

The DISAPPEARANCE OF BILLY BUNTER

BY
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CHAPTER I

TOO SEASONABLE!

“SEASONABLE, at least!” remarked Bob Cherry.

Bob always looked on the bright side of things.

His comrades did not seem to take quite so equable a view.

“Fathead!” remarked Harry Wharton.

“Well, snow at Christmas, you know—!” said Bob.

“Ass!” said Frank Nugent.

“What’s the odds, so long as you’re ‘appy?” inquired Bob.

“Br-r-r-r-r!” grunted Johnny Bull.

“The snowfulness is a little too terrific, my esteemed and idiotic Bob,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter, the sixth member of the party, did not speak.

He just groaned.

Bunter had more weight to carry than any member of the Famous Five. Likewise, he disliked exertion in any shape or form. A fellow who was twice as heavy, and thrice as lazy, as any other fellow, couldn’t possibly take a cheerful

view of a trudge through thick clinging snow. And the flakes were still falling fast. They were coming down in chunks, almost in loads. The Greyfriars juniors, snow-covered from head to foot, looked almost like spectres. Their feet sank into deep snow, and were hard to drag out again. If Bob Cherry was able to derive any comfort from the reflection that such weather was seasonable at Christmastide, he was the only fellow in the party who could.

"Jolly near home!" said Bob, encouragingly.

"Quarter of a mile to the school yet!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, lor'!" moaned Billy Bunter. A quarter of a rod, pole, or perch, would have been enough for Bunter.

"Blow it!" said Nugent.

"Bother it!" said Harry Wharton.

"Luck, really," persisted the cheerful Bob, "We don't get snow at Christmas as a rule, like they used to, or fancy they used to. It's really coming down this time. First time I've seen Friardale Wood looking really like a Christmas card."

"Oh, lor'!" repeated Bunter. "I say, you fellows, I just can't keep on! I've got to have a rest."

"Oh, buck up!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Beast!" moaned Bunter. "I tell you my legs are just bending under me."

"That's the tuck you scoffed at Cliff House," said Bob, "You shouldn't have had twenty-seven helpings of cake—"

"Yah! Why couldn't you fellows keep to the footpath?" yapped Bunter, "It wouldn't be so bad there."

"Quicker by the short cut," said Harry. "It saves nearly half the distance, fathead. Brace up."

Groan, from Bunter. He trudged on wearily. The Famous Five tramped as cheerfully as they could—which was not very cheerfully.

It was, in fact, a most unpleasant walk through Friardale Wood. It was a very pleasant wood for a ramble in summer. But on a December day, in the midst of a sudden blinding snow-storm, it was quite the reverse. Even Bob Cherry almost wished that they hadn't walked across from Greyfriars to Cliff House School that afternoon, for tea with Marjorie and Co there. Billy Bunter wished from the very bottom of his fat heart that he hadn't. It was true that there had been a very nice tea at Cliff House, that the supplies had been ample, and that Bunter had annexed the lion's share of them. But even that was not worth this awful tramp through a frosty tangled wood and thick-falling snow.

It had come on quite suddenly, as they were leaving Cliff House. There had

been only a few flakes earlier in the afternoon. Now they came down in earnest. Whether it would have been wiser to keep to the footpath, it was now too late to consider. The short cut through the wood saved distance. But it undoubtedly was hard and heavy going.

The Famous Five were tired. Bunter was almost crumpled up. But they had to keep on.

"Keep your eyes open, you chaps," said Bob Cherry, as he pushed aside a mass of frozen bracken, and trudged through, "There's that dashed old well somewhere about in these parts—we don't want to tumble into it."

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Bunter. "I—I say, old chap, I—I'll keep behind you. I—I don't want to fall into that well."

"It wouldn't matter if I did, what?" asked Bob, sarcastically.

"No! I—I mean, you keep in front of me—."

"Kick him!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

It was dusky under the frozen, snow-laden branches. Reminded of the old well in the wood, the Famous Five did not fail to keep their eyes open. In ancient days, when Greyfriars had been a monastery, there had been a monk's cell in the wood, where a recluse had told his beads in solitude. Hardly a brick remained of it: but the old well, from which the monk had drawn his supply of water, was still there, though chain and bucket had long vanished. Certainly it would have been a most unpleasant experience, to step over the crumbled edge and nose-dive into the depths of the old well.

"Silly idiots to come this way!" moaned Bunter, "If we'd kept to the footpath—."

"Pack it up!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

"It's somewhere about here," said Bob, as the party pushed into a wide clearing in the wood, "Mind your step! I remember it's just by those oaks,—why—what! Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob broke off with almost a shout of astonishment. Ahead of the juniors, within a dozen feet of the crumbling brick edge of the old well, a surprising object met their eyes. It was a large vehicle, thick with snow.

"Oh, my hat!"

"What—?"

"A caravan!"

"A caravan—here!" said Bob, almost dazedly, "Here in the middle of the wood! Must have wanted some shoving, to get it here!"

The juniors came to a halt, staring at the vehicle.

Undoubtedly it was a caravan: not a large one, but undoubtedly a caravan.

There was no sign of a horse, and no sign of a caravanner. But there was the caravan, looming up through the snow, its roof a sheet of white.

"Well, this beats Banagher, and then some!" said Bob Cherry, "Plenty of caravans roll around here in the summer—but just on Christmas—phew!"

"Chap must have a queer taste for weather, caravanning here in the middle of December," said Nugent.

"I say, you fellows," squeaked Bunter.

"Oh, come on!" said Johnny Bull.

"Put it on, Bunter."

Bully Bunter came to a halt.

Surprising as it was to see a caravan there, in the middle of a snowy wintry wood, the chums of the Greyfriars Remove saw no reason for delaying. After a surprised stare at it, they were ready to push on. But William George Bunter, it appeared, was not. Bunter remained planted.

"I say, you fellows, we can get shelter here," he squeaked "and a rest—I tell you I want a rest. Look here, let's ask that chap, whoever he is, to let us sit down in his caravan till the snow blows over."

"Looks as if nobody's there," answered Bob. "Push on!"

"Shan't!" hooted Bunter.

He rolled on towards the caravan. If there was a chance of sitting down, and resting his weary fat legs, the Owl of the Remove was not going to miss it. Certainly the caravan looked deserted and uninhabited. The door was closed, the window curtained: there was no sound from within, and not a whiff of smoke from the tin chimney. To whomsoever that caravan might belong, it looked as if the owner had left it there untenanted.

But Billy Bunter was not to be denied. He thumped on the door with a fat fist.

The Famous Five came to a halt again, and watched him. If there was, after all, a chance of getting under a roof, until the blizzard blew over, it was welcome. They did not want to be late for calling-over at Greyfriars: but Mr. Quelch would no doubt make allowances for the weather. So they rather hoped that the caravanner was at home, though it did not look like it.

Thump! thump! thump!

Bunter's thumps echoed through the van. But they did not draw any answer. Obviously, there was no one inside.

"Nothing doing!" said Bob, "Come on, fatty."

Billy Bunter did not come on. He grabbed the door-handle and turned it. If the door had opened, Bunter would have rolled in.



"I say, you fellows!" he howled

But it did not open. It was locked.

"Blow!" hissed Bunter.

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Johnny Bull, impatiently. "We shall be buried if we stand here much longer."

In the open glade, there was no protection from branches above. The snow was piling on the five juniors, turning them almost into pillars of white. Nobody was in the caravan, and there was no chance of shelter, and they were anxious to push on.

"Come on, fathead!" exclaimed Bob.

Billy Bunter gave the locked door a glare through his spectacles. Then he gave the Famous Five another glare.

"I'm not going on through this," he howled, "I'm going to sit in that van till the snow stops."

"You can't get in, ass."

"Can't I?" snorted Bunter, "I jolly well can."

"Through the keyhole?" asked Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows, one of you get a brick! There's lots over there by the well. We can bu'st in the lock."

"Wha-a-t!" exclaimed all the Famous Five, together.

"Easy enough," said Bunter, "Rotten cheap old van—looks as if it would fall to pieces if a fellow shoved it. You get a brick—!"

"You benighted bloater!" shrieked Bob, "do you think that you can damage a man's property like that?"

"Well, if he comes back and kicks up a row, we can pay for the damage," yapped Bunter. "I'll pay for it, if you're too jolly mean. One of you fellows can lend me the money, and I'll settle up out of my postal order. You get me a brick—!"

"Leave that van alone, and come on!" hooted Bob.

"Beast."

"I've had about enough of this," said Johnny Bull, "I'm going on." And he went.

"Come on, Bunter!" called out Harry Wharton.

"Shan't!"

"We're going—!" said Nugent.

"Beast!"

Johnny Bull had started. Four other fellows followed him. Billy Bunter blinked after them through his big spectacles, with a devastating blink. None of the Famous Five, certainly, had the remotest idea of forcing an entrance into the deserted caravan, welcome as its shelter would have been. Billy Bunter made one step to follow the five. A flurry of snow wallowed down on him, and he spluttered, and stopped.

"I say, you fellows!" he howled.

They were disappearing through the frosty trees, nothing doubting that Billy Bunter would follow. But Billy Bunter did not follow. His little fat legs were aching, and the snow was coming down almost in buckets-full. Bunter was going to shelter in that caravan.

He tramped across to the old well, where it was easy to detach a brick from the crumbled rim. Brick in hand, he rolled back to the van.

Bang!

One bang did it. It was, as Bunter had said, a cheap old caravan, far from

solid construction, and looked as if a few hard knocks would have knocked it to pieces. One hard knock, at all events, was enough for the lock on the door.

The door flew open.

Billy Bunter clambered in. Then he put his fat head out of the doorway, and yelled:

"I say, you fellows! I've got it open! It's all right!"

But answer there came none. Harry Wharton and Co. were out of hearing by that time. With their heads bent to the blizzard, tramping with weary feet, and still not doubting that Bunter was tagging on astern, they pushed on through Friardale Wood: and the fat Owl of the Remove was left on his lonely own.

CHAPTER II

BEASTLY FOR BUNTER!

BILLY BUNTER blinked round the interior of the little caravan. He took off his big spectacles, wiped the damp from them, replaced them on his fat little nose, and blinked round again.

"Beastly hole!" he grunted.

It was a case of any port in a storm: but assuredly the interior of the caravan was not attractive or inviting.

It was not only small and old and shabby. It was extremely untidy, and had no signs of comfort. Blankets on the floor indicated that somebody slept there, when the van was occupied. There was a rusty little stove, with a tin chimney projecting through the roof: but the ashes in it were cold. There were a folding chair and a small folding table, both folded up. There was a locker, which might have contained food or anything else: locked. Bunter noted that the lock on it was new and strong, very different from the old lock on the door that had yielded so easily to the application of a brick. A coil of strong thick rope lay in a corner—evidently a long rope, for the coil was large. Several strings of gipsy pegs hung from a hook. That looked as if it might be a gipsy van, and the owner's trade that of selling pegs at back-doors. If so, the stock-in-trade was very limited.

Bunter blinked round him and sniffed.

His quarters were very far from meeting with his approval. Still, what he wanted was rest for his weary fat legs, and shelter from the snow: and the caravan afforded both.

He set up the folding chair, and sat in it. It was a tremendous relief just to sit down. Billy Bunter never stood if he could sit: and now he was tired from a long tramp in heavy snow.

"Beasts!" was his next remark.

He realized that Harry Wharton and Co. had gone on and left him to it. Five more fellows would have been a crowd, not to say a cram, in the small interior of the van: but Bunter would have been glad of their company. He was not feeling quite easy about what might happen if the owner of the van returned while he was still there.

It was somewhat uncomfortable to think of a hefty gipsy coming along and finding the lock on his door broken, and a stranger sitting in his van. It was more than likely that such a person might cut up rusty. In such an event, Bunter would have preferred to be strong in numbers.

Still, such a person could be placated by an offer to pay for the damage. It would be a difficulty that Bunter was in his usual stony state, and couldn't produce cash on the spot. But he was prepared to make quite extensive promises.

Anyhow, he had to rest his fat legs, and he had to get out of the snow. It was cold and uncomfortable in the van, but it was better than the blizzard that was raging in from the sea, and bending every branch in Friardale Wood. Gipsy or no gipsy, Bunter was going to sit in that van till the snow-storm blew itself out. If the other fellows preferred to tramp on through blinding snow, they could—and be blowed to them!

He had managed to jam the door shut. That kept off the snow, and most of the wind. And he had a packet of toffee in a sticky pocket. He extracted it therefrom, and chewed, and felt better. There was comfort in toffee.

Billy Bunter was not much given to thinking: but he could not help wondering about that van, and why it was in such an unexpected place, and who and where the owner was.

The strings of pegs looked like gipsies: but why on earth should any gipsy take the trouble to push his van into the middle of a wood? Only a small van could have been pushed through the trees, and even then it must have been a difficult and troublesome matter, for in most places the trees were too thick for any vehicle to pass. And why was it camped so close to the old well, into which anyone might tumble after dark? Not for a water supply, for it was well known that the old well had been dry for centuries. It was all quite perplexing to Bunter.

Plop, plop, plop, came snow on the roof.

There was no sound or sign of the caravanner returning. Possibly he had

gone to the village of Friardale for supplies, and the snow-storm had kept him there. Bunter hoped that, if that was so, it would keep him a long time, till the storm was over, and a fat Owl well on his way homeward.

Plop! plop! plop!

Bunter finished the toffee, and grunted discontentedly. Would that beastly snow never stop?

Suddenly he gave a jump, as the door swung open.

For a moment, he thought it was the wind. But the door did not swing to again: and a heavy object was tossed into the van from without. It was a large bag, crammed with something: and as it landed, a tin of corned beef rolled out.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He started to his feet.

It was the returning caravanner: with a supply of food. The storm had not, after all, kept him at the village so long as Bunter had hoped that it would.

A face stared in at the open doorway.

There was an expression of angry astonishment on that face. Obviously, it was the caravanner: and no doubt he had been surprised, and not pleased, when he found the door of his van, which he had left locked, unfastened and opening at a touch. The further discovery that the lock was in pieces could not have improved his temper.

Billy Bunter's eyes almost popped through his spectacles at that angry face.

The man glared in at him.

He was a rather tall man, of strong build, with an overcoat turned up about his ears, and a bowler hat crowned with snow. His face was not pleasant, apart from its angry expression. He was not a gipsy, as Bunter could see with one blink. It was not after all a gipsy van. He had a sharp-featured face, sharp bright eyes of a light colour, and a hard mouth that looked like a vice. In the best of tempers he would not have looked attractive. Now, only too clearly, he was in the worst of tempers.

"Who are you?" he roared. "What are you doing in my van?"

"I—I—I—!" stammered Bunter, "I—I got in out of the—the—snow! I—I—I hope you don't mind."

Really, Bunter could hardly have hoped that the caravanner didn't mind! He looked as if he minded very much indeed.

"You've broken the lock on my door."

"I—I—I—it—it just came open," gasped Bunter, "I—I just gave it a—a tap, and it—it came open, you know—."

"You young rascal!"

"I—I—I'll pay for the lock!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I'll pay anything you like."

If the man with the sharp face had closed on that offer, matters would have been a little awkward for a "stony" Owl. But the caravanner did not heed it.

"You've broken into my van! I've a good mind to walk you off to the police-station and give you in charge."

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

It had not occurred to Billy Bunter's fat brain that that might be a possible outcome of forcing an entrance into a locked van. Now that it occurred to him, he goggled at the angry man in sheer terror.

"I—I—I say—!" he stuttered. "I—I haven't touched anything—I—I was only just sitting here, out of the snow—."

"Get out!"

Billy Bunter would have been only too pleased to get out. Thick snow underfoot, and more coming down, would not have deterred him, with that angry face and those beady sharp eyes glaring at him. But to get out he had to pass the man glaring in. He had a dreadful foreboding that something would happen to him then!

"I—I—I say—!" he mumbled. "I—I—Look here, I haven't done any harm—I—I was only just sitting in the van—."

"Are you coming out?"

"Oh! Yes! No! I—I—"

The tall man plunged headlong in. Billy Bunter gave a frantic yell as two strong hands grasped him.

"Ow! Leggo! Beast! Yarooooooh!"

Smack! smack! smack! smack! smack!

The caravanner had a large and heavy hand. It smote the hapless Owl of Greyfriars almost like a flail. It landed on his fat head, his plump ears, his podgy back, again and again and yet again.

Billy Bunter roared, and yelled, and wriggled, and struggled. But the angry man went on smacking and smacking, as if his sinewy arm would never tire. Smack! smack! smack! smack! smack!

In sheer desperation, Bunter hacked at the man's shins. He was in luck. The smacking suddenly ceased, as a shin was back-heeled. It was the caravanner's turn to yell. His grasp on Bunter relaxed: and that was enough for the terrified Owl. He shot out of the van like a fat pip from an orange.

"Oooooogh!" gasped Bunter, as he rolled headlong in snow.

But he rolled for only an instant. What would happen to him next, if that angry man, howling with the pain of a hacked shin, got hold of him again, did



He charged after Bunter

not bear thinking of. Bunter bounded up and ran. He heard an angry roar behind him, which spurred him on. Seldom or never, in his fat career, had Billy Bunter put on such speed. For once, if for once only, Billy Bunter looked as if he would have quite a good chance for the School 100-yards. An angry caravanner, standing on one leg, holding a painful shin, glared after him from the van, as he vanished into the snowy distance. For some moments, he rubbed that painful shin. Then he leaped from the van, and charged after Bunter, and the expression on his face as he charged was positively ferocious.

CHAPTER III

A SPOT OF TROUBLE!

“WHERE’S that fat ass?”
“The wherefulness is terrific.”

“Bother him!”

“Oh, come on!”

Harry Wharton had come to a halt. Reluctantly, the other members of the Co. did the same. They looked back through blinding snow-flakes.

They had emerged into Friardale Lane, at last, from the snowy wood. So far, they had not doubted that Billy Bunter was rolling on behind. Looking back, however, they could see no sign of him.

“He’s all right,” grunted Johnny Bull. “Can’t expect him to crawl faster than a snail. Does he ever?”

“Can’t see anything of him,” answered Harry.

“Can’t see anything at all, in this. Are we going to stand around like a lot of owls in the snow, waiting for Bunter?” snorted Johnny. “Fat lot of good, if he’s sitting in that van all the time.”

“It was locked—!”

“He was going to bu’st it with a brick.”

“Even Bunter wouldn’t be idiot enough—”

“Isn’t he idiot enough for anything?”

“Well, yes! But—”

“Oh, come on!” grunted Johnny. “Enjoying the weather, or what?”

Harry Wharton hesitated.

Certainly he was not enjoying the weather. He was as keen as the other fellows to get under a roof, and near the warmth of a fire. But if Billy Bunter was still trudging on wearily through the thick snow in the wood, he did not like the idea of leaving him to it.

Bunter undoubtedly, was an exasperating animal. With great artfulness, the fat Owl had fixed up a visit to his sister Bessie at Cliff House School, precisely at the time that the Famous Five were going over to tea with Marjorie and Co. At Cliff House his desire to see Bessie had evaporated, and he had somehow become a member of the tea-party. After which, he had been just one worry on the walk homeward. Every one of the five had been strongly disposed to boot him. Nevertheless, the captain of the Remove did not like the idea of leaving him on his own in the snow-storm.

"Let's wait a bit, under this tree!" said Harry, at last.

"Oh, let's!" said Johnny Bull, sarcastically. "It would amuse Bunter, sitting in that van, if he knew we were standing around here."

It was not a happy thought! Harry Wharton wondered whether even Bunter, ass as he was, could have carried out that bright idea of getting into the van with the aid of a brick. True, Billy Bunter was ass enough for anything. But that really was the limit, even for the obtuse Owl.

"He might be run in, if he did," said Nugent.

Snort from Johnny.

"Think he would think of that? Does he ever think?"

"The thankfulness of the esteemed Bunter is not terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh bother him!" said Bob Cherry. "Still, we'd better wait a bit. What's the odds so long as you're 'appy?"

"Br-r-r-r-r!" grunted Johnny.

Standing under a tree, it was windy, but not so snowy. The juniors hugged their overcoats closer, and stared back at the scarcely-marked path by which they had come. They had saved time by taking the short cut through the wood, but looked like losing it again waiting for Bunter. The weather was no doubt, seasonable, as Bob Cherry declared, but it was far from enjoyable. The most exasperating aspect of the matter was, that possibly Bunter had carried out his bright idea, and was sitting in the van all this while. That possibility made every member of the Famous Five just long to plant a foot on the plumpest trousers at Greyfriars.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, suddenly.

