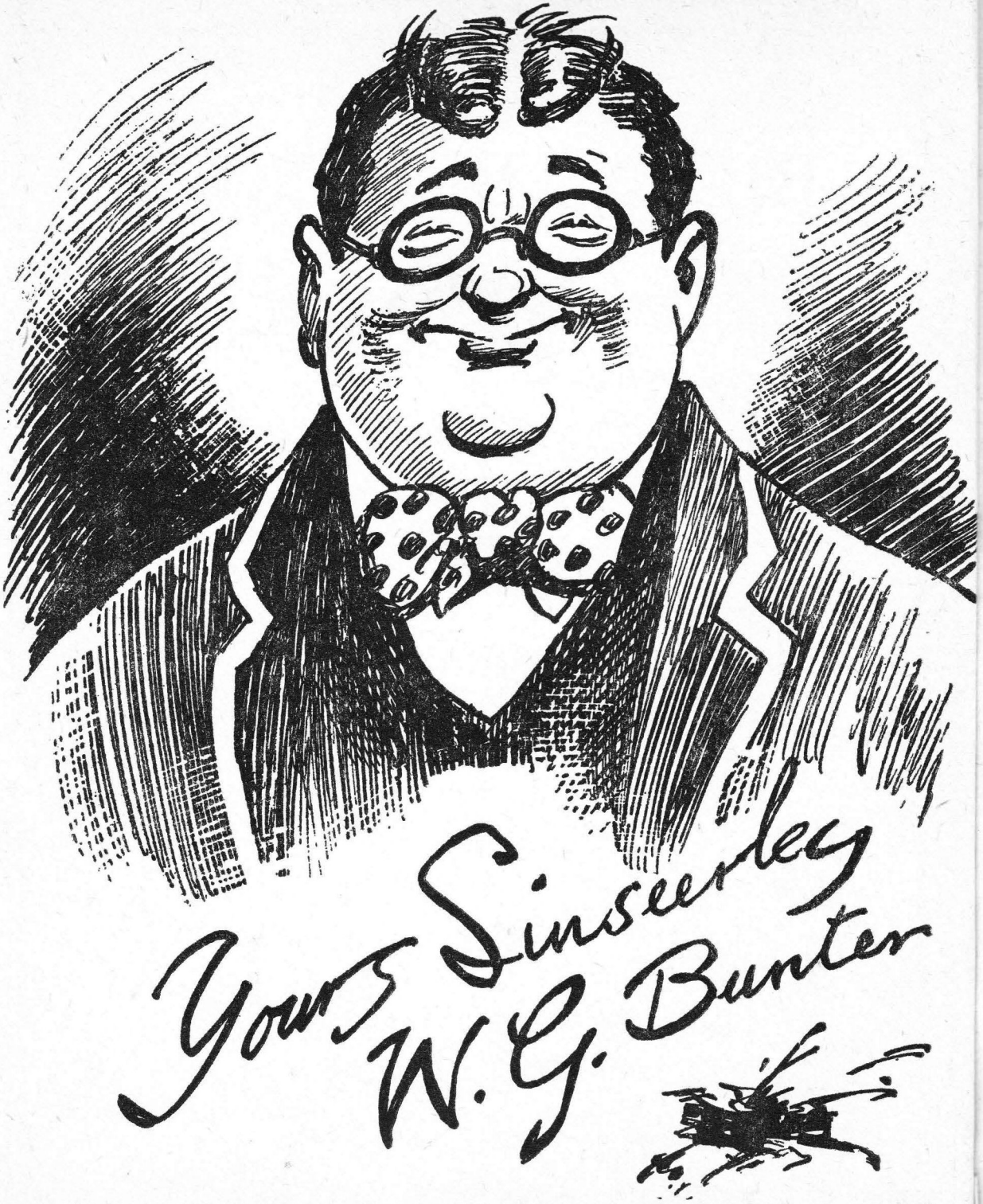
Yours Sincerely
W. G. Bunter

BILLY BUNTER'S OWN

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FOREWORD

Billy Bunter has had quite a long career. But never so far has he, like the King in olden times, come into his own! Now, at length, he comes into it—Billy Bunter's Own! Frank Richards hopes that his readers will be as pleased as Frank himself certainly is.

There are other attractions in this first issue of the BBO. The Rio Kid rides again. The Felgate fellows make their first appearance outside the covers of Raymond Glendenning's annual. We renew the acquaintance of the School for Slackers. But Billy Bunter annexes the largest portion: which of course is just like Bunter: he always takes the lion's share. It is Bunter's book—Buntro duce et auspice Buntro, if one may venture to make a pun on Horace!

Well, here it is! Publisher, artist, and author have combined to do their best: and we leave the rest to our readers.

FRANK RICHARDS

GREYFRIARS "WHO'S WHO"

Headmaster: Dr. Locke.

Form-masters: Fifth Form, Mr. Prout; Shell, Mr. Hacker; Upper Fourth, Mr. Capper; Lower Fourth, "Remove", Henry Samuel Quelch; Third, Mr. Wiggins; Second, Mr. Twigg.

French master: Monsieur Charpentier. Games-master: Larry Lascelles.

SIXTH FORM

George Wingate, captain of the school
Patrick Gwynne
Arthur Carne
Gerald Loder
Tom North
James Walker
Sykes

FIFTH FORM

George Blundell, captain of the Fifth
Bertram Bland
Horace James Coker
William Green
George Potter
Terence Fitzgerald
Cedric Hilton
Stephen Price
Tomlinson
Smith major

SHELL

James Hobson, captain of the form
Albert Carr
Claude Hoskins
Stewart
Chowne

UPPER FOURTH

Cecil Reginald Temple, captain of the form
Edward Fry
Dabney
Aubrey Angel
Paul Kenney
Scott
Turner

LOWER FOURTH, OR REMOVE

Harry Wharton, captain of the form	No. 1	Study	Smith minor	No. 8	,,
Frank Nugent	,,	,,	Herbert Trevor	No. 9	,,
Tom Brown	No. 2	,,	Monty Newland	,,	,,
Peter Hazeldene	,,	,,	Dick Penfold	,,	,,
Robert Donald Ogilivy	No. 3	,,	Percy Bolsover	No. 10	,,
Dick Russell	,,	,,	Harold Skinner	No. 11	,,
Herbert Vernon-Smith, the "Bounder"	No. 4	,,	Sidney James Snoop	,,	,,
Tom Redwing	,,	,,	Fred Stott	,,	,,
Oliver Kipps	No. 5	,,	Lord Mauleverer	No. 12	,,
Micky Desmond	No. 6	,,	Bob Cherry	No. 13	,,
David Morgan	,,	,,	Hurree Jamset Ram Singh	,,	,,
William Wibley	,,	,,	Wun Lung	,,	,,
William George Bunter	No. 7	,,	Mark Linley	,,	,,
Peter Todd	,,	,,	Field, "Squiff"	No. 14	,,
Tom Dutton	,,	,,	Johnny Bull	,,	,,
			Fisher T. Fish	,,	,,

THIRD FORM

Bolsover minor
Harold Lunn
Percival Spencer Paget
George Tubb
Wingate minor, "Jack"

SECOND FORM

Sammy Bunter, minor
George Gatty
Edwin Myers
Dicky Nugent, minor
Sylvester
Tatton

CHAPTER I

A SPOT OF VENTRILOQUISM!

"HARRY, old chap!"

"Oh, bother!" said Harry Wharton.

Four fellows in No. 1 Study, in the Greyfriars Remove, grinned. Bob Cherry, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, seemed rather amused.

Harry Wharton did not seem amused.

"Harry old chap" from Billy Bunter meant that Billy Bunter wanted something. And the captain of the Remove had no doubt what Billy Bunter wanted.

Christmas was in the offing. Greyfriars School was soon due to break up for the "hols". Christmas holidays were in every mind—and especially in Billy Bunter's. Bunter, as was not uncommon at such times, was rather at a loose end. Home, sweet home, seemed to have no great attraction for him. But among all the crowd of Greyfriars fellows who were asking one another for Christmas, nobody had thought of asking Billy Bunter.

Not that Bunter was punctilious upon such points. He was prepared to ask himself. And Harry Wharton could see it coming, as it were.

The Famous Five of the Remove were discussing that very subject, over

baked chestnuts in No. 1 Study, when the fattest member of the form rolled in, blinked at them through his big spectacles, and addressed Harry Wharton affectionately as "Harry old chap".

"I say, old fellow—!" pursued Bunter.

"Blow!" said Harry Wharton.

"Eh? Anything the matter, old boy?" asked Bunter, blinking at him in surprise, "Why, you were looking as jolly as anything when I came in—and now you're looking as if Quelch had given you six! Anything the matter?"

"Yes."

"What is it, old chap?"

"You!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Shut the door after you, Bunter," said Frank Nugent, laughing.

"Eh? All right," said Bunter. He shut the door: remaining, however, himself on the inner side of it, which was not precisely what Nugent meant.

"Like me to boot him out, Wharton?" asked Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Have some of these baked chestnuts, Bunter," said Bob Cherry, "Shove in enough to stop you talking."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

Billy Bunter helped himself to the chestnuts. Never was William George Bunter known to refuse an offer of that kind. The most extensive mouth in the Greyfriars Remove was filled to capacity. But if Bob hoped that that would stop Bunter talking, it was a delusive hope. Bunter's fat squeak continued, through a barrage of chestnuts.

"I say, you fellows, I came here to speak about the Christmas hols—"

"I guessed that one!" sighed Harry Wharton.

"The fact is—grooogh! Oooooogh!" Billy Bunter spluttered. Conversation did not seem to synchronize comfortably with chewing chestnuts, and something appeared to have gone down the wrong way. "Oooogh! Wooogh! Urrrrrgggh! Ooooch! The fact is, you fellows—urrrrggh! I was going to say—wurrrrrggh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ooogh! Blessed if I see anything to—ooogh!—cackle at, when a fellow's chook-chook-choking—woooooch! Urrrrrggh!"

Billy Bunter cleared a fat neck at last, and resumed.

"The fact is, you fellows, I've been rather dished, over Christmas. I'm not going home to Bunter Court."

"If any!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—Urrgh! Wurrgh!" Bunter cleared a fat neck again. "The fact is, my people will be away over Christmas, so there won't be the usual magnificent festivities at home. Sammy and Bessie are going to uncles and aunts: but they don't seem keen on me—I—I mean, I'm not keen on

Christmas with fusty and musty old uncles and aunts. So I've told the pater I'm going with some of my pals in my form here, see?"

"The seefulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin. "The esteemed pals will be terrifically pleased—perhapsfully!"

"Oh, really, Inky! I say, Harry, old chap—"

"Run away and play, Bunter," suggested Harry Wharton.

"Eh? I haven't finished yet," said Bunter. "Of course, lots of fellows would like me for Christmas, I mean to say, I'm the sort of chap to be the life of a party, as you fellows know. With my wonderful ventriloquism, for instance—you fellows know what a wonderful ventriloquist I am—"

"We know you fancy you are!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull! I could ventriloquise your head off, and chance it," said Bunter, warmly. "Why, only yesterday Smithy kicked me because I made him think Quelch was calling him—I had the old boy's bark to a T. Can't I jolly well throw my voice wherever I jolly well like?"

"No: you jolly well can't!"

"Throw it out of this study, old fat man, and throw yourself after it!" said Bob Cherry.

"Beast! I say, you fellows, whose dog is that under the table? Dogs ain't allowed in the studies," said Bunter.

Five fellows stared at Bunter.

"There's no dog in the study, you fat ass," said Harry Wharton. "You—" The captain of the Remove broke off suddenly, with a jump.

Gr-r-r-r-r-r!

It was a sudden, hideous, ferocious growl from under the study table. It startled all the fellows in No. 1 Study: excepting one!

Johnny Bull, whose legs were under the table, jerked them out so suddenly, that his chair rocked, and went over backwards. Johnny sat on the floor.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

All the Co. jumped to their feet. Not one of them had had the faintest suspicion that there was a dog in the study. And that horrible growl under the table indicated that it was a very vicious one! Five fellows backed away from the table. Bunter remained where he was: apparently indifferent, and with a fat grin wreathing his fat face.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Where did that dashed dog come from?"

"The wherefulness is terrific."

"Sounds jolly savage—!" said Nugent.

Gr-r-r-r-r!

There was no doubt that that dog sounded savage!

Johnny Bull made a stride to the fireplace, and grasped the poker. Poker in hand, he turned back to the table.

"Must be Gosling's dog," he said. "Goodness knows how he wandered in here. I'll jolly well drive him out. I—Oh, my hat! Where's that dog?"

Johnny stared under the table.

No dog was visible there.

In utter amazement he stared. There was no sign whatever of a dog. The growl had been distinctly audible: twice. There was no mistake about that. All the Famous Five had heard it, quite distinctly. But that dog, if it was audible, was not visible.

"He, he, he!" came from Bunter again. "I say, you fellows! He, he, he! Think I can ventriloquise now, Bull? He, he, he!"

"Oh!" gasped Johnny Bull.

"You!" roared Bob Cherry.

"You fat ass—!"

"You terrific tick—!"

"He, he, he!" Billy Bunter chuckled, and chuckled again. He at least was amused, if the Famous Five were not. Certainly he had given indubitable proof that he could ventriloquise: nothing could have been more life-like than that ferocious growl, and undoubtedly it had appeared to come from under the table.

"So it was you ventriloquising, was it?" breathed Johnny Bull. Johnny had withdrawn his legs from an imaginary dog so rapidly that he had overturned his chair and bumped on the floor. He did not seem pleased. He gripped the poker and glared at the fat ventriloquist.

"He, he, he! Now, about the hols, Harry, old chap—!" went on Bunter. "I was going to say—yarooooh! Keep that poker away, Bull! If you shove that poker at me again, I'll—whooooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Johnny Bull did not keep the poker away. He jabbed it quite ferociously in Billy Bunter's fat ribs. The fat Owl of the Remove bounded.

"Beast! Will you stop jabbing that poker at me?" he roared. "Wooooh! Ow! You're pip-pip-puncturing me—wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, Harry, old chap, make him stoppit!" shrieked Bunter, dodging frantically, "I—I want to speak to you about the Christmas hols, old fellow—wow!—Keep off! Stoppit! About the hols, old fellow—"

"Keep it up, Johnny!" said Harry Wharton, laughing. He did not seem keen to hear anything from Bunter about the hols!

"Yarooooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a roar of laughter in No. 1 Study as Billy Bunter frantically dodged the lunges of the poker. But those lunges were not to be dodged: and the fat Owl, at length, dragged open the door and bounded into the passage. A final lunge from the poker just missed him as he disappeared.

"Beast!" floated back from the passage.

Johnny Bull banged the door after him. And the discussion of plans for the Christmas holidays was resumed in No. 1 Study: without the assistance of William George Bunter.

CHAPTER II

UNEXPECTED!

"FIXED up for the hols, Bunter?"

"Beast!"

It was Herbert Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars, who asked the question. It was Billy Bunter who answered it.

It was not a gracious answer to the Bounder's question. But Billy Bunter was not in a gracious mood.

He was peeved.

Sitting, or to be more exact sprawling, in the roomiest armchair in the Rag, Billy Bunter had a frown of thoughtfulness on his fat brow. He was thinking over a problem that seemed to have no solution, so far.

It was the problem of the Christmas holidays.

Whether Bunter Court was, or was not, the magnificent abode of wealth and luxury such as the fat Owl often described to unbelieving Remove fellows, it seemed that it was not available for Bunter. Mr. and Mrs. Bunter were going away for Christmas. Brother Sammy of the Second Form at Greyfriars, and Sister Bessie of Cliff House School, were booked for a sojourn with an uncle and aunt over the holidays. For some reason quite unknown to Billy Bunter, no uncle or aunt seemed to yearn for his company. It was rather a puzzle, for Bunter knew, if nobody else did, what a very fascinating fellow he was: a youth of many gifts, calculated to be the life and soul of any party.

But there it was!

Not that Bunter was keen on Bunter Court: an establishment that, seen close at hand, diminished to a semi-detached villa in Surrey. Neither was he keen on what he had described as "musty and fusty" old uncles and aunts. Christmas at Mauleverer Towers, or at Wharton Lodge, or in company with the Bounder on one of his expensive trips abroad, would have suited Bunter.

Mr. Bunter had suggested that his hopeful son should pass the Christmas holidays with some of his many friends at Greyfrairs: who, according to that hopeful son, were all eager for such a treat. As an alternative he had offered to arrange for William to remain at the school over the holidays—a prospect that did not appeal to Bunter in the very least.

So it was no wonder that Billy Bunter was peeved: and that his fat brow was sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought, as Shakespeare has expressed it.

Really it was a problem!

Lord Mauleverer had been tried, but tried in vain. His lordship had often been long-suffering with Bunter. But there was a limit. This time, all that Bunter had been able to extract from Mauly, was a promise to kick him if he spotted him anywhere within a mile of Mauleverer Towers.

In No. 1 Study he had had no better luck. Harry Wharton, it was true, had shown some signs of relenting, but the ventriloquial incident had put the lid on: and Bunter's fat ribs were still feeling the effects of lunges from the poker in Johnny Bull's vigorous hand.

Thinking it over, in the Rag, Bunter frowned, as Vernon-Smith came into the room with his pal Tom Redwing. A holiday with Smithy would have suited him—Smithy always did something fearfully expensive, as a millionaire's son could afford to do. But he had not even tried Smithy—there was no hope in that quarter. Smithy was as hard as nails: the very last fellow at Greyfriars to have a fat and fatuous Owl landed on him for the "hols".

So when Smithy came across, and asked him genially whether he was "fixed up for the hols", Billy Bunter could only suppose that the question was asked in a spirit of derision: and he answered accordingly.

Tom Redwing, apparently, had the same impression, for he gave his chum a rather expressive glance, and said:

"Chuck it, Smithy!"

"Only asking a question," said the Bounder, blandly, "I'm interested to know whether you're fixed up for the hols, Bunter."

"Yah!" retorted Bunter.

Several fellows in the Rag grinned. Billy Bunter and his problem, in fact, were rather a joke in the Remove. As a fisher for invitations, Bunter had no equal—and on this occasion, in the desperate circumstances, his fishing had been unusually extensive though unavailing. Every man in the Remove knew that Bunter was still "unfixed" for the hols: Skinner, indeed, had remarked that fellows had to guard with their left if Bunter came near them!

"Look out, Smithy!" said Skinner, "You'll find yourself landed with Bunter before you know where you are!"

"Oh, really, Skinner—"

"But that's just what I want," said Vernon-Smith, "If you're not fixed up for the hols, Bunter, like to come with me?"

Billy Bunter jumped almost out of his armchair.

His eyes fairly popped through his spectacles at the Bounder.

That was the last, the very last thing he had dreamed of hearing from Herbert Vernon-Smith.

Had the fat Owl dreamed that there was the remotest chance of a Christmas holiday with the millionaire's son, he certainly would not have wasted his time in No. 1 Study. Now he could scarcely believe his fat ears.

"Oh!" he gasped. "Mean it, Smithy?"

"Of course."

"Oh, crikey!" said Bunter. "I—I—I say, old fellow, I'll come with pleasure. I—I'd like it no end, Smithy!"

"Done, then!" said the Bounder.

Every fellow in the Rag stared at Smithy. All were as surprised as Bunter. Tom Redwing stared at his chum, more blankly than the rest.

"Look here, Smithy—!" he exclaimed.

"Don't jaw, old chap! I'm asking Bunter for the hols. Why not?"

"But——!" exclaimed Redwing.

"Is Redwing coming?" asked Bunter, with a rather inimical blink at the sailorman's son. It looked to him, from Redwing's words, that Tom had some objection to this addition to the Christmas party.

"Oh, yes, Reddy and I are going on a trip together," said Vernon-Smith. "If you like to make a third, Bunter——"

"Yes, rather, old chap! Look here, Redwing, you shut up," said Bunter. "Smithy can ask whom he likes, I suppose?"

"Yes, of course," said Redwing. "But——"

"You needn't butt in," said Bunter, warmly. "You shut up, see——?"

"But—!" persisted Redwing.

"Take Bunter's advice, and shut up!" said Smithy. "Now, is it fixed, Bunter? If you're on—"

"What-ho!" gasped Bunter. "Rely on me, old chap!"

"Then you'll pack in the car with us on the day we break up here, and get along to Folkestone, where we go aboard," said Smithy.

Billy Bunter's eyes danced behind his spectacles. This sounded like one of the Bounder's expensive trips abroad! It was exactly what Bunter wanted—if he could get it! Now he had got it!

"That's that," said the Bounder. "Come on, Reddy—"

"Look here, Smithy, Bunter won't like it, "exclaimed Redwing. "I can't make you out. If this is a joke—"

"Sober as a judge!" said Smithy. "Shut up, old fellow, and come along. It's a go, Bunter——and we'll have a tremendous time! Come on, Reddy."

"But——!"

"Oh, rot! You talk too much, old chap!" And with that, Vernon-Smith linked his arm in Tom Redwing's, and fairly dragged him out of the Rag.

Billy Bunter was left grinning with satisfaction.

Some fellows eyed him rather enviously. Everyone knew how the wealthy Bounder was accustomed to spending money right and left. Expense was no object, with Smithy, when he was after a good time. Skinner and Co. would have been very glad to join up—Fisher T. Fish would have jumped at it with both his transatlantic feet: quite a number of fellows, in fact, would have welcomed that breezy invitation from the Bounder. But he had not asked

them—he had asked Bunter—which really was inexplicable. How the Bounder, or anyone else, could possibly want Billy Bunter for the "hols", was a mystery.

But it was no mystery to Bunter! To his fat mind it was clear enough. Smithy had realized what a splendid chap he was, what a credit he would be to his party, and that was all. Smithy, certainly, was rather a sardonic fellow, with a satirical turn of humour: but an invitation was an invitation: Smithy couldn't possibly go back on it. Billy Bunter, at last, was safely booked for the hols. and with the very fellow he would have chosen! No wonder he grinned an expansive grin that extended almost from one of his fat ears to the other.

"Pulling your leg, I expect," said Skinner.

"Yah!" retorted Bunter. "Don't you wish he would pull your leg the same way? He, he, he!"

It was quite a happy Bunter.

CHAPTER III

BUNTER ALL OVER!

HARRY WHARTON glanced round at his chums in No. 1 Study, opened his lips, and closed them again. The chestnuts were finished, and the Famous Five about to go down. But it seemed that the captain of the Remove had something to say——yet hesitated to put it into words.

"Coming?" asked Bob Cherry, glancing at him.

"Oh! Yes! But—hold on a minute—"

"Two if you like," said Bob, cheerily.

Harry Wharton paused. His friends were looking at him inquiringly, wondering what was on his mind. All was settled, so far as the Christmas holidays were concerned. The Co. were going with Wharton to Wharton Lodge for Christmas. All that Harry had to do was to write to his uncle, Colonel Wharton or to his aunt, Miss Amy Wharton, and apprise them that four guests would be coming home with him.

"Well, look here——" said Harry, at last.

"Looking!" said Johnny Bull.

"The lookfulness is terrific," smiled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Give it an esteemed name, my absurd chum. What is the idiotic trouble?"

"Not exactly a trouble," answered Harry. "But—" He paused again, colouring a little.

"Cough it up!" said Bob, encouragingly.

"Well, look here—!" Another pause.

"We're all looking!" said Frank Nugent, laughing.

"Well, about Bunter," said Harry, getting it out at last.

"What about Bunter?"

"Well, he's rather a bothering ass, and a fat fraud, and when he plays ventriloquist tricks he wants kicking, and—and——well, after all, we've stood him before," said Harry. "He seems to have some spot of bother at home, and you know he's rather hung up for the hols—and I was thinking——well, if we've stood him before, we can stand him again, what?"

Four fellows grinned.

Evidently the genial influence of Christmastide had done its work, and Harry Wharton, instead of hardening his heart like Pharaoh of old, had softened it towards the fat Owl of the Remove. Nobody wanted Bunter——certainly Harry Wharton didn't—but for that very reason, he was thinking of including the fat Owl in the party for Wharton Lodge.

"So that's it?" said Bob.

"That's it! You see—"

"It's your party, old man."

"But if you fellows don't like the idea—!"

"Who would?" asked Johnny Bull. "All the same, it's a good idea, old bean. Have the fat chump by all means."

"Right as rain," said Nugent. "If that's all—"

"Well, that's all," said Harry. "If you fellows think you can stand him, I'll ask him when we go down."

"The standfulness will be terrific, my esteemed chum," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, reassuringly.

"Hear, hear!" grinned Bob.

Harry Wharton looked relieved.

"Well, if that's settled, let's go down, and I'll tell Bunter," he said; and with that, the Famous Five left the study, to go down to the Rag.

On the Remove landing they passed Vernon-Smith and Redwing, apparently engaged in a warm argument. Tom Redwing was looking disturbed, while the Bounder was grinning his most sardonic grin.

"Look here, Smithy—!" Redwing was saying, as Harry Wharton and Co. came along. "Look here, it's too thick—"

"Bow-wow!" said Smithy.

"It's a rotten joke——"

"Quite a good one, I think."

"Well, I don't! You know jolly well——exclaimed Redwing.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "You fellows rowing? Forgotten that Christmas is coming? Peace, my infants, peace!"

"Fathead!" was the Bounder's reply to that.

The Co. went down the stairs, leaving Smithy and his chum still arguing, though they did not hear any more of the argument. But they could guess that Smithy was in one of his sardonic moods, and had been "up" to something, and that his more considerate pal was trying to reason with him.

The Famous Five came into the Rag in a cheery bunch. They were not, it

had to be admitted, feeling particularly exhilarated by the proposed addition of William George Bunter to the Christmas party at Wharton Lodge. On the other hand, it was Christmastime: and Christmas was the time for goodwill and good turns. On the whole, they were rather glad that they were going to relieve the fat Owl of his pressing problem.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here he is," said Bob Cherry. And the Famous Five came over to the fat figure sprawling in the armchair.

Billy Bunter blinked at them through his big spectacles.

It was not a welcoming blink.

Half-an-hour ago, Bunter would have been extremely glad to see them looking so friendly and genial. He would have broached the subject of the Christmas holidays on the spot, hoping for the best.

But there had been a change since then.

Bunter was booked for the "hols" now, and he had no use for Harry Wharton and Co. They were, so far, quite unaware of that change in the fat Owl's fortunes. They were about to learn!

"Looking for you, Bunter," said Harry.

"Look for somebody else!" suggested Bunter.

"What?"

"Deaf?" asked Bunter.

"Look here, you fat ass—"

"Yah!"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"It's all right, fathead," he said. "If you'd like to come along to Wharton Lodge for Christmas, we'll make you welcome. Like to come?"

Only one answer was expected to that question. For a week at least, Billy Bunter had been going up and down the Remove, like a lion seeking what he might devour, in quest of an invitation for the "hols". Now that he had, at long last, received one, naturally he might have been expected to reply with a prompt affirmative, before the inviter had time to change his mind. But it was the unexpected that was destined to happen.

Bunter's fat lip curled. He turned up his fat little nose, even further than Nature had already done. All the contemptuous derision of which he was capable was concentrated in his fat face.

"No!" he answered.

"Eh?"

"I said no!" sneered Bunter. "Sorry, and all that, but I really couldn't come. You can't expect it."

The Famous Five gazed at him, blankly.

They had expected an affirmative reply, and were genially prepared to make the best of it. A negative reply was too much to be hoped for. Certainly, a negative was more gratifying than an affirmative, if it came to that. But the manner in which it was handed out was not gratifying.

"Sorry, of course," pursued Bunter, blinking at the amazed five, "I'd give you a week or two, at your humble home, if I could, Wharton. But I simply couldn't spare the time, these hols."

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob Cherry.

"You fat ass—!" said Harry.

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"I'm not pulling your leg, Bunter," said Harry, quite puzzled. "You can come home with me for Christmas——"

"I'll watch it!" said Bunter, derisively. "Sorry, and all that, but it's not good enough, if you don't mind my saying so. I have enough of those fellows at school, without having them in the hols. as well. And of you too, Harry Wharton, if you want it plain. And I couldn't stand your fussy old uncle, or your fussy old aunt—I just couldn't! And I may as well say, too, that Wharton Lodge isn't exactly the sort of place I'd care to spend the hols. in. Hardly my class, if you know what I mean."

Bunter was "rubbing it in".

He was enjoying this!

Safely landed for the hols, Bunter could venture to make himself as objectionable as he liked. Which he accordingly did! It was Bunter all over!

"Well suffering cats and crocodiles!" said Bob. "Is Bunter wandering in his mind, or has he landed himself on Mauly for the hols, or what?"

"Oh, really, Cherry—!"

"Kick him!" suggested Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

Harry Wharton laughed. He was surprised: and he could not really be expected to be pleased by the way Bunter put it. Nevertheless, the prospect of not seeing Bunter again till after the holidays was grateful and comforting!

"So you won't come, Bunter?" he asked.

"No!" answered Billy Bunter, emphatically," I jolly well won't!"

"Thanks!" said Harry.

"Eh?"

"Many thanks!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the Co.

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"The thankfulness is terrific, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Co. walked away, leaving the fat Owl frowning.

But the frown soon disappeared from the fat brow: and Billy Bunter grinned again, a happy and anticipative grin. He had jolly well told Wharton off—which was a considerable satisfaction. And he was going abroad with Smithy on one of his expensive holiday trips—a still greater satisfaction. Billy Bunter

was, for the present, in a happy dream—from which, alas! he was destined to wake later!

"Blessed if I make the fat ass out," remarked Bob Cherry, as the Famous Five walked out of the Rag. "But that's that, at any rate! What an escape!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Famous Five went out into the quad to punt a footer till tea-time: undoubtedly feeling that they had had a lucky escape!

CHAPTER IV

BEASTLY FOR BUNTER!

"'EAVY!" remarked Gosling.

"I believe you!" said Cripps, the carrier.

Billy Bunter blinked round, through his big spectacles.

The arrival of the carrier from Friardale interested Bunter. Old Cripps sometimes brought a hamper along for some Greyfriars fellow. Perhaps the fat Owl nourished a faint hope that the old folks at home might have sent him a hamper—hope springs eternal in the human breast. But the object that Cripps had landed at the porter's lodge was nothing like a hamper.

It was a long box of considerable dimensions. It was nearly six feet long, nearly two feet wide, and well over a foot deep. The long lid was of wooden slats, through the interstices of which, brown sacking could be seen, and wisps of straw. Whatever that lengthy box contained was, apparently, packed in straw and sacking. Obviously it was not food: so there was no reason why Billy Bunter should be interested in it. But Bunter was always interested in what did not concern him.

"Wot the dickens can be in it, Cripps?" went on the ancient Greyfriars porter.

"You can ask me another!" answered the Friardale carrier.

"It's for Mr. Quelch," said Gosling, peering at the label. "Bit 'eavy to carry up to the 'Ouse, Cripps."

"More than a bit," agreed Cripps.

"More like Mr. Quelch will want it unpacked in the wood-shed," said Gosling. "He wouldn't want all that rubbidge littering his study." Gosling glanced round at the fat junior who was looking on. "'Ere, Master Bunter! You go in and tell your form-master that this 'ere box has come, and ask him where he wants it put, please."

Billy Bunter blinked at Gosling through his big spectacles.

Possibly Gosling fancied that a fellow who was hanging about idly with nothing to do, would be quite willing to oblige in so small a matter. If so, he

had forgotten all he knew about Bunter. True, a walk from the porter's lodge to the House was not a great exertion. But William George Bunter did not like even a small exertion.

"Oh, really, Gosling—!" he said, warmly.

"Well, cut off, will you?" said Gosling.

"I'll watch it," answered Bunter.

Gosling gave him an expressive look. Probably he would have preferred to give him something more expressive, with his horny hand.

"Well, I got to be going, Gosling," said Cripps.

"'Old on," said Gosling. "You'll 'ave to give me a 'and with it, wherever the dratted thing 'ave got to go. I'll speak to Mr. Quelch from the lodge."

Gosling went back into his lodge, to speak to Mr. Quelch, in his study, on the telephone there. Cripps waited. Billy Bunter stood blinking at the long box, wondering what it might possibly contain that had arrived for the Remove master just before Christmas. Whatever it might contain, did not concern Billy Bunter in the very least: so naturally he was curious. Curiosity was Billy Bunter's besetting sin.

Gosling emerged from the lodge again.

"He's coming," he said.

A rather tall and angular gentleman came down from the House. It was Mr. Quelch, master of the Remove, to whom that mysterious box was addressed on the label. There was quite a keen expression on Quelch's face. Evidently he was interested in that box. He came on the scene with rapid strides.

"Ah! It has come!" said Mr. Quelch, glancing at the box with much satisfaction. "I think it had better be unpacked in your shed, Gosling—there seems to be a great deal of packing inside. Please carry it to the shed, and be extremely careful with it. One cannot be too careful with busts."

"There ain't any bu'st, sir," said Cripps. "It says 'With Care,' on that box, sir, and I've 'andled it with care. Don't you be afraid of a bu'st, sir."

"Eh! What? There are two busts in that box, Cripps—"

"I'm sure there ain't sir," answered the Friardale carrier, warmly. "When it says 'with care', sir, we 'andles things with care. You can take my word for it, sir, that there ain't a single bu'st in it, let alone two."

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch. "You misunderstand me, Cripps—"

"There certainly ain't any bu'sts in that box, sir," declared Cripps. "You see any bu'sts in it, Gosling?"

"Can't say I do!" said Gosling. "It's all right, Mr. Quelch, sir—Cripps ain't busted that box, sir—there ain't a sign of a bu'st—"

"You misunderstand my meaning entirely," rapped Mr. Quelch. "That box contains the busts of two famous Roman poets—Horace and Virgil. Marble busts! Do you understand?"

Billy Bunter grinned. Evidently there were two "busts" in that box, though

not the kind of "bu'sts" to which Cripps had supposed the Remove master to be alluding.

"Marble busts!" repeated Mr. Quelch, to make it quite clear. "Do you understand now, Cripps?"

"Well, of course I understand that marble bu'sts if you drop it, sir—"said the carrier. "If there's marble in that box, sir, it ain-t busted, you can take my word for that."

Mr. Quelch breathed rather hard.

"A bust, Cripps, is a sculptured figure, consisting of the head and shoulders," he rapped. "Kindly take the box to the wood-shed. Carry it between you, and take the greatest care."

"Oh! Yessir!" said Cripps, "lend a 'and, Gosling."

" 'Ere you are," said Gosling.

The long box was heaved up. No doubt the marble busts it contained were of a good size, for that box undoubtedly was weighty. Quelch watched the heaving-up process quite anxiously. Those Roman busts, in fact, were a Christmas present for Quelch, from his old college friend Professor Pawson. Horace and Virgil, in marble, were to adorn Quelch's study: happily reminding him at odd moments of the Aeneid and the Odes! That was the sort of thing, as Billy Bunter sarcastically reflected, in which Quelch was interested! Bunter, personally, would gladly have swopped both Horace and Virgil, with all their deathless works thrown in, for a single dough-nut!

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch, as Cripps and Gosling started.

"Eh! Oh! Yes, sir," answered Bunter.

"Run to the wood-shed and open the door ready."

Billy Bunter gave him one blink! But he could not venture to answer Mr. Quelch as he had answered Gosling. Deep as were Billy Bunter's objections to making himself useful, he had no choice in the matter. Suppressing his feelings, the fat Owl rolled away to the wood-shed to open the door.

After him marched Gosling and Cripps with the long box. After them marched Mr. Quelch, with an eye on the box, evidently anxious to see Horace and Virgil safely landed.

Bunter had the door open by the time they arrived. The long box was carried into Gosling's wood-shed, and dumped down there—with care!

"Bunter!"

The fat Owl, in dread that further usefulness might be required of him, was rolling away. But his form-master's sharp voice called him back.

"Yes, sir!" breathed Bunter: suppressing his feelings once more.

"Go to my study, Bunter—"

"Oh, really, sir—"

"What? What did you say, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir!" gasped Bunter, "I—I—I'll go to your study with—with—with pleasure, sir."

"Go to my study immediately, Bunter and fetch a key that you will find in the top drawer on the left-hand side of my writing-table."

Billy Bunter breathed hard. As there was a lock on the box, and as Quelch was sending him for a key, he could guess that the key in the top drawer on the left-hand side of Quelch's writing-table was the key of that box. Really, Quelch could have brought it along with him! Apparently he hadn't thought of it: and Billy Bunter had to fetch it! Billy Bunter wished, from the bottom of his fat heart, that a fellow could talk to his "beak" as a fellow would have liked to talk to his beak! However, a fellow couldn't: so the fat Owl, with deeper feelings than ever, rolled off to the House to fetch that key. He did not hurry!

By the time he returned with it, Cripps, the carrier, was gone. Gosling and Mr. Quelch stood looking at the long box: Quelch with keen interest and anticipation: Gosling with neither. Quelch was eager to get that box unpacked: Gosling was far from eager to bend his ancient limbs to the task of unpacking it. Quelch gave Bunter a frown, as he rolled in with a key in a fat hand.

"You have kept me waiting, Bunter!" he rapped, severely.

"I—I—I hurried like anything, sir—"

"You did nothing of the kind, Bunter."

"I—I—I—"

"You are a lazy and idle boy, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir—!"

"This is the key of the box, Gosling," said Mr. Quelch. "My friend, Professor Pawson sent it by post a day or two ago, in readiness for the arrival of the box. Please take it and open the box, Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir—!"

"You need not go, Bunter."

"I—I think I heard Toddy calling me, sir—"

"Never mind that—"

"I—I mean, I—I've got some lines to do, sir—"

"You may help Gosling unpack that box, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter's feelings could hardly have been deeper than they were already. They were very, very deep, as he lent a reluctant fat hand in unpacking that box, when Gosling had unlocked it. Quelch, ruthlessly regardless of the indignation of the fattest and laziest member of his form, watched the unpacking with eager eyes, and fairly beamed when Horace and Virgil came to light from the midst of a vast accumulation of sacking and straw.

CHAPTER V

MYSTERIOUS!

"HA, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter blinked round him in astonishment.

Why that roar of laughter greeted him, as he rolled into the Rag after tea, he did not know.

There were quite a crowd of Remove fellows in the Rag after tea. They were all talking and grinning, when Bunter arrived. And his arrival was the signal for a roar of laughter from one end of the room to the other.

Evidently, some joke was on. Equally evidently, it was somehow in connection with William George Bunter. But what it was all about, was quite a mystery to the Owl of the Remove.

"I say, you fellows!" he squeaked.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, what's the joke!" demanded Bunter.

"You are!" answered Skinner.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter, both surprised and peeved, blinked from one face to another. The Famous Five, in a group by the window, were smiling—broadly. Skinner and Snoop and Stott chuckled. Squiff, and Tom Brown, and Peter Todd, and Ogilvy, and Russell, and Bolsover major, and a dozen other fellows, all seemed in a high state of amusement. Even Lord Mauleverer, placid in his armchair, was smiling. Clearly, every fellow in the room knew the joke—whatever it was. Only William George Bunter was in the dark.

"Going to have a jolly good time in the hols, Bunter?" called out Squiff.

"Eh! Yes, rather," answered Bunter.

Why that reply should have evoked another roar of laughter, Billy Bunter simply could not guess. But it did! There was quite a yell.

"I say, Toddy, what's all this cackling about?" asked Bunter.

"You, old fat man," answered Peter.

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"Merry Christmas, Bunter!" roared Bob Cherry. "Have a good time!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The merrifulness of the esteemed Bunter's Christmas will be terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, really, you fellows—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going abroad with Smithy!" said Bunter, loftily. "We leave in a car on breaking-up day—"

"A life on the ocean wave, a home on the rolling deep!" sang Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" exclaimed the fat Owl, more mystified and peeved than ever. "Nothing funny in a Christmas holiday abroad, is there?"

"That depends!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"The dependfulness is preposterous."

"It's too bad of Smithy, really," said Frank Nugent. "Poor old Bunter."

Billy Bunter gave him a disdainful blink.

"Yah! I jolly well know you'd be jolly glad to join up, Nugent!" he exclaimed. "You don't often get a Continental holiday, and chance it."

"Going to the Continent?" chuckled Johnny Bull.

"Eh? Yes! Of course! We're going aboard at Folkestone, Smithy said," answered Bunter. "I suppose that means the Continent, doesn't it? What else could it mean?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

More mystified than ever, Billy Bunter blinked round at the laughing juniors. For some reason, utterly mysterious to Bunter, the Remove fellows seemed to regard his Christmas holiday with Smithy as a tremendous joke. Evidently they did not take the view that he was going to enjoy it as he anticipated. Why, Bunter could not begin to guess. An expensive trip with Smithy was a great catch. Quite a number of fellows would have liked it. Bunter, so unexpectedly but so happily selected by the wealthy Bounder, was the lucky man!

There was absolutely nothing of a comic nature in the affair, so far as Bunter could see: unless, indeed, Smithy was only pulling his fat leg, and was going to let him down at the last minute. But that was unthinkable. There was a spot of the "bounder" in Smithy, whence his nickname in the Remove: but no Greyfriars man could be quite such a bounder as that. Smithy, having asked him for the "hols", couldn't possibly let him down. So that was all right—so far as Bunter could see, at all events.

True, Smithy had said nothing about a Continental trip. But going aboard at Folkestone couldn't mean anything else. How could it?

"I say, you fellows." A sudden doubt smote Bunter. "I suppose the trip ain-t off for any reason? Has Smithy said anything?"

"He's certainly said something," chuckled Skinner.

"Well, what?" demanded Bunter.

"Better ask him!"

"The trip isn't off, old fat man," said Bob. "That's all right! Smithy and Redwing are going—and you too, if you want to."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh!" said Bunter, relieved. "That's all right, then. Blessed if I see anything for you fellows to cackle at. I'll bet you'd like it!"

"Well, I might," chuckled Bob. "But I fancy you won't."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!" retorted Bunter. "I say, where's Smithy?"

"Up in his study," said Skinner. "Don't you worry, Bunter. Smithy isn't letting you down! You're going—if you don't cry off."

"Why should I?" demanded Bunter.

"Echo answers why!" grinned Skinner.

"Estimated echo answers that the whyfulness is terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you can cackle," said Bunter, disdainfully. "I'm going to have a good time abroad, I can tell you. Sorry for you spending the Christmas vac. at your poky little home, Wharton. You couldn't afford a trip like this.

"Well—I think I might," said Harry Wharton. "But I rather think I'd prefer Christmas at my poky little home."

"I don't think!" jeered Bunter. "Well, you can make the best of it, but you won't see me there, I can tell you. Like your cheek to ask me, I think, when I've got the choice between Bunter Court and going abroad with Smithy.

"Right—I won't ask you again," said Harry, laughing.

"No good if you did!" said Bunter, with overpowering disdain. "You can keep your poky little place, and your fusty old uncle and aunt—I've no use for them. I can do better than that, I can jolly well tell you."

"Best of luck," said Harry, amiably.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" snorted Bunter. "You can cackle, and pack into the school bus when we break up, while I'm rolling off in Smithy's car——"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter revolved on his axis, and rolled out of the Rag. A roar of laughter followed him as he went.

He headed for the stairs, and the Remove studies. He wanted to see Smithy.

There was something—Bunter could not imagine what—in that trip with Smithy which the Remove fellows seemed to regard as an excruciating joke. Smithy, it seemed, had said something: and that had started the joke. Nobody was going to tell him what it was—but Bunter, rather naturally, was anxious to know. The trip was not off—and Smithy couldn't possibly let him down—so it was all as right as rain! Still, Bunter wanted to know what it was that caused the Remove fellows to regard it as a tremendous joke. He was feeling just a little inward uneasiness.

He arrived at No. 4 Study in the Remove, pushed open the door, and blinked in. Smithy and Redwing, in that study, were finishing tea. They were talking—the Bounder grinning, and Redwing frowning a little—but they ceased to speak as the fat face blinked in.

"I say, Smithy—!" squeaked Bunter.

Vernon-Smith looked round at him.

"I say, all the fellows are cackling about something," said Bunter. "They seem to think there's something funny about me going with you for the hols."

"Do they?" asked Smithy, raising his eyebrows.

"You ain't calling it off, old chap?"

"Not at all."

"Well, what is all the cackling about, then?" asked the mystified Owl.

"Ask me another."

"Look here, Smithy—!" began Redwing.

"Cheese it, old man! Shut that door after you, Bunter."

Billy Bunter blinked from one to the other, and back from the other to the one. Then he withdrew, closing the door after him with rather a bang. Either Smithy had nothing to tell him—or was not going to tell him anything. Bunter was still in the dark as to the cause of the merriment in the Remove.

But Billy Bunter had his own ways and means of acquiring information when he wanted it. He banged the door of No. 4 Study—but he did not depart. He remained close to that door: and bent a fat ear to the keyhole! If anything was to be learned from the conversation in No. 4 Study, Billy Bunter was not going to remain in the dark.

CHAPTER VI

SMACK!

"SMITHY, old man—!" Tom Redwing spoke seriously.

"Can it!" said the Bounder.

"It's rather thick—"

"So you've said before. More than once."

