



BESSIE BUNTER'S BIG BANG!



HILDA RICHARDS

I

“CLARA, dear—!”
“Hook it!”

That reply, from Miss Clara Trevlyn of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, could not have been called elegant. Such remarks were really not in the best traditions of the Cliff House Fourth.

But Clara was a little given to expressing herself slightly slangily. And she had no patience to waste on Bessie Bunter.

Bessie, as often happened, was superfluous.

Clara had arrived at the door of her study, No. 7 in the Fourth. She had a carefully-wrapped and tied parcel in her hand. That parcel attracted the attention of Bessie Bunter. Bessie rolled up, her little round eyes and big round spectacles, that were so like her Brother Billy's at Greyfriars, fastened on the parcel.

She addressed Clara in her most endearing tones. When a Fourth-form girl was taking a parcel to her study, close on tea-time, it was a moment for endearment.

Clara, it seemed, had no use for Bessie's endearments. Her reply was short and sharp.

"But I say—!" persisted Bessie.

"Buzz!" said Clara, still slangy and still impatient.

"If you're going to have tea early—"

"We're not."

"What have you got in that parcel, then?"

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

"I jolly well know it's tuck," said Bessie, with a reproachful blink. "You've been down to Friardale, and brought it back with you. I jolly well know it's something special, or you'd have got it at the school shop. I say, I'll come to tea if you like—!"

"It's nothing for tea! Now mizzle."

"Oh, really, Clara—"

"Travel!"

"Look here, I'll help you build the bonfire after tea," said Bessie. "You want it ready for to-morrow, the Fifth. You haven't got enough stuff for it, and I'll get some books from my study—Barbara and Mabel won't miss them—"

"You little fat fathead!" said Clara. "If you snoop any of Babs' or Mabs' books for the bonfire—"

"Well, I only want to help," said Bessie. "Miss Bellew's given us leave to have a bonfire on the Fifth of November, and we want a good one. A few grammars and dictionaries would help—"

"Run away and play!"

"Shall I come into your study and help you unpack that parcel?"

"No!" shrieked Clara. "Scram!"

And by way of inducing Elizabeth Bunter to "scram", Clara swung up the parcel by the string, and brandished it over the fattest head at Cliff House School. Bessie jumped back in alarm. She jumped rather too hastily, and stumbled. Then there was a heavy bump in the Fourth-form passage, as Bessie sat down.

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Miss Clara.

"Cat!" gasped Bessie.

Clara, laughing, went into No. 7 Study, and closed the door after her with a bang. Bessie Bunter clambered to her feet—not a rapid process, for she had almost as much weight to lift as her brother Billy. She gasped for breath as she resumed the perpendicular.

Then she stooped to the keyhole of No. 7.

"Cat!" howled Bessie, through the keyhole. "Think I want anything out of your measly parcel! Cat!"

And having thus expressed her feelings, Elizabeth Bunter rolled away to her own study, breathing indignation—with what little breath she had left!

II

MARJORIE HAZELDENE glanced up, as Clara came into No. 7 and banged the door. She was seated at the study table, with Dolly Jobling. Two heads were bent over a French exercise when Clara arrived.

It was very cosy and pleasant in No. 7 Study. Outside, the winter dusk was falling thickly: but within, all was cheery. A bright fire burned in the study grate, and it was warm and comfortable in spite of the November chill. Clara slammed the parcel down on the table, and Dolly Jobling jumped, and there was a spurt of ink from her pen, which did not improve the French exercise on which the two juniors were engaged.

"Oh!" ejaculated Dolly, "look what you've done, Clara!"

Clara looked: but did not seem impressed.

"That's all right," she said, "Mamselle never makes a fuss. Not like Bellew, with an eagle's eye for a blot."

"All the same—!" began Marjorie.

"Never mind all the same," interrupted Clara, briskly, "it's done now, and it doesn't matter anyway. I say, aren't you through yet? How long is it going to take you to push Dolly through that exercise, Marjorie?"

"Nearly through," said Marjorie. "There'll be time for a trot round the quad before tea, after Dolly's taken this in to Mamselle."

"I've got them!" announced Clara.

Miss Clara was, apparently, alluding to the contents of the parcel she had slammed on the table. There was triumphant note in her voice.

"That little noodle Bessie nobbled me as I came up," went on Clara. "She fancied there was tuck in that parcel! She would!"

"She would!" agreed Dolly, "and I wish there was, instead of what you've brought from Friardale, Clara."

"Rot!" said Clara.

She made a grimace at Marjorie, across the table. Marjorie's face was very grave.

"Do you wish it was tuck, instead of fireworks?" asked Clara, pettishly.

"Never mind about the tuck," said Marjorie, "but I wish you hadn't brought in fireworks, Clara, after what Miss Bellew said."

Sniff, from Clara.

"Who's Bellew?" she snapped.

"Well, she's our form-mistress," said Dolly Jobling, "and she's very strict about fireworks in the studies. She thinks they're dangerous things to have about in junior studies."

