's study. In that study Wharton was now with Quelch: and the Bounder, several miles away on his bike by that time, little dreamed of the spot of trouble he had left behind for another fellow.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR IT!

"WHARTON!"

"Yes, sir!"

"I shall deal with you severely for this."

"For what, sir?" asked Harry Wharton, coolly.

Mr. Quelch gave him a look—a very expressive look.

The junior's face was set: almost sullen. His eyes met Mr. Quelch's steadily, with what seemed to the Remove master a hint of defiance in them.

"You threw a cricket ball from the window of your study, Wharton, at a member of Dr. Locke's staff!" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"I did not!" answered Harry.

"Do you deny, Wharton, that you threw the ball which struck Mr. Hacker?"

"Certainly I do, as I never knew that anything of the kind had happened till I heard what was said under my window."

Mr. Quelch gazed at him. The matter was so absolutely certain in his own mind, that he had not expected denial. He had no doubt whatever that that lawless action was a sequel to the "row" in the afternoon: reprisals on Hacker for having brought the Remove master on the scene.

But Quelch was a just man. He was deeply incensed: but if the junior had anything to say, he was going to hear it, and weigh it. He controlled his anger, and answered quietly:

"The ball was thrown from your study window, Wharton."

"I don't think so, sir."

"What? what? What did you say, Wharton?"

"I said I don't think so, sir!"

"Upon my word!"

Mr. Quelch's eye strayed to the cane on his table. However, he did not reach for it. Harry Wharton was his Head Boy: hitherto trusted and relied upon. Quelch was going to be as patient as he could.

Wharton stood silent, waiting for more. He had spoken as he believed: it did not seem possible to him that the ball had come from his study window. The incident had occurred during his brief absence from the study, for it was immediately after his return that the hubbub in the quad below had attracted his attention. But he had been absent only a couple of minutes. Had some fellow dodged into the study, hurled the cricket ball, and dodged out again, in that brief space of time, disappearing before he came back? It did not seem likely to Wharton.

"There is no doubt whatever, Wharton, that the ball was thrown from your window," said Mr. Quelch, breathing hard.

Wharton did not reply to that. He gave a slight, almost imperceptible, shrug of the shoulders. Almost imperceptible as it was, Mr. Quelch noted it, and his eyes glinted.

"Listen to me, Wharton! I should have expected the truth from you—"

"You will hear the truth from me, or nothing, sir!" answered Harry. "I did not throw the ball, and I do not believe that it came from my window."

"It was I who saw it thrown, Wharton."

"Not from my window, sir!"

"From your window, Wharton! I was in the quadrangle, and chanced to be looking towards the House. My attention was caught by seeing something shoot down suddenly from a study window—an open window! I did not for the moment realize what it was, or that it was a missile intentionally thrown—but the next moment it struck Mr. Hacker. That drew my attention to him, or I should doubtless have seen you at the window, in the very act—"

The set, obstinate look on Wharton's face changed a little. In the face of this categorical statement, he had to believe that the ball had come from his study window. Quelch could believe his own eyes: and Harry Wharton had to believe them too.

"—when I did look up at the window, however, you were looking out," continued Mr. Quelch. "You were there—"

"I was looking out to see what the row was, sir! I had not been at the window when it happened."

"You were in the study!"

Wharton was silent. He realized now, that, improbable as it had seemed, some unknown person must have whipped into his study during those few minutes while he was in pursuit of the irritating fat Owl. Quelch was taking it for granted that he had remained in the study, according to orders. That made it possible for him to come to only one conclusion.

"If you still deny that action, Wharton—"

"I do, sir."

"Very well!" said Mr. Quelch, quietly, "in that case you must be aware by whose hand the ball was thrown. The act could not have been perpetrated in your presence without your knowledge."

No answer.

"I am willing to hear what you have to say, Wharton, if you have anything to say. Was some other boy in the study with you?"

"No, sir."

"Did anyone enter at the time?"

"I—I—I don't know," stammered Harry.

Mr. Quelch raised his eyebrows.

"You do not know!" he repeated. "You were in your study, writing lines, and you tell me that you do not know whether anyone entered!"

Wharton's face crimsoned. It had to come out, now.

"Well?" rapped Mr. Quelch, as the junior did not speak.

"I—I—" Wharton stammered. "I—I was not in the study, sir, just at that moment—"

"What?"

"I—I—"

"Let us have this clear," said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice. "This afternoon you joined in the disturbance in the Remove passage, and you were ordered to remain in your study till tea-time and write lines. Are you now telling me that you disobeyed and disregarded that order—you, the Head Boy of my form?"

"N—n—no! A fellow was—was ragging in the passage, and I—I went out to him for a minute or two—a couple of minutes—not more—"

"Indeed! You now tell me that, although commanded by your form-master to remain in your study, you left it, and that this occurred at the precise time when the assault was made on Mr. Hacker from your window?"

"It—it must have been, if—if it was my window, sir—!" Wharton's voice faltered.

Quelch's face set like iron.

"I hardly know what to say to you, Wharton! Your conduct this afternoon has been wild and reckless, joining in a disturbance which, as Head Boy, you should have done your best to control. Now a lawless act has been perpetrated in your study, where only you were present—and all you can say

in your defence is that you deliberately disregarded a positive order from your form-master, and left your study: and that at that precise time, and no other, someone else threw a cricket ball at Mr. Hacker from your study window! Do you expect me to believe this?"

Wharton did not speak. It must have happened so: but he could not help realizing how utterly improbable it must seem to Quelch.

"That you left your study, against orders, I am quite prepared to believe," went on Mr. Quelch, grimly. "You appear to be in a reckless and unruly mood to-day, Wharton, and I have no doubt that you had added disobedience to orders to your other offences. But that it was you who threw the ball from the window there can be no doubt—"

"I did not—"

Mr. Quelch raised his hand.

"You need say no more, Wharton! I have assured Mr. Hacker that the offender will be adequately punished. You are the offender. I am bound to take into consideration your good conduct hitherto: otherwise, I should send you to your headmaster." Quelch's eye strayed to the cane on the table again. But it was only for a moment, and he went on: "You will be given detention for four half-holidays, exclusive of Extra School on Saturday: and you will write out a whole book of the Aeneid. I shall trust, Wharton, that this will be a lesson to you to keep your temper in better control. You may leave my study."

Harry Wharton looked at him, and opened his lips to speak. But he closed them again, and walked to the door.

At the door, however, he turned. His face was dark, and there was a glint in his eyes. But he was very calm: respectful, indeed meek.

"May I ask you one question, sir?" he said, in quite a silky voice.

"What is it, Wharton?"

"Is my detention to go on, if you find out who really threw that ball at Mr Hacker?"

Mr. Quelch fairly jumped at that unexpected question. He could scarcely believe his ears. He stared blankly at Harry Wharton for a moment, and then made a stride to the table and clutched up the cane.

"Leave my study, Wharton! Another word and I shall cane you severely."

Wharton did not utter another word. He walked out of the study, closed the door quietly after him, and walked down the passage: leaving his form-master with the cane gripped in his hand, and half-regretting that he had not given it exercise.

CHAPTER IX

UP TO SMITHY!

“SMITHY—!”
“Cut in—”
“But—!”

“Do you want to be late, ass?”

Herbert Vernon-Smith, at all events, did not want to be late. It was just on lock-ups when he wheeled in his bike: and as he came out of the bike shed, the bell was ringing for calling-over. Tom Redwing met him as he was hurrying across to the House, and caught him by the arm: but he shook off that detaining grasp, and hurried on. The Bounder was not always so particular about being punctual for roll: but after his exploit that afternoon, he did not want to draw a gimlet-eye specially on himself. He cut on, and Tom Redwing, with a clouded and troubled face, hurried after him.

“Smithy! I’ve been waiting for you to come in—”

“Well, I’m on time! Think I want another row with Quelch to-day?” snapped the Bounder. “Come on.”

“I’ve got to tell you—”

“Pack it up till after roll.”

“But—!” Redwing caught his arm again.

“Oh, rot!” The Bounder dragged his arm free, and cut into the House. Redwing could only follow him into hall, with what he had to say still unsaid.

Vernon-Smith’s look was quite casual and unconcerned, as he joined the ranks of the Remove. It was his cue to know nothing of the Hacker episode. The effect of the “six”, and the savage resentment it had evoked, had passed off, during a long spin on his bike in the open air. In cooler mood, Smithy had realized, much more clearly than before, how very serious the consequences of his act might be—especially for him. There were, as his chum had told him in the study, too many black marks against him already, for any hope that he might be let off lightly if discovered. It was as good as certain that he would be sent up to the Head: quite probable that this final act of reckless insubordination might be his last at Greyfriars. There was no “good conduct” to be remembered in favour of the fellow who liked to give all the trouble he could to those placed in authority over him. Vernon-Smith realized that he had to walk very warily, till this incident blew over: and if questioned, he was prepared to declare that he had gone out on his bike before it happened: he was no stickler for the facts, with a row in the offing. But there was, so far as he could see, no danger: unless Redwing talked: which Redwing was not

likely to do. Even Redwing could not know for certain, though no doubt he would guess.

Smithy, with an indifferent face, glanced round at other faces in the Remove. Even if he had known nothing, he could have seen that something unusual had occurred. There was a buzz of whispering among the juniors. Billy Bunter was grinning from one fat ear to the other, as he blinked through his big spectacles at Mr. Hacker, coming into hall with Capper and Prout. Skinner and Snoop and Stott and Bolsover major and several other fellows were grinning too. On the other hand, five members of the Remove were looking unusually serious. Harry Wharton's face was almost grim: Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh looked glum—why, the Bounder neither guessed nor cared. He gave Skinner a nudge.

"Anything up?" he asked.

Harold Skinner looked round at him, grinning.

"Haven't you heard?"

"I've been out on my bike since the rain stopped. Anything happened? What are the fellows staring at Hacker for?"

Skinner chuckled.

"Hacker's in the news," he answered. "A beak's tile isn't knocked off every day in the quad."

"Somebody knocked off Hacker's tile?"

"Yes: with a cricket ball."

"Oh, my hat!" said the Bounder. "Accident, I suppose?"

"Lot of accident about it!" chuckled Skinner. "Got him fair and square from a study window, while he was ambling in the quad with Prout. Was Hacker wild?" And Skinner chuckled again.

"Some chap in Hacker's form?" drawled the Bounder.

"No fear: Remove man."

Vernon-Smith started just a little. He was quite certain that he had not shown himself at the window of No. 1 Study when he had "got" Hacker. He had not supposed that it would be known that the cricket ball had whizzed from a Remove study at all, among innumerable windows. Apparently more was known than he had supposed.

"How do they know it was a Remove man?" he inquired. "Must have had a nerve—but how do they know?"

"Quelch was in the quad, and saw the whole thing." Skinner's grin became almost as wide as Billy Bunter's. "Bit of a shock for him, what?—his Head Boy! Not much of a form-master's favourite just now!"

"Head Boy!" repeated the Bounder, blankly. "You don't mean Wharton—?" He stared at Skinner, completely taken aback.

"Sort of!" grinned Skinner. "You see, Quelch spotted the ball coming from the window, as it happened: and of course he knew which was Wharton's window. So it was a fair cop!"

"Oh!" gasped the Bounder.

He glanced across at the captain of the Remove. He understood that black look on Wharton's face now: and the glum expression of his friends. He breathed quickly. Not for a moment had he expected anything of this kind. He had not supposed that there would be a ghost of a clue to the culprit: that anyone could even surmise from which, among so many windows, the ball had whizzed: or indeed that it had whizzed from a window at all. And all the while, a gimlet-eye had witnessed the whole affair!

"Oh!" repeated the Bounder. He glanced round at Tom Redwing's clouded face. He knew now what Redwing had wanted to tell him. He coloured as he met Redwing's eyes, and looked away again.

"I say, you fellows." It was a fat whisper from Billy Bunter. "I say, the Acid Drop looks jolly shirty, what? He, he, he!"

"Has Wharton been called up for it?" muttered the Bounder to Skinner.

"Of course he has! Quelch was after him like a hawk! I'll bet you Hacker's shirty because Quelch didn't come down heavier!" grinned Skinner. "Bet you he'd have liked the bad lad to be sent up to the Head."

"Silence there!" called out Wingate of the Sixth.

Mr. Quelch was preparing to take the roll. The buzz of whispering voices died away.

The Bounder fixed his eyes curiously on Harry Wharton. He knew, if no one else did, that Wharton had had nothing to do with the Hacker episode: and he could guess what he was feeling like. What form his punishment had taken Smithy did not know: but he concluded that it was a licking, with all Quelch's beef in it. Smithy, with all his wild ways, had his good qualities: he was not the man to let another fellow take his "gruel", if he could help it. But in this case, he could not have helped it: he had been out of gates, never dreaming that the wrong man had been caught: and it had been all over before he came back. He could not help a feeling of relief that it was all over. Nothing he could say now would undo what had been done: and he certainly did not want to say anything.

After roll, Redwing slipped his arm through the Bounder's.

"Come up to the study," he muttered.