"Well, I'll say it again," said Redwing, warmly. "It's not fair on that silly fat chump Bunter."

Outside the study door, a silly fat chump, Bunter, knitted fat brows. Bunter himself was quite unaware that he was a silly fat chump! He could not see that that description applied to him in any way at all. However, it was said of old that listeners never hear any good of themselves. Bunter would have liked to hiss "Beast!" through the keyhole. But he wanted to hear more. His fat brow wrinkled in a frown: but he remained quiescent, and listened.

"Rot!" came the Bounder's sardonic voice. "Isn't it the joke of the term?"

"Well, yes, perhaps: but—"

"Don't you want Bunter with us on the trip?" chuckled the Bounder.

"No more than you do, Smithy: but you jolly well know that he won't come when he finds out what it's going to be like."

"Oh!" breathed the fat Owl outside the keyhole. It seemed that there was something for Bunter to "find out". He listened-in with more eager intentness than ever. Whatever there was to be found out, Bunter was going to know.

The Bounder laughed. Smithy seemed amused if his pal was not.

"Think he wouldn't come if he knew, Reddy?"

"You know he wouldn't, Smithy! As soon as he finds out, he will call it off, and you jolly well know it."

"That won't be till we break up here," chuckled the Bounder.

"You've told a good many of the fellows—"

"Too good a joke to keep!" Smithy chuckled again. "But nobody's going to tip Bunter! It's too good to spoil by telling him."

"If he doesn't find out till we leave the school—"

"He won't."

"Well, that will leave him stranded," said Redwing.

"Exactly!" said the Bounder, coolly, "and a jolly good thing too. For more than a week he's been fairly dunning fellows for the Christmas hols—I've seen old Mauly hop round corners to keep clear of him—and this will keep him quiet! He won't know a thing till we break up here, and that will give the Remove a rest on the subject, see?"

"Well, yes: but—it's really taking him in—"

"That's rot!" said Vernon-Smith. "I've asked him for the hols—he can come if he likes! How's that taking him in?"

"Of course he thinks it's one of your expensive trips abroad—winter sports in Switzerland, or a run down to Nice or Cannes—"

"I've not said so."

"You've let him think so," said Redwing, sharply. "Think he would have jumped at your invitation if you'd told him we're going to spend the holidays on a coasting trip in my father's ketch, facing foul weather, living on hard tack, and working like forecastle hands? I wonder you're willing to face it yourself, Smithy—but you jolly well know that Bunter wouldn't."

The Bounder laughed: loud and long. Certainly the fat Owl of the Remove could hardly be imagined welcoming such a "holiday" as Redwing described. Had Smithy put it to him in those words, undoubtedly the indignant fat Owl would have hurled his invitation back in his teeth, as it were!

"Well, it's funny, in a way, perhaps," said Redwing. "But I think it's tough on Bunter. It will be a blow to him when he wakes up and finds out what sort of a trip it's going to be. Look here, Smithy, let him know—"

"I'll watch it!" said Smithy, chuckling. "Joke of the term, I tell you. Bunter can come—if he likes! It would do him good! Fancy him rolling about a sloping deck in a North Sea gale, soaked to the skin, and pulling and hauling like a jolly old sailorman! What? Ha, ha, ha!"

Outside the study, a fat junior with a fat ear glued to a keyhole seemed quite paralysed.

Bunter knew now!

Smithy was, after all, pulling his fat leg!

The invitation was genuine enough. Smithy was not going to let him down! He could join that Christmas holiday trip if he liked! But—!

Never for a moment had the fat Owl dreamed of anything like this. He had pictured one of Smithy's magnificent trips on the Continent—winter sports or palm trees in the sunny South: or something in that expensive line. And it was going to be a coasting trip in a sailing ketch—the North Sea in December—hard work and hard tack!

It was strange perhaps that the Bounder, whose millionaire father never counted expense when his son wanted anything, was content with such a trip. But there was a hardy strain in the Bounder: he loved ease and luxury with one side of his nature, as it were: but there was another side, to which hardship, and peril, and tough exertion, had a strong appeal. Smithy was going to enjoy that rough and stormy trip in old John Redwing's ketch, as much as he had ever enjoyed Monte Carlo or Biarritz or Zermatt.

But William George Bunter was built on very different lines. William George Bunter really wouldn't have been found dead on such a trip!

He knew, now!

Billy Bunter had gone up and down the Remove, as it were, seeking some fellow on whom to land himself for Christmas. He had landed himself at last! And this was the happy landing!

That beast Smithy knew that he wouldn't come on such a trip! That unspeakable beast Smithy was going to leave him in his dream till break-up day: when it would be too late for him to seek a happier landing! No doubt that would, as Smithy said, give the Remove fellows a rest from Bunter! No doubt it would be the joke of the term—from Smithy's point of view! But—

"Oh!" breathed Bunter.

For some moments, the fat Owl really seemed paralysed by that stunning revelation. Certainly, he was not going with Smithy on the "hols" now! Wild, wild horses would not have dragged him on such a trip! After that delusive happy landing, he was at a loose end once more—unfixed after all for the hols! Wrath and indignation boiled up in the fat Owl.

Smithy was still laughing, in sardonic enjoyment of his jest on Bunter, when the study door was hurled suddenly open.

The Bounder and Redwing jumped, and stared round.

"What the—!" ejaculated Smithy.

In the doorway stood a figure of wrath. Billy Bunter's fat face was crimson, his eyes gleaming through his spectacles. Never had so extensive an amount of wrath and indignation been packed into that fat face.

"Beast!" he roared.

"What's biting you, Bunter?" asked Smithy.

"Rotter!" roared Bunter.

"What the dickens——?"

"He's heard!" said Redwing, quietly. He guessed that a fat ear had been at the keyhole, now. "All the better, Smithy—it was too thick, as I told you—"

"Cad!" roared Bunter. "Beast! Rotter! Outsider! Think I'm coming with you on a rotten cheap trip on a dirty coaster in December? I'll watchit! Taking a fellow in! Beast!" Billy Bunter advanced into the study, and shook a fat fist almost under the Bounder's nose. "Rotter! Yah!"

The Bounder scowled. His tremendous joke on Bunter—such as it was—had come to a sudden end! It was annoying to Smithy.

"Oh, get out!" he snapped.

"Beast! I've a jolly good mind to punch your head!" roared Bunter. "I've a jolly good mind to smack your face! I've a jolly good mind to——"

"Are you waiting to be kicked out?" snapped the Bounder.

SMACK!

Bunter had stated that he had a "jolly good mind" to smack the Bounder's face. Certainly it had never occurred to Vernon-Smith that the fat Owl would venture to do so. Now he did! Carried away by indignant wrath, Billy Bunter forgot, for the moment, that discretion was the better part of valour. A fat hand swiped across Vernon-Smith's astonished face, with a smack that could almost have been heard at the end of the passage.

"Oh!" gasped Smithy.

He bounded from his chair.

The look on his face was enough for Billy Bunter. Towering wrath changed in an instant to terrified alarm. Bunter, quite scared at what he had done, and still more scared of the coming consequences, made a frantic bound for the doorway.

He would not have reached it, had not Tom Redwing jumped up, and grasped the Bounder's arm, stopping him as he leaped after Bunter.

"Hold on, Smithy," gasped Tom.

"Let go!" yelled Smithy.

"Keep cool, old chap! Look here——"

Smithy did not look like keeping cool! His face had been smacked—by the egregious Owl of the Remove. So far from thinking of keeping cool, Smithy was boiling over. He wrenched his arm free from Redwing's grasp, and rushed out of the study in pursuit of Bunter. Fortunately for the fat Owl, owing to Redwing's intervention, he had a start. And an arrow in its flight had nothing on William George Bunter, as he flew down the stairs, and bolted out of the House—hunting cover.

CHAPTER VII

HIS MASTER'S VOICE!

"GOSLING!"

"Yes. Master Vernon-Smith."

"Seen Bunter?"

Billy Bunter trembled.

The December evening had long closed in. It was clear and starry, and a crescent of moon sailed over the old quad of Greyfriars, a silver crescent in a steely sky. It was past lock-ups: and no Greyfriars junior was supposed to be out of the House. Bunter, heedless of lock-ups, heedful only of the angry Bounder on his track, had dodged out of the House by way of the junior lobby: hoping to keep at a safe distance till Smithy had had time to cool down.

But a glimpse of Smithy in the starry quad warned him that the Bounder was equally heedless of lock-ups. Had it been darker, the fat Owl would have been safe—but the visibility was good. He dodged away in great haste, and rolled into Gosling's wood-shed. There, he hoped, he was going to find safe cover.

Alas for Bunter! Hardly a minute later, he heard footsteps outside the shed: and the Bounder's strident voice. Evidently Smithy had spotted him cutting off in that direction.

"I seen him," came Gosling's crusty voice. "Jest going down to my wood-shed to tidy up, I was, and I seed him. Out of the 'Ouse in lock-ups, and you too, Master Vernon-Smith! Such goings-on——"

"Where is he now?" snapped the Bounder.

"'Ow'd I know, unless he's dodged into my wood-shed," grunted Gosling. "You go back to the 'Ouse, sir, or I'll 'ave to report you out in lock-ups."

"Go and eat coke."

With that polite reply, Smithy tramped towards the wood-shed. Gosling, with another grunt, followed. Gosling had to tidy up in that wood-shed, where a huge quantity of straw and sacking lay about, after the unpacking of Horace and Virgil from the long box. Horace and Virgil were now adorning Mr. Quelch's study: the box remained where it had been unpacked.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Billy Bunter.

From the bottom of his fat heart, Billy Bunter repented him that he had allowed himself to be carried away by indignation to the extent of smacking Smithy's face. Never, assuredly, had a fellow deserved more to have his face smacked! Bunter would have liked to administer a round dozen of smacks, if it came to that. But the consequences were going to be dire, when the Bounder ran him down. Already he seemed to feel a boot crashing on his tight trousers.

He blinked wildly round the wood-shed for a hiding-place. If Smithy did not see him there, he would depart and look elsewhere. But there was no cover in that shed, once Smithy stepped in.

But was there not?

Moonlight glimmering in at the window glimmered on a long box, with a slatted lid wide open, surrounded by straw and sacking. That box had lately contained two marble busts, packed end to end. Now it was empty!

Billy Bunter's fat brain did not often work quickly. But the imminence of peril spurred it into unusual activity. He cut across the shed to the box.

There was ample room inside it for Bunter. It was five or six feet long. It was wide and deep. Space had been required for layer after layer of packing to preserve those marble busts from damage. Almost in a twinkling, Bunter rolled into that box, and drew the slatted lid shut.

He had no time for more. He would have been glad to drag some of the sacking over him before he closed the lid: but there was no time. He lay on his fat back in the long box, the lid closed down. As the lid was of slats, with interstices between the slats, his fat face was quite visible from outside—had there been a light in the shed. But the moonlight from the little window did not reveal it. He lay and palpitated, and hoped for the best.

Hardly a few seconds later, there were footsteps in the doorway. Then came the Bounder's voice:

"Bunter, you fat scoundrel! I know you're here! I'm going to kick you all round Greyfriars and back! Show up, you fat frog."

Never was Billy Bunter less disposed to show up! His cue was to understudy that sagacious animal, Brer Fox, and to "lay low and say nuffin". He tried to still his breathing.

There was the scratch of a match: and the Bounder glanced round the shed in the flicker. Billy Bunter trembled in the box.

"'Ere, none of that!" came Gosling's voice. "Don't you light matches in this 'ere shed, with all that stror about, Master Vernon-Smith. You want to set the blinking place afire?"

"If Bunter's here—"

"I'll soon see if he's 'ere, when I get my lantern alight."

"Oh, lor'!" breathed Bunter, in dismay.

Gosling, evidently, had something to do in that shed, and was going to light his lantern, that hung from a nail. Once the shed was illuminated by the lantern-light, a fat face would be visible between the slats of the box-lid.

Gosling, in his turn, scratched a match, and the lantern was lighted. Vernon-Smith stood staring round him in the light.

"Nobody 'ere," grunted Gosling, "and wot I says is this 'ere, you better 'ook it back to the 'Ouse, arter lock-ups—"

"I'm going to find Bunter," snapped Vernon-Smith. "If he's here, I'll root him out all right—"

Billy Bunter heard the Bounder's footsteps moving about the wood-shed. So far, he had not thought of the box. But it was quite certain that he would notice it, in a matter of moments, or minutes at the most, and then—!

Once more Billy Bunter's fat brain worked quickly.

"Gosling!" came a sudden, sharp, rapping voice, apparently from the open doorway. If it was not Mr. Quelch's voice, it was a twin to it.

Bunter could do these things! If William George Bunter could do nothing else, he could ventriloquise. His imitation of Quelch's bark was perfect. Had Mr. Quelch heard it, he might have fancied that he himself had spoken. Gosling and Smithy had no doubt about it.

"Yessir!" answered Gosling, staring round.

"Gosling! What is that Remove boy doing in your wood-shed after lock-ups?" came the sharp bark. "Take him back to the House at once!"

"Oh! Yessir!" gasped Gosling. "I didn't know you was 'ere, sir. I'll take him at once, sir."

Vernon-Smith breathed hard. He had not heard Mr. Quelch's footsteps: neither did the Remove master look in at the doorway. But there was no doubt about the voice!

"Vernon-Smith!" came the sharp bark.

"Yes, sir!" muttered the Bounder, sullenly.

"Take fifty lines for leaving the House after lock-ups without leave."

"Yes, sir!" breathed Smithy.

"Now you jest come alonger me, Master Vernon-Smith," said Gosling. "I got to take you back to the 'Ouse—"

"I can go without your help!" snapped Smithy.

"Mr. Quelch says take you back, sir, and I got to take you back!" grunted Gosling. "Now you come alonger me, and don't waste a man's time. You coming, Master Vernon-Smith, or you want to be took with a 'and on your shoulder?"

"Oh, go to Jericho!" snarled Smithy, and he walked out of the wood-shed, Gosling following him. Gosling had to take him back to the House, according to instructions: little dreaming that those instructions emanated from a fat ventriloquist hidden in the long box. Both of them, to Billy Bunter's immense relief, left the wood-shed: somewhat surprised to see nothing of Mr. Quelch when they came out, but certainly not guessing that the master's voice had been there without the master!

"He, he, he!" chuckled Billy Bunter.

He pushed up the slatted lid on its hinges, and sat up, grinning in the lantern light. The fat Owl crawled out of the box. He blinked cautiously out of the wood-shed through his big spectacles. Smithy and Gosling were gone: and the coast was clear. Billy Bunter rolled out of the wood-shed, grinning all over his fat face. That long box, once the repository of Horace and Virgil, had served his turn: and Billy Bunter, at the moment, was far from dreaming how it was to serve his turn again, and in what remarkable circumstances.

CHAPTER VIII

NOTHING DOING!

"I SAY, YOU fellows!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at—"

"Look in the glass, old fat man! Then you will!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"About Christmas, you fellows—"

"Shut the door after you!"

"Beast! I mean, look here, old chap—"

"Buzz off!" exclaimed five voices in chorus.

The sight of Billy Bunter's fat face, in the doorway of No. 1 study, seemed to have moved Harry Wharton and Co. to merriment. But the fat Owl of the Remove was far from sharing that merriment. Never had his plump visage been so serious and solemn.

Billy Bunter was at a loose end again. His arrangements for the Christmas vacation, which had seemed so happily fixed, had come sadly unstuck. Not for worlds would Bunter have taken on that trip with Smithy and Redwing, now that he knew what that trip was going to be like.

The Remove fellows seemed much amused by Smithy's jest on the fat Owl. Bunter was not in the least amused.

The sardonic Bounder had intended to keep up the joke right up to the day Greyfriars broke up for the holidays. But the fat Owl had put paid to that, at least. He was now aware of the true inwardness, as it were, of Smithy's unexpected invitation. He certainly was not going with Smithy! He still had time to make other arrangements, before the Greyfriars fellows scattered to the north, south, east, and west. But other arrangements did not seem easy to make.

Deeply did the fat Owl repent him that he had turned down Harry Wharton with such ineffable scorn. His only hope now was, so to speak, to turn him up again!

He could have been safely booked for Wharton Lodge! In the belief that he was going to a gorgeous trip with Smithy, he had turned that down: scornfully, contemptuously, derisively. He had quite enjoyed telling Harry Wharton "off". Now he wished that he hadn't!

The Famous Five were at tea in No. 1 Study the next day, when Billy Bunter materialized in the doorway. They did not need telling why he had called. Now that the delusive Continental holiday was washed out, Bunter had a use for them again. But it did not appear that they were prepared to be made use of. Billy Bunter had turned them down not wisely but too well.

"I say, you fellows—!"

"Hook it!"

"But I say—"

"The hookfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed idiotic Bunter."

"I say, I ain't going with Smithy after all—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He took me in, you know," said Bunter, sorrowfully. "Of course I thought it was going to be topping—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I jolly well smacked his face for it!" said Bunter. "The beast kicked me in the dorm last night—still, I jolly well smacked his face! I say, you fellows, I'll tell you what. I've turned Smithy down, and—and—and I'll jolly well come with you fellows, if you like, after all."

"If!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Jolly big 'if'!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"The if-fulness is terrific."

"I say, Harry, old chap—!"

"Cut it out!" said Harry Wharton, "Wharton Lodge wouldn't suit you, Bunter. You just don't want the hols in my poky little place."

"That—that was only a jog-jig-joke, old chap—"

"Hardly your class, you know!"

"I—I—I——"

"And you have enough of these fellows at school, and of me too!"

"You—you—you see—!" stammered Bunter.

"Yes, I see!" agreed Harry Wharton, laughing. "Quite! And all I have to say about the hols is this——"

"Yes, old chap?" said Bunter, eagerly.

"Just this: that if you show up anywhere near Wharton Lodge, I'll kick you all over Surrey."

"Oh, really, Wharton——"

"And we'll all do the same," said Bob Cherry.

"The samefulness will be preposterous!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"And now cut!" said Frank Nugent.

Billy Bunter stood in the doorway, blinking at them. It was borne in upon his fat mind that the invitation that had been turned down, was not to be turned up again! He had let his chances like the sunbeams pass him by!

However, he did not "cut". Wharton Lodge was his last hope: the alternative was holidays at the school, with such cheering company as that of Mrs. Kebble, the house-dame, and Gosling the porter. Somehow or anyhow he had to escape that. It was necessary, as the old song says, for a victim to be found!

"I say, Harry, old fellow——!"

"You can Harry-old-fellow me till you're tired, but it won't make any difference," said the captain of the Remove. "For goodness sake, cut."

"But I say——"

"Travel!"

"Beast! I mean, I heard you tell Nugent yesterday that your uncle was away from home, and wouldn't be back till Christmas Eve——"

"You hear a lot of things that don't concern you, you fat eavesdropping tick! What about it, anyway?"

"I mean, where is he now?" asked Bunter.

"If you particularly want to know, he's gone to visit some old Army friends at Aldershot. Anything more you'd like to know?"

"Oh! Yes! No! I mean, don't you think your uncle would rather like to see me at Christmas?" asked Bunter. "I—I like Colonel Wharton a lot, you know! I—I don't think he's a musty and fusty old military fossil, old chap."

"You fat frump—"

"Don't you think he'd be rather disappointed not to see me?" asked Bunter.

" Not at all."

"And then there's your Aunt Amy—she rather likes me, you know—"

"I don't!"

"Beast!"

With that, the fat Owl rolled out of the doorway, and departed. Bob Cherry banged the door after him.

The Famous Five went on with their tea. The talk round the study table ran on the Christmas holidays, and plans for the same: which did not include William George Bunter. The Co. in fact, forgot the existence of the fat Owl of the Remove: little dreaming of what was working in his podgy mind when he rolled away.

They had just finished tea, when there was a tap at the door, and Vernon-Smith looked in.

"You're wanted, Wharton," he said.

"Who and what?" asked Harry.

"Quelch's study. He told me to tell you your uncle's rung up from Aldershot, and he's holding the line."

"Oh, my hat!" Harry Wharton jumped up at once. "Blessed if I was expecting a phone call from my uncle. Something about Christmas, I suppose."

He hurried out of the study.

"Seen Bunter about?" asked Vernon-Smith, glancing at the Co. as Wharton cut away down the passage.

"He was here a quarter of an hour ago," asnwered Bob Cherry. "Asking him for the hols again?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Quelch gave me fifty lines yesterday—or I thought he did!" answered the Bounder. "When he called me just now, I thought he was going to ask for my lines—and I haven't done them. But he didn't—he seems to have forgotten all about them."

"Not like Quelch!" said Bob, staring. "He never forgets a fellow's lines."

"Exactly!" said Smithy. "He spoke from outside a door, and I didn't see him—but I believe Bunter was hanging about somewhere, in the offing. And as Quelch hasn't asked for the lines——"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bob. "Some more of Bunter's ventriloquism, what?"

"It looks like it! I'm going to kick him, just in case! Anybody know where he is?"

But nobody in No. 1 Study knew where Billy Bunter was, and the Bounder went on his way, to look for him. But he did not find Billy Bunter in the Remove quarters. Billy Bunter, just then, was in a spot where certainly no Remove fellow would ever have thought of looking for him!

CHAPTER IX

AMAZING!

"PLEASE come in, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch.

Harry Wharton had tapped at the door of his form-master's study, and opened it. Then he paused.

Quelch was not alone in the study. Mr. Prout, the portly master of the Fifth Form, was there also: talking. Prout generally was talking. The Remove master was seated at his writing-table: Prout was standing, looking at the two Roman busts that now adorned Quelch's bookcase. Horace and Virgil, in marble, grew in beauty side by side, as it were: and no doubt Quelch was quite pleased to show his valued new possessions to other members of the Staff. At the same time, it was easy to have enough, and even too much, of the portly Prout's conversation: and perhaps Wharton's arrival came as rather a relief to Quelch.

Wharton, having been sent for to take a telephone call, had arrived with promptness and despatch. But finding two masters in conversation in the study, he paused in the doorway. Glancing across the room, he saw that the telephone receiver was off the hooks: somebody apparently was holding the line. He looked inquiringly at Mr. Quelch, who bade him enter in very cordial tones.

"You will excuse me, Prout—" added Mr. Quelch.

"Eh, what?"

"This junior——"

"Oh, quite! quite! I will wait," said Mr. Prout. Prout was not yet tired of talking: he never tired so soon as the listeners-in. He was prepared to wait till the junior was done with, and then resume.

"Wharton is here to take a telephone call, Mr. Prout. His uncle is waiting to speak to him."

"Oh! In that case—!" said Mr. Prout. "I will give you a look-in later, Quelch." And the portly Prout rolled out of the study.

"Wharton! Your uncle, Colonel Wharton, has rung up," said Mr. Quelch. "He tells me that he is speaking from Aldershot, and desires to tell you something about the Christmas holidays. You may take the call."

"Thank you, sir."

Harry Wharton crossed over to the telephone by the window. The door closed on Prout, and Mr. Quelch picked up his pen, leaving the junior to take the call.

Wharton put the receiver to his ear, and spoke into the transmitter.

"Harry speaking, uncle."

"Is that you, Harry?" came back a voice over the wires. It was a rather deep, incisive voice, with a slight huskiness in it, sounding as if the speaker had a spot of the common cold.

"Yes, uncle! That is Colonel Wharton speaking?" asked Harry. He knew the voice: but it did not seem to sound quite so familiar as usual.

"Speaking from Aldershot, Harry," came back the husky voice.

"I hope you haven't a cold, uncle."

"Eh? What? No—a trifle of huskiness that is all—these cold December winds! You are breaking up at your school the day after to-morrow, I understand?"

"Yes, uncle."

"I think you told me you were bringing some friends home with you."

"Yes: four fellows. You know them all, uncle—Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, Bob Cherry, and Inky—I mean Hurree Jamset Ram Singh."

"I shall be glad to see them, my boy! But what about your other friend—who was with us last Christmas—a very nice boy named Bunter."

Harry Wharton quite jumped.

It was true that Billy Bunter had spent the last Christmas at Wharton Lodge. Colonel Wharton was quite well acquainted with the Owl of the Remove. But that he regarded William George Bunter as a "very nice boy" was news to his nephew—and quite surprising news. Harry Wharton's own impression had been that the old gentleman had tolerated Bunter, making the best of him: assuredly without forming any high opinion of the fat Owl.

"Bunter?" repeated Harry.

"Yes—a very nice lad, of whom I have a high opinion. Is he not coming home with you this time?"

"Oh, my hat!"

"What? What did you say—what?"

"I—I mean—!" stammered Harry. "I—didn't know you thought much of Bunter, uncle——"

"I certainly think a great deal of him, Harry. He compares very favourably, I think, with your other friends."

"Oh!" gasped Harry.

"I should certainly like to see him again, Harry. Probably he may have other engagements—I imagine him to be a very popular lad, from his attractive appearance and agreeable manners——"

"Oh, crikey!"

"What? What?"

"—I—I mean——"

"If he has other engagements, naturally, he cannot come to Wharton Lodge. But have you asked him?"

"Nunno! I—I mean, I did ask him, as a matter of fact, uncle, but he had fixed up to go with another chap—Vernon-Smith, of my form——"

"I am glad you asked him, Harry. I should like to see you cultivate the friendship of that very nice-mannered and manly boy."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"If he cannot come, of course, it cannot be helped, though I should certainly like to see him again. Is it definite that he is going with another schoolfellow?"

"Oh! No! As a matter of fact, it has fallen through after all—"

"Then Bunter is not otherwise engaged, and could come with you, if he cared to do so?"

"Oh! Yes."

"Well, I will not dictate to you, my boy, as to what friends you gather round you at Christmas! I will only say that if Bunter consented to come with your party from Greyfriars, I should be very pleased."

"Oh, suffering cats!" breathed Harry Wharton.

That he was astonished to hear all this from Colonel Wharton, is putting it very mildly. He was amazed! He was, in fact, astounded. Never by a word or a glance had his uncle ever displayed any liking or esteem for William George Bunter. They had met on a good many occasions: but not on a single one of those occasions had there been a sign, or the ghost of a sign, that Colonel Wharton regarded the fat Owl as anything but an object to be tolerated with as much patience as possible. Now it might really have been supposed, by the talk on the telephone, that the fat Owl was the apple of his eye!

"Well, Harry—?" came a rap over the wires.

"I—I—I—" stammered Harry, "I—I'll certainly ask him, uncle, if you'd like him to come! I never dreamed you'd like to see him—"

"Nonsense! A very fine lad—a credit to his school in every way—I shall be delighted to see him."

"Oh! All right, then—"

"You will invite him to Wharton Lodge for Christmas, Harry?"

"Certainly, if you wish it, uncle."

"I do wish it, Harry! Do you think he will come?"

"Oh! Yes! I'm sure he will, if I ask him again."

"Very good! Then I shall expect to see him at Wharton Lodge, with your party of school friends, when I return from—from Aldershot on Christmas Eve."

"He will be there all right, uncle. If—if—if you're quite sure that you want him to come—?"

"Certainly! An admirable lad——so frank, and manly, and truthful—"

"Eh?"

"An excellent friend for you, Harry, whom you might very well take as an example—"

"Oh, scissors!"

"It is settled, then Harry. Very good! Now I have only to say—— YAROOOOOH!"

Harry Wharton fairly staggered, as that frantic yell came ringing along the telephone wires. Obviously it could not have come from Colonel James Wharton. It sounded like the yell of Billy Bunter in the throes of terror. What it meant, what it could possibly mean, was an astounding mystery. In his utter amazement, Harry Wharton dropped the receiver, and staggered. Mr. Quelch, at the same moment, dropped his pen, and stared round at him. That frantic yell, pealing from the telephone, had startled him as much as it had startled Wharton.

"Wharton—what—?" ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I—" Wharton was quite dazed. "I—I—" He picked up the receiver, and called again into the mouthpiece.

But there was no answer. The telephone had gone quite dead. Whosoever had been speaking to Harry Wharton over the wires, had evidently been cut off——quite suddenly!

CHAPTER X

BAD LUCK FOR BUNTER!

MR. PROUT stared.

Then he frowned.

He frowned portentously.

Prout had opened the door of his study to enter. To his surprise, his ears were greeted by the sound of a voice speaking. Then his eyes fell on a fat figure standing at the telephone.

That fat figure had its back to the door. But it was quite easy to recognize W. G. Bunter of the Remove by a back view.

It was no wonder that Prout frowned. A boy—not even a boy of his own Form, but a Remove boy—was using his telephone without leave. That Remove boy had had the audacity, the impertinence, to enter Prout's study in

his absence, and use the telephone—no doubt having made sure first that the Fifth-form master was safe off the scene! Prout had been off the scene: indeed, he would have remained off the scene, talking to Mr. Quelch in his study, had not Harry Wharton come there to take a call. Owing to that interruption, Prout had left Quelch: and after a few words of chat with Mr. Hacker, from which Mr. Hacker escaped as promptly as he could!—he came into his study sooner than he had intended to do—and doubtless sooner than that impertinent junior had expected him to do.

Prout was surprised and annoyed. But his surprise increased, and his annoyance ripened into wrath, as he heard what Billy Bunter was saying at the telephone.

He knew Bunter's voice—normally! But he did not know it now! The fat Owl was speaking in a voice quite other than his own. He had assumed an elderly and deeper voice, with a slight huskiness in it——a trick that came easy to the Remove ventriloquist.

Perhaps Prout had heard of Bunter's ventriloquism, and his curious trick of imitating voices. Anyhow he knew what the fat junior was up to now. Not only had he entered Prout's study without leave. Not only had he borrowed a senior master's telephone unpermitted. He was playing some deceptive trick—assuming the voice of an elderly man, obviously for some purpose of deception, as he could have no other reason for so doing.

Prout gazed at the fat back of the fat Owl, thunder in his brow.

Bunter, deep in his telephone talk, had not heard the door open. He did not look round. He carried on regardless.

Billy Bunter, in fact, was feeling quite safe. He had been very cautious about borrowing a telephone. He had made quite sure that Prout was not in his study. Often and often did Prout, after tea with the other masters in Common-Room, linger there for a chat, and his chat seldom ended so long as there was a single person left to listen-in. Bunter, nothing doubting that Prout's plump chin was going strong in Common-Room, felt quite secure.

Little did he dream, as he stood at the telephone, that the door had opened, and that a basilisk-glare was fastened on his podgy back.

Prout breathed hard, and he breathed deep! Amazingly Bunter's voice came, not in the least like Bunter's voice, but like some elderly voice Prout had heard before, though he did not remember, for the moment, when or where. And the fat junior was saying, in that assumed voice—"an excellent friend for you, Harry, whom you might very well take as an example". Really, it was amazing. Breathing very hard, Mr. Prout stepped into the study.

Still unaware, Bunter was running happily on, in that assumed elderly voice: "It is settled, then, Harry! Now I have only to say—" At that point a plump hand grasped the back of Bunter's fat neck. Startled almost out of his fat wits, the Owl of the Remove uttered a wild yell, "YAROOOOOOOH!"

He dropped the receiver, and wriggled round, in the grasp of that plump

hand. His little round eyes almost popped through his big round spectacles at Mr. Prout.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

"Boy!" boomed Prout.

"Ow! Leggo! I—I wasn't using the telephone—!" gasped Bunter.

"What? What? I heard you telephoning, Bunter—"

"I—I—I mean——I—I was—was speaking to my pater at home, sir—he's—he's ill, and I—I was—was anxious about him, sir—"

"Upon my word! Is your father's name Harry, and are you accustomed to address him as Harry?" thundered Prout.

"Oh, lor'! I—I mean, I—I was speaking to my—my cousin Harry——"

"And why were you speaking in a disguised voice to your cousin Harry, Bunter?" boomed Prout.

"Oh! I—I—I—I was—I mean I—I wasn't——"

"Come!" said Prout: and still with that plump grasp on Bunter's collar, he led him across the study to the door. "I shall take you to your form master, Bunter, and report to him this act of outrageous impertinence. It is for your form master to inquire what foolish prank you were playing by speaking into the telephone in an assumed voice—"

"Oh, crikey! I—I say, sir——" stuttered Bunter.

"Come!" boomed Prout.

"But I—I—I say, sir, I—I'd rather not go to Quelch, sir—oh, crikey—I—I—I say—!" stuttered the dismayed fat Owl.

"Come!" And with the plump hand on Bunter's collar, Mr. Prout hooked him out of the room, and marched him down the passage to Mr. Quelch's study.

Still grasping Bunter with his right, he tapped on the door with his left, and opened it. Billy Bunter, almost collapsing with terror, was marched into his form master's study. Mr. Quelch was speaking as they marched in.

"Most extraordinary, Wharton! Most!"

"I can't understand it, sir!" said Harry, in whose face was depicted blank astonishment. "It can't have been my uncle who yelled out like that—but—but——I can't make it out, and I'm cut off now—"

"Mr. Quelch!" boomed Prout.

Quelch and Wharton looked round together. Both were astonished to see the Fifth-form master roll in, with a terrified fat Owl in his grip.

"What—?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"I have brought this boy Bunter to you, sir—!" boomed Prout.

"I can see that, Mr. Prout! But what—"

"I have to report him, sir, for playing a most extraordinary prank in my study! A most extraordinary——I may say unparalleled—prank, sir! He was speaking at my telephone when I found him, sir——"

"Bunter! How dare you use a master's telephone without permission?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"I—I——I——"

"That is not all, sir!" went on Mr. Prout. "Bunter was speaking in a disguised voice—a voice assumed, sir, for some purpose of deception. Had I not actually seen him with my own eyes, sir, I should never have dreamed that it was a boy speaking at all—he made his voice sound like that of an elderly man with a slight cold, sir—a most extraordinary trick——"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Upon whom he was playing this unparalleled prank, I cannot say, sir! That is for you to inquire into. All I can say is that he was addressing some person as Harry——!"

"Harry!" ejaculated Harry Wharton, involuntarily.

"Harry!" repeated Mr. Prout. "Speaking in an assumed elderly voice, with a husky tone, he was telling this person he called Harry, Mr. Quelch, to take example by some other boy, or words to that effect—"

"Oh!" gasped Harry Wharton.

He knew now!

That telephone-call had not come from such a distance as Aldershot. It had come from no greater distance than Prout's study. It was the Remove ventriloquist who had spoken in an elderly voice remarkably like Colonel Wharton's, with a spot of huskiness artfully added to make assurance doubly sure, as it were. That was why "Colonel Wharton" had so unexpectedly requested his nephew to add Billy Bunter to the Christmas party for Wharton Lodge! That was why the talk had ended in that astonishing yell—when Prout caught the fat spoofer at the telephone!

"Oh!" repeated Harry. "Bunter, you fat villain—!" He remembered that he was in his form-master's study, and broke off.

"Bunter!" Mr. Quelch's voice was both loud and deep. "What does this mean, Bunter? What insensate trick were you playing?"

"I—I—I wasn't——" stuttered Bunter. "I—I mean, I—I didn't—I—I—oh, lor'!"

"Thank you for bringing this matter to my notice, Mr. Prout. You may be sure that I shall deal with this boy as he deserves."

"Quite so, sir," boomed Prout. "Such a trick—such an extraordinary and indeed unparalleled trick, sir—" Prout faded out of the study.

"Now, Bunter—!"

"It—it wasn't me, sir!" groaned Bunter. "I—I mean, I never didn't—that is, I wasn't wouldn't—oh, crikey!"

"Tell me at once, Bunter, to whom you were telephoning!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Nobody, sir!"

"What?"

"I—I mean, it was my father Harry—I mean my cousin Wharton—I—I—I mean—oh, crikey! I—I mean, I—I—I wasn't telephoning to Wharton, sir! Nothing of the kind."

"To Wharton?" repeated Mr. Quelch, quite blankly.

"Yes, sir! I mean, no, sir! I—I—I never asked him where his uncle was, so that I could make out I was speaking from there, sir——never thought of anything of the kind. I—I couldn't imitate Colonel Wharton's voice if —if I tried, sir! I—I was just—just phoning to my father Harry—I mean to my cousin Colonel—I mean—"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch. He, too, grasped now what Wharton had already grasped. "Bunter! Is it possible—is it imaginable—that you have ventured to play such a trick as this—!"

"Oh, no, sir! No! I—I—"

"Wharton! I certainly supposed that it was your uncle speaking on the telephone when I sent for you to take the call. It now appears that it was this utterly obtuse boy, Bunter, playing an insensate trick. Colonel Wharton has not telephoned at all—it was Bunter—"

"I see that now, sir," said Harry.

"I—I—I say, I—I—I never——" moaned Bunter.

"You may leave my study, Wharton! Bunter, you will remain. I shall deal with you most severely for this insensate trickery."

Harry Wharton, at the momen, was feeling disposed to bestow upon William George Bunter the kicking of his fat life. Not for a moment had he suspected that he was being "spoofed" on the telephone. He had been taken in all along the line, and but for Prout's discovery in his study, the artful fat Owl would undoubtedly have "got away" with that amazing trick: and would have been once more "fixed up" for the holidays! Only the fact that he was in Quelch's study saved Billy Bunter, at that moment, from an avenging boot. But as he left the study, Mr. Quelch picked up the cane from his table: and the expression on his face quite eliminated Wharton's desire to kick the fat Owl. Obviously, Bunter was going to get enough, and would not need any more, when Henry Samuel Quelch had done with him!

The swishing of a cane, and loud sounds of woe, followed Harry Wharton, as he went down the passage. Quelch, evidently, was running no risk of spoiling Bunter by sparing the rod!

Even the Bounder did not feel like kicking Bunter, when the hapless fat Owl was seen again. It was a dismal, doleful, dolorous, disconsolate Bunter: who wriggled and mumbled, and mumbled and wriggled, and like Rachel of old, mourned and could not be comforted.

CHAPTER XI

BUNTER ON HIS OWN!

"I SAY, Gosling—"

"Huh!" grunted, Gosling.

"I say—"

"Wot I says is this 'ere, Master Bunter—you cut orf!" said Gosling.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter rolled away.

It was a fine, clear, frosty December day. There was a glimmer of wintry sunshine. A light powdering of snow, on the old red roofs, gleamed in that glimmer. It was really quite a cheerful scene. But the fat face of the Owl of the Remove did not match it. That fat face was deeply pessimistic.

Greyfriars School had broken up for Christmas.

Passages no longer echoed to the tramp of feet. No voice was heard in the deserted studies. The form rooms were closed—not that Billy Bunter had any predilection for form rooms! Lessons were at an end—which was so much to the good! But——!

The rest, as Shakespeare has remarked, was silence! Everybody, or nearly everybody, was gone. Billy Bunter remained. Quelch was not yet gone—though he was going. Other masters had departed. Even the Head was going. Billy Bunter was going to have Greyfriars almost to himself! Even Fisher T. Fish, who was sometimes left over, as it were, in holiday time, was gone. Not a single Greyfriars man, excepting William George Bunter, remained on the solitary spot that had lately been so thickly populated.

The day after breaking up, Bunter had turned out in an empty school. He had breakfasted with Mrs. Kebble, the house-dame. Fortunately, it was a good breakfast, which was a comfort so far as it went. But the solitary spaces of Greyfriars, afterwards, weighed on the hapless Owl. Utterly and totally did he fail to see the charms which sages have seen in the face of Solitude. Bunter was rather a gregarious animal. His own company, fascinating as it doubtless was, palled on him. He had even rolled down to the porter's lodge to speak to Gosling: a last resource for the sake of speaking to somebody. But he did not find Gosling appreciative. Gosling had simply no use for him.

"Oh, crikey!" said Bunter, as he rolled away into a deserted quad.

He would have been glad of the company of even Sammy Bunter of the Second Form. But Sammy Bunter was gone with the rest. Little as he liked walking, he would have walked over to Cliff House School for a word or two with Sister Bessie. But Cliff House School was closed for the holidays: Sister

Bessie also was gone. Sammy and Bessie were the guests of uncles and aunts who, for some mysterious reason quite unknown to Bunter, did not yearn for the society of Brother Billy. Even Bunter Court—otherwise Bunter Villa—was unavailable. The old folks at home were no longer at home.

Mr. Bunter had kindly made the arrangements for William to remain at the school over the holidays—if he did not depart with some of his many friends! Bunter was wont to expand, at home, on the subject of his many friends: and no doubt Mr. Bunter failed to see why some of them should not accommodate him at Christmas for the vacation. And indeed it was the first time that Billy Bunter had been stranded like this. The skill with which he landed himself on other fellows for the "hols" was really phenomenal. But this time—!

This time his luck had let him down!

It was that beast Smithy's fault, of course. If he had not pulled the fat Owl's leg about that holiday trip, Bunter would have been safely booked for Wharton Lodge. But even Bunter did not quite expect Harry Wharton to renew that invitation, after the way in which he had turned it down!

Certainly, such a trifling formality as an invitation did not weigh very much with Bunter. He could have managed without that! He was quite prepared to walk into Wharton Lodge as a happy surprise for the inhabitants of that abode —had it been practicable. But all the Famous Five had warned him that they would kick him all over Surrey if they saw him during the hols. Bunter had often been kicked: but he had never grown to like it. He did not want to be kicked all over Surrey!

"Beasts!" murmured Bunter, as he rolled disconsolately in the deserted quad.

He had done his best——that extraordinary scheme on the telephone had very nearly landed him at Wharton Lodge after all. Harry Wharton had taken it like milk, as it were: and if it had come off, and it had transpired afterwards that old Colonel Wharton never had telephoned from Aldershot, still Bunter would have been somewhere for the hols, even at the risk of a kicking for his trickery. But it had not come off! It very nearly had—but not quite! It had been the last hope—and it had failed!

But was it the last?

Billy Bunter was thinking, as he rolled in the quad. Thinking was not really his long suit: his fat brain usually moved in slow motion. But the dismal prospect of "hols" in a deserted school spurred on his intellect, such as it was. If there was any way out of this, Bunter was going to discover it. He concentrated on it.

A sharp voice interrupted his reflections.

"Bunter!"

He blinked round at Mr. Quelch. Quelch was standing in the doorway of the House, in hat and coat, with a bag in his hand. Apparently he was about to depart. Even in the dismal solitude of a deserted school, Billy Bunter could not

regret that Quelch was departing. It was something, at least, to lose sight of that severe face and gimlet-eye!

But Quelch's face, at the moment, was less severe than usual. No doubt Christmastide had its ameliorating effect. He gave Bunter quite a kindly nod.

"Yes, sir," mumbled Bunter. His blink at his form-master was as inimical as he could venture to make it.

"As you are staying at the school over the holidays, Bunter, you will have a good deal of time on your hands," said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" mumbled Bunter.

"It will be an opportunity for you, Bunter, to give some little extra attention to studies which, during the term, you have often neglected."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

That undoubtedly, was a resource, for a fellow who had time to kill. But it was not a resource of which Bunter had thought. His one consolation, in the present dire circumstances, was that lessons were at an end. If Mr. Quelch fancied that he would find comfort and consolation in giving a little extra attention to neglected studies, he was quite in error. Bunter was quite prepared to leave those studies in their present neglected state!

"I have set you a holiday task, Bunter," went on Mr. Quelch, benevolently. "You will find the paper on my study table."

"Oh!" repeated Bunter. He knew what he was going to do with that paper, as soon as Quelch was gone!

"You have been extremely backward, Bunter, in Latin grammar. You are especially weak in deponent verbs," said Mr. Quelch. "I have set you an exercise in deponent verbs, Bunter, which I trust will be of some benefit to you. .'

Billy Bunter did not answer. Really, he could not trust himself to speak. If there was a section of the Latin grammar which Bunter loathed more than all the rest, it was those irritating verbs which are passive in form but active in meaning. Verbs in the active voice were rotten. Verbs in the passive voice were putrid. But verbs which combined the horrors of both voices were the limit! Bunter's feelings were too deep for words.

A taxi came grinding up the drive from the gates. Evidently it was the taxi that was to convey Mr. Quelch to the station. Bunter was going to see the last of him now, at any rate.

"Good-bye, Bunter!" said Mr. Quelch, quite benevolently.

"Oh! Good-bye, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"You will not forget your holiday task, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I mean, no, sir!"

The taxi rolled away with Mr. Quelch. Billy Bunter stood on the House steps and watched it till it was gone.

"Beast!" he breathed.

When the taxi had turned out of the gates and disappeared, Billy Bunter

rolled away to his form-master's study. He was quite anxious to get hold of that holiday task—though not to penetrate deeply into the mysteries of deponent verbs.

He rolled into Mr. Quelch's deserted study.

The remains of a fire smouldered in the grate. Bunter clutched up a paper from the table, jammed it into the fire, and stirred it well home with the poker! That exercise in deponent verbs vanished in smoke!

That was some comfort, at least.

Quelch being gone, Billy Bunter deposited himself in Quelch's armchair. He blinked inimically at Horace and Virgil, in marble, on Quelch's bookcase. He remembered how he had had to help in unpacking them from the long box in Gosling's wood-shed. Quite willingly he would have knocked their marble heads together, knocking their Roman noses off! Still, it was really rather lucky for Bunter that Horace and Virgil had arrived at Greyfriars when they did: for that long box had certainly served him well, on the occasion when the exasperated Bounder was raging on his track.