"That's somebody—!"

"Bunter, after all," admitted Johnny.

There was a sound in the wood of crashing thickets. Somebody, evidently, was coming, and coming at a run—a rapid run. It looked as if the lagging Owl had put on speed to overtake the party ahead.

Next came a sound of panting, gasping and spluttering. Finally, a fat figure, almost clothed in snow, burst into view, and charged down the slope from the wood into the lane. Undoubtedly, it was Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob.

"Bunter, you ass—!"

"Bunter, you fathead—!"

"Bunter, you blithering bloater—"

Billy Bunter came to a halt. He had been about to charge on frantically in the direction of Greyfriars. But the voices of the Famous Five called him to a halt, and he blinked round through his big spectacles.

"Oh! I say, you fellows!" he gasped. "I say, look out! He's after me."

"He! Who—?"

"That caravan beast—"

"What caravan beast, you howling ass?"

"He—he—he came back, and found me in the van!" gasped Bunter. "I hadn't been in it ten minutes, when the beast came. Oh, lor!"

"You fat villain!" roared Bob Cherry. "Did you burgle that van after all?"

"Oh, really Cherry—"

Evidently, Bunter had burgled the van!

"You unmitigated idiot!" said Harry Wharton, in measured tones. "Don't you know you could be run in for that?"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"So the man came back, and found you in his van, did he?" said Johnny Bull. "I hope he smacked your cheeky head."

"Oh, really, Bull—. Urrrrggh!" gasped Bunter. He tottered breathlessly against the tree. "I say, you fellows, look out! I heard him after me! He's a fierce-looking beast! Glared at me like a—a—a tiger! He seemed in an awful bad temper about something—"

"I wonder what!" said Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"You expected him to look pleased when he found his van burgled?" asked Frank Nugent.

"Oh, really, Nugent! I say, he smacked my head—"

"Good!" said Johnny Bull. "Hard, I hope."

"Beast! He kept on smacking my head," wailed Bunter. "And I hacked his shins and got away, and he's after me—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here comes somebody."

The thickets were rustling again. A tall figure rushed into view in the falling flakes—that of a man in an overcoat and a bowler hat. He came out into the lane with a rush.

The Famous Five stared at him. They could guess that this was the "caravan beast", as Bunter described him, who had found the fat Owl ensconced in his van, and had not been pleased thereby. Fast as he was running, he seemed to limp a little: doubtless the effect of Bunter's hack on his shin. In such circumstances, a spot of bad temper was not unexpected. But the savage expression on the man's face was quite startling.

He did not even look at the staring juniors. He saw Bunter, and rushed at him. There was a frantic yell from the fat Owl.

"Ow! I say, you fellows! Help! Keep him off! Yaroooooooooh!"

Smack! smack! smack!

For a moment, Harry Wharton and Co. stared on, blankly. Bunter, undoubtedly, deserved something, for what he had done. But this was altogether too much of a good thing.

"Stop that!" roared Bob Cherry.

Smack! smack! smack! The angry man paid no heed. Billy Bunter's frantic yells woke all the echoes.

"Stop him!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

And the Famous Five made a rush, all together, collared the angry man right and left, and dragged him away from Bunter by main force.

He staggered in their grasp, for a moment. The next, he was hitting out all round. In a matter of moments, every member of the party had captured a punch or two: and they were not gentle ones. Then the angry caravanner, dragged over by five pairs of hands, went spinning, and crashed headlong into the snow.

"Ow! ow! ow! wow!" roared Bunter.

Bob Cherry rubbed a nose that had a pain in it.

"Oh, gum, what a wild cat!" he gasped. "Give him jip, if he asks for any more!"

"What-ho!" said Johnny Bull.

"The jipfulness will be terrific," panted Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ow! wow! wow!"

"Shut up, Bunter!"

"Beast! Ow! ow! ow! wow!"

The sprawling man picked himself up out of the snow. The Famous Five drew together, in a bunch, between him and Bunter. He stood glaring at them, panting, with clenched fists.

"Come on, you hooligan!" said Johnny Bull. "We'll give you all you want, and a little more."

It looked, for a moment, as if the enraged man would rush at them, hitting



The angry caravanner . . . crashed headlong into the snow

out. But probably he realized that five sturdy fellows could handle him quite easily if he did: and that they were more than ready to do so. Finally, after a threatening glare, he turned away, and tramped back into the wood. The spot of trouble was over.

"Ow! ow! wow!" came from Bunter. "I say, you fellows—wow—wow!"

"You fat, frabjous, footling frump!" said Bob Cherry. "What did you damage the man's van for? Shouldn't wonder if he barges in at Greyfriars to complain about it!"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I say, you fellows, if he does, you stand by me, you know, and tell Quelch that I never touched his van—"

"What?" yelled Johnny Bull.

"I'd do as much for you fellows, of course," said Bunter. "I don't want Quelch down on me, if that beast makes out I damaged his rotten old caravan."

"Boot him!" said Bob.

"Yarooooh!"

Billy Bunter started for Greyfriars—at a run! Five fellows followed him, and dribbled him up Friardale Lane. Bunter had been feeling as if he hadn't a run left in his fat legs. Now, however, he found that he had—and it was quite a rapid run! He panted and gasped, he puffed and he blew: but he was still on the run when the school gates were reached.

CHAPTER IV

NO CHOCS FOR BUNTER!

"YOU will go on, Bunter."

"Oh, lor'!"

Mr. Quelch gave the fattest member of his form a very expressive look.

"What did you say, Bunter?" he rumbled.

"Oh! Nothing, sir!" stuttered Bunter.

"Go on at once."

It was the following morning, in the Remove form-room. Latin was the order of the day. Outside, Greyfriars was a sheet of white. Snow carpeted the ancient quad, clung to the old red roofs, and ridged the leafless elms. But fellows who were thinking of snowballing, or of the coming Christmas holidays, had to forget those attractive things, and concentrate on the stately language of Horace and of Cicero. Which they did, more or less: with the exception of William George Bunter.

BILLY BUNTER'S OWN

Bunter, never a whale on lessons, had a more important matter on his fat mind. Hidden under Bunter's jacket was a rather large flat box of chocolates. It was rather a tight fit, for the fat Owl filled his garments almost to bursting point. But he had crammed it there, when he had found it on the table in Vernon-Smith's study, just before class. The laws of "meum" and "tuum" were a dead letter to Billy Bunter, where foodstuffs were concerned—especially sticky foodstuffs. Smithy might have left his well-filled wallet on the study table, and Bunter would not have given it a second blink. But the fat Owl could not resist the lure of tuck. Somehow it always seemed to Bunter, that if there was tuck about, he was the fellow to devour it.

He had had no time to devour his prey before the bell went. So there it was, wedged rather uncomfortably against Bunter's fat ribs.

Bunter did not mind the discomfort. He would have endured quite a lot of discomfort, for a couple of pounds of expensive chocolates. His trouble was that he could not venture to taste a single one of those chocolates, under Quelch's gimlet-eye, in the form-room.

But could he not?

Harry Wharton was on "con", and Wharton's construe was always good, and Quelch was hearing it with satisfaction. No doubt for that reason, he was letting Wharton run on a little long. His attention seemed to be concentrated on his Head Boy, who was one of those not very numerous members of the Remove who saw something more than a grind in Virgil.

If Quelch continued to concentrate on Wharton, there was a chance for Bunter. A fat hand was already creeping stealthily under a jacket. Unless Quelch looked his way, it might be possible to extract a chocolate from the box, and convey it to a large mouth that watered at the prospect—just one to go on with.

But alas for Bunter!

All of a sudden, Quelch, perhaps realizing that he was giving too much attention to one of his best scholars, and too little to one of his worst, signed to Wharton to stop, and swivelled round on Bunter. Really, it was just like Quelch!

Bunter's fat hand was instantly whipped back from under his jacket. So far, so good! Quelch didn't know a thing! But Billy Bunter's fat mind had to switch back from chocolates to Latin.

Which was very awkward for Bunter, as he had not even looked at his prep the previous evening. His wild adventures in the snow-storm had tired the fat Owl. He had reposed comfortably in the armchair in No. 7 Study, while his study-mates, Todd and Dutton, worked at preparation. Not for the first time, he "chanced it" with Quelch in the morning!

So now, blinking at a page of Latin, the hapless fat Owl was completely at a loss. Prepared Latin was tough, for Bunter. Unprepared Latin was a deep and impenetrable mystery. He did not even know where Wharton had left off. A fellow couldn't think of two things at the same time: and Bunter had been thinking of Smithy's chocolates, not of Harry Wharton's construe.

The gimlet-eyes glinted at him.

"I have told you to go on, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I—I'm just going on, sir!" moaned Bunter. "I—I—I've lost the place for a—a—a minute, sir."

"You should not have lost the place, Bunter."

"Oh! No, sir! Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir."

"You have not been giving attention to the lesson, Bunter."

"Oh, yes, sir! I—I've been listening like—like anything, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I—I—I like Latin, sir—"

"Give Bunter the place, Vernon-Smith."

"Yes, sir."

The Bouncer leaned over, and pointed to a paragraph on the open page of Bunter's Virgil.

"Go on from 'O dea'," he said.

Bunter blinked at it. Then he stammered out the line.

"O dea, si prima repetens ab origine pergam—"

"Construe!" came a rap from Quelch.

"Oh, lor'!" breathed Bunter. He would have been glad enough to construe. But what that verse meant, if indeed it meant anything at all, was quite hidden from William George Bunter. But he had to make a shot at it.

"Oh, dear!" he began.

"WHAT!!" almost bawled Mr. Quelch.

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry, and there was a suppressed chuckle in the Remove. Bunter could always be relied upon for a "howler". This was one of his best.



Vernon-Smith leaned over

"Oh, dear!" repeated Bunter. If "O dea" didn't mean "Oh, dear!" Billy Bunter did not know what it did mean. It looked probable, to Bunter.

"O Goddess, you ass!" whispered Vernon-Smith, greatly daring. It required some nerve, to whisper under those gimlet-eyes.

"Vernon-Smith!" came a clap of thunder.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" stammered Smithy.

"Were you giving Bunter the translation, Vernon-Smith?"

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

"Take fifty lines, Vernon-Smith."

After that, Herbert Vernon-Smith sat silent. Bunter had no more help to expect from the Bounder.

However, he proceeded to make use of the help he had had. He did so in his own inimitable way.

"O Goddess, you ass!" resumed Bunter. As that was what Smithy had said, the ineffable Owl took it all for translation.

"Ha, ha ha!" came quite a howl from the Remove.

"Silence!" hooted Mr. Quelch. "Silence in the form! Bunter, how dare you say so ridiculous a thing!"

"Is—is—is'nt that right, sir?" stuttered Bunter.

"You utterly absurd and obtuse boy!" hooted the Remove master.

"Oh, lor'!" moaned Bunter. Evidently that translation of Virgil was not satisfactory. He gave Vernon-Smith an inimical blink. It was Smithy's fault. he had said just what Smithy had whispered to him!

"Bunter! You have not prepared this lesson!"

"Oh, yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I—I was slogging at prep like anything, sir, in the study. I wasn't sitting in the armchair all the time, sir. You can ask Todd, sir—he saw me sitting there, —I—I—I mean, he didn't saw me—I mean he didn't see me saw—I mean saw me see—I—I—I mean—." Bunter, under the glare of the gimlet-eye, was getting a little confused and mixed.

"You will write out the whole lesson after class, Bunter. You will remain in the form-room and do so. And—"

Mr. Quelch was interrupted. There was a sudden thud!

From under Bunter's jacket, as he stood, something slipped. It thudded on the form-room floor. Quelch's eyes, and most other eyes, turned on it. A large flat box of chocolates was revealed.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

He stopped to clutch up that box. But it was much too late. Gimlet-eyes were fixed on it. Vernon-Smith's eyes were fixed on it, too. The expression on Smithy's face was almost as alarming as that on Mr. Quelch's. At a glance, the Bounder recognized the magnificent box of chocs he had left on his study table.

"My chocs!" whispered Smithy to Tom Redwing. "My chocs! That fat villain's snooped them out of my study—"

"Bunter!" The thunder was rolling. "Bunter! Bring me that box at once."

"I—I—I—I—"

"At once!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

In the lowest of spirits, Billy Bunter picked up the box of chocolates, and rolled out before the form. Most of the Removites were grinning. Vernon-Smith was not grinning, however. Only the circumstance that they were in the form-room, under the form-master's eye, kept his foot from contact with Billy Bunter's tight trousers.

Mr. Quelch took the box of chocolates from Bunter's fat hand. Bunter could have groaned. Fat lot of use it was, snooping a box of chocolates from Smithy's study, only to hand it over to a beak. And that was not all. Now that Smithy had seen it, he had something to expect from Smithy after class. He had no doubt that it would be something painful.

"Bunter! You have been punished before, for bringing comestibles into the form-room!" rumbled Mr. Quelch. "Bunter, this box of chocolates will be confiscated. I shall take it to my study after this class. It will be returned to you, Bunter, at the end of the term. I shall now cane you, Bunter, for having brought it into the form-room during lessons."



... Only to hand it over to a beak



Dismally Bunter bent over

"I—I—I say, sir—!"

Mr. Quelch picked up the cane from his desk.

"You will bend over, Bunter!"

"Oh, crikey!"

Dismally, Billy Bunter bent over.

Swipe!

"Yarooooh!" roared Bunter.

"Go back to your place—"

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow—!"

"If you make another sound, Bunter, I shall cane you again."

Billy Bunter wriggled back to his place, contriving not to make another sound. He wriggled during the remainder of that class. When the Remove were dismissed, Herbert Vernon-Smith gave him an extremely significant look, as the juniors went out. That look was so significant, and so expressive, that Billy Bunter was almost glad that he had to remain in the form-room and write out the lesson.

CHAPTER V

CATCHING A TARTAR!

PLPOP!
"Oh!" gasped Mr. Quelch.

He could hardly believe it! A snowball, landing right in the middle of the severe and majestic features of a Greyfriars form-master, was very surprising.

It was also very unpleasant. It burst all over those severe majestic features causing Mr. Quelch to totter, and almost to sit down in Friardale Lane.

Quelch was taking a walk abroad after third school. The hard wintry weather did not deter Quelch. Generally, on his walks abroad, he had the company of some other member of the Staff. But Mr. Prout had shaken his head, Mr. Hacker had shrugged his shoulders, Mr. Capper had shivered at the idea. The weather was altogether too seasonable for them.

Quelch, hardily regardless of weather, walked briskly down Friardale Lane. The sky seemed to have exhausted its supply of snow, for none had fallen that day: but what had fallen the day before lay very thick, here and there cut into frozen ruts by cart-wheels. Quelch, when he walked out of the gates, had beheld Harry Wharton and Co. and a crowd of other fellows cheerily snowballing one another in the quadrangle. But he had never dreamed of a whizzing snowball coming in his own direction. Now it came.

As he tottered, spluttering, another came. This one caught him on the right ear, and spattered there.

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Quelch, again.

He rubbed snow from his face and his ear. Then he looked round, with a look that the fabled gorgon might have envied. He grasped the stout walking-stick he carried. His first impression was that some playful village urchin was snowballing him: and he was prepared to make that reckless youth realize that a Greyfriars form-master was not a proper target for snowballs.

But no such urchin met his gaze. Friardale Lane seemed untenanted, excepting for himself.

As he stared round, with glinting eyes, a third snowball came, tipping off his hat.

"Oh!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch, for the third time.

He clutched up his hat. Once more he glared round. This time he spotted a rather tall figure, and a grinning face, among the frosty trees by the lane, at the top of the little slope that led up from the road to the open wood.

It was not a playful village lad larking. It was a man in overcoat and bowler hat, at least thirty years old: quite old enough to know better than to snowball a schoolmaster on his walks abroad.

"Ruffian!" panted Quelch. He made rapid strides towards the snowballer. But for the steep slope between, ridged with snow, the walking-stick would probably have come into active play on the spot. As it was, Quelch came to a halt, and glared up at the man, who grinned down at him. The wrath in his face seemed to amuse the man in the bowler hat.

"Good shots, Quelch, what?" he remarked.

Quelch stared up at him harder. The young man, evidently, knew him, as he called him by name. The Remove master scanned a sharp-featured face, with sharp beady eyes, and a hard mouth. He realized that that face was familiar: he had seen it before, though he could not for the moment recall where and when.

"You impertinent rascal!" he exclaimed. "How dare you hurl snowballs at me?"

"I'd have chucked something harder, if there had been anything handy!" retorted the man in the wood. "I haven't forgotten you, Quelch, if you have forgotten me. It was you who got me six weeks in the stone jug, you rusty old gargoyle."

Quelch gave a little start.

"I remember you now," he snapped. "You are Dexter—"

"Right in one!" said the man in the bowler hat. "And glad to see you again, Quelch—in a pleasant lonely spot!" There was a threat in his voice and his look.

"Dexter!" repeated Mr. Quelch, knitting his brows. "I know you now—James Dexter, once house-porter at Greyfriars School. You committed a theft in my study, and escaped with a number of stolen banknotes. You hid in the old well in the wood to elude pursuit—I recall it all now. You would have escaped with your plunder, had not Inspector Grimes found a rope hanging down the well, and guessed what it meant. I remember—"

"And I had to climb up, and let him walk me off!" said Dexter, with a nod. "And they liked me so much, that they wouldn't part with me again under six weeks."

"You deserved every day of your imprisonment, and more!" snapped Mr. Quelch. "I wonder that you are not ashamed to show your face in a neighbourhood where you are known to be a thief."

"Bird of passage!" drawled Dexter. "Just passing through. While I'm around, I looked out for a chance to see you again."

"And why?" snapped Mr. Quelch.

The little beady eyes glittered at him.



The thing was altogether too undignified . . .

“Just to let you know how fondly I remember you for sending me to the stone jug!” said Dexter. “You’ve got it coming, Quelch!”

With that, he made a leap down the snowy slope, and came at the Remove master with brandished fists.

Mr. Quelch jumped back.

“Stand back, you scoundrel!” he panted.

Quelch was a tough gentleman for his age. He was lean, and he was wiry. He had unlimited courage, and a will of iron. But he was not prepared to enter into a bout of fisticuffs. The thing was altogether too undignified for a form-master of a public school. He backed away, hardly able to believe that the ex-house-porter would dare to assail him.

But he was soon undeceived on that point. As he backed, Dexter rushed, and a heavy fist caught Mr. Quelch on the chin, and a moment later, another landed on his nose. He staggered, and almost slipped over in the snow.

But one on the chin, and another on the nose, drove all reflections of dignity from Quelch’s mind. He did not back away further. He grasped his walking-stick hard, and it lashed through the air. It came down on Dexter’s bowler hat with a crash.

The hat crumpled under that hefty smite. The head under it did not escape. Dexter uttered a loud yell, and jumped back.

The next moment, he was coming on again, his sharp face ablaze with fury. The walking stick was up again, and it met him with another smite, that made his head ring. Again he jumped back, barely escaping a further smite.

He did not come on again. He was a powerful fellow, and had probably deemed a middle-aged schoolmaster an easy victim. It dawned on him now that he had caught a Tartar.

He stood panting with rage.

But Quelch, by this time, was rather like a tiger that had tasted blood. He had a pain in his nose, a pain in his chin. He had been driven to meet force with force, and, having started, he warmed to the work. He did not wait for Dexter to decide whether to renew the attack or not. He renewed it himself, coming on with brandished stick.

Crack! crack! Twice that stout walking-stick landed on the ex-house-porter of Greyfriars, and he yelled, and howled, and bounded to escape. Dexter was not thinking of paying off old scores now. He was only thinking of dodging Quelch's walking-stick.

It was not easy to dodge. Another and another swipe caught him, as he bounded, with all Quelch's beef in the swipes.

Then he fairly turned tail and fled, scrambling frantically up the bank into the wood from which he had emerged. Quelch, with glittering eyes, followed him up. The stout stick swiped on his back, and swiped again, before James Dexter was out of reach and fleeing, panting, among the frosty trees.