"Rubbish!" said Clara, decisively. She made another grimace at Marjorie. "Stop looking as serious as a judge on the bench, old dear—it spoils your good looks—such as they are!"

Marjorie smiled. But her face became grave again.

"It's too bad, Clara," she said. "Miss Bellew told us, quite distinctly, that we could have a bonfire in the School Field to-morrow, and buy our fireworks at the school shop any time on the Fifth. But she was very strict about getting them in beforehand, and keeping them in the studies. She would go off at the deep end if she knew."

"Well, she won't know, so that's all right," said Clara, cheerfully. "I've got a splendid lot at Friardale—much better than we could have got for the money at the school shop, to-morrow. Squibs, crackers, jumping-crackers, Roman candles, and catherine-wheels—something of everything in old Uncle Clegg's shop. Think they won't be safe in the study cupboard here?"

"Yes, of course. But—"

"But what, then?"

"Miss Bellew—!"

"Bother Miss Bellew!"

"Oh, Clara—!"

"Bless Miss Bellew! If I wasn't the most lady-like girl in the Fourth, I'd say blow Miss Bellew!"

Marjorie laughed.

"Well, it's done now," she said. "I wish you hadn't—there's such a thing as respecting the rules, Clara—"

"Bother the rules!"

"Yes, but—"

"Bless the rules!"

"My dear Clara—!"

"Blow the rules!"

Miss Clara, with her nose in the air marched across to the study cupboard, and deposited the parcel therein. Marjorie shook her head, and resumed work on the French exercise with Dolly. Clara's reckless disregard of rules, and of her form-mistress's strict injunctions on the subject of fireworks in the studies, worried her more thoughtful friend: but Clara, like an obstinate horse, had to be given her head: and that was that.

"Now buck up with that beastly French," said Clara, as she stood warming her hands before the crackling fire. "It's all right, Marge—Bellew won't know a thing. How could she! We're not going to let off crackers in the study, just to let her know we've got them here."

"But—!" said Marjorie.

"Blow butts!" interrupted Clara. "Get that putrid French done, and let's get out for a trot before tea. It will be lock-ups soon."

The French exercise was finished at last. Then the three girls left No. 7 Study, and went down.

III

“CATS!” murmured Bessie Bunter.

Bessie was in her study, No. 4. It was near tea time, but Barbara Redfern and Mabel Lynn, who had the pleasure—or otherwise—of sharing No. 4 with Miss Elizabeth Bunter, had not come up. It looked, to Bessie, as if they were going to tea in Hall: in which case there would be no tea in the study for Bessie: who was in the usual state of members of the Bunter tribe,—stony! So when Bessie, through the open doorway, had a view of three girls passing, she frowned a fat frown at them and murmured “Cats!”

Unconscious of Bessie, Marjorie and Clara and Dolly went down the stairs, to deliver that French exercise to Mademoiselle Lupin, and then take a “trot” in the quad before lock-ups, and call at the school shop for something for tea in No. 7. Bessie, quite unaware of that intention on their part, had no doubt that there was something for tea already in No. 7—lots, in fact! Had she not seen Clara carry in that parcel from Friardale, with her own eyes and her own spectacles? And what could it contain but tuck for tea?

“Cats!” repeated Bessie, morosely.

She was indignant.

With a parcel of good things from Uncle Clegg’s in their study, they might at least have asked a girl to tea, Bessie considered. They were “cats”: everyone who displeased Miss Bunter was a “cat”: indeed it might have been inferred from Bessie that Cliff House School was an almost wholly feline establishment.

Bessie rose from Barbara’s armchair, and blinked out of the study doorway. Marjorie and Co. had disappeared: and there was still no sign of Barbara and Mabel coming up. It looked as if Bessie, if she wanted any tea at all, would have to roll down the staircase and join the scramble in the hall.

Or would she?

There was a gleam in the little round eyes behind the big round spectacles. Marjorie and Co. were gone—and they certainly had not taken that parcel with them. It must be in the cupboard in No. 7. That study would be vacant, in their absence: and there was nobody about in the passage.

Bessie stepped out of No. 4.

Quietly, she walked up the passage to No. 7.

At the door of that study, she paused, to cast a stealthy and cautious blink round her. The coast was clear! Nobody was going to see Bessie Bunter going into No. 7—and the parcel was there, at Bessie’s mercy. And in matters of tuck, Bessie was merciless!

She rolled into No. 7, and shut the door after her.

She rolled across to the study cupboard.

“Good!” breathed Bessie, as she blinked in. Her eyes danced behind her spectacles. There was the parcel from Friardale.

There it was—just as she had seen it in Clara’s hand! They had not even

unwrapped it yet! There it was, wrapped in brown paper, tied with string. A fat hand reached into the cupboard.

In a moment, that parcel was transferred from the shelf in the cupboard, to the table before the fire. Bessie grabbed up a pair of scissors, and cut the string.