"Beasts!" said Bunter, addressessing the marble busts on the bookcase. Horace and Virgil did not seem to mind. They stared at him with stony eyes, quite indifferent.

Billy Bunter sprawled in Quelch's armchair, thinking. How was he going to get out of this? Suddenly he gave a start. Perhaps it was because Horace and Virgil were before his eyes, reminding him of hiding in the long box, that a startling idea came into his fat mind.

"Oh, crikey!" ejaculated Bunter.

He sat up in the armchair, with quite an excited fat face. His eyes gleamed through his big spectacles.

"Oh, scissors!" he gasped. "Why not?"

He grinned.

It was a startling idea that had flashed into his mind. Probably it never would have flashed into any other. Billy Bunter's fat mind moved in mysterious ways its wonders to perform!

"By gum!" breathed Bunter. "It would work! I should be there, anyhow—I could manage the rest, somehow! By gum, I'll jolly well try it on!"

Anyone who had overheard that cryptic utterance, might have been puzzled to guess its meaning. But evidently some great idea was working in the podgy brain of the Owl of the Remove.

He grinned at Horace and Virgil on the bookcase. It was the marble busts of those long-dead Roman poets that had put that stupendous idea into his fat head! They had arrived at Greyfriars in that long box with its slatted lid—the box that still lay in Gosling's wood-shed: the box in which Bunter had hidden from the wrathful Bounder. Bunter had thought of a use for that long box, in which Horace and Virgil had travelled!

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

He heaved his weight out of the armchair. He rolled across to the telephone. That instrument was at his disposal: there were no "beaks" about to butt in and interrupt him this time. With a grinning fat face, Billy Bunter rang up Gosling's lodge: and when he spoke into the transmitter, his voice was nothing like that of Bunter of the Remove: it was an exact reproduction of the bark of his form-master, Henry Samuel Quelch!

CHAPTER XII

GOSLING GETS INSTRUCTIONS!

GOSLING grunted.

"Drat it!" he remarked, to space.

Gosling had settled down in comfort, in his cosy room in his lodge. An armchair before a crackling fire on a frosty day: a pipe in his ancient mouth, a glass at his elbow with something warm, and a newspaper with a murder in it—that was Gosling's ideal of comfort. The deserted state of the school did not worry Gosling as it worried Billy Bunter. He rejoiced in it. His fixed opinion was that all boys ought to be "drownded": and the next best thing was to have them at a good distance. Gosling was going to enjoy the holidays in his own crusty way: and his enjoyment was just beginning, when the buzz of the telephone bell in his lodge jerked him out of his comfort.

Buzzzz.

"Drat it!" repeated Gosling. "DRAT it!" he added, with increasing emphasis. "Wot is it now, I wonder? DRAT it, anyway."

He laid down the newspaper and the pipe, and shuffled to the telephone. His horny hand grabbed off the receiver, and he fairly growled into the mouthpiece:

"'Allo!"

"Gosling!" came a sharp bark over the wires. "Is that you, Gosling? Mr. Quelch speaking from Courtfield Station."

"Oh, my eye!" said Gosling.

He was surprised and annoyed. Quelch had gone off in his taxi, and must be at the station by this time: really and truly, Gosling felt that he was entitled to consider that he had done with Mr. Quelch till next term. Apparently, however, he hadn't!

"What? What did you say, Gosling?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir! What's wanted, Mr. Quelch, sir? 'Ave you lorst your train, sir?" Why Mr. Quelch had rung him up from the railway station was quite a mystery to Gosling. He could only surmise that the Remove master had forgotten or overlooked something before his departure, and wanted him to see to it. "Anything I got to do, sir?"

"Yes, Gosling! I quite forgot to mention it to you before I left. I desire a box to be despatched to Colonel Wharton, at Wharton Lodge, Surrey."

"Orl right, sir! I'll ring up the carrier, and get Cripps round."

"It is the box—the long box—in which the Roman busts were delivered a few days ago, Gosling. You will find it prepared for transit."

"That there box in my wood-shed, sir—"

"Precisely."

"I didn't know you'd packed it, sir—"

"That is quite immaterial, Gosling."

"I mean, I'd 'ave 'elped pack it, sir, if you'd spoke to a man—"

"That was unnecessary, Gosling. I did not need assistance. You will find the box packed and locked: all that is needed is for you to label it, carefully, for its destination."

"Werry good, sir."

"You must be very careful with the box, Gosling. Warn the carrier to be very careful. The contents are very valuable."

"Yessir."

"The box must not be jolted, or bumped, or handled roughly in any way. Impress that upon Mr. Cripps. Any damage might be irreparable. It must travel by road, Gosling, not by railway. It is essential for it to arrive at Wharton Lodge this afternoon, or the evening at the latest."

"My eye! I—I mean, sir, it'll be a bill, travelling by road—'adn't I better let it go by rail, sir?"

"Expense is no object, Gosling—no object at all. There are too many delays on the railway. The box must travel by road, and be delivered at Wharton Lodge in the shortest possible space of time. Impress this upon Mr. Cripps. No objection will be made to the cost of transit."

"It will come 'igh, sir."

"Never mind that, Gosling! I repeat that expense is no object. Whatever it may cost, such are my instructions."

"Oh! werry good, sir," grunted Gosling. He could not help being surprised. Mr. Quelch, though by no means parsimonious, was careful with money. Extravagance like this was quite out of his line. Cripps' bill for the carriage of that box by road was certain to be extensive. Quelch did not seem to care. Surprised as he was, Gosling could only carry out the instructions he was receiving.

"You will label the box carefully, addressed to Colonel Wharton, at Wharton Lodge, Surrey. You understand, Gosling?"

"Yessir."

"It must be despatched by the shortest route, in a fast vehicle," continued the voice on the telephone. "That is very important! You may tell Cripps that he must see to this, regardless of expense."

"Cert'nly, sir!" said Gosling, more and more surprised. "It'll come to a pretty penny, at that rate, sir."

"Oh, quite, quite! Never mind that! So long as the box is delivered safely, without damage, and quickly, that is all that really matters. Speed and safety are the essentials, Gosling. If the slightest damage should be done to the—the contents of the box, or if there should be delay in delivery, I shall take a very serious view of the matter. Please tell Cripps so."

"I'll tell 'im, sir."

"Immediately I ring off, Gosling, ring up Cripps to make the necessary arrangements. You will have ample time to label the box before he arrives at the school to take it away."

"Lots, sir! I'll see to it, sir. I'll get the label ready, sir, and stick it on when Cripps comes for the box." Gosling did not feel like taking an unncessary walk round to the wood-shed.

"Very good, Gosling! That will do very well. Now, you understand clearly —the box is to travel by road, in a fast vehicle, and be delivered at Wharton Lodge at the earliest possible moment, without consideration of expense. Is that clear, Gosling?"

"Yessir! Wot about paying Cripps, sir? It will come to pounds."

"Oh! Ah! Yes! One moment! Carriage will be paid at the other end, Gosling. Cripps will present his bill and receive payment at Wharton Lodge."

"Werry good, sir! I'll tell 'im! Is that all, Mr. Quelch, sir?"

"That is all, Gosling! Remember to telephone Cripps the moment I ring off—no time whatever must be lost."

"Yessir."

"Good-bye, Gosling!"

"Good-bye, sir!"

Gosling stood with the receiver in his hand, staring at the telephone. He frowned at that useful instrument. He had to ring up Cripps, at Friardale, and make the necessary arrangements for the transit of that troublesome box, before he would get back to his armchair, his fireside, his glass of something warm, and his newspaper with a very attractive murder in it. It was very annoying. Really, Gosling considered Quelch might have seen to all this himself, before he started for the station.

Neither was it like Quelch, as a rule, to overlook things in this careless way. No doubt the hurry and bustle of getting off for Christmas had caused it to slip his mind. But it was very annoying to Gosling—interrupting the happy, peaceful calm which had followed the departure of those irritating creatures, the boys, from Greyfriars School.

Still, it could not be helped: Gosling had to carry out his instructions. He proceeded to ring up Mr. Cripps at Friardale, and explain to the carrier what was required of him. Which probably surprised Mr. Cripps a little: though the Friardale carrier certainly had no objection to undertaking transport regardless of expense.

Having arranged matters with Mr. Cripps, Gosling sat down to write out a

label for the box. Then, at long last, he was able to get back to his armchair, and his pipe, and his glass of something warm, and the interesting murder in his newspaper, while he waited for Mr. Cripps to arrive. He was still feeling rather annoyed with Mr. Quelch: and assuredly did not dream that that gentleman was speeding away in a train in blissful ignorance of the whole transaction: and that it was a fat and fatuous ventriloquist who had talked on the telephone in his master's voice!

CHAPTER XIII

BUNTER IN THE BOX!

"HE, he he!"

Billy Bunter chuckled.

He felt that he had reason to chuckle.

It had worked like a charm! The fat Owl chuckled, and grinned from one fat ear to the other, as he hung up the receiver in Mr. Quelch's study.

Gosling had taken it like milk! Evidently, there had not been the remotest glimmering of suspicion in his mind. He knew Quelch's voice: and the fat ventriloquist had reproduced it to the last tone. Gosling, nothing doubting that he had received those instructions from the Remove master, was going to carry out Billy Bunter's remarkable plans: never even dreaming that a fat Owl had anything whatever to do with the matter.

"He, he, he!"

But Bunter did not waste time.

He rolled out of Mr. Quelch's study, and for once, like Iser in the poem, he rolled rapidly. He had his own arrangements to make: and it was essential to get through with them, before Gosling went round to his wood-shed. Very artfully—in Quelch's voice!—he had insisted that Gosling should ring up the carrier before he labelled the box. That would take a little time—possibly more than a little, for William Gosling was not the man to hurry. But the fat Owl could not afford to take risks: he had to be quite, quite sure of being ready for Gosling.

Seldom did Billy Bunter put on speed. But he put it on now. In a very few minutes after hanging up the receiver in Quelch's study, the fat junior rolled out of the House in overcoat and cap. Gladly he would have packed sandwiches in the overcoat pockets: Mrs. Kebble would have supplied them, if asked: but there was no time for that. Minutes might be precious. For once, if for once only in his fat life, Billy Bunter allowed even the consideration of food to take second place. All was lost, if he was not ready before Gosling came round to the wood-shed.

His little fat legs whisked like machinery when he hurried out of the House.

In a remarkably short space of time, considering the weight he had to carry, he arrived at the wood-shed.

He rolled into that little building, panting for breath, and shut the door.

The long box lay where he had seen it last. Gosling had tidied up, shoving the straw and sacking back into the box, and closing the lid. Quelch, probably had not given that box a further thought: Gosling, probably, had expected it to be left there as one of his perquisites. Anyhow, there it was, with the key still sticking in the lock.

Billy Bunter rolled breathlessly across to it.

He lifted the slatted lid.

Swiftly—even Bunter could be swift, in such pressing circumstances—he dragged out the sacking. Under it was a mass of crumpled straw.

The fat Owl rolled into the box.

He jerked out the key, and jammed it in the inside of the lock on the box. That box had been locked on the outside when it travelled to Greyfriars containing Virgil and Horace. It was going to be locked on the inside now, when it went on its travels again, with very different contents!

The fat Owl rolled into the long box.

There was ample space for even his rotund form. His fat figure sank into the thick straw. On a previous occasion, when the vengeful Bounder was hunting him, that box had accommodated Bunter for a matter of minutes. It was going to accommodate him now for a considerably longer period!

Such was the amazing scheme that had been hatched in Bunter's fat brain!

Bunter was not going to spend the holidays at the school. Bunter knew—or at least he had no doubt that he knew—a trick worth two of that! He was going to Wharton Lodge for Christmas after all!

True, he could not present himself at that abode openly, under penalty of being kicked all over Surrey! He was going to enter surreptitiously: inside that long box—rather like the Greeks in their Wooden Horse at the taking of Troy!

It was bound to work, Bunter considered.

He knew that Colonel Wharton was away from home, not to return till the eve of Christmas. The box, therefore, would not be opened on arrival: it would be placed somewhere till the Colonel's return. Long before that, the fat Owl would be outside it!—but inside Wharton Lodge!

Once within those walls, Bunter had to trust to luck for the rest. It was not the first time that the fat Owl had taken long chances.

He might be able to keep out of sight till it was judicious to show up. That would not be difficult, since no one would have the slightest suspicion that he was in the house at all. When he was discovered, the genial influence of Christmas might come to the rescue, and save him from being kicked out. But even if he were kicked out, he would be no worse off than before. In the meantime, he hoped for the best. Anyhow he was not sticking in a deserted school over the holidays if he could help it. He was going to Wharton Lodge: and taking the chance how it might turn out.

Nobody but Billy Bunter, probably, would ever have thought, or dreamed, of such a scheme. But to Bunter's fat mind it looked like a winner. Anyhow, that was what he had planned: and what he was going to do.

Squatted in the straw in the long box, he drew the sacking over him. He was in haste, lest Gosling should materialize too soon: but he had more time at his disposal than on the previous occasion. He covered himself carefully with the sacking: all but his fat face.

Having disposed himself as comfortably as possible, he drew the slatted lid shut, and turned the key in the lock on the inside. There was no shortage of air, in the box: an ample supply came through the interstices between the slats of the lid. Bunter grinned up through those slats. Very carefully, he drew the sacking over his fat face, and it disappeared from view. Looked at from out-

side, through the slats, only sacking was to be seen: and Bunter had only to keep silent.

He grinned under the sacking.

He listened intently while he grinned. Gosling might come along at any minute. There was nothing to excite his suspicions if he came now. So far as Gosling knew, Mr. Quelch had packed something in that box, for transit to Wharton Lodge. What it was, he did not know, and doubtless did not care. Certainly it was never likely to occur to him that what was contained in that box had packed itself, and that it was the fattest member of Mr. Quelch's form!

Bunter waited.

He had some time to wait. He need not, after all, have been in such a hurry: but he had to be on the safe side. Minute followed minute: and it seemed to Bunter quite a long time before he heard, at last, footsteps and voices.

"'Ere you are, Cripps." It was Gosling's crusty voice. The wood-shed door opened, and the old Greyfriars porter came in, followed by the carrier.

"Same box that I brought 'ere?" asked Cripps.

"That's it!"

"Well, I 'ope it ain't so 'eavy as last time."

"I'll lend you a 'and with it, if it is. Wait a minute while I stick on this 'ere label."

Billy Bunter, hidden from sight, could see nothing. But he could hear: and he stilled his breathing as he heard Gosling stooping over the box, to attach the label to the lid.

"Now get 'old of it," said Gosling.

Billy Bunter felt the box move. It was lifted a few inches, with Gosling at one end and Cripps at the other. Then it bumped on the floor again, and the fat Owl barely repressed a startled squeak. Apparently Gosling and Cripps found it heavy!

"My word!" gasped Mr. Cripps, "Why, that's 'eavier than it was last time, Gosling. Something 'eavier than blinking busts in it this time."

"'Eavy, and no mistake!" agreed Gosling.

"Wot's in it?" asked Cripps.

"Blessed if I know! Never even knew it was packed at all, if you come to that," answered Gosling. "Mr. Quelch rings me up from the station, to give me instructions, and that was the first I 'eard of it. Packed it 'isself, without asking a man to lend a 'and. Goes orf and forgets all about it, and rings up a man from the station! Huh!"

"Well, we got to get it to the car," said Cripps. "'Ave another go!"

The box heaved up again.

This time it remained up. It was heavy—undoubtedly it was heavy! It was very heavy indeed. It was a cold December day: but both Gosling and Cripps perspired, as they bore that box out of the wood-shed.

They bore it away quite slowly: but it was dumped down at last. Again its hidden contents barely repressed a squeak, as it was dumped.

"'Eavy, and no mistake!" came a gasp from Cripps.

"I believe you!" gurgled Gosling. "'Orribly 'eavy, if you ask me!"

"Wot the dickens can be in it, to weigh all that?"

"Ask me another."

"Well, somebody will 'ave to 'elp me with it at the other end," said Cripps.

There was the sound of an engine. Billy Bunter felt himself in motion. He subdued a fat chuckle.

He had left Greyfriars. He was on his way to Wharton Lodge. How it was going to turn out, was on the knees of the gods: but the fat Owl had great faith in his own fat artfulness. Anyhow, there he was: on his way to Wharton Lodge for Christmas: the most extraordinary Christmas Box that had ever arrived anywhere at Christmastide!

CHAPTER XIV

THE MAN IN THE TREE!

BOB CHERRY jumped.

"Oh!" he ejaculated.

It was really no wonder that Bob jumped. A heavy object, suddenly falling on his head apparently out of the wintry sky, was enough to make any fellow jump. It was so very unexpected.

"Oh!" repeated Bob. His hand shot to his head. "Wow! What the dickens What the thump—what—wow!"

Something dropped at his feet. It was the heavy object that had fallen on his head and rolled off.

"What on earth—?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Great pip!" ejaculated Johnny Bull.

Five fellows were quite astonished. Bob Cherry seemed hurt, as well as astonished. He rubbed his head, where there was a pain.

Harry Wharton and Co. had been out for a ramble that fine wintry afternoon, and were returning a little late for tea to Wharton Lodge. Being a little late, and aware that Miss Amy Wharton, presiding over tea and cakes, would be awaiting them, and naturally not wishing to keep that kind old lady waiting, they were rather in a hurry. For which reason, they were taking a short cut across the park to the house. There was no track to be seen among the thick trees: but Harry Wharton knew every foot of the ground round his old home: and he led the way without a pause, Bob and Nugent and Johnny Bull and the nabob of Bhanipur following his guidance. They were passing under the massive branches of an ancient beech when it happened.

They came to an astonished halt. Bob was chiefly occupied in rubbing his head but four pairs of eyes fixed on the object that had fallen on the earth. It was a pair of field-glasses.

Harry Wharton stooped and picked them up.

He stared at them. The other fellows stared at them. How a pair of field-glasses could have fallen on a fellow's head, in the middle of a thick wood, was a mystery. Of that mystery there was only one possible explanation—somebody in the branches above their heads must have dropped them. So, after staring blankly at the field-glasses, the chums of the Greyfriars Remove stared upwards, into the branches of the tall old beech.

"Somebody's up there!" said Johnny Bull.

"And he dropped those field-glasses—!" said Frank Nugent.

"On my head!" growled Bob Cherry, "I'll jolly well punch his, whoever he is, when he comes down! Who the dickens can be sticking up in that tree?"

"Goodness knows," said Harry Wharton. "But we'll jolly soon know! Nobody has a right to trespass here."

The Famous Five forgot, for the moment, both tea, and Miss Wharton presiding over the tea-table. Somebody, evidently, was hidden in that tree, over their heads: obviously somebody who had no business there. Whoever it was, must have climbed over the park wall, and trespassed on private grounds: apparently having selected the tallest tree in the park to take a survey with his field-glasses. It was very unusual, and very surprising, and Harry Wharton had no intention of passing on without looking into it. But for the accidental dropping of the field-glasses, the schoolboys would have gone on their way, without the faintest suspicion that there was anyone in the tree.

They scanned the overhead branches. The winter winds had stripped the tall tree of most of its foliage, but the branches were thick, and the winter dusk was falling. Whoever was in the tree seemed to have packed himself close, for they could not pick him out.

"Who's up there?" called out Harry Wharton.

No answer.

"Somebody's there!" said Nugent.

"That's a cert," said Johnny Bull.

"The certfulness is terriffic," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

"Will you answer me?" shouted Wharton.

There was still no reply.

"Whoever he is, he's up to no good," said Johnny Bull. "We're not going on without knowing what he's up to."

"No fear," said Harry.

"If the esteemed mountain will not come to Mahomet, the worthy Mahomet must go to the mountain," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Let us go up climbfully and chuck him down."

"We jolly well will, if he won't come down," said Harry.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "You in the tree! Show a leg! Are you coming down, or are you waiting for us to come up and chuck you down?"

There was a stirring in the tree at last. Its mysterious inhabitant did not, apparently, desire the Greyfriars fellows to climb up and "chuck" him down. A figure emerged from a mass of thick boughs, and clambered down the tree.

It was that of a small, lithe man, who clambered as actively as a monkey. The juniors watched him as he descended, with keen eyes.

"Mind he doesn't dodge away when he drops!" said Harry. "He's got to give an account of himself."

"What-ho!" said Bob.

The little man stopped, on a branch a few feet over the juniors' heads, and looked down at them, peering in the dusk. Five pairs of eyes fastened on his face: and not one of the five juniors was favourably impressed by its aspect. It was a sharp foxy-looking face, with bright black eyes that gleamed like beads. The man seemed as watchful and alert as a badger.

But if he had hoped to jump down and run, he had to give it up. The five schoolboys stood round in a circle to receive him. He had no chance of dodging away. He paused on the branch watching them like a cat.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"You may as well drop!" he called out. "We've got you—and you're going to explain what you're up to here. Make up your mind to it."

"Coming, sir!" said the small man, quite civilly: though the glint in his beady eyes belied the civility of his tone. And he dropped lightly from the branch, and landed on the earth: the Famous Five closing round him as he landed.

"Well, what's your game here?" asked Harry. "Who are you?"

"No harm, sir! Name of Tucker, sir! Thank you for picking up my glasses. They dropped from my 'and."

"On my nut!" grunted Bob Cherry.

"Sorry, sir!" said Mr. Tucker, very civilly. "'Ope your 'ead aint 'urt, sir! They jest dropped from my 'and."

He stretched out his hand to the field-glasses, and slipped them into his pocket. His manner was quite cool and assured: though there was a restless glint in his beady eyes.

"Well, never mind my nut," said Bob. "I know you didn't drop those dashed glasses on purpose—you didn't mean to show up if you could help it. What were you hiding in that tree for?"

"And what were you watching through those glasses?" grunted Johnny Bull.

"You're not going till you explain," said Harry Wharton.

"Explain as fast as you like, young gentlemen," said the small man. "I'm

'aving a day in the country, and I jest climbed that tree, sir, to give the scenery the once-over through field-glasses, sir. No 'arm in that, is there?"

"You're trespassing here," said Harry. "Couldn't you have picked a tree without clambering over a park wall into private grounds?"

"I jest picked out the tallest tree I saw, sir, wanting to take a good look round," said Mr. Tucker, apologetically. "Sorry if I've pushed in where I ain't wanted. I'll go as soon as you like."

Harry Wharton looked at him very intently. He did not like the foxy face or the restless, cunning, watchful beady eyes. But Mr. Tucker's explanation seemed plausible: and it was difficult to guess what ill motive he could have had, for parking himself at the top of the tree.

"No 'arm done, and sorry I intruded, sir!" said the small man. "P'raps you'll point out the quickest way out of this, sir! I sort of lost my way among all these 'ere trees."

"Gammon!" said Johnny Bull.

The beady eyes shot round at Johnny. Johnny gave him a grim, uncompromising stare.

"You're up to no good here," he said. "If I were you Wharton, I wouldn't let him clear off."

"Well, he's done no harm, if you come to that," said Harry.

"Not so far!" said Johnny. "But what was he doing up on that tree with field-glasses? We can't see the house from here, on the ground: but he could see it all right from that tree-top, and count every brick, if he liked, through those field-glasses. He was watching the house."

The little man gave a start, and his beady eyes snapped. A hunted look came, for a moment, into those beady eyes.

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. "But what—?"

"The house can be seen from here—up a tree," said Johny, "and every window examined, as if it was only a yard away, through those glasses. That was his game, and it's as clear as daylight."

"Oh!" repeated Harry.

"Oh, come orf it, sir!" protested Mr. Tucker. "Wot would I want to be watchin' the 'ouse for, and counting the winders?"

"That's an easy one," answered Johnny Bull, stolidly. "Looking for a way in, I fancy, later on."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Is that it?"

"By gum! It looks like it, now Johnny mentions it!" said Frank Nugent. "That would explain——"

"The lookfulness is terrific."

"Oh, draw it mild," said Mr. Tucker. "I tell you—"

"Look here, Wharton," said Johnny Bull, "the best thing we can do is to walk this merchant to Wimford Police-station, and let them inquire into his business. He can tell them all about climbing trees in a private park to look at

the scenery—and perhaps they may believe him! I don't: and I jolly well think——Look out!"

"Collar him!"

Evidently Mr. Tucker did not want to be walked to Wimford Police-station, for inquiry into his business. He made a sudden bound like a wild cat, taking the juniors by surprise.

Hands reached out on all sides to grasp him, as he bounded: and he barely eluded them. But he was too swift for those grasping hands. In the twinkling of an eye, he was running. And he ran like a hare.

"After him!" roared Bob.

That sudden flight could hardly leave any doubt that the man was a suspicious character! And all the five schoolboys rushed after him, in hot pursuit. But in a matter of seconds Mr. Tucker—if Tucker was his name—vanished among the trees.

They had one more glimpse of him—on the top of the park wall. But it was only an instant's glimpse! Then he dropped on the further side, and vanished.

"Oh, crumbs!" Bob Cherry came to a breathless halt. "Gone!"

"By gum!" he could run!" panted Harry Wharton. "Not much doubt now that Johnny had it right. It looks like it, at least."

"Not the sort of guest you want dropping in one night over the hols," grinned Nugent.

"Hardly," said Harry laughing. "Come on, you fellows—he's given us the slip, and we're jolly late for tea."

The man with the beady eyes, whoever and whatever he was, had vanished. And the Famous Five remembered Miss Amy Wharton and tea: and resumed their way at a trot. They arrived rather breathlessly at Wharton Lodge: but they did not find Miss Wharton, as they expected, awaiting them at a belated tea-table. They found her in the hall, with Wells, the butler, and John and James, the footmen: all four gazing at a long box, with a slatted lid, addressed to Colonel Wharton, which had apparently just been delivered.

CHAPTER XV

THE BOX FROM GREYFRIARS!

"HARRY, my dear." Miss Wharton looked round, as her nephew came in with his friends. There was quite a perplexed expression on her face. The arrival of the long box seemed to have puzzled her.

"Yes, Aunt Amy," answered Harry.

"It is very odd!" said Miss Wharton. "Did you know anything about it, Harry?"

"About what, auntie?"

"This box!" said Miss Wharton, pointing to it.

Harry Wharton looked at the box, and looked at his aunt. His friends looked at the box curiously. None of them had ever seen it before, and certainly they knew nothing about it. Billy Bunter had seen it arrive at Greyfriars School a few days since; and Smithy might have noticed it in Gosling's woodshed when he looked there for the fleeing fat Owl: but the Co. had seen nothing of it. It did not occur to them that it had come from the school at all.

"No aunt," said Harry, puzzled. "It's addressed to Uncle James." He glanced at the label. "It will have to wait till he comes home on Christmas Eve."

"But it is very odd!" said Miss Wharton. "Your uncle never mentioned to

. . . . the famous Five closed round him.

me that he was expecting anything of the kind, when he left last week. He did not mention it to you in his letters?"

"No, aunt!"

"Did not Mr. Quelch?" asked Miss Wharton.

"Mr. Quelch?" repeated Harry, blankly. "No! How could Mr. Quelch know anything about a box coming here for uncle?"

"It was sent here by Mr. Quelch," explained his aunt. "No doubt you saw Mr. Quelch yesterday, when the school broke up—"

"Of course," said Harry. "But—"

"But he did not mention that he was sending this box to your uncle?"

"Not a word!" said Harry, in astonishment. "Blessed if I make it out! What the dickens can Quelch have sent to uncle, in a box that size? It's jolly odd that he never mentioned it."

"Very odd!" said Miss Wharton. "I cannot imagine what it contains! Very odd that my brother never mentioned it to me, and that Mr. Quelch never mentioned it to you, Harry."

"Very!" agreed Harry. "But are you sure it comes from Mr. Quelch, auntie?"

"So the carrier informed me. It was carried by road, by a carrier of Friardale named Cripps—"

"Old Cripps, the carrier? By road!" exclaimed Harry. "Why if it came by road, auntie, it would run into pounds—"

"It certainly did!" said Miss Wharton. "Mr. Cripps informed me that he had instructions at Greyfriars School to carry it by road, in the shortest possible time, and deliver it here, and I was quite dismayed by the amount I have had to pay for carriage."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Has Quelchy sent Wharton's uncle a Christmas box, and forgotten to pay carriage on it?"

"It is most puzzling," continued Miss Wharton. "The box could have come by rail, and I see no reason for the haste to which the carrier referred, as your uncle is absent, and will not see it until he returns. Perhaps Mr. Quelch did not know that he was away from home at present. But it is very singular."

"Can't make it out!" confessed Wharton. "But if old Cripps says it comes from Quelch, I suppose he knows. May be something breakable in it, if it had to come specially by road."

"Well, I suppose we shall know, when my brother returns home," said Miss Wharton. "But it is very, very odd, that no mention has been made of it. It must wait for my brother's return. Wells!"

"Yes, ma'am," said Wells.

"You had better place the box in the Colonel's study, to await his return."

"Very good, ma'am."

Wells, the portly butler of Wharton Lodge, proceeded to direct John and James to bear the mysterious box to the Colonel's study. John and James

picked it up by either end: fairly bending under the weight. Gosling and Cripps had not found that box easy to negotiate. Neither did John and James.

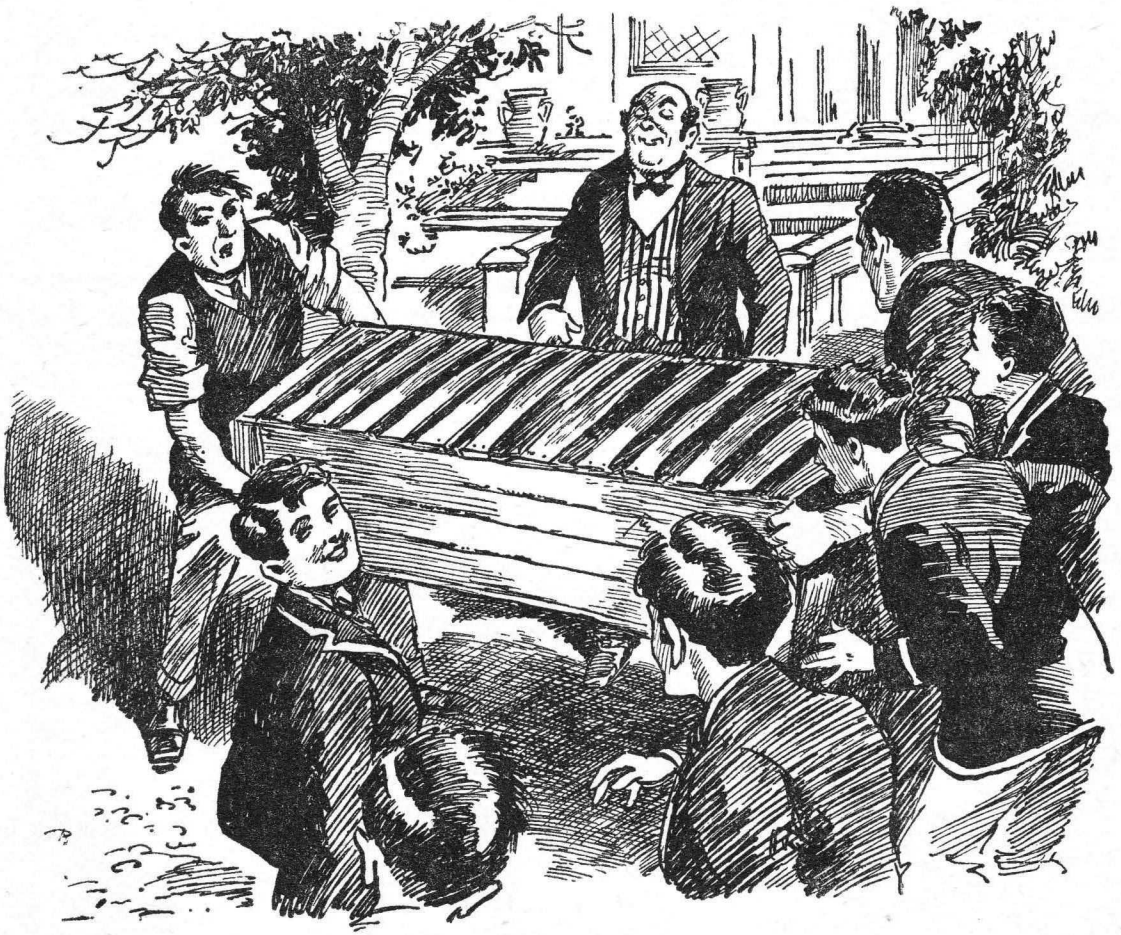
"Something jolly heavy in it!" remarked Bob. "What on earth can Quelchy have sent your uncle in that big box, Harry?"

"Goodness knows!" said Harry.

"Might be a statue, or something, from the size of the box, and the weight," remarked Nugent. "I suppose Quelchy isn't sending your uncle a life-size statue for a Christmas present?"

"Hardly!" said Harry, laughing.

"Take care, John!" said Wells, as the heavy box bumped against a chair. "Take care, James! There may be something breakable in the box! Take the greatest care not to drop it. The contents might be damaged."



John and James staggered with the box.

Wells was quite unaware that his voice reached a pair of fat ears, hidden beneath the sacking under the slatted lid of the box. The "contents" of that box almost squeaked aloud, as it swayed in the hands of James and John. Billy Bunter, at least, had no doubt that the contents might be damaged, if John and James dropped it!

"It's very heavy, Mr. Wells," gasped John.

"P'raps you'd lend a hand, Mr. Wells," suggested James.

"You have not far to take it." The portly butler did not heed the suggestion. "I will open the door for you."

"Dear me! It does appear to be very heavy indeed!" said Miss Wharton. "I really cannot imagine what Mr. Quelch can have sent to your uncle, Harry, that weighs so very much. The carrier had to have assistance in getting it into the house. It is very singular."

"Careful!" admonished Wells, again, as John and James staggered with the box. It seemed almost too much for their combined efforts.

"Let's lend a hand, you chaps," said Bob Cherry. Bob was not the fellow to stand idle while others exerted themselves. "All hands on deck, and heave ahead, my hearties!"

"Go it!" agreed Harry.

And all the Co. gathered round the long box, grasping it on all sides, to lend their aid in its transit.

Many hands make light work! Heavy as it undoubtedly was, the box was fairly easily handled, when five sturdy schoolboys lent their aid. Wells had opened the door of Colonel Wharton's study: a room which adjoined the library, and had a door on the hall. Surrounded by bearers, the long box was borne through the doorway into the study.

"Something jolly solid in it!" breathed Bob Cherry. "Feels as if it weighs about half a ton!"

"Not quite that!" said Harry, with a breathless laugh. "But—my hat! It's heavy! Weighs as much as Bunter, I should think."

"The weighfulness is terrific!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But many hands make the cracked pitcher go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks: and a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, saves a stitch in time."

And with a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together, the mysterious box was carried into the Colonel's study, and dumped down there. It dumped down rather hard, and there was a sudden squeak:

"Wow!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! On somebody's foot?" asked Bob Cherry, looking round.

"Not mine," said Harry.

"Or mine," said Nugent. "Yours, Johnny?"

"No!" answered Johnny Bull, "Yours, Inky?"

The nabob shook a dusky head.

"Hurt, either of you?" asked Harry Wharton, looking at John and James.

"Thank you sir, no," answered John.

"Not at all, sir," answered James.

"Well, it sounded as if somebody had got it on his foot!" said Bob. "I heard somebody yowl. Who was it?"

There was no answer to that question. Everyone of the bearers had heard that sudden squeak as the box dumped sharply on the floor. Who had uttered it did not transpire. And the person who actually had uttered it kept as still and quiet as a mouse with the cat at hand. Billy Bunter had squeaked quite inadvertently as the box dumped: but no one was likely to guess that that squeak had come from the interior of the box from Greyfriars.

"Well, that's that!" said Bob. "Shouldn't like to have to carry that box a mile, you chaps! Come on—we're jolly late for tea."

Harry Wharton and Co. left the Colonel's study. John and James followed: and Wells closed the door from the hall. The long box from Greyfriars was left in the dusky room, to remain there till Colonel Wharton returned home. And when Harry Wharton and Co. went to bed that night, if they dreamed, not one of them dreamed that Wharton Lodge now had an additional inhabitant.

CHAPTER XVI

IN THE DARK!

BILLY BUNTER sat up.

Like the heathen of old, he sat in darkness.

Midnight had sounded from the grandfather clock in the hall. The strokes reached two fat and eager listening ears in the room adjoining the library of Wharton Lodge. Others might be sleeping, at midnight's witching hour: but the inhabitant of the long box from Greyfriars did not sleep. Which was very unusual: for Billy Bunter, when it came to sleeping, could as a rule beat Rip van Winkle at his own game.

But circumstances alter cases. Bunter was hungry! He was awfully hungry! He was fearfully hungry! Hunger, like Macbeth, murdered sleep!

It was hours and hours and hours since Bunter had had a meal. It seemed to him like days and days and days, if not weeks and weeks and weeks. Seldom, if ever, had the fat Owl been so hungry. As he lay in the straw, under the sacking in the long box, he realized what a ship-wrecked crew must feel like after weeks in an open boat! That was how Bunter felt—only worse! He was just ravenous.

Nevertheless, he had to be cautious.

He was safely landed inside Wharton Lodge! His amazing scheme had

worked like a charm! The artful Greeks who penetrated Troy, hidden in the interior of a wooden horse, had not been more successful than the artful fat Owl, hidden in the slatted box. So far, so good!

But it would be bootless to overcome the difficulty of entering, only to be kicked out again. Bunter had to lie low, for the present at least. Later, he might be able to show up, and somehow make his peace. He hoped so: hope springs eternal in the human breast. But evidently he had to wait for a favourable opportunity. On Christmas Day, when all was peace and goodwill, he might make the venture. Even those beasts, Bunter considered, wouldn't feel like kicking a fellow on Christmas Day. In the meantime, Bunter had to keep doggo—very strictly doggo!

But he had to eat!

That was necessary for any fellow: and especially necessary for Billy Bunter. He knew his way about Wharton Lodge—he had stayed there several times, and it was quite familiar ground. It would be easy to find his way to the larder: when everybody was asleep in bed. But he had to wait.

True, there was likely to be some spot of surprise in the morning, when it was discovered that the larder had been raided. Everyone would wonder who had been at work there.

But that mattered little—to Bunter. Miss Wharton and Wells, might think that Harry Wharton's schoolboy guests were the culprits. The Co. might suspect one another. Or John or James, or the house-maids, might come under suspicion. All that mattered nothing at all, so long as nobody suspected that a fat Owl had raided the foodstuffs. And nobody was likely to suspect that!

But Bunter had to wait! In his peculiar position, he simply had to consider "safety first". Unless, and until, some happy opportunity came for showing up and staying on as a guest, his presence in Wharton Lodge had to be kept a deep, dark secret!

Hungry as he was, yearning for foodstuffs as he had seldom yearned before in his fat life, Bunter waited for midnight. By that time he had no doubt that everyone would be in bed. If not, he had to chance it. He simply could not wait longer than that.

Never had a sound been so welcome to his fat ears as the chimes of midnight.

He unlocked the box-lid, pushed it up, and sat up, blinking round him through his big spectacles, in dense darkness.

The Colonel's study was as black as a hat. Outside, Bunter could hear the December wind whistling. There was a light fall of snow: but the blinds were drawn, and no gleam of it penetrated the room. In densest darkness, the fat Owl clambered out of the box, slipping the key into his pocket.

He had had plenty of room, and had been quite comfortable there: still, he was feeling a little cramped, and he stretched his fat limbs with satisfaction. But he did not delay. The call of food was irresistible.

He groped to the door.

Bump!

"Wow!"

Bunter was no cat to see in the dark. He bumped into a chair, and it went over. In the deep silence of midnight it sounded very loud: and almost as loud was Bunter's yelp, at a pang in a fat shin.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter. He stooped and rubbed the fat shin, listening intently, with beating heart. If that noise had been heard—

But who was likely to hear it, at midnight? The Colonel's study was on the ground floor: and everybody was upstairs in bed. Still, Bunter listened with painful intentness for a long minute.

There was no sound: and he resumed his groping. He reached the door without further mishap, opened it, and peered out into the hall.

It was not so dark there. Winter starlight glimmered in through high windows, and there was a glimmer of snow outside. In a dim twilight, the fat junior groped out into the hall, and made his way to the service door. That was the door that led to the region of the foodstuffs! It also led, as Bunter was aware, to Wells's room which was next to the pantry. But he had no doubt that Wells was fast asleep, like the rest of the household. He had only to tiptoe past Wells's door in the dark.

There were electric switches at hand, but he could not venture to turn on a light, much as he would have liked to do so. But for his haste when leaving the school, he might have provided himself with a flash-lamp—he could have found one in somebody's study. Now he had to creep in darkness. He crept on, groping at walls and doors: wishing from the bottom of his fat heart that he had thought of providing himself with at least a box of matches. But he hadn't!

Where was he?

He had made a surreptitious visit to that larder, on the occasion of a previous visit to Wharton Lodge. He had banked on finding his way without much trouble. But the darkness was baffling. He groped over a door, and felt a door handle. Was it the right one?

He just didn't know.

For a long, long moment he hesitated. He was almost sure that he was on the right track: but not quite. If he opened the wrong door, in the dark, he simply did not know what might be on the other side. He decided to open it very, very quietly, peer in, and listen. That, really, was all that he could do, in the baffling circumstances.

Very cautiously he turned the door handle. He pushed the door open, and blinked into the darkness beyond.

That door might lead into the kitchen: it might lead into a passage: it might lead even into Wells's room: in fact, it might have led almost anywhere, for all Bunter knew. The quest of food at midnight was not the simple proposition that the fat Owl had anticipated.

But it was neck or nothing now: and he groped through the doorway. There was a jarring sound as he bumped into some article of furniture.

He stopped, his fat heart thumping.

Another sound came to his fat ears! It was the sound of someone stirring in bed! It was a bedroom into which he was groping.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

The creak of the bed was followed by a startled voice:

"What's that? Who's there?"

It was the voice of Wells, the butler of Wharton Lodge! In utter dismay the fat Owl realized that he was groping into Wells's room, and that he had awakened Wells!

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He backed out hurriedly through the doorway. Even as he closed the door after him, there was a flash of light in the dark. Wells, startled, had switched on a bedside lamp. Staring from the bed, the startled butler saw the door closing! A moment earlier he would have seen Bunter.

"Oh, jiminy!" gasped Bunter, outside.

He could hear the butler scrambling out of bed. Wells was alarmed: and he was coming after the unseen, unknown person who had opened his door at midnight. Probably he was thinking of burglars. In a matter of moments that door would be open again——!

Bunter was hungry! He was famished! He was ravenous! But in his alarm he forgot foodstuffs: forgot that he was hungry, famished, and ravenous. He remembered only that he had to escape discovery. He fled as if for his fat life! By the time Wells had that door open, Bunter had groped and stumbled and scrambled back to the service door, and rolled breathless and panting into the dim hall.

CHAPTER XVII

NOT A BURGLAR!

"OH, lor'!" breathed Billy Bunter.

His fat heart was beating fast.

Wells had turned out of bed. No doubt he had delayed a few moments, to don a garment or two. But he was after the midnight intruder. Lights had flashed on behind Bunter. In wild alarm, the fat Owl stumbled and groped in the dim hall, bumping into anything that came in his way. His idea was to get back to the Colonel's study and hunt cover in the long box—there to lie low till all was quiet again. In the darkness he opened a door and pushed through, hoping that it was the right door.

Right or wrong, he had no chance of retracing his steps, for the electric light flashed on in the hall as he closed that door behind him. He did not dare to latch it, lest a sound should reach Wells, and betray the way he had gone. With the door an inch open, he stood gasping for breath and listening intently with both fat ears. The room into which he had groped had tall windows, from which came a glimmer of stars. He realized that it could not be the room he had been seeking, which was black as a hat. He realized further that he was in the dining-room of Wharton Lodge where, on happier occasions, he had had stuffed turkey and mince pies and Christmas pudding. But it was too late to retreat now: Wells was in the hall, with the light on.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

He could not get back to his former refuge. He had to remain where he was. If Wells followed him in, there was the long table under which he could dodge. That was the hapless Owl's last resource—if it came to that!

Keeping the massive oak door barely an inch ajar, he peered out into the lighted hall through his big spectacles.

Wells was standing, half-dressed, at a distance, looking round him. He had a poker in his hand. He was not looking towards the dining-room: and evidently was not aware that that was the direction the midnight intruder had taken. He was looking towards the stairs, as if doubting whether the unseen intruder might not have dodged up to the upper floors. That was a relief to Bunter. Wells was welcome to investigate in any direction except that of the dining-room, so far as Bunter was concerned.

The fat Owl blinked at him apprehensively.

The butler's door had been opened at midnight: by some person he had not seen. He could hardly suppose that that person was an inhabitant of Wharton Lodge. Obviously, he must be thinking of burglars. What was he going to do? It was practically certain that he would call John and James, for a search of the house. Billy Bunter realized it, and his fat heart sank. Had he been safely back in the long box, with the lid locked over him, all would have been secure. But as it was, could a search for the imaginary burglar fail to unearth him? His game was up.

Or was it?

Spurred by peril, Billy Bunter's fat brain functioned more efficiently than was its wont. He remembered that he was a ventriloquist.

"Wells!"