Quelch looked like following him into the wood, for a few more swipes. But he checked himself: no doubt remembering that such a chase would not be in accordance with the dignity of a form-master of Greyfriars. He cast a gorgon-



It came down . . . with a crash

like glare after his fleeing assailant: but the sharp-featured man, in the crumpled bowler, disappeared into the wood without further swipes.

"Pah!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

And he put the walking-stick under his arm, and resumed his walk. He was quite prepared to deal with James Dexter if he showed up again. But James Dexter did not show up again. James Dexter was in a caravan in a snowy glade in Friardale Wood, rubbing the many places where Quelch's stick had landed, every one of which had a distinct pain: and uttering a string of remarks that might almost have turned the snowy atmosphere blue!

CHAPTER VI

CALLED TO ACCOUNT!

"TWELVE-and-six!"

"Eh!"

"Twelve and six, please."

"Wharrer you mean—twelve and six?" yapped Billy Bunter.

"Exactly what I say," answered Herbert Vernon-Smith.

Billy Bunter blinked at him, through his big spectacles, in angry surprise. Some of the fellows in the Rag chuckled.

It was after class, and a crowd of Remove fellows were in the Rag. William George Bunter was ensconced in the most comfortable armchair, in the warmest spot by the fire, when the Bounder came in. He was in no mood for Smithy's little jokes, if Smithy was joking. Bunter was feeling rather morose that afternoon. A whop on his fat trousers, and a lesson to write out in the form-room, that morning, had not enlivened him. Still less had the loss of the box of chocolates, confiscated by Quelch, not to be handed back till the end of the term. Billy Bunter was thinking sadly and sorrowfully about those chocs.

But the Bounder did not seem to be joking. His face was quite serious, and he was holding out his hand, as if in expectation of cash from Bunter. Any such expectation was likely to be disappointed. Bunter was in his accustomed cash-less state. Even Bunter would not have snooped chocs from another fellow's study, had he possessed cash to purchase some. He blinked morosely at Smithy's extended hand, and grunted.

"Paying up?" asked Smithy.

"Wharrer you mean?" hooted Bunter. "I don't owe you anything. You're too jolly mean to lend a fellow a bob when he's been disappointed about a postal order."

"You owe me twelve-and-six for a box of chocolates."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. He grasped it now.

"Are you paying up?"

"Oh, really, Smithy—!"

"Either that, or you get it back from Quelch's study," said the Bounder. "Just as you please—and whichever you like. I'm going to boot you till you do one or the other. Take your choice."

Billy Bunter blinked at him in alarm. Evidently, Herbert Vernon-Smith was not joking! He meant every word he said. Bunter blinked at him, and blinked round at a crowd of grinning faces.

"I say, you fellows," he squeaked. "I never had Smithy's chocs. I had that box from Bunter Court. I never knew Smithy had any chocs. If there's any missing from his study, I don't know anything about it. How could I? I never saw them on his table just before class—I wasn't up in the studies at all, and I never had his chocs under my jacket when I came down—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" yapped Bunter. "Look here, Smithy, you ain't the only chap with a twelve-and-six box of chocs. I bought that box of chocs in Courtfield—"

"After it came from Bunter Court?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh! I—I mean, I bought it at Bunter Court—that is, I—I mean it came by post from Courtfield—I—I—I mean—"

"We know what you mean, old fat man," said Harry Wharton. "You had Smithy's chocs, you fat villain, and you ought to be booted."

"I never had them—Quelch had them!" hooted Bunter. "He's got them in his study now. Making out they're confiscated—I shouldn't wonder if he's going to scoff them himself!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You just shut up about your chocs, Smithy," said Bunter. "I had that box from Bunter Court, and I'll show you the letter that came with it, if you like."

"Okay!" said Smithy. "Show it up!"

Billy Bunter groped in his pocket.

"Oh! I—I think I left it up in my study!"

"Just where?" asked Peter Todd, grinning. "I'll cut up and fetch it, Bunter—we'd all like to see it."

"Oh! I—I mean, I—I dropped it—" stammered Bunter. "I—I remember now—I—I dropped it while I was cutting away from the caravan beast

yesterday. I—I can't show it to you, Smithy, as I dropped it in Friardale Wood—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Are you coughing up twelve-and-six?" asked Vernon-Smith.

"Beast! If you're going to be mean, I'll pay for the chocs, of course. I'm expecting a postal-order—"

"Get out of that armchair."

"Eh! What for?"

"I can't boot you while you're sitting down."

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"Are you getting up?" snapped Smithy.

"No!" yelled Bunter. "I jolly well ain't! I say, Bob, old chap, lend me twelve and six, will you? I'll settle up out of my postal order when it comes."

"Pleasure!" said Bob Cherry, cheerily. "I'll lend it you like a shot, Bunter—"

"Oh, good!"

"—if you can take it out of a threepenny bit, and give me the change!" added Bob.

"Beast! I say, Harry old chap—!"

"Forget it!" said Harry, old chap.

"Franky, old fellow—!"

"Bow-wow!" said Franky, old fellow.

"Inky, old pal—"

"The answer is in the esteemed negative," grinned Inky, old pal.

"I say, Mauly, will you lend me—?"

"I'll lend you a boot, you snoopin' octopus!" said Lord Mauleverer.

"Last time of asking, Bunter," said Herbert Vernon-Smith. "Are you going to pay for the chocs you snooped from my study?"

"When my postal order comes—"

"I shall be getting my old-age pension by that time! Now or never. Yes or no?" said the Bounder.

Billy Bunter blinked at him. He blinked round at the other fellows. Every fellow was grinning. Nobody, evidently, was going to lend Bunter twelve-and-six. If the Bounder booted him for his sins, there was no doubt that there would be general approval. Billy Bunter's tuck-snooping was, in fact, a little too much and a little too often. And a twelve-and-six box of chocolates was undoubtedly too much of a good thing—rather exceeding the limit—even for Bunter.

"I—I say, you fellows—!" stammered Bunter. "I—I—look here, you keep off, Smithy, you beast—"

"I want that box of chocs!" said Smithy. "It's in Quelch's study. If you can get it back, all right, I'm going to boot you till you do."

"How can I get it back from Quelch's study?" howled Bunter. "I—I say, he's going to hand it back at the end of the term. That ain't long now, Smithy! I—I'll let you have it then."

"I can see you doing it!" agreed the Bounder. "Tip him out of that chair, Reddy."

Redwing, laughing, tipped the armchair. There was a roar, as Billy Bunter rolled out of it.

Thud! The Bounder's foot landed on tight trousers, as he rolled. The Owl of the Remove bounded up.

"Ow! wow! Keep off, you beast! I say, you fellows, keep him off."

Thud! thud!

"Yaroooh! Beast! Leave off kicking me, will you?" raved Bunter. "I—I say, I—I'll get the chocs back from Quelch's study—I—I— Whooop!"

Thud! thud!

Billy Bunter raced for the door. After him rushed the Bounder, still booting. The fat Owl tore the door open and bounded into the passage.

"More to come, if you don't shell out that box of chocs!" called out Smithy, as the fat Owl raced down the passage.

"Beast!" floated back.

Billy Bunter disappeared round a corner. He left a crowd of fellows in the Rag laughing. But the hapless fat Owl was not feeling like laughing. The Bounder's foot had landed hard. And there was more to come! Somehow or other, the fat grub-raider of the Remove never expected to be called to account for his innumerable sins. But he was called to account now and the outlook was gloomy. No more frowsting in an armchair before the fire in the Rag, for Bunter, so long as Smithy was there. He had to steer very carefully clear of Smithy—unless and until he could restore the box of chocs pilfered from No. 4 Study! And that box was confiscated—in Quelch's study! Not for the first time in his fat career, Billy Bunter realized that the way of the transgressor was hard!



... After him rushed the Bounder, still booting

CHAPTER VII

MUTUAL SURPRISE!

MR. QUELCH sat in his study.

There was quite a cheery expression on his somewhat crusty countenance.

The day's work was done. The Remove were through with Quelch: and Quelch was through with the Remove. That was equally satisfactory on both sides.

Quelch had a spot of leisure now. He was employing it in a manner that would hardly have appealed to his form! Open before him on his study table was a volume of Horace's Odes. A mere glance at that entrancing volume was enough to bring a cheery look to Quelch's face. It would not have had the same effect on the Remove fellows!

Quelch's study was a very comfortable apartment. Outside, the snow night glisten on the window-sill, the frost on the window-panes, and the stormy winds might blow. But within, a crackling log fire burned in the open lights and shadows danced on the old walls of polished oak. Quelch's study was in the oldest part of Greyfriars, untouched by modern innovations. The old oak panelled walls were just as they had stood for centuries. No doubt the room was a little dusky. Billy Bunter had remarked, in the Remove, that he wondered why old Quelch didn't have his study brightened up with a nice bright wall-paper with pink roses and things on it. Quelch would have shuddered at the thought. The dark old oak glistening in the firelight was a delight to his eyes.

"Quo!" murmured Mr. Quelch, "or qua?"

He was looking at Ode II.III.

Few fellows at Greyfriars School would have cared a boiled bean, whether the third stanza of that ode began with "quo" or with "qua". But it was a matter of the deepest interest to Henry Samuel Quelch.

"Quo pinus ingens albaque populus—!" murmured Quelch. He paused. "Or qua?" he added, in deep thought. "Qua pinus ingens albaque populus!"

Really, it made quite a lot of difference—to Quelch! Authorities were somewhat divided on the subject! Quelch was sorting it out! Had old Quintus Horatius Flaccus, a couple of thousand years ago, written "quo" or had he written "qua"? Had he or hadn't he? The knotty point required deep thinking! Quelch was happily prepared to put in the deep thinking. Happy

occupations like this, in hours of leisure, made a schoolmaster's life really worth living!

Quelch's eyes were fixed earnestly on Horace. Quite near Horace, on the study table, lay a large flat box of chocolates. Quelch did not waste a glance on that. Bunter, certainly, wouldn't have wasted a glance on Horace! It was just a matter of taste!

"Dillenburger may have something on this!" murmured Quelch, pursuing his deep and happy train of thought. "I will see!"

He rose from his chair.

Dillenburger's edition of Horace, with Latin notes, was available. In a corner of the study was an alcove, and in that alcove there were book-shelves. Quelch stepped across to the alcove, selected a ponderous volume, and opened it.

He did not return to his seat at the table. He opened Dillenburger, and stood perusing Latin notes, the ponderous volume resting on the bookshelf. Absorbed in Dillenburger, and his sage remarks in Latin on the entrancing subject of the Odes, Quelch forgot time and space.

In the circumstances, it was quite natural that he neither heard, nor heeded, a light tap at his door. What was a light tap at a door, to a schoolmaster deep in Dillenburger?

The tap was not repeated. The door-handle turned softly, the door opened a few inches, and a pair of little round eyes blinked in through a pair of big round spectacles.

Quelch, his back to the door, his eyes earnestly on Dillenburger, remained quite unaware of it.

Billy Bunter blinked in cautiously. He had a view of the study table, with a box of chocs on it in company with Horace. But he had no view of Quelch, standing silent in the corner with Dillenburger. He was as unaware of Quelch, as Quelch was of him.

"The beast's gone!" Bunter breathed inaudibly.

He pushed the door a little farther open.

The fat Owl had been watching for a chance like this. He had to get the box of chocs back, for Smithy, or take the dire consequences. He had to penetrate into Quelch's study—when Quelch was not there, of course!—and collar that box of chocs and flee. Or else—!

Having tapped at the door, Bunter was prepared with an excuse, if Quelch was there. He was going to ask Quelch something about deponent verbs.

But as there came no reply to his tap, it was all right!

However, he was very cautious! He was not running unnecessary risks! A fellow who tried to walk off with a confiscated article from a master's study had to be cautious! He peered in through his big spectacles, and ascertained



"Bunter! what are you doing here?"

that the coast was clear. Nobody was in the room—nobody that Bunter could see, at all events! How was a fat Owl to guess that a form-master was standing in a corner alcove deep in Dillenburger?

He pushed the door wider.

Then he tiptoed in. He did not blink round him, being assured that Quelch was not there! His eyes, and his spectacles, were fixed on that box on the table: Smithy's chocs. He headed direct for the table, and stretched out a fat hand to seize the box.

It was at that moment that Quelch, failing to find enlightenment in Dillenburger on the knotty point of "quo" or "qua", turned to come back to his seat at the table.

Quelch gave quite a convulsive jump at the sight of Bunter. Up to that moment he had not dreamed that he was not the sole inhabitant of the study.

He stared blankly at a fat Owl with a fat hand outstretched.

"Boy!" he gasped.

"Oh, crikey!"

Bunter spun round, staring at him. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at Quelch. It was a mutual surprise.

"Bunter! What are you doing here?"

"Oh, crumbs! I—I ain't—"

"What?"

"I—I—I mean, I—I wasn't!" stuttered Bunter. "I—never—oh, lor'!"

"I did not hear you enter my study, Bunter! What are you doing here? What is the meaning of this?" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I—" Bunter tried to remember the excuse he had had ready, if Quelch happened to be there. "I—I—I came to—to—to—"

"To what?"

"To—to—to ask you about—about deponent chocolates, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I—I mean deponent verbs, sir! I—I didn't mean chocolates, sir—I—I meant verbs, sir—deponent verbs—"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch. "Bunter! Have you the audacity—have you the effrontery, to think—to think for one moment—of abstracting the box of chocolates I confiscated in the form-room this morning?"

"Oh! No, sir. I—I never thought of it, sir," groaned Bunter. "I—I got mixed up in deponent nouns, sir—"

"In what?"

"I—I—I mean verbs, and I—I came to ask you about it, sir! I—I'm awfully keen on deponent pronouns, sir—I mean verbs—"

Mr. Quelch crossed to his table. He picked up a cane therefrom: a proceeding that Billy Bunter eyed with well-founded apprehension.

He pointed, with the cane, to a chair.

"Bend over that chair, Bunter!"

"Oh, really, sir! I—I—"

"You came here to abstract that box of chocolates, Bunter! I am amazed at such audacity—astounded! I shall cane you severely, Bunter. Bend over that chair immediately."

"Oh, crikey!"

Whop! whop! whop!

"Whooooooooooooooooop!"

"Now leave my study, Bunter "

"Ow! wow! wow!"

Billy Bunter was only too glad to leave the study—though he had to leave Smithy's chocolates also. He wriggled out at the door and closed it. Mr. Quelch cast a frowning glance after him. Then he sat down, fixed his eyes on Horace, resumed his meditations on the subject of "quo" and "qua", and dismissed the incident from his mind.

It was not easy for Bunter to dismiss it!

It was a wriggling and mumbling Owl that limped away down the corridor. The suffering Owl rolled away to the Rag: then, remembering that Smithy might be there, he stopped, in the passage, where he expressed his feelings by further wriggling and mumbling.

While he was thus engaged, the door of the Rag opened, and Herbert Vernon-Smith came out. Bunter gave him an alarmed blink.

"Got those chocs?" asked the Bounder genially.

Bunter did not answer. He turned to flee.

Thud! thud!

Smithy's foot landed twice. The Bounder walked away laughing: leaving Billy Bunter wriggling still more emphatically—and not laughing!

"Oh, crikey!" groaned Bunter.

Evidently, there was a series of bootings in store, till he recovered that box of chocs. And how was he to recover it from Quelch's study? Sadly and sorrowfully the fat Owl pondered over that knotty problem—without finding a solution. Like his form-master, Bunter had a problem on his mind—but really, it was rather a more serious one than the alternative between "quo" and "qua!"

CHAPTER VIII

BOOT FOR BUNTER!

"YAROOOOOHH!"

That sudden roar woke most of the echoes in the Remove passage.

The Remove fellows were coming up to the studies for prep. Billy Bunter was rolling into No. 7, at his usual pace of a very old and very tired tortoise. But he accelerated suddenly, as a foot landed on his tight trousers, and he shot into the study almost like a bullet from a rifle.

Peter Todd and Tom Dutton were already in the study. They stared, as Bunter shot in, first at Bunter, then at Vernon-Smith, grinning in at the door.

From the passage came a sound of laughter. Smithy's methods with the grub-raider of the Remove seemed to evoke merriment.

"Yow—ow—ow—ow!" roared Bunter. He bumped into the table, clutched at it for support, and glared round through his big spectacles. "Who—what—wow! Beast!"

"Got those chocs yet?" inquired Smithy.

"Beast!"

"Look out after prep!" said the Bounder, and he walked away to his own study. Apparently, there was more to come, after prep.

"Ow! wow!" gasped Bunter. He blinked indignantly at Peter Todd. "Wharrer you sniggering at, Toddy, you beast? Wow! I—I say, Toddy, you stand by a chap! You could lick Smithy, old fellow! You stand by a fellow in your own study! You could lick that beast, and—and you've got tons of pluck—never saw such a plucky chap as you are, Toddy—"

"Thanks!" grinned Toddy.

"I mean it," said Bunter. "I mean every word, Toddy. I'm not just saying it because I want you to keep that beast off, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Toddy.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I say, old chap, will you jolly well pitch into that beast Smithy and keep him off!"

"Not at all!"

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"Time you learned not to snoop in the studies," said Peter. "No fellow's tuck is safe from you. Smithy can keep on with the good work as long as he likes."

"Yah!" snorted Bunter. "You couldn't lick him, anyhow, and you've no pluck—not an ounce. Yah! I say, Dutton."

Peter having been drawn blank, Bunter turned to his other study-mate. The deaf member of the Remove looked at him inquiringly.

"Eh? Did you speak, Bunter?" he asked.

"You deaf dummy!" breathed Bunter.



"Thanks," grinned Toddy

"Eh?"

"I say, old chap." Bunter put on steam. "I say, you could lick Smithy. I say, you give him a jolly good hiding, old chap."

Tom Dutton looked puzzled.

"Have you looked for it?" he asked.

"Eh? Looked for what?"

"Didn't you say somebody's been hiding your cap?"

"No!" yelled Bunter. "Give Smithy a hiding—"

"Rot!" said Dutton. "Smithy isn't hiding—why, I saw him at the door a minute ago! What do you mean?"

"Smithy makes out I had the chocs from his study," howled Bunter.

"Rubbish! No frocks in any study here," said Dutton. "Lots at Cliff House, I dare say. What do you mean about frocks?"

"Not frocks—chocs!" shrieked Bunter.

"Oh, socks! Well, I suppose there might be socks in Smithy's study, though I should think he'd keep them in the dorm. Nothing to do with you, if he has socks in his study, is it?"

"You deaf dummy—"

"Did you say rummy? Rummy, if he had socks in his study, I suppose. Did you say rummy or gummy? I don't suppose his socks are gummy."

"Smithy's after me!" Bunter fairly roared. "He makes out I had his chocs, and he's after me. Will you keep him off?"

"No need to shout at me," said Dutton. "I can hear you all right, when you don't mumble. No, I won't keep him off. The more he boots you the better, till you learn to leave a fellow's tuck alone."

"Beast!" hooted Bunter.

"Not much of a feast, as Quelch took them away from you," said Dutton. "You'd better get them back for Smithy, if you don't want him to go on booting you till we break up for Christmas. Now shut up—prep!"

Evidently, there was no help for Bunter in his own study! Neither Toddy nor Dutton was going to interpose between him and the Bounder's boot.

Billy Bunter did not give much attention to prep that evening. Really, after his experience in the form-room in the morning, it would have behoved him to do. But he was too worried about what was going to happen after prep.

When prep was over, and Toddy and Dutton went down to the Rag, the fat Owl lingered in the study. He had a misgiving that Smithy might be waiting for him in the passage.

He blinked at Skinner, as that member of the Remove passed the open door.

"I say, Skinner, old chap, is Smithy about?" he squeaked.

Skinner chuckled.

"Waiting at the end of the passage," he answered.

"Oh, crikey!"

Skinner went on his way, laughing. But it was not a laughing matter for the unhappy Owl. Billy Bunter did not often repent of his sins: but now he did wish from the bottom of his fat heart that he had not touched that box of chocs in Smithy's study—especially as Quelch had it! He had to suffer for tuck-raiding, without having devoured the tuck: which really was rough luck on a fat tuck-hunter.

Even his study was not a safe refuge. Smithy might get tired of waiting for him, and come up the passage.

The fat Owl peered out. There stood Smithy, at a distance, at the landing end, talking, in a group with Skinner, Bolsover major, Kipps, and Ogilvy. They all glanced towards the fat face and big spectacles peering out of No. 7, and grinned.