"I'm goin' into the Rag—I want to hear the latest details of the latest spot of excitement!" drawled Smithy.

"Come up to the study."

"Oh, rot!"

"You'd better, Smithy: I've got to speak to you."

Vernon-Smith gave him a dark look: but he acquiesced, and they went up to the Remove studies. In No. 4, Redwing shut the door: the Bounder eyeing him angrily and impatiently.

"Well?" he rapped. "Cough it up! What's the long face about?"

"Wharton's been nailed for what happened to Hacker," said Redwing, quietly.

"Well?"

"He denied knowing anything about it. I believe him—after what you were doing in this study only a few minutes before it happened. It was you, Smithy!"

"Was it?" jeered the Bounder.

"Wasn't it?"

"Ask no questions, and you'll be told no lies, my pippin." The Bounder laughed. "Think our infallible beak has made a mistake?"

"Quelch can't be blamed. He saw the ball come from Wharton's window and Wharton had been ordered to stay in, and ought to have done so. I hear that that fat fool Bunter was ragging him, and he cut out for a minute or two—that must have been when it happened. Smithy, old man, it was you—it happened hardly a minute or so after I had stopped you at this window—"

"You shouldn't have butted in, old boy. Meddlin' always does more harm than good!" jeered the Bounder.

"You must have cut into Wharton's study while he was out—"

"Think so?"

"Didn't you?" breathed Redwing.

"Find out!"

"This won't do, Smithy! Wharton's not the fellow to play such a mad trick even if he had his back up: but you—it's you all over: and you'd have done that very thing from this window if I hadn't stopped you. Smithy, you can't leave it on him."

The Bounder sneered.

"What's the odds?" he snapped. "Suppose I did it—which I don't feel in the least inclined to admit—suppose I did, Wharton's had his whopping, and what good would it do him, if I went to Quelch and asked for another? And I shouldn't get off with a whopping, either, like Wharton—my record is a bit different from his. I should have to go up to the Head. Think I want to see the Old Man and have a heart-to-heart talk with him?"

"I warned you of that—"

"Oh, cut the cackle. It's over and done with, and the least said, the soonest mended," snapped the Bounder, impatiently, "Let's go down—"

"It's not over and done with, as you seem to think Smithy! Wharton hasn't had a whopping—"

"Not!" ejaculated the Bounder. "By gum, if Quelch has let him off with lines, the Acid Drop will rage! Phew."

"He has detention for four half-holidays, with a book to write," said Redwing. "Everyone knows excepting you, as you've been keeping out of the way."

The Bounder whistled.

"I never knew that—!" he muttered.

"You know it now."

Vernon-Smith did not answer. His brows were knitted, and his face troubled. He had taken it for granted that all was over, and it had been a relief to him. It was extremely disconcerting to learn that it was not all over by any means. The penalty was not over and done with: it lay ahead of the supposed offender: which altered the case very considerably.

Redwing watched him anxiously. As he did not speak, Tom broke the silence at last.

"You can't leave it like that, Smithy!"

The Bounder gave him a dark and bitter look.

"What do you want me to do?" he muttered.

"What any decent fellow would do, when another man is lagged for what he did. Do you think Wharton would leave it on you, if it were the other way about?"

"I'm not a little tin angel like Wharton," sneered Smithy. "Besides, he's got himself to thank. Quelch ordered him to stay in his study, and he chose to disobey orders. That's his look-out! How was I to know that Quelch was in the quad, and happening to be looking up! I never dreamed that anyone would guess where the ball came from."

"I know that! But now—"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" said Vernon-Smith, harshly. "If it were just an ordinary rag, and another fellow got nailed, I'd own up like a shot, and you know it. But this—it's different. Think Quelch would let me off with detentions and a book!"

"I'm afraid not! But—"

"Why, you fool, it might be the sack—you said so yourself!" snarled the Bounder. "Do you think I'm going to ask to be turfed out of Greyfriars, to save a fellow from detentions? Don't make me laugh."

"It was you, and not he—!"

"You'd better not say so outside this study, Tom Redwing. You'd have to prove it!"

"Smithy!"

"You don't know that it was I—you guess: and you'd better keep your guesses to yourself! Now leave me alone." The Bounder swung round to the door.

"Smithy, old chap—! It's up to you—"

"Oh, rats!"

The Bounder dragged open the door, and stamped out of the study. He closed the door after him with a bang. Tom Redwing made a step to follow him: but stopped. There was nothing more he could say, to any purpose, for the present at least. He was left with a deeply troubled mind. If the Bounder's too was troubled, his face did not reveal it, when he mingled with the other fellows in the Rag.

CHAPTER X

WHO ?

“WHO?” said Bob Cherry.

Bob asked that question in break, the following morning.

It was a bright and sunny summer's morning, after the rain of the previous day. But its brightness was not reflected in the faces of the Famous Five of the Remove. For once, the usually cheery Co. were clouded.

“The who-fulness,” sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, “is terrific.”

“Smithy was out!” remarked Frank Nugent.

“Was he?” grunted Johnny Bull.

“Never mind Smithy,” said Harry Wharton, quietly. “Smithy's got some sticky ways, but he's not the man to let another fellow take his gruel.”

The Co. nodded assent to that: though Johnny Bull seemed to hesitate a little. What had happened to Hacker seemed, to him, much more in Smithy's line than in anyone else's: it was wildly reckless, even for the Bounder.

The Co. knew that Harry Wharton had had nothing to do with the Hacker episode: his word was good enough for them: though the penalty had fallen upon him. But it followed that if Wharton had not buzzed the ball at Hacker, someone else had, and the question was, who?

It was a rather urgent question, for all concerned. After Extra School on Saturday, detentions for four half-holidays lay ahead of the captain of the Remove, which looked like playing ducks and drakes with the cricket. On the next Wednesday they were going over to St. Jim's to play Tom Merry and Co.: and their best batsman would have to be left behind, grinding out a “book” in the form-room. Vernon-Smith, as vice-captain, would skipper the side, no doubt efficiently: and a new recruit would be found to fill the vacant place. But it was not a happy prospect—especially for Wharton himself.

“If we could spot the man,” said Bob, “we'd jolly well boot him till he owned up to Quelch. That would make it all right.”

“The bootfulness would be preposterous!” agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “But the spotfulness is a boot on the other leg.”

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

“Quelch wouldn't jump at admitting that he's made a mistake, even if something did come out!” he said.

Four fellows frowned a little, at that remark. It was an indication of the deep and bitter resentment that Harry Wharton was feeling.

“Oh, that's rot, old chap,” said Bob, uncomfortably. “The old boy is just—He would be glad to set it right if he knew he'd nailed the wrong man.”

“It's up to a beak to nail the right man, or nobody.”

"Um! Yes! But—"

"You see, you rather asked for it," said Johnny Bull, in his slow and thoughtful way. "It couldn't have happened in your study, if you'd stayed there as Quelch told you to—what's a beak to think, when a fellow's only defence is that he disobeyed orders?"

Harry Wharton's eyes glinted.

"So far as Quelch can see, it was you or nobody," went on Johnny. "I don't see that Quelch could look at it any other way, unless it comes out that some fellow dodged into the study just at that moment when you were out—and that does sound jolly unlikely, too."

"Does that mean that you think I buzzed that ball at Hacker, when I've told you I did not?" asked Harry, very quietly.

"You know it doesn't," answered Johnny, calmly. "I know you didn't, as you say so. But it's no use getting your back up because Quelch doesn't look at it as your own pals do. If you'd stuck in the study—"

"That won't get us anywhere, Johnny," interrupted Bob. "It was that fat idiot Bunter's fault—"

"It was Bunter made Wharton cut out of the study, as he's told us," said Frank Nugent, with a snap in his voice.

"Well, he shouldn't make him!" said Johnny, stolidly, "Wharton shouldn't—"

"My esteemed Johnny," murmured the nabob of Bhanipur. "Speechfulness is silvery, but silence is the bird in the bush that makes Jack a dull boy, as the English proverb remarks."

"I'm only talking sense," said Johnny.

"You talk too much sense, old man—too much and too often," said Bob. "When you feel it coming on, just put a sock in it."

"Look here—"

"Oh, let him run on," said Harry, sarcastically. "It seems that I'm to blame all along the line, and perhaps I ought to go to Quelch and thank him for jumping on me for nothing."

"Not quite for nothing, old chap," said Johnny. "You see—"

"Pack it up, Johnny!" interrupted Bob. "We'll take it as read. The question is, can we spot the man who did it, and boot him till he squeaks! Who the dickens can it have been?"

"It's the sort of thing Smithy might do, in one of his tantrums," said Johnny.

"Smithy was out of gates when it happened," said Bob. "He never heard of it till Skinner told him at roll. I've heard him say so."

"Um!" said Johnny.

"I tell you, you can leave Smithy out," said Harry, sharply. "He wouldn't leave it on another fellow if he'd done it. Skinner or Snoop might—not Smithy."

"Might have been a Shell man!" said Bob. "They loathe the Acid Drop in his form! But—a Shell man wouldn't be in the Remove studies—and Quelch is certain it came from a Remove window—"

"Might have been almost anybody," said Nugent. "Quelch may find out something later—before St. Jim's day—"

"He isn't looking for anyone!" said Harry Wharton, with a curl of the lip. "He's satisfied with getting the first man that came to hand."

"Oh, bosh," said Bob. "Quelch is rather a Tartar, but he's a just Tartar. He's let Bunter off Extra School on Saturday, because I told him the fat ass wasn't mixed up in the rag yesterday."

"Nice of him to take your word for it," said Harry.

"Why shouldn't he?" demanded Bob, rather warmly.

"He doesn't take mine."

"Well, that's different—the whole thing's different. Don't be an unreasonable ass, old chap. Look here, what we want to get at is this, who did it? We could jolly well make him own up if we knew. We're not going to leave you behind next Wednesday, if we can help it."

"I'm not so sure that I should be left behind anyway," said Harry Wharton, coolly. "I don't feel like cutting the biggest fixture of the cricket season to please Quelch."

"You'll be in detention—"

"Fellows have cut detention before now."

"Why, you thumping ass!" exclaimed Bob aghast. "If you cut, to go over to St. Jim's with the team, Quelch would be as mad as a hatter—"

"The madfulness would be terrific."

"Harry, old chap!—" murmured Nugent. Johnny Bull did not speak: but an expressive grunt expressed his views.

"Why not?" said Wharton, in the same cool tone. "I don't see sticking in detention because Quelch makes silly mistakes. Why shouldn't I play cricket on a half-holiday, as I'm entitled to do! That's what I'm thinking of, at any rate."

"Better think twice!" said Bob, dryly. "You'd have to go up to the Head. There's a limit!"

Harry Wharton made no reply to that.

"No good thinking of wild and woolly stunts like Smithy's," said Bob. "One Bounder is enough in the form. If we could spot the man—I wonder he hasn't owned up already: any decent man would, in the circumstances, rather than leave it on another chap. Hallo, hallo, hallo, there's the bell! Come on."

The bell for third school was ringing. Four members of the Co. started for the House. One member remained where he was. Bob looked round.

"Come on, Wharton!"

"Any hurry?"

"Can't you hear the bell?"

"I'm not deaf."

"Well, you ass, do you want to be late?" exclaimed Bob. "Quelch isn't in the best of tempers with you already."

"Dear man!" said Wharton.

The Co. came to a halt. Fellows on all sides were heading for their form-rooms. The captain of the Remove seemed in no hurry to do so.

Nugent ran back and caught him by the arm.

"Come on, old fellow," he said. "What's the good of looking for more trouble with Quelch?"

"Why not?"

Johnny Bull gave a grunt.

"I'm going in!" he said. And he went. Three fellows hesitated. Wharton, evidently, was in a reckless and rebellious mood: the result of a sense of injustice. So far from desiring to placate Quelch, his idea seemed to be to irritate him further.

"Do come, old fellow," urged Nugent.

"No hurry. You cut in."

"Look here," exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Are you coming?"

"Cut in, and leave me alone."

"Isn't a 'book' enough for you?" hooted Bob. "Do you want a lot more lines from Quelch?"

"I don't care."

"Oh, you're an ass!" exclaimed Bob, impatiently. "Come on, Inky—come on, Frank. The bell will be stopping."

Bob Cherry and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh cut off. Frank Nugent did not follow. He remained with his disgruntled chum.

"Better cut in, Frank," said Wharton. "The bell's stopping."

"You don't want to be late for class, Harry—"

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, all right!" said Nugent. "I'll stay out too."

"Look here, cut in, I tell you."

"Not unless you do."

Harry Wharton gave him almost a grim look. for a moment. But it was only for a moment. Then he smiled.

"Come on!" he said. And they ran for the House together: arriving at the door of the Remove form-room just as Mr. Quelch was letting in his form.

CHAPTER XI

THE REBEL

"I SAY, you fellows—!"

"Scat!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

Harry Wharton glanced round at the doorway of No. 1 Study, and picked up a Latin dictionary from the table, without speaking.