The butler started, as his name was called. It was difficult for him to "place" that unexpected voice, but it certainly seemed to him to come from the dim gallery over the hall, at the head of the big staircase. And the voice was familiar to him. Unless his ears deceived him, it was the voice of Harry Wharton.

"Master Harry—!" he ejaculated. "Are you awake, sir? Are you up? Look out, sir—there is somebody in the house—"

"Don't be an ass, Wells."

"What?"

"What are you rotting about in the middle of the night for, with a silly poker in your hand, you old ass?"

Wells could hardly believe his ears.

Wells was an old retainer of the Wharton household. He had known Harry Wharton all his young life, and was accustomed to regard him with almost a fatherly eye. Harry, on his side, liked old Wells, and had always treated him with the consideration and respect due to his age and faithful service. For Master Harry to address him in this manner was unheard-of: unthinkable. Yet Wells had to believe his ears!

The butler's face reddened. He stared up at the balustrade of the old oak gallery over the hall, from which direction he had no doubt that Master Harry was speaking. Indignation glowed in his plump face. He could not see over the balustrade, from below: but he could hardly doubt that Harry Wharton was there!

"Master Harry—!" he exclaimed. "There is a burglar in the house—"

"Rot!"

"Really, Master Harry—"

"Rubbish!"

Wells breathed very hard.

"If your uncle were present, Master Harry, he would not permit you to address me in that manner!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, rats!"

Wells breathed harder still.

"I am sorry you have been awakened sir," he said, with cold dignity. "But there is someone in the house, and a search must be made. Someone opened my door at few minutes ago and awakened me—"

"It wasn't a burglar, you old donkey! It was me."

"Wha-a-t?"

"Only a lark, Wells. Just to make you jump! No need to fancy there's burglars in the house, you old ass."

"Upon my word!" gasped Wells.

He stared blankly. Not for a moment had it occurred to him that that startling episode might mean only that a schoolboy was "larking". Least of all would he have suspected that the Colonel's nephew was the fellow for such a "lark". He could hardly believe his ears. Still, he had to believe them.

"You, Master Harry!" Wells fairly stuttered.

"Yes, you silly cuckoo: and there's nothing to do a song and dance about. I'm going back to bed, and you'd better do the same."

"Master Harry——!" gasped Wells.

There was no reply. "Master Harry", apparently, was gone. Wells stood staring up, breathing hard and deep. His plump face was red, and his eyes glinted. Not a burglar, after all—only a schoolboy larking—and that school-

boy, instead of expressing regret, had addressed him in the most disrespectful manner! Wells's feelings were deep.

However, he gave up the idea of burglars. The poker was not needed after all. There was no need to call John and James, and search the house. With deep, deep feelings, Wells switched off lights, and went back by the service door to his own quarters.

A fat junior, behind the dining-room door, was glad to see him go. The darkness, as the lights went out, was more than welcome to Billy Bunter.

The artful fat Owl grinned in the dark.

Once more his weird gift of ventriloquism had served his turn. Wells was gone: and everybody else was still asleep: Harry Wharton, among the sleepers, little dreaming how he had deteriorated in Wells's esteem! Once more the unsuspected inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was safe: and at liberty to carry on in his search for provender.

But the grin faded off Billy Bunter's fat face. After what had happened, he dared not risk going by way of the service door again. The foodstuffs in that direction were barred to him. But he remembered—from a previous visit to Wharton Lodge—that there were biscuits in the side-board in the dining-room: and he was in the dining-room now.

He closed the latch of the door, softly: and in the glimmer from the tall windows, groped to the sideboard. A minute later a biscuit box was in his hands: and the grin returned to his fat face, as he found that it was crammed with biscuits. Having popped two or three into a capacious mouth—for in the circumstances there was not a second to be lost!—the fat Owl rolled to an armchair, chewing as he rolled: and sat down there, with the biscuit box on his fat knees.

Outside Wharton Lodge, the wind whistled round the chimney-pots, the trees in the park creaked and rustled: within, there was another sound: a sound of steady, industrious munching!

Munch! munch! munch! munch!

Luckily for Bunter, there were no ears to hear. For quite a long time the munching continued. There was an ample supply of biscuits in the box: few fellows could have disposed of all of them at a single sitting. But Billy Bunter was equal to it. Munch-munch-munch went steadily on, till the last biscuit had disappeared on the downward path.

Then Billy Bunter leaned luxuriously back on the soft leather of the chair, and rested after his exertions. Really, he needed rather a rest. He was no longer hungry. But he was sleepy—awfully sleepy! Billy Bunter was quite unaccustomed to hearing the chimes at midnight: and it was now long past midnight. Almost unconsciously, his little round eyes closed behind his big round spectacles. He was not thinking of going to sleep in that deep comfortable armchair. He just went to sleep without thinking of it!

Snore!

A new sound was added to those of the windy December night. It was a sound that was wont to wake the echoes in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars in term time. When Billy Bunter went to sleep, he stayed asleep. And when he slept, he snored. And he was still sleeping, and still snoring, when the dim light of the December dawn glimmered in at the windows.

CHAPTER XVIII

A SURPRISE FOR HARRY WHARTON

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

Billy Bunter woke suddenly.

His eyes opened behind his spectacles, and he blinked drowsily. That cheery roar, impinging on his fat ears, was familiar to him: and for the moment, as he emerged from the mists and shadows of sleep, he fancied that he was waking up in the old dormitory at school, and that the rising-bell had gone.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter. "Waking a fellow up! Urrrggh."

He sat up.

Then he jumped. He was not in bed in the Remove dormitory: he was in a big deep armchair in the dining-room at Wharton Lodge. He remembered where he was: and the need for caution. And deep dismay was depicted in his fat face.

He was aware that he must have nodded off. But it was hard to realize that he had slept for solid hours. Evidently he had: for light was glimmering in at the windows, and there were sounds of a stirring household.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

He blinked round him in alarm.

He was still alone. That familiar roar in Bob Cherry's powerful voice had come from the other side of a closed door. Bob was in the hall: and there was—so far—solid oak between him and the surreptitious dweller in Wharton Lodge.

That was a relief. He was not discovered yet. But he had cause for dismay and alarm. It was early morning—very early—but it was morning. Some of the household, evidently, were up. Somebody would be coming into the dining-room before long if only to sweep or dust. And there was Bunter!

The fat Owl heaved his weight hurriedly out of the armchair.

On awakening in the morning, Billy Bunter's first thought, as a rule, was of breakfast. But he was not thinking of breakfast now. He was thinking of the imminent danger of discovery.

The fat Owl did not want to depart from the Lodge with a boot thudding on

his tight trousers. Very much indeed he did not. It wouldn't be safe to make his presence known till Christmas Day—if then!

On that day, could they kick a fellow out? Bunter hoped not, at any rate. But earlier than that, there was no doubt that they could: and little doubt that they would!

He crept to the door, and listened. Bob Cherry, evidently, was in the hall: his stentorian roar had sounded quite near. And Bunter heard a fruity voice from beyond the door: that of Wells.

"Good-morning, Master Cherry!"

Apparently it was the butler whom Bob had greeted with that roar.

"Top of the morning, Wells," came Bob's cheery voice. "I'm down first, but the other chaps will be down in two ticks—we're going down to the lake to look at the ice, before brekker. Topping morning, isn't it?"

"It is very cold, sir."

"All the better for the ice."

"Oh! Quite, sir."

Billy Bunter listened, intently. It seemed that the Famous Five were going out before breakfast to look at the ice on the lake in the park, with a view to skating: which was all to the good from Bunter's point of view. There were plenty of others for him to dodge, without those beasts around.

Then the door handle turned.

Billy Bunter caught his breath.

One of them—no doubt Wells—was coming into the dining-room. For a moment it seemed to the hapless fat Owl that all was lost.

But once more his fat brain, spurred by peril, worked! He backed swiftly behind the door.

It opened. But for the moment, at least, the fattest member of the Greyfriars Remove was invisible.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" Bob Cherry was understudying Stentor again. "Here you are, you slackers! Ready?"

"The slackfulness is not terrific, my esteemed and idiotic Bob!" came Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's voice. "The readifulness is preposterous."

Billy Bunter heard footsteps on the stairs, as four schoolboys came down. They joined Bob near the dining-room door: and Harry Wharton called to the butler, who had stepped into the room. The door was between Wells and the fat junior crammed against the wall within. Bunter barely breathed.

"Wells!" called Harry.

"Yes, sir!" said Wells, in a voice as cold and icy as the frozen surface of the lake in the park. Wells had not forgotten the episode of the night. Such expressions as "old ass" and "old donkey" were not easily forgotten! Wells was in a state of reserved and icy dignity.

"Good-morning, Wells!"

Wells did not return that cheery greeting.

"Did you want anything, sir?" he asked, icily.

Harry looked at him. All the Co. looked at him. They had known Wells, so far, as a quite benignant, indeed almost fatherly, butler. The change in him was quite startling. True, his manner to Bob had been as respectfully benignant as ever. But to Harry Wharton it was very much altered. The ice on the lake could not have been icier.

"Is anything the matter, Wells?" asked Harry, puzzled.

"You called to me, sir! Will you kindly give me your instructions, sir?" asked Wells, in a voice that appeared to proceed from a refrigerator.

"I want you to tell Miss Wharton that we've gone down to the lake, if we're not back when she comes down—"

"Very good, sir! Is that all?"

"No, that isn't all!" said Harry, rather sharply. "What's the matter? I can see that something's up. What is it?"

"You should know, sir," said Wells, stiffly.

Behind the door, Billy Bunter listened, suppressing his breathing. So long as this went on, he was safe. It was a respite, at least.

"I should know?" repeated Harry, blankly.

"I imagine so, sir."

"Well, I haven't the faintest idea what you're driving at, Wells," said Harry, impatiently. "Suppose you explain?"

"I should prefer not to refer to the matter, sir, at least until Colonel Wharton returns," answered Wells. "I quite understand, sir, that boys will be boys, and that schoolboys are given to what they are pleased to call larking: but there is a limit, sir, a very definite limit, to what I consider is due to myself, and my position in this household, to tolerate."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry: while Nugent, Johnny Bull, and the nabob, looked blankly surprised. Something, evidently, was very wrong with Wells. He was in an unmistakable state of dignified offence. Most surprised of all the quintette was Harry Wharton.

"You're talking in riddles, Wells," he said.

"Indeed, sir."

"Will you tell me what you are talking about?" asked Harry.

"It would be superfluous, sir, for me to tell you what you are perfectly well acquainted with already."

"Tell me all the same," said Harry. "I simply can't imagine what you're driving at, Wells."

"You have a very short memory, sir! Possibly—." Wells was sarcastic. "Possibly you have forgotten opening my door and waking me up in the middle of the night."

Harry Wharton almost bounded, in his amazement.

"I did!" he gasped.

"You did, sir: and it was not what I should have expected of you—"

"But I did nothing of the kind!" howled Wharton.

"Really, sir—"

"I slept like a top all night," exclaimed Harry. "If anybody woke you up, Wells, it was certainly not I. Sure you didn't dream it?"

"I could hardly have dreamed, in addition, that you called me an old ass, sir, and told me to get back to bed." Wells was still sarcastic. "Kindly say no more about the matter, sir. I shall consider whether to lay it before Colonel Wharton on his return home—"

"I—I—I called you an old ass, and—and—and told you to get back to bed!" Wharton fairly stuttered. "You've been dreaming, Wells. I tell you I never woke up once in the night, and was never out of bed till Bob called me this morning. You must have dreamed it all."

"Must have, Wells," said Bob Cherry, soothingly.

"The dreamfulness must have been terrific, my esteemed Wells."

"Harry wouldn't—!" said Nugent.

"Of course he wouldn't," said Johnny Bull. "You'd better get it into your head that you dreamed it all, Wells."

Wells's face did not relax. He was perfectly well aware that he had not dreamed it. And his dignity was deeply offended.

"Please say no more about the matter, sir," he said: and with that Wells walked into the dining-room: leaving Harry Wharton and Co. in the hall, staring blankly at one another.

CHAPTER XIX

THE ARTFUL DODGER

"OH, jiminy!" breathed Billy Bunter.

He peered round the edge of the door.

Harry Wharton and Co. were gone: all of them in a state of considerable surprise. The only conclusion to which they could possibly come was that Wells had had an extraordinary dream: but they were puzzled, and not a little concerned, as they walked down to the lake in the cold and frosty morning. Billy Bunter dismissed them from mind. Wells was quite sufficient to occupy that fat mind: Wells was in the dining-room: and any minute might discover a fat Owl crammed behind the open door. It had not, naturally, occurred to Wells to look behind the door: but if he did so—!

He seemed very silent: and Bunter wondered what he was up to, and whether there might be a chance of stealing softly away when his back was turned. And at length the fat Owl ventured to peer round the door—and had a view of Wells's back, across the room.

Wells was standing by the armchair, which Bunter had occupied. On the rug before that chair lay a silver biscuit-box—empty! On the chair, and on the rug, and round about, were scattered crumbs. Wells, his back to Bunter, was gazing at the armchair, the biscuit-box, and the crumbs, in a state of great astonishment. It was really a startling discovery. Evidently, someone had been there, during the night, had devoured the biscuits, and left ample traces of the feast. Wells gazed at those traces, as if transfixed. And Billy Bunter, through his big spectacles, gazed at Wells's back!

His fat heart thumped.

If Wells did not look round for a few moments, there was a chance for a fat Owl to steal out of the room, on tiptoe, unseen. But if he did—!

Bunter realized that he had to risk it! To remain where he was, was certain discovery, before long. He simply had to take the chance.

Harry Wharton and Co. were no longer on the spot. Someone else might be in the hall: but Bunter had to risk that.

With thumping heart, the fat junior stepped out from behind the door. On tiptoe, with his eyes and his spectacles glued on Wells, he backed out of the doorway into the hall.

Wells, fortunately, did not stir, for the moment. Hardly able to believe in his good luck, the fat Owl backed into the hall, leaving Wells still staring at the armchair and the traces of its late occupant.

In the hall, Bunter cast a rapid blink round. If only the coast was clear, for a rapid retreat to the Colonel's study, and the box—— !

But the coast was not clear. Across the hall, John, the younger footman, was bending down at the hall fireplace. He had brought in a basket of logs: and apparently one of his duties was to set the log-fire going.

Bunter blinked across the hall, at his back, as he had blinked at Wells's back in the dining-room, with palpitating fat heart.

To get to the Colonel's study, and the refuge of the "Christmas Box", he had to pass John: and though John was too busy to look round behind him, it was quite certain that the fat Owl could not pass him unseen and unnoticed. The distance to the door of the Colonel's study was only a matter of yards: but it might as well have been miles, or leagues, for all the chance Billy Bunter had of reaching it undiscovered. His retreat in that direction was cut off.

But he could not stay where he was! John might look round—Wells would be coming out of the dining-room: at any moment an early housemiad might appear from somewhere—Bunter had to hunt cover.

There was only one way open—up the staircase. And on tiptoe, lest his footsteps should reach John's ears, Bunter rolled to the stairs, and mounted them as fast as his fat little legs could mount.

Breathless, he reached the old oaken gallery that ran round three sides of the hall. He rolled into it, glad that the oaken balustrade concealed him from view from below.

He was only in time. He heard Wells's voice below: the butler had come out of the dining-room, and was speaking to the younger footman.

"John!"

John looked round from the fireplace.

"Yes, Mr. Wells, sir."

"Someone has been in the dining-room, John. The biscuit-box has been taken from the side-board, and left empty—"

"Lor', Mr. Wells, sir!"

"Every biscuit has been eaten! The rug is smothered with crumbs, John. This must be looked into."

Billy Bunter did not stay to listen. He was more than content to leave the mystery of the missing biscuits to Wells and John. He crept silently along the gallery, and rolled into the corridor on which, as he knew from of old, the rooms of Harry Wharton and his friends opened. The Co. were all out of doors, not to return till breakfast: so that was a safe quarter for a harassed Owl, at least till the maids came up to "do" the rooms.

The Colonel's nephew had two rooms there: a bedroom with a sitting-room which was called his "den" adjoining. Both had doors on the corridor: and Bunter rolled into the "den", and closed the door after him.

There, for the moment at least, he was safe.

He sat down in Harry Wharton's armchair, gasped for breath, and wiped spots of perspiration from his fat brow. Quite a lot of excitement had been compressed into the last few minutes, and his fat heart was still thumping.

But he had escaped discovery! He sat in the armchair, and blinked round the room through his big spectacles. Now that immediate peril was past, Bunter's thoughts turned automatically, as it were, upon food. He had to seek a hide-out: but to pass a whole day in any hide-out without sustenance, was not only impossible—it was unthinkable, at least to Billy Bunter.

But he was aware that when Harry Wharton had his friends home for the holidays, they were often wont to gather in the "den", as they had been wont to gather in the old study at Greyfriars: and it was probable that there would be something about in the way of light refreshments. And his little round eyes brightened behind his big round spectacles, at the sight of several articles on the table—a large box of candied fruits, two or three packets of toffee, a box of chocolates, and a dish of apples.

"Oh, good!" breathed Bunter.

He rolled to the table. Certainly, he would have preferred eggs and bacon: but all was grist that came to a hungry Owl's mill.

It was Billy Bunter's happy custom, in the presence of food, to begin on it at once, and keep on till the last morsel had vanished. But his present position was too perilous for him to adhere to his usual manners and customs. He had to be in hiding before anyone came up. There were no minutes to waste. He opened the large box of candied fruits, and began on them: and while they went

down like oysters, his fat hands were busy: packing chocolates and toffee and apples into his pockets, cramming them to capacity. He was still wearing the overcoat in which he had left Greyfriars: the December cold had been too keen for him to discard it when he started on his over-night foraging expedition. Every pocket in that overcoat bulged, by the time he had finished the box of candied fruits.

What Wharton would think, when he came in, and found the table cleared, Bunter did not know, and neither did he care. Possibly he would think that the other fellows had helped themselves rather liberally: possibly that some servant had done so. At all events he was not likely to think of a fat Owl whom he did not suppose to be within miles and miles of Wharton Lodge.

Billy Bunter had packed in the last apple, and was finishing the last of the candied fruits, when he jumped at the sound of a footstep.

He suppressed a gasp.

Someone had come up! The juniors could hardly have come in yet. But it was someone—and the door handle was turning!

Billy Bunter's fat heart almost jumped into his mouth.

He had just time to duck down behind the table, when the door opened. The table hid him, for the moment, from sight. But he had a view of a pair of legs at the doorway, and the lower end of a basket of logs. It was John, with logs for a fire in the "den".

For a second, Billy Bunter's fat brain swam. He was fairly cornered. But that fat brain was becoming accustomed, by this time, to working at accelerated speed.

A few steps, and John would pass the table, and a crouching fat Owl would be full in his view. But even as John was taking the first of those few steps, a voice was heard: and had Wells heard it, he would hardly have doubted that it was his own fruity voice.

"John! Where are you, John?"

John looked round, over his shoulder, into the corridor.

"Here,Mr. Wells, sir."

"Come down at once, John: I want you."

"I was going to do Master Harry's fire, sir—"

"I said come down at once."

"Oh, very well, Mr. Wells."

John set down the basket of logs, and, leaving the door open, went back down the corridor to the gallery over the hall. No doubt he would discover, to his astonishment, when he contacted Wells, that the butler had not called him. But the fat ventriloquist had a minute or two!

Bunter rose to his feet, and tiptoed to the door. He peered out. John had turned the corner into the gallery, and was out of sight. The fat Owl fairly bolted from the room, and scudded up the corridor. There were quite a number of rooms on that corridor: and all of them, he knew, could not be

occupied by the guests at Wharton Lodge. An unoccupied room was what Bunter wanted. In dread every moment of hearing John's returning footsteps, the fat Owl bolted up the corridor to the end, and opened the last door.

One blink within reassured him.

That room, obviously had no occupant, for the bedstead was bare of all but the mattress: and there was nothing about to indicate that the room was in use. Billy Bunter rolled in, and closed the door. He sat down on the bedstead, and gasped for breath. He was safe at last: and he was feeling rather like the Ancient Mariner when, after his hair-raising voyage, he found himself at long last safe in port.

CHAPTER XX

BURGLARS!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

"Something's up!"

"The upfulness seems to be terrific."

"What the jolly old dickens—"

"What's happened, Wells?"

Harry Wharton and Co, had come in, merry and bright, and more than ready for breakfast, after a walk in the keen frosty air. They had found the ice on the lake in good condition, and were looking forward to skating later in the morning. At the moment, however, they were looking forward chiefly to breakfast.

But they forgot all about breakfast, at the sight of what was going on in the hall. It was a spot of very unexpected excitement.

The door of the Colonel's study was wide open. In the room were visible Miss Amy Wharton and Wells, the butler. In the doorway were John and James. Outside it, several maids were gathered, staring in, all in a state of breathless excitement. Evidently, something had happened: though what it could possibly have been, the Famous Five had, for the moment, no idea.

Harry Wharton ran across the hall. The startled maids made room for him to pass, and John and James stepped aside. He hurried into his uncle's study. Whatever it was that had happened had happned there.

"Auntie!" he exclaimed. Miss Wharton was looking very startled: Wells almost thunderstruck. "What is it, Aunt Amy? What has happened, Wells?"

But he did not need answers to those questions: for the next moment he saw what had happened. All eyes were fixed on the long box which had been delivered by Cripps, the Friardale carrier, the previous day, and which had been deposited in Colonel Wharton's study. And Wharton's own eyes fixed on it, in amazement: and the Co. following him in, stared at it too, dumbfounded.

That box had been left closed and locked, as it had been delivered. But it was neither locked nor closed now.

The slatted lid stood wide open. No key was to be seen: but it looked as if a key had been used, for the lock showed no sign of damage. Sacking and straw almost filled the box, and some of the sacking sprawled over the side. Apart from straw and sacking, there was nothing in the box.

"Burglars, sir!" said Wells. "There was burglars last night, after all, sir."

"Burglars!" repeated Miss Wharton, in quite a faint voice. "Oh, goodness gracious! And my brother away—oh, dear!"

"Burglars!" repeated Harry.

"But what's been taken?" asked Bob Cherry.

"That we cannot tell, sir!" answered Wells. "Eliza found the box open, sir, when she came in to dust: and called me at once. I found the box exactly as you see it now, sir. Whatever may have been in it, was gone. Whatever it was that Mr. Quelch sent to the master, sir, has been taken away."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" said Miss Wharton. "It must have been something very valuable—very valuable indeed! What will my brother say! Oh, dear."

"Nothing else missing, Wells?" asked Harry.

"Nothing, sir! I have no doubt now, sir, that it was the burglar who opened my door last night, and awakened me—no doubt that he was after the plate, sir. But the silver is quite safe. Nothing has been taken excepting from this box."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. "You told me that somebody woke you up in the middle of the night, Wells, and you fancied—"

Wells coloured deeply.

"I am sorry, Master Harry, sir. I came out, bringing with me a poker, thinking that it must be a burglar, but when I heard your voice—"

"You did not hear my voice."

"I—I understand that now, Master Harry, now that I know that there must have been a burglar in the house," said Wells, humbly. "But I certainly thought I knew your voice, sir, calling down to me from the gallery—It is quite amazing, sir, and I cannot comprehend it now, but certainly it sounded exactly like your voice, sir—and I was quite deceived. But now that it is clear that there was a burglar in the house, I know that it must have been he that spoke—though how his voice came to be exactly like yours, sir, I cannot understand."

"I expect you were half-asleep," said Harry. "If anybody spoke to you at that time, it must have been the burglar, I suppose—"

"Someone certainly did, sir, and I—I thought—"

"Is that jolly old burglar a jolly old ventriloquist like Bunter?" said Bob Cherry. "I've heard Bunter play such tricks. But a burglar—"

"You fancied that it was Wharton speaking!" said Johnny Bull, staring at the butler, "and you went back to bed, and left the burglar to carry on, what?"

Wells's face, already red, grew redder.

"I—I had absolutely no doubt that it was Master Harry speaking to me," he said. "Certainly, I did not see him: but his voice was quite familiar—I am quite amazed, sir, now that I know that it was not Master Harry speaking. I cannot understand it now, for he addressed me by name—he called me Wells—and how could a burglar know my name? But it must have been the burglar—if—if it was not Master Harry who awoke me by opening my door—"

"Of course it was not," said Harry, curtly, "and I can't understand a burglar's voice being so like mine that you were taken in by such a trick to make you go back to bed."

"I—I can't understand it myself, sir—but—" stammered Wells.

"Half asleep, I suppose," said Harry. "Anyhow, it seems that you fancied that it was I, and went back to bed, and then the burglar carried on. You seem to have let him walk off with whatever was in that box."

"At least the silver is safe, sir, and it is extremely valuable: owing to my having been awakened, the miscreant did not make any further attempt on it."

"Something in that!" said Bob Cherry. "Nothing gone except what was in that box. What the dickens could it have been?"

"And how did a burglar get it away?" exclaimed Johnny Bull. "You fellows remember how jolly heavy that box was—a jolly good weight for two men to carry! You remember we all lent a hand with it. Whatever was in that box was too heavy for one man to carry off."

"That's so," said Nugent, with a nod.

"But it is gone, sir!" said Wells.

"Blessed if I make it out!" said Johnny. "There's something jolly queer about this."

"The queerfulness is terrific."

"Dear me! dear me!" Miss Wharton almost wailed. "It must have been something very valuable! What will my brother say? Oh, dear! Oh, dear! Whatever can have been in the box, Harry?"

Harry Wharton shook his head.

It was a complete mystery to him. The arrival of the box, from Mr. Quelch to Colonel Wharton, had been a surprise. Nobody could begin to guess what the Remove master at Greyfriars could possibly have sent to the old Colonel at Wharton Lodge, of such weight and bulk. But for the Colonel's absence, the box would have been opened. Naturally it did not occur to Harry, or to anyone else, that but for the Colonel's absence that box would not have arrived at Wharton Lodge at all! It was the Colonel's absence which had enabled the fat Owl of the Remove to carry out his extraordinary scheme.

Everyone was looking into the box. But no one was able to discover a clue to its missing contents. That those contents had walked away on their own fat legs nobody was likely to guess. Obviously—so far as anyone could see—it was a case of burglary: what else could it be?

"What shall we do, Harry?" Miss Wharton turned to her nephew. "While your uncle is away—"

"I'll get on the telephone to the police-station at Wimford, at once," said Harry; and he went back to the hall. Johnny Bull followed him, and tapped him on the shoulder as he was going into the telephone cabinet.

"Better tell them about that merchant in the park yesterday," said Johnny. "If there's been a burglary, he's the man, I fancy. I jolly well know that he was spying on the house with his glasses from that tree-top."

"Looks like it—now!" said Harry. "If he's the man, we've got his description all right."

And he rang up the Wimford police-station.

His friends were at breakfast when he rejoined them: Miss Wharton, in a state of considerable agitation, presiding at the breakfast-table. The whole house was in a state of half-suppressed excitement, awaiting the arrival of the police to investigate the burglary.

"Inspector Jenks is coming over from Wimford at once, auntie," said Harry. "He won't be very long. He will get in touch with Mr. Quelch, and then we shall know what was in the box, at any rate."

"I wonder what the dickens it was!" said Bob.

Everyone in Wharton Lodge was wondering just that! Something—something very heavy!—had been in that mysterious box: and it was gone. What it was, and where it was now, nobody could even surmise. And certainly no one was likely to surmise that it was sitting on a bed in an unoccupied room upstairs, devouring apples!

CHAPTER XXI

VERY MYSTERIOUS!

INSPECTOR JENKS was puzzled.

Every inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was puzzled: and the portly police-inspector from Wimford was as puzzled as anyone else.

It was, in fact, a "case" that might have puzzled the keenest wits at Scotland Yard. Sherlock Holmes or Ferrers Locke could hardly have known what to make of it, had those celebrated detectives been on the case.

One surprise followed another. Every spot of new information seemed only to deepen the mystery.

First of all, Inspector Jenks examined the mysterious box: but all he could ascertain therefrom was the fact that it was now empty save for straw and sacking. There was no clue to what it had contained.

Then he made a meticulous examination of windows and doors: without discovering by which—if any—the burglar could have entered.

He listened, with a thoughtful but undoubtedly perplexed face, to all that anyone had to tell him. But he failed to make head or tail of it.

Wells's story no doubt surprised him. It seemed fairly clear that the burglar must have been after the silver, when he butted into Wells's room and inadvertently awakened the butler: after which he had decided to give the silver a miss. It seemed clear, too, that it must have been the burglar who had spoken to Wells from the gallery over the hall, tricking him into going back to bed: though how Wells could have mistaken the voice for Master Harry's was inexplicable.

It seemed probable, if not clear, that the beady-eyed man whom the juniors had found in the tree, the previous day, watching the house, was the man who was wanted. Really, it did look like it!

But the rest was wrapped in mystery: one mystery piled on another, like Pelion piled on Ossa, and on Pelion Olympus!

The greatest surprise was when the inspector succeeded in getting into touch with Mr. Quelch. A telephone call to Gosling, at Greyfriars School, elicited the information that the Remove master was at Bournemouth, and Gosling was able to furnish his telephone number there. A call to Mr. Quelch at Bournemouth followed: from which Inspector Jenks hoped, at least, to learn what had been contained in the box.

To his amazement, Mr. Quelch stated categorically that he had despatched no such box to Wharton Lodge, and knew nothing whatever about it.

Another call to Gosling followed: but the Greyfriars porter could only state that he had received telephonic instructions from Mr. Quelch to despatch the box, that he had found it ready for despatch, and had despatched it by Cripps the carrier as instructed.

By this time, Inspector Jenks was feeling almost as if his head was turning round! He was not accustomed, in a quiet country town like Wimford, to such inextricably mysterious cases as this!

The box had come from Greyfriars School. That was certain. But it was almost the only thing that was certain, in this strange case.

Mr. Quelch, who was supposed to have sent it, had not sent it. Gosling, who supposed that he had received telephonic instructions from Quelch, must been deceived by some person unknown. The box had contained something—quite heavy: many witnesses testified how heavy it had been. Whatever it had contained, was gone! How could a burglar have walked off with the contents of a box which had taxed the strength of John and James combined? And without leaving a trace, on door or window, of entrance or exit?

It was no wonder that Inspector Jenks was puzzled!

In the hope that Colonel Wharton might be able to let in some light on this baffling mystery, Mr. Jenks rang up the old Colonel at Aldershot. All he learned from him was, that Colonel Wharton had not been expecting such a box, or any box at all, from anyone: that he was astonished to hear that such a

box had arrived at his home: and that he could not even surmise what it all meant. The Colonel added that, if there had been a burglary at the Lodge, he would cut short his visit to his Army friends at Aldershot, and return home immediately. But that was no present help in time of need.

Inspector Jenks spent most of that day at Wharton Lodge a puzzled man. Finally he departed: leaving everyone as puzzled as himself. He assured Miss Wharton that the matter would be carefully investigated: though he was quite unable, at the moment, to indicate to what those investigations would lead.

"Well!" said Bob Cherry. The Co. gathered in Wharton's "den", after the inspector was gone, to discuss the strange affair. "Well! If you ask me, my beloved 'earers, this beats Banagher!"

"The beatfulness is terrific!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Anybody make head or tail of it?" asked Nugent.

There was a general shaking of heads. No member of the Co. could make "head or tail" of it!

"The jolly old box came," said Bob. "But from whom? Who sent it?"

"Not Quelch," said Harry.

"No, that's clear now. But it came from the school. Somebody at Greyfriars must have sent it."

"Looks like it!"

"Everybody's away from the school now, except a few of the staff—"

"And Bunter!" said Nugent.

"Oh! Yes, I'd forgotten Bunter! I wonder how jolly old Bunter is getting on! Tired of his own company by this time, I expect."

"Not so tired as everybody else!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"Somebody got Gosling on the phone, and made him believe it was Quelch giving him instructions. That sounds like one of Bunter's tricks—you know his dashed ventriloquism. But Bunter wouldn't be sending your uncle a Christmas box, Harry—"

"Hardly," said Harry, laughing.

"Something must have been in it," said Bob. "Can't think of anything but a Christmas present for your uncle, as it was sent to him. But who?"

"Ask me another!"

"And why should he send it in Quelch's name?"

"The whyfulness is terrific."

"And what the thump was it?" said Bob. "Simply no clue to that! Only something jolly heavy—that's all we know."

"And valuable!" said Nugent. "A burglar wouldn't walk off with it if it wasn't worth walking off with."

"Yes, that's so! But how the thump would a burglar know anything about it? If it was that merchant we came on in the park yesterday, he may have seen the box arrive—he was spying on the house. But he wouldn't know it was worth burgling—and he seems to have taken nothing else."

"Must have been after the silver too," said Nugent. "That's how he came to wake up Wells."

"Yes, I suppose so. It's all dashed queer," said Bob. "Wells waking up seems to have scared him off from that quarter. But he went into the dining-room and scoffed the biscuits, from what Wells says."

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, suddenly. He was staring at the table in his "den".

"What—?" began Nugent.

"Looks as if the jolly old burglar scoffed something else, as well as the bikkers in the dining-room!" said Harry. "None of us has been up to this room to-day, till now—"

"No, what about it?" asked Bob.

Harry pointed to the table.

"Somebody's cleared off the tuck," he said. "There were toffee, and chocs, and apples, and—look at that box: it was full of candied fruits, and it hadn't been opened! Look at it!"

"Oh, my hat!"

The Co. gathered round the table, staring. It was quite a large box that had contained candied fruits. It was empty! And there was no other article to be seen on the table. Some unknown hand had made a clean sweep of apples, chocolates, and toffee!

"Well, this is the bee's knee, as Fishy would say!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "He must have been up here!"

"Must have been!" said Harry. "Blessed if I ever heard of a burglar before, scoffing biscuits and apples and toffee and chocs! More like Bunter than a burglar!"

"The morefulness is terrific."

"Well, this beats it!" said Bob. "I wonder what Ferrers Locke would make of a case like this! A mysterious box arrives from nobody knows whom, containing nobody knows what, and the same night a burglar burgles the box, and stuffs himself with bikkers, and candied fruits, and toffee and chocs, and apples! And not a sign how he came in or went out! It gets curiouser and curiouser, as Alice said in Wonderland. I give it up!"

And the rest of the Co. had to give it up also. And when Colonel Wharton returned that evening, and heard the whole strange story, he had to give it up too. The whole thing was utterly inexplicable: an impenetrable mystery, and it remained one.

CHAPTER XXII

TWO IN THE DARK!

BILLY BUNTER grinned.

It was a grin of happy anticipation.

The hour was late.

It was, in fact, past midnight. In normal circumstances, Billy Bunter would have been fast asleep at that hour, and a melodious snore would have been rousing out the adjacent echoes.

But the circumstances were not normal. Billy Bunter was passing his Christmas holidays under very unusual conditions. A Christmas guest who arrived not only unexpected but unknown and unsuspected, packed in a box, could not carry on in quite a normal manner.

At the moment, Billy Bunter was standing at the door of the room in which he had camped, the door ajar, listening.

He was listening for the chime of the clock in the hall. As soon as the stroke of one came, Bunter was going to get busy. He was in fact like one of those deponent verbs which bothered him so much at school—passive in form but active in meaning! He was keen to get going. But "safety-first" was his motto. He had to wait till all was quite, quite safe for an unsuspected inhabitant of the house to go in quest of provender. After his wild adventures the previous night, Bunter felt that a fellow couldn't be too careful. It was a wary Owl.

He seemed quite secure in his present quarters. Only once during the day had there been an alarm: when the fat Owl had dodged promptly under the bed at the sound of footsteps coming up the corridor. Someone had come into the room, and fumbled at the window: why, Bunter didn't know, and couldn't guess. He was unaware that Inspector Jenks was making a round of the house examining windows for traces of an imaginary burglar.

Whoever it was, of whose feet and trouser-ends he had a glimpse from under the bed, he had departed, certainly never dreaming that a fat Owl was in the offing. Bunter was glad to see the feet and trouser-ends disappear.

Since then, nothing had disappeared. Of the spot of excitement going on in the Lodge, Bunter knew nothing—voices did not reach his secluded retreat. What the household had thought of the open box in the Colonel's study he did not know, neither did he care—they were welcome to think of anything they liked, so long as they did not think of William George Bunter, which was unlikely.

No one had come near the unoccupied room: no one, certainly, dreaming that it now had an occupant.

All was going well for the surreptitious Owl: except in one particular. Bunter was hungry.

Candied fruits, toffee, chocolates, and apples, were all very well in their way. They had taken the edge off Bunter's appetite. He had enjoyed them, so long as they had lasted. But the inner Bunter longed for something of a more solid nature. That was to come.

Peering into the dusky corridor, listening with both fat ears for the chime from below, Billy Bunter grinned in anticipation.

His capacious mouth watered at the thought of mince pies, cake, ham, jam, and Christmas pudding. This time he was going to make a clean sweep. His fat thoughts dwelt on the larder, and the good things to be found there. He was going to return to his hide-out heavy-laden. He was not going to wake up that beast Wells this time! He had found a box of matches in the room, and he would be able to light his way. This time all was going to be well. No doubt there would be surprise in the morning, when it was discovered that the larder had been cleared out over-night. That did not worry Bunter. Nobody had guessed so far that the grub-raider of Greyfriars was in the house: and nobody was likely to guess that one!

A sound came through the silence of the December night at last. It came from the clock in the hall.

It was one o'clock.

All the household were asleep at that hour. They had long been asleep. Bunter had left it late enough for absolute safety.

But he was very cautious.

He stepped softly out of the room, eyes and spectacles and fat ears on the alert.

He had to pass the rooms occupied by Harry Wharton and Co.: door after door: and he passed them on tiptoe. Once he paused, with beating heart, at a faint sound from one of the rooms. But it was only one of the juniors turning in bed: and there was silence again.

"Beast!" breathed Bunter.

He tiptoed on his way.

All was dim and silent when he reached the oaken gallery over the hall. He peered over the balustrade into a well of darkness.

Leaning on the oaken balustrade, he peered and listened. Then his fat heart gave another jump.

A faint, indefinable sound came from below.

It seemed to Billy Bunter's listening ears that it was the sound of a faint, stealthy footfall!

"Oh, crikey!" breathed the startled Owl.

He strained his eyes into the darkness.

Nobody could be up, at that hour, and without a light, It was really impossible. Yet he had heard something.

But if there had been a sound, it was not repeated. A faint wail of the

December wind came from without. There was no other sound. Possibly what he had heard had been a rustle of old ivy in the wind!

Reassured at last, he moved on.

On tiptoe he descended the staircase, with a fat hand on the banisters. He reached the hall, and groped his way to the service door, Groping for the door, his fat hand traversed an open doorway.

The door had been left wide open.

That, no doubt, was very careless of Wells: but it did not bother Bunter. He groped through the doorway into the passage beyond.

Then he felt for the box of matches in his pocket.

He needed a glimmer of light now, to make sure that he did not arrive at the wrong door, as on the previous unfortunate occasion.

He struck a match.

Scratch!

The light glimmered.

He held up the match: and the next second, jumped almost clear of the floor, startled almost out of his fat wits.

He had expected that match to reveal his surroundings. But he had not expected those surroundings to include a human figure.

But they did!

Ahead of him, in the passage, was a man. And that man, at the scratch of the match and the sudden light, stared round—at Bunter.

It was not Wells. It was not anyone whom Bunter knew as belonging to the household. It was a small man, with a foxy face, and little glcaming beady black eyes. Those beady eyes popped at Bunter.

Bunter's eyes popped back, almost popping through his spectacles.

Never had two persons been more utterly taken by surprise at the same moment!

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"Cor'!" gasped the beady-eyed man.

Billy Bunter stood transfixed, the match in his fat fingers, staring. It rushed into his fat mind what this man was—what he must be! And in his terror, as he realized that he was standing only two or three yards from a burglar, the fat Owl stood paralysed.

Both were too astonished and startled to stir, for the moment. Billy Bunter stared at the burglar. The burglar stared at Billy Bunter.

But the beady-eyed man was the first to recover. A fierce gleam shot into the beady eyes, and he made a spring.

Probably his idea was that this fat fellow in spectacles, who had come upon him so unexpectedly, had to be kept quiet, while he got on with his business of removing the silver plate.

But that spring woke Bunter from his trance, as it were. He dropped the match and bounded.

With one bound, he reached the open doorway into the hall. But as he reached it, a hand in the dark grasped him, from behind.

The yell of terror that pealed from Billy Bunter, as that hand grasped him, woke every echo within the walls of Wharton Lodge.

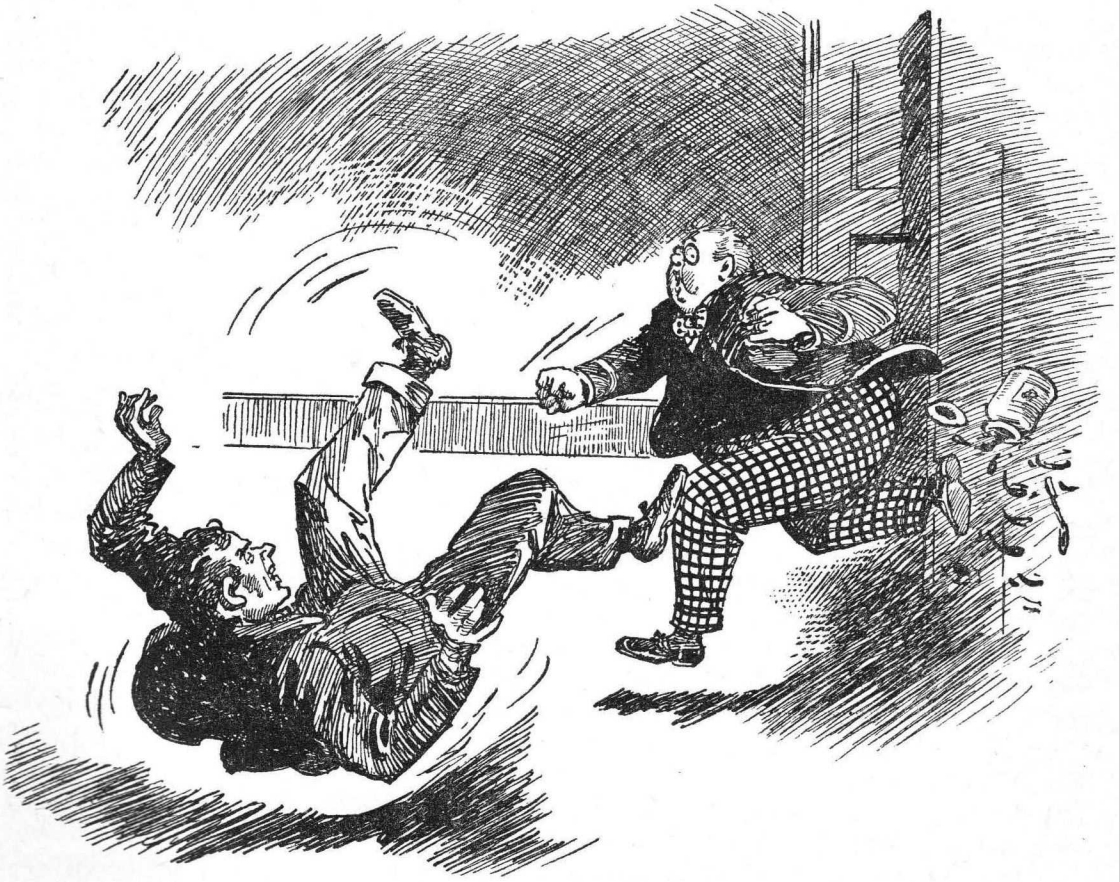
Hardly knowing what he did, he hit out in the dark.

Crash!

The fat fist landed upon something that seemed soft. Bunter did not know what it was: but he knew that it was some section of the burglar. And he knew that that terrifying grasp relaxed, and slipped from him. He heard a gurgle. he heard strange suffocated sounds.

"Urrrrrrrrrgh! Woooooh! Gurrrrrrggh."

It sounded like a man in the throes of asphyxiation. Bunter's fat fist, in fact, had caught the beady-eyed man below the belt. A frantic jolt in the wind,



Hardly knowing what he did, he hit out

with Bunter's uncommon weight behind it, was no light matter. The burglar had had all he wanted, and more. Unseen by Bunter in the dark, he was staggering against a wall, emitting sounds of suffocating anguish.

Billy Bunter did not stay to listen to those musical effects.

He bolted.

There were sounds of alarm in the house. The household were awakening. Bunter's yell, when the burglar had grasped him, would have awakened Rip van Winkle.

The fat Owl bolted for the stairs.

Somehow, he hardly knew how, he had escaped the burglar. He had to bolt back to his lair like a rabbit to its burrow, to escape discovery, now.

But as he reached the staircase, a light flashed on in the gallery above. Voices were calling.

Escape that way was cut off.

But there was still a refuge. The fat Owl bolted across the hall to the Colonel's study. He darted into that apartment. He closed the door behind him, as there was a tramp of footsteps on the stairs: the next moment lights flashed on, and there was a crowd in the hall.

CHAPTER XXIII

RUN TO EARTH!

"WHO—?"

"What—?"

"Which—?"