Billy Bunter emerged from the study. He did not go down the passage towards the group at the landing end. He went up the passage to No. 13 Study. Bob Cherry and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, Mark Linley and little Wun Lung, were all there, and they all grinned at Bunter.

"I say, Bob, old chap!" squeaked Bunter. "I say, what do you think Smithy has been saying about you?"

"Eh! What?" asked Bob.

"He says you're a long-legged clumsy ass, with no more brains than a bunny rabbit," said Bunter. "I—I heard him—"

"Does he?" grinned Bob.

"Yes, old chap! I say, you could lick Smithy! I say, I'd jolly well lick a chap who said I was a long-legged, clumsy ass—!"

"So I will!" said Bob. "I'll smack his head, at any rate."

"Oh, good!" gasped Bunter. "I say—yaroooh—whooop—wharrer you smacking my head for—yaroooooop!"

Smack! smack!

"Yow—ow—ow! Gerraway!" yelled Bunter.

Smack!

Billy Bunter revolved rapidly on his axis, and bolted out of No. 13. A yell of laughter followed him as he bolted.

He bolted into Herbert Vernon-Smith, who was coming up the passage. The Bounder caught him by a fat neck, and twirled him round.

Thud! thud! thud!

"Yoo—hoooooop!" roared Bunter.

Smithy landed three good ones before the hapless fat Owl escaped.

Billy Bunter did not show up in the Rag that evening. Smithy was there: and he had had more than enough from Smithy. Often had Bunter been booted for his transgression: it was no new experience: but he had never grown to like it! Emphatically, he did not want any more. It was quite an awful thought that it was going on, and on, and on, until he restored that wretched box of chocolates now reposing in Quelch's study.

Wingate of the Sixth saw lights out for the Remove in their dormitory that night. So long as the captain of Greyfriars was there, Bunter was safe. But when he had put out the light, and departed—!

The fat Owl quaked in his bed.

There was a sound of someone getting up! It was dark in the dormitory, and Bunter could not see who it was. But he could guess.

"Chuck it, Smithy!" came Harry Wharton's voice. "Don't kick up a row in the dorm."

"I'm not going to kick up a row! I fancy Bunter may! Wait till I get a boot on, Bunter. I'm going to boot you up and down the dorm."

"I—I—I say, Smithy! Bunter sat up in bed. "I—I—I'm going to get that box of chocs from Quelch's study! I—I—I am, really! I—I 'll go down and get it after he's gone to bed!"

It was a desperate resolution. But the fat Owl was driven to it. It was risky—but it was better than being booted up and down the dorm!

The Bounder chuckled.

"Okay," he said. "It will be safe at midnight. Don't go to sleep!"

"I—I might nod off, you know—"

"I'll wake you up, if you do!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

It was a respite, at all events. Smithy went back to bed, without booting the fat Owl up and down the dormitory. Bunter laid a fat head on his pillow. He was going to sleep: and he could only hope that Smithy would do the same, and would not wake up till rising-bell. But it was a faint hope!

CHAPTER IX

AT MIDNIGHT!

BOOM!

The last stroke of midnight died away, on the December wind.

Billy Bunter did not hear it! Billy Bunter was fast asleep. His melodious

snore woke echoes in the Remove dormitory. He was dreaming—happy dreams of Christmas, of turkeys and Christmas pudding, of mince pies and Christmas cake. He had forgotten his woes in slumber.

He was suddenly reminded of them. He started into sudden wakefulness, as his bedclothes were stripped off, and a cold draught impinged upon his fat limbs.

“Oooooooooogh!” gasped Bunter.

He sat up, blinking in the dark. A glimmer of wintry stars came in at the high windows. It revealed a shadowy form by his bed.

“Time!” said the Bounder’s voice.

“Oh, lor’!” gasped Bunter. He remembered. “I—I—I say, Smithy, it ain’t time yet—I—I’ve only just closed my eyes. Gimme my bedclothes.”

“Are you getting out?”

“No, I ain’t!” howled Bunter. “It’s too jolly cold! You lemme alone, Smithy! I say, you fellows, you make that beast lemme alone.”

There was stirring in almost every bed in the long row. Remove fellows sat up and peered in the dark.

“Chuck that row!” came a growl from Johnny Bull. “Can’t you let fellows sleep?”

“Pack it up, Smithy,” said Bob Cherry. “Enough’s as good as a feast, you know. Let that fat frowster go to sleep.”

“Draw it mild, Smithy!” came from Frank Nugent.

“Yaas, chuck it, Smithy,” said Lord Mauleverer. “Bunter’s had enough to go on with.”

“The enoughfulness is terrific, my esteemed Smithy!” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “The chuckfulness is the proper caper.”

Several other voices chimed in. The Bounder heeded none of them. There was the sound of a loud smack, and a yell from Bunter.

The fat Owl rolled out of bed.

“I say, you fellows—!” howled Bunter.



“Time!” said the Bounder’s voice

"Look here, Smithy, chuck it!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "That fat ass will get into a row, if he goes nosing downstairs in the middle of the night. There's a limit."

"Think so?" sneered the Bounder.

"Yes, I do!" snapped Harry Wharton. "Let the fat chump alone."

"Well, you can think what you like!" said Vernon-Smith, in the same sneering tone. "I seem to remember that once when Bunter grub-raided in your study, you fixed up a Form trial, and he was sent to Coventry! Perhaps my study doesn't matter so much as yours, and perhaps my chocs don't matter so much as your doughnuts. Not that I care two hoots about the chocs, as you all know: but I'm going to stop Bunter snooping in my study."

"That's all right!" said Bob. "But—"

"If I'd told Quelch the chocs were mine, he'd have handed them back to me, and Bunter would have been up for pilfering. Well, I'm not going to give even that snooping octopus away to the beaks. But he's going to get that box of chocs back. Get your clobber on, Bunter."

"I—I—I'll get it back to-morrow, Smithy—"

"You'll go down for it now."

"Shan't!" hooted Bunter.

"You will!" said Smithy. "I'm going to kick you out of the dorm, anyhow. You can get your trousers on first if you like. Better—it's pretty parky on the stairs."

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

"Let the fat ass off, Smithy!" murmured Tom Redwing.

"Rats!"

"But look here, old chap—"

"Rot! Are you getting into your bags, Bunter?"

"Oh, lor'!" moaned Bunter. The Bounder came round the bed: and Bunter made a hurried dive for his ample trousers.

There was a murmur along the row of beds. It was true that Billy Bunter was an unscrupulous raider of other fellow's tuck: that he needed a lesson on the subject, and that Smithy's process of booting him till he recaptured the confiscated chocs had caused only amusement so far. But there was, as the captain of the Remove had said, a limit: and most of the juniors were of the opinion that Smithy was exceeding it.

That made no difference at all to Smithy: or rather, it only made him more stubborn. He was going on his own way, regardless. That box of chocs was in Quelch's study downstairs. Bunter was going to get it back: and in the daytime he could not make the venture. He was going to make it now, while

Quelch was asleep in bed. It was, in fact, his own offer: and the Bounder was grimly holding him to it.

In the lowest of spirits, Billy Bunter plunged into his clothes. He had to go: and certainly he did not want to creep along dark passages and staircases on a December night in his pyjamas.

He dressed himself dismally in the glimmer of wintry stars from the high windows. The Bounder stood waiting, impatiently.

The fat Owl had to make up his mind to it. After all, it was not a very difficult enterprise. Nobody would be up at midnight: there was no danger of being spotted by beak or prefect. Five minutes would be enough for the fat Owl to creep down to Quelch's study: and grab the box of chocolates from the table: five more to creep back to the Remove dormitory. And while most of the juniors felt that Smithy was being a little too tough, really there was no valid reason why Bunter shouldn't undertake the task of recovering the lost property. Undoubtedly it would be a warning to him to remember the distinction between "mine" and "thine" in matters of tuck.

Having wriggled into his clothes, and jammed his big spectacles on his fat little nose, Billy Bunter bestowed a devastating blink on the Bounder, and moved slowly and unwillingly to the door.

At the door he paused, after opening it. A long, cold, dark, draughty passage did not seem to tempt him forth.

"I—I say, Smithy—!" he burred.

"Get going, you fat freak."

"I say, old chap, I—I—I never had your chocs—I—I had that box from Bunter Court, as I've told you, but—but I—I'll pay for them if you like. There!"

"Cash down!" jeered the Bounder.

"I'm expecting a postal order—yaroooh! Leave off kicking me, you beast," yelled Bunter, dodging a lunging foot. "You kick me again, you beast, and I'll jolly well—whoooooop!"

Bunter dodged out of the doorway.

Herbert Vernon-Smith closed the door after him, and went back to bed. He was prepared to turn out again, if Bunter came back without the chocs. But the door remained closed, and there was no sound of Bunter returning.

Most of the Removites laid their heads on their pillows, and went to sleep again. But some remained awake, waiting for Bunter's return. Any fellow but Bunter might have been back in five minutes. Ten seemed enough for even the slow-moving fat Owl. But when ten minutes had elapsed, there was no sound of an opening door—and minute followed minute, and still the fat Owl did not return.

The half-hour chimed through the December night. By that time, only a few fellows were still awake.

"Where has that fat ass got to, I wonder!" murmured Bob Cherry, drowsily.

"Can't have been spotted—if a beak spotted him, he would walk him back," said Harry Wharton.

There was a chuckle from Skinner's bed.

"Bunter won't be back in a hurry," he said.

"Why not?" asked Bob.

"I'll bet he's scoffing the chocs."

"Oh! Of course!" exclaimed Bob. "You'll get the box back, Smithy—but there won't be a lot in it."

"Boot for him, then!" growled the Bounder. "I suppose that's it! Well, he can take his time—I'm going to sleep."

"Same here!" yawned Bob.

One by one, the few wakeful ones dropped off into slumber. It was only too probable that Bunter, with a box of expensive chocolates in his fat hands, would linger to sample them. That, indeed, seemed to be the only explanation of his prolonged absence.

Slumber reigned in the Remove dormitory. But the snore of Billy Bunter was not added to the regular breathing of other sleepers. No one was awakened by the fat Owl's return. And the Remove fellows, sleeping the sound sleep of healthy youth, remained in complete ignorance of the fact that one bed in the dormitory continued untenanted: and that Billy Bunter did not return at all.

CHAPTER X

TWO IN THE DARK!

"OH, lor'!" murmured Billy Bunter, dismally.

He blinked round the dormitory landing through his big spectacles. Wintry glimmers came in at windows, but it was dark and shadowy. The House was very still and silent. The fat Owl shivered.

Silence and solitude and dark shadows made Bunter feel very uneasy. The fact that several masters' rooms opened on that landing added to his uneasiness. If Quelch should wake up—!

He crept like a dispirited snail across the landing to the stairs. He groped his way down by the banisters, and reached the study landing below.

Farther on was the big staircase to the ground floor: a well of darkness. Bunter blinked into that darkness and hesitated.

But he had to go through with it. Slowly, reluctantly, he crept down the big staircase, blinking uneasily into shadows. Slowly, very slowly, he groped through the gloom to the Masters' Studies. Slow as his movements were, hardly more than five minutes had elapsed, when he arrived at the door of Quelch's study.

He pushed that door open.

There was no danger of Quelch now. Quelch was asleep in his room above: and if he was dreaming, it was probably of Horace, or Dillenburger's notes on Horace: certainly not of a fat member of his form and a confiscated box of chocolates.

The interior of the study was very dark. But Bunter knew his way about there, and he groped to the table, and groped over it for the box of chocs.

His groping hand contacted something, and knocked it over. There was a gurgling sound in the dark.

"Oooogh!" breathed Bunter.

He knew that it was an inkpot, from the sound of gurgling ink as it flowed out. Quite probably it was flowing over Quelch's papers on the table. However, that was Quelch's worry, not Bunter's. He groped and groped again, and papers rustled, and a book fell to the floor—probably Horace. But his fat paw did not contact that box of chocolates.

"Beast!" hissed Bunter.

He had taken it for granted that the box would be on the table where he had seen it last. Apparently he had taken too much for granted.

Perhaps his earlier essay to recover the box had caused Quelch to put it away somewhere. Or perhaps he had simply moved it out of his way. Anyhow, nothing like a box of chocolates met Bunter's groping fat fingers.



Bunter groping his way by the banisters

Billy Bunter breathed hard and deep.

He was strongly tempted to give up the quest, and return to the dormitory. But he knew what awaited him there if he returned minus the box of chocs. He had to find that box.

He dared not switch on the light. He groped in his pocket for a match-box, and struck a match.

The flickering flame revealed that the box he sought was not on the table. Where was it? Where had that beast Quelch put it?

No doubt it was still in the study: but where? On a shelf, perhaps or in a cupboard—it might be almost anywhere.

“Beast!” mumbled Bunter, again. He hardly knew whether he was referring to Quelch or to Smithy! Everybody who caused Bunter a spot of bother was naturally, beastly. Indeed, it often seemed to Bunter that it was a beastly world altogether, himself the only really fine fellow in it!

He struck another match, and blinked into a table-drawer. There he found papers and nothing more. Another match, and another blink into a cupboard, revealed bottles of ink, blotting-paper, and such things. Six or seven matches flickered and died out, while he blinked round anxiously into various corners. Finally he rolled across to the alcove, where there were bookshelves, and where Quelch had been standing that afternoon consulting Dillenburger when a fat Owl had surreptitiously crept in.

Once more he struck a match, and held it up, and blinked over the bookshelves. Then he gave a gasp of relief.

“Oh, good!” gasped Bunter.

There it was—at last, a large flat box of chocolates, adorned with gold lettering: pushed in on top of a row of books.

Bunter stretched out a fat paw and grabbed it.

Smithy's property was in his hands now: and all he had to do, was to roll out of the study, and return to the Remove dormitory with it: and all would be over: that worry on his fat mind gone for good. But he paused.

Owing to his haste before class that morning, and Quelch in the form-room afterwards, Bunter had not tasted a single one of the rich fat chocs in Smithy's box.

The box was in his fat hands now: the chocs were at his mercy. It was not in flesh and blood to resist that temptation—not in Bunter's flesh and blood, anyway. He simply had to have one, at least—perhaps more than one—perhaps half a dozen. Smithy would hardly miss a few: and even if he did, it was worth the risk. Anyhow, there were the chocs, and Bunter's extensive mouth watered for them.

“Wow!” howled Bunter, suddenly.

In his deep interest in the chocs, he had forgotten the match. It had burned down to a fat finger and thumb.

There was light thud, as the box of chocolates dropped to the floor. The burnt match dropped with it. Bunter forgot even chocs, for the moment, as he sucked frantically at a fat finger.

For a long minute, the fat Owl stood there, sucking that burnt finger, just as Quelch had stood there consulting Dillenburger.

However, the pain abated: and he stooped to grope for the fallen box of chocs. But even as he stooped, there was a sound in the study, that made him start upright again, in sudden alarm.

He blinked round in terror.

Someone was in the room!

His first thought was that it was Quelch, and that his form-master had come down and caught him. But the next moment he knew that it wouldn't be that, for Quelch, of course, would have switched on the light.

Who was it?

Thoughts of burglars flooded into his fat mind. Or was it Smithy, coming down after him, or somebody else!

He stood quite still, hardly daring to breathe, peering into the darkness through his big spectacles.

A sudden gleam of light came. A flash-lamp had been turned on. Dimly Bunter made out a tall figure behind the light. It was as tall as Quelch—but obviously it couldn't be Quelch!

His fat heart almost died within him. Rooted to the floor, he stared through his spectacles.

The light of the flash-lamp moved in a circle, as the man, whoever he was, scanned his surroundings. Moving round slowly, it was only a matter of moments before it would reach Bunter, standing by the book-alcove. Who was this man—what was he—what was he doing there? Bunter, paralysed, could only stare. Something familiar in the tall figure struck him—and then, suddenly he glimpsed the face.

He knew that face!

He knew the small, sharp, light eyes: the hard set mouth, the sharp foxy features, under a battered bowler hat. It was the man of the caravan—the man who had smacked his head for entering the van, who had chased him in Friardale Wood. Bunter had almost forgotten his existence! He was terrifyingly reminded of it now.

A moment more, and the circling light fell on Bunter's fat, staring, frightened face.

The man gave a violent start. It was from motives of caution that he was

circling the light round the room, certainly not in the expectation of seeing anyone there. That fat face, staring in terror from the book-alcove, came as a startling surprise to him.

For a second, he was amazed. Then the threatening look that came over the sharp face scared Bunter out of his fat wits.

"You!" muttered the tall man. Evidently he recognized Bunter, at a glance, as Bunter had recognized him. His beady eyes blazed, and he made a swift stride towards the fat junior.

Billy Bunter opened his mouth for a yell. He did not care if Quelch caught him in his study, now: indeed, the sight of Quelch coming in would have been the gladdest sight he could have beheld. But he had no time to utter that yell. Strong hands grasped him, and a hand was clapped over his mouth. What happened next Billy Bunter did not know, for at that moment he fainted away from sheer terror.



He made a single stride towards Billy Bunter

CHAPTER XI

MISSING!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

"What—?"

"Where's Bunter?"

"Bunter! Isn't he in bed?"

"Look!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The rising-bell was ringing, in the frosty morning. Bob Cherry, out of bed first, as usual, in the Remove, was the first to notice that a bed was empty. He stared at Bunter's vacant bed: and his startled exclamation drew glances at it from up and down the dormitory.

Fellows who had been fast asleep had, naturally, forgotten about Bunter. So far as they had thought of him at all, when they nodded off into slumber, they had taken it for granted that he would come back to bed—as why should he not? But evidently, he hadn't! His bed was vacant, just as he had left it at midnight: he had not returned.

Vernon-Smith knitted his brows as he stared at Bunter's unoccupied bed. He, like the rest, had gone to sleep and forgotten Bunter.

"The fat fool!" muttered Smithy. "What does he fancy he's up to—staying out of the dorm all night?"

"Can't be scoffing those chocs all this time," remarked Skinner.

"He hasn't come back!" said Harry Wharton, in wonder. "Why on earth—"

"Copped out of the dorm!" suggested Nugent.

"Quelch would have walked him back, if he'd copped him out of the dorm!" said Johnny Bull, shaking his head. "Tain't that!"

"Then why—?"

"The whyfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton caught his breath, as an alarming idea occurred to him.

"Could he have taken a tumble in the dark, and—and—?"

"Rot!" interrupted the Bounder, angrily. "Even that fat idiot can walk downstairs without taking a tumble. Don't be a fool."

Vernon-Smith was looking, and feeling, uneasy. He was utterly taken aback by Bunter's inexplicable absence. He had been "tough" with Bunter, and he was satisfied that he had been no "tougher" than the fat Owl deserved.

At the moment, however, he wished that he had not been quite so tough.

"Something's happened to him!" said Squiff.

"Rubbish!" snarled Smithy.

"Well, where is he, then?" asked Tom Brown.

"I don't know, and don't care."

"Can't make it out," said Bob Cherry, slowly. "If Bunter tumbled over in the dark, on the stairs, somebody would have heard him. Whatever happened, he would have been marched back here. He can't be in Quelch's study all this while, that's a cert."

"Unless he's gone to sleep in Quelch's armchair, and hasn't woke up yet!" grinned Skinner.

"Oh, don't be an ass," snapped Bob.

The Bounder laughed. He was uneasy: and Skinner's suggestion, absurd as it was, came as rather a relief to him. Certainly, "tough" as he had been, he would have been sorry if anything serious had happened to Bunter.

"Shouldn't wonder," he said. "I can just see him, sitting down in the armchair to scoff my chocs, and falling asleep there."



"I can see hi'n . . . and sleeping"

"Bosh!" said Johnny Bull. "Even Bunter—!"

"I—I suppose it's barely possible," said Harry Wharton, slowly. "If it's that, he will be back pretty quick—Quelch is always down before us."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here comes somebody!" exclaimed Bob, as there were footsteps in the passage.

"He's coming!" grunted Smithy. And, relieved of his uneasiness, the Bounder was prepared to boot Bunter as soon as he came in.

"That's not Bunter," said Bob, listening. "Sounds more like Quelch—"

"Oh, rot," growled Vernon-Smith. "Must be Bunter—"

He broke off, as the dormitory door was thrown open. It was certainly not Billy Bunter who appeared in the doorway. It was the tall angular figure and frowning face of Henry Samuel Quelch that met the stare of a crowd of eyes.