"Scat" from Bob Cherry had no effect whatever on Billy Bunter. But the dictionary seemed to impress him. Instead of rolling into the study, he remained in the doorway, blinking warily at the captain of the Remove through his big spectacles.

Five fellows were gathered in that study after class on Friday. Not one of them was looking merry or bright—least of all Harry Wharton. An argument was proceeding in the study, and it was growing warm. Billy Bunter interrupted it. Always superfluous, the fat Owl of the Remove was more superfluous than ever, at the moment.

"Can't you chuck cricket for a minute, and let a fellow speak?" demanded Bunter, indignantly.

"We're not talking cricket!" said Frank Nugent, "and nobody wants to hear you squeak. Buzz off."

"Shut the door after you!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—!"

Harry Wharton took aim with the dictionary.

Generally, he was more or less patient with the fat and fatuous Owl. But his patience was at a low ebb now. Bunter's antics had led to disaster for the captain of the Remove: and really No. 1 Study was rather dangerous ground for him.

"Where will you have it, you fat ass?" asked Wharton.

"Beast!"

Bunter, apparently, did not want it anywhere. He backed into the passage, and Bob Cherry kicked the door shut.

But it opened again a moment later, and a pair of little round eyes blinked in through a pair of big round spectacles.

"I say you fellows, do listen to a chap!" squeaked Bunter. "It's important."

Five separate and distinct glares were fixed on the fat face. But glares did not worry Bunter unduly. So long as the dictionary was not hurled, he was prepared to carry on.

"You fellows are booked for Extra School to-morrow afternoon," went on Bunter. "I'm not, see! I'm going to the pictures at the Regal."

"Is that what you've come here to tell us?" asked Bob, staring.

"That's it, old chap! But I'm in rather a jam," explained Bunter. "I think I told you fellows I was expecting a postal-order—"

"You howling ass—!"

"Oh, really, Nugent! It hasn't come," said Bunter, sadly. "I don't know why, but there it is—it hasn't! Which of you fellows is going to lend me half-a-crown?"

"The whichfulness is terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Look here, what are you fellows confabbing about?" asked Bunter, blinking curiously at the Famous Five. "Is anything on?"

Harry Wharton took aim with the dictionary.

"One second to hop it!" he said, briefly.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter "hopped" it promptly. The study door closed with a bang, and Harry Wharton laid down the dictionary. Really, the Famous Five had more urgent matters to think about than Billy Bunter's financial embarrassments, due to the non-arrival of a long-expected postal-order.

But Bunter had not "hopped" far!

Five fellows were "confabbing" in a study, on a glorious summer's day, instead of heading for the nets as they might naturally have been expected to do: all the more because there could be no cricket on Saturday afternoon, when they had to be in "Extra". Inquisitiveness was Bunter's besetting sin: he always wanted to know. When Bunter wanted to know, he had absolutely no scruple about his method of acquiring knowledge. It was said in the Remove that there was hardly a keyhole at Greyfriars to which Bunter had not had a fat ear. So, having banged the door, as a sign that he had departed, the fat Owl, grinning, bent a fat head to the keyhole. Billy Bunter was going to know what that confabulation was about!

"Now that bloater's gone, we can get this settled!" came Johnny Bull's voice: and Bunter's fat grin widened.

"Nothing to settle, that I know of!" answered Harry Wharton.

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"I'll leave that to you."

"Look here—"

"Peace, my infants, peace!" said Bob Cherry. "What's the good of ragging? It's rough luck, Harry: but a fellow has to take the rough with the smooth. You don't want to play the goat in Smithy's style."

"Not at all. I want to play cricket."

"It's mad, Harry." There was a note of deep anxiety in Frank Nugent's voice. "You can't cut detention on Wednesday—"

"The cutfulness is not the proper caper, my esteemed and absurd Wharton," urged Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "The roughfulness of the luck is terrific, but what cannot be cured must go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarkably observes."

"Have a little sense!" said Johnny Bull. "Quelch has made a mistake, but he wouldn't have if you hadn't—"

"I've heard that one!"

"It may come out before Wednesday who it really was that knocked Hacker's lid off!" said Bob.

"It won't!" said Harry Wharton. "It happened two days ago, and the fellow, whoever he is, has kept mum: that makes it pretty clear that he's going to keep mum."

"Quelch may spot him, all the same—"

"He thinks he has spotted him, and that's good enough for Quelch. He isn't looking for anybody else."

"Well, I suppose not: but—"

"If it does come out before Wednesday, O.K." said Harry. "But if it doesn't, and it won't—!"

"Then you'll have to toe the line," said Johnny Bull.

"I shall go over to St. Jim's with the team, and play cricket!" said Harry Wharton, coolly. "It's no good talking—that's settled."

Billy Bunter, on the other side of the keyhole, almost gasped aloud, as he heard that! So that was what they were confabbing about! The fat Owl's eyes bulged behind his spectacles. This was a spot of exciting news for the fellows in the Rag! Bunter liked to be the fellow with the news—especially startling news! There was no doubt that the news that the captain of the Remove intended to clear off on Wednesday, in reckless defiance of authority,



Billy Bunter almost gasped.

and play cricket at St. Jim's instead of sitting in detention at Greyfriars, would startle every fellow who heard it.

"You can't do it, Harry," said Nugent.

"I think I can."

"Quelch will stop you—!" said Bob.

"Quelch won't know a thing. I shall slip out quietly, and join the team outside the school. All Quelch will know is that I've cut detention, when he's ready for me in the afternoon."

"If he guesses where you've gone—"

"Oh, rot."

"Even if you get clear, which seems jolly unlikely to me, you'll be called up for it afterwards," said Johnny Bull.

"I know that!"

"It means going up to the Head."

"Let it!"

"It's asking for trouble," said Johnny.

"Why not, when I get the trouble whether I ask for it or not?" said Harry Wharton, savagely. "Look here, it's no good talking, I tell you—and mind you don't say a word outside this study: I don't want Quelch watching me like a hawk next Wednesday—!"

"Yaroooooh!"

A sudden terrific yell, just outside the door, interrupted the captain of the Remove. It was accompanied by the sound of a thudding foot. Harry Wharton broke off: and all the juniors in the study stared round towards the door.

"Ow! wow! Leave off kicking me, Smithy, you beast! I wasn't listening at the keyhole—yaroooooh!—I only stooped to tie my shoe-lace—yow-ow-ow—if you kick me again, you rotter, I'll—whoooooop!

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

The study door was flung open, and Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in. From up the passage came an echo of scudding feet and an anguished howl.

The Bounder glanced at the startled faces in the study.

"You fellows talking secrets?" he asked. "You didn't know Bunter had an ear to the keyhole, I suppose? I spotted him as I came up, and booted him."

Bob Cherry whistled.

"That tears it!" he said. "It will be all over the shop, Wharton, old man, you'll have to chuck it up now—!"

"Nothing of the kind."

"It may get to Quelch now—"

"I don't care." Harry Wharton compressed his lips. "No secret about it, Smithy, though I'd rather Quelch didn't know. I'm going over with the team on Wednesday for the St. Jim's match, that's all."

The Bounder started.

"All!" he repeated. "Mad. You can't do it."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"I should have thought you'd approve!" he said. "It's rather in your own line, isn't it, to back up against the beaks? Anyhow, I'm going."

"Quelch—"

"I'm not bothering about Quelch."

"He will bother about you, if he gets wind of this," said Vernon-Smith. "For goodness sake, Wharton, have a little sense—"

"I've had that from these fellows, thanks." Harry Wharton crossed to the corner of the study, and picked up a cricket bat. "Coming down to the nets, you men? We're in Extra to-morrow, you know."

He left the study, with the bat under his arm. Four fellows exchanged rather expressive glances, and followed him. The Bounder, with a dark and rather troubled brow, walked up the passage to his own study, kicked open the door, and went in.

CHAPTER XII

BUNTER'S BRIGHT IDEA!

"EXTRA!" groaned Bob Cherry.

Saturday afternoon was bright and sunny: quite a contrast to the last half-holiday. But the outlook for the cricketing fellows in the Remove was gloomy. But for that unfortunate "rag" on Wednesday, all would have been calm and bright. Cricket on Little Side would have been the order of the day: and it was glorious weather for cricket.

But most of the Remove were booked for Extra School, and were due in No. 10 class-room at half-past two: up to Monsieur Charpentier. Never had French irregular verbs seemed so utterly unattractive. Even Bob Cherry, for once, did not seem to be enjoying life. Really it would have been a spot of comfort, had it rained that afternoon, as it had rained on Wednesday. But there was not a cloud in the blue sky over the old quad.

"Extra—on a day like this!" said Bob. "I—I wonder whether a fellow could cut! Mossoo hardly ever reports a fellow for cutting Extra. He's a jolly good little ass!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"I like that, after the sermons you've been giving me about cutting next Wednesday!" he remarked.

"Um!" said Bob. "I—I suppose we've got to stick it. But it's rotten."

"The rottenfulness is terrific," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But after the esteemed feast comes the ridiculous reckoning, as the proverb remarks."

"All our own fault!" said Johnny Bull. "We asked for it, you know. Wharton was against it, and if we'd had as much sense—"

"Well, a fellow must do something on a rainy day," said Bob. "And I thought Quelch had gone out—he hardly ever misses his grind on a half-holiday. He had to stick in that afternoon."

"And we've got to stick in this!" sighed Frank Nugent. "You ever propose passage cricket again, old man, and we'll bump you bald-headed."

"Well, we should have chucked it, but for that obstinate ass Smithy!" said Bob. "Bother him! Bother Quelch! Bother Hacker! If the Acid Drop hadn't barged in—"

"Shurrup, you ass!" breathed Nugent, hastily.

"What—?"

"Ware beaks!"

"Oh!"

The Famous Five were in a group in the sunny quad. Mr. Hacker, coming out of the House, passed quite near them, and his sour glance turned on the juniors. Bob reddened, as he glanced round at the master of the Shell. Bob's voice was never low, and he wondered whether Hacker had caught his words.

It appeared that he had not, fortunately: for after that sour glance at the Remove group, he walked on, towards the gates.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob. "If he'd heard me call him the Acid Drop—"

"Six from Quelch, if he had!" said Johnny Bull. "That's what Smithy got the other day. Hacker doesn't like fancy names."

"The esteemed Acid Drop did not hear, and the missfulness is as good as the milefulness!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Bother him!" murmured Bob. "No wonder some fellow knocked his lid off the other day—Hacker asks for these things."

"I wonder—!" said Johnny Bull, slowly.

"What and which?"

"Nothing's come out about that," said Johnny. "It's jolly queer that nobody knows a thing, when it must have been a Remove man. I wonder—"

Harry Wharton frowned. He wondered, as his friends did, who could have "buzzed" that cricket ball at the Acid Drop. Very gladly indeed would he have identified the unknown "buzzer". But he had no use for Johnny Bull's surmises on the subject. He interrupted, rather sharply.

"If you're thinking of Smithy, wash it out!"

"I was thinking of Smithy," answered Johnny, calmly. "Smithy had six, and all through Hacker. I know he's supposed to have been out of gates at the time, and all the rest of it. But I wonder—"

"Whoever it was, it was not Smithy!" snapped Harry Wharton. "It was his fault there was a row at all—and mine, for letting him jeer me into it—but he wouldn't let another man take his gruel—that's all rot."

"Um!" said Johnny. He did not seem at all sure. "Somebody's letting you take his gruel—"

"Not Smithy! He's rather a rotter in some ways, but he's too decent for that," said the captain of the Remove. "He's got a spot of decency."

"Thanks!" said a sardonic voice: and the Famous Five looked round at the Bounder. He gave them a somewhat unpleasant stare. "Talking about me?"

"Why shouldn't we?" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Glad to hear you think I've got a spot of decency. Wharton, though I'm a rotter in some ways!" sneered Smithy. "Many thanks for your good opinion."

Harry Wharton looked at him steadily.

"You know what I think of you, Smithy," he answered. "If you heard what I said, it's no news to you."

"Not at all! But you were speaking to Bull, and I didn't hear what he said. What was it, Bull?"

The Famous Five did not speak: four of them feeling somewhat uncomfortable, but Johnny merely taking time to think before he spoke. The Bounder's look grew more unpleasant and aggressive. It was quite clear that he was in a mood for trouble, and ready to quarrel at a word. Possibly a quarrel with Harry Wharton might have furnished some sort of solace to his conscience.

"I'll tell you, if you like," said Johnny Bull, calmly. "I was wondering whether it was you buzzed that ball at the Acid Drop, and I said so. Wharton thinks it couldn't have been, or you'd have owned up, as any decent fellow would. I'm not so jolly sure."

"Oh!" exclaimed Vernon-Smith. Something of the truculence faded out of his face. He gave Johnny a look, and then turned his eyes on the captain of the Remove.

"You don't think so?" he asked.

"No!"

"Why not?" sneered Smithy.

"I think you'd own up, if you did it," said Harry. "You couldn't be rat enough to keep mum, when another fellow was nailed in your place."

The colour came into Vernon-Smith's cheeks. The word "rat" struck him very unpleasantly, in the circumstances.

"I say, you fellows." A fat voice interrupted, perhaps to the Bounder's relief. "I say—!"