"How—!"

There were startled ejaculations on all sides. Every eye was fixed on a beady-eyed man who staggered and tottered, with hands pressed to his waistcoat, emitting sounds of woe and anguish.

Colonel Wharton, in flowing dressing-gown, had been first down, at the alarm in the night, with his old Army revolver in his hand. Wells had been on the scene a second later, issuing through the service door with a poker in his hand—the poker that he had wielded the night before. But Harry Wharton and Co. were not long in coming—half-dressed, they came speeding from their rooms, at the sound of the uproar, John and James materialized from the shadows: somewhere in the distance maids were shrieking: and Miss Amy Wharton was calling. Every inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was wide awake—and most of them gathered in the hall, round the strange figure that staggered, and tottered, and pressed his waistcoat, and moaned.

"A burglar!" gasped Wells. He gripped the poker, hard. "The same man, sir, as last night, I should think—"

"Probably! A burglar undoubtedly!" said Colonel Wharton. His old Army revolver was half-raised. True, it was not loaded: but it looked very businesslike: and doubtless would have scared the burglar, if that burglar had been in a state to be scared by anything.

But he was not. He was gurgling and moaning in anguish for his lost wind. He was winded to the wide: and could not have lifted a finger to resist, nor did pokers and old Army revolvers affect him in the least. Staggering, bent almost double, he caressed his waistcoat and moaned.

"That's the man!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. Bob was the first to recognize the foxy face the juniors had seen once before: the face of the man in the tree, whom they had suspected of watching the house with burglarious intent.

Evidently, that suspicion had been well-founded: for this was the man!—foxy face, beady eyes, and all.

"The man we saw—!" exclaimed Frank Nugent.

"The same man!" said Johnny Bull. "I jolly well told you so!"

"The samefulness is terrific."

The old Colonel looked at them.

"You have seen this man before?" he exclaimed.

"It's the man we saw in the park, the day before yesterday, that we told Inspector Jenks about, uncle," answered Harry Wharton. "I'd know that foxy face again anywhere."

"Oooooooogh!" came moaning from the man with the foxy face. "Woooogh Oooogh!"

"He's been knocked out!" said Bob, in wonder. "Somebody seems to have knocked the wind out of him. Was it you, Wells?"

"No, sir!" answered Wells. "The master, perhaps—"

"Not at all!" said Colonel Wharton. "He was like this when I came down and found him. He seems quite incapacitated. Possibly some dispute with his accomplice—there were two of them—"

"Two, sir!" exclaimed Wells. He took a harder grip on the poker. "Did you see—?"

"Someone was running across the hall!" said the Colonel. "I heard him, though I did not see him, as I came down—I found only this man here, and he certainly was not running—he does not look as if he had a run in him—he is quite incapacitated—"

"Mooooooogh!" came from the hapless burglar. "Oooooh!" Certainly there was no run in him. There was not a walk in him! Undoubtedly he was quite, quite incapacitated!

"Then there's another burglar in the house!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Which way was he running, sir. Do you know—?"

"Across the hall from the stairs, I am certain!" said Colonel Wharton. "He may have run into the library, or my study—"

"Come on!" exclaimed Bob.

"Stop!" rapped the Colonel. "You may follow me! Wells, take care of this man! He does not look like giving you much trouble."

"Wurrrrggh!" moaned the burglar.

"Leave him to me, sir!" said Wells. "I will take care of him, sir! He will not get away from me, sir."

Wells dropped a plump hand on the foxy man's shoulder. In the other he grasped his poker, ready for business. But the hapless man was in no state to give trouble. Heedless of the hand on his shoulder, heedless of the poker, heedless of everything, he continued to caress his waistcoat and moan.

Colonel Wharton strode across the hall, with the Famous Five at his heels, John and James bringing up the rear.

That there had been another on the spot, the old Colonel knew: quite distinctly he had heard him running across the hall. He could only conclude that there had been two of the midnight marauders: and judging by the speechless state of the one who had been captured, it looked as if the other had knocked him out and then run—though why, was quite inexplicable. Anyhow there certainly had been another on the spot, and he was going to be rooted out and seized, unless he had already contrived to make his escape.

In considerable excitement, the juniors followed the old Colonel: ready to lend a helping hand in the capture of the other marauder. The foxy man was left mumbling and moaning in Wells's portly grasp.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "That's somebody in your study, sir—I heard—!"

"So did I!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Somebody—"

"Keep back!" said Colonel Wharton. "You may follow me in."

He threw open the door of the study.

The juniors stared into the dark room. All of them had heard a sound within—the sound of a movement! Somebody was there—and there could be no doubt who it was!

Colonel Wharton reached in with his left hand, and switched on the electric light in the room. Then, with the old Army revolver well to the fore, he marched in, followed by the Co.

They stared round the room. The electric light illuminated every corner of it: gleaming on curtains and carpet, chairs and table and desk, and on the long box that had arrived from Greyfriars. But it did not gleam on some beetle-browed ruffian, as they expected. There was no one to be seen in the room.

"Nobody here!" said Nugent.

"I jolly well heard—!" said Bob.

"Gone by the window, perhaps!" said Johnny Bull. He ran to the window. "No—it's shut—fastened inside—"

"He must be still here!" said Colonel Wharton. Under his knitted brows, he stared about the room. Harry Wharton and Co., stared about it, into every corner and recess. No one was to be seen.

Bob gave a sudden yell:

"The box!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry. "That's it!"

It dawned on them, all at once. The slatted lid of the box was closed. The box was amply large enough to conceal a burglar. That, undoubtedly, was where he had taken refuge: a last desperate attempt to find a hiding-place when he heard them coming across the hall.

"Good gad!" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "That must be it! Good gad! He has hidden himself in that box!"

"We'll jolly soon have him out—!"

"What-ho!"

"He's there all right!"

"Stand back while I lift the lid!" said Colonel Wharton. "We have him now, if he is there: and there seems no doubt that he must be there."

Colonel Wharton stooped, and grasped the slatted lid with his left hand, the old Army revolver in his right. Harry Wharton and Co. gathered round, ready for action if needed. If the burglar was there, undoubtedly they had him now: and there was no doubt that he was there!

The Colonel threw back the slatted lid.

The interior of the long box was revealed: stuffed with straw and sacking, and in the midst of the straw and sacking, a huddled figure. A fat face stared up at staring faces, and a big pair of spectacles gleamed in the electric light. A fat gasping squeak was heard:

"I say, you fellows! Oh, crikey! I say—"

Colonel Wharton stared blankly. Five fellows, who had been expecting to see a burglar, doubted their vision when they beheld a fat Owl sprawling in the straw and sacking. From all of them came a yell of astonishment.

"Bunter!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ONLY BUNTER!

"BILLY BUNTER!"

"Bunter!"

"The esteemed and ridiculous Bunter!"

"That fat ass Bunter—"

"That—that—that prize porker, Bunter."

Billy Bunter sat up in the box. He set his big spectacles straight on his little fat nose, and blinked at Colonel Wharton, who gazed at him in speechless amazement, and at the Famous Five, hardly less amazed then the old Colonel.

"I say, you fellows—!" gasped Bunter.

"Bunter!" said Harry Wharton, almost dazedly. "Bunter! Is that Bunter, or are we dreaming this?"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"It's Bunter!" said Bob Cherry, blankly. "It's not a burglar—it's Bunter! How did Bunter get here? You fat, frabjous ass—"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Good gad!" Colonel Wharton found his voice. "I think I have seen this—this boy before, Harry—a schoolfellow of yours, I think—"

"Yes, uncle—Billy Bunter—"

"But what does this mean, then?" exclaimed the Colonel. "I did not know that Bunter was in the house at all—"

"Neither did anyone else!" said Harry. "I just can't imagine how he got here. Bunter, you mad porpoise, how did you get here? And what are you here for?"

"Oh, really, Harry, old chap—"

"You fat villain—"

"Beast! I mean, look here, old fellows—"

"Bunter!" said Colonel Wharton. "What are you doing here?"

"I—I—I—I'm sitting in this box, sir."

"What? what? You utterly stupid boy, what does this mean? Did my nephew ask you here for the holidays?"

"He—he—he forgot, sir—"

"What?"

"So I—I—I came—!" stuttered Bunter. "I—I—I knew it would be a—a—a pleasant surprise for him, sir—"

"Upon my word!"

Billy Bunter blinked uneasily at the staring Co.

What was going to happen now, Billy Bunter did not know: but at any rate his game was up. He was run to earth: and there was no more hiding in secluded corners for the fat Owl. Quite unintentionally he had revealed his presence in Wharton Lodge: there he was, under all eyes, sitting in the box in which he had arrived from Greyfriars! He had hoped to keep "doggo" till Christmas Day; trusting to the genial influence of that day to see him through. And here he was, with the amazed Co. all staring at him.

"How long have you been in the house, Bunter?"

"Only—only since the day before yesterday, sir—"

"The day before yesterday!" repeated Colonel Wharton. "Good gad! And you knew nothing of it, Harry?"

"Nothing at all, uncle."

"You have been keeping out of sight all that time, Bunter?" exclaimed the Colonel.

"Oh! Yes! You—you—you see. I—I—I was going to give the fellows a—a—a surprise—a—a—a happy surprise, on Christmas Day—"

"The happifulness would have been terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, really, Inky—"

"But how did you get here?" exclaimed the Colonel. "How could you possibly have come into the house without being seen?"

"I—I—I—"

"Well?"

"I—I came—"

"I can see that you came, as you are here! But how—?"

"I—I—I came in—in—in—"

"In what?"

"In this box!" gasped Bunter.

Colonel Wharton gazed at him. Harry Wharton and Co. gazed at him. For a long moment, there was silence. The discovery of the fat Owl in the house at all was amazing. But the discovery that he had arrived in the box from Greyfriars put the lid on, so to speak.

They gazed at him, dumbfounded.

"Good gad!" said the Colonel, at last. "You—you—you came—packed in this box—good gad! You—you—you came in—in—in this b-b-box!"

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"Oh, suffering cats!" said Johnny Bull.

"No wonder it was heavy!" murmured Frank Nugent.

"No wonderfulness that the heaviness was terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Good gad!" repeated the Colonel. He was gazing at Bunter as if the fat Owl mesmerized him. "Good gad!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "Then—then there was no burglary last night after all! If it was Bunter in the box, and he got out—"

"I—I—I was hungry—"

"What?"

"I—I never meant to wake up Wells, you know—I—I was looking for the larder—" stammered Bunter.

"Oh!" gasped Harry.

"I—I never had anything but some biscuits!" said Bunter, pathetically. "Nothing else till the morning, old chap, when I found some tuck in your room—"

"So that was you—"

"I—I—I knew you wouldn't mind, old fellow—"

"And you've been keeping doggo ever since?" exclaimed Harry Wharton, blankly.

"Yes, old chap! I—I—I wasn't quite sure you'd be glad to see me, as—as—as you forgot to ask me to come—"

"You fat frabjous, footling fathead—"

"Oh, really, Harry, old chap—"

"Then you have been in hiding!" exclaimed Colonel Wharton. "And why, Bunter, did you come out of your hiding-place, wherever it was, in the middle of the night?"

"I—I was going down to the larder—a—a—a chap has to eat, you know," gasped Bunter. "I—I—I—

"Oh! I see!" A faint smile came over the old Colonel's grim face. "That was how you ran into the burglar, I suppose?"

"Oh! Yes!"

"Great pip!" yelled Bob Cherry. "Was it Bunter knocked the burglar out? Somebody did—"

"He—he—he grabbed me, in the dark," gasped Bunter. "I—I—I hit out— Was—was he knocked out—?"

"Sort of!" chuckled Bob. "You seem to have landed him in the bread-basket, and he's still trying to get his second wind."

"Oh! I—I mean, I—I knocked him out, of course," said Bunter. "I—I wasn't frightened, or—or anything like that! I—I—I knew he was a burglar, you know, and—and I just knocked him out—I was as cool as a cow-cumber —I mean as cow as a coolcumber—I—I mean—"

"Yes, we can guess just how cool you were!" agreed Bob. "But you jolly well did knock him out—"

"And the knockfulness was terrific."

"You had better get out of that box, Bunter," said Colonel Wharton. "For whatever reason you are here, and by whatever extraordinary means you came, there is no doubt that you have, by sheer accident, prevented a burglary, and saved me from what might have been a very heavy loss. Perhaps you will bear that in mind, Harry, in dealing with this very extraordinary boy."

"Oh!" said Harry. "Yes, uncle."

Billy Bunter scrambled out of the box.

"I—I say, sir—!" he gasped.

"Well?"

"Mum-mum-mum-may I—I—"

"May you what?"

"Mum-mum-may I have some supper?"

Colonel Wharton stared at him, for a moment, and then smiled.

"You may!" he said.

And Bunter did.

He had doubts about the morrow. But at the moment, the most important consideration within the wide limits of the universe was something to eat. Billy Bunter ate: and was happy.

CHAPTER XXV

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

BUT BUNTER need have had no doubts about the morrow.

On the morrow, it was all right for Bunter.

His extraordinary adventures, inside the "Christmas box" and out of it, seemed to add considerably to the gaiety of the Christmas party at Wharton Lodge. And it was clear that the fat Owl had been the inadvertent means of preventing the foxy-faced man from walking off with the Colonel's silver plate. Inspector Jenks, when he came from Wimford with a constable to take the burglar in charge, gave the fat Owl somewhat grim looks; his valuable time had been wasted looking for an imaginary burglar. Still, he was compensated by the capture of a real one: so upon the whole he was satisfied.

"Like to stay on for the hols, Bunter?" asked Harry Wharton, in the morning.

Bunter gave him a thoughtful blink.

"Well, if you really want me to, old chap—!" he said.

"Not at all!"

"He, he, he!"

"What are you he-he-heing about?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Harry's little joke! I can take a joke!" said Bunter. "He, he, he! I'll stay on, old chap, as you're so pressing. And look here, I'll help to make things go, you know, with my wonderful ventriloquism—"

"If you do, we'll pack you up in that box again, and send you back to Greyfriars."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"We'll keep the box handy in case," said Bob.

"Beast! I—I mean, ain't it jolly, all of us old pals being together again for Christmas? I say you fellows, I've seen the turkey! It looks prime! We're going to have a merry Christmas!"

And a merry Christmas it was, for everyone at Wharton Lodge: and especially for the unexpected guest who had arrived in Billy Bunter's Christmas Box!

THE END

NOTE: The Bunter Books, by Frank Richards, in which are chronicled the adventures of Harry Wharton and Co. of Greyfriars School, are published by Cassell & Co., Ltd., Ludgate Hill, London, E.C.4.

Some typical incidents in the life of . . .

. . . William George Bunter.

BILLY BUNTER'S LETTER HOME

DEER FATHER,
I am riting these
Few lines from Greyfriars Kollege,
To let you know how much I pleeze
My masters with my noledge.

I'm very sure that you'll be glad,
To heer how I'm progressing,
Work makes some phellows very sad,
But I think it's a blessing.

Some phellows here will slack in class,
And dodge their preparation,
Their time they mutch prefer to pass
In idle konversation.

Not Me! My tasks I always face,
And loathe the thort of shirking,
I never loll about the plaice,
While uther chaps are wurking.

I always do my best to pleeze
Dear Mr. Quelch, my master,
He don't think I'm too fond of ease,
Or ort to learn mutch faster.

Indede in form I think it's fine
To hear my master telling
The other phellows how I shine,
Espeshully in spelling!

There's only one thing trubbles me,
It's really very phunny,
How very, very frekwently,
A chap runs out of munny.

I hope you're keeping well and fine,
(This isn't just soft sawder),
And hope that soon you'll drop a line,
and send a postal-awder!

Treasure of Temooka

A STORY OF KING OF THE ISLANDS

By CHARLES HAMILTON

CHAPTER I

COMING ABOARD !

"BARNEY HALL!" said Kit Hudson, the mate of the *Dawn*.

King of the Islands frowned.

Of all the skippers who sailed the sunny waters of the Pacific, the one he least desired to see at any time was Barney Hall, the red-bearded, hard-fisted, ruffianly trader of Tonga.

The *Dawn* lay at anchor in the lagoon of Ovuva. The sun was red in the west, glowing on the blue waters of the lagoon, on the circling beach of shining sand, the nodding feather fronds of the palm groves, and the dark shadowy bush beyond. Black-skinned natives on the beach stared across at the anchored

ketch, and every now and then there was a threatening gesture or a spear was shaken. At Ovuva King of the Islands and his crew were in a bad spot.

Ken King had come there for trade, as often he had done before. But since his last call there had been a change on Ovuva. Temooka, the old chief, who had been glad to trade copra for glass beads, musical boxes, trade-knives and sticks of tobacco, had fallen, and a young chief reigned in his place. Temooka's head was smoking in the hut of his successor: and Ogoo, the new chief, had no use for white men and their trade. It was in fact only the sight of the rifles in the hands of the ketch's crew, that kept the native canoes on the beach instead of swarming round the *Dawn* for an attack. Once a canoe had pushed out, near enough for a spear to be thrown, which stuck quivering in the deck. But a rifle shot had sent it scuttling back to the beach.

That reception at Ovuva had been an unpleasant surprise for King of the Islands. There was no trade to be done: there was nothing to be done but to pull out and make sail for the next port of call. But the wind which had wafted the *Dawn* into the lagoon was still blowing hard on the reef passage, and the boy traders had to wait for the morning and the off-shore breeze. So the *Dawn* still lay at anchor under the threatening eyes on the beach when a whaleboat pulled in from the open sea.

It was manned by half-a-dozen dark Tonga boys. In the stern sat a figure the shipmates of the *Dawn* knew well: Barney Hall, with his rough tangled beard, his dingy shorts and shirt, his wide-brimmed hat, and a big revolver buckled to his belt. There had been trouble more than once between King of the Islands and the ruffianly trader of Tonga. In lonely waters, Barney Hall was the man to help himself to stores from any small vessel, with a revolver in his hand: and he had tried that game once with the *Dawn*, with painful results to himself. But he was the man to try again, if pushed by need. The frown deepened on Ken King's handsome face as he watched the whaleboat pulling in from the Pacific.

"That swab!" he muttered, "Well, if he's looking for trouble, we can give him all he wants."

"And a little over!" remarked Kit Hudson.

"That feller Hall he plenty too much bad feller altogether," said Koko, the brown-skinned boatswain of the *Dawn*, " 'Spose he comey along *Dawn*, little white master shoot along long-feller gun."

"He's seen us, Ken," said Hudson.

Barney Hall had evidently been unaware that the ketch was there, for as he suddenly sighted her, he gave a start of surprise: stared, and then, shading his eyes from the sun with a large hairy hand, stared harder. The shipmates, watching him, saw the surprise in his face, followed by a look of satisfaction. It was plain that Barney Hall was glad to see the vessel.

Ken's face grew grimmer.

"He's glad to see us here, Kit," he said.

Hudson shrugged his shoulders.

"That means that he's short of stores, and looking for stores—and trouble," he answered.

"Let him!" said Ken, briefly.

Barney Hall, after that long stare, rapped out something to his crew that the shipmates could not hear at the distance. But its import they guessed easily enough, as the whaleboat changed its course a little, and pulled directly for the anchored ketch. Whether he was looking for trouble or not, Barney was coming to the *Dawn*.

He waved his hand as he came, apparently in greeting. There was no answering wave from the ketch. All the shipmates wanted of Barney Hall was that he should keep his distance.

That, obviously, he had no intention of doing. The whaleboat pulled nearer and nearer across the sun-reddened waters.

"Coming aboard!" sang out Barney Hall, as soon as he was near enough for the shipmates to hear him.

"Keep your distance, Barney Hall!" called back King of the Islands, "You're not wanted on this packet."

The trader of Tonga scowled.

He rapped out a word to his crew, and the Tonga boys pulled harder. Ken King glanced round at his boatswain.

"You, feller Koko!"

"Yessar!"

"You take feller belaying-pin, hand belong you, knock that feller Hall back along boat, 'spose he comey aboard."

Kops grinned, with a flash of white teeth.

"Me savvy, sar! Me likee too much kill that bad feller Hall along belaying-pin!" he answered. "Kill", in the Kanaka dialect, signified no more than a hard knock: but clearly Koko was prepared to administer a quite sufficiently hard one, if Barney Hall asked for it.

The whaleboat floated alongside. Barney Hall stood up, scowling across the low rail at the shipmates—with a rather uneasy eye on Koko.

"Look here, Ken King . . .!" he began.

"You can stow it," answered Ken, "You're not coming on this hooker, Hall. Keep that rifle handy, Kit."

"You bet!" said Hudson, tersely.

"If you pull that gun, Hall, you get something sudden," said King of the Islands, "Keep your distance. If you're here to trade, I'm not stopping you. But I'll warn you that there's been trouble here . . . old Temooka's dead, and the new chief, Ogoo, would jump at the chance of smoking your head in the wood-fires. We've found that out since we came."

"I guess I know all that, better than you do," growled Hall, "No white man's life is worth a foot of shell-money on the beach of Ovuva now."

"If you knew, why have you pushed in?" said King of the Islands, "If it's stores, we've none to spare . . ."

"I've all the stores I want."

"Then your best guess is to pull out, while the going's good. We've got to wait for the wind—you haven't."

"Do you think I've come here for nothing, with the island swarming with black cannibals!" snarled Barney Hall, "I've come for something that I'm not going without—and as you're here, I'm willing and ready to share with you, if you'll go into it with me. Let me come aboard, and I'll explain—"

Hall put a hand on the rail. He snatched it away, and jumped back so suddenly that the boat rocked, as Koko lashed with the belaying-pin. He staggered in the boat, almost losing his footing.

Ken King laughed.

"That's a tip, Hall," he called out, "Steer clear."

Hudson, his rifle half-raised, watched Hall like a cat. He fully expected him to grab at the revolver at his belt.

But Barney did not touch his weapon. He steadied himself, with a savage glare at the ship-mates on the deck of the *Dawn*.

"Tell your nigger to keep that belaying-pin clear, King of the Islands," he bawled. "Let me come aboard, and—"

"And we know the rest," snapped King of the Islands. "We know you, Barney Hall—you're a swab, and as treacherous as a tiger-shark. Pull off."

"I'll leave my gun in the boat, if you like. I tell you I'm here to make a fortune, and I'll share with you if you come in on it. Look!" Hall unbuckled the holster at his belt, and threw it, with the revolver in it, into the bottom of the boat. "There! Are you afraid to let an unarmed man come aboard your packet?"

Ken and Kit exchanged a glance. They did not like Barney Hall, and they did not trust him an inch. But unarmed, it was apparent that he had no hostile intention: and they were curious, too, to know the meaning of the strange words he had spoken.

"O.K." said Ken at last. "Stand back, you feller Koko. You can come aboard, Hall, but if you try any tricks, you go into the lagoon, and take your chance with the sharks."

Hall replied with a surly grunt. Then, grasping the rail, he clambered aboard, and stood on the teak deck of the *Dawn*.

CHAPTER II

A TALE OF TREASURE

KING OF THE ISLANDS, standing by the binnacle, waved his hand to a Madeira chair. It creaked as Barney Hall dropped his huge bulk into it.

Kit Hudson sat on the taffrail, his rifle under his arm. Both the shipmates eyed the trader of Tonga curiously.

Hall had come aboard, apparently in amity. But the scowl on his brow, the glint in his little piggy eyes, told how he resented his unceremonious reception. Still, it was not likely that even the hard-fisted trader of Tonga would venture to let his evil temper rip, unarmed as he now was.

That his feelings towards the boy traders were no more amicable than they had ever been was clear enough. He came in peace because he wanted something of them. What he wanted was a puzzle: but King of the Islands was willing to hear what he had to say.

"Carry on, Hall," said Ken.

Hall grunted.

"I'm putting up a proposition, King of the Islands," he said. "We've never been friends—"

"Nothing like it," agreed Ken.

"Nor ever likely to be," scowled Hall.

"Nothing more unlikely," said Ken, with a smile.

"All the same, white men can stand together in a hole like this," said Barney Hall, with a wave of his huge hand towards the glimmering beach, now growing dim in the tropical dusk. "I guess I've never been pleased to see you before, but I'll say that I was glad to raise your hooker here when my boat pulled in. Nobody's ever been more pleased to see you, come to that."

"Thanks," said Ken, laughing.

"Not because I like the cut of your jib, any more than I ever did," growled Barney. "But you can help me— And I can help you, if you'd rather finger a thousand or so Australian sovereigns, instead of drumming around making small-time profits on copra."

"Copra's good business these days," said Ken. "The old traders used to dream of the days when copra was twenty pounds a ton, never hoping that they would come back again: now it fetches four times as much, and even five. We're not doing badly out of copra, Hall."

"Mebbe not! But there's something on Ovuva worth more than all the coconuts that ever grew on the island, and all the copra that ever came out of them," growled Hall, "and more than ever came out of the pesky margarine they make from the copra."

"And you're going to tell us where to lay hands on it?" grinned Kit Hudson.

Hall gave him a scowl.

"Jest that!" he snapped.

"Kind of you!" chuckled the Australian mate of the *Dawn*.

"I've got my reasons. I want help to lay my own hands on it, and finding you here, I'm ready to take you into the proposition. I'd have gone in alone, but—" Hall waved his horny hands towards the circling beach again, "Look at that crowd of niggers, all as keen to get our heads off our shoulders as their new chief Ogoo. They don't dare face the rifles: but ashore, in the bush, I guess it would be a different palaver."

"Very!" said Ken, drily. "If you set foot on the beach of Ovuvu, Hall, you can bank on your head smoking in the wood-fire in Ogoo's hut. Old Temooka was hardly able to keep them in check: and Ogoo is as savage a head-hunter as ever handled a spear. Keep afloat if you're not tired of life."

"I'm going ashore after a fortune, if every durned nigger in the Black Islands stood in the way," said Barney Hall, doggedly." But I ain't denying that I'd like a white man at my side—and a man of your heft, King of the Islands. You'd stand by a man through thick and thin if you took it on."

"Bank on that," said Ken. "But you're talking in riddles. What are you after on Ovuva?"

"Old Temooka's treasure!" muttered Barney Hall. He spoke in a low voice, slowly, as if reluctant to speak at all. "I ain't saying I'm keen on sharing it, Ken King. But I'll share it, fair and square, fifty-fifty, if you stand in with me. Better half the treasure, and live to spend it, than the lot of it with a spear in the back."

"Old Temooka's treasure!" repeated Ken.

He stared at the trader, and Kit Hudson chuckled.

"We've heard that yarn," said the mate of the *Dawn*. "You can hear a dozen such yarns on any beach."

"This isn't a beach-comber's yarn," snapped Hall. "This is the goods. Old Temooka traded for a good many years, and I guess he handled a whole heap of Australian sovereigns in his time. He was keen on trade—he raided other islands for heads to smoke in his canoe-house, but he kept the peace with white men for the sake of trade. A good many thousands of gold sovereigns passed through his hands when he was chief here."

"Passed through, no doubt," said Ken. "I've heard a yarn of a treasure on Ovuva, and sometimes it's pearls, and sometimes rare corals, and sometimes golden Australian sovereigns hoarded by Temooka. I've never believed a word of it."

"You can believe it now," growled Barney Hall. "I'm not willing to tell you, and you know it: I'm telling you because I want your help in lifting a sea-chest packed with treasure."

Kit Hudson whistled.

"It's anybody's game, if you're particular," went on Hall, with savage sarcasm. "Old Temooka kept the sea-chest hidden in the bush. It was his as long as he lived. It's anybody's now that can lift it. I reckon you ain't thinking that it belongs to the new chief, for taking the trouble to spear Temooka in the back and cut off his head.

"Hardly," said Ken. "If it's there, I'd keep it out of that savage brute's hands, if I could."

"It's there!" rapped Hall.

"Well, how do you know?" demanded King of the Islands. "I can hardly think you're risking your life here on nothing more than a drunken beachcomber's yarn. But how do you know?"

"I've had the news," said Hall slowly and again with evident reluctance. "I've got it square. Ogoo wiped out all the old chief's friends that he could lay hands on, when he wiped out Temooka, but some of them got away in canoes—one of them at least: for I contacted him at Loa: old Temooka's servant Bomoo. Mebbe you've seen him—"

"I've traded with him, my last call here," said Ken, "and what did you pick up from him at Loa?"

"The whole bearings," said Hall. His reluctance seemed to leave him, and he spoke eagerly. "I traded him rum till it all came out." He scowled, as he noted Ken's look of distaste. "That was the way to make the nigger talk, and he talked. He dare not come within fifty sea-miles of Ovuva, or I reckon he would be after the treasure himself. But he was more'n willing to let a white man take the risk if he wanted to. I didn't swallow the yarn whole at first, but I got more and more out of him, till I had it clear. There's a big cedarwood sea-chest hidden in the bush on Ovuva, and inside it is Temooka's treasure. I've got the bearings. If the sun wasn't so low down you'd see a big banyan over-topping the bush—but I reckon you've seen it—"

"I've seen it. It's a regular landmark here."

"That's the location. There's a grass hut under that banyan, and the sea-chest is hidden under the floor of the hut. It's not hidden deep—only covered up with grass and rushes to keep it out of sight. Lifting it would be as easy as falling off a yard, if the niggers don't stop us."

"Bomoo had seen it?"

"More'n once, spying on old Temooka, who kept the secret to himself. He's not seen inside it, but he's seen the chest, and seen old Temooka visit it, and if he'd dared, I reckon he would have helped himself. The chest was kept locked, and old Temooka kept the key: he was as jealous as a tiger about that chest, and if he'd known that Bomoo knew anything about it, he would have had his head smoking in a jiffy. But Bomoo knew, and I've got the bearings from him."

"And what's in the chest?" asked Kit Hudson.

"I've told you—Temooka's treasure. What would be in it?" snarled

Barney Hall. "Do you think old Temooka kept a sea-chest hidden in the bush, and visited it secretly, with nothing in it?"

"Well, not likely," admitted Hudson, with a nod. "If he hoarded Australian sovereigns, as the chiefs often do, that's where he would pack them, safe out of thieving hands. But—"

"But what?" snapped Hall.

Kit Hudson laughed.

"Look at the beach," he said, "A white man's life wouldn't be worth the toss of a ship's biscuit if he landed on Ovuva. We shall be lucky if we get through the night without having to fight off a swarm of canoes with yelling head-hunters in them. Landing on Ovuva is asking for it."

"Nothing risk, nothing win," growled Barney Hall, "I've come to Ovuva for Temooka's treasure, and I'm not going without it. I know the risk—and I'm ready to face it, for a bigger prize than all I've ever made by trading in fifteen years. If they get me, I'll make a few of them roll over, before they get the head off my shoulders. But after dark there's a chance, a good chance, of pulling through, and pulling it off; especially with two good men instead of one. With one carrying the chest, and another handling a gun if the niggers show up—what?"

"You can bet that some of them would show up," said Hudson.

"That's not sure. They'd never be expecting a white man to land, and they're not cats to see in the dark. Might get through without a shot fired. I ain't saying it's likely: but we might. If it comes to shooting, I want a man to stand by me—share and share alike. Are you on, King of the Islands?"

Ken did not reply immediately.

Barney Hall watched him, with an anxious scowl.

Evidently, he was prepared to make the desperate venture alone, if he did not receive aid from the shipmates. But finding the *Dawn* at anchor in the lagoon had given him hope of aid: and the danger was so terrible, so overwhelming, that the aid of a steady and reliable comrade in the venture, was very likely to make all the difference between success, and failure—which meant a fearful death. Bitter as were his feelings towards the boy trader, Barney Hall wanted his help that wild night if he could get it, on any terms.

"Mebbe thousands," he muttered, "You're making nothing but a loss on this trip to Ovuva, King of the Islands—time and money wasted. And there's a fortune in the bush for the picking up."

"And a wood-fire in a canoe-house for a sailorman's head to smoke in," said Hudson.

"Are you afraid of niggers?" snarled Barney Hall. "If I'm ready to go it alone, I reckon one of you lubbers ought to be willing to go it in company."

King of the Islands nodded, slowly.

"One of us would have to stay on the ketch, Kit," he said, "Ogoo's crew might attack, after dark—we cannot tell. I'll go—"

Barney Hall's face lighted up.

"Good for you, King of the Islands," he exclaimed, and his look, for the moment, was almost cordial. "You're the man I'd rather have at my side, than any other white man in the Pacific, on a venture like this."

"Let's have it clear, Hall," said Ken, quietly, "I don't trust you an inch. I believe what you've told us, because I know you wouldn't be risking your life here unless you believed it worth while. I believe the sea-chest is hidden in the bush, as you say, and I don't see what can be in it excepting old Temooka's treasure. I'll go in with you to lift it—nobody on Ovuva has any claim to it, and I'd be glad to stop any chance of it falling into the hands of that murderous villain Ogoo. But—"

"But what?" muttered Hall. He eyed the boy trader furtively.

"But we've got to have it clear. If we stand in with you, the treasure, if we get it, is shared fairly—one-half to you, and one-half to us. And the chest will be brought on board the *Dawn*, and opened here—landed on this deck for the opening and the share-out."

"You figure that I'm trying to double-cross you?" sneered Hall.

"I've said that I don't trust you an inch," answered King of the Islands, coolly. "There's the terms—if you agree, it's a go: if not, get back to your whaleboat and leave us out of it."

"Of course I agree," growled Hall. "We land the chest on this deck and open it here, and then, share and share alike. Can any man say fairer than that?"

King of the Islands glanced at his shipmate, and Hudson nodded.

"It's a go, then!" said Ken.

Barney Hall lighted a cheroot, with a grin of satisfaction. Far away across the Pacific, the sun dipped beyond the sea, and the sudden night of the tropics came. It was to be a wild night for the white men in the lagoon of Ovuva.

CHAPTER III

IN THE DARK NIGHT

NIGHT lay like a dark velvet cloak on the Pacific. Stars gleamed in the deep dark blue of the sky: distant to the south, the Southern Cross sparkled like a mass of jewels. But on the lagoon of Ovuva it was dim: the shelving beach was dusky, the palm groves and the high bush black and impenetrable. Here and there through the night came glimmerings of lights from the native villages: but these died out one by one, and at last all was shadow. After dark, King of the Islands would not have been surprised if canoes had paddled out to attempt an attack on his ship: and all hands were ready to pour rifle-fire on the head-hunters if they came. But as yet there was no sign of it.

Barney Hall's whaleboat was tied up to the ketch. His crew of Tonga boys sprawled in it, sleeping on their mats, or sitting up and idly chewing betel-nut. They were unarmed: Barney was not likely to sail alone in solitary seas with an armed native crew. They were of little use if an attack came: King of the Islands did not count on them. But on board the *Dawn* every man was wakeful and watchful: even Danny the cooky-boy had a rifle under his arm. Every man, every shot, would be needed if the islanders attacked in the hours of darkness.

Kit Hudson stared at the shadowy beach, with a faintly uneasy look on his sunburnt face. Had he been making the venture with Barney Hall, he would have been as cool as ice: careless of peril. But the thought of his comrade and shipmate plunging into the black shadows of the bush, amid swarms of savage head-hunting blacks, troubled him. Yet Barney Hall, assuredly, was prepared to make the venture alone, if it came to that: and neither of the shipmates could have thought of hesitating, where the ruffianly skipper from Tonga dared to go. And the treasure, too, was worth the risk—if it materialized. But Hudson was uneasy all the same.

Koko, the brown skinned boatswain, eyed his "little white master", from time to time, without speaking. But when, at last, it was midnight, and Ken made a move, the Kanaka spoke.

"This feller Koko go along little white master, along bush along Ovuva, sar!" he murmured.

Ken smiled, and shook his head.

"You feller Koko stop along ketch," he answered. "Spose black feller belong Ovuva comey along night, you shoot along long-feller gun, Koko."

"No likee little white master go along bad-feller-too-much Hall," muttered Koko: quite regardless of the fact that Barney Hall was within hearing. "He no good-feller along little white master."

"You'd better tip that nigger to stow his jawing-tackle, King of the Islands," came a sullen growl from Barney Hall.

"I trust you no more than Koko does," answered Ken, coolly. "But we're together in this, and you cannot but play fair. Tell your crew to be ready."

Barney Hall muttered an oath, and slouched to the side, to speak to the boat's crew below. Ken glanced at his shipmate, and smiled faintly as he read his thoughts in his face.

"O.K. Kit," he said. "The big banyan's a landmark I know like the back of my hand, and even in the dark I shall make it without any trouble. Hall will carry the chest, if we find it there—I shall cover his retreat to the boat with my gun. Even if the blacks get wise to us, we shall get through. And it looks as if we may make it a quiet trip."

"Look here, Ken, if I come with you, and leave Koko in charge here—" muttered Hudson.

"It wouldn't do, old man. Ogoo and his horde may attack the ketch before dawn—every man here will be wanted, you most of all."

"Aye, aye! But—"

Hudson broke off: he knew that his shipmate was right.

"It will be all right, old man," said Ken, smiling, "and it's worth while. We know that old Temooka handled stacks of Australian sovereigns in his time; and that chest hidden in the bush looks as if he hoarded them, as many of the chiefs did. It's worth the risk."

"I know! But—" Hudson broke off again. "Carry on, shipmate. But—for goodness sake, make the quickest trip you can and keep a weather-eye on Barney Hall—he would play you false if it suited him."

"It won't suit him, under my gun!" said King of the Islands, grimly. "Any tricks from Barney Hall, and I'd shoot him as soon as I would a mad dog. But what tricks could he play, Kit? We're in this together, and if we don't stand together through it, his head goes to smoke as well as mine."

Hudson nodded.

"I know!" he assented. "Rely on me to keep the old packet safe while you're gone, Ken. If Ogoo butts in with his horde, they won't get a foot on the *Dawn*. If you hear gunfire you can bank on that."

There was a growl from Barney Hall at the rail.

"Ready, King of the Islands?"

"Ready," answered Ken.

The whaleboat rocked as Barney Hall's heavy hulk dropped into it. King of the Islands followed him.

The Tonga boys sat at the oars. Hall cast off the painter, and pushed off from the ketch. From the rail, Kit Hudson and Koko, and the Hiva-Oa crew of the *Dawn*, watched the whaleboat glide away into the shadows.

For some minutes it was visible as a dark shadow. There was little or no sound as it moved with muffled oars—nothing to give the alarm to the savages ashore if any were wakeful. It disappeared in the deep tropical dusk. Kit Hudson drew a deep, deep breath. Koko's brown face was dark and gloomy.

"No likee!" he muttered.

Hudson stood silent, watching, listening. The night was very still. If the savages on shore were plotting mischief, there was no sign of it. But the mate of the *Dawn* would not expect a sign of it, till the canoes, crowded with savages grasping spears and war-clubs, came rushing out of the dark. That the rifle-fire from the ketch would drive them off he had no doubt; but one minute of unwariness might be fatal. The crew of the *Dawn* had to watch like cats till the new day came.

The minutes were long to Kit Hudson as he waited. With his mind's eye he followed his shipmate—ashore by this time; the boat waiting in a dark inlet, King of the Islands and the Tonga trader tramping by the dark runways of the bush. If they got through without an alarm——!

He could only wait, and wait, and watch, and listen. So still was the night, that he could hear, faintly from afar, the "plop" of a falling coconut, falling

in the wind from the sea. Minutes, that seemed hours, crawled by. And when, at length, the silence was suddenly broken, the crack of a pistol shot from the dark bush startled his strained ears like a crash of thunder.

CHAPTER IV

HIDDEN TREASURE!

"STARBOARD!" muttered Barney Hall.

"Port!" said King of the Islands, briefly.

Hall cursed under his breath.

They were at a cross in the tortuous runways in the bush of Ovuva. In the blackness, hardly broken by the glimmer of a star through tangled branches, they could see little or nothing. They peered, and groped, and tramped with silent feet, till they came to the spot where runways crossed in the shadowy bush, and there Barney Hall halted, in perplexity, and King of the Islands drew to a halt also.

So far, all had gone well. The whaleboat, with the Tonga rowers, had been left in a little inlet that ran from the lagoon into the bush. There it was to await their return, in darkness and silence: the Tonga boys would be silent enough, knowing that headhunters lurked on Ovuva: some as likely as not, wakeful, in the late hours of the night. Landing in the bush, Ken King and the burly trader plunged on in the deep gloom: guided by their memory of the position of the over-topping banyan-tree, for nothing could be seen. But at the cross of the ways, Barney Hall was uncertain. Seen in daylight, that vast and towering banyan seemed a certain guide: but in the blackness of the night it was a different matter, and Barney was far from sure of his bearings. He fancied the way lay to the right: but he was not sure: and as King of the Islands chose left, he cursed in low tones, fearful lest some savage lurking in the bush might hear.

"I guess it's starboard, King of the Islands," he muttered. "I got the lie of it when my boat pulled in—"

"Port," repeated Ken, curtly. "Don't waste time, Barney Hall. You're more a lubber than a sailorman."

"I reckon I got my bearings—"

"You reckoned you had your bearings when you ran your lugger on the reef at Oao, a year ago."

The trader cursed again. He had never hated King of the Islands more than he did at that moment. But he knew that the boy trader of Lalinge was most likely right. Ken was ten times the sailorman that Barney had ever been: and when he had taken his bearings, there was no doubt about it. The burly trader suppressed his bitter resentment, and muttered:

"Have your way, King of the Islands! I'm not sure, and if you're sure—"

"Follow on."

That was Ken's only reply, as he led the way again. They swung into the dark tangled runway to the left: and it added to Barney's sullen rage to realize that, without the help of the boy trader, he would never have found his way at night in the trackless bush. It was unfamiliar ground, and the darkness was blinding and baffling. But King of the Islands trod on, as if he could see like a cat in the dark, and Barney tramped sullenly after him: savagely resentful but more than glad of his guidance.

"Stop!" came a whisper from the boy trader.

"What—?" began Barney Hall.

"We're here! Here's the big banyan."

"Oh!" breathed Barney.

He peered round him in the deep gloom. He made out the mass of the vast banyan, with its many stems that seemed like a grove in a single tree. It loomed up like a vast building, over-topping the other trees, though many of them were tall. Evidently King of the Islands, had chosen the right path: the Tonga trader would have wandered in the bush, without him, and perhaps never have found the banyan before dawn came. But they had arrived, at last, at the spot where, according to the tale told by Bomoo at Loa, the treasure of old Temooka was hidden under the floor of a grass hut.

"We're here," breathed Barney. He muttered an oath. "It's as black as the deep pit, under that banyan—I reckon we got to strike a glim, if we're going to find that hut."

"I've a dark lantern. Come on."

King of the Islands flitted silently between the banyan stems, under the mighty tree. Hall tramped clumsily after him. With its many stems standing like columns, it was like aisles in a cathedral under the great banyan. The blackness was intense: not a glimmer of starlight came through the dense mass of foliage overhead. King of the Islands groped to the main trunk of the great tree: a mass of timber that was a dozen yards in circumference. There, feeling fairly sure that the surrounding stems would hide the light from the bush, if there were eyes to see, he turned on a gleam of the dark-lantern. Barney blinked in the light, and cast an uneasy glance round him. But all was silent and still in the dense bush of Ovuva.

With merely a glimmer of light showing, but enough for his purpose, Ken moved round the vast trunk, searching the endless recesses among the stems for the grass hut. And in a few minutes he found it.

"Here!" he whispered.

Barney Hall's narrow eyes glittered in the glimmer of light.

"By hokey!" he breathed. "I told you it was true. King of the Islands—I knew I got it straight from that nigger at Loa. This is where old Temooka kept his treasure—by hokey, we've got it."

"Looks like it!"

There was a doorway to the hut, of matting hanging from a palm pole. King of the Islands pulled it aside, and Barney followed him in. It was a small hut, not more than twelve feet across either way: the floor covered with tapa mats. Certainly, without a clue, no one could have dreamed that it was the hiding place of a treasure. But Barney knew, or at least was certain that he knew, what lay hidden under the mats.

He began to drag them aside with feverish haste. The earth was revealed, and again, without a clue, no one could have guessed what it hid. But Barney knew, and he knew, too, that it was not hidden deep—old Temooka could not have buried his treasure deep, when he was in the habit of visiting it, adding to it, gloating over it. There was a mere screen of earth and grass over the lid of the hidden sea-chest: easy to remove by old Temooka when he came: easier for the burly trader of Tonga. With a huge claspknife in his horny hand, Barney Hall slashed at the earth, and barely suppressed a shout of triumph as the knife checked on something hard under the earthy surface.

"By hokey!" His narrow eyes danced. "Here—!"

"Belay it!" breathed King of the Islands. "Listen—"

"I tell you—"

"Listen, will you?" hissed the boy trader.

Eager as he was to hack the earth away from the hidden chest, Barney Hall paused, and listened. But there was no sound.

"What did you fancy you heard?" he muttered, savagely.

"I heard a sound from the bush—it's quiet now—"

"Getting nervy?" jeered Barney Hall. "There's no sound—the niggers on this island are sleeping like pigs. Look here, keep your gun in your hand, while I get out the chest."

"Quiet—and quick!" said Ken.