Her extensive mouth watered at the prospect of what she was going to find in that parcel from Uncle Clegg's. A cake, at least, and probably jam: very likely dough-nuts, possibly meringues: all sorts of good things, Bessie had no doubt. She almost gasped with anticipation as her fat hands pulled open the wrapping-paper.

And then—!

Then, as the poet has expressed it, a change came o'er the spirit of her dream!

She gazed into that parcel.

Her eyes almost popped through her spectacles at it.

"Cats!" hissed Bessie.

It was an overwhelming blow!

Not a single edible article met her eyes or spectacles. Not a cake—not a dough-nut—not a meringue—not a stick of toffee, a bar of chocolate, or even a bullseye! Crackers and squibs, Roman candles and catherine-wheels, were there in plenty! Absolutely nothing to eat!

Bessie Bunter could eat almost anything. But even Bessie Bunter could not eat crackers, or squibs, or Roman candles, or catherine-wheels. Her feelings, as she gazed at that stack of fireworks, were inexpressible.

"Cats!" gasped Bessie.

She glared at that parcel, with a glare that might almost have cracked her spectacles. All her trouble for nothing—and nothing to eat! Not so much as a plum or a crumb! It was altogether too disappointing and exasperating! In a spasm of wrath, Bessie raised a fat hand, and knocked that parcel whizzing off the table. Crash!

IV

FIZZZZZZZZZZZ!
"Oh!" gasped Bessie.

Fizzzzz!

She jumped.

It was, in fact, rather a reckless proceeding, to knock that parcel of fireworks off the table, with an angry smack, so near the fireplace. Bessie did not think before doing so—thinking, really, was not much in Bessie's line. Certainly she had no intention—did not even dream—of landing that parcel in the fire-place. She did it without intending to or dreaming of it!

Fizzzzzzzzzzz!

There was a shower of sparks. That parcel had landed fairly in the middle of a crackling fire. Flames were licking all round it.

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Bessie.

She made a step towards the grate, to drag the parcel out of the glowing fire before it was too late! But it was too late already!

Bang!

Fuses were fizzing! The first cracker went off with a bang. It was followed fast by others.

Bang! bang! bang!

"Oooooogh!" gasped Bessie.

She jumped back in haste.

Bang! bang! bang! bang! Bang! Whizzzzzz! Whoooosh! Bang! bang! Crackers were cracking, squibs were squibbing, Roman candles fizzing, catherine-wheels scattering sparks. Bang! bang! bang! BANG!

The study filled with smoke and the smell of gunpowder. A jumping-cracker leaped from the explosion in the fire, and landed at Bessie's feet with a bang. She jumped clear of the carpet. The cracker jumped as Bessie jumped, and banged again. Shrieking, Bessie Bunter fled from the study and the havoc



"Oooooogh!" gasped Bessie.

she had wrought. Bang! bang! bang! bang! followed her as she went. She slammed the door of No. 4 after her, and collapsed into Barbara Redfern's armchair, spluttering for breath, and hardly aware whether she was on her head or her heels. From along the passage came the merry sound of fireworks, echoing all over Cliff House.

Bang! bang! bang!

There were excited exclamations and hurrying footsteps. In a matter of minutes, Miss Bellew, form-mistress of the Fourth, and a crowd of girls, were staring into No. 7—reeking with smoke and smell, with crackers still cracking and squibs still squibbing, and a catherine-wheel fizzing in the middle of the room. The expression on Miss Bellew's speaking countenance resembled that of the fabled Gorgon.

"Fireworks in this study—against my express injunctions!" gasped Miss Bellew. "And they have exploded! Barbara!"

"Yes, Miss Bellew."

"Find Marjorie and Clara and Dorothy, and tell them to come to my study immediately."

"Yes, Miss Bellew."

Bang! bang! bang!

Miss Bellew stayed only to see the last spark extinguished, before she went down to deal with the delinquents in her study.

V

THERE was a bonfire in the School Field at Cliff House the following day, when all the junior girls were pleased to remember the Fifth of November, the gunpowder treason and plot! Under Miss Bellew's supervising eye, there were crackers and squibs and Roman candles and catherine-wheels. But there was one member of the Fourth Form who did not join in the celebration of Mr. Fawkes' anniversary. Clara Trevlyn had only a distant glimpse of dancing flame as she sat in the detention-room, writing out sadly and sorrowfully "Fireworks must not be taken into the studies" five hundred times: with detention for four half-holidays to follow.

How those fireworks had gone off, in No. 7, was a mystery to Clara. But they had—there was no doubt about that! They had gone off, with a terrific banging that had roused out every echo in Cliff House School. As Bessie Bunter did not think it judicious to enlighten her, it had to remain a mystery.

By the time she had written her five-hundredth line, no doubt it was fully impressed on Clara's volatile mind that junior studies were no place for explosives. And so long as her detentions lasted she was not the least little bit pleased to remember the Fifth of November!

THE END