Quelch's face was grim. Quelch was not always in a bonny mood, early in the morning. On this particular morning, however, he was looking his grim-mest. One glance at him showed the Removites that something had happened—and that it was something serious. Every fellow guessed at once that it was something to do with Billy Bunter's prolonged and unexplained absence from the dormitory.

"Has any boy been down from this dormitory in the night?" rapped Mr. Quelch, in his sharpest bark.

He scanned the staring faces.

No one replied. Nobody was keen to give Bunter away, if Quelch did not miss him from the dormitory. But the gimlet-eyes, scanning the crowd of Removites, missed one familiar fat face.

"Where is Bunter?" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"We—we don't know, sir!" stammered Harry.

"You do not know!" repeated Mr. Quelch, raising his eyebrows, and his bark sharper than ever.

"No, sir! He wasn't in bed when we got up at rising-bell."

"Not in bed!" repeated the Remove master, blankly.

"No, sir."

"Upon my word!"

The gimlet-eyes turned on Bunter's bed. They noted at once that Bunter's clothes were gone, as well as the fat Owl himself.

"Has—has anything happened, sir!" ventured Harry Wharton.

The gimlet-eyes shot round to him.

"Yes, Wharton—something has happened—something very serious. A theft has been committed in my study."

"Oh!" gasped all the Removites, together.

The Bounder stared at his form-master. Quelch could not possibly be alluding to the box of chocolates, which Bunter had gone down to abstract from his study. What could that fat ass have done?

"Did you say a—a—a— theft, sir?" stammered Smithy.

"I did, Vernon-Smith. The money-drawer in my desk has been broken open, and a number of currency and banknotes taken."

"Oh!" gasped all the Removites, again.

"I came here to ascertain whether any boy of my form had been down during the night. The same inquiry is going on in all the other dormitories. I find that Bunter is missing. Apparently he went down from this dormitory and did not return. Does any boy here know where he is at the present moment?"

Heads were shaken, but there was no other reply. Not a fellow in the Remove dormitory had the faintest idea where the fat Owl might be at that moment. He had gone down, and had not come up again: that was all they knew. The rest was a mystery.

"Very well!" rapped Mr. Quelch. And with that he rustled out.

"My only hat!" breathed Bob Cherry, when the door had closed on Quelch. "Where on earth is Bunter? Quelch hasn't seen anything of him—he expected to see him here!"

"The fat fool!" muttered Smithy. "What has he been up to. He's always kept to tuck-snooping, so far—now it looks—"

"Don't be an ass, Smithy," broke in Lord Mauleverer. "Bunter never had anything to do with what's happened in Quelch's study."

"He was there—!" snapped the Bounder. "The fat idiot will pinch anybody's tuck. Now it looks—!"

"It doesn't," said Lord Mauleverer, quietly. "Bunter's a blithering idiot, and can't keep his paws off tuck—but he would no more steal than any other fellow here. He wouldn't touch Quelch's currency notes, if Quelch had left the drawer wide open packed with them."

"Who did, then?" sneered Smithy.

"For goodness sake, Smithy—!" said Tom Redwing.

"What does it look like?" snapped the Bounder.

"Never mind what it does or doesn't look like, Smithy," said Harry Wharton. "Nobody here is going to believe that Bunter touched Quelch's money: and if you think so you'd better keep your opinion to yourself."

"I'll please myself about that."

"You won't!" said the captain of the Remove. "You'll shut up, or you'll get booted by every decent fellow here."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob Cherry.

"The hear-fulness is terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, emphatically. "A still tongue shows a wise head to the bird in the bush, as the English proverb remarkably observes, my esteemed Smithy."

The Bounder snarled, but he said no more. When the Remove went down from their dormitory, everyone was anxious for news of Bunter.

But there was no news of Bunter.

At breakfast, there was a vacant place at the Remove table. The fattest member of the form was conspicuous only by his absence. At every table there was a buzz of half-suppressed excitement. All Greyfriars knew, by this time, what had happened in Mr. Quelch's study in the night: and all knew that Billy Bunter was missing from the school. What had become of him was a deep mystery. That he was no longer within the walls of Greyfriars School, was all that was known for certain. Probably the Bounder was not the only person who connected the two events—money missing and Bunter missing at the same time. Whatever had happened, Billy Bunter had disappeared from all knowledge. He had gone down in the night—and he had vanished in the night—and what had become of him nobody knew or could guess.

CHAPTER XII

WHERE IS BUNTER?

INSPECTOR GRIMES rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Mr. Quelch waited for him to speak.

The Remove were in their form-room: with one exception. Monsieur Charpentier was taking them in French, as Quelch was not available for the usual lesson. Quelch was in his study with Inspector Grimes from Courtfield.

Little as Quelch liked calling in the aid of the police, there had been no choice in the matter: and, after consultation with the Head, he had telephoned to Mr. Grimes. Money was missing, and a Greyfriars boy was missing: two mysteries for Mr. Grimes to solve. His expression showed that he was not finding the solution easy.

"A very curious affair, sir," said Mr. Grimes, after a long and thoughtful silence. "The sum of twenty-five pounds, you tell me, is missing from a drawer in your desk."

"Precisely," said Mr. Quelch.

"I have examined the drawer. It had been forced open by some such instrument as a chisel or a jemmy. No other drawer was touched."

"That is so."

"Obviously, the thief knew where to look for cash," said Mr. Grimes. "He was aware that you kept money in that particular drawer."

"It would appear so," said Mr. Quelch, reluctantly.

"An inside job," said Mr. Grimes. "Many persons within the school may have been aware of that fact: but no one outside Greyfriars could be aware of it."

Mr. Quelch made no reply to that. He was unwilling to admit the possibility of a thief within the walls of Greyfriars School. But he had nothing to say.

"The boy Bunter is missing," went on Mr. Grimes. "He must have come down from his dormitory during the night, as his bed was empty in the morning. For what reason?"

"I cannot believe that Bunter is the guilty person, Mr. Grimes. He is a very obtuse and stupid boy, and has been punished on several occasions for helping himself to foodstuffs belonging to other boys. But there has never been the remotest reason to suppose him capable of an act like this."

Mr. Quelch paused a moment: and then went on:

"I have no doubt that he came down to this study. Yesterday I had occasion to confiscate a box of chocolates which he brought into class. Later in the day he made an attempt to take it away from this study, for which I caned him. I had no doubt that that was sufficient warning to him. But I think now that the foolish boy must have come down in the night to repeat his attempt."

"Um!" murmured Inspector Grimes.

"There is some evidence of the fact," said Mr. Quelch. "A number of burnt matches were found here: and surely an intended thief would have provided himself with some better light than a box of matches. The box of chocolates, which I had left on the shelf in that alcove, was found lying on the floor. It had been taken from its place and dropped. All this points to Bunter."

"And demonstrates that he came to this study at night, where the theft was committed," said Mr. Grimes.

"Quite! But—"

The Courtfield inspector rubbed his chin again.

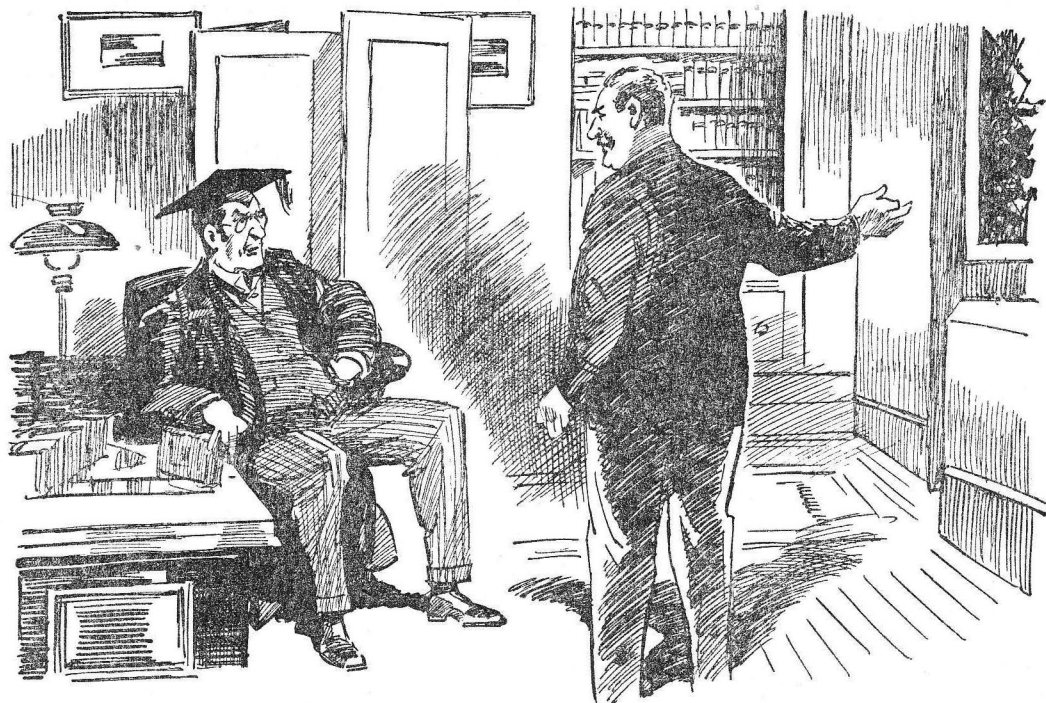
"The boy is gone," he said.

"Undoubtedly."

"The box of chocolates, for which you assume that Bunter came down, was left here. Money from your desk was taken—and the boy left the school. Why do you suppose he left, Mr. Quelch?"

The Remove master made no answer.

Billy Bunter's disappearance was as utter a puzzle and mystery to him, as to everyone else at Greyfriars School. He did not, and could not, believe that



"It would seem that Bunter left by that window"

the fat Owl had robbed his desk and fled with the plunder. But he had no alternative theory to advance.

"You have ascertained, beyond doubt, that the boy is gone, of course?"

"The most rigorous search has been made," answered Mr. Quelch. "It is certain that Bunter is no longer at Greyfriars."

"He can only have left at his own accord?"

"It would appear so," said Mr. Quelch, slowly. "I cannot understand it—but it would certainly appear so."

Mr. Grimes made a gesture towards the study window.

"You have told me that you found that window unfastened in the morning, Mr. Quelch. You fastened it over-night?"

"Undoubtedly."

"It would seem, then, that Bunter left by that window. It is a very easy drop to the ground."

"It looks like it, Mr. Grimes. But—" Quelch shook his head. "The whole affair is utterly perplexing to me. The boy, when he went, must have known that he would be traced and found and brought back. He can have had no doubt on that point, stupid as he certainly is. It is all inexplicable."

"Not wholly so, sir, if we consider that the boy, after what he had done, was panic-stricken, and thought only of escape."

"I—I suppose that is possible. But—but I cannot believe that the money-drawer was broken open by Bunter."

"Is there any other Greyfriars boy of whom you could believe it, Mr. Quelch?"

"None!" answered Mr. Quelch, promptly.

"Yet it is clear that the theft was committed by some person with an inside knowledge of the school."

Quelch was silent again. If it was what the police-officer called "an inside job", obviously someone within Greyfriars was involved. And only Bunter was known to have come down in the night—only Bunter was missing from the school. There was no doubt of the conclusion to which Mr. Grimes had come.

The inspector rose from his chair.

"The first step is to find the boy Bunter, sir," he said. "I have no doubt that the rest will be cleared up, when he is found. It should not be very difficult: he cannot have gone very far: at a late hour on a snowy winter's night.

He cannot have taken a train at such an hour: and from what I remember of what I have seen of the boy, he is no great walker—"

"Far from it," said Mr. Quelch. "I am amazed that he should have gone at all: but I have no doubt whatever that he could not have gone far."

"I shall make every inquiry, sir, you can rest assured that there will very soon be news of him!" said Mr. Grimes.

With that, the Courtfield inspector took his leave.

Mr. Quelch was left in a very troubled and unenviable frame of mind.

His only consolation was, that the missing junior must soon be found and brought back to the school. Whether the missing money



Inspector Grimes talks to Mr. Quelch

would be found on him, was a question that he had to wait for an answer. But that Bunter could succeed in evading the search that would be made for him, seemed impossible: wherever he was, and for whatever reason he had fled.

But if that was so, it seemed that it was the impossible that was destined to happen. For there came no news of Bunter.

CHAPTER XIII

AWFUL FOR BUNTER!

“YOU fat fool!”

It was a savage, growling voice.

Billy Bunter did not reply to that polite remark.

He just groaned.

Only a groan could express Bunter's feelings. Even that could not fully express them. His feelings, in fact, were inexpressible.

Often and often, had Billy Bunter's sins landed him in difficulties. But never before had they landed him in one like this.

Indeed, he could hardly believe that his present experience was not some awful nightmare: and he almost expected to wake up at the sound of the rising-bell, in the Remove dormitory at Greyfrairs.

The wintry morning was glimmering in at the little window of a shabby old caravan. It glimmered on Billy Bunter's fat face. Blinking round him, the fat Owl of Greyfrairs could scarcely believe that he was lying on the floor in the caravan, in the midst of the frozen wood, in which he had taken shelter on Wednesday afternoon. Surely he was going to wake up!

His previous stay in that caravan had been brief: counted indeed by minutes. His present stay seemed destined to be longer.

How had he got there?

He hardly knew.

Only too well he remembered coming down from the Remove dormitory to Quelch's study in the middle of the night, after that wretched box of chocolates. Only too well he remembered his sudden terror, when he had seen that tall figure in the study, and recognized the “caravan beast” in the gleam of the flash-lamp, and felt his sudden savage grasp.

How had the man got there? Why was he there at all? Billy Bunter did not know, and could not guess. Neither did he know what had happened after the man had grasped him. He surmised that he must have fainted: for what followed was a blank.

He had come to his senses in pitchy darkness: not knowing where he was, only that he was no longer in Quelch's study. He could see nothing, and hear only a low voice that muttered threats. He had a dim confused recollection of stumbling along, with a grip on his fat shoulder: a considerable distance it seemed to him, in cold clammy air. Not in the open air, for there was no snow and no wind. But where, Bunter could not begin to guess. If he lagged, a drag on his shoulder, or an angry cuff on his fat head, urged him on again. He stumbled on and on in black darkness in a state of utter bewilderment.

Then suddenly he found himself in snow—deep snow, that came up to his fat shoulders. He was in the open air: in a night dark as pitch. It was useless to blink around him, for he could see nothing.

He felt a rope knotted round him. Then he was dragged out of the snow, bumping against what seemed to be a wall. That gave the final touch to his bewilderment.

Suddenly he was released from the rope, and the grip on his fat shoulder dragged him on again, a very short distance this time. He heard a key click in a lock, and felt himself flung into a dark interior, like a sack of coke. He landed on a floor and sprawled spluttering.

Then a door closed, and a key clicked again. Then the flash-lamp, at last, gleamed again, and he glimpsed the "caravan beast". The man glared at him in savage anger, and displayed a knuckly fist.

"Don't make a sound, or—!" That was all he said. But it was enough for Bunter. He did not make a sound.

The rest of the night was a nightmare to Bunter. The caravanner, rolled in blankets on the floor, slept, and Bunter heard him snore. But there was little sleep for the bewildered and terrified Owl.

It was not till the wintry dawn glimmered in, that Bunter recognized the interior of the van. It was the shabby old caravan in which he had taken shelter: as indeed he might have guessed, from the fact that it was the caravanner who had seized him and brought him there. But his fat mind had been too confused and bewildered for that or anything else.

The caravanner was up now.

He had opened the door of the van, and looked out into the snowy wood. It was an utter solitude. Flakes were falling, and a dim mist was thick among the trees: sea-fog rolling in from the sea.

Bunter heard him give a grunt, as if of satisfaction. No doubt the dim, snowy, misty solitude was pleasing to the eye of a man who had a prisoner in the van, and certainly did not want strangers to pass that way.

That was unlikely enough. The glade in Friardale Wood was utterly

lonely in the bitter winter weather. Not a soul had been near the spot since the Greyfriars party, taking the short cut through the wood, had passed by the old well and the camped van on Wednesday afternoon.

The man shut the door again. Bunter noted that there was a new lock on the door, in the place of the one he had cracked with a brick from the margin of the old well. Turning from the door, the caravanner caught the fat junior's eyes and spectacles fixed on him, and scowled.

"You fat fool!" he snarled.

Billy Bunter could only groan dismally.

"You fat, silly, mumbling object! You troublesome fool! I've got you on my hands now! You had to come down in the middle of the night! What did you come down from your bed for, you fat fool?"

"I—I—I—it was Smithy!" groaned Bunter. "I—I didn't want to come down: but that beast was going to boot me if I didn't—Oh, lor'! I—I was after that box of chocs—oh, lor'!" Bunter wound up with a groan. "Oh, crikey! I—I—I wish I hadn't found it in Smithy's study—oh, lor'!"

It had often happened that Billy Bunter had had cause to repent of his tuck-raiding proclivities. But never had he had so much cause as now. If only he hadn't snooped those chocs from Smithy's study—!

But he had! And this was the unexpected and horrifying outcome!

"You came down for a box of chocolates, in the middle of a winter night!" exclaimed James Dexter, staring at the fat Owl.

"That beast Smithy made me!" moaned Bunter. "You see, Quelch took them away from me in the form-room, and—and—and Smithy said they were his, and—and—"

"Quelch!" The beady eyes glittered at the name. Even Bunter could see that that name was rather like a red rag to a bull, to the man in the caravan.

"Yes: my form-master—"

"Quelch!" The man's hard lips set in a tight line. "Maybe I'll be seeing Quelch again, before I clear out of this! But you—you fat idiot—what am I to do with you?"

"I—I—I'd like to go back to Greyfriars!" gasped Bunter. "I—I don't want to stay here, if—if you don't mind."

The man stared at him, burst into a harsh laugh, and turned away without replying. He proceeded to light up the rusty little stove, and cook his breakfast over it. The scent of frying bacon rather revived Bunter.

But when the man ate, he did not offer a share to Bunter: and the fat Owl dared not speak. He sat hunched against the side of the van, and watched the man through his spectacles.



Dexter tossed Bunter half a loaf

When his meal was over, Dexter looked out at the door again. Then he turned scowling to Bunter, and threw him half a loaf.

“Eat, fool!” he snapped.

Apparently that was going to be all there was for Bunter’s breakfast. He was glad of it, such as it was: but his feelings were deep.

The man sat smoking cigarettes for some time, in deep thought, every now and then casting a dark glance at his prisoner. Probably he was as fed up with Billy Bunter, as Billy Bunter could possibly be with him.

He spoke at last, in a threatening growl.

“You’re on my hands! I’ve got to keep you here, you fat fool—you know too much for me to let you run.”

“I—I—I say—”

“Hold your tongue!” growled

Dexter. “You saw me in the school last night—do you think I could leave you there, to tell the world? I had to keep you quiet, you troublesome fool: and this was the only way. Now I’ve got you on my hands, you wretched lump of lard.”

Bunter blinked at him dismally.

It had dawned even on Bunter’s obtuse brain, by this time, that the man must have had some lawless object in being in Quelch’s study the previous night: that, in fact, he could only have come there as a thief in the night. He had taken the only means of securing the fat Owl’s silence: but that left him with a prisoner on his hands: and he found a prisoner an exceedingly troublesome proposition.

The man looked out of the van again. Then he donned coat and hat. For whatever reason James Dexter was camped in that solitary spot, he did not seem to like the solitude: the Cross Keys at Friardale, or the Three Fishers on the river, was a spot more congenial to his tastes. He was going out: and Billy Bunter’s eyes brightened hopefully behind his big spectacles. If he left him there—!

But alas for his brief hopes! Dexter was going: but he proceeded to make



"Hold your tongue," growled Dexter

his fat prisoner safe during his absence. He bent over Bunter, and, the fat Owl not daring to make the least attempt at resistance, bound him hand and foot with a strong cord. Then he jerked open a capacious mouth and tied a muffler round Bunter's fat head, between his jaws, gagging him so effectually that he could not utter even a mumble. Indeed, but for his fat little nose, the unfortunate Owl would not have been able to breathe at all.

"Stick there, you fat fool!" snarled Dexter.

With that farewell, he left the van, closing and locking the door after him. Billy Bunter was left alone. He was left with the deepest feelings. He could not express them now even with a groan.

It was an awful day for Bunter!

CHAPTER XIV

NOT BUNTER!

"SOMETHING'S up!" said Bob Cherry.