"Oh, blow away, Bunter," grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Hook it!" said Bob Cherry.

"Beast! I mean, do listen to a chap," urged Bunter. "I'm not in Extra, you know, and I told you I was going to the pictures. But—but my postal order didn't come this morning, after all."

"Fathead!"

"They've got a jolly good picture on at the Regal in Pegg," went on Bunter, "Three murders in it, I've heard! Or four! If one of you fellows would lend me half a crown—"

"Scat!"

"Look here," said Bunter. "I'll tell you what. The Acid Drop's going over to Pegg this afternoon—I heard him tell Prout he was taking a walk on the cliffs—"

"Bother the Acid Drop, and bother you!"

"But look here," urged Bunter. "Hacker's got you all into a row—Extra School for the lot of you, and Wharton stacked with detentions for buzzing a cricket ball at his napper—"

"As it happens, I did not, you fat ass," said Harry.

"He, he, he!" Bunter's fat cachinnation hinted that he doubted that denial. "Well, anyway, you're for it, old chap, and I'll tell you what! Hacker's sure to take the short cut through the wood to Pegg, ain't he?"

"What about it, ass?"

"Well, I'm going to Pegg," said Bunter. "What about shifting the plank on Friardale Water after I've got across? The Acid Drop would have to walk a couple of miles round, when he came back. See?"

"You dithering ass!"

"Well, that would pay him out for getting you fellows into Extra," said Bunter. "Hacker ain't a walker like old Quelch—I expect he'll be pretty well cooked by the time he gets back to the stream. He, he, he! Make him walk two or three miles round when he's jolly tired see? His skinny legs will be dropping off by the time he gets back to the school! He, he, he!"

Billy Bunter chuckled, loud and long. The idea of making Mr. Hacker walk two or three miles round, on his homeward route, apparently amused the fat Owl. He seemed to expect the chums of the Remove to chuckle too. But they did not appear to share Bunter's amusement. They only stared at the fat Owl.

"Serve him jolly well right, after getting you fellows bunged into Extra, what?" said Bunter, breezily. "I'll jolly well do it, if you'll lend me half a crown for the pictures at the Regal—"

"You benighted chump—!" said Bob Cherry.

"—and half a crown for a taxi back!" added Bunter. "You see, if I shifted the plank, I couldn't walk back that way, and I don't want to have to go miles round like Hacker. Lend me a couple of half-crowns—"

"I'll lend you a couple of thick ears, you fat foozler," said Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry! You're going to stick in Extra—well, while you're doing French with Mosssoo, you can think of Hacker coming back and finding that plank gone—fancy his face!" said Bunter. "Mind, I'll settle the five bob when my postal order comes on Monday."

"You blithering bloater—"

"Beast! I say, you fellows, don't walk off while a fellow's talking to you," howled Bunter.

Unheeding that injunction, the Famous Five did walk off. They seemed to have had enough of Billy Bunter and his bright ideas about reprisals on Hacker. The fat Owl turned his spectacles, not very hopefully, on Vernon-Smith. The wealthy Bounder had more ten shilling notes than other fellows had half-crowns, and it would have cost him little to accede to the fat Owl's request—if he chose so to do. That was a very doubtful point however. But hope springs eternal in the human breast.

"I say, Smithy, Hacker got you six the other day!" said Bunter. "You've got to go into Extra this afternoon, too! I say, if he finds the plank gone, he might try to jump it, and go in—wallop!"

The Bounder laughed. The idea of Mr. Hacker trying to jump the woodland stream in Friardale Wood, and going in "wallop", seemed to amuse him. He slipped his hand into his pocket.

Billy Bunter's little round eyes glistened behind his big round spectacles. The Famous Five had had no use for his bright idea. But it appeared that the Bounder had. Smithy's was not a forgiving nature: and his feelings towards the "Acid Drop" were as acid as Mr. Hacker's own temper.

"Here you are, fathead!" he said.

The fat Owl could hardly believe in his good luck, as a couple of half-crowns were dropped into a fat palm.

"Oh! Thanks!" he gasped, "I'll settle this on Monday, of course, Smithy—"

"I don't think!"

"Oh, really, Smithy! My postal-order can't be later than Monday—it's from one of my titled relations, you know—"

"Pack it up!" said the Bounder, "Hike off. And don't forget to shift that plank, Bunter. I'll take a trot that way after Extra, and if you haven't done it, I'll boot you all over Greyfriars."

"Oh, really, Smithy—!"

The Bounder slouched away, consoled a little, no doubt, by the prospect of the Acid Drop, on his return, facing the alternative of walking several miles round, or risking a ducking. Billy Bunter blinked after him through his big spectacles, murmured "Beast!" and then rolled away to the gates. Bunter, at least, was going to enjoy that half-holiday: with a picture with three or four murders in it, and a taxi home afterwards. It was a cheery fat Owl that rolled away for Pegg: leaving quite a crowd of Remove fellows behind him who were feeling anything but cheery.

CHAPTER XIII

A WARNING FOR WHARTON

“WHARTON!”
“Yes, sir!”

The famous Five came to a dismayed halt.

It was almost time for “Extra”: but not quite. They were in the quad, with a number of other Remove fellows—due in the French master’s classroom at half-past two. The St. Jim’s match on the coming Wednesday was the subject they were discussing: though Harry Wharton had little to say. There was a faintly dogged expression on his face, which his chums understood only too well.

Four members of the Co. were worried. They were thinking of the fixture at St. Jim’s, less as a cricket match, than as the probable date of a very bad spot for the captain of the Remove. For Harry Wharton’s determination was quite fixed: he was going over to St. Jim’s with the cricketers when that date came round—detention or no detention, Quelch or no Quelch. And if that had been a wildly reckless plan before, it was doubly so now, since Billy Bunter had heard of it, and, of course, spread the news. Every fellow in the Remove, and some fellows in other forms, knew that Harry Wharton was going to “cut” on Wednesday, flouting authority to the very limit. It was a topic among dozens of fellows: and it seemed impossible that it should not reach Quelch’s ears, sooner or later. Nobody, of course, would mention it in his hearing intentionally: but careless words were very likely to be dropped: and the merest hint would be enough for Quelch. That added danger seemed to make no difference to Harry Wharton: but it was a matter of deep anxiety to his friends.

Now, as the Remove master called to Wharton, the Co. could not help thinking that he had heard. Quelch’s face wore its grimmest look. There was a glint in the gimlet eyes, and his lips were compressed in a hard line. He rapped out Wharton’s name like a bullet.

Harry Wharton answered him respectfully. But his face did not register dismay like those of his friends. He met his form-master’s grim glance with perfect calmness.

“Wharton! I have something very serious to say to you.”

“Indeed, sir.”

“You are under detention, Wharton, for four half-holidays, after to-day.”

“I had not forgotten, sir.”

Mr. Quelch breathed a little hard. Wharton’s manner was respectful, indeed almost meek: yet there was a hint in it of cool impertinence. Quelch did not need telling that that member of his form was in a mood of dogged

defiance. It was a change in Harry Wharton: it was almost as if he had, for the nonce, changed characters with the Bounder. Quelch was not a man to take it with much patience.

The Co. stood silent in dismay. Other fellows gathered round, wondering, like the Co. whether Quelch had heard what all his form had heard. Vernon-Smith, Squiff, Tom Brown, Peter Todd, Lord Mauleverer, and five or six other fellows, looked on, in silence.

"I trust, Wharton, that you have not forgotten—and that you will not forget," said Mr. Quelch, in a very deep voice.

"I've quite a good memory, sir."

Again Quelch breathed very hard.

"I will speak plainly, Wharton." Something has reached my ears, to the effect that it is your intention to disregard your form-master's authority, and leave the school on Wednesday."

Wharton made no answer to that.

Since Billy Bunter's keyhole performance, and the tattle up and down the Remove, he had more than half-expected Quelch to hear something. Now, evidently, Quelch had. It made no difference to his determination: except, perhaps, to harden it.

"I regret," went on Mr. Quelch, "that your just punishment should interfere with school games. But for that you have only yourself to thank. You are well aware, Wharton, that such a punishment is light, in view of your action, and that it would have been more severe, had not your previous good conduct been taken into consideration.

No reply.

"I trust," went on Mr. Quelch, "that what I have heard is merely idle talk. But I feel it my duty to give you a very serious warning, Wharton."

"Thank you, sir."

"What? What did you say, Wharton?"

"I said thank you, sir."

Skinner, in the little crowd that was gathering round, winked at Smithy. Wharton was asking for it, as hard as he could: which was amusing to the amiable Skinner. But the Bounder gave him only a scowl in response to his wink. Smithy's look was troubled. The Bounder's conscience was somewhat elastic, and did not often perturb him. But it was troubling him now.

The gimlet-eyes glinted at the captain of the Remove.

"Listen to me, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch, his voice deeper.

"I am listening, sir."

"I am speaking to you in the presence of your friends, who may have some influence on you in this matter," said Mr. Quelch, "I trust that they will exercise it, if you actually have any such intention as I have mentioned. For if you should carry out any such intention, the consequence will be drastic."

No answer.

"I scarcely understand you of late, Wharton. Your riotous conduct on last Wednesday, when you should, as Head Boy, have exercised a restraining influence on your thoughtless form-fellows, was a painful surprise to me—"

Bob Cherry broke in.

"That wasn't Wharton's fault, sir—"

"You need not speak, Cherry."

"Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! But it really wasn't, sir—Wharton was against it all the time, and we rushed him into it—"

"The rushfulness was terrific, sir," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"It was all our fault, sir," said Frank Nugent.

"It was, really and truly, sir!" said Johnny Bull.

"And mine, sir!" The Bounder, unexpectedly, spoke, causing all the fellows on the spot to stare at him. "I said he was funking it, and—!"

"Silence!" snapped Mr. Quelch. "Whatever may have been the cause of your joining in that riot, Wharton, you are well aware of what was your duty as Head Boy."

Wharton coloured.

"I know, sir!" he said, in a low voice, "I was to blame in that. But I did nothing more than that—I do not even know who pitched that cricket ball from my window at Mr. Hacker."

"That matter has been inquired into and judged, Wharton, and I desire to hear nothing further from you on the subject."

"Very well, sir!" said Harry, quietly.

"I have, as I have said, a warning to give you. If you are indeed meditating an act of open rebellion against authority, I trust that your better sense may prevail, or that your friends may influence you for your good. For understand, this, Wharton, clearly—if you should be guilty of such a flagrant defiance of authority as to leave this school on Wednesday, against orders, I shall report your act to your head-master, and request your expulsion from the school."

"Indeed, sir."

"That will be the penalty," said Mr. Quelch. "If you carry your obduracy to such a length, you will know what to expect. That is all!"

With that, Mr. Quelch turned away, and rustled into the House. He left a silent crowd of juniors behind him. All eyes were on Harry Wharton: but his indifferent face expressed nothing.

"By gum!" Bob Cherry was the first to speak, "Quelch is in a bait."

"The baitfulness is terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, dismally.

"That tattling ass Bunter—!" muttered Johnny Bull.

"You'll chuck it now, Wharton?" The Bounder eyed him anxiously. "It was pretty decent of Quelch to give you that warning, you know—he doesn't want to come down hard if he can help it. He's given you a chance."

Wharton glanced at him.

"Thanks for your advice," he said. "It's of no use to me, but thanks all the same."

"You won't carry on—after that?"

"Why not?"

"Harry, old chap—!" breathed Nugent.

"For goodness sake—!" mumbled Bob.

"Quelch meant every word he said!" said Peter Todd.

"So do I!" said Harry. "If I'd pitched that ball at Hacker, I should have no kick coming. I should deserve it, and more. But as it happens, I did not—and I'm not going to cut a cricket match because Quelch doesn't choose to sort out the right man."

"Who did—if you didn't?"

Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

"Ask me another! That's for Quelch to sort out—he's the beak! Some rat dodged into my study, when that fat idiot Bunter ragged me into chasing him up the passage—that's all I know. It's up to Quelch to sort out the facts. If he doesn't choose to, it's not my fault, is it?"

"But, my dear chap—!" said Squiff.

There was a chime from the clock-tower.

"Time!" said Harry "Better not be late for Mossoo. You fellows coming?" He walked away to the House.

His friends followed him, in glum silence.

CHAPTER XIV

THE RIGHT THING

"SMITHY—"

"Chuck it."

"We shall be late for Extra—"

"I'm not keeping you."

"I know! But—"

"Give us a rest."

Herbert Vernon-Smith, plainly, was not in a good temper. Tom Redwing was used to that, and he was tolerant: all the more, because he knew that Smithy's savage humour was due chiefly to the gnawing of his conscience.

Smithy had not gone with the crowd to Mossoo's class-room. While the rest went into Extra, the Bounder had slouched off to his study, with a black brow. Redwing followed him there, to remind him that he was due in No. 10 class-room: and, as the Bounder refused to stir, he remained. Tom was far from sharing his chum's reckless manners and customs, and he was generally as punctual as a clock. But it looked as if he was going to be late for once.