He stood with the lantern in his left hand, his revolver in his right, his face tense. If some lurking savage had heard a sound, or caught a glimmer of the light, it meant the alarm on Ovuva—it meant a swarm of fierce enemies in the bush: it meant a desperate fight for life, a fighting retreat to the boat: it meant, as likely as not, white men's heads smoking in the woodfires in the canoe-house of Ogoo. But Barney Hall, in his greed and eagerness, almost forgot the deadly peril, as he slashed the shallow covering away, and revealed the lid of a sea-chest sunk in the earth.

It was locked: and the lock was strong. Barney Hall, with an exertion of his burly strength, swung the chest out of its place, and lifted it to the floor of the hut, his eyes bulging under his bushy brows with greed. He jabbed savagely at the lock with his clasp-knife.

"If we'd brought an axe—!" he breathed.

"Fool! Do you want to wake the whole island? Quiet, I tell you, and listen," whispered King of the Islands.

"There's nothing—!"

"Will you listen?"

Hall scowled savagely, but he listened. And his face changed, as faint sounds from the bush round the banyan came to his ears. He gritted his teeth.

"The wind—!" he muttered.

"It's not the wind! There was no sound before. We've been spotted, and a crowd of them are creeping in the bush, looking for us. We've got to run."

Hall knew that it was true. His face set doggedly.

"We're not going without the chest!" he hissed. "If every durned nigger in the South Seas stood in my way, I'd not take a step without that chest. I can handle it, King of the Islands—cover me with your gun and we'll get through."

Hall swung the heavy cedar-wood chest on his brawny shoulders. He could handle it, as he said: but he could not handle a weapon at the same time. His life depended on King of the Islands covering his retreat to the boat.

Ken shut off the light.

"Ready?" he whispered.

"Aye, aye."

"Follow me! It's for life or death now."

"Don't I know it?" muttered Hall. "Lead the way! We'll beat them—we'll beat the durned niggers! Lead the way."

Ken stepped from the hut, his revolver in his hand, his eyes as watchful as a wildcat's. Hall followed him, with the heavy chest on his shoulders. They wound among the many stems of the banyan, back to the runway. There was no mistaking the sounds from the bush now—they were nearer and clearer: rustling of twigs, padding of naked feet, now and then a low call. As Ken emerged into the runway, there was a sudden gleam of a spear point, a flash of rolling eyes: his revolver roared even as the savage sprang, and a yelling black islander went rolling. Loud and sharp in the night silence rang the crack of the revolver, heard all over the island, heard on the anchored ketch in the lagoon. It was followed by yells from the bush.

"Come!" breathed Ken.

Barney Hall plunged on, at a run, the heavy chest swinging on his broad shoulders. At his side ran King of the Islands: and from the black bush round them came yell on yell of the savage horde hunting them in the darkness.

CHAPTER V

PUNIC FAITH!

CRACK! CRACK! crack! crack!

"Durn the niggers—"

Crack! crack!

On all sides came yelling from the bush: two or three score, at least, of the savages of Ovuva were hunting them. But the darkness was baffling: and the treasure seekers hoped, for a moment or two, to get through with a rapid rush down to the inlet where the whaleboat waited. But from the bush at the side of the runway, shadowy forms suddenly leaped, with brandished spears and war-clubs. Ken's revolver blazed fast, and black man after black man reeled and rolled under his fire. He dodged a spear-thrust, and a crashing club, he hardly knew how, and fired and fired.

There was a heavy thud in the darkness close by, and a roar from Barney Hall. A whirling war-club had caught his shoulder, and he staggered, the sea-chest crashing to the earth. The savage roar he uttered was more of rage than of pain. He clutched the revolver from his belt, and standing over the treasure-chest, fired at the leaping, half-seen dark figures in the dark.

It was pandemonium for a long wild minute—then there was a crashing in the bush, as the savages fled from the fire, leaving five or six of their number groaning on the earth. Ken panted as he hurriedly reloaded.

"Quick!" he breathed. "Are you hurt, Hall?" There was a note of anxiety in his voice. Hall, for the moment, was not the ruffianly, unscrupulous, hard-fisted trader: he was Ken's comrade in a fight for life. "Hall—"

Barney Hall was staggering against a tree. But he pulled himself together, growling savagely.

"Only a knock—my shoulder's bruised! Get on—get on—they'll be swarming over us in a brace of shakes—get on!"

Unheeding the pain of his bruised shoulder, the burly trader bent over the chest, to swing it up. In spite of himself, a groan escaped him as he did so. But he gritted his teeth and swung up the chest.

"If you're hurt—"

"Get on, I tell you, get on."

"Give me the chest—I can handle it, if you're hurt—"

"Leave it to me."

Even at that moment, with bitter pangs of pain in his bruised shoulder, intensified by the weight of the chest, with swarming savages yelling all round them, in the very shadow of death, Barney Hall could not bring himself to relinquish hold of the treasure-chest. He staggered and stumbled along the dark runway, the sea-chest on his shoulders: and King of the Islands followed him, gripping his revolver.

In that fierce brief fight the savages had been driven off, and the way for the moment was clear. But they knew now exactly where the fugitives were, and there was no more hunting at random in the bush: the whole swarming crew were in the runway behind, pursuing. Yelling voices and padding feet were terribly close, as the two white men raced down to the inlet. Twice Hall would have taken a wrong path, had not King of the Islands caught his arm, and guided him aright. It was well for the trader of Tonga that he had been able to enlist the aid of the boy skipper of the *Dawn*: only too well he knew that, alone, his life would have been beaten out under crashing clubs and thrusting spears. But there was a glimmer of water ahead at last: they were close on the inlet: but Barney, racked with pain, stumbled and slackened speed.

A spear whizzed by, missing him by an inch. King of the Islands turned, and blazed back a shot: answered by a yell. It slackened, for a moment, the rush of the swarming pursuit.

"Give me the chest, Hall—and run!" panted Ken.

"Leave it to me! Keep them durned niggers back!" muttered the Tonga trader, hoarsely.

Again Ken fired back in the run way, and again there was a brief slackening

He fired fast into the rushing horde.

of the rush of padding feet. Barney Hall, staggering, reached the swampy margin of the inlet: and with a final effort, hurled the chest into the boat, among the bare legs of the Tonga crew.

There was a wild chattering from the Tonga boys, terrified by the savage yelling from the bush. Barney Hall gave them a fierce glare.

"Cast off!" he hissed. "Cast off, you black scum."

"Stand by me, Barney Hall!" came King of the Islands' voice. "They're on us!"

From the dark runway came a wild rush. King of the Islands faced about, his revolver up, his eyes gleaming over it. He fired fast into the rushing horde, but they came on, yelling.

Barney Hall glared round.

One of the Tonga boys had cast off the painter. The boat rocked on the inlet. King of the Islands, his face to the rushing enemy, his back to the trader, was only a yard from him. For a second, Barney Hall grasped his revolver, to turn back to his aid. But it was only for a second. The next, he had leaped into the boat: the impact of his weight sending it spinning far out on the water.

"Washy-washy too quick, you black scum!" he snarled. "You hear me, ear belong you? Washy-washy, or me knock seven bells out of your hides."

The oars dipped into the water. Ashore, King of the Islands emptied his revolver into the rushing horde on the runway, and savage forms reeled to right and left under the fire. It checked them, if only for a moment, and the boy trader turned and leaped towards the inlet, staring into the darkness for the boat.

"Barney Hall! Where—?"

He broke off, as the dash of oars from the night came back, to answer him. The boat was gone. Barney Hall was gone.

Even then, for the moment, King of the Islands did not grasp the full extent of the Tonga trader's treachery. He shouted:

"Hall, you fool! You're leaving me behind—bring the boat closer, you lubber—get to the bank. Do you hear?"

Only the dash of oars answered, dying away towards the lagoon. Then King of the Islands understood. The treasure-chest was in the boat: and it was gone: Barney Hall had abandoned him to the head-hunters. That the ruffian was as treacherous as a tiger-shark, Ken knew: he had not trusted him: but he had given him, and intended to give him, no opportunity for treachery. But the close pursuit of the savages had offered Barney the chance he wanted: and he had been quick to seize on it. The boat was pulling away to the lagoon —pulling away to sea—as fast as oars could drive it, the Tonga boys slaving at the oars under the savage threats and curses of the trader—and King of the Islands on the shore of the inlet, was left to death under the spears of the head-hunters of Ovuva.

CHAPTER VI

FOR LIFE OR DEATH!

KING OF THE ISLANDS stood, knee-deep in the shallow margin of the inlet, panting, his empty revolver in his hand. Had the boat been still there, one leap would have carried him to safety. His eyes gleamed with rage, as he realized how the trader of Tonga had tricked him: fleeing with the treasure, and leaving him to his fate. He did not need telling that Barney Hall was not pulling for the ketch: he was pulling for the reef passage, to escape to the open sea: the treasure wholly his, and laughing at the man he had tricked. It was well for the trader of Tonga that he was out of Ken King's reach at that moment.

But there was no time to think of Hall and his treachery, or the loss of the treasure—or anything else but the shadow of death that lay on him. He turned his head as he stood in the shallow water. From the darkness of the runway, the savages came pouring from the bush—even in the darkness the spear-points, the wild rolling eyes, the glimmering lava-lavas, could be seen: and they were almost upon him. Ahead of the yelling crew came a brawny young savage with a brass ring in his nose, and strings or cartridge-clips adorning his thick neck: Ogoo, the new chief of Ovuva. With blazing eyes Ogoo ran at him, his spear lifted to strike.

Up went Ken's arm, and the empty revolver was hurled, crashing into the ferocious black face. Ogoo, yelling, staggered back, his spear dropping. The rest came on with a rush: but King of the Islands had a moment. He plunged out headlong into the water, to swim for his life. There were sharks in the lagoon, but he had to take his chance of them—it was swift and sudden death to linger. A moment after he cleft the water, a yelling mob was on the margin of the inlet, splashing in the mud, hurling spears.

Ken felt a spear touch his arm as it grazed. There was a splash a foot from him, as a hurled war-club smote the water. But he swam with powerful strokes, and shot almost like an arrow down the inlet to the lagoon. Splashes behind him told that several, at least, of the savages had taken to the water in pursuit—crashing of bushes showed that others were racing along the bank of the inlet. He gave no heed, though it seemed to him that he could almost hear the rustle of the wings of the Angel of Death. With steady powerful strokes he cleft the glimmering water, and the inlet was left behind, and he was swimming swift and strong for the ketch.

The *Dawn* was anchored well out in the lagoon: out of range of arrows from the beach. But King of the Islands was a strong swimmer, and he was almost like an arrow in the water. On board the ketch, they must have heard the firing in the bush, and the yelling of the savages: they would be on the look-out for

him. The *Dawn's* riding-light was his guide, and he drew rapidly nearer. And he ceased to swim, and, treading water, shouted with the full force of his lungs.

"Ahoy! *Dawn* ahoy!"

A shout came back from the ketch.

"Ken! Ahoy, King of the Islands." It was Kit Hudson's voice. It was followed by the deep tones of Koko:

"Little white master comey along he swim along lagoon. Little white master he stop along water."

In the glimmer of the stars Ken swept on. He had a glimpse of the brown face of Koko, and of Kit's anxious face, over the rail. Then something touched him in the water, and for a second a shudder of horror ran through him at the thought of a shark. But it was a hand that touched—and grasped: one of the blacks, more powerful than the rest, had swum him down, and grasped him: and in a moment Ken gave grasp for grasp, and was fighting for his life in the water.

He did not hear a splash, as a brawny form plunged down from the *Dawn's* rail. But he felt the fierce grasp on him suddenly relax, and he was free: his head came up, and he panted for air. The brown face of Koko grinned at him in the shadows, and a brown hand held him.

"Koko!" panted the boy trader.

"Me comey along water help little white master, sar! That black feller go kill-dead knife belong me," grinned Koko.

"Good man!"

"Look out!" yelled Hudson, over the rail, and a rope splashed in the lagoon. "Quick! For your life!" A black fin glided over the water: it was a shark, drawn by the scent of blood.

Ken grasped the rope.

"Hold on, Koko," he panted.

"Yessar."

The Hiva-Oa boys on deck dragged at the rope. Ken and Koko were dragged headlong up the side: and as they reeled panting and drenched on deck, there was a gleam of white below: the shark had turned over to bite. But he was moments too late: King of the Islands and the faithful Kanaka were safe on the deck of the *Dawn*.

Kit Hudson grasped his shipmate's arm, and helped him to his feet. Ken stood unsteadily, leaning on the mate.

"You're all right, Ken?"

"Right as rain! But it was a close thing," breathed King of the Islands. "The closest ever, Kit!"

"But the boat—Barney Hall—what—?"

Ken's eyes glinted.

"Gone!" he said. "He ran in the boat, with the treasure-chest, and left me

to it—he had his chance, with the blacks fairly on me, while I was stalling them off. The dastardly villain—!"

"Oh, the hound!" breathed Hudson.

"I knew he'd double-cross us, if he had a chance! But—he would never have had a chance if the blacks had not been so close behind." Ken clenched his hands. "You've seen nothing of the whaleboat?"

"Nothing!"

"He's through the reef passage before this, making for the open sea. He was quick to take his chance," said Ken bitterly.

"Up hook, and after him!" exclaimed Hudson. But he shook his head the next moment. "We can't run the reef passage in the teeth of the wind. He knows that! Oh, the double-crossing swab!"

"Nor pick up the boat in the darkness, if we did," said Ken. "And—we're going to be busy in a minute or two, Kit. Look!"

From the shadows of the night, dim shapes were visible on the lagoon towards the beach. Canoes were pushing out from the shore. Whether Ogoo and his head-hunting crew had intended to risk an attack or not, the affray in the bush had settled the matter: the savages of Ovuva, maddened with rage, were manning their canoes and paddling out to the ketch's anchorage. There was no time now for talk, or for wasting thought on Barney Hall: every hand grasped a rifle: every eye watched for the attack that was coming.

It came with a rush: canoe after canoe shooting out towards the *Dawn*: savage eyes gleaming and rolling, black hands grasping spear and axe and war-club: spears and sharp stones whizzing through the air. A hundred or more yelling savages crowded down on the *Dawn*.

"Fire!" shouted Ken.

And the rifles roared, pouring hot lead into the crowded canoes. They came on: and for anxious minutes it seemed that the infuriated head-hunters, in spite of raining bullets that tore through flesh and bone, would push on and reach the low freeboard and clamber up.

But the rifle-fire was too hot for them. Black savage after savage rolled over in the canoes: and in sudden panic they whirled away and fled into the shadows. The Hiva-Oa boys, grinning, pumped lead after them as they fled.

The *Dawn* rode safe at her anchor for the rest of that wild night—though with a sleepless, watchful crew. And when the sunrise came, and with it the change of wind, the anchor was swung up, the canvas shaken out, and the ketch glided across the lagoon for the reef passage to the open sea. On the beach black head-hunters yelled and howled and brandished spears: till the tall sails of the *Dawn* disappeared over the reef.

Glad enough were the shipmates to see the palms of Ovuva sinking astern. And as the *Dawn* glided through the blue waters under the blaze of the sun, they searched the horizon on all sides with the binoculars, in the faint hope of picking up Barney Hall's whaleboat.

But there was no sign of the whaleboat on the wide rolling waters of the Pacific. Barney Hall had vanished into the immensity of the boundless ocean: and with him the treasure of Ovuva. And the shipmates, with deep feelings, could only set their course for their next port of call, hoping at some future date to call the treacherous trader of Tonga to account.

CHAPTER VII

BARNEY'S PRIZE!

BARNEY HALL grinned and chuckled in the glimmering sunrise. He was far from Ovuva.

Not a moment had been lost by the wily trader after he had left King of the Islands to his fate among the head-hunters. He was in fear of pursuit. Whether King of the Islands perished under the spears of the savages or whether he escaped with his life, Barney cared little: but in either case he had pursuit to fear, for he had the mate of the *Dawn* to reckon with. The adverse wind chained the ketch to the lagoon till sunrise: Barney counted on that. But once out of the lagoon, his whaleboat, if still within the range of powerful binoculars, would be run down helplessly by the swift ketch: and his treasure, and as likely as not his life, depended on putting the furthest distance he could between himself and Ovuva. And, scarcely heeding the locked chest that lay in the bottom of the boat, Barney took an oar and rowed with the Tonga boys: twice as powerful an oarsman as any of them, and driving them on with threats and oaths to equal his efforts.

Fast through the night the whaleboat fled, sea-mile after sea-mile gliding under her keel. And when the dawn came at last, Barney was satisfied that he was fairly safe from pursuit. The palm-tops of Ovuva were many a long mile below the horizon, as he glared round over the sea, shining in the rising sun. Even yet the swift ketch could have run him down, had the shipmates known what course to steer to find him: but how were they to know? Unless the binoculars on board could pick him up he was safe—and he was sure now that the most powerful glasses would search for him in vain.

But for many long minutes he watched the horizon anxiously in dread of seeing a tall white sail rise over the blue waters.

But there was no sail. The whaleboat floated alone in a vast solitude of waters. He was safe—and the treasure was his! He had made use of King of the Islands: and, at the finish, wreaked his old grudge: and he grinned and chuckled as he thought of it—every now and then a gasp of pain interrupting his gleeful chuckles. His bruised shoulder was aching horribly, and pulling

at an oar had made the ache more bitterly intense. But the burly trader seemed made almost of iron: bitter as the pain was, it was as nothing in comparison with his triumph over his old enemy, and his possession of the treasure locked in the sea-chest.

The Tonga boys, exhausted with the long, hard pull, lay listless in the boat, when Barney at length permitted them to slacken. They hardly heeded him, as he bent over the sea-chest: at leisure, at last, to examine his prize, to break open the lock with an axe, to run the hoard of Australian sovereigns through his greedy fingers—to count them, and count them, in hundreds, perhaps in thousands! His piggy eyes blazed with greed at the thought. He grasped an axe, and rained blows on the lock of the sea-chest.

It was a strong lock: old Temooka had taken care of that. Even the axe, wielded in Barney's brawny hand, made no impression on it for long minutes. But as he exerted his great strength, crashing blow after blow, it cracked at last, and the lid was loose.

He flung the axe aside, grasped the lid, raised it and threw it back. The treasure-chest was open.

Within was a covering of dried palm leaves over what the chest contained. Barney, with blazing eyes and panting breath, tore them aside: and the contents of old Temooka's chest were revealed.

And then—!

Then Barney Hall, on his knees, staring into the chest, looked like a man stunned by a sudden and terrible blow. He looked, indeed, as if he could not believe his eyes.

It was not a stack of Australian sovereigns, hoarded by the old chief of Ovuva in his trade with the white skippers, that he saw. It was not strings of pearls. It was the treasure of Temooka—such a treasure as any savage head-hunting chief might have prized, and gloated over, and guarded with care—but such a treasure as the greedy trader of Tonga had never dreamed of. For what was packed in the treasure-chest was a collection of smoked heads—heads of Temooka's enemies smoked and dried in the wood-fires!

Barney Hall's jaw dropped.

The colour went out of his bearded face, leaving him ghastly. He gazed, and gazed, dropping over the treasure-chest like a sick man. Smoked heads of savages slain in battle, or in treacherous ambush in the bush—inestimable in the eyes of the head-hunting chief; to a white man, repulsive and sickening and utterly worthless.

Barney Hall stirred at last. A pang of agony shot through his bruised shoulder. He groaned aloud. It was for this treasure that he had risked his life on Ovuva, that he had suffered the hurt that racked him with pain, that he had treacherously betrayed a white man to almost certain death—for this! For a collection of smoked heads, the trophies of a cruel and ignorant savage!

The disappointment was too bitter. The Tonga boys stared at their master,

and exchanged glances and grins. Barney did not heed them—or see them! He slumped down in the boat, utterly overwhelmed, and groaned, and could only groan.

. . . . . .

King of the Islands, and his mate, as the *Dawn* sailed the blue waters that sunny morning, thought of Barney Hall, and of calling him to account. But they might have pitied him, had they been able to see the wretched, overwhelmed possessor of the Treasure of Temooka.

THE END

The Ghost of Rookwood

By

Owen Conquest

CHAPTER I

SHIRTY!

"LOVELL!"

No reply.

"Coming out?"

Still no reply.

"Chance to get some of those Modern ticks with a snowball."

Grunt!

Three fellows had come up the Fourth-form passage, on the Classical side at Rookwood School, and were looking into the end study.

One fellow was in that study.

It was Arthur Edward Lovell. He was seated at the table, with a pen in his hand, and an almost ferocious expression on his face.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome gazed at him.

After class there was no special reason, so far as they could see, why Lovell should be busy in the study, till prep. It was not yet dark, though the December dusk was falling. And there was snow in the quad. It was a chance, as Jimmy Silver said, to get some of the Modern fellows with snowballs: an idea that might certainly have been expected to appeal to Lovell.

Now he did not heed, save for a grunt.

"Lines for Dalton?" asked Newcome.

"No!"

"Well, what—?" began Raby.

"Do let a chap get through."

Lovell did not even look up. His pen ran on while he answered over his shoulder.

"Well, if you're busy—!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Can't you see I am?"

"O.K. We'll get out and leave you to it—"

Lovell looked up, at that.

"Oh, get out by all means, if you can't wait a minute or two for a chap." he said, sarcastically. "Don't mind me."

Having added a snort to that remark, Lovell resumed operations with the pen.

The three juniors in the doorway exchanged glances.

Arthur Edward Lovell, evidently, was "shirty". He was not the most reasonable fellow, at the best of times. In a shirty state, he was apt to be a little unreasonable.

But they were great pals in the end study at Rookwood. If Arthur Edward Lovell was shirty, as not infrequently he was, his chums were wont to bear with him. So having exchanged a glance—and a smile!—they came into the study, instead of getting out and leaving him to it.

Lovell scribbled on.

Apparently he had a task to complete, and was anxious to complete it as soon as possible, which was only natural, as there was very little daylight left for a fellow to get out of doors. It was not, it seemed, lines for Mr. Dalton, the master of the Fourth. His friends looked over his shoulders to see what it was: and then they stared.

"Le fantôme. Le fantôme. Le fantôme."

That was what Lovell was writing, or rather scrawling: a single French word over and over again.

"What the dickens—?" said Jimmy Silver.

"Shut up while a fellow's working."

"Something for Mossoo?" asked Raby.

"Yes! Shut up."

"But—!" said Newcome.

"I said shut up!" hooted Lovell. "I'm just on the finish! Can't you fellows keep quiet for a minute?"

Three fellows became dumb.

With the dusk thickening, and lock-ups close at hand, they really would have preferred to get out. It was close on break-up for the Christmas holidays, and snowballing Tommy Dodd and Co. of the Modern side, would have given their old foes and rivals something to remember them by till next term. They had been looking for Lovell till they found him in the study: and now perhaps they rather wished they hadn't looked!

However, they waited patiently, glad to hear that Arthur Edward was near the finish, for whatever mysterious reason he was writing that French word over and over and over again.

Lovell threw down the pen at last: or rather, hurled it down. He gave a gasp of relief.

"That's done!" he said. "I'd better count 'em, though! The little beast said a hundred times."

"But what—?"

"Shut up a minute."

Lovell proceeded to count the words he had written. Once more Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome exercised patience.

"Oh, blow!" hooted Lovell, suddenly.

"What—?"

"Only ninety-nine! I thought I'd done a hundred." Lovell grabbed up the pen again, jabbed it into the ink, and added one more "le fantôme". Then he banged the pen on the table again, with a bang that snapped the nib off short.

"Are we getting out now?" asked Newcome, meekly, as Lovell rose from the table.

"I've got to take this rot down to Mossoo!" said Lovell. "By gum, I'd like to catch him with a snowball. Making out that a fellow can't spell."

"But what—?"

"He picked it out of my French exercise," explained Lovell. "I happened to spell the word f-a-n-t-u-m—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came involuntarily from Jimmy and Raby and Newcome. Even in English, Lovell was no whale on orthography: but apparently he had excelled even himself in that French exercise.

Lovell glared at them.

"Think it's funny?" he demanded. "The little beast jumped on me, making out I couldn't spell a word in French—"

Really, what else Monsieur Monceau was to "make out", if Lovell spelt "fantôme" f-a-n-t-u-m, Lovell's friends did not know. But Arthur Edward, evidently, was deeply indignant.

"He told me to look the word out in the dick, and write it a hundred times,"

he went on. "Just as if I was a fellow like Tubby Muffin who couldn't spell for toffee! I'll jolly well make him sit up for it, somehow."

"Rot!" said Jimmy Silver. "Mossoo's a good little ass—"

"If I get a chance at him with a snowball—"

"Forget it, old chap! Mossoo's all right!" said Jimmy Silver, soothingly. "Anyhow you'll remember the French word for 'ghost' now."

"Blow the French word for 'ghost'. Who wants to remember it?" hooted Lovell. "Making a fellow stick in a study writing a silly word a hundred times— I tell you I'll jolly well rag him—"

"You jolly well won't!" said Jimmy, shaking his head.

"I jolly well will!" bawled Lovell, and he added emphasis to that statement, by bringing down his fist with a bang on the study table.

"Look out!" gasped Raby.

But it was too late! Lovell was a rather emphatic fellow. He had a heavy hand. He had banged on the table not wisely but too well. The inkpot danced —and overturned. A stream of ink shot across the sheet on which Lovell had so laboriously written "le fantôme" a hundred times!

"Oh!" gasped Lovell.

"Oh, my only hat!" ejaculated Jimmy Silver. "You've done it now."

"Done it to a turn!" said Newcome.

Arthur Edward Lovell gazed at the ruin. That sheet was swamped with ink. More than half the words written on it were illegible: Monsieur Monceau, had he looked at it, couldn't have guessed whether Lovell had spelt that troublesome word "fantôme" or "fantum". Obviously, that imposition could not be taken to the French master in that state.

"Oh!" repeated Lovell. "You silly idiots—"

"What—?"

"All your fault!" roared Lovell. "Now I've got to write that tosh all over again! You silly asses—"

"But—!"

"You blithering fatheads! By gum, won't I jolly well rag Mossoo for this!" breathed Lovell. "All that rot twice over—!"

"But—!"

"Oh, shut up, if you don't want me to shy the inkpot at you!" bawled Lovell.

"But—!"

Lovell clutched up the inkpot. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome faded out of the end study. Lovell, evidently, was better left alone just then! They departed, and Lovell kicked the door shut after them with a terrific bang.

Then he sorted out a new nib, a fresh supply of ink, and another sheet of paper, and sat down to write "le fantôme" a hundred times. And when, about ten minutes later, the study door opened, and a fat chubby face looked in, Lovell turned a glare on that fat chubby face that was absolutely deadly.

"I say, ain't Jimmy Silver here?" asked Tubby Muffin. "I say, I heard that Jimmy had a parcel of mince pies from home—wow!"

Why Arthur Edward Lovell, without even speaking, hurled a French dictionary at his fat head, Reginald Adolphus Muffin did not know. But he knew that Lovell did! The fat Classical uttered a wild howl as the dictionary landed on a plump chin, and he disappeared quite suddenly from the doorway —his disappearance followed by the sound of a heavy bump, and a loud howl, in the passage. After which, Arthur Edward Lovell kicked the door shut once more, and once more settled down to endless repetitions of "le fantôme": quite unlikely to be interrupted again by the fat Tubby.

CHAPTER II

LOVELL KNOWS HOW

"I'LL GIVE him fantômes!"

Arthur Edward Lovell made that remark some hours later, in prep.

Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome sat round the study table, deep in Latin. They had a section of the Aeneid to prepare. Lovell, of course, had his prep to do, as well as his friends. But he was not giving the same attention to it. Lovell had other matters on his mind. When Lovell had other matters on his mind, it was not uncommon for him to give his prep only very cursory attention —if any! Which sometimes caused a spot of bother with Richard Dalton in the form-room the next day.

Lovell was sitting at the table with the others. But he had not even looked at Virgil. His brow was knitted: a sign that he was thinking: if Lovell's mental processes could be described as thinking, which his friends sometimes doubted.

He was silent, which was a blessing at any rate. Often when Arthur Edward let his prep slide, it was because he had something to say, which made it difficult for other fellows to get work done. But so long as he was content with silent reflection, his friends were able to get on.

When he broke silence at last, with that rather cryptic remark, Lovell seemed to expect the other three fellows to abandon Virgil and give him attention: to sit up and take notice, as it were.

But they did not! They just went on, as if prep was more important than anything Lovell might have to say.

Lovell glanced round from face to face, breathing rather hard.

"I spoke!" he said, with dignity.

"Yes—shut up, old chap," said Raby. "Prep, you know—"

"Never mind prep for a minute," said Lovell.

"Vix e conspectu Siculae telluris—!" murmured Newcome. "Telluris—telluris—let's see, that's tellus—is telluris dative or ablative, Jimmy?"

"Never mind whether it's dative or ablative," said Lovell. "You can chuck that tosh for a minute or two. That little beast Mossoo—"

"Never mind Mossoo—"

"I do mind!" said Lovell. "Cheeky little brute! Making out that a chap couldn't spell, and giving him a word to write out a hundred times, as if a chap was a fag in the Second Form. And I had to write it out twice over, owing to you fellows making me upset the ink over it—"

"—in altum vela dabant—!" said Raby.

"I said I'll give him fantômes!" said Lovell, unheeding. "That's what put the idea into my head—that idiotic French word fantômes. Christmas is the time for phantoms, isn't it?"

And Lovell chuckled.

Jimmy Silver looked up from prep. Evidently, Lovell had something he was determined to say, and blessed silence would not accrue until he had said it. "Uncle James" of Rookwood was always patient: patience indeed was his long suit. Really he needed it, with Arthur Edward Lovell for a pal.

"Get it off your chest," he sighed.

"Well, look here," said Lovell, "It will be no end of a jape. There's a legend that Rookwood is haunted by a ghost at Christmas time, and we're jolly close on Christmas now. Well, the ghost is going to walk, see?"

"What rot!" said Raby, staring. "It's only an old yarn, and there isn't any ghost, and—"

"I know that!" yapped Lovell. "Think I believe in ghosts? All the same, there's that old ghost story, and I remember once a fellow turned out the light on the landing, and put a sheet over his head, and a lot of fellows were scared—they thought it was the Rookwood spook. Bet you Mossoo will be scared when he sees a ghostly figure at midnight."

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

"That's the idea," said Lovell, with another chuckle, "I can tell you, when I took my impot. in to Froggy this afternoon, I came jolly near chucking it at his head! But—I didn't!"

"We can guess that one!" remarked Raby. "You'd get home a bit early for the Christmas vac if you did!"

"But I've got it in for him!" said Lovell, darkly. "If he thinks he can treat me like some silly fag in the Second Form, he's got another guess coming. I'll give him fantômes—more fantômes than he likes."

"But—!" said Jimmy Silver.

"The Rookwood ghost is going to walk to-night!" said Lovell. "Easy

enough, with a sheet, and a white handkerchief over the face, and a spot of phosphorescent paint! What?"

"Oh, my hat!" said Raby.

"I make up in the dorm," went on Lovell, who had evidently been thinking the matter out in detail, "Mossoo's room is across the landing. I creep out quietly, when everybody's fast asleep—"

"Oh, scissors!"

"I hike across to Mossoo's room," continued Lovell. "What do you think he will feel like, when he wakes up suddenly and sees the ghost of Rookwood at his bedside? What? Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell laughed, loud and long. He seemed to expect his chums to join in that outbreak of merriment, at the idea of Monsieur Monceau waking up suddenly and beholding the ghost of Rookwood at his bedside. But they did not laugh. They only gazed at Arthur Edward.

Lovell's merry peal of laughter died away. He stared, or rather glared, at his silent chums.

"Don't you think it will be funny?" he demanded.

Three heads were solemnly shaken.

"Not at all!" said Jimmy.

"Anything but!" said Newcome.

"Mad?" asked Raby.

"So that's what you think of it, is it?" snorted Lovel. "Talk about wet blankets! I take all the trouble to plan the jape of the term, and that's all you've got to say about it! Think of the silly little ass popping up in bed and thinking he's seeing a ghost! Why, he will yell the House down! Think he will guess that it's a fellow from the Fourth larking? Of course he won't! He will think it's the ghost of Rookwood visiting him at dead of night, and I'll bet you he'll wake up all the other beaks with his yelling."

"Very likely," said Jimmy Silver, "and they'll catch you out of your dorm, with a sheet over your head—"

"They won't! The ghost will vanish when Mossoo starts yelling," grinned Lovell. "I shall be back in bed on time, when the beaks are roused out. Leave that to me."

"You utter idiot—!" said Newcome.

"What?"

"Mossoo might have a fit—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Lovell. The idea of Monsieur Monceau having a fit seemed to appeal to his remarkable sense of humour.

"So that's what you've been thinking out, is it?" said Jimmy Silver.

"That's it!" said Lovell, complacently.

"Then the sooner you forget all about it, the better. It's a mad trick playing ghost. Man with weak nerves might get an awful jolt. A fellow like Muffin would be scared out of his wits—"

"Muffin will be fast asleep in bed, and he hasn't any wits to be scared out of, anyway. It's Froggy I'm after."

"Froggy's all right—"

"Is he?" snorted Lovell. "Making out a fellow can't spell—"

"Well, you can't!" pointed out Newcome. "If you spelt 'fantôme' f-a-n-t-u-m, did you expect him to pat you on the back?"

"I can spell your head off, and chance it, Newcome. I'll give him fantômes!" said Lovell, vengefully. "He will be fed up of fantômes by the time I've done with him! And if you fellows don't like the idea—"

"We don't!"

"Then you can jolly well lump it!" said Lovell, defiantly. "Why, you silly asses, everybody will be laughing like anything to-morrow, when they hear that Mossoo thinks he's seen a ghost— Ha, ha, ha!"

Again Arthur Edward roared with laughter. Again he had the roar all to himself. Judges on the bench could not have been graver than Jimmy Silver, Arthur Newcome and George Raby.

Lovell was, in his own esteem at least, the man for ideas. He was the fellow to plan things: he esteemed himself a tremendous planner. Often and often his ideas found no appreciation whatever in his own study. But never had one of his bright ideas fallen so flat as this.

But if Jimmy Silver and Co., fancied that opposition would have a deterrent effect on Lovell, it only showed that even yet they did not quite know their Arthur Edward. If Lovell had had a lingering doubt, it was gone now. Opposition had the effect on him of a spur.

"Now, look here, old chap—!" argued Jimmy Silver.

"You think it's a rotten idea?" snapped Lovell.

"Quite putrid!" said Jimmy.

"Then you can shut up!"

"But look here—!" said Raby.

"You shut up too!" said Lovell.

"But—!" said Newcome.

"And you shut up!" said Lovell.

"Well, we may as well get on with prep," remarked Newcome. "We don't all want a row with Dicky Dalton in the morning."

And they got on with prep. Lovell, at last, condescended to give a little attention to that trifling matter. A frown lingered on his brow. The reception of his brilliant idea by his comrades was annoying and irritating: but its only effect on Lovell was to make him more determined to carry on. If his friends had a lingering hope that Arthur Edward might see reason, and abandon that extraordinary project, there was nothing in it. The ghost of Rookwood was going to walk that night!

CHAPTER III

THE GHOST WALKS!

SCRATCH!

A match scratched, in the dormitory of the Classical Fourth, as the last stroke of midnight from the clock-tower died away. There was a flicker of flame, and it revealed the features of Arthur Edward Lovell, sitting up in bed.

Everyone else in the dormitory was fast asleep. The sound of regular breathing could be heard on all sides. From Tubby Muffin's bed came a snore. Lovell was the only fellow awake.

He reached out, and lighted a candle-end placed in readiness beside his bed. All his preparations had been made. Lovell would have preferred his friends to enter into that remarkable jape, and turn out and help him to make up as the ghost of Rookwood, and give him his meed of applause when he had successfully scared Mossoo out of his seven senses. But they had turned the whole thing down: and gone to sleep regardless of him and his bright ideas: and he was going to let them stay asleep, and be blowed to them.

That at all events was his intention; but it did not quite work, as he kicked the chair beside his bed, in getting out, stubbed his toe, and uttered an unintentional but somewhat emphatic ejaculation.

"Ow! ow! ow!"

Three heads lifted from three pillows. Three fellows peered through the dark at the flickering candle.

"What's that?" came Raby's drowsy voice.

"Who's up?" asked Newcome.

"Is that you, Lovell?" came Jimmy Silver's voice.

"Ow! wow! Yes, it's me," snapped Lovell. "Don't jaw—I've no time to waste jawing! Go to sleep." He rubbed a painful toe.

Three fellows sat up in bed, peering at him. Having finished rubbing his toe, Arthur Edward plunged into his trousers, tucking his pyjamas into the same. Then, taking a sheet from his bed, he draped it round him, securing it round his neck with a couple of safety-pins.

"Hallo, what on earth's that?" came a startled voice, as Valentine Mornington sat up in bed, "—Who—what—what the dooce—?" That figure in white, in the glimmer of the flickering candle, was startling.

"Only Lovell, Morny," sighed Jimmy Silver.

Morny stared at Arthur Edward.

"What on earth's that game?" he exclaimed. "Gone crackers?"

"Wake up the whole dorm!" said Lovell, sarcastically. "Yell! Perhaps you'd like to bring Dicky Dalton here with a cane."

"But what—?"

"Froggy's going to see the ghost of Rookwood, if you want to know!" snapped Lovell. "Now shut up."

"Oh, gad!" said Mornington.

"Playing ghost?" Rawson was awake now. "That's a fool's game, Lovell."

"Fatheaded!" came from Conroy's bed.

"Chuck it, Lovell, you ass!" called out Oswald. More and more of the Classical Fourth were sitting up, at the sound of voices.

"Shout!" said Lovell, still sarcastic. "Yell and bring Dalton here! Or the Head, perhaps! Like to see Dr. Chisholm at midnight?"

"Quiet, you fellows," said Jimmy Silver. "If Lovell's caught playing the giddy ox like this, there will be a fearful row."

"Silly ass, waking us all up in the middle of the night," said Peele.

"Go to sleep, can't you?" snapped Lovell. "Ow! wow! Dash that rotten pin—I've run it into my finger—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Is that anything to cackle at?" hissed Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lovell breathed hard. A ripple of laughter ran up and down the dormitory. All the Classical Fourth were awake now, with the exception of Tubby Muffin. Tubby was still snoring serenely. Reginald Adolphus Muffin, once asleep, was not easy to wake: and the unaccustomed sounds at midnight's still hour passed by his fat ears unheard and unheeded. But all the other fellows were sitting up in bed, staring at Lovell in the glimmer of the candle.

Lovell was fastening a large white handkerchief over his face, securing it at the back of his head with a pin. Two holes had been cut in it: eye-holes for the "ghost" to see through. In the candle-light his eyes glistened quite eerily from the eye-holes.

By that time, he certainly had a very startling aspect. Seen in the dark, there was no doubt that he would produce a startling effect on the beholder. Some of the Classical juniors certainly would have had a jolt, had they awakened suddenly and seen him thus, in the gloom. He proceeded to enhance the unearthly effect with a rub of phophorescent paint, which added an uncanny glow. Even in the candle-light, he looked a very alarming figure.

"Look here, Lovell—!" Jimmy Silver essayed a last effort at persuasion.

"I'm going."

"But, old chap—" said Raby.

"Do shut up! Do you want the beaks here?" hissed Lovell. "I've got to keep jolly quiet about this."

He blew out the candle, and all was dark. Only a faint glimmer of wintry starlight came from the high windows of the dormitory. In that faint glimmer, Lovell was dimly visible, and undoubtedly ghostly. Had not the other fellows seen him making up, they never would have guessed that that ghostly figure was Arthur Edward Lovell of the Classical Fourth.

Lovell turned to tramp away to the door. He was ready, and he was going. He added a last word of caution to the staring juniors.

"You fellows keep quiet here! Don't jaw and don't cackle! Not a sound—ow! wow! yow! ow! ooooooh!" Lovell's cautionary remarks ended in a sudden howl of anguish.

"What on earth—?" gasped Jimmy Silver.

"Ow! Oh, crikey! That dashed safety-pin is sticking in the back of my neck! Oh, scissors!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled all the Classical Fourth.

Lovell grappled frantically with the safety-pins that fastened the draped sheet round his neck. One of them, seemingly, had been imperfectly fastened: at all events, a sharp point was jabbing into the back of his neck.

"Will you be quiet?" howled Lovell. "What is there to cackle at, I'd like to know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, blow you."

The snore of Tubby Muffin, which had gone on till that moment like an unending melody, ceased. Lovell's wild howl, and the laughter that followed, had awakened even Tubby.

Muffin sat up in bed, blinking round him in the gloom.

"What's up?" he asked. "What—Oh! Oh, crikey! What's that?" Tubby's fat voice rose to a yell, as he sighted Lovell. A white figure in the dark, with a deathly white face glimmering with a strange eerie light, dimly seen in the glimmer of wintry starlight, was enough to startle even a fellow with plenty of nerve—and Tubby was not blessed with much in the way of nerve. His eyes almost popped from his head. "I say, what's that? Keep it off! I say, its the gig-gig-gig-ghost—Help!"

Tubby's frightened yell rang through the dormitory.

"Shut up, you fat tick!" roared Lovell.

"Ow! Help! Keep it away! Help!" yelled Tubby.

"Quiet!" shrieked Lovell. "Do you want to wake the House? Shut up! Do you hear?"

Tubby Muffin certainly heard. But he did not heed. He knew Lovell's voice, but he did not know that it proceeded from that dim ghostly figure in the dark. Really, he couldn't be expected to guess that! He yelled.

"It's the ghost! Help!"

"Will you shut up?" howled Lovell, and he rushed towards Tubby Muffin's bed, to shut him up.

That did it!

Reginald Adolphus Muffin might have sat in bed and yelled till the other fellows had a chance to enlighten him, but for Lovell's rush. But the sight of that ghostly figure rushing at him was too much for Muffin. As Lovell reached the bed on one side, Tubby rolled out of it on the other.

He rolled on the floor in a tangle of bedclothes, roaring.

"Keep off! Help! Oh, crikey! Help!"

Lovell raced round the bed. Tubby Muffin had to be shut up, and that promptly, if masters and prefects were not to be awakened in the middle of the night. He bent and grabbed at Tubby.

Tubby Muffin let out an ear-splitting yell, as the ghostly figure bent over him. In frantic terror he scrambled up, and bolted for the door.

"Stop!" yelled Lovell.

Stopping was the last thing Tubby was thinking of. Lovell rushed after him, caught his feet in the trailing sheet, and stumbled, landing on the floor with a howl as loud as Tubby's. A moment more and Muffin had torn the door open and bolted into the passage still yelling at the top of his voice.

"Ow! Help! Help! The ghost! Help!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Jimmy Silver. "That's torn it!"

It had!

CHAPTER IV

LOVELL ALL OVER!

"WHAT—?"

"Who—?"

"Qu-est-que-c'est?"

"Upon my word—"

"A Fourth-form boy—"

"Muffin!"

"Ow! The ghost! Oh, crikey! Keep it off! It's after me! Help!"

It was quite a hubbub on the dormitory landing. Tubby Muffin had done the passage like the cinder-path, emitting yell after all, and every yell woke echoes far and wide. It was no wonder that the "beaks" had awakened. It would have been a wonder had they not. Doors opened, and lights flashed on, while Tubby yelled and yelled. Richard Dalton, the master of the Fourth; Greely, master of the Fifth; Mooney, master of the Shell; Monsieur Monceau, the French master, all turned out at the same time, bundling out in dressing-gowns, not even staying for slippers. The light flashing on revealed Reginald Adolphus Muffin in the middle of the landing, with terrified eyes popping from his face, yelling.

"Muffin!" thundered Mr. Dalton.

"Ow! Help! The gig-gig-ghost—" howled Tubby. "Oh, help the gig-gig-gig—"

Mr. Dalton grasped him by a fat shoulder, and shook him.

"Silence, you absurd boy! How dare you make this disturbance at such an hour!" He exclaimed.

"The—the ghost—" babbled Tubby. "It's after me—help!"

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Greely, "the boy has been frightened, Dalton—"

"Nightmare, no doubt," said Mr. Mooney.

"The ghost—!" howled Tubby.

"Un fantôme—incroyable!" said Monsieur Monceau, little guessing how near he had been to beholding that phantom at his bedside!

"Be silent, Muffin! If you fancy—"

"I saw it—in the dorm!" burbled Tubby. "It rushed at me, sir—it was after me—an awful-looking spectre, sir, all in white, with eyes of—of flame—and-and—"

"Absurd!" said Mr. Greely. "A nightmare."

Mr. Dalton compressed his lips. That Tubby Muffin had been scared out of his fat wits was clear: and hardly to be accounted for on the theory of a nightmare. Richard Dalton thought it more probable that some junior had

"Help me off ***with these things, you fatheads.***"

been "larking" in the Fourth-form dormitory. He strode across the landing.

"Follow me to your dormitory, Muffin," he rapped.

"B—b-but the gig-gig-ghost, sir—"

"Follow me, you stupid boy."

Richard Dalton went up the passage to the door of the Fourth-form dormitory with long and rapid strides. He was not surprised to hear a sound of voices as he neared the doorway.

"Help me off with these things, you fatheads—"

"We're trying to—"

"Don't jab that pin into me, idiot! Haven't you any sense?"