Bob's chums did not need him to tell them that.

On Saturday morning, it was only too clear that "something" was "up".

"The upfulness seems to be terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"It's not news of Bunter," said Nugent.

"No! Something's happened!" said Bob. "There's no news of poor old Bunter—it's something else! But what the dickens—"

"All the beaks are looking jolly solemn," said Johnny Bull. "I heard Capper say something about the Head's study."

"What could have happened there?" asked Bob.

"Goodness knows."



The Inspector talks to the Famous Five

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob, suddenly. "Here's old Grimey again."

The Famous Five were in the quad after breakfast, on Saturday morning. There was plenty of snow about for snowballing: and Coker of the Fifth, passing at a little distance with his usual air of being monarch of all he surveyed, was a tempting target. But they did not feel like snowballing Coker. The mystery of Billy Bunter's strange disappearance weighed on their usually sunny spirits.

The lapse of more than twenty-four hours had brought no news of the missing Owl. It was known that he had not gone home. It was known that he had not been seen at any railway station within a wide radius. Where he was, was just a mystery that nobody would guess. But at the sight of Inspector

Grimes coming in at the gates, Harry Wharton and Co. hoped that it meant a spot of news. They bore down on the portly Courtfield inspector, and capped him politely.

"Any news of Bunter yet, Mr. Grimes?" asked Harry.

"None so far!" answered Mr. Grimes, briefly: and he went on his ponderous way.

"No news!" said Bob. "Then what is Grimey barging in again for?"

"Something jolly well happened last night, or the beaks wouldn't all be looking like boiled owls this morning," said Frank Nugent.

Mr. Prout and Mr. Hacker came along, deep in talk. Prout's loud fruity voice floated to the ears of the juniors.

"Extraordinary, Hacker! This is the second time—"

"Quite!" came Hacker's acid tones. "It cannot be Bunter this time, as he is absent from the school. It looked—"

The two beaks passed on, leaving the chums of the Remove staring.

"Oh, gum!" breathed Bob Cherry. "Has something of the same kind happened again? That sounded like it!"

Herbert Vernon-Smith came up to the Famous Five. He did not receive very welcoming looks. Smithy was not exactly popular at the moment. His "toughness" with Bunter had had unexpected and dismaying results. Whatever Bunter had or had not done in Quelch's study, it was certain that he never would have gone down from the dormitory that night but for Smithy.

Smithy easily read the expressions on five faces.

"Was it my fault?" he snapped.

"Well, yes," answered Harry Wharton. "You might have gone easier with that fat ass. Goodness knows what's become of him now."

The Bounder sneered.

"Think I could guess that he would burgle Quelch's desk, and then lose his head and bolt in a panic?" he snapped.

"I don't believe he did anything of the kind."

"Why has he cleared off, then?"

"How should I know?"

"Well, I fancy I know," sneered Vernon-Smith. "I saw you speaking to Grimes a minute ago—any news of the fat ass?"

"None, Grimes says," answered Harry. "Grimey seems to have come here about something else—something's happened last night, I think."

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders impatiently. He was not interested in what had happened in the night, if anything had. In point of fact, his conscience was a little uneasy on the subject of Bunter: and he wished sincerely that he

had not been quite so "tough" on the exasperating fat Owl: though nothing would have induced him to admit it.

"Grimes must be an ass, not to have found that fat chump by this time," he growled. "How far away can he have got, on a winter's night? A mile in the snow would knock him out."

"Might have got a train—"

"That's rot! He would have been seen, and somebody would remember him—think Grimes hasn't asked the railway people? Anybody who'd seen him would remember a fat porpoise blinking like an owl."

"Might have got a car somewhere—!" said Nugent.

"Not likely," said Bob. "Cars cost money, and Bunter hadn't any."

"Hadn't he?" sneered Vernon-Smith. "You seem to forget that a bundle of notes was missing from Quelch's desk."

"Oh, shut up!" roared Bob.

Smithy shrugged his shoulders again.

"You fellows can't be whales on arithmetic, if you can't put two and two together," he jeered. "Do you think that Bunter bolted in the middle of a December night for no reason at all?"

"He never touched Quelch's money," snapped Wharton.

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Vernon-Smith. "When money and Bunter are missing at the same time—"

"Did you hear me say shut up?" hooted Bob.

"You could be heard a mile away, with that megaphone you call a voice. But I shall please myself, and I jolly well know—"

"Roll him over!" said Bob.

"Good egg!"

"That will shut him up!" agreed Johnny Bull.

The Bounder jumped back.

"Hands off, you cheeky rotters! I—Oh! Oooooogh!" Five pairs of hands grasped Smithy, and he went over in the thick carpet of snow in the Greyfriars quad. Then those five pairs of hands rolled him in the snow, struggling and yelling with fury. By the time he had rolled over and over for a few minutes, he bore a remarkable resemblance to an Abominable Snowman.

"Stop that!"

It was a sharp rap from Wingate of the Sixth. At the voice of the Greyfriars captain, the Famous Five ceased to roll Smithy. The Bounder sat up, smothered with snow, spluttering for breath. Wingate looked at him, and then looked at Harry Wharton and Co., frowning.

"This isn't a time for skylarking, you young sweeps!" he snapped.

"I say, Wingate, has something happened?" asked Bob Cherry. "All the beaks are looking like boiled owls—"

"What?"

"I—I—I mean, they're all looking jolly solemn," answered Bob, hastily. "Did something happen last night?"

The Greyfriars captain paused for a moment. Then he nodded.

"All the school will hear it before long," he amended. "Yes, something did happen last night—that's why Inspector Grimes is here again. The Head's study was robbed: more than a hundred pounds taken."

"Oh, jiminy."

The juniors knew now what Mr. Prout had meant by the "second time" and Mr. Hacker's remark that it "could not be Bunter", was now explained.

"Another robbery?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Yes—the Head's study this time," said Wingate. "It looked like Bunter, in Quelch's study, as he's cleared off but this couldn't be Bunter, so very likely the other wasn't, either. I daresay Grimes will sort it out."

With that, Wingate walked away.

"By gum!" said Bob Cherry, with a whistle. "So that's it! Same thing over again—but the Head's study this time."



"Stop that!" rapped Wingate

"Couldn't possibly be Bunter this time," said Harry. "And if it wasn't this time, it wasn't last time, either."

"What have you got to say to that, Smithy?" snapped Bob.

The Bounder had scrambled to his feet, smothered and dripping with snow. His face was furious as he scrambled up. But Wingate's words seemed to have struck him—hard! The fury died out of his face.

"Then—it's happened again!" he muttered.

"Same thing over again," said Nugent.

"The samefulness is terrific."

"And Bunter miles away, goodness knows where!" growled Johnny Bull. "Think it was Bunter this time, you tick?"

"Oh, don't be a fool!" snapped Vernon-Smith. "You know how it looked—money missing and Bunter missing—"

"Br-r-r-r-r!" grunted Johnny.

"There's a pilferer about," said Nugent. "But it's not Bunter! Even Smithy can see that now, I suppose."

"Satisfied now, Smithy?" asked Bob, sarcastically.

The Bounder scowled. He was suspicious, and he was obstinate: but he had to admit that the new occurrence, since Bunter's disappearance, as good as cleared the missing Owl. There was a mysterious pilferer at work in the school: but assuredly it was not William George Bunter of the Remove.

"Well, it looked—!" muttered Smithy, sullenly.

"Oh, rats!"

Smithy, scowling, tramped away to the House, to brush off snow. The Famous Five walked on, in a puzzled mood. Even Smithy had come round to their belief, that the missing Owl had had no hand in what had happened in Quelch's study on Thursday night. It was plain enough, in the light of what had happened on Friday night—it was hardly possible to doubt that the second theft was by the same hand as the first. But that, apparently, left no reason at all why Billy Bunter should have gone. Yet he had gone! The mystery of his disappearance seemed deeper than ever.

CHAPTER XV

TIT FOR TAT!

LOOKS like football!" grunted Bob Cherry.

"Not a lot!" said Frank Nugent.

"The lookfulness like the absurd football is not terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Blessed if I feel much like football, or anything else," said Harry Wharton, "Poor old Bunter—!"

"What on earth's become of him?" said Johnny Bull.

"Goodness knows."

"Must do something," said Bob. "Let's get out, anyhow. Can't stick indoors on a half-holiday."

The Famous Five were standing at the window of the Rag, looking out. It was a fine, clear afternoon, with a glimmer of wintry sun. But the snow was piled thick all over Greyfriars. The playing-fields had disappeared under a deep white mantle. Even Bob Cherry did not think it possible to "urge the flying ball" in such conditions. But the open air always called to Bob with an insistent voice.

Billy Bunter's mysterious disappearance had, undoubtedly, cast a cloud on the form of which he was the fat ornament. Even Skinner was not jocular on the subject. What had happened—what could have happened—to the hapless fat Owl, was utterly inexplicable. To all appearances, he had left the school of his own accord, in the middle of a December night: and yet it was certain that he would never have gone down from his dormitory at all, but for the Bounder. He had gone to Quelch's study—that was known: and the window left unfastened seemed to indicate that he had gone out that way. But why, was quite inexplicable: and where he was now, still more so. He seemed to have vanished into thin air.

"If that tick Smithy hadn't chivvied him into going down—!" said Nugent.

"Thanks!" said a sarcastic voice.

The Famous Five glanced round at Vernon-Smith. He had lounged into the Rag with his hands in his pockets, and a sullen scowl on his face. The Bounder as a matter of fact, was feeling more than a twinge of remorse. Certainly, he could never have foreseen what would result from his "chivvying" of the fat Owl. Every fellow in the Remove had expected Bunter to return to the dormitory, with or without that wretched box of chocolates. But he had not returned: and Smithy wished from the bottom of his heart that he had gone easier with the missing Owl.

But he was not disposed to admit it: and any allusion to his "tough" measures with Bunter only brought a scowl to his face, and a glint to his eyes. He came into the Rag in time to hear Frank's remark, and he came across to the group at the window with a very unpleasant expression on his face.

"Let's get out!" said Bob.

"Chewing it over?" sneered Vernon-Smith. "You've booted Bunter often enough for snooping tuck in the studies."

"There's a limit," said Nugent. "If you hadn't made him go down that night, nothing would have happened—you know that!"

"I don't know it, and you don't!" snapped the Bounder. "He must have had it in his mind to clear off, or he wouldn't have cleared as he did. I made him go down from the dorm, but did I make him get out of Quelch's window and scud!"

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"Bunter never had it in mind to do anything of the kind," he said. "He didn't want to go down. I can't imagine what made him clear, but—"

"Oh, rats!" snarled the Bounder, and he turned away, and stood staring moodily from the window.

"Let's get out," repeated Bob Cherry. "Look here, what about a trot across to Pegg. Might look in at the pictures at the Regal."

"And might fall in with Marjorie and her pals!" remarked Johnny Bull, with a faint inflection of sarcasm in his voice.

Bob Cherry coloured, while his comrades grinned. It was quite possible that the chance of falling in with Marjorie Hazeldene, of the Cliff House Fourth, attracted Bob in the direction of Pegg, quite as much as the pictures at the Regal

"Oh, let's!" said Nugent. "The snow's pretty thick, but there's no more coming down. No more short cuts through Friardale Wood, though. We'll go by the footpath."

"Let's see what's on at the Regal," said Harry Wharton. "There's a local paper about somewhere."

Herbert Vernon-Smith glanced round, and walked across towards the door. There was a glint in the Bounder's eyes. He had not forgotten his roll in the snow that morning: Smithy had a long memory for such incidents. He hurried to the junior lobby for coat and cap, and left the House by the lobby door.

He was crossing towards the gates at a quick walk, when Tom Redwing called to him, and came up.

"Going out, Smithy?" he asked.

"Yes!" answered Smithy, without stopping. Redwing walked by his side to the gates, a little surprised by his haste.

"In a hurry?" he asked.

"Yes, rather."

"Like me to come?"

The Bounder grinned sourly.

"Yes—if you'd like to lend me a hand snowballing those smudges who rolled me over in the snow this morning!" he answered.

"Smithy—!"

"They're going over to Pegg by the footpath through the wood. I'm going to get ahead of them, and give them a few—"

"I wouldn't, Smithy!" said Tom, earnestly. "What's the good of a row?"



He had a good supply of ammunition

You put fellows backs up by putting down what happened in Quelch's study to Bunter, and you really asked for it—”

“That's enough!”

“But look here, Smithy—!”

“Oh, rats!”

Vernon-Smith quickened his pace, and turned out at the gates. Redwing did not follow him. If a “row” with Harry Wharton and Co. was what his chum had in mind, Tom Redwing certainly did not want to have a hand in it. He went back to the House with a frowning face.

Heedless of him, and of what he thought, Vernon-Smith broke into a run in Friardale Lane. The Famous Five were not likely to be long in starting, and he wanted to be well ahead of them—with a few preparations to make. He reached the stile in the lane in a few minutes, and vaulted over it. The sour grin lingered on his face, as he hurried along the footpath.

At a little distance from the lane, he stopped. He picked a spot screened by a tree and a frosty thicket, and proceeded to gather snow, and knead snowballs. He had quite a good supply of ammunition piled up, ready to hand, when there was a sound of tramping feet on the snowy footpath, and of voices.

He peered out of his cover.

Five Greyfriars juniors, in coats and caps and scarves, were coming up the footpath from the lane. The Bounder, deep in cover, waited till they were within easy range, a snowball in either hand.

"Blow the snow!" Johnny Bull was saying, as he dragged a foot out of a deep rut into which it had slipped. "Blow!"

"Seasonable, old chap!" said Bob Cherry.

"Fathead!"

Johnny, at the moment, did not seem to share Bob's cheery view. He had had rather a jar as his foot slipped.

"Blow!" he repeated. "I—Whooop!" Johnny broke off, with a sudden yell as a snowball, coming from nobody knew where, landed in the middle of his face, and he staggered back. He slipped in the snow, and sat down.

"What the thump'—!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "What—Oh! Oooogh!" Another snowball whizzed, and caught the captain of the Remove under the chin. The sudden shock caused him to slip also, and he sat down in snow,

Whiz! whiz!

"Oh!" yelled Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent simultaneously. They tottered under crashing snowballs.

"My esteemed hat—!" ejaculated Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, staring round. "What the terrific dickens—yaroooooh!" A crashing snowball landed in the middle of the nabob's dusky features, and he staggered.

Whiz! whiz! whiz! whiz!

The Famous Five, taken utterly by surprise by that sudden and unexpected onslaught from an unseen assailant, floundered in snow. As they floundered, and spluttered, and gasped, snowballs fairly rained on them, from an opening in the thicket behind which the grinning Bounder stood in cover. But Smithy stayed only to despatch five or six. Then, turning, he cut off at a rapid run through the snowy wood.

"Who—what—?"

"By gum, I'll—"

"Oh, my hat! Who—"

"Uggh! I'm smothered—"

The Bounder grinned as he ran. He did not lose a moment. Smithy did not want to repeat his experience of the morning; and it was certain that, if Harry Wharton and Co. had collared him, just then, he would have been booked for a hectic time. He had given them "tit for tat": but he did not want "tat for tit" back again, as it were. Leaving the chums of the Remove to flounder and splutter, he raced away through the wood, winding among frosty trees and bushes, and the excited and wrathful exclamations on the footpath died away behind him as he ran.

CHAPTER XVI

SMITHY MAKES A DISCOVERY!

CRASH!
"Oh!" gasped Smithy.

He reeled back from the shock.

He had been running like a deer. Whether the Famous Five might be in pursuit of the unseen assailant who had knocked them right and left with a hail of whizzing snowballs, he did not know. He glanced back several times over his shoulder, as he ran. He did not even see the man in the overcoat and bowler hat, coming through the frosty thickets, till he crashed headlong into him.

It was a mutual surprise! The man went flying, under the sudden impact, and Vernon-Smith reeled against a tree. Panting, he stared at the man sprawling on his back.

The man was a stranger to him. Harry Wharton and Co. would have recognized him, as the man of the caravan parked in the glade in Friardale Wood: they would have known the foxy features, the beady sharp eyes, and the hard-set mouth, at once. But the Bounder had never seen him before—it was before Smithy's time that James Dexter had been house-porter at Greyfriars. But whoever he was, Smithy could see at a glance that he was not a good-tempered fellow. His hard features were red with rage, as he sprawled in the snow.

"Oh!" gasped the Bounder, again. "Sorry—I never saw you—"

The man scrambled up.

"You clumsy young fool!" he roared. "Can't you see where you're running! Haven't you eyes?"

"I—I—I—Hands off!" yelled the Bounder, as the man made a rush at him. "Why, you cheeky rotter—you ruffian—oh, crumbs! Oh! how! Stoppit! Oooh!"

Smack! smack! smack! smack!

Smithy yelled as the savage smacks landed.

It was Billy Bunter's experience, over again, at the hands of the angry caravanner. No doubt Dexter had been hurt, by that sudden crash and fall, and he was giving free rein to a savage and violent temper. But the Bounder of Greyfriars was made of sterner stuff than Billy Bunter.

His hands came up, clenched, his eyes blazing over them. He struck out

with all his strength, and his knuckles landed with a crash on a sharp nose, drawing a spurt of crimson.

The man staggered: and, fortunately for Smithy, his foot slipped in the snow. He went over backwards, sprawling.

Smithy did not waste a split second. As the caravanner crashed, he tore away at top speed. In a matter of seconds, he vanished through the snowy wood.

He came out of the thickets into an open glade, where the wintry sun glimmered on the snow-covered roof of a caravan. He halted, panting for breath, and listening for sounds of pursuit. He was not thinking of Harry Wharton and Co. now, but if that savage-tempered brute was following him—

There was a sound of rustling in the snowy thickets. The man was coming! It did not occur to Smithy, at the moment, that the man was the owner of the caravan, and that he was on his way back to his van when the collision had occurred. He had no doubt that the ruffian was pursuing him.

The Bounder panted.



Fortunately for Smithy, the man's foot slipped

He had no chance in a foot-race with the man, if he was in hot pursuit. But it occurred to him at once to take cover, and let the ruffian pass him by unseen. Cover was at hand. The caravan was banked all round with snow, which covered the wheels. But it had been cleared away from the door. Hardly stopping to think, Smithy ran on towards the caravan, dropped on his hands and knees, and crawled under the van.

Under the van, the earth was clear of snow: banked in all round, excepting at the spot below the door. It was a safe refuge, if the man did not think of stopping and looking under the van. Smithy had to take that chance: but it did not seem likely.

He heard a tramp of feet in the snow.

His heart beat fast.

Who the man was, what he was, he had no idea. All he knew was that he was a ruffianly brute with a violent temper, and if an accidental collision had made him so savagely angry, what was the effect of a hefty punch on the nose likely to be? Smithy hardly breathed, as he heard the tramping footsteps approach the van.

The man was not running. Had he guessed? From the narrow dusky space under the van, Smithy had a glimpse of his legs, and the end of his overcoat. He was coming directly towards the door of the van.

Vernon-Smith set his teeth.

He had hoped that the ruffian, pursuing him, would chase on, never guessing that he had stopped and found a hide-out. This did not look like it. The man had stopped at the door of the caravan; and Smithy expected him, the next moment, to stoop and look under it.

But it did not happen.

To his surprise, and immense relief, he heard the click of a key turning in a lock!

"Oh!" breathed the Bounder, inaudibly.

He understood now. The man he had up-ended in the wood was the caravan-owner; and he was not in pursuit of the schoolboy who had punched his nose and fled; he was simply coming back to his van.

Smithy could have gasped with relief.

But he was careful not to make the slightest sound. The man did not know that he was there, and, if he was thinking of him at all, no doubt supposed that he was still on the run, somewhere in the snowy wood. But if he discovered him, Smithy knew what to expect. Under the van, the Bounder was as still and silent as a mouse with the cat at hand.

He heard the caravan door open.

The man tramped in, and Smithy heard his heavy footsteps overhead. The

door was slammed shut. Faintly, an angry growling voice came to his ears, but he could not distinguish the words. Either the man was talking to himself, or there was another person already in the caravan.

Smithy drew a deep breath.

Now was his chance, while the door was shut. On his hands and knees, he crawled slowly and silently towards the opening in the banked snow under the door. He reached it, and emerged, with infinite caution. A glance up showed that the door was still shut.