The Bounder, lounging by the study window, with his hands driven deep into his pockets, gave his chum a scowl.

"That mule!" he muttered.

Redwing smiled faintly, for a moment. He knew to whom the Bounder referred.

"That stuck-up noodle!" went on Smithy. "He can't take what comes to him like other fellows—too much of a Great Big Panjandrum."

"It's the injustice that's put his back up, Smithy," said Redwing, quietly. "I think he's wrong—in fact I know he is—but I can understand how he feels about it. He never buzzed that ball at Hacker—"

"How do you know?" sneered Smithy.

"I know and you know," said Redwing, sharply. "It was you, and I know just as well as if I'd seen you."

"Suppose it was? Didn't Hacker ask for it, the meddlin' ass! Why can't he mind his own business, and leave the Remove alone?"

"There was a fearful shindy, Smithy! Any beak was bound to barge in, as Quelch didn't—"

"Are you sticking up for the Acid-Drop?"

"Oh, don't be an ass, Smithy. Hacker's a pain in the neck, if you like. But that doesn't alter facts. You got him with that cricket ball from Wharton's study window, and that's the trouble."

"I couldn't have if Wharton had been there, as he ought to have been. If he chooses to disobey orders—"

"I know! I know! But—come down to brass-tacks, Smithy. Wharton never did what he was nailed for—and you did!"

"And why can't he take it, like any other fellow?" demanded the Bounder. "Think he's the first man at Greyfriars, or the first man in the world, to land a spot of injustice? It isn't a flogging—not even six from Quelch—it's detention—and a fellow can stand that without yowling."

"It's a cricket match too! But I'm not defending him—he's a hot-headed ass, to think of kicking over the traces like that, and I hope his friends will make him think better of it before next Wednesday—"

"Some hope!" sneered the Bounder. "He's as obstinate as a mule, and you know it. He'd rather leave the school on his neck, than put his precious pride in his pocket."

"If it comes to that, Smithy—"

"Well?" snarled the Bounder.

"You can't let it go on, old chap."

"Can't I?"

"It's not good enough. I can see that that's what's worrying you now—"

"It's not worrying me."

"I can see that it is, and so it ought, Smithy. Quelch meant every word he said, and you can't see a man sacked for what you did."

"For his own mulish obstinacy, you mean," snarled the Bounder. "He got detentions for bowling Hacker—that's all. If he gets the sack, it will be for defying Quelch."

"I know! But—"

"You fancy that I ought to walk into Quelch's study and own up?"

Redwing did not reply to that. But his look was enough.

"And suppose I did?" said Smithy, breathing hard. "Think I should be let off lightly on my good record, as Wharton was?" He laughed savagely. "It would be the last drop in the bucket for me—I should be sacked, and you warned me yourself—and you know it."

"It mightn't come to that—"

"You'd like me to take the chance—because a fellow can't put up with a spot of injustice without doing a song and dance about it?"

"It's up to you, Smithy. The time to think of the consequences was when you did that silly, disrespectful, mad thing—not now. You chose to carry on with it, and you can't leave it on another fellow."

"That's all you've got to say?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd better leave me alone!" snarled the Bounder. "Get down to French verbs—you're late already."

"We're both late already—for goodness sake, come along, Smithy, and don't make matters worse by cutting Extra."

"Extra go hang! Think I'm feeling like French conjugations with that little ass Mossos now? I'm not going into Extra."

"But—"

"Oh, chuck it, and leave me alone."

"If you'd rather I went—"

"Much rather! Think I want to listen to your sermons? If you've got to hand out sixthly and seventhly, let Wharton have the benefit of it—he needs it as much as I do, now he's setting up to be a law for himself. Tell him that it's a good little boy's good little duty to obey his kind teachers," jeered the Bounder. "Anyhow, give me a rest!"

Redwing moved to the door, but he hesitated. He was unwilling to leave his chum to himself in that savage mood. The Bounder eyed him almost malevolently.

"Perhaps it will do him good," he jeered. "Perhaps he will listen to you—perhaps! Anyhow leave me alone."

Tom Redwing opened his lips, but he closed them again, and left the study without another word. The Bounder kicked the door savagely shut after him.

Left alone, he moved about the room restlessly. He would have been glad to dismiss the whole matter from his mind: but that he could not do.

Smithy was a hard case, in many ways. More than once, the "sack" had

impended over him: and fellows who knew him best, often wondered how he had escaped it so long. His luck had always been phenomenal. Somehow or other he had always eluded what seemed inevitable: and he had laughed in his sleeve at his success. To delude the masters, to bamboozle the prefects: to carry on in his own wilful way regardless of authority: all that was like meat and drink to the reckless fellow, and it never troubled his conscience. But—there was a limit! To let another fellow bear the brunt of his misdoings was mean, and it was cowardly: and meanness and cowardice were not in his nature. It was intolerable to him to sink in his own esteem: to feel contempt for himself.

It was very unusual for Smithy to have to wrestle with his own conscience. Yet for the past few days he had been doing little else. He argued that detentions, after all, were little, even if undeserved: and that was all that had come to Harry Wharton: while in his own case, judgment would undoubtedly have been much more severe. Was he to ask for the "sack", just to save a fellow from giving up a few half-holidays?

That argument had not satisfied his conscience: but it had lulled it. But now the case was altered. It was Wharton over whom the "sack" impended: for he knew that Quelch's warning had made no difference to him. The rankling sense of injustice was driving Harry Wharton to act as the Bounder himself might have acted: and the outcome, after what Mr. Quelch had said, was not doubtful. That Wharton was obstinate, stubborn, unreasonable, might be all true: but it did not alter the fact that he was going to pay the penalty of what Herbert Vernon-Smith had done. Could he let it go on? He knew that if he did, he would despise himself for ever afterwards.

Smithy, with such thoughts in his mind, was not likely to bother his head about extra French with Mossoo. In fact, he forgot that he was booked for No. 10 classroom with the other participants in that unlucky game of indoor cricket. He moved about his study like a caged animal, and then stood staring with a black brow from the window.

He scowled at the sight of Mr. Quelch, walking in the quad with Prout. He pictured the expression on Quelch's face, if he went to him with his confession. Quelch, unintentionally, had been unjust: he had had to act on the evidence, which seemed conclusive: nevertheless, his sentence on the captain of the Remove had been an injustice, and that injustice had turned his Head Boy into a mutineer. Quelch's feelings, if he learned the truth, could easily be imagined. He would be as hard as iron. There would not be a spot of mercy for the delinquent who had caused him to act unjustly. If Smithy had owned up in the first place, he might have had a chance—but he would have no chance now! He knew what he had to expect—one grim, icy glare from Quelch: an interview with his head-master, and the train home. That was what Redwing seemed to expect him to ask for!

And that, as Smithy knew at the bottom of his heart, was what he was going to do!

But for that scene in the quad, it could have gone on. It could not go on now. He knew that it could not.

He left the study at last. He did not head for No. 10 classroom, or remember it. He headed for Masters' Studies. Quelch was out of the House: neither did Smithy want to see him. He had no use for Quelch's glares or biting words. He walked into the Remove master's vacant study, with a set, sullen, savage face. He was going to do the right thing: but it was in a mood of bitterness and angry resentment that he was going to do it.

He picked up the Remove master's pen, and selected a blank sheet of paper. With a firm hand he wrote:

Mr. Quelch.

Sir,

It was I who knocked Mr. Hacker's mortar-board off with a cricket-ball last Wednesday.

H. Vernon-Smith.

Leaving that message in a conspicuous spot on Mr. Quelch's blotter, he left the study.

At the end of the passage he paused.

The temptation was strong to return to the study, and undo what he had done. For a long moment he hesitated.

Then, setting his lips, he walked on. A few minutes later, he was out of the House, and out of the school: tramping away with a set savage face for Friardale Wood: he had done the right thing: but it had left him in the worst temper ever.

CHAPTER XV

BEASTLY FOR BUNTER!

"YAROOOHH!"

Billy Bunter yelled.

He was taken by surprise. Seldom, indeed, had the fat Owl of the Remove been so utterly taken by surprise.

The very last thing Billy Bunter would have expected, at that moment, was a sudden grasp on the back of his collar. Least of all could he have expected that the hand that grasped would appertain to Mr. Hacker, the master of the Shell. It came like a bolt from the blue.

Billy Bunter was, as he had told the Famous Five, going to the pictures, at the Regal, at Pegg. Naturally he took the short cut through Friardale Wood, as he had also told the Co. It saved miles: and not only miles, but furlongs,

indeed yards, were a matter of importance to Bunter when he walked abroad. That, he had no doubt, was the way Hacker had gone: and that was the way he was going—having succeeded in extracting the necessary loan from Herbert Vernon-Smith.

Bunter's progress was slow. He rolled down Friardale Lane: he rested his fat person on the stile for quite a long time, while he recovered breath, never in extensive supply with the fat Owl. At length he rolled on by the leafy, shady footpath through the wood: which, at a certain point, was continued by the plank bridge over the woodland stream that rippled under shady branches on its way to the Sark. Having arrived thus far, the Owl blinked rather dubiously at the stream, before he rolled across the plank.

Friardale Water, generally low in the summer, was full to overflowing. The heavy rains on Wednesday had made a great difference.

The stream filled up and overflowed its banks. It even lapped a little over the heavy old plank that formed a bridge across. Billy Bunter did not quite like the look of it. The bridge was perfectly safe, as a matter of fact: still, if a fellow slipped on wet wood—! Such a fellow, on most summer days, would have slipped off into a foot of water and a foot of mud, and scrambled out again unharmed save for a muddy drenching. But on the present occasion, such a slip would probably have had much more serious results: for there was a depth of six or seven feet now, and the water was running almost like a mill-race.

Billy Bunter blinked at the stream, and almost wished that he had gone the long way round. He did not like the look of that rushing water and a wet plank at all.

But he really couldn't go round the long way, by Friardale village. The fat Owl finally made up his mind to risk it, and he rolled across the plank, treading in a very gingerly manner: and uttering a startled squeak as flowing water washed over his feet.

However, he rolled off the other end of the plank in safety: and then he would gladly have rolled on his way to Pegg, leaving the plank precisely as it was. But a bargain was a bargain: and still more to the point, a boot was a boot! Safe off the plank, he turned, and stopped, to grasp it and shift it, as he had undertaken to do, for Mr. Hacker's behoof.

It was a heavy plank: but, luckily—or perhaps unluckily—the flowing water dashing over it had loosened it, and Bunter was able to heave up the end. It was not much trouble, really: and after all, it was rather amusing—to Bunter—to think of the Acid Drop coming back, and finding that he could not get across.

It did not occur to Bunter's fat brain that, a considerable time having elapsed, Hacker might be already on his way back.

He had himself remarked that Hacker was no walker like Quelch. That made it all the more entertaining to give him a long walk round to get home!

But it also made it probable that Hacker's walk on the cliffs at Pegg might be brief, and that he might start back quite early.

Bunter did not think of that. It had not occurred to his fat brain that the late heavy rains might have made Friardale Water overflow: neither did it occur to that fat brain that Hacker might be already in the offing on his way back. Things did not occur to Bunter's fat brain very readily. And in fact, had he blinked up the footpath in the direction of Pegg, probably he would not have observed a lean figure coming along, in the shadow of leafy branches: his vision being limited, even with the aid of his big spectacles.

But in point of fact, a lean figure was in the offing: and, little as Billy Bunter guessed it, a pair of sharp suspicious eyes were on him, from a distance, as he stooped and heaved at the plank. The Acid Drop was unseen by Bunter, who had of course no eyes in the back of his fat head. But Bunter was in full view of the Acid Drop, as he panted and heaved at the plank.



A sudden grasp on the back of his collar.

Hacker gazed at a fat back as he came on.

For a moment or two, he did not understand what Bunter was at. Then he realized that that Remove boy was playing tricks with the plank bridge. Actually he was shifting the plank, thus making the stream impassable.

The look that came over Mr. Hacker's acid face was extremely expressive. Not only was this an insensate trick, likely to cause inconvenience to the public: but it would bar Hacker's own way home, giving him a long extra walk. Hacker was not, perhaps, particularly concerned about the public: but he was very much concerned about his own thin long legs, already tired. As soon as it dawned on him what that fat Remove junior was doing, Hacker hastened his strides, to come up with him and stop him in time. He was more eager to stop that insensate trick of Bunter's, than he had been to stop the shindy in the Remove passage at Greyfriars a few days ago. His long legs fairly whisked.

Splash!

He was just too late!

Bunter had the end of the plank up. He heaved it to one side, intending to detach it at the other end. But there was not sufficient beef in the fat Owl for such a heave as that. The other end of the plank still rested in its place: Bunter's end dropped into the water, splashed, and sank out of sight. The plank was left sloping down into the water from the opposite side of the stream, leaving quite a wide space unbridged.

The next moment Hacker reached him.

It was then that Billy Bunter had the surprise of his life. The splash of the dislodged plank was followed by a startled yell that woke most, if not all, of the echoes in Friardale Wood.

"Yarooooh!" yelled the startled fat Owl.