"Look here, Lovell—"

"Don't jaw! Do you want the beaks to come and catch me like this? That idiot Muffin must have awakened the whole crew—"

"You silly ass—"

"Shut up, Raby. I've got tangled in this beastly sheet—"

"You howling chump—"

"Shut up, Newcome. There's a pin sticking in my neck—"

"For goodness sake, be quick," gasped Jimmy Silver. "Dalton must be up—if he catches us out of bed—oh, my aunt Belinda!" Jimmy broke off, as the light flashed on in the dormitory, switched on at the door.

Richard Dalton stood in the doorway, staring in.

It was quite a startling sight that met his eyes, considering that it was past midnight, when all Rookwood was—or should have been—asleep!

Not a man in the Classical Fourth was asleep, or even lying down. Four fellows were out of bed—every other fellow was sitting up and staring. Jimmy Silver, Raby and Newcome, were making hurried and frantic efforts to help Arthur Edward Lovell get rid of his ghostly outfit before a "beak" could arrive on the scene. Like good pals they had turned out of bed to help: for it was certain that if Arthur Edward was caught in that outfit, there would be sore trouble ahead of Arthur Edward. Even Lovell was no longer thinking of playing ghost! The idea was to get that outfit off, and get back into bed, before the chopper came down. But Richard Dalton had arrived on the scene too quickly for that.

"Oh!" gasped Jimmy.

"Dicky!" breathed Newcome.

"Will you fellows help?" came a muffled howl from Lovell. Lovell's head was tangled in the sheet; for the moment, the visibility was not good, and he did not see what every other fellow in the dormitory saw. "Do you want to suffocate me? Haven't you any sense! Do you want Dalton to get here and catch us out of bed?"

"Shut up!" breathed Raby.

"You silly chumps, will you get my napper out of this beastly sheet?

Can't you get the pins out! You clumsy chumps, there may be a beak along any minute—"

"He's here!" hissed Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, crikey!"

"Lovell! Raby! Newcome! Silver!" Mr. Dalton's voice was not loud, but it was deep. "So this is, as I guessed, a foolish prank. You have been playing ghost and frightening that foolish boy Muffin."

"Oh!" gasped Lovell. He wrenched the sheet off, at last, and blinked at Richard Dalton, "Oh! Copped!"

Mr. Dalton turned his head and called along the passage.

"Muffin! Come here at once."

"The gig-gig-gig-ghost—!" wailed Tubby.

"It was Lovell, playing a stupid trick, you absurd boy. Come here at once," snapped Mr. Dalton.

Tubby Muffin came very reluctantly up the passage. His eyes popped into the dormitory. But the sight of Arthur Edward Lovell, with the sheet still hanging from one safety-pin sticking in the neck of his pyjama jacket, was reassuring. Even Tubby, as he blinked at Arthur Edward, realized that this was not the genuine ghost of Rookwood.

"Oh!" gasped Tubby. "I—I—I thought—I mean to say—it—it looked—I—I didn't know—I—I—I—"

"Go back to your bed, you foolish boy."

"Oh! Yes, sir!" mumbled Tubby.

He rolled back to his bed, Arthur Edward Lovell giving him an expressive look as he rolled. Judging by that look, there was something coming to Reginald Adolphus Muffin, later.

"Lovell! Silver! Raby! Newcome! You have played this foolish, this insensate trick, in the middle of the night, and frightened a foolish boy, playing ghost. I shall deal with you severely," rapped Mr. Dalton.

"It was only me, sir!" Lovell spoke up at once. "The other fellows weren't in it, sir—"

"I find them out of bed, and assisting you. All four of you will go into Extra School to-morrow afternoon."

"But I say, sir—"

"You, Lovell, will be caned, as it appears to be you who actually played ghost," said Mr. Dalton, sternly. "You will come to my study after prayers in the morning, and I shall cane you. You are a very obtuse boy, Lovell, but I should have expected even you to have too much common-sense to play so foolish and dangerous a trick on a boy like Muffin."

"I—I didn't—!"

"What?"

"I—I—I mean—!" stammered Lovell.

"What do you mean?" snapped Mr. Dalton.

"Oh! Nothing, sir!" gasped Lovell. Arthur Edward Lovell was not, perhaps, very bright: but he was bright enough to realize that it would not improve matters to let Dalton know that he had intended that trick, not for Tubby Muffin, but for the French master. Certainly Mr. Dalton's wrath would not have diminished, had he learned that it had been a member of Dr. Chisholm's staff who had been scheduled to be scared by the ghost of Rookwood!

"Return to your beds at once!" snapped Mr. Dalton. "If there should be any further disturbance in this dormitory, I shall deal with it very severely."

Four juniors returned to their beds. Mr. Dalton, with a grimly frowning brow, shut off the light, shut the door, and strode away. There was a murmur of voices when he was gone.

"Lovell all over!" remarked Mornington.

"Oh, just Lovell!" said Newcome. "If he frightened anybody got up as a ghost, it was bound to be the wrong party."

"Extra for all of us!" said Raby. "Satisfied now, Lovell?"

"Was it my fault?" hissed Lovell. "How was I to know that that fat chump would take me for a ghost?"

"Didn't you mean Mossoo to take you for a ghost?" hooted Jimmy Silver. "Why shouldn't anybody else?"

"That fat idiot's got me a licking—you fellows have only got Extra! Why, I'll burst him all over the dorm!" hissed Lovell.

There was a sound of a bed creaking. Jimmy Silver sat up.

"Is that you getting up, Lovell?"

"Yes, it is!"

"You heard what Dicky Dalton said—"

"Blow Dicky Dalton!" snorted Lovell. "I'm going to bolster that fat idiot Muffin till he can't crawl—!"

Jimmy Silver breathed hard.

"If you get out of that bed," he said, in concentrated tones, "we'll get out too, and scrag you. You've kicked up enough row for one night, you blithering idiot! If you want Dicky back here with a cane, we don't! Stick in that bed and keep quiet, or we'll scrag you bald-headed!"

Snort, from Lovell. But he did not get out of bed. Perhaps even Lovell realized that there had been row enough for one night: and that he did not want Dicky Dalton to return with a cane. He snorted: but he dropped his head on the pillow: and the Classical Fourth, at last, settled down to slumber.

CHAPTER V

SNOWBALLS FOR SOMEBODY!

"THAT ASS!"

"That fathead!"

"That chump!"

There was no doubt that, in the end study at Rookwood, they were great pals. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome would have stood by Arthur Edward Lovell through thick and thin. Yet it was a fact that when they referred to him, it was generally in terms which might have indicated that they regarded Arthur Edward almost as a fellow of defective intellect. Much as they liked old Lovell, and strenuously as they would have backed him up had occasion required, it could not be denied that he was, in their estimation, an ass, a fathead, and a chump. And just now they could have expressed themselves still more emphatically, still without giving full expression to their feelings.

There was bright sunshine on the snow that powdered the old quadrangle at Rookwood: it was one of those bright, cold, clear December days that naturally make a fellow feel pleased with himself and things generally. But the "Fistical Four" of Rookwood were not looking so bright as might have been expected of such usually cheerful youths. They were booked for "Extra" that afternoon, and there were so many things more attractive than Extra School on a half-holiday.

Lovell, in addition, had had quite a painful interview with Mr. Dalton in his study after prayers. He had been wriggling quite uncomfortably in form that morning. His only consolation was to kick Tubby Muffin, which he had done several times, to his own satisfaction if not to Tubby's.

After third school, the Co. missed Lovell, and looked for him. Now they had found him, under the old Rookwood beeches. It was as their eyes fell upon him that they considered to one another that he was an ass, a fathead, and a chump. Lovell, clearly, was "up" to something. Exactly what he was "up" to, Jimmy and Raby and Newcome did not know: but his attitude and aspect indicated only too clearly that it was "something".

Under the trees, the snow was piled rather thickly. There was ample ammunition for snowballing. Lovell, while his friends were looking for him, had been busy: for he had manufactured a stack of solid snowballs, which he had piled against a beech trunk. Now, with a snowball clutched in hand, he was half-hidden behind that trunk, watching the path that ran under the beeches.

In that rather secluded spot, he was not in general view. Still, anyone coming along would have seen him: and it would have leaped to the eye, at

once, that Lovell was lying in wait for somebody to come down that path, with snowballs ready for him when he came: one clutched in his hand, the others ready in a stack.

The three juniors came on him from the rear, and had a back view of him. Lovell, having of course no eyes in the back of his head, did not see them coming. He continued to watch the path in the other direction.

They gazed at the back of their chum.

"The ass!" repeated Jimmy Silver.

"The blithering idiot!" said Newcome.

"The benighted fathead!" said Raby.

"Who's he waiting for?" asked Newcome. "Is he going to snowball Dicky Dalton for giving him six this morning?"

"Shouldn't wonder!" sighed Jimmy Silver. "Six on the bags wouldn't be enough for Lovell, without a Head's flogging to follow."

"Better stop him," said Raby.

"Oh, rather," agreed Jimmy. "Whatever Lovell's ever up to, it's better to stop him. Come on."

They walked on towards Lovell, and he turned his head. He did not seem gratified by the sight of his friends. He frowned at them.

"What do you fellows want!" he asked, irritably. "Look here, you'd better keep clear of this! I shan't get spotted—I've got my wits about me—but I'll bet you fellows would. Cut before he comes along."

"He—who?" asked Jimmy Silver.

"That little beast Froggy, of course," snapped Lovell. "He's doing one of his trots, and he went this way ten minutes ago. He will be coming back any minute. You fellows cut off."

Jimmy and Raby and Newcome did not cut off. They remained where they were, with expressive looks fixed on Lovell.

"Froggy!" said Newcome. "You're waiting here to snowball a beak?"

"It was rather a frost last night with the ghost business," said Lovell. "Owing to that fat idiot Muffin, I couldn't carry on. Better luck next time—"

"You're thinking of trying it on again?" ejaculated Jimmy Silver.

"Why not? These snowballs are just for Mossoo to go on with."

"Why not?" repeated Jimmy, almost dazedly. "About a million reasons why not, I think. You howling ass—"

"That will do!" interrupted Lovell. "Cut off before Froggy hikes along. If he sees you, he'll think you had a hand in it."

"And he won't think you had a hand in it?" asked Newcome, with gentle sarcasm.

"I shall keep behind this tree! I've got it all planned," explained Lovell. "Leave that to me. Cut off, see!"

"Drop that snowball!" rapped Jimmy Silver.

"Don't be an ass! I've got it ready for Mossoo."

"Chuck it, I tell you."

Lovell stared.

"What's the good of chucking it now, when he's not coming?" he asked. "I'm waiting for him to come before I chuck it."

"I mean chuck it—drop it—stop it—have a little sense!" hooted Jimmy Silver. "You're not going to snowball old Froggy, see?"

"Ain't I?" said Lovell, grimly. "You'll see! I'm going to get him right in the eye with this one, and then jolly well pelt him till he doesn't know whether he's on his head or his heels! I've got it in for him."

"Look here—!"

"Shut up and clear off—he's coming!" hissed Lovell. "If you don't want him to fancy you did it, get clear, you fatheads."

In the distance, up the path, a little plump figure came in sight. It was Monsieur Monceau, coming back along that path under the beeches, as Lovell had expected him to do. That Lovell would get him with snowballs, when he came within range, there was no doubt—but that Lovell would escape undetected after that exploit, there was very considerable doubt, in the minds of his friends at least. Moreover, they did not want Froggy snowballed. Mossoo was, in the estimation of the Co. quite a good little ass: even if he had found fault with Arthur Edward for spelling "fantôme" "fantum".

"Will you hook it?" breathed Lovell. "You'll spoil the whole thing, butting in like this! Look here—"

Jimmy Silver stooped, and picked a snowball from Lovell's stack. Then he picked another with his other hand.

Newcome and Raby stared, for a moment. Then, guessing what was in Jimmy's mind, they too stooped, and supplied themselves with snowballs.

Lovell stared at them.

"I tell you, you'd better keep clear of this!" he snapped. "I can look after myself—I've got brains—you fellows haven't and can't! Look here, I don't want you joining in snowballing Froggy, see?"

"That's all right!" said Jimmy Silver. "We're not going to snowball Froggy—and you're not, either! Go it, you fellows."

"What-ho!" chuckled Raby.

"What the thump do you mean?" exclaimed Lovell. "I tell you—ooooch —why—what—stoppit—oooooogh! Wooooogh!"

Whiz! whiz! whiz! crash! smash!

Lovell hardly knew what was happening, for a moment. Snowballs—his own snowballs, so carefully prepared for the bombardment of Monsieur Monceau, were fairly raining on him. He drooped his own snowball, as he clutched at snow in his eyes, in his ears, and in his neck.

"Urrgh! Wharrer you up to?" spluttered Lovell. "Gone mad? Why, you silly idiots—grooogh—oooooch!"

"Go it!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Whiz! whiz! smash! Three juniors, helping themselves liberally from Lovell's stack of snowballs, "went it," with vigour. Lovell staggered away from the tree into the path, followed up by his three loyal pals, raining snowballs.

"Ooogh! Wooogh! Will you stoppit?" spluttered Lovell. "You mad asses—whooooh! Stoppit! I—I'll smash you! Yoooooch! Wurrrrggh! Stoppit!"

The Co. were not thinking of stopping it! They were going to keep Arthur Edward Lovell busy, till Mossoo had passed, and was out of the danger-zone. Luckily, Lovell had piled up plenty of snowballs—there was plenty of ammunition. His own supplies crashed and smashed on Lovell from all sides. He trotted wildly in the path under the beeches, yelling and spluttering, and sat down.

"Ciel!" Monsieur Monceau, coming down the path, stopped to stare. "Mon Dieu! Mes garçons! Ah! Ces Anglais! Zese English, how zey luff ze rough game viz ze ball of snow! Zese English!"

Mossoo skirted the busy group on the path, with a wary eye open for whizzing snowballs, and hurried on: happily unaware that he had had a narrow escape of taking part in that rough game with the balls of snow. He disappeared at a trot, leaving Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome still busy, and Arthur Edward Lovell still yelling and spluttering, as he sat in the snow.

The French master having disappeared, and the supply of Lovell's snowball's having been exhausted, Lovell was given a much-needed rest. He sat dizzily, gouging snow out of his eyes, his ears, his hair, and his neck. Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome walked cheerily back to the quad, leaving him to it.

They had, undoubtedly, saved Arthur Edward from another row: probably from an interview with his headmaster. But they did not expect any gratitude from him for services rendered: and they did not get any. When they met at dinner, Arthur Edward Lovell's looks indicated anything but gratitude.

CHAPTER VI

RAP!

"LUFFELL!"

No answer.

They were in Extra School. Monsieur Monceau was detention master, and he seemed to have a special eye on Lovell of the Fourth. Possibly that was because Lovell had a grim, dogged, indeed rebellious expression on his face:

or perhaps it was because his weakness in French spelling made the dutiful little gentleman single him out for special attention.

When he called on Arthur Edward, however, there was no reply: and Arthur Edward seemed unconscious of his call. Lovell's name was not Luffell, and he saw no reason why he should answer to a name that was not his own. In a less disgruntled state, no doubt, he would have done so. Now he wouldn't.

"Luffell!" repeated Monsieur Monceau, more loudly.

Jimmy Silver nudged his chum.

"Wake up, you ass! Mossoo's speaking to you!" he whispered.

"Is he?" grunted Lovell.

"Deaf, you ass?"

"Not at all," drawled Lovell. "He's calling somebody named Luffell. That's not my name, is it?"

"Oh, you ass!" breathed Jimmy.

Lovell, evidently, was out for more trouble.

It was not uncommon for spots of trouble to accrue in Extra, when Mossoo was detention master. Fellows would drop books, and bang desks: quite by accident of course, though such accidents never happened under the eye of a master like Richard Dalton. The little French gentleman was so patient and long-suffering, that thoughtless fellows often took advantage of it: not with any ill intent; but from the sheer exuberance of youth. Still, it was uncommon for a fellow to remain stonily silent when his name was called, and all the detention class looked round at Lovell.

Mossoo had about a dozen hapless fellows in his class that afternoon—the Fistical Four, Mornington and Oswald of the Classical Fourth: Smythe and Tracy of the Shell; Tommy Dodd and Towle of the Modern Fourth; and two or three others. Nobody liked Extra: few liked French: all were restive: and there had been quite a number of accidents in the way of dropping books and desk-lids.

"Luffell!" said Monsieur Monceau, for the third time. He was looking directly at Lovell, and Lovell was looking directly at him. But no answer came from Arthur Edward. He did not appear to know that he was being called upon.

"Luffell! Stand up at vunce viz you!" rapped Monsieur Monceau, showing signs of losing patience.

Lovell did not stir.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome gave him expressive looks. Most of the other fellows grinned. They scented a "rag": and a rag was ever so much more entertaining than French verbs.

"Is it zat you are deaf viz you, Luffell?" exclaimed Mossoo, "Vat is it zat you have ze mattair, Luffell?"

Grim silence.

A gleam came into Mossoo's eye. He had a pointer in his hand, and he came across and tapped Lovell on the shoulder with it.

"Vy you no answer ven zat I speak?" he rapped.

Lovell stared at him.

"Did you speak to me, sir?" he asked, calmly.

"Mon Dieu! Is it zat you are sourd, zat you do not hear me?"

"I heard you, sir! But my name isn't Luffell!" explained Arthur Edward. "My name is Lovell, sir! You said Luffell."

Monsieur Monceau gazed at him. His cheeks reddened, as he realized that Arthur Edward was being impertinent. Nobody in Extra would have been surprised had the pointer come into play as a reward for Arthur Edward's affected misunderstanding of the pronunciation of his name. But Mossoo seldom or never used that pointer for corrective purposes. Probably there would have been fewer rags in the French class, had he done so.

"You are mauvais garçon, Luffell," said Mossoo. "Vat you sa is ze sheeky —vat you call sheek in English."

"Is sheek an English word, sir?" asked Arthur Edward. "I've never heard it, sir."

Mossoo breathed hard.

"Assez! Zat is enoff, Luffell. Now you take ze chalk and you write a sentence in French on ze blackboard. And if it is not spelt correctly, you will write out, after ze class, one hundred times, all ze words zat are wrong." Evidently Mossoo was getting his back up.

Lovell too breathed hard, as he rose and went to the blackboard. The rest of the class looked on, with interest. Unless Lovell carefully selected words of one syllable, it was probable that he would have some writing-out to do after class! Even with words of one syllable he might have bad luck.

"Oh, the ass!" sighed Jimmy Silver.

"Asking for it!" grunted Raby.

"Isn't he always?" said Newcome.

Lovell stood at the blackboard, the chalk in his fingers, and deep thought in his brow. All eyes were upon him: Mossoo's with impatience.

"Zat you proceed, Luffell!" he snapped.

To the surprise of the detention class, a grin dawned on Arthur Edward Lovell's face. Some bright idea, evidently, had come into his active brain. He began to handle the chalk quite briskly.

Having chalked a sentence on the board, he stepped back, to give the class a full view of it.

There was a gasp, and a chuckle in the class.

"Oh, the chump!" breathed Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, the ass!" murmured Newcome.

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from several fellows.

They all gazed at the sentence chalked on the blackboard. Monsieur Monceau gazed at it, and his face changed from sallow to purple. Lovell had written a sentence in French, as bidden. And there were no mistakes in the

spelling. But that sentence was one that Monsieur Monceau certainly had never expected to see. The cheery Arthur Edward had written:

Le maître est un âne.

There was no fault to be found with the spelling. Lovell had even remembered to place the circumflex over the "a" in "âne" and the "i" in "maître". So far as that went, the sentence, though brief, was quite in order. But as it meant, "the master is an ass", it was not calculated to give undiluted satisfaction to Monsieur Monceau.

"Oh, gad!" Morny whispered to Oswald. "That chap Lovell knows how to ask for it."

"Don't he just!" grinned Oswald.

Jimmy Silver and Raby and Newcome could only look on in dismay. Lovell's face was quite calm. Apparently he expected to get by with this! Monsieur Monceau gazed at the sentence on the blackboard, then at Lovell, then at the blackboard again, and then once more at Lovell.

"Is that right, sir?" asked Lovell, cheerfully.

"Mon Dieu! Zat is too mooch!" exclaimed Monsieur Monceau!" His hand went up, with the pointer in it. RAP!

"Yow-ow-ow-ow!" roared Lovell.

He seemed surprised, as well as pained, when the pointer in Mossoo's hand rapped on his knuckles. He did not seem to have expected that! Really, he might have—but he hadn't! The crack sounded through the class-room almost like a pistol-shot: and Lovell sucked his knuckles frantically, and almost danced.

"Ow! wow! Oh, crikey! Wow!"

"Now you go back to your place, Luffell—"

"Wow!"

"And if zere is more of ze sheek from you, I report you to Monsieur Dalton. Taisez-vous! Sit down!"

Lovell went back to his place, and Mossoo seized the duster and obliterated that offending sentence. During the remainder of Extra, Arthur Edward Lovell was chiefly occupied in sucking his suffering knuckles: with feelings that he could not have expressed in words, either French or English.

CHAPTER VII

THE ONLY WAY!

"ONE swallow doesn't make a summer!"

Lovell stated that maxim in the end study, at tea.

Jimmy Silver sighed. Newcome looked sarcastic. Raby grunted.

What Lovell stated was undoubtedly true. Its proverbial wisdom was indubitable. It was the inference that Lovell drew from that maxim that worried his chums.

That even Arthur Edward Lovell, with all his well-known obstinacy and fatheadedness, could think, or even dream, of carrying on with that ghost stunt, was really amazing. His comrades would hardly have believed it, even of Lovell. But that was what was in his mind. And it was fixed there—fixed and immutable. Argument had no effect on it. Argument never had any effect on Lovell: it rolled off him like water off a duck. Lovell was so immovably convinced that he knew best—which seemed to him a self-evident proposition—that he had no use whatever for arguments or sage counsels.

"It was a frost last night," continued Lovell. "That was Muffin's fault and I've jolly well booted him for it, too. I'll boot him again next time I see him. But one failure—not my fault—doesn't matter. As I've said, one swallow doesn't make a summer. Next time it will click."

Jimmy Silver drew a deep, deep breath.

"Lovell, old man, do try to think a minute em!" he urged.

"I fancy I do most of the thinking in this study," said Lovell, disdainfully, "I'd like to know where you fellows would be, sometimes, if you hadn't got me to think for you."

"Ye gods!" murmured Raby.

"And little fishes!" said Newcome.

"Leave it to me!" said Lovell. "I'm on Mossoo's track, and I'm going to make him sit up! Making out a chap can't spell—"

"A lot of making out it wanted!" remarked Newcome.

"And rapping a chap over the knuckles with a pointer, just as if a chap was a fag in Bohun's form!" said Lovell, breathing hard.

"Didn't you ask him to?" inquired Newcome.

"I did what he told me!" said Lovell. "He told me to write a sentence in French on the blackboard! I wrote a sentence in French on the blackboard! Then he raps me over the knuckles—"

"Think you can call a beak an ass, and nothing happen!"

"I didn't call him anything! I wrote a sentence as he told me. If he liked to take it to himself, that's his look-out. Cap fit, cap wear!" said Lovell.

"Look here, Lovell—"

"I'm going to make him sit up! That's settled," said Lovell. "You fellows needn't help, if you're so fond of Froggy. That fat ass Muffin won't be scared if he sees me to-night, and yell the House down. It will be all right."

"But, old man!" pleaded Jimmy Silver. "Can't you see that if a ghost happens, everybody will know that it was you, after what happened in the dorm last night?"

"No, I cant."

"None so blind as those who won't see," remarked Newcome.

"Dicky Dalton will jump on you first thing, if there's a ghost around, after seeing your get-up in the dorm last night!" howled Jimmy.

"I don't see why he should! Any fellow might play ghost," said Lovell. "Not that Froggy will think it's a fellow playing ghost! He'll think it's real, and yell his head off with fright." Lovell chuckled. "I'll give him fantômes! I'll give him rapping a fellow over the knuckles like a Second-Form fag! I'll jolly well show him."

"Now look here, Lovell—!" said his three friends, all together.

Lovell rose from the table. He had finished tea, and he seemed to have had enough of the remonstrances of his friends.

"Nuff said!" he remarked. "It's settled, and that's that!"

"You howling ass!" roared Raby. "If you start your ghost stunts to-night in the dorm, we'll collar you and sit on your head."

"Will you?" said Lovell. "You'll have a black eye to take home for Christmas, if you try it on. Don't you fellows worry," added Lovell, kindly, glancing back from the door. "It will be all right! I know my way about! Leave it to me."

And Lovell walked out of the study.

Three fellows looked at one another.

"The benighted chump!" said Newcome. "Even if he doesn't scare the wrong party, as he did before, he will be copped—"

"Sure thing!" said Raby.

Jimmy Silver looked worried. Often and often Uncle James of Rookwood found his chum Arthur Edward Lovell a spot of worry. But never so much as now.

"It's no good arguing with him," he said. "Lovell won't see sense—or he can't. Arguing with him only puts his silly back up, and makes him more fatheaded. But we can't let him carry on with this."

"We can't!" agreed Newcome. "Why, he would have to go up to the Head—might be a flogging—goodness knows what it might be. But how—!"

"Sit on him in the dorm!" suggested Raby.

Jimmy shook his head.

"He would kick up a shindy, and bring a beak up again. We want to keep him out of a row, not land him in one."

"He had six this morning," said Newcome. "Any fellow but Lovell would be satisfied with six. But he wants more."

"It would be something worse than six, if he really scared a beak with his ghost stunt," said Jimmy Silver, shaking his head.

"Think Mossoo would be scared?"

"Well, I think anybody would, waking up and seeing such a ghastly object in the dark. Only an ass like Lovell would think of playing such tricks. I'll bet Lovell himself would be scared, if he came across another ghost, while he's creeping about in the dark."

"Pity there isn't another such silly ass around, to play such silly tricks and give him a scare himself!" grunted Raby.

Jimmy Silver gave a start. His eyes danced. That chance remark from George Raby had caused a sudden idea to flash into his mind.

"Oh, my hat!" exclaimed Jimmy.

"What—?"

"That's the idea!"

"What is?" asked Raby and Newcome together, mystified.

Jimmy Silver chuckled.

"Lovell was quoting proverbs at us," he said. "Well, there's another proverb—what's sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander. Lovell's going to tiptoe out of the dorm at twelve to-night, got up as the ghost of Rookwood—"

"Yes, if we don't stop him—"

"We can't stop him! He's going creeping down the passage, and across the landing, rooting after Mossoo's room!" continued Jimmy Silver. "Nothing to stop him, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the real ghost of Rookwood happened to be walking, and Lovell barged into it—"

Raby and Newcome stared blankly.

"But there ain't a real ghost of Rookwood!" said Raby.

"And if there was, he wouldn't happen to be walking to-night, just to oblige us!" said Newcome.

Jimmy Silver laughed.

"Old Lovell isn't the only planner in this study," he said. "He's planned all this—and if he can plan one ghost, we can plan another."

"Oh!"

"Lovell may be fed up of ghosts before he gets as far as Mossoo's room—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Raby and Newcome.

When Jimmy Silver and Co. joined Lovell in the hall, he gave them rather a sour glance, doubtless expecting further argument on the subject of ghosts and ghost stunts. But they joined with cheery and smiling faces, and did not utter one more word of dissuasion. Apparently they had made up their minds to let Arthur Edward go ahead: which, as he was determined to go ahead anyhow, was satisfactory to him.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO OF THEM!

BOOM!

It was the last stroke of twelve, booming dully through the dark December night.

Arthur Edward Lovell sat up drowsily in bed, and peered round him in the gloom.

He rubbed his eyes.

Lovell was sleepy, as was only to be expected at midnight. He was not accustomed to such late hours.

Several times, indeed, he had almost nodded off.

But he was determined to keep awake. The ghost of Rookwood was scheduled to walk that night: and obviously the ghost couldn't walk, if Lovell went to sleep and stayed asleep. All the more, very much more, because his comrades were totally opposed to the idea, Lovell was determined to carry on. Opposition had that effect on Arthur Edward.

But it was not easy to keep awake. He almost had to prop his eyelids open. But Lovell was a sticker. If he nodded, he jerked himself out of drowsiness: and he was awake, though drowsy, when midnight sounded from the clock-tower.

The dormitory was very dark, and silent save for the breathing of sleepers, and an occasional rumble from Tubby Muffin's bed. It was very cold: outside, snowflakes whirled against the windows, and the winter wind wailed over the old Rookwood roofs. But a freezing atmosphere did not deter Lovell: though he shivered as he put a long leg out of his warm bed—the shiver accompanied by a yawn. "Twas now the very witching hour of night, when churchyards yawn", as the great poet has expressed it: and Lovell, being drowsy, yawned too. But he stepped out manfully into the cold.

He was very cautious. He did not want to rouse the dormitory, as had so unfortunately happened on the last occasion. True, even Tubby Muffin would not take him for a ghost a second time, if the fat Classical woke. Still, a fellow couldn't be too careful, when he was breaking rules right and left.

Even Lovell realized that, after his first exploit, results would be serious if he was caught a second time at the same game. But he was not going to be caught, so that was all right. To his friends, it was clear as the sun at noonday that if the ghost was seen to walk that night, Richard Dalton and everyone else would know that it was Lovell at his stunts again. But it was not at all clear to Lovell. He had unbounded faith in his own sagacity. He was going to scare Mossoo right out of his seven Gallic senses, and get back to bed undiscovered—and unsuspected! Happily unaware that he was absolutely certain to be found out, he tucked his pyjamas into his trousers, and reached under his bed for the rubber shoes placed there in readiness. Being Arthur Edward Lovell, he bumped his head on the bed, and uttered a sharp ejaculation:

"Ow!"

Remembering caution, he suppressed a second "Ow!" But the single ejaculation had reached other ears.

"That you, Lovell, you ass?" came Raby's whisper.

"Shut up!" breathed Lovell.

"Out of bed, fathead?" asked Newcome.

"Will you shut up?"

Lovell expected to hear Jimmy Silver's voice next. But he did not hear it: Uncle James did not speak. Perhaps he was asleep. Lovell concluded that he was: having not the remotest suspicion that Uncle James had quitted the dormitory a quarter of an hour since, flitting as silently in the dark as any ghost could have done: leaving a "dummy" in his bed in case Arthur Edward's eyes fell on it.

Lovell scratched a match, and lighted his candle-end. He had to have a glimmer of light to don his special outfit.

In the flickering glimmer, he donned the sheet, and fastened it with safety-pins, as before: and pinned the white handkerchief with its eye-holes over his face, and added a smear of phosphorescent paint. Raby and Newcome watched him from their pillows in the glimmer. They did not speak: and Lovell, glancing at them, was rather surprised to see them smiling. He had not expected them to smile.

"You fellows keep mum!" he whispered. "We don't want Dicky up here again. Don't wake the other fellows."

"Mum's the word!" agreed Newcome.

"There'll be row enough when Froggy sees the ghost!" grinned Lovell. "I expect you'll hear him yell, from here."

"Think so!" yawned Raby.

"What-ho!" chuckled Lovell. "But don't jaw—don't wake Jimmy, and start him arguing again. I've had enough of his arguing."

Lovell glanced at Jimmy Silver's bed, as he whispered. In that bed the outlines of a sleeper could be seen, in the glimmer of the candle. Those outlines did not stir.

"What are you grinning at?" added Lovell, transferring his stare from Jimmy's bed, to the faces of Raby and Newcome. "Nothing to grin at, that I know of. Just keep mum and don't wake Jimmy."

"We won't wake Jimmy!" said Newcome.

"He can't hear us!" grinned Raby.

"Well, he might, and I don't want any more jaw. Just shut up," said Lovell.

He gave another glance at Jimmy Silver's bed. But there was no movement in that bed: and no sound from it. There was no intervention from Uncle James to be feared!

Raby and Newcome obediently shut up, though they still grinned. Lovell blew out the candle, and their grins disappeared in darkness. Why they grinned at all rather puzzled Lovell. He had expected argument and remonstrance, not hilarity. However, they were welcome to grin as much as they liked, so far as Lovell was concerned, so long as they did not kick up a row. Leaving them to it, he groped his way in the dark to the door.

Nobody else in the Classical Fourth had awakened: not, apparently, even Jimmy Silver. It was a relief to Lovell to get out without leaving a buzz of voices behind him. Caution was his cue: even Lovell felt a slight tremor, at the thought of his form-master coming on the scene again. But there was no danger of that: all was as silent as he could have wished: nothing was going to be heard, till the yells of a frightened Froggy rent the air. Lovell was going to be safe back in bed by the time those yells caused other beaks to turn out. He opened the dormitory door, and shut it after him very carefully—though with an inadvertent thud.

In the dark passage he stood listening. At that hour, everyone at Rookwood was certain to be in bed: the last light had long been extinguished. It was black as a hat in the corridor, and silent save for the echoing wail of the

With freezing blood he gazed at the ghost of Rookwood.

December wind. That was all that Lovell heard as he listened, and he was quite reassured on the subject of beaks. He trod away silently down the corridor towards the landing, where there was a dim glimmer of starlight and snow from windows. A little to his own surprise, his heart was beating just a trifle uncomfortably. It was all so dark, so silent, so lonely, in the middle of the night: and a fellow playing ghost could hardly help remembering the legend of the ghost of Rookwood, supposed to haunt those ancient dim passages at Christmastide. In the dormitory, among a crowd of other fellows, Lovell would have snorted, at the idea of a ghost: but alone at midnight in shadowy passages it seemed different, somehow. Lovell found himself peering uneasily into the shadows, and listening quite intently for any unusual sound. In spite of himself, a slightly creepy feeling came over him: and he gave quite a start, at a rustle of snow tumbling off ancient ivy at a window.

But he carried on resolutely. Lovell was not a fellow to be scared by darkness, and dim mysterious shadows, and eerie sounds from rustling old ivy. He did not admit to himself that he wished he was back in bed, and had never thought of this uncanny stunt at all! He crept and groped on, peering in the gloom, with ears stretched to listen. But he was going on!

Suddenly he halted, at the sound of a faint rustle.

The blood rushed to his heart.

It was not the ivy this time. It was not tumbling snow outside. It was a faint eerie rustle, as of swishing garments, quite near at hand, on the landing.

He stood with his heart thumping, staring into the gloom.

What was that?

It couldn't be a master up—no beak would have been there in the dark. There was no danger of that. But—what was it?

Again that faint sound came to his straining ears. It was the faint swish of some loose garment: and back into Lovell's mind came that old story of the ghostly monk that haunted Rookwood, in snow-white robe and cowl. It was all rot, of course, but—but—what was that?

Was that a gliding figure in white, or were his eyes and his nerves deceiving him? What—what was it?

He stood rooted to the floor. His eyes bulged, and almost popped from his head.

Dimly, but visibly, in the glimmer from a high window, he saw it. It was not fancy it was not nerves—his startled eyes were not deceiving him. Frozen where he stood, he stared at it—a dim figure in a sweeping white robe, with a white cowl over the face, gliding soundlessly. He did not stir—he could not have stirred, at that moment, to save his life. With freezing blood he gazed at the ghost of Rookwood.

It turned—towards him!

Lovell almost ceased to breathe. Like one spellbound, he watched, with staring eyes.

The strange, unearthly figure glided towards him, and still he did not move. A ghostly hand was raised—in a few moments more, it would have touched him! But before it could reach him, Lovell came out of his trance of terror. He gave one horrified gasp, turned, and raced back to the dormitory.

CHAPTER IX

LOVELL KNOWS BEST!

"I'VE BEEN thinking—!"

"You have?" asked Newcome, as if in surprise.

"Yes!" rapped Lovell.

"Wonders will never cease!" murmured Raby.

Arthur Edward Lovell frowned, across the tea-table in the end study. He frowned at three smiling faces.

"Chuck it, you chaps," said Jimmy Silver. "If you've been thinking, Lovell, let's hear the result!"

"If any!" murmured Newcome.

Lovell breathed rather hard. Lovell was, in his own belief at least, the fellow who did practically all the thinking that was done in the end study at Rookwood. So his remark ought to have been received with respect, if not even with interest, or at least seriousness. Instead of which, his comrades seemed surprised to hear that he had been thinking at all: and indeed seemed to doubt it.

Arthur Edward Lovell had been, as a matter of fact, unusually thoughtful all that day. He was not much given to reflection: but the strange and startling occurrence of the previous night might have made any fellow thoughtful. Even in broad daylight, he felt a little shivery as he remembered that strange spectral figure of the ghostly monk glimmering on the dark landing.

"Carry on, old chap," said Jimmy Silver, encouragingly. "Thinking about the hols—?"

"No!" snapped Lovell.

"Well, we break up this week," said Newcome. "I'm thinking about the hols. Jolly old Christmas—!"

"Never mind that," said Lovell. He paused a moment, and went on. "I had a bit of a shock last night. You know what happened—I've told you—I saw the phantom monk in the dark—"

"Oh!" said three fellows.

"I don't mind admitting," continued Lovell, "that it was a bit of a K.O. It looked so jolly real. It gave me a jump. It—it came towards me, and—and—and I—I—"

"You bolted," said Newcome.

"Well, I own up I did!" said Lovell. "I think any fellow would have bolted, in the circumstances. You fellows can grin, here in the study, with the light on, and lots of people about: but it's a bit different alone at midnight in the dark, and the thing happening so suddenly and unexpectedly, too—" He paused. "I wouldn't say that I exactly bolted," he added, cautiously. "But—but I got back to the dorm as—as fast as I could."

"I thought you seemed rather in a hurry when you shot in," agreed Raby.

"Seemed to me in a bit of a rush," remarked Newcome, with a nod.

Lovell gave them a glare each.

"You'd have been in a hurry, in my place," he yapped. "So would you, Jimmy—if that's what you're grinning at."

"Quite, quite!" agreed Jimmy, soothingly. "Seeing a spectre monk was enough to make any fellow think that bed was the best place on a cold December night. I was glad to get back to it myself, without a spectre monk to help."

Lovell stared.

"I didn't know you'd been out of bed," he said. "You were fast asleep when I went out of the dorm—"

"Was I?"

"Like a log!" Lovell grunted. "You never woke up when these fellows chattered. I remember now I thought I heard somebody moving, after I got back to bed. Blessed if I know what you turned out for. Never mind that—as I've said, I've been thinking, and—and—and—" Lovell paused, once more. His three friends regarded him curiously. It was clear that Lovell really had been thinking, improbable as it seemed, but he appeared to hesitate to confide the results to the other fellows round the tea-table in the end study.

"Go it!" said Jimmy, encouragingly.

"Well, I'm not the fellow to make mistakes, or play the fool, or anything of that kind, as you fellows know—"

"Oh!" murmured three fellows.

"But—but—but I own up that I was rather an ass to think of that ghost stunt." Lovell got it out at last. "It's a fool trick I—I hadn't looked at it like that, but—but after what happened last night, I can see it all right. It's a fool trick to play ghost and frighten people."

"Well, my hat!" said Jimmy.

"His brain does work!" said Newcome, regarding Arthur Edward Lovell attentively. "We never noticed it before—but it does!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows are going to cackle at a fellow—!" roared Lovell.

"My dear chap—"

"I'm telling you what I think," snapped Lovell. "Mind, I don't believe in ghosts, of course—"

"Not in the daytime?" asked Raby.

"Not at any time, George Raby. I was a bit taken aback last night as any chap would have been: but after I got back to bed, and thought it over, I jolly well knew that it wasn't a ghost, but some utter idiot playing ghost—some silly, fatheaded, blithering nitwit—"

"Thanks," said Jimmy.

"Eh? What do you mean? I'm speaking of the fellow, whoever he was, who was got up as the Rookwood monk. I jolly well know now that the monk's robe was jolly well made out of a sheet or something, and the cowl out of a white muffler or something—must have been! Somebody was playing ghost——some utterly idiotic gibbering nitwit—"

"You think a fellow who plays ghost is an utterly idiotic, gibbering nitwit?" asked Newcome.

"Yes, I do!" snapped Lovell.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the end study.

"I—I—I mean—" Lovell stammered a little, remembering that he had played ghost himself. "I—I mean—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cut the cackle," hooted Lovell. "It's not a laughing matter, I can tell you. It gave me an awful turn, and I bolted—I mean, I got back to the dorm in rather a hurry—"

"Quite a hurry," said Newcome, with a nod.

"Full throttle," said Raby.

"Well, I'm going to punch that funny ass's head when I find out who it was," said Lovell. "But all the same, I'm glad it happened really—glad I never got as far as Mossoo's room. I—I'd been thinking it jolly funny to wake him up to see ghost at his bedside, but—but—I—I'm glad I didn't, now."

Jimmy and Newcome and Raby gazed at him. It was indubitable now that Arthur Edward Lovell had been thinking! Indubitable, too, that, as Newcome had remarked, his brain did work: though slowly, and not often. Evidently Lovell was capable of learning by experience, if in no other way. The spectral monk had given him a useful lesson on the subject of playing ghost! Arthur Edward Lovell was through with such remarkable stunts.

"Well, that's that," said Lovell. "It gave me a jump, I can tell you, and—and I'm glad I never gave Mossoo a jump like it. And if ever you fellows think of playing ghost at Christmas—"

"What?"

"Don't do it," said Lovell. "You're asses enough, I know: but just don't do it, see?"

"Sure it wasn't a real ghost that you saw on the landing?" asked Raby, with a wink at Jimmy and Newcome.

"Of course it wasn't," said Lovell, testily. "I—I thought it was, just for the minute—any fellow would have—but how could it have been, when there ain't

such things as ghosts! It was some gibbering idiot playing tricks—and I'm jolly well going to try to find out who it was before we break up, and give him a thick ear to remember me by over the hols. I'm going to look for him, I can jolly well tell you."

"Good hunting, old chap," said Jimmy Silver, blandly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But it's a bit of a puzzle," said Lovell, wrinkling his brows. "Must have been a man from another dorm—but how could he have known that I should be there? It's plain enough that he was on the spot to give me a scare—but only you fellows knew I was going out of the dorm at all, so it's queer. Perhaps you fellows could help me spot who it was."

"I shouldn't wonder," agreed Jimmy Silver: while Raby and Newcome chuckled.

"Got any idea who it was?" asked Lovell.

"Sort of!"

"Well, if you know, cough it up," said Lovell. "I'm going to let him know what I think of a fellow who's idiot enough to play ghost in the dark—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop cackling for goodness sake, and if you've an idea who it was, Jimmy Silver, tell me—"

"I think it was a fellow about my size!" said Jimmy.

"Eh? Lovell looked at him. "Well, yes, now I think of it, he was about your height. But there's lots of fellows your size at Rookwood. If you know that much, I suppose you know what his name is."

"Oh, quite!"

"Well, what is it?" Lovell rose from the tea-table, evidently prepared to go on the war-path as soon as he learned the name. He pushed back his cuffs in readiness. "Cough it up!"

"Silver!"

"Eh?"

"Silver!"

"What the thump do you mean, Silver?" exclaimed Lovell, irritably. "I'm not talking about silver, or gold either. I'm asking you for the fellow's name who played ghost on me last night if you know who it was. What's his name?"

"Silver!" said Jimmy, for the third time.

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Raby and Newcome.

"Oh!" It dawned on Lovell. "That's your name, you ass! Are you trying to pull my leg, or what? It wasn't you!"

"It was!" said Jimmy, cheerfully.

"Oh, don't be an ass! Think you can stuff me like that?" said Lovell, disdainfully. "It wasn't you or Raby or Newcome either—I left all three of you in the dorm, those two chattering like magpies, and you fast asleep and snoring—"

"Did you hear me snore?" gasped Jimmy.

"Well, fast asleep, anyway! I saw you in bed, at any rate—you were there all right—"

"Not exactly. What you saw was an overcoat and a couple of pillows, arranged under the bedclothes—"

"Rot!"

"It was a dummy in Jimmy's bed," chuckled Raby. "He went out a quarter of an hour before you did, and had the things all ready behind the settee on the landing—"

"Rubbish! I can see myself being taken in by a dummy in a bed!" said Lovell, derisively. "Think I'm a mug like Tubby Muffin to be taken in with a yarn like that! Look here, Jimmy, if you know who it was—!"

"Little me!" roared Jimmy. "It was the only way to stop you playing the giddy ox, and that's why, see?"

"Well, if you won't tell me—"

"I've told you!" shrieked Jimmy.

"I suppose you don't know who it was, any more than I do," snapped Lovell. "All right—I'll find him out somehow, and jolly well punch his head." He crossed to the door, his chums staring after him blankly. At the door he glanced back. "I don't know why you're spinning me this silly yarn, Jimmy Silver, but if you think you can pull my leg like that, you've got another guess coming! I'm not the sort of fellow to be taken in, I fancy."

"But I tell you—!" yelled Jimmy.

"Pack it up!" said Lovell. "Keep your funny stories for Raby and Newcome—they may think 'em funny: I don't." And with that, Arthur Edward Lovell departed from the end study, and slammed the door after him.

"Oh, crumbs!" said Jimmy Silver.

"Oh, scissors!" said Raby.

"Oh, holy smoke!" said Newcome. "Lovell knows best—as per usual!"