Silently, he rose to his feet. In another moment, he would have been stepping lightly away. But at that moment a growling voice within the van came to his ears.

"You fat fool!"

The caravanner was speaking. Evidently, there was a second occupant of the van. That did not interest the Bounder. But as another voice came, he stopped, and stood rooted.

"Oh, crikey! Oh, lor'! Oh, dear! I say, I'm awfully hungry!"

Herbert Vernon-Smith stood spell-bound.

He had forgotten the missing Owl of the Remove. He was reminded of him now. For that fat dismal voice from the van was—if he was not dreaming—the voice of Billy Bunter! Amazed, astounded, almost stunned with astonishment, the Bounder of Greyfriars stood petrified.

CHAPTER XVII

THE PRISONER OF THE CARAVAN!

BILLY BUNTER blinked dismally at the man who had entered the caravan. Dexter's first proceeding was to scowl blackly at the unfortunate fat junior, huddled in the blankets on the floor of the van. It was quite usual for Billy Bunter's presence anywhere to be regarded as superfluous. But never had it been so superfluous as in the caravan parked in the frosty wood. The fat Owl could hardly have been more tired of Dexter, than Dexter was of him. But angry and resentful as the man was of his prisoner's presence, as ready with an angry cuff as with a word, he stooped and released Bunter from a cord knotted on his fat limbs. During his absences from the van, which were frequent, he took every precaution to keep his prisoner safe and silent. Anyone passing the locked van, in the lonely glade, could never have guessed or dreamed that it

held a prisoner. Only when the caravanner was at home, was Bunter given freedom for his fat limbs.

The fat junior sat up in the blankets, and grabbed at the gag in his mouth, and removed it. Then he mumbled dismally.

He had just one glimmer of consolation, as he blinked at the caravanner. The man had poured water into a basin, and was bathing his nose, which was red and raw, with a trickle of crimson. It looked as if somebody had punched that nose; recently; as indeed, somebody had!—and Bunter hoped that the unknown somebody had punched it hard! Gladly he would have landed a fat fist on that nose himself, with all his extensive weight behind it. But that was a happy idea that the fat Owl was never likely to think of putting into action. One glance of the glittering beady eyes was enough to terrify Bunter.

It seemed, to Billy Bunter, that he had been ages and ages a prisoner in that shabby, wretched caravan. But he was aware that this was only the second day of his imprisonment there. The hours seemed endlessly long—it was like a prolonged nightmare. Worse, if possible, was the anticipation of what was to come. How long was he to be kept there, a prisoner on short commons; tied up like a turkey when the brute was absent, scowled at or cuffed when he was at home? How was it going to end?



The fat junior sat up in the blankets

Bunter realized that the man did not want him there, but dared not let him go. But how long was it to go on? Who was the man, and what was his game?—why was he camped in December snows by the old well, in that frosty glade in Friardale Wood? What had he been doing in Quelch's study that night? How long was this going to last? These and many other questions the hapless fat Owl asked himself, without being able to find an answer.

"Mmmmmmmmm!" mumbled Bunter.

The man, bending over the basin of water, dabbing at his painful nose, turned a threatening glare on him.

"You fat fool!" he snapped.

"Oh, crikey! Oh, lor'! Oh, dear!" mumbled Bunter, little dreaming upon whose ears, outside the locked door of the van, that mumble fell. "I say, I'm awfully hungry."

"Your own fault, you fat fool! You will get little here!" snapped the caravaner. "Do you fancy I want you here, idiot?"

"I—I—I'd like to go back to Greyfriars!" wailed Bunter. "Oh, crikey! I'd rather be taking six from Quelch, than this! Oh, lor'! I—I wish I hadn't come down that night."

"No doubt!" snarled Dexter.

"It was all Smithy's fault!" groaned Bunter. "He made me go down after that beastly box of chocs in Quelch's study. Just like Smithy to kick up a fuss about a measly box of chocs. Oh, dear! I—I say, nobody will think of looking for me here! Oh, lor'!"

Dexter gave a harsh laugh.

"You can bank on that fool," he said. "Your schoolmaster can only suppose that you have run away from school."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"That is what I intended him to suppose, idiot. I left that study window unfastened, and what else could he think?"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, again.

"Whatever they think, and wherever they may look for you, they won't fancy that you are parked in a caravan only a short walk from the school," said Dexter, sourly. "You're safe here."

"Oh, lor'!" groaned Bunter. "I—I—I say, wharrer you want to keep me here for, I'd like to know."

"Fool!" was Dexter's brief reply to that question.

"I—I—I say, did—did you pinch something in Quelch's study that night?" gasped Bunter.

"Has that just dawned on you, booby?"

It had dawned on Bunter! As it was the only possible explanation of the

man's presence in Mr. Quelch's study at midnight, even Billy Bunter's fat brain had been able to work it out.

The man gave his nose a last dab, and towelled his face. He scowled into a little glass fastened on the wall. The reflection of his nose was red and rather bulbous. The Bounder's knuckles had landed hard.

"You fat fool!" He said. That seemed to be his favourite epithet for Bunter. "You had to butt in where you were not wanted, and nearly spoil everything—and now you're on my hands! I've got to keep you here till I'm through—and that will be a week yet."

"I—I say, if you'll let me go—"

"Fool!"

"I can't stick here!" groaned Bunter.

"You've asked for it, and you've got to make the best of it," snarled Dexter. "I've got to keep you quiet till I'm through, and can go. I'm not through yet, you fat booby." He gave Bunter a glare. "You're trouble enough. You're safe here, but I can't leave you alone too long, in case—" He broke off, with a muttered oath, and another black scowl at Bunter. Possibly he was thinking of last Wednesday's happenings, and of Bunter's exploit with a brick on the door of the caravan. He could not have felt too easy in his mind about his prisoner.

"I—I say—!" mumbled Bunter.

"Oh, pack it up!"

"But I say, I'm hungry!" wailed Bunter.

It was a sad fact! Billy Bunter was often, if not always hungry. But never in his fat career had he been so hungry as he was now. He had been left alone in the van since a bare breakfast that morning, and it was now afternoon. The "caravan beast" did not seem to care; indeed, so far as Bunter could see, he couldn't have cared less. Bunter cared tremendously!

The man gave an angry grunt. However, he opened the food-locker, and tossed out half-a-loaf and a chunk of cheese.

"Eat!" he snapped.

Billy Bunter was only too glad to do as he was told! He grabbed the half-loaf in one fat hand, the chunk of cheese in the other, and took alternate bites—quite extensive ones. The man snapped the locker shut again, and gave the munching fat Owl a threatening glare.

"I'm going out to smoke a cigarette," he said. "One sound from you, and I'll come back, and wring your fat neck."

Those words were the last that Herbert-Vernon-Smith heard through the van door. Up to that moment, the Bounder had stood where he was, as if

rooted to the ground, listening to the voices within. But at those words, he woke to sudden action. If the man found him there—

This man, whoever he was, was keeping the missing Greyfriars junior a prisoner in his caravan. It was this man who had robbed Quelch's study, and Bunter was a prisoner because he knew. And if the ruffian found him there—!

Vernon-Smith fairly flew.

He cut across the snowy glade like a deer, only anxious to reach the surrounding trees, and get out of sight, before the mysterious caravanner emerged from the van. His feet seemed hardly to touch the snowy earth as he tore away. There was not a second to lose.

"Oh!" panted Smithy, suddenly.

He hardly knew what happened. He was falling—falling into space. He had forgotten the old well in the glade, and it lay directly in his path as he ran. He remembered it only as he fell: and then it was too late. Only a faint cry escaped him, as he shot downward into darkness.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SECRET OF THE WELL!

THUD!
"Oh!" gasped Smithy.

He plunged headlong into something soft, that yielded under his weight. He did not know, for the moment what it was. Whatever it was, he sank deep into it, and lay panting, dazed and dizzy, his mind utterly confused.

Darkness surrounded him but high above, there was a glimmer of wintry daylight at the top of the deep old well.

But a few moments were enough for the Bounder to pull himself together. It was snow into which he had fallen. It lay several feet deep at the bottom of the old well. He was half-buried in snow, and he realized that, beyond the shaking and the shock, the fall had not hurt him.

He struggled to his feet.

The snow was almost up to his shoulders as he stood, panting for breath. It was the snow that had saved him from broken bones. He was breathless and shaken, but he was unhurt.

He stared up, as he panted, at the glimmer of wintry daylight above. It was far above his head—very far.

"By gum!" breathed Smithy.

He had escaped the man of the caravan—escaped unseen. Whether he could have reached the trees at the edge of the glade, before the man emerged from the van, he did not know; but his unexpected tumble into the old well had done it—he was safe from the ruffian who was keeping Billy Bunter a prisoner in the van.

But it was rather like an escape from the frying-pan into the fire. His heart sank, as he looked up at the steep sides of the old well.

He had forgotten its existence, but now that he remembered, he remembered that it had long since run dry, and that chain and bucket had disappeared ages ago. There was no means of climbing out of the well, unless he could clamber up the steep sides—and it looked impossible.

He set his lips, hard.

The chill of the snow packed round him was already penetrating his overcoat. He had to get out of this, or freeze. He had to have help—but who was to hear a shout for help, in that lonely glade in the middle of a frosty wood? Only the man of the caravan, whom he had fled to escape!



Smithy shot downward into darkness

"I've got to get out, somehow!" muttered Vernon-Smith, desperately.

He pushed his way through the thick snow. The well was old, crumbling with age; there might be broken brickwork that would give him a hold—crevices and fissures that would afford a grip for his hands. Slowly, very slowly, for the thick clinging snow impeded every movement, he pushed his way, making a circuit of the well, staring up with almost desperate eyes at the walls.

"Oh!" he ejaculated, suddenly.

Panting for breath from his exertions, he came to a stop, staring up at the wall of the well. His eyes were growing accustomed to the dimness, and he made out an opening in the frosty old brickwork, above the ancient water-level.

It was an arched opening. He stared at it blankly. It was above the level of his head, but within reach of stretched hands; and he gazed at it in wonder. Above the arch the brickwork rose sheer—there was no possibility of climbing farther up. But at least it was a refuge from the snow that was freezing him; and, after that wondering stare, Vernon-Smith reached up, grasped the edge of the brickwork, and dragged himself up out of the snow.

He clambered into the arched opening, panting.

He lay for a few moments, recovering his breath. Then he rose to his feet, and groped in his pocket for a match-box.

He stared about him, in utter wonder, in the flickering light of the match. He was standing at the opening of a passage, not more than three feet wide, the arched roof hardly a foot over his head. Behind him was the old well, glimmering with snow: before him, as he stared, was pitchy darkness, into which the light of the match did not penetrate.

"Holy smoke!" breathed Smithy.

It was a startling discovery. No one, so far as Smithy was aware, knew of that strange secret of the old well in Friardale Wood. No one was ever likely to discover it, except by falling into the well as Smithy had done. In the more ancient parts of Greyfriars, secret passages were known to exist, dating from the old monastic days. But who could have dreamed of a secret passage leading out of the old well in the wood?

The Bounder whistled softly.

Was it a way out? Could it, indeed, be anything else? That arch, giving access to a subterranean passage, must have been built with the old well, long centuries since, and for a purpose. For what purpose, except as a secret means of escape, in times of dire need, from some building in the vicinity?

The match burned out.

The Bounder struck another. Then he caught a glimmer in the light, and stared down. His eyes bulged, at the sight of a lantern, lying close by the wall. He stared at it dumbfounded.

The match burned down to his fingers as he stared. He threw it down, and struck another, stooping over the lantern. If it had been some rusty old relic of ancient times, it would not have been so astonishing. But it was a clean lantern of modern manufacture, with a trimmed wick, and well supplied with oil. The amazed Bounder put the match to the wick, lighted the lantern, and rose to his feet with it in his hand.

"Who—what—?" he muttered, blankly.

He knew now that he was not the first discoverer of that secret of the old well. Someone had been there before him, and quite recently, for in the lantern-light, he discerned traces of snow about him. It could not have fallen there—it had been tramped in, from the snow in the well. And the lantern could scarcely have been left there by accident: it was left there by someone who had used that secret passage, and intended to use it again. Who—and why?

The Bounder shook his head, in utter puzzlement. Then suddenly it flashed into his mind!

The man of the caravan!

"By gum!" Smithy's eyes gleamed. "That ruffian! That's it."

Why was the man camped there, in a caravan, in the cold and snow of December? Harry Wharton and Co. had wondered, but they had never dreamed of connecting his presence there with the old well, knowing nothing of its secret. But the Bounder, now that he thought of it, had no doubt about it. The man who held Billy Bunter a prisoner in the van—it was he who had stood where the Bounder was now standing—he who used the mysterious secret passage, he who had left the lantern there for future use.

Where did the passage lead?

The Bounder could not guess. But he knew that it must have an outlet, and his heart was light now. Amazingly, utterly unexpectedly, a way of escape from the old well opened before him.

He lifted the lantern, to shine the light in advance, and stepped forward. The densest, deepest darkness lay in front of him: the passage seemed to wind away into the heart of the earth. Aware that there might be pitfalls, he kept his eyes well about him. But the old brick floor was firm under his tread.

There was evidence that the passage had been trodden before him, for here and there the light glimmered on a fragment of frozen snow, that could only have peeled off a boot. Some man—Smithy had no doubt that it was the man of the caravan—had trodden that way. No doubt he had a rope in the van, for descent into the well, and climbing out again—Smithy could guess that. But why? He wondered whether he would find an answer to that question, when he reached the outlet.

He tramped steadily on.

The subterranean passage was long. But suddenly the Bounder came to a halt, as the lantern-light gleamed on stone steps that rose before him. It was the end of the passage.

He flashed the light over the steps. They rose before him in a narrow spiral, disappearing into black darkness above.

"Journey's end!" murmured Smithy.

He tramped up the steps, winding upward, apparently in the thickness of some ancient wall. He could guess that he was now under some building; but what, or where, he had not the remotest idea. But it was the way out of the subterranean depths, he was assured of that.

The steps ended abruptly. He stood at the top, circling the light round him. To right and left were the walls of clammy stone. In front of him was what



Smithy tramped up the steps, winding upward

looked like a solid sheet of oak, black with age. It was a door; but there was no sign of a lock or a door-handle.

But it was the way out—it had to be the way out! A secret door, the Bounder could guess, leading from some building into the secret passage that led away to the well in the wood. The man who had used the subterranean passage before him, knew the secret of it: it could not be for nothing that he had tramped that dreary distance underground, and intended to tramp it again. There was—there must be—a means of opening that door.

With the lantern light close to the black old oak, the Bounder scanned it. A rusty metal projection, close by the edge, caught his eye. Was that it? He tried it, with finger and thumb.

There was a faint click.

The next moment, the door was open. It dawned on Smithy that it was not precisely a door; it was a thick oaken panel, and his touch had started the secret spring that moved it. It stood wide, and he stared through a narrow opening into a room beyond. Daylight met his eyes—he was looking across at a window, on which wintry sunlight gleamed. He saw a table, with books and papers on it, and a man sitting at the table, with a pen in his hand: and for a moment he wondered whether he was dreaming. The man at the table turned his head: he stared at Vernon-Smith, and Vernon-Smith stared at him: and for a moment, both were too dumbfounded to do anything but stare.

Then the man at the table started up.

“Vernon-Smith!” he gasped.

“Mr. Quelch!” stuttered the Bounder.

He stepped through the secret panel, dizzy with amazement. He had not known, or guessed, where the secret passage would lead him. It had led him into Mr. Quelch’s study at Greyfriars School!

CHAPTER XIX

QUELCH TO THE RESCUE!

“HALLO, hallo, hallo!” ejaculated Bob Cherry.

“Quelch!” exclaimed Harry Wharton.

“The esteemed Quelch!” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Looks fierce!” remarked Johnny Bull.

“Quelch here, in the middle of Friardale Wood!” exclaimed Frank Nugent, in wonder.

All the Famous Five were surprised.

They were coming back from Pegg, through the wood. Their visit to the Regal had been duly paid. Who it was that had snowballed them on the foot-path, they did not know: the Bounder's flight had been too swift. After that somewhat disconcerting incident, they had proceeded on their way: little dreaming to what that incident had led. Having stayed at the Regal long enough to see the end of a picture, they had no time to lose in getting back to the school: lock-ups were early in winter. So they were again taking the short cut, which led them by the glade where the mysterious caravanner was camped by the old well. It was not such rough going, as it had been on the former occasion, for snow had long ceased to fall. But there was plenty of it under-foot. They tramped through it cheerfully, and emerged from the thickets into the glade: and their eyes fell on the caravan standing in the snow. They had almost forgotten its existence. A blur of smoke from the tin chimney indicated that it was not deserted, as when they had seen it last. But they gave the caravan hardly a glance; for beyond it, on the other side of the glade, a well-known figure had come into sight.

They stared across at Mr. Quelch. He had arrived at the glade from the direction of Greyfriars School, while they were arriving at it from the direction of Pegg.

Even at the distance, they could see that Mr. Quelch's expressive features were set in a frown. If he did not exactly look "fierce", as Johnny expressed it, he certainly looked very grim.

Why Quelch was there, they could not imagine. Quelch was accustomed to take his walks abroad with little regard to weather conditions—but pushing through tangled snowy thickets in the middle of a frosty wood was not an attractive walk, unless for fellows in haste. But there was Quelch, striding out of the wood into the glade, with knitted brows, and with his thick walking-stick under his arm. Really his expression seemed to indicate that he contemplated handling that walking-stick upon somebody!

"Quelchy's in a bait!" remarked Bob.

"Looks like it!" said Nugent. "Not little us—he hasn't seen us yet. Is he heading for that caravan?"

"He is—he are!" said Bob. "What the dickens—"

There was no doubt about it. Quelch, having emerged from the frosty wood, directed his long strides towards the camped caravan. He did not glance across the glade, and remained unaware of the five members of his form watching him from a little distance. His interest, evidently, was centred in that caravan. Why, the juniors could not begin to guess.

Quelch stopped at the van. He slipped the walking-stick from under his arm into his hand, lifted it, and struck on the door.

Bang!

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob. "What—!"

Bang! came again, as the walking-stick contacted the door.

It was quite a terrific smite. The door rang under it: the van almost rocked. Quelch was not standing on ceremony, in paying that call on the caravanner.

Bang! came a third time.

Harry Wharton and Co, looked at one another, in wonder.

"He's calling on that jolly old caravanner!" said Bob. "That ruffian we collared when he was pitching into Bunter—"

"But what the dickens—!"

"Something's up!" said Nugent. "But what? Looks as if there's going to be a row. The man's at home—see that smoke from the chimney—"

"He's not in a hurry to answer the door!" chuckled Bob. "He must hear Quelch tapping."

The juniors chuckled. Undoubtedly the man in the van must have heard Quelch tapping! The smites of the stick on the door echoed through the wood.

But the caravan door did not open. Apparently the man within did not want to see callers. But Quelch was not to be denied. Bang! bang! bang! rang the stick on the door, fairly shaking the van from end to end.

Bob Cherry gave a low whistle.

"Quelch means to have him out!" he said. "I say, he's a hefty brute—you remember the tussle we had with him! If he goes for Quelch, the old bean may be glad of a helping hand! We'd better stay around."

"Yes, rather," said Harry Wharton. "If that ruffian lays a finger on Quelch, we'll handle him fast enough."

Bang! bang! bang! rang the stick. Then, at length, an angry voice shouted from within the van.

"Who's there? Go on your way, whoever you are! Do you want me to come out to you?"

"Open this door at once!" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"Go away!"

"I refuse to go away! I intend to enter that van, and search it. Unless you open the door, I will break it in."

"Is Quelch in a bait?" murmured Bob Cherry.

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

"What do you want?" came an angry roar from within the van. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"I am Mr. Quelch, a form-master of Greyfriars School: and I have reason to believe that a boy of my form is detained in that van: and I have come here

to ascertain. I insist upon entering the van, and ascertaining whether the boy Bunter is a prisoner there."

Mr. Quelch's words were the climax of surprise to the Co.

"Holy smoke!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"Bunter!" repeated Harry Wharton, almost dazedly. "Bunter in that van! How could Bunter be there?"

"Do you hear me?" Quelch's voice was going on, on its top note. "A boy named Bunter is missing from school: and I have reason to believe that he has been kidnapped, and is detained in this van. Now, open the door."

"This beats Banagher!" murmured Johnny Bull.