Hacker panted. "You young rascal!"

"Yow-ow! Leggo, you beast! Ow! Will you leggo!" yelled Bunter. He wriggled round in Hacker's grasp, and his eyes almost popped through his spectacles, as he saw who had so suddenly grasped him. "Oh! Oh, crikey! The—the—the Acid Drop! Oh, lor'!"

Shake! shake! shake!

Hacker came very near boxing Bunter's fat ears. However, he contented himself with shaking the fat Owl. It was a severe shaking, and the hapless Owl sagged and squeaked as he shook.

"Ow! Leggo! Wow! Oooogh! I say—ow! Stop shick-shack-shaking me, will you—ow! If you make my specs fall off—ow!"

"You young rascal!" repeated Hacker. "You have been playing tricks with the plank—"

"Oh! No! I never touched it!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I—wouldn't—wow!"

"I saw you—"

"Oh! I—I mean, I—I—I was—was—was—was—wow! Leggo my collar! You're chook-chook-chook-choking me!" gurgled Bunter. "I—I was only going to sake it mafe—I—I mean make it safe—wow!"

Shake! Shake! Shake!

"Urrrrrgggh!" gurgled the fat Owl. "Will you leggo? Urrrh!"

Mr. Hacker did not let go. A wide flowing stream lay before him, and he had to jump it at the risk of a ducking, or walk a long way round on bony legs that were already fatigued. Even a good-tempered man might have been annoyed. Hacker's temper, never sweet, was at its sourest. Instead of letting go, Hacker shook, and shook, till the fat Owl felt like a quivering jelly: and finally, resisting temptation no longer, he smacked a fat head—and apparently deriving consolation from that, smacked it again, and yet again. Wild and frantic yells from Billy Bunter accompanied the smacks.

Then Mr. Hacker, at last, let go—or rather, he threw Bunter away like a sack. The fat Owl stumbled and sat down: and roared:

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

Hacker stared at the rippling stream with glinting eyes. How was he going to get across? Plenty of Greyfriars fellows could have jumped it: but Hacker was even less of a jumper than a walker. He did not like the look of it at all. On the other hand, he liked still less the prospect of a long, long walk round by the road and the village. Having stared at the stream he stared round at Bunter: and he was so evidently meditating further smacks for the fat head, that the Owl of the Remove scrambled up in hot haste, and bolted.

The master of the Shell cast a black look after him, as he charged up the footpath, and disappeared in the direction of Pegg. He would gladly have smacked that fat head again.

However, Bunter's fat head was now out of his reach: and, after all, smacking it would not have solved his problem. Hacker turned back to the stream once more, and debated that problem in his mind—to jump or not to jump! He was still hesitating, when a Greyfriars junior came in sight from the direction of Friardale Lane: and Herbert Vernon-Smith stared at Mr. Hacker across the flowing water.

CHAPTER XVI

VERY UNEXPECTED!

"MAIS qu'est-ce-que-c'est?" snapped Monsieur Charpentier.

Extra School was going on the uneven tenor of its way, when a knock came at the door of No. 10 class-room. The door opened, and the chubby face of Trotter, the House page, looked in.

Mossoo was not enjoying Extra, any more than the detained juniors. He

had an unusual number of offenders in the detention class: and most of them were in rather an unruly mood. Dropping books and banging desk-lids accompanied French irregular verbs, and Mossoo's patience was wearing thin. So when Trotter looked in and interrupted, he snapped.

"If you please, sir—!" began Trotter.

"But vat is it, zen?" snapped Mossoo, "Mon Dieu! Ordair in ze class! Sherry, zat you shuffle not ze feet. Vy you drop vunce more zat book, you Todd? Field, zat you talk not viz Brown. Taisez-vous, donc! Vat is it, Trot-tair? Vy you come?"

"Mr. Quelch, sir, wishes to see Master Wharton and Master Vernon-Smith in his study, sir!" said Trotter.

"Phew!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Smithy's copped. Lucky you're here, Wharton."

Harry Wharton shrugged his shoulders.

Herbert Vernon-Smith was not present. The Bounder had "cut" Extra. Quite possibly Monsieur Charpentier might have failed to report that circumstance to Quelch, for he was a kind though irritable little gentleman, and disliked handing over offenders to strict justice. But Smithy, undoubtedly, was "copped", as Bob expressed it, now. Quelch had sent for him, and he certainly could not obey the summons, as he was not there.

"Wharton! Vernon-Smeet!" Monsieur Charpentier glanced over the class, "Ah, çç! Vernon-Smeet is not here. Wharton!"

"Yes, sir."

"Zat you go at vunce to Monsieur Quelch. Trottair, you vill tell Monsieur Quelch zat Vernon-Smeet is absent."

"Yes, sir!" said Trotter: and he departed.

Harry Wharton's face was set, as he rose to follow. Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, all glanced at him uneasily. Why his form-master had called him away from Extra, not one of the Co. could begin to guess: but after that little scene in the quad, they wondered whether it portended further trouble. That idea certainly was in Harry Wharton's mind, as his expression very plainly revealed.

Nugent caught at his sleeve.

"Harry, old chap!" he whispered. "You don't know what Quelch wants—! Wharton's lip curled.

"Not in the least," he answered, "Unless somebody's done something, and Quelch wants somebody to fasten it on, and I'm the happy man."

"That's rot," grunted Johnny Bull.

"Is it?"

"The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed Wharton," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"For goodness sake, don't check Quelch!" whispered Bob Cherry.

"Why not?"

"Isn't there enough trouble on hand already?" grunted Johnny.

"If Quelch wants more, I can't stop him."

"Look here—"

"Wharton!" yapped Mossoo, "I say zat you go at vunce to Monsieur Quelch. Ze ozzers, be silent! Taissez-vous! Go at vunce, Wharton."

"Very well, sir."

All eyes followed Harry Wharton, as he went to the door. Most fellows would have liked to be called out of Extra: though certainly not to Quelch's study. The Co. were left feeling very uneasy. Why Quelch wanted Vernon-Smith, they did not know, or care very much—though Tom Redwing certainly did. But they were concerned for their stubborn chum, who was answering Quelch's summons to his study in a mood very likely to make matters worse rather than better.

Wharton did not hurry on his way to Masters' Studies. He was in no mood to be particularly prompt at his form-master's orders. Like his friends, he wondered what Quelch wanted, with little doubt that it meant more trouble. One injustice was not enough: there was more to come! It was in a bitter frame of mind that he arrived, at last, at Mr. Quelch's study, tapped, and entered.

Mr. Quelch was standing by his table, with a paper in his hand. The expression on his face was not grim and unbending, as Wharton had expected to find it. He looked perturbed, and indeed distressed, and the junior looked at him in wonder. This was an unusual and unexpected Quelch. Something, evidently, had occurred that had disturbed the Remove master very deeply: but it did not look as if it spelled trouble for the junior who now stood before him.

"You sent for me, sir?" Wharton's tone was quite respectful.

"Yes, Wharton! I—I—" Quelch was almost stammering. Evidently he was very much disturbed, "I—I have something to say to you, Wharton—I—I—have to express my regret—my deep regret—"

Wharton could only stare.

What this implied, was a mystery to him. He had last seen Quelch in his hardest, grimmest mood. Something had changed him, somehow. To his amazement, he saw the colour flush into his form-master's cheeks.

Mr. Quelch coughed.

"A few days ago, Wharton, you were judged guilty of the disrespectful act of—of throwing a cricket-ball at Mr. Hacker."

"Oh!" breathed Wharton. He began to see light! Evidently, something must have occurred to enlighten his form-master on that subject. Had they, at last, found the right man?

"I had no choice but to act on the evidence, which appeared conclusive, Wharton. But—but—it now appears that it was the act of another Remove boy, who must have entered your study during your brief absence, as you told me—" Mr. Quelch paused.

Wharton did not speak.

But the angry, resentful, mutinous feelings in his heart were fading out fast. He had come there bitterly expecting one injustice to be piled on another. And he found his form-master deeply disturbed by the discovery that there had been a single act of injustice. He had been angry, and he had felt, like the prophet of old, that he did well to be angry. But now—! Now he was feeling more like kicking himself!

"I regret this, Wharton, very deeply! I regret that I was unable to accept your word when you told me you knew nothing of the affair. I cannot help feeling that I should have known you better!" said Mr. Quelch, in a low voice.

"Oh, no sir!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, impulsively, "It was my fault—if I'd stayed in the study, it couldn't have happened—I can't see how you could have believed anything but what you did, sir, in the circumstances. But I—I—I'm glad you know now that it was not I."

"There is no doubt about that now. Wharton, and your sentence of detention for the four half-holidays is of course, rescinded."

"Oh!" breathed Harry.

He felt his cheeks crimson. His sentence was washed out: he was free to go over to St. Jim's with the cricketers when Wednesday came. And he had been determined to go, in defiance of authority: flouting the master who, as he could now see, and as he realized he ought to have known, was only anxious to be just. Shame was a rather unaccustomed feeling for Harry Wharton: but at that moment, no fellow at Greyfriars School had ever felt so thoroughly and utterly ashamed of himself. His face burned as he stood silent.

"The matter is now clear," went on Mr. Quelch. "The boy responsible for the act has now confessed: and his punishment will not be light." Quelch's face set grimly, "This will be his last offence at this school. I understand from Trotter that he is absent from Monsieur Charpentier's class?"

Wharton gave a start.

"You—you don't mean Vernon-Smith, sir!" he exclaimed.

"Certainly I do."

"But—but—!" Wharton stammered. "It—it can't have been Smithy, sir—there's some mistake—Smithy would have owned up like a shot, sir, when it was put on me—he couldn't have kept mum—he wouldn't—"

"He has confessed, Wharton."

"Oh!" gasped Harry.

"You may see this note!" said Mr. Quelch. "I found it on my table when I came into my study a short while ago."

Harry Wharton stared blankly, as the Remove master held up the paper in his hand. He read, with amazed eyes, what Herbert Vernon-Smith had written there. He knew the Bounder's hand well enough. Smithy, after all, had owned up!

"Oh!" he gasped, again.

"Vernon-Smith has chosen to absent himself!" said Mr. Quelch, with a

glint in his eyes. "He will be dealt with immediately he returns to the school, and he will leave Greyfriars to-day. I sent for you, Wharton, to apprise you that the facts were now known and to express my regret for an involuntary act of injustice. You may now return to Monsieur Charpentier's class."

"Thank you, sir."

Wharton moved to the door. But he paused, and turned back.

"I—I—I'm sorry, sir!" he stammered, with crimson cheeks. "I—I—You know that I—I was thinking of—of kicking over the traces on Wednesday—for the cricket match—I—I—I—I can see now that my friends were right, and I was a fool—an obstinate fool—I—I'm sorry that I ever thought of any such thing, sir."

And without waiting for a rejoinder, he hurriedly left the study.

CHAPTER XVII

JUST LIKE SMITHY!

THE Bounder laughed.

Mr. Hacker, across the woodland stream, gave him a dark look.

Smithy was not in a laughing mood. He had tramped out of the school, after leaving that note for Quelch in the form-master's study, in the blackest temper ever. He had done the right thing—he had done what he knew he must do—but only too well he knew what the consequences would be. Only too well he knew what awaited him when he went back. He tramped on the footpath in Friardale with a black brow, sullen and savage. He remembered that he had been booked for Extra, and shrugged his shoulders as he remembered it. He was not likely to care about that, with the "sack" impending over him. Indeed, now that all was up, he was rather glad that one more mutinous act had been added to the tally: and, as Quelch would undoubtedly be waiting for him to come in, he was coolly determined to cut calling-over, and leave Quelch to wait! If he was going, he was going with his chin up, defiant to the last. But black and bitter as was his mood, he burst into a laugh at the sight of Mr. Hacker on the other side of the stream in the wood.

Billy Bunter, evidently, had carried out his fatuous plan. The plank, on Smithy's side of the stream sloped down into the water, far out of reach from the other side, where the fat Owl had tipped it in. Hacker, on the bank, was frowning, or rather scowling, and it gave the Bounder some sardonic amusement to watch him. The Acid Drop, at least in Smithy's opinion, was the cause of all the trouble that had now overwhelmed him, and Smithy would have been very pleased to see him attempt the jump, with a ducking for his reward.

Mr. Hacker's dark brow grew darker, as he looked across at Vernon-

Smith. His predicament was annoying enough, without a Remove junior laughing disrespectfully in his very face. His eyes glinted at Smithy. He would have been very glad, at that moment, to smack Smithy's head harder than he had smacked Bunter's.

"Vernon-Smith!" he rapped out.

"Hallo, old thing!" answered the Bounder: an answer that made the master of the Shell doubt his ears. "Stranded, what?"

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Hacker, "Vernon-Smith! How dare you answer me with such insolence?"

The Bounder laughed again. Certainly he would not, in ordinary circumstances, have addressed Hacker in that strain. But he had nothing to lose now. Hacker's anger was nothing to a fellow booked for the "sack."

"Oh, can it, Acid Drop!" he called back. "Save your breath for the jump!"