Then they all yelled together:

"Ha, ha, ha!"

. . . .

Lovell did not discover the unknown fellow who had played the part of the ghostly monk of Rookwood. Possibly, at long last, it dawned upon his powerful brain that it really was "Uncle James" who had saved him from himself, as it were. At all events, the desired result had been achieved: when the school broke up for Christmas, nothing more had been seen of the Ghost of Rookwood!

THE END

CHAPTER I

CHARD knew that something was "on" in the Fifth.

Chard must have known.

There were so many whispers, nods, grins among the Fifth-form men at High Coombe, that Chard must have been both blind and deaf if he had not suspected something.

That it was something up against James McCann, the new headmaster, Chard also knew, or at least accurately surmised.

As a member of Mr. McCann's staff: as form-master in the Fifth: obviously it was Mr. Chard's duty to look into the matter, and take steps.

Chard neither looked into the matter, nor took steps.

He calmly affected to observe nothing.

Even when, coming out of his form-room after class, he caught muttering

voices in the corridor, and words that could hardly have left him in doubt, Chard was still determined to know nothing and suspect nothing.

Three Fifth-form men were in the corridor—Aubrey Compton, the dandy of the Fifth, glass of fashion and mould of form at the School for Slackers; Bob Darrell, muscular and rugged and a keen footballer, whose necktie and trousers were eye-sorrows to his elegant chum Aubrey; and Teddy Seymour, who chummed with both of them, and in his irresolute way followed the lead of either, generally the slave of the last word.

Bob Darrell was speaking as Chard came out. Bob's voice was not loud, but it was rather deep, and every word reached Chard's large red ears.

"You can't do it, Aubrey! You know you can't."

"Can't we?" smiled Aubrey.

"Everybody's in it, Bob," said Teddy. "Why, even some of the Sixth-form pre's are in it—they hate McCann as much as we do."

"I don't!" said Bob.

"Nor I," said Aubrey, loftily, "I hope I shouldn't condescend to hate a dashed usher. I admit that I loathe him. One loathes a bounder."

"Oh, don't be a silly ass!" growled Bob. "Look here, whether you loathe him or not, he's the Head, and a fellow who lays a finger on a headmaster—"

Chard coughed loudly.

The three Fifth-formers, becoming aware of him, were suddenly silent. Chard gave them a smile and a nod as he passed. Chard, certainly, was not deaf: but it seemed that he must have been as deaf as an adder, for he took no note whatever of what he had heard. He charged on his way as if he had heard nothing.

Chard, big, red, stout, aggressive, was aggressive even in his walk. He charged rather than walked. In Common Room his loud voice dominated all the other beaks. Gapes, the master of the Fourth, sometimes mimicked Chard, in Common Room, when he was not present, to the amusement of the rest of the staff. But in Chard's oppressive presence Capes was meek. Chard was not exactly popular, in Common Room. In one matter, however, he had the hearty support of all—in his opposition, open or covert, to the new Head.

Chard, as all High Coombe knew, as even Liggins the porter knew, had expected to step into Dr. Chetwode's shoes when that venerable Beak retired. Instead of which, the Governors had appointed Jimmy McCann: a young man hardly more than half Chard's age: a nobody from nowhere, as Chard at least described him. High Coombe had been nicknamed the "School for Slackers", not without reason. It had practically run to dry rot in old Dr. Chetwode's time. That fact, it seemed, had dawned at last on a rather drowsy governing body: and they had woken up, as it were, and appointed quite a young headmaster in the Venerable Beak's place: a keen and vigorous young man, with a spot of ginger in his hair, and more than a spot of ginger in his character.

It was a disappointment to Chard, as well as a shock for everybody else. Everyone knew that Chard couldn't get over it. Like Juno in the Aeneid, he nursed an undying wound.

But that, of course, was not all. James McCann had come to High Coombe to pull the old school out of its rut: to wake it up from its long drowse, as it were. To a staff accustomed to let things take their own easy course, he seemed rather like a bull in a china-shop.

Since McCann had come, all High Coombe, from Tredegar, captain of the school, down to the smallest fag in the Third Form, had turned out at rising-bell in the morning! Work had been done in the form-rooms, and even in the studies. Capes no longer chatted in the passage while his form played leap-frog in the Fourth Form-room. Mace looked at history papers before he marked them. Fellows who had browsed contentedly on the back benches in Chard's form-room for whole terms, untroubled by Chard, made the sudden and unpleasant discovery that life is real, life is earnest! Cigarettes disappeared from Big Study, where the prefects congregated, as completely as if Sir Walter Raleigh had never brought the noxious weed home at all. The influence of James McCann ran through the old school like an electric current. Nobody liked it. Nobody could be expected to like it—at the School for Slackers.

Least of all did Chard like it.

Chard, big and aggressive, twice the weight of the slim young man who now reigned in the old Head's place, somehow felt like a small man under McCann's clear steady eyes. His loud voice, often likened by the High Coombe fellows to the trumpeting of an elephant, was subdued when he talked to him. After all, McCann was Head: and a headmaster had to be obeyed. But it came hard. Added to Chard's personal grievances, was his conviction that the old way was the best way: that every change must necessarily be for the worse, and that James McCann's new methods would ruin the old school. Chard believed that chiefly, perhaps, because he wanted to believe it. Anyhow he did believe it: and there were few at High Coombe who did not agree with him.

Chard, of course, would never have permitted any mutinous act, directed against the new headmaster, to pass unchecked and unreproved, if he had known of it—officially. There was a limit. But a man who was determined to keep his eyes shut, and his ears sealed, naturally could not act upon anything that he saw or heard! In the present instance, Chard charged out into Big Quad with his mind resolutely blank to the mutterings he had heard in the corridor.

Bob Darrell looked uneasy, as he glanced after Chard's broad disappearing back. He knew that Chard must have caught something as he came down the corridor.

"Think he knows?" muttered Bob.

Teddy Seymour looked alarmed.

"I say, even Chard would have to do something if he knew—!" muttered Teddy.

Aubrey Compton smiled, and shrugged his elegant shoulders. Aubrey knew his Chard better than they did.

"Chard won't know a thing," he answered. "None so blind as those who won't see, or as deaf as those who won't hear. Don't you worry about Chard."

"But—!" said Bob.

"My dear man, forget it! Chard won't give three cheers in the quad when that outsider McCann gets it in the neck: but won't he chuckle in his study? I can tell you that all Common-Room will be on the grin."

Bob Darrell snorted.

"Pretty state of affairs!" he growled.

"Quite!" agreed Aubrey.

"Look here, you can't do it," argued Bob. Bob Darrell was almost the only man in the Fifth who could see good in James McCann. But Bob could see quite a lot of good in that vigorous young man. Bob, one of the few High Coombers who was keen on games, liked keenness and admired it. Bob would have liked to see High Coombe rally round the new Head, pull up its socks, and earn some more creditable name than the "School for Slackers". His opinions, indeed, often put a severe strain upon his friendship with the elegant Aubrey: who was the heart and soul of the covert resistance to McCann.

"You've said that twice!" remarked Aubrey.

"Well, I'll say it three times, then—you can't do it!" growled Bob. "It's a rotten, disrespectful, putrid stunt—"

"Dear me!" said Aubrey.

"He's headmaster," said Bob. "There's such a thing as respect for a man's position, even if you don't like the man."

"Um!" said Teddy. As usual, Teddy rather followed the views of the last speaker. "Of course, there's that, Aubrey."

"What rot!" drawled Aubrey. "The man's a bounder—a rank outsider. The whole show is at sixes and sevens since he came. He's abolished fagging for the Fifth—the fags are cheeky since he's been here. When I told young Ferguson, of the Fourth, to carry a bag to my study the other day, he just looked at me and walked away! I smacked his head—but he didn't carry the bag. Does Chard rag us in form now or does he not? He hates it as much as we do: but he's got to do it—now! That man McCann is capable of pushing him out if he doesn't toe the line—after twenty years as a beak here."

"Isn't it rather a beak's duty to see that fellows in his form learn something?" asked Bob, sarcastically.

"Don't preach, old chap," implored Aubrey. "When you get on your seventhly manner, you almost make me forget that you're a pal."

"Look here—!"

"Yes, don't preach, old chap!" said Teddy, following Aubrey's lead this time. "We're all up against McCann. Look how he's pulled in school bounds—"

"There's one thing you don't seem to have thought of!" snapped Bob.

"What's that?" asked Compton. "If we've overlooked any detail, old bean, put us wise, like a good chap."

"This—if you carry on, every man who has a hand in it will be sacked from High Coombe, so quick it will make his head swim."

"Phew!" said Teddy Seymour. His mind swayed again. "I say, Aubrey—"

Aubrey Compton laughed.

"Is McCann a cat?" he asked.

"A cat!" repeated Bob, staring at him. "What do you mean, fathead?"

"I mean, is McCann a cat? If he isn't, he can't see in the dark," explained Aubrey. "He won't see a thing, dear man—especially after he's got the tar over him, with the feathers added—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" trilled Teddy.

"After it's over," resumed Aubrey, calmly, "the Blighter will have the whole school to choose from, if he wants to know who did it. He will get a lot of assistance from the staff!"

"I don't think!" chuckled Teddy.

"And there's another thing," yawned Aubrey. "It's pretty well known that McCann hates the idea of sacking a man, and that he's going to get through without sackings if he can. It wouldn't do him any good with the governors, if he started sacking men right and left. If it comes out who did it, I fancy nobody will have to catch the morning train home. But it won't come out."

"How could it?" said Teddy. "It will be as black as a hat in Head's corridor, when McCann gets the tar and feathers."

"If he switched on a light!—" said Bob.

"He can switch on all the switches he likes," drawled Aubrey. "All the lights will be out of action, you see. Old Corky cuts it off at the meter."

"Oh!" said Bob.

"We're taking some care, you know," said Compton. "Nobody wants six on the bags from McCann—he's a hefty brute: and it has to be admitted that he can whop! He has the nerve to whop Fifth-form men as if they were fags—"

"If Fifth-form men act like fags—!" began Bob.

"Dear man, I asked you not to preach!" murmured Aubrey. "You're wastin' your breath, anyway—McCann's got it comin'. We've been plannin' this for days, and it's comin' off this evening. If you funk takin' a hand—"

"Do you want me to punch your silly head, Aubrey Compton?"

"Thanks, no! I mean, if you feel that it would be naughty—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" from Teddy.

"—in that case, you can stay out. Lots of us to do the trick," said Aubrey, cheerfully. "I shall be there, and Teddy, and Carter, and two Sixth-form men —old Tred and Randal. We really shan't need your help."

"It's mad—!" said Bob.

"Dear me!"

"For the love of Mike, Aubrey, old man, wash it out!" said Bob, earnestly. "It's rotten—measly—you can't do it! McCann's a good chap really—he means well by the school, and well by us—look how he's pulled the games together, since he's been here—look— And he was quite right to pull in school bounds, too—"

"Comin' out, Teddy?" yawned Aubrey.

"I'm speaking to you—!" hooted Bob.

"You can go on speakin', old bean, as long as you like: but I'm tired of listenin'-in. Come on, Teddy."

Aubrey and Teddy strolled out into the quadrangle. Bob Darrell was left with a red face and knitted brows. He was only one man against many—his earnest remonstrances had no more effect on Aubrey, than water on a duck. He could not stop them—he had to let this go on! He could keep out of it, if he liked: and certainly he was going to keep out of it. But he had to let it go on!

CHAPTER II

"COMPTON!"

"Oh!" breathed Aubrey.

He had not known that Mr. McCann was at hand. That quiet, but extremely authoritative voice was his first intimation that the new headmaster of High Coombe was in the offing. If he had known, probably he would not have kicked Ferguson. On the other hand, if any fag at High Coombe deserved to be well and truly booted, was it not Ferguson of the Fourth form? Ferg had been Compton's fag before the new Head came. McCann, among other innovations, had abolished fagging for the Fifth form. The Sixth still had their fags: the Fifth, seniors as they were, had none. If Compton wanted tea in his study, he had to brew it with his own well-cared-for hands. If he wanted a parcel carried, it was useless to call "Boy!" as in the happy days of old. No call of "Boy" from a Fifth-form study was answered now. It was very annoying and exasperating.

It was hardly Ferg's fault. But Ferg was, or Aubrey fancied he was, cheeky about it. Certainly, under the new dispensation, he refused to fag. No doubt that constituted cheek. Aubrey, quite a good-natured fellow at heart, never dreamed of bullying. He simply kicked Ferguson, in passing, because he had no doubt that it was for Ferg's good to be kicked for cheek to the Fifth. It was a trifling incident—the merest trifle: Aubrey would have forgotten it in a minute or two, though perhaps Ferguson would have remembered it longer, being the recipient of the kick.

Aubrey did not even glance round before he kicked Ferguson. Teddy

Seymour noticed the new Head coming up the path: but, unaware that his friend was about to kick a fag for his own good, did not draw Aubrey's attention to the circumstance. So it came about that Compton of the Fifth kicked Ferg right under the eyes of James McCann.

Ferguson yelled.

Aubrey's foot was not large, and it was shapely, and elegantly shod. But there was a lot of drive in it when he planted it on Ferguson of the Fourth. Aubrey would have strolled elegantly on, leaving him to yell: but for the quiet authoritative voice that rapped out his name. He stared round at James McCann, breathing rather hard. Teddy looked dismayed. But Aubrey, if he felt dismayed, was not the fellow to allow dismay to appear in his face. He met the Head's gaze calmly. But his heart was beating a little fast. He could have kicked himself, harder than he had kicked Ferguson, for feeling the trepidation he so carefully concealed.

"Did you call me, sir?" His voice was calm.

"I did, Compton! Go to my study, and wait for me there."

Aubrey Compton breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He knew what that meant, of course. He was going to be caned. In old Dr. Chetwode's time, seniors had never had to bend over, at High Coombe, like juniors. Chard would have been quite horrified at the idea of caning any boy in his form—a circumstance of which his form did not fail to take full advantage. McCann had changed all that. If a senior man asked for a whopping, he received that for which he asked. Indeed it was said in Big Study that the man was quite capable of whopping a Prefect of the Sixth, if just cause were given. No such catastrophic occurrence had occurred so far, it was true, to shake High Coombe to its ancient foundations. But you never really knew what McCann might do next!

Having given his order, Mr. McCann walked on. Aubrey gazed after the stocky, muscular figure of the new Head. His gaze was expressive. Teddy Seymour's face registered deep dismay.

Ferguson grinned. He cut away in quite cheery spirit, to tell the Fourth-form men that that supercilious Fifth-form man, Compton, was going to be whopped for booting him. Aubrey did not even notice him. He stood breathing hard and breathing deep, without stirring from the spot.

Teddy touched him on the arm.

"Better go, old chap!" he murmured. "I—I say, McCann will expect to find you in his study when he goes there. Better go."

"That—that usher—!" breathed Aubrey.

"Well, he's Head—"

"I won't go."

"Oh, gum!" Teddy Seymour almost wailed. "I say, old chap, don't play the goat. For Pete's sake, don't play the goat! You've got to go."

Aubrey did not stir.

"I'll go to Chard!" he said. "Chard won't stand for that outsider whopping men in his form."

"Chard can't do a thing! He talks jolly big in Common Room, as all the fellows know: but he always has the wind up, under McCann's eye. He loathes him as much as we do: but he can't do a thing!" pleaded Teddy. "Besides, even Chard couldn't stand for booting fags on their trousers. You did, you know."

Aubrey clenched his hands. He realized that Teddy was right: Chard could do nothing. Gladly, very gladly, Chard would have backed up any High Coombe man against the newcomer whom he regarded as an interloper. Everyone knew that. But Chard was, after all, in the position of the gentleman who was willing to wound and yet afraid to strike! Chard, as Teddy said, couldn't do a thing.

Compton of the Fifth kicked Ferg.

Slowly, very slowly, Aubrey went into the House, and repaired to the Head's study, to wait there for Mr. McCann. Teddy carried the dismal news to Big Study, where Tredegar and Randal, and Carter, and a dozen more of the Sixth and Fifth, all agreed that it was the limit, that it was just what was to be expected of a bounder like McCann, that the governors must have been off their nuts to send such an outsider to High Coombe at all: that the whole school was fed up with him, that Chard ought to do something, and that it was rough luck on old Aubrey. Which, if Aubrey could have heard it as he waited in the Head's study, would probably not have comforted him very much.

He had to wait! McCann was not in a hurry to come; possibly having matters to attend to, which he regarded as more important than dealing with a wilful, mutinous body in the Fifth form. Aubrey moved about the study while he waited, stared from the window into the quad, loafed round the room again, and finally came to a halt, looking at the papers on the Head's table, with a very supercilious sneer on his handsome face. Among his other shortcomings, McCann was a man with classical tastes. True, he was a great games-man: he had bowled for the M.C.C.: and his record at soccer was known, if not admired, at High Coombe. But his prowess at games did not deter him from finding pleasure in books. Amid the many cares and duties of a headmaster's busy life, he found time somehow to indulge that taste, and it was known that in his scanty leisure hours, he was working on a translation of the Odes. Quintus Horatius Flaccus was not a popular name at High Coombe: but this sort of thing was, of course, to be expected of a man like McCann.

Evidently, he had been at work on Horace that afternoon, for there were sheets and sheets of paper on the table, covered with the fine, clear, caligraphy of Mr. McCann, and a volume of the Odes lay wide open. Aubrey looked at the papers and sneered: and then a gleam came into his eyes. Those written sheets, corrected and corrected again in many places, represented many hours of work. For a long minute Aubrey gazed at them. Then he stretched out his arm over the table, and knocked over the inkpot. He knocked it over with a careful hand, so that the stream of ink from it spattered all over those carefully-written papers. If the Blighter was so fond of construing Latin for amusement, he could do it all over again, and Aubrey wished him joy of it.

Aubrey walked back to the window, and stood staring out, with his hands in his pockets. He was going to be whopped, he knew that: but he had, so to speak, paid the bill in advance, by swamping McCann's papers with ink. What the outcome would be, he did not know: but he waited for it to accrue, with cool hardihood.

The door-handle turned at last.

Aubrey turned from the window, as Mr. McCann came into the study. The young man who now governed High Coombe glanced across at him,

without for the moment noticing what had happened to his papers on the writing-table. He eyed the Fifth-Former thoughtfully.

"Compton!"

"Yes, sir!" muttered Aubrey.

"I am afraid that you are a somewhat unthinking boy, Compton. You deserve to be caned for the action I witnessed in the quadrangle, as you very well know. But I shall not cane you for it. I only warn you not to let anything of the kind occur again. You may leave my study."

Aubrey caught his breath. Never for a moment had he expected that. He had had a bitter suspicion that the Blighter had been glad of a chance to catch him for a whopping! Evidently, the Blighter hadn't! And he had paid McCann in advance for a whopping that was not going to materialize. Half-an-hour's wait in the study was all his penalty: and now he was free to go—unwhopped! But the next moment, McCann's eyes fell on the ink-swamped papers on the table, and he gave a start, and uttered an exclamation.

"What is this? What—?"

He gazed at the swamped papers. Then he turned to Aubrey, his face hard.

"You did this, Compton?"

"An accident, sir—!" said Aubrey, calmly. "Sorry—" He paused at the contempt in McCann's face, and coloured, and was silent. Aubrey had the courage of his misdeeds: and he would not lie like a frightened fag. He would never give that outsider just cause to despise him. He stood sullen and stubborn—and silent.

"I shall not cane you, Compton, for your action in the quadrangle, as I have said." McCann's voice was very quiet. "But I shall cane you for this act, with the greatest severity." He picked up a cane from the table. "Bend over that chair, Compton."

In savage silence, Aubrey bent over the chair. How he got through the "six" that followed, without yelling, Aubrey hardly knew. But pride was strong, and he would not utter a sound: though he had to clench his teeth to keep back yells. It was well known at High Coombe that McCann could whop: and if Aubrey had ever doubted it, he had it proved now to his fullest satisfaction. Every stroke of that "six" was laid on with scientific precision, and Aubrey was almost tottering when it was over.

"You may go, Compton!"

Aubrey went from the study almost blindly.

As the door closed on him, Mr. McCann dismissed him from mind. His attention was wholly given to the papers Aubrey had rendered indecipherable. Mr. McCann was not the man to cry over spilt milk. Many hours of patient labour had been wasted by the folly of a wilful boy: and James McCann had a great deal of work to do over again. He sat down at his writing-table to do it. Other matters which claimed his time had to be set aside, for the present.

But as his pen travelled over the paper, there came an interruption: the buzz of the telephone-bell.

Mr. McCann put down the pen, and picked up the receiver. A rich and fruity voice came through, not particularly welcome to McCann's ears. It was Chard speaking from his rooms across the quad. The charms of Chard's conversation, if any, had long since palled on Jimmy McCann. However, he was always polite to the staff.

"Chard speaking," came the fruity voice. "Is that Mr. McCann?"

"Speaking."

"If you are at leisure at the moment, sir, there are some matters I should like to discuss with you." A slightly sarcastic tone crept into Chard's voice. In the older days, of Dr. Chetwode, Chard had never bothered to ascertain whether the Head was at leisure before he charged in on him. The Venerable Beak simply had to be at leisure, when Chard desired to exercise his double-chin. Old Dr. Chetwode had never been able to stand up to big aggressive Chard. But it was quite different with the new Head. McCann's time was more valuable than the old Head's: no doubt because he ran High Coombe with a firm and efficient hand, instead of letting things slip and slide.

"At the moment, I am busy, Mr. Chard," said McCann. "But what is the matter you desire to discuss?"

"The question of bounds, sir! The town of Okeham has always been within bounds for senior boys on half-holidays, until your new order was posted, rescinding school bounds to this side of the town. That order is, if I may venture to say so, unpopular in my form. Several of my boys have spoken to me about it."

"I am sorry for that, Mr. Chard! But it is definite."

McCann could bear heavy breathing at the other end.

"I trust, sir," said Mr. Chard, with almost overwhelming dignity, "that you will consent to discuss the matter with a senior form-master."

Mr. McCann hesitated for one moment. School bounds had been drawn in, in the direction of Okeham, for good reasons. Chard might not have known, but Mr. McCann knew, that certain sporting fellows in the senior forms had been wont to "back their fancy" with a certain sporting gentleman at the Feathers in Okeham. It was quite useless for Chard to "discuss" the matter. But Jimmy McCann, though High Coombe called him a bounder, and an outsider, and all sorts of names, never liked taking a high hand with members of the staff who had been years and years and years at High Coombe. He liked to be considerate.

"Very well, Mr. Chard," he said, after that moment's hesitation. "I am afraid that I cannot alter my decision: but I will certainly hear whatever you desire to say on the subject."

"Then I will walk across, sir, if you are at leisure—" Again the slightly sarcastic note in Chard's voice!

"At the moment, no!" Jimmy McCann was prepared to let Chard trumpet in his study when he was at leisure. But he was not at leisure now: he had to put in some long and steady work to undo the mischief Aubrey had done. "I am very busy at the moment, Mr. Chard, but if you care to walk across this evening—say about nine—"

Heavy breathing again!

"Very well!" came Mr. Chard's reply, with almost overpowering dignity. "If you are not at leisure now, sir, I certainly do not wish to trespass on your time. I will look in about nine, sir."

"Very well, Mr. Chard!"

"Puppy!" said Chard, after he had cut off, confiding that opinion of the new Head to his rooms on the other side of the quad.

Mr. McCann did not confide his opinion of Chard to his study! He sat down at his writing-table, and forgot that such a person as Chard existed.

CHAPTER III

BOB DARRELL looked, and felt, just miserable.

In No. 3 Study, in the Fifth, he stood with his hands in his pockets, his sturdy shoulders leaning on the mantelpiece, looking at Aubrey Compton.

Teddy Seymour, sitting on the corner of the table, looked at him, too, with a deeply sympathetic face, and making vague sympathetic noises.

Aubrey heeded neither of them.

He was standing—since leaving the Head's study he had had no inclination whatever to sit down. His handsome face was quite pale. His eyes smouldered. "Six" on his elegant bags had told on Aubrey. He was feeling it yet: and likely to feel it for some time to come.

There had been a long silence in the study, save for Aubrey's hard breathing, and Teddy's sympathetic but vague distressed murmurs.

Bob Darrell had seldom felt so discouraged and downcast. He had hoped, even at the eleventh hour as it were, to dissuade Aubrey and his friends from carrying out that mad scheme of ragging the new Head. It had been planned—all preparations had been made—the time and place had been fixed—yet Bob still hoped that he might induce the reckless fellows to wash it out—till now. Now he knew that the last hope was gone. The expression on Aubrey's face was more than enough to tell him so. If there had been the remotest chance of dissuading Aubrey, it was gone.

Bob was loyal to his pal. He liked Aubrey, and Aubrey liked him, though they had hardly a single taste in common. He felt every pang of that "six" almost as much as Aubrey did. It was rotten ill-luck that this should have happened now, embittering Aubrey to the very limit. He felt a little resentful

towards McCann too. Need he have laid it on so hard? After all, senior men did sometimes boot fags. Bob knew nothing so far of Aubrey's exploit in the Head's study: Aubrey had not spoken a word since his arrival in No. 3. Both Bob and Teddy supposed that the licking had been for landing an elegant shoe on the trousers of Ferguson of the Fourth. And if that was it, McCann had certainly come down very hard and heavy. Bob, looking at Aubrey, could not help resenting that.

And yet, McCann was a good man, an able man, and just exactly the Head that High Coombe needed: Bob realized that, though few if any others at High Coombe could see it. Under the Venerable Beak, the old school had drifted into utter slackness. Most of the staff were old, and set in their ways—unconsciously consulting their ease more than their duty, for lack of a strong hand on the reins. Younger masters, like Capes, fell into the rut, under the influence of the general slackness. Some of the fellows hardly worked at all, till McCann came: Randal of the Sixth, for instance, a happy-go-lucky and pleasant fellow whom everyone liked, "specialized" in history, as he was pleased to call it: which meant that he could stay out of form to work in his study—and everyone knew just how much work Randal did there! School bounds had extended far and wide in old Dr. Chetwode's time—Jimmy McCann had pulled them in: much to the indignation of all concerned. Fifth-Form men were furious about it—especially those members of the form who liked to drop in at the back door of the Feathers on a half-holiday! Chard was deeply annoyed by it: he trumpeted in Common-Room on the subject, declaring that it showed a lack of trust: he, Chard, had always trusted his boys!

Bob knew that McCann was right. In his quiet way, he backed up the new Head as much as he could. But now, as he looked at the suffering Aubrey, he felt resentful, as well as miserable. That mad scheme was certain to go on now: High Coombe fellows were so hopelessly out of hand, that they did not seem to realize what an awful, unheard-of thing it was to rag a headmaster: and it was no mild rag, either—it was tar and feathers! It was really unthinkable—yet they were not only thinking of it, but were going to do it, and had laid careful and meticulous plans for the doing. And in Aubrey's present mood, it was obviously useless for Bob Darrell to say another word on the subject.

There was a tap at the door of No. 3, and it opened to reveal a stout aggressive figure and a red face. Chard walked in.

Three Fifth-form men stood to attention at once: Aubrey making a great effort to clear his countenance, and suppress the signs of anguish. Mr. Chard's face, always red, was redder than usual, and his small light-blue eyes had a gleam in them. Apparently Chard was angry about something. It was not uncommon for Chard to be angry about something: and on such occasions he always felt, like the ancient prophet, that he did well to be angry! Chard's temper, in fact, had been straining at the leash ever since Jimmy McCann had blown in at High Coombe.

"Ah! You are here, Compton." Chard's loud, deep, fruity voice was a little deeper than usual. "I have heard, Compton, that you have been called before the—before Mr. McCann." Chard hated alluding to McCann as "the Head".

"Yes, sir," muttered Aubrey. No. 3 Study knew now why Chard had looked in. He had heard of the whopping in the Head's study. A Fifth-Form boy had been whopped, without any reference whatever to the Fifth-Form master! No wonder Chard's small eyes gleamed from his portly red face. Was Chard a a man to be disregarded in this manner: disregarded as if he did not exist? Chard was prepared to take up the cudgels for that member of his form: if there was anything to be done. But naturally he wanted to know the details first. Quite aware that something against the new Head was being planned in his form, Chard had to walk warily. He could not afford to make mistakes in dealing with that keen, efficient, steady-eyed young man, James McCann.

"I heard that you have been caned, Compton?"

"Yes, sir."

Chard breathed heavily. Aubrey really did not want to reveal the signs of suffering: but Chard could see that he had had it hard. And Aubrey was high in Chard's good graces. He was the son of Colonel Compton, a member of the Governing Board, with great influence on that Board. Chard revered the Board of Governors: except, of course, when they made such a ghastly mistake as that of appointing a young man like James McCann as headmaster!

"For what," asked Chard, heavily, "were you caned, Compton?"

Aubrey hesitated.

Teddy Seymour rushed in to explain. Teddy was burning with indignation, as well as throbbing with sympathy.

"It was nothing really, sir! Nothing at all really! Aubrey never did a thing, sir! He just booted a cheeky fag—and McCann saw him—and that—that was all, sir! Young Ferguson wasn't hurt—why, I saw him laughing as he walked away! And Aubrey's had six—"

"It's pretty thick," muttered Bob.

Chard breathed more heavily. Aubrey's offence, evidently, was very light. Still, Chard could not exactly register official approval of the booting of fags!

"A thoughtless act, Compton!" he said. "Hem! A very thoughtless act! But I shall certain take this matter up with the—with Mr. McCann—"

Aubrey coloured. Chard, evidently, fancied that he had hold of a case of undue severity, of which he was going to take all the advantage he could. Aubrey could not let him go to the Head and make a fool of himself.

"That—that wasn't all, sir!" Aubrey stammered a little, but he had to get it out. "Mr. Cann let me off for that, sir—"

"Oh!" ejaculated Chard, staring at him, "I do not quite follow, Compton—"

"He let you off—!" babbled Teddy, in astonishment. "But you've jolly well been licked—"

"What—?" began Bob, equally surprised.

"I—I—I had to wait for the Head in his study, and—and upset some ink over the papers on his table," muttered Aubrey.

"Oh!" ejaculated Teddy.

"Oh!" breathed Bob.

They understood now.

Chard was silent for a moment or two. But he rallied.

"An accident, I have no doubt!" he said.

Aubrey was silent.

Chard looked at Aubrey, and for a moment he was angry, even with the son of Colonel Compton, influential member of the Governing Board. He knew what had happened in the Head's study just as if Aubrey had described it to him: and there was evidently nothing to be done: he had wasted his time, and his breath, in coming up the stairs to No. 3 in the Fifth. But his portly brow cleared. He could find extenuating circumstances in anything that was up against that obnoxious young man James McCann.

"Hem!" he said, at last. "Hem! In that case—hem! In the—the circumstances—hem! Hem!" A faint smile dawned on the red face. "I have heard from Mr. McCann that he is very busy now—hem! Possibly that accident—hem—with the ink may have given him some extra work—hem! It was my intention to raise the matter of drawing in the school bounds, with Mr. McCann but—hem—he seems very busy at the present moment." Chard almost grinned. "Hem!"

He revolved on his portly axis to go.

Then he gave a little start, his eyes fixing on a large can that stood in the corner of the study. A large can was quite an unusual article in a study at High Coombe. And several black smears on the outside of the can revealed that its contents were still more unusual: for obviously it contained tar. Mr. Chard gazed at that can of tar for a long moment, as if it fascinated him. Did so extremely unusual an article in a High Coombe study connect itself, in Chard's mind, with the whispers and mutters he had caught on the subject of an intended rag on the Head?

If so, Chard was quite determined to know nothing. He simply could not help staring at that surprising can. Otherwise he took no note of it. He charged out of the study, and was gone.

Bob Darrell quietly closed the door after him. Then he looked at Aubrey, meeting a stare of defiance.

"So that was it!" said Bob. "McCann never licked you for next to nothing—you ragged the papers in his study—!"

"Why not?" sneered Aubrey. "A few hours writing them out over again may keep him from meddlin' where he's not wanted. He seems to like swotting over Horace, too—I wish him joy of it."

"Well, he had to lick you for it. And I was thinking—" Bob did not finish. But that spot of resentment against McCann had vanished.

"I say, Chard saw that can!" Teddy was alarmed. "He never said anything, but he jolly well saw it—"

"Safer to keep it out of sight, if you're mad enough to do anything with it, Aubrey," grunted Bob.

"Why?" sneered Aubrey. "The Blighter never comes to this study: and nobody else would say a word."

"Chard's a beak, and—"

"Chard will forget all about that can. He won't know a thing about it, when McCann gets the tar and feathers. You know that!"

Bob was silent. He did know it: and that knowledge did not add to his respect for his form-master.

Aubrey gave a painful wriggle.

"He's got it comin'!" he said, between his set lips. "Tar and feathers for that rank outsider—and they'll laugh as much in Common-Room, as the fellows in the studies. He may go, after that! He may be as fed up with High Coombe as High Coombe is with him. This evening—"

"Aubrey, old man, chuck it—"

"Don't be a fool!"

"I tell you, it's mad—rotten—chuck it, old chap—"

"After six from McCann?" Aubrey laughed, while he wriggled. "Shut up, if you can't talk sense, old man. He's got it comin'!"

Bob, dismally, shut up.

CHAPTER IV

IT was sheer luck—a happy chance that solved a problem for Bob Darrell. What would have happened, if he had not spotted James McCann just then, in the thickening dusk Bob did not know.

There was a heavy weight on Bob's mind. He couldn't let this thing go on—how could he? He, if nobody else, realized how terribly serious it was, and what a frightful row there would be about it: and he was as much concerned for McCann himself, as for his unthinking friends. He couldn't let it go on—and he couldn't stop it. It was something of a dilemma.

He knew the whole plan. His friends had never thought for a moment of hiding anything from Bob: he was to be trusted. He was against it: but that cut no ice. Only by giving his friends away to the Beak could he have stopped it: and that, of course, was unimaginable. Bob would not have betrayed a friend to save a whole clan of McCanns from tar and feathers. He wandered in the dusky quad thinking it out, miserably and dismally, wondering and wondering whether there was anything he could do to stop that mad scheme. The dusk fell more thickly: lights gleamed in innumerable windows: but Bob, in his distress, was oblivious of lock-ups. Was there anything he could do?

It was all cut and dried. The can of tar was ready in No. 3. Carter had

the bag of feathers in his study. At the fixed time, no less a person than Corkran of the Sixth, head-prefect of High Coombe, was going to cut off the electric light at the meter. The House would be plunged into sudden and utter darkness. Everyone would think, of course, that it was a "cut": such cuts had occurred before. Anyhow there would be utter darkness. They would make sure first, of course, that McCann was in his study. Plunged into sudden dark, McCann would come out of his study: he was not likely to sit there, like the heathen of old, in darkness! Besides, if it was an electricity "cut", he would have to see to temporary lighting arrangements. There was no doubt that he would come out of his study.

In the corridor, black as a hat, five fellows would be waiting for him, with a can of tar, and a bag of feathers!

McCann was a muscular man, fit as a fiddle. But five pairs of hands would be more than enough for him. And he would be taken wholly and utterly by surprise. It would be, in fact, a matter of only moments, to up-end the can of tar over him, and add to that adhesive flood the mass of feathers. Aubrey, Teddy, Carter, Randal, Tredegar, would be gone the next moment: leaving the Blighter staggering and tottering, well and truly tarred and feathered: and in no doubt whatever about what High Coombe thought of him!

The plan had been laid, discussed, conned over, considered in all its aspects and from every angle: and it simply could not fail. Bob himself did not see how it could possibly fail. James McCann was going to be tarred and feathered that evening by the rebels of High Coombe: and Bob could not stop it: the stars in their courses couldn't stop it.

In No. 3 Study, in the Fifth, there was quite a merry gathering. Aubrey, a little recovered from the "six", was in high spirits: rejoicing in happy anticipation. Bob, feeling as he did, was quite disinclined to add himself to that merry gathering. He was wandering dismally in the dusky quad, thinking it out, or trying to think it out. Was there anything—anything that he could do to stop this mad trick?—to stop it without bringing disaster on his friends? And thinking it over till his head almost ached with the problem, he couldn't think of a thing. And then, glimpsing the Head in the dusk, he remembered that he was staying out of the House after lock-ups.

Much as he admired Jimmy McCann, and gave him what support he could in putting a spot of discipline into the School for Slackers, Bob did not precisely want that discipline to come down on him personally: and McCann was very strict about lock-ups. In the circumstances Bob did not desire to meet his eye. He was close to the ivied wall of the old clock-tower, and he backed into the ivy as he glimpsed the mortar-board. McCann was, apparently, taking a walk in the dusky evening, as he often did: Bob had noticed that there was no light in his study window. He was quite content to let Mr. McCann pass him unseeing. He had not seen him yet, and was not going to, if Bob could help it. To his dismay, McCann came directly towards him.

For a moment or two, it seemed to him that he was spotted. But it was not that. McCann, as Aubrey had remarked, was not a cat to see in the dark: and keen as his eyes were, they did not pick up a shadowy figure crammed into shadowy ivy. He passed within a yard of Bob, and disappeared into the little stone porch of the clock-tower. Bob, breathing rather fast, heard the sound of a key turning in a lock: and then footsteps within the little building died away. McCann had not seen him: did not know he was there: he had evidently walked across to go into the clock-tower for some reason of his own. Bob fancied that he knew the reason, too.

There was only one ingress into the old ivied tower: by the iron-clamped door in the porch, where McCann had just gone in. But about fifteen feet up there was a little window, to which venturesome fags had climbed on the ivy, trespassing into forbidden precincts: at risk of life and limb. Mr. McCann was not the man to come down very heavily on venturesome fags for thoughtless breakages of the rules: but he was the man to be very seriously concerned about their lives and limbs. So he had directed Liggins to screw up that little window: thus putting an effective end to the antics of Ferguson of the Fourth, and other reckless spirits in the Lower School. Old Liggins was as slack as almost everyone else at High Coombe, and the master's eye was required to see that he had carried out instructions. Bob, looking up, caught a glimmer of light at the little window in the tower. McCann had gone up the almost endless spiral stair, as far as that window, and the gleam came from a pocket-torch. Clearly, McCann, taking his evening stroll in the quad, had remembered that window, and was giving it a look-in to make sure that Liggins had done his job. It was merely one of the unnumbered details to which McCann had to give his attention, in the slack and shiftless state of the school of which he had taken charge.

Bob blinked up at that glimmer, and could not help thinking that Jimmy McCann was a much more thorough and dutiful headmaster than High Coombe deserved to possess. Almost every minute of his day and evening was taken up with some duty or other: and that ass, Aubrey, had deliberately wasted hours of his time with that silly trick on the papers in his study. And they were going to tar and feather him that very evening, unless Bob Darrell could think of some way of putting a stop to it. And he couldn't!

But could he not?

Looking up at that glimmer, Bob knew that the Head was fifteen feet up. In all likelihood he had left the key in the lock, to lock it when he went. If he had—!

Bob felt quite giddy, for a moment, with the startling idea that flashed into his mind. If that key was still in the lock—!

He groped into the dark porch.

The iron-clamped door in the little arch was half-open. His groping hand felt the key sticking in the outside of the lock. Naturally McCann had left it there.

Bob's heart thumped.

Locking his headmaster in was an act of disrespect in which many members of the Fifth Form at High Coombe would have rejoiced. Aubrey, certainly, would never have let such a chance like the sunbeams pass him by. Bob would never have dreamed of it: but for one reason—if McCann could be kept from going back to his study, the whole plan of the rebels of High Coombe would fall to pieces. For the accomplishment of that plan, McCann had to be in his study, to issue forth when the light failed. If he was not in his study—!

He couldn't be in his study if Bob turned the key in that door! If that band of reckless young rascals waited for him in the corridor, when Corkran cut off the light, they would wait in vain: and could wait on till dorm, if they liked, but no McCann would fall into their mutinous hands. That awful "rag" could not take place: Bob would have prevented it, and without landing his friends in trouble!

He hesitated. Locking the Head in was a very serious thing—awfully serious! But to prevent something much more serious—to prevent a mad prank that would be followed by the most frightful "row" High Coombe had ever known—surely—! While Bob hesitated, there was the sound of a footstep descending the spiral stair. That settled it for Bob. He had to stop that rag, if he could—and he could: by pulling that door shut and turning the key. McCann would be grimly angry: he would leave no stone unturned to discover who had locked him in the tower: and if he discovered who had done it, Bob would have to face the music, and take what came to him. But he would have saved Jimmy McCann from being tarred and feathered!

He drew the door shut, and turned the key! He jerked the key out of the lock, slipped it into his pocket, and cut away. Later—when all danger of a rag was over—he would have to cut out of the House and unlock that door—the Head could not be left there all night. For the present, James McCann was safest where he was: and Bob vanished into the shadows with the key in his pocket.

CHAPTER V

MR. CHARD grunted, as he stepped out of his door, into the deep dusk, and into the wind that came up the coombe from the Atlantic. Chard had reached an age when an armchair in the evening had a strong appeal. An armchair, a fireside, a pipe, and somebody to listen to his opinions stated in loud tones that brooked no contradiction, was Chard's idea of comfort. And he had to walk across the windy quad to see that obnoxious young man, because he had not been—forsooth—at leisure earlier. Old Dr. Chetwode had never been inaccessible to Chard—though perhaps he would have liked

to be, sometimes! This young man with ginger in his hair seemed to consider his time more valuable than Chard's. It was annoying. Everything, in fact, about McCann was annoying to Chard: and he resolved to speak very plainly, and very emphatically, on that subject of the drawn-in bounds. Really it was time that McCann learned that a senior master, who had been twenty years on the staff, was not a trifle light as air.

Still, Chard smiled, as he remembered why McCann had not been at leisure earlier. He could not, of course, approve of such a trick as Aubrey had played in McCann's study. He was bound to disapprove of it very strongly. Nevertheless, he smiled. A young man who made himself obnoxious all round must naturally expect a spot or two of trouble.

Chard charged across the quad, and almost charged into a dim figure that lurked in the shadows there.

"Carter!" he exclaimed.

It was Carter of the Fifth, out of the House long after lock-ups. Chard peered at him, Chard was not a whale on discipline like McCann, and he closed his eyes when he could to kickings over the traces in his form. Still, even Chard could not quite pass this without remark.

"What are you doing out in lock-ups, Carter?" he asked.

Carter gave him a stealthy look. Inwardly, he was thinking that it was just like that old ass, Chard, to blunder in where he was not wanted. If he was going across for a chin-wag with the other beaks in Common-Room, did he have to run into a fellow in the dark? Carter, as a matter of fact, was a scout: he was watching the window of the Head's study, waiting for a light to come on there. As soon as a light in the study indicated that McCann was there, Carter had to pass the word to his confederates, and the "rag" would proceed. But no light had come on in the study window yet.

"Well!" rapped Mr. Chard, as Carter did not immediately answer.

"I—I just stepped out for a breath of fresh air, sir, after prep—Livy gave me a bit of a headache," said Carter, artlessly.

That would not have done for Jimmy McCann. But it did for Chard. Chard, as he often said in Common-Room, trusted his boys!

"Well, well, you should not have stepped out in lock-ups, Carter," he said. "Rules are rules, you know. You had better go in at once."

"Oh, yes, sir!" Carter made a few steps towards the senior lobby.

Chard charged on, and disappeared.

Carter winked at a star glimmering overhead, and halted.

Chard, no doubt, supposed that he had gone in at once, as bidden. Carter was willing to let him suppose so. But as Carter had to scout in the quad till a light came on in McCann's study window, he was not thinking of going in. Chard went in. Carter stayed out.

Mr. Chard forgot all about Carter, as he charged into the House. He stopped for a few minutes to chat with Capes, and then for a few more minutes

to chat with Mace. He was a chatty soul. At length, however, Chard charged up the corridor to the headmaster's study, tapped at Mr. McCann's door, and opened it.

Then he stared into the study, breathing hard and breathing deep.

It was dark within. McCann was not there. Distinctly, quite distinctly, he had said that he would see Chard about nine. It was now nine. There was no mistake about the matter. Chard was on time. In common civility, McCann should have been there to greet the senior master with whom he had made a definite appointment. He was not there!

For a long moment, Chard stood looking into an empty shadowy study. He was deeply offended—not for the first time. Careless neglect like this could hardly be accidental—McCann had a very retentive memory, and never forgot an appointment or anything else. This was deliberate! It was an affront! It stirred Chard's ire deeply. Apparently McCann considered that a senior master could wait till he chose to come, like a fag waiting for a beak!

Breathing very hard, and very deep, Chard reached in and switched on the electric light, and charged in.

He had to wait!

That puppy intended him to cool his heels in the study, waiting for him! Chard could think nothing else—knowing nothing, of course, about a headmaster in a clock-tower, and a key in Bob Darrell's pocket!

"Puppy!" breathed Chard.

He closed the study door, and sat down in an armchair—to wait! He drew a spot of comfort from a glance at the writing-table, where sheets of paper lay, covered with McCann's neat writing. Judging by the number of the sheets, the puppy had had a lot of work to do after Aubrey Compton's visit. Thinking of Compton, he was reminded of something he had seen in Compton's study. A grim smile came over the red face. What were they