"The beatfulness of esteemed Banagher is preposterous."

Still the door did not open. But the angry voice of the caravanner came through.

"You're mad! I am alone here! Now go on your way, and stop that shindy. If I come out to you, you'll get hurt."

Bang! bang! bang! went the stick again. The door creaked and groaned under the blows. Amazing as it was to the Famous Five, there was no doubt that Mr. Quelch believed that the missing member of his form at Greyfriars was a prisoner in that van, and he was going to ascertain.

He rained blows on the caravan door. Quelch had a sinewy arm, and the stick was thick and strong. It really looked as if the door would have to yield under that frontal attack.

The caravanner seemed to realize it. His voice came again, husky with rage.

"Stand back, and I will open the door."

Mr. Quelch stepped back. The door was opened, barely wide enough for the caravanner to step out. He stepped out, and instantly banged the door shut behind him: obviously to prevent his unwelcome visitor from getting a glimpse of the interior. He clenched his hands, and his beady eyes glittered at the Remove master of Greyfriars.

"It is you, James Dexter!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "I suspected it, from the description I received from Vernon-Smith."

It was another surprise, for the Famous Five. Smithy, it seemed, was mixed up in this, somehow!

Dexter's hands were clenched, almost convulsively, his eyes burning. The juniors could see that he could barely restrain himself from springing at their form-master. Probably it was only the recollection of his last encounter with Mr. Quelch that held him back.

"You old fool!" He grated the words between his teeth. "Are you mad, or what! What should I know of a boy missing from your school? What are you dreaming of?"

"Stand aside, and let me look into the van."

"I'll do nothing of the kind."

"I shall use force, if necessary" said Mr. Quelch. His voice was not loud now, but it was very deep. "I have received information, from a boy of my form at Greyfriars, that Bunter is here. It was so strange a tale, that I decided to ascertain the facts before calling in the police. I am here to do so. Your refusal to admit me into the van can have only one meaning—what I have been told is correct. The boy is here."

"I tell you I am alone here—"

"I shall look into the van, and ascertain for myself," said Mr. Quelch. "If the boy is here, as I can no longer doubt, I shall release him, and you will be handed over to the police—Stand back!"

But the man of the caravan did not stand back. He came at the Remove master with a spring like a tiger. Up went Quelch's right arm, and down came the stick. The juniors, across the glade, heard the crack of it, as it landed on the caravanner's head. But it did not stop him. Before the Remove master could deal another blow, Dexter was upon him, grasping him with savage hands and bearing him backwards. They went with a crash to the earth together.

"Quick!" panted Harry Wharton.

The captain of the Remove had never put up such speed on the football field. He fairly flew across the little glade, his comrades at his heels. It was only then that James Dexter discovered that there were others on the scene. He discovered it, as he was grasped on all sides, and dragged away from Mr. Quelch, rolled over in the snow, and pinned to the earth in the grip of many hands.



The Remove Master struck with his stick

CHAPTER XX

LIGHT AT LAST!

"BUNTER!" roared Bob Cherry.

He could hardly believe his eyes.

Mr. Quelch was sitting up, gasping for breath, and staring at the juniors in amazement. No more than the caravanner had he been aware that a bunch of Greyfriars fellows were close at hand. Dexter, sprawling on his back, panted and struggled; but he was pinned down helplessly, with Harry Wharton grasping his wrists, Johnny Bull kneeling on his chest, and Nugent and Hurree Janset Ram Singh trampling on his legs. Bob's aid was not needed, and he rushed to the caravan and tore open the door. He stared in, at a fat figure sprawling in blankets on the floor of the van.

"Bunter!" Bob's eyes fairly popped at the sprawling Owl. "It—it—it's Bunter! He's here, you fellows."

He clambered into the van.

Billy Bunter lay in the blankets, tied up like a turkey, with a thick muffler tied across his mouth. He could not stir, and he could not speak: he could only blink at Bob Cherry.

Bob grabbed away the gagging muffler, and there was a gasp from Bunter.

"Ooooooogh! Woooooogh!"

"Okay, old fat man," grinned Bob. "I'll soon have you loose."

"Urrrrggh!"

Bob's pocket-knife was quickly at work. In a few moments the fat Owl was free of his bonds. He sat up, spluttering.

"Ooogh. That beast—ooogh!—he tied me up all of a sudden, you know, when he heard somebody coming! I say, I heard Quelch yelling—is old Quelch there? Ow! Oh, crikey! I say, where's that beast—?"

"We've got him safe," said Bob, reassuringly. "Four of us sitting on him—you needn't worry about him."

"Sure he's safe?" asked Bunter, anxiously.

"Quite!" grinned Bob.

"Oh, all right, then," said Bunter. "I say, I'm awfully hungry! If you're sure you've got that beast safe—"

"Safe as houses."

"Then I'll jolly well get something to eat."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at," snorted Bunter. "I can tell you I'm jolly well famished! There's lots of grub here, but that beast was jolly mean with it!" Bunter grabbed open the food-locker, and reached into it with eager fat hands.

Bob, chuckling, jumped down from the van, leaving a sound of munching behind him. Bunter did not follow. Bunter was hungry, and there was food at hand—and first things came first, with Bunter.

Mr. Quelch was on his feet now, a little breathless. His gimlet-eyes glinted at the man who was still struggling and wriggling under four sturdy juniors, and he picked up his stick.

"Wharton!"

"Yes, sir," said Harry.

"Are you able to hold that ruffian securely?"

"Oh, quite, sir! We've got him all right."

"He can't do a thing, sir," said Nugent.

"Very good," said Mr. Quelch. "Do not let him escape. It appears from what Cherry says that Bunter is in the van, as Vernon-Smith informed me—"

"He's there, sir," said Bob. "He was tied up, and I've let him loose. Bunter's all right, sir."

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch.

Munch, munch, munch! Perhaps Billy Bunter did not hear. Or perhaps he was too busy to heed.

"Bunter!" repeated Mr. Quelch, crescendo. "BUNTER!"

The munching in the van changed to a grunt. Then Billy Bunter appeared in the doorway. His fat face, even more than usual in need of a wash, looked out, and his little round eyes blinked at Quelch through his big round spectacles. He did not speak. His mouth was too full for speech.

"So you are there, Bunter!" said Mr. Quelch. There was satisfaction in his look and his tone. Billy Bunter was not, perhaps, a particularly delightful object to the view, at the best of times: and at the present moment he looked untidy, grubby, tousled, dishevelled. But undoubtedly Mr. Quelch was very glad, and very relieved to see that missing member of his form again.

"Grooogh! I mean, yes, sir!" gurgled Bunter, through a barrage of ham.

"Come out of that van, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

Billy Bunter unwillingly descended from the van. Up to a few minutes ago, the fat Owl had been longing and yearning to get out of that van. But circumstances alter cases. Matters were quite different, now that he was at liberty, with a free run of the food-locker. However, he had to heed his master's voice, and he emerged reluctantly.

"I am very glad to see you safe again, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Are you, sir!" said Bunter. "I—I mean, yes, sir! I—it wasn't my fault, sir!" he added, hastily.

"Eh! What was not your fault, Bunter?"

"I—I—couldn't help that beast taking me away that night, sir. He said you'd all think I'd run away from school, sir—but I—I didn't—"

"I am aware of that, Bunter." Mr. Quelch glanced round at the bunch of juniors pinning down the caravanner. "Keep that man secure, my boys. He will be given into custody on a charge of kidnapping. Bunter!" He turned to the fat Owl again. "How long have you been a prisoner in that van?"

"Ever since that night, sir, when that beast collared me in your study, sir—I—I mean. I wasn't in your study, sir—I—I never came down after that box of chocolates, and I—I wouldn't have, only Smithy—"

"In the circumstances, Bunter, you will not be punished for your foolish action in coming down from your dormitory at night to take that article from my study—"

"Oh!" Bunter's grubby fat face brightened. "If—if I ain't going to get into a row, sir, I—I—I did come down to your study, sir—"

"How did you fall into the hands of that man?"

"He—he—he was there, sir—"

"In my study?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir! He grabbed me, and—and—"

"And how did he convey you here?" asked Mr. Quelch, quietly.

"I—I don't know how he got me out of the study, sir—I—I think I—I fainted when he grabbed me—I—I—I mean, I didn't faint—I—I'm not the sort of fellow to faint, I hope—but—but I don't know how he got me out, sir," stuttered Bunter. "He made me walk a long way—"

"Underground?" asked Mr. Quelch, in the same quiet tone.

Bunter blinked at him, in astonishment.

"How did you know, sir?" he stuttered.

"Answer my question, Bunter."

"Yes, sir, I—I thought it must be underground, because there wasn't any snow or wind, but it was all dark, and I don't know—"

"Where did you come out into the open air?"

"I—I don't know, sir"

"Was there snow where you came out?"

"Oh, yes, sir, lots of it burying a fellow—"

"Did the man use a rope to pull you up?"

Again Bunter's eyes bulged at Quelch, in astonishment.

"Yes, sir, I don't know why, as it was all dark, but he tied a rope on me and dragged up and up a wall or something—"

Mr. Quelch nodded. Harry Wharton and Co. could only listen in amazement, but Bunter's replies evidently confirmed something that was in Quelch's mind.

"Very well, Bunter, that will do," said Mr. Quelch. "You will now return to your school, Bunter. But if there is soap and water in the van, make yourself a little more presentable before you do so."

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. He shot back into the van. But it was not to look for soap and water. He nose-dived for the food-locker.

Mr. Quelch, with a grim brow, walked across to James Dexter, still sprawling on his back, pinned down securely, and no longer struggling. Harry Wharton and Co. were too much for him, and he had ceased to resist. His beady eyes glittered up at Quelch like a savage animal's. The Remove master stood looking down at him, grimly.

"The matter is now clear, Dexter," he said. "You will be detained, and handed over to the police, on a charge of kidnapping and robbery. You were in my study at midnight, on Thursday, when that foolish boy Bunter came down, and you kidnapped him to keep him silent. You were aware of the secret of that old well, which was discovered this afternoon by Vernon-Smith, a boy of



The Remove Master looked down at him

my form, who fell into the well. You were aware that a secret subterranean passage exists, from that old well, to Greyfriars School, and that it gives access to my study there."

There was a snarl from Dexter, but no other reply.

"Neither have I any doubt how you made the discovery," said Mr. Quelch. "I have not forgotten that when you were a house-porter at Greyfriars and fled with the proceeds of a robbery you hid at the bottom of that old well, and would have gone safe with your plunder, had not Inspector Grimes found the rope by which you descended. You discovered the secret passage then, by chance, as Vernon-Smith discovered it this afternoon: and you stored it in your memory to be used later for further depredations."

Quelch, evidently, had thought it out.

"It was you who robbed my desk that night," went on Mr. Quelch. "It was you who robbed the headmaster's study the following night." His brow grew stern. "Rascal! As no signs of entrance could be found, it was assumed that there was a pilferer in the school—you cared nothing for that: indeed, I have little doubt that it suited your plans, as it made you more secure. You are an unmitigated rascal, Dexter."

"You can't prove—!" muttered Dexter.

"I am assured that the police will find ample proof, when they search you and your van," said Mr. Quelch, contemptuously. "The matter will be left in their hands. Cherry!"

"Yes, sir!" said Bob.

"You will, I think, find a rope in the van," said Mr. Quelch. "Get it at once."

"Certainly, sir."

Bob jumped into the van. He emerged a moment later with a coil of rope in his hand: evidently the rope that Dexter used for descent into the old well.

"You may secure that man's hands behind his back!" said Mr. Quelch.

There was a brief struggle from Dexter, as the juniors rolled him over on his face. But in a couple of minutes his wrists were tied together behind him.

"You will now return to the school, my boys," said Mr. Quelch. "Wharton! I shall give you a note to take to Mr. Prout, who will telephone to the police-station at Courtfield. I shall remain here in charge of this man till Inspector Grimes arrives."

"Yes, sir."

Mr. Quelch pencilled a note on a leaf of his pocket-book, tore it out and folded it, and handed it to the captain of the Remove. Then he glanced at Dexter.

"You may get into the van, Dexter," he said. "I shall lock the door on you, till the police are here to take you into custody."

Dexter gave him one look—a very expressive look. Then, in sullen savage silence, he tramped into the caravan. There was a sudden frantic yell from the van.

“Yaroooh! I say, you fellows, keep him off!”

A fat figure bounded from the van. Billy Bunter, with his little round eyes almost popping through his big round spectacles, leaped out as if for his life. A foot appeared behind him in the doorway. Dexter’s hands were tied: but his feet were available, and he landed one of them on Billy Bunter’s tight trousers as he leaped. No doubt he derived some satisfaction from bestowing that final attention upon his late prisoner. Billy Bunter derived no satisfaction from it whatever.

“Yaroooh!” roared Bunter.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Ow! wow! I say, you fellows—wow!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Bunter!” rapped Mr. Quelch. “You will go back now with Wharton—You have not washed!” he added, severely.

“Oh! No! There wasn’t any soap in the food-locker—I—I—I mean, I—I’ve been looking for it—I—I haven’t been eating the ham—”

“Go!” snapped Mr. Quelch.

“Oh! Yes, sir!” gasped Bunter.

Mr. Quelch slammed the door of the van, and locked it on the outside. He remained there, with his stick under his arm, as the juniors trailed away in the thickening dusk: Billy Bunter rolling with them, and probably for the first time in his fat life, glad to use his fat little legs again.

CHAPTER XXI

HAPPY LANDING!

“I SAY, you fellows!”

It was after class. Five fellows were in No. 1 Study, discussing break-up and the Christmas holidays, when the fattest figure at Greyfriars School rolled in. They all looked at Bunter: but manfully refrained from saying “Hook it!” or “Buzz off!” It was the day before breaking-up, and Christmas was at hand: and they were in a tolerant mood.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo, old fat man!” said Bob Cherry quite affably.

"Have some chocs, you fellows?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

Billy Bunter had a large box of chocolates in his fat hand. Smears round his extensive mouth indicated that he had already sampled the contents. But the box was still almost full, as he extended it to the surprised five.

"Have some, you chaps," he said. "There's lots."

"Whose are they?" inquired Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"It's time Bunter disappeared again," remarked Frank Nugent. "A fellow could leave tuck about his study while Bunter was disappeared."

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Is that Smithy's box of chocs?" he asked. "I remember Quelch said he was going to hand it out at the end of the term."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at," said Bunter, warmly. "These chocs ain't Smithy's—they're a Christmas present from my Uncle Carter. Making out they're Smithy's, when they've just come by post from Bunter Court—I mean from my Uncle Carter. I haven't just been to Quelch's study, and he never handed me this box and jawed me about taking it into the form-room. I think he might have let me off the jaw, too, after all I've been through," added Bunter. "But that's Quelch, all over."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, it was all through me that he got back what that man Dexter pinched from his study that night," yapped Bunter, "and what was pinched from the Head's study, too! Didn't old Grimey find it all parked in the caravan, when he searched it? If I hadn't taken that box of chocs into the form-room that day, and if I hadn't come down from the dorm after it that night, that man Dexter would have got away with it, instead of old Grimey walking him off to the police-station. It was all through me really, but is Quelch grateful? No wonder Spokeshave said that a thankless tooth was sharper than a serpent's child! He jawed me—"

"When he handed over the box of chocs?" asked Bob grinning.

"Yes—I—I mean no! This choc of box came from Bunter Court—I mean, this box of chocs came from my Carter uncle—I mean my Uncle Carter—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Lots to go round," said Bunter, generously.

"Are you going to offer Smithy some?" asked Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the juniors. Bunter seemed very generous with that box of chocs. But it was unlikely that he would offer some to Smithy—the late proprietor thereof.

"Well, Smithy would want the lot," said Bunter. "I—I mean, I—I don't like Smithy! I jolly well well know he made out I'd burgled Quelch's study that night—I've heard it all from Skinner, and Snoop, and other fellows, too. Just like Smithy—just like he made out that I had this box of chocs from his study! I certainly shan't offer that suspicious beast any of my chocs. I say, you fellows, I've come up to whack them out with you chaps! While we're scoffing them, we'll fix up about the Christmas holidays, what?"

There was a chuckle from the Famous Five. Billy Bunter, it seemed, was not yet fixed up for the Christmas holidays. Evidently he had come up to No. 1 Study to do the fixing up: and the generous whacking-out of Smithy's chocs was to pave the way!

There was a step in the passage, and Herbert Vernon-Smith looked into No. 1, Billy Bunter was rattling on.

"I say, you fellows, do have some of these chocs! They're jolly good—Smithy always has the best, you know—he's caked with oof. I mean, they're specially good—my Uncle Carter sent them to me for a Christmas present—nothing to do with Smithy! If Smithy made out that this box was his, I'd jolly well punch his head, and chance it! What are you fellows grinning at?"

Billy Bunter blinked round, through his big spectacles, to see what the fellows were grinning at? He jumped, at the sight of the Bounder looking in at the doorway.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"That looks like my box of chocs!" remarked the Bounder.

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"So you're going to punch my head, if I make out that it's mine?" went on Vernon-Smith.

"Eh? Oh! Yes! No! I—I—Tain't yours, Smithy! It's a Christmas present from my Uncle Court—I mean from Bunter Carter—I mean Bunter Court—that is, my Uncle Carter. I haven't just got it back from Quelch. Don't you be a suspicious beast, Smithy—making out that a chap cracked old Quelch's desk, when it was that caravan beast all the time—"

"I've been looking for you, Bunter."

"Well, now you can jolly well go and look for somebody else," snorted Bunter. "I'm fed up with you, Smithy."

"I was going to ask you—"

"I jolly well know: but you needn't ask me for my box of chocs. I say, you fellows, you boot him out!" exclaimed Bunter. "Look what he was saying

about me, while I was stuck in that caravan—you jolly well boot him—”

“You fat ass,” said Harry Wharton. “That’s Smithy’s box of chocs—”

“Tain’t!” yelled Bunter.

“’Tis!” grinned Bob Cherry.

“Tain’t—!”

“’Tis!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Not at all,” said Vernon-Smith, unexpectedly. “It’s yours, Bunter.”

“Oh!” gasped Bunter.

“And I was going to ask you—”

“Well, if you were going to ask me for some, you can forget it—”

“I was going to ask you—”

“Yah!”

“Whether you’re fixed up for the Christmas hols.”

“Eh?”

“If not, you might like to come along with me for the hols!” suggested the Bounder. “I’ll try to give you a good time.”

“Oh!” gasped Bunter.

He blinked at the Bounder. Harry Wharton and Co. looked at Smithy curiously. Of all the fellows in the Remove, Billy Bunter was about the last whom Smithy might have been expected to ask for Christmas, at the home of his millionaire pater. But they could guess his reason. Smithy was sorry for his suspicion of the fat Owl, which had proved to be so utterly unfounded, and this was his way of making amends.

But no such idea occurred to the fat brain of Billy Bunter. He blinked at Smithy, his fat brow assuming a very thoughtful expression. Billy Bunter knew, if no one else did, that he was a very desirable guest, at Christmas or any other time, and the fellow to make any party a success. He seemed to be considering it carefully.

“Well, I might come—!” he said.

“Do!” said Smithy.

“I should have to turn some other fellows down,” said Bunter, thoughtfully. “Mauly rather wants me for Christmas—and I don’t really like saying no to old Mauly—! And then there’s that chap D’Arcy, at St. Jim’s—he’s rather banking on getting me for the hols. But I’ll come, old chap.”

“Done!” said Smithy.

Billy Bunter blinked round, at five grinning faces.

“Sorry I shall have to cut out Christmas at your place, Wharton,” he said.

“As I’m going with Smithy, you see that I couldn’t manage it.”

“Oh, don’t mind me!” said Harry, while his comrades chuckled.

"Another time, perhaps," said Bunter, airily. "It's all right, Smithy, I'll come. If you're going to have tea now, Smithy, I'll come to your study, and we'll talk it over—over tea—. What?"

"Oh, do!" said Smithy.

And Bunter did.

GREYFRIARS SCHOOL broke up for Christmas the next day: and while Billy Bunter rolled off in a big car with the Bounder, Harry Wharton and Co. boarded the humbler school-bus for the station. Billy Bunter was booked for a gorgeous Christmas holiday, regardless of expense: while Harry Wharton and Co. were booked not to see Bunter again till the next term: which was a happy ending all round to the exciting episode of the Disappearance of Billy Bunter!

THE END