Mr. Hacker goggled at him. Knowing nothing of what Smithy had done, and wholly unaware of what awaited the Bounder on his return to the school, his breath was fairly taken away by Smithy's impertinence.

"Boy!" he gasped.

"Man!" answered Smithy.

"Are you out of your senses, Vernon-Smith?" gasped Mr. Hacker.

"Not at all, old bean! Are you out of yours?"

"Upon my word!"

"Jump it!" said the Bounder, encouragingly. "Or are you understudying the jolly old yokel in jolly old Horace, and waiting for the stream to run by?"

"You impertinent young rascal!" roared Mr. Hacker.

"You impertinent old rascal!" retorted the Bounder.

"What? what?" stuttered Mr. Hacker, "Vernon-Smith, I shall report this insolence to your form-master, immediately I return to the school."

"Oh, do!" drawled the Bounder. "Good old Acid Drop! Never happy unless you're reporting somebody for something, what? Well, go ahead and be happy. While you're chinning with Quelch, tell him, from me, that he's a pain in the neck, and that I'm as fed up with him as I am with you."

Mr. Hacker's eyes bulged at Vernon-Smith. He was too astonished to speak: he stared with bulging eyes.

Smithy laughed again: he found that absolutely flabbergasted expression on Mr. Hacker's face amusing. It was some consolation to him, in the present circumstances, to tell the Acid Drop what he thought of him: and he went on:

"Funk the jump, what? You're rather a poor fish, Hacker. Any man in the Remove could jump it! Go it—see what your spindle-shanks will do! I'll stand here and catch you by that long nose of yours, if you like—that long nose you're always poking into what doesn't concern you."

"Boy!" gurgled Mr. Hacker, "I shall report this, not to your form-master, but to your head-master! You shall be expelled for this insolence, Vernon-Smith."

"You old ass!" retorted the Bounder, contemptuously "do you think I should be talking to a beak like this, if I wasn't booked for the sack already? Quelch knows now that I knocked your mortar-board off your silly head the other day with a cricket-ball."

"Wha-a-a-t?"

"Sorry it didn't knock your silly head off, instead!" added the Bounder.

"That—that was Wharton—"

"I was I, you old ass, and I've owned up to Quelch, and I'm going back to Greyfriars to be sacked for it," jeered the Bounder. "You can tell Quelch that I may drop in about midnight—I'm in no hurry. If he's thinking of my catching a train home to-day, tell him to forget it. I'll go when I please, and Quelch can go and eat coke! Tell him that from me."

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Hacker.

He understood, at last, why the Bounder was addressing him in that



unexpected strain. The most outrageous recklessness cost Smithy nothing now.

"You will certainly be expelled, Vernon-Smith, if it was you—"

"No 'if' about it, Acid Drop! It was I, and Quelch knows now. Fancy the old bean's face, finding out that he's jumped on his precious Head Boy for nothing! Think he would go easy, after that?" sneered Smithy. "I fancy he's feeling like a jolly old tiger, waiting for me to drop into his claws! Well, he can wait! Tell him I may be home with the milk in the morning."

Mr. Hacker breathed hard.

"Vernon-Smith! The plank is on your side of the water—you could push it out, so that I can cross—"

"Likely!"

"I order you to do so!" bawled Mr. Hacker.

"Order away!" jeered the Bounder. "Why, you old ass, do you think I care two hoots for you and your orders? Pack it up, Hacker."

Hacker's eyes fairly flamed at him, across the whirling water. Herbert Vernon-Smith, undoubtedly, was booked for the "sack": but at that moment, Hacker yearned for something even more drastic—if only that mocking, insolent junior had been within reach—!

Hacker had been debating whether to risk a jump, or to resign himself to a long walk round. Now he made up his mind. Vernon-Smith was not going to get away with this unexampled insolence: neither was he going to remain out of gates so long as he chose—he was going to be walked back to Greyfriars with Hacker's bony hand on his collar. With set lips and glinting eyes Hacker backed from the bank, to take a little run for the jump.

"Go it!" called out the Bounder, mockingly. "Screwed up your courage to the sticking-point, Acid Drop? Mind you don't get wet."

Mr. Hacker made no reply to that. He came on at a run, and, reaching the bank, leaped across the water.

Vernon-Smith watched him, with a grinning face. He doubted very much whether Hacker would make it, without getting a ducking. Hacker was no athlete: and a leap that would have been more or less easy for Smithy, was far from easy for Hacker. It was a sheer satisfaction to Smithy to picture the master of the Shell splashing into the water and mud by the bank.

The next moment, he had that satisfaction.

Hacker came flying across the stream—and reached the bank, just! But he reached it too barely to make his footing good. For a split second, he strove to throw his balance forward—and failed! Another second, and he splashed back into the water, and his long legs shot up into the air.

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

Hacker, certainly, had a ducking: and a much more severe ducking than Smithy had anticipated. He disappeared under the flowing water, his legs for a moment in the air, and then they followed him. There was a wild and

frantic splashing in the middle of the stream: and the Bounder, watching from the bank, roared with laughter. Smithy was enjoying this.

Then, suddenly, his laughter ceased: as a white face showed above the water, for a moment, and then vanished again.

"Oh!" gasped Smithy.

For the first time, it flashed into his mind that Hacker was in danger. He had not thought of that, or dreamed of it. But the glimpse of that colourless face drove the colour from his own.

For a moment he stood transfixed, staring at the widening circles in the water where Hacker had gone down. It flashed into his mind that Hacker could not swim: and that he was out of his depth. The master of the Shell was utterly helpless in deep, rushing water.

A hand was thrown up—a white face glimmered again. The next second, the Bounder of Greyfriars had dived in. The rushing waters rushed him away, away towards the broad Sark in the distance—but his grasp was on Hacker, and that white face was above the water now: and Herbert Vernon-Smith, the teckless rebel, the hard case who was booked for the "sack", was fighting for two lives—that of the man he had mocked and derided, and his own!

CHAPTER XVIII

BOOKED!

"I SAY, you fellows!"
"Oh, blow away, Bunter."

"But I say—!"

"Br-rr-r-r!"

"Extra" was over: and the Remove fellows who had suffered for their sins were out at last, in the sunshine: as happy to have done with Mossoo, as Mossoo was to have done with them. But Harry Wharton and Co. were not looking their usual cheery selves. Certainly, it was good news, great news, that the captain of the Remove had been cleared: that the spot of trouble with his form-master was over: and that his wildly reckless programme for St. Jim's day had been washed out. That was a tremendous relief to his friends, and to Harry Wharton himself. But great as that relief was, it was rather dashed by the knowledge of what was coming to the culprit who had, at long last, done the right thing.

Smithy was out of gates, and had not come in. Few doubted, or could doubt, what was going to happen to him, when he did come in. It was the finish for Smithy: even Redwing could not hope that it was anything else. And it cast a shadow over five faces that were usually as bright and cheery as any at Greyfriars School.

Billy Bunter's fat face, also, was very glum, as he rolled in at the gates, and joined the group of juniors who were discussing Smithy. It appeared that the fat Owl, had not, after all, enjoyed that half-holiday: though he had been free of Extra, and Smithy's half-crowns had made it possible for him to view a delightful film with three or four murders in it, and take a taxi home from Pegg. Bunter did not look as if he had taken that taxi when he rolled in. He looked as if his little fat legs were almost dropping off.

But the Famous Five did not want to hear about Bunter's woes, whatever they were. They were concerned about Smithy, not at all about a fat Owl. They bade him blow away. Instead of doing so, Bunter leaned a fatigued plump back on an elm, and blinked at them dolorously through his big spectacles.

"I say, you fellows—!" he squeaked, plaintively.

"It's all up with him!" said Bob Cherry, ruthlessly regardless of fat squeaks, "It was jolly decent of him to own up: but that won't cut any ice. Quelch will walk him straight off to the Head when he comes in. It's tough on Smithy."

"Bound to," said Johnny Bull. "If Smithy had a chance, he's washed it out himself by keeping mum all this time, and making Quelch jump on the wrong man."

"Henry couldn't get over that!" said Bob, dismally.

"He couldn't!" said Nugent, shaking his head. "It's made him look rather an ass, too—beaks aren't supposed to nail the wrong man. And Quelch is such a whale on being just, and now—"

"Jolly old Aristides hadn't a thing on him, in that line!" sighed Bob, "and now he's got to chew on it that he's been unjust—and he won't be able to get it down."

"The esteemed Quelch will be terrifically infuriated!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, sadly.

"I say, you fellows—!" squeaked Bunter.

"And I've made matters worse," muttered Harry Wharton. "I—I ought to have toed the line, and taken it—and—and I didn't! I—I wish I had seen that a little sooner."

"Well, we told you so!" remarked Johnny Bull.

Harry Wharton made no reply to that. It was true enough: but he did not seem to derive much comfort from it.

"Well, you were rather a hot-headed ass—!" said Bob.

"Thanks!" said Harry, with a grimace.

"Well, you were, you know: but after all, you never did what Quelch nailed you for, and it was pretty tough to have to cut the St. Jim's match—for nothing. But after all the fuss Quelch will be grimmer than ever."

"The grimfulness will be preposterous."

"I say, you fellows, I wish you'd listen to a chap! I've had an awful time this afternoon!" said Bunter, pathetically.

"No murders in the film after all?" asked Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"I haven't been to the pictures!" said Bunter, dolorously. "That beast Hacker—that beastly Acid Drop, you know—"

"You fat ass!" said Bob. Have you been getting into a row with Hacker?"

"Well, it wasn't my fault!" said Bunter. "How was I to know that he would be coming along, just as I was shifting the plank?"

"You potty porpoise, did you shift the plank?"

"Didn't I tell Smithy I would?" yapped Bunter. "That was why he lent me the five bob—half-a-crown for the pictures, and half-a-crown for the taxi back. And—and he said he'd boot me if I didn't do it after all—I—I mean. I'm a fellow of my word, I hope! Well, just as I was shifting it, that beast Hacker came up—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And grabbed me by the back of the neck!" wailed Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The Famous Five were feeling serious enough over the misadventures of the Bounder. But the misadventures of the fat Owl seemed to afford a spot of comic relief.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" hooted Bunter, indignantly. "Hacker grabbed me by the back of the neck, just as the plank went in, and shook me—"

"Good!"

"And smacked my head—"

"Hard, I hope!"

"Beast! And then pitched a fellow over, just as if he was a sack of coke!" howled Bunter, "and when he found he couldn't get across Friardale Water, he was jolly well going to pitch into me again, only I bolted—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" said Bunter, bitterly. "I—I ran nearly all the way to Pegg. And—and when I got to the Regal, and was going in, I—I found I'd lost Smithy's half-crowns. They must have dropped out of my pocket when that beast Hacker was shaking me and pitching a fellow over!"

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

"And I couldn't go into the Regal, and I had to walk back!" moaned Bunter. "And I couldn't come back by the short cut, you know, as I'd tipped the plank into the water, and I had to go round by the village, and I can tell you, I'm awfully tired. Just tired out! And all you fellows can do is to cackle!"

"Serve you jolly well right!" remarked Johnny Bull. Which appeared to be all the sympathy he had to bestow on a weary and woeful Owl.

"Beast!" moaned Bunter. "My legs are nearly dropping off! Miles and miles, you know! Oh, lor'!"

"You thought it would be funny to make Hacker walk the long way round," grunted Johnny Bull, "Didn't you find it funny yourself?"

"Beast!"

"The long-walkfulness for the esteemed lazy Bunter is a boot on the other leg," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Seen anything of Smithy out of gates, Bunter?" asked Bob.

"Blow Smithy! I wish he hadn't lent me that five bob now!" mumbled Bunter. "I never got into the pictures, and I've walked miles and miles and miles and miles. Bother Smithy! I passed him in the lane coming back—"

"You passed him?" ejaculated Bob Cherry. All the Famous Five stared at Bunter. It was surprising news that Billy Bunter had "passed" anybody on the road. As a rule, he would have been unlikely to pass a tortoise, or even a snail.

"Eh! Yes! Just before I got in," said Bunter. "He was just crawling. Looked as if he was done in. I jolly soon left him behind. But I say, you fellows, what's that you're saying about Smithy? Is he in a row?"

"Sort of," said Bob. "He's owned up to buzzing that cricket ball at Hacker's nut last Wednesday—poor old Smithy!"

"Oh, crikey!" said Bunter. "Wasn't it you after all, Wharton?"

"No, ass!"

"Quelch jolly well thought it was—"

"He doesn't think so now, fathead, now that he knows it was Smithy, fathead."

"He, he, he!" Bunter chuckled. "I say, you fellows, Quelch will look an awful ass—getting the wrong pig by the ear, you know. He, he, he! I'll bet he's as mad as a hatter! He will take it out of Smithy. He, he, he!"

"Kick him!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here's Smithy!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. The Bounder appeared in the gateway. Tom Redwing, who was waiting there, joined him, and they came in together.

The Famous Five eyed Vernon-Smith curiously as he came. He looked, as Bunter had said, "done in". His face was a little pale, and weariness was written all over him: it was almost as if he could hardly drag one weary foot after the other. But he grinned sardonically as he met the eyes of the Famous Five.

"Anything happened out of gates, Smithy?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Yes."

"You look all in," said Bob.

"That's how I feel."

"I'm glad you've come in, Smithy," said Tom Redwing, in a low voice. "We all heard about it, old chap, after Extra—we know what you did—it was splendid, old chap—I—I knew you'd own up, in the long run.—"

"Can it!" grunted Smithy.

"You did the right thing, Smithy," said Nugent.

The Bounder's lip curled.

"So uncommon for me to do the right thing, what?" he sneered. "Thanks—

"I didn't say so——"

"You thought so!"

"It was jolly decent, Smithy," said Harry Wharton, quietly. "You've got me out of an awful scrape by owning up to Quelch."

"And got myself into one!" said the Bounder, savagely. "Think I don't know that I'm booked? Quelch would go easy with his precious Head Boy—good conduct and all that—think he will go easy with me? You couldn't take what was coming to you, could you? You had to get your back up, hadn't you? Well, I had to own up, after what Quelch said today, and I knew you'd carry on all the same—I couldn't let it go as far as that! I'd not have said a word, not a syllable, if you'd toed the line like any other fellow would have done. It was only detentions for you, and it was the sack for me! I'd have kept mum, but for your hoity-toity high-and-mightiness! Now you've got me sacked, and I wish you joy of it!"

With that, the Bounder slouched on, scowling, leaving Harry Wharton with a crimson face, and his friends uncomfortably silent. Tom Redwing went with him to the House. As they reached it, a grim face appeared in the doorway: and the sharpest of sharp voices rapped:

"Vernon-Smith!"

The Bounder stared sullenly at his form-master.

"Well?" he snapped.

Redwing pressed his arm, in distress. The Bounder was "booked": there was no doubt about that. But insolence to Quelch certainly could not improve matters, if there was still room for improvement.

Mr. Quelch's eyes glinted.

"So you have returned, Vernon-Smith—?"

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" sneered Smithy. "If you're interested, I was going to stay out of gates till midnight——"

"What?"

"In a hurry to get me bunked?" jeered the Bounder. "Well, I wasn't in a hurry. But I've come back, for my own reasons—something's happened that's tired me out, and I want a rest. That's why I've come in, just to suit myself."

"Where have you been?"

"Out."

"What have you been doing?"

"Making a fool of myself."

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips very hard.

"I have no doubt, Vernon-Smith, that this insolence is derived from your knowledge that this is your last day at Greyfriars," he said.

"What a brain!" jeered the Bounder.

"Eh?"

"You've hit it! Is that the lot."

"Smithy!" almost groaned Redwing.

The Bounder did not heed him. His eyes were fixed in sullen defiance upon Mr. Quelch's expressive countenance. The Remove master seemed at a loss for words, for some moments. He spoke at last.

"Go to your study, Vernon-Smith, and remain there until you are sent for!" he said, very quietly. "As soon as your head-master is at leisure to deal with you, I shall take you to him. Now go!"

The Bounder slouched sullenly in, with his anxious chum. Mr. Quelch's eyes followed him, glinting. And his look indicated very clearly, for all eyes to see, that if there had been a ghost of a chance for Smithy before, there was none now.

The Bounder's number was up!

CHAPTER XIX

HAPPY LANDING!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"
"The Acid Drop!"

"What's the matter with Hacker?"

"Looks pretty sick!"

"What the dickens—?"

"Hacker! My dear fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. It was the first time that Quelch had ever thus addressed the master of the Shell. He did not esteem Mr. Hacker. He disliked Hacker's interfering ways. Even in Common-Room they seldom met without a little sparring. But circumstances alter cases. Hacker, at the moment, looked so thoroughly and completely "sick", that all the kindness in Mr. Quelch was aroused. He was quite concerned.

A taxi had driven in and stopped at the House steps. From it emerged Mr. Hacker. Fifty pairs of eyes, at least, fastened on him: Harry Wharton and Co. and a crowd of other fellows, stared at him: Billy Bunter blinked at him with little round eyes almost popping through big round spectacles. Hacker certainly did not look as usual. His face was very pale, his eyes looked hollow, and he almost tottered as he stepped from the taxi. Quelch fairly whisked down the steps, and gave him an arm, upon which the master of the Shell leaned heavily. Few at Greyfriars liked Hacker: but every face was concerned now: even the taxi-driver gave him a commiserating glance before he drove away. Something, evidently, had happened to Hacker: he looked at the end of his tether.

"My dear fellow—!" repeated Mr. Quelch. "What—"

"My dear Hacker!" Mr. Prout rolled up. "What has happened? What—?"

"By gum!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Hacker's been through it! What on earth—"

"I say, you fellows, what—"

Hacker leaned his weight on Quelch's strong arm. He seemed utterly spent: unable even to mount the steps of the House. When he spoke, his voice was low: quite unlike the usual sharp, sardonic tones of the Acid Drop.

"Thank you, Quelch! Please lend me your aid for a few minutes—"

"Certainly, certainly. Has there been an accident—?"

"I have had a narrow escape from drowning, Quelch!"

"Bless my soul!"

Mr. Hacker shivered. His nerves were in a twitter from the recollection of what he had been through.

"A foolish boy moved the plank over Friardale Water, and I found it gone," said Mr. Hacker. "I jumped it, and—and—fell in."

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl was pushing forward, to see what was to be seen. Now he suddenly reversed, and backed away through the crowd. Bunter was not the fellow, as a rule, to elude the limelight, if any came his way. But he was very anxious not to come into it now!

"You fat chump!" hissed Johnny Bull into a fat ear.

Bunter did not reply to that. He backed out of the crowd and disappeared. It had seemed quite funny to Bunter to give Hacker a long walk round, or alternatively, a ducking if he tried to jump the stream in the wood. It did not seem funny to him now. Evidently that "ducking" had been much more serious than the fat and fatuous Owl had dreamed. Bunter, in haste, faded out of the picture.

"I was swept away by the water." Hacker shivered again. "I was quite helpless—I gave myself up for lost. Had not help been at hand, I should have been swept out into the Sark, and—and—" He did not finish.

"Bless my soul!" said Prout.

"Thank heaven that help was at hand," said Mr. Quelch. "It is a very solitary spot—it is very fortunate that someone was there—"

"A Remove boy," said Mr. Hacker. "He was there—"

"Oh! A boy of my form!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. Concerned as he was for Hacker, Quelch could not help a pleased note in his voice.

"Yes! He dived in for me, and—and after a long struggle, succeeded in helping me to the bank," said Mr. Hacker, faintly. "I was quite exhausted, and so indeed was Vernon-Smith—"

"Eh?"

"Vernon-Smith—"

"Did—did you say Vernon-Smith?" stuttered the Remove master.

"I did!"

"But—but—what—"

"It was with the greatest difficulty that he helped me to the doctor's house in the village," said Mr. Hacker. "I have been resting there, till I felt equal to coming back in a cab. It was a terrible experience, Quelch."

"I have no doubt that it was! But—but you said—Vernon-Smith—is it possible that it was Vernon-Smith—Bless my soul!"

"Good old Smithy!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"The goodness of the esteemed old Smithy is terrific!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Smithy!" muttered Harry Wharton, "Smithy, who buzzed that cricket-ball at his head, went into the water for him—"

"No wonder he looked all in," said Nugent. "And he hasn't said a word about it."

"It's like him, really," said Johnny Bull. "Good old Smithy!"

"I must speak to you about that boy, Quelch!" Mr. Hacker was going on. "He has admitted to me that it was he, and not Wharton, who was guilty of that outrageous action last Wednesday, when I was struck by a cricket ball—"

"He has confessed to me, Hacker." Mr. Quelch's expression was quite extraordinary. "I was about to take him to his head-master for judgment—"

"A brave lad!" boomed Mr. Prout. "A very brave lad! Surely, Quelch, in the circumstances—"

"I ask you, as a favour, Quelch, to allow that matter to pass," said Mr. Hacker. "The boy was disrespectful—insolent—I am very far from condoning his conduct, or thinking of doing so. But this afternoon, Quelch, he risked his life to save me—I ask you, sir, to pardon him, and to allow that matter to end here."

"My dear Hacker—"

"You will not refuse what I ask, Quelch?"

Mr. Quelch smiled.

"Most certainly not, Hacker! How could I do so? But now, pray let me help you into the House, my dear fellow—you must rest—"

With Quelch on one side, and the portly Prout on the other, Mr. Hacker was assisted into the House. The crowd in the quad were left in a buzz of excitement. Five fellows detached themselves from the buzzing crowd, cut into the House, and fairly raced up the staircase. There was news for Smithy—and they were eager to let him hear it.

The door of No. 4 Study in the Remove was shut. It flew open with a bang as Bob Cherry reached it.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob.

Herbert Vernon-Smith was leaning back in an armchair. Tom Redwing standing, with an anxious face, stared round as five Removites burst into the study rather like a hurricane. The Bounder scowled at them.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"We've come—!" panted Bob.

"I can see you've come! Now I want to see you go! Shut the door after you," snapped Smithy.

"Smithy, old man—!" muttered Redwing.

"Oh, pack it up!" snarled the Bounder. "I'm for it, and jaw won't help! Can't you fellows leave a fellow alone?"

"My esteemed and ridiculous Smithy—!"

"You see, old chap—"

"Hacker—"

"Quelch—"

"We've come to tell you—"

The Famous Five all spoke at once. Vernon-Smith interrupted them savagely, before they could get the news out.

"Get out of my study!"

"But we've just heard!" roared Bob. "Hacker's come in—"

"Blow Hacker!"

"He looked just washed out—"

"He would!" sneered the Bounder. "Weedy specimen."

"He's told Quelch how you went in for him, in Friardale Water, and saved him from drowning!" yelled Johnny Bull.

"Smithy!" Redwing jumped. "Did you? What—"

"Suppose I did!" snapped Vernon-Smith. "Think I could let the old ass drown under my eyes? I got him out. What about it?"

"Oh, Smithy—!" gasped Redwing.

"Oh, Smithy!" mimicked the Bounder. "Are you thinking that that will make any difference, you ass? Hacker's a badger, all bite. Think he's the man to put in a word for me? Don't be a goat."

Evidently the Bounder expected nothing of the Acid Drop!

"But he has!" roared Bob Cherry.

"Rot!"

"I tell you—!" yelled Frank Nugent.

"Rubbish!"

"Hacker's got his good points—!" said Harry Wharton, "and—"

"I'd like to see them!" jeered the Bounder. "I've never seen any sign of them, so far. Is that what you've rushed in to tell me, you fatheads? You could have saved yourselves the trouble. Now get out, and leave a fellow alone. I'm booked for the Head any minute now."

"But Hacker said—!"

"I don't want to hear what Hacker said. Give a fellow a rest."

"And Quelch said—"

"Bother Quelch!"

"Will you listen, you silly ass?" bawled Bob Cherry.

"No, I won't! Get out of my study."

"You've got to listen, Smithy," said Harry Wharton. "Hacker's not so tough as you think—"

"Rats!"

"He asked Quelch to let you off!" howled Bob.

"Oh, did he?" said the Bounder, scoffingly. "I can see Quelch doing it, after the way I talked to him!"

"He's done it!" shrieked Bob.

"Wha-a-a-t?"

"Hacker asked him, and he said yes, he would! It's all over! Now get that into your fat head, you ass!" roared Bob. "You're all right—right as rain!"

The Bounder sat bolt upright in the chair. He stared at the Famous Five, blankly. He seemed unable to believe what he heard. He had expected nothing of Mr. Hacker—nothing at all. And now—

"Oh, good!" Redwing's eyes danced. "Oh, jolly good! Of course Hacker would speak up for you, Smithy, after what you've done—"

"I never thought he would—"

"Well, he did," said Harry Wharton, "and you're through, Smithy—you're not going up to the Head—you're O.K. You'll be playing for Greyfriars next Wednesday at St. Jim's. Got it now?"

The Bounder whistled.

"Sure it's straight?" he asked. He seemed still to have a lingering doubt.

"Straight as a string!" chuckled Bob.

"The straightfulness is terrific, my esteemed idiotic Smithy!"

The Bounder laughed. He could laugh now.

"By gum!" he said. "The Acid Drop's not such a bad sort, after all. I wish you'd stopped me buzzing that cricket ball at his nut, Reddy. By gum! I know what I'm going to do—I'm going to beg his pardon for being such a cheeky ass, next time I see him. Good old Acid Drop!"

BILLY BUNTER was of opinion that the Bounder's happy landing was due entirely to him, William George Bunter, for his bright idea in shifting that plank. He had the further bright idea, that, in view of this, it was up to Smithy to cash a postal-order he had long been expecting. Nobody, however, seemed to understand that credit was due to Bunter—least of all Mr. Quelch, who rewarded his exploit with five hundred lines. Which the fat Owl dolorously scribbled, with many smears and many blots, on Wednesday, while the Remove eleven were playing cricket at St. Jim's: led by Harry Wharton, on the best of terms now with Smithy, who had at long last done the Right Thing.

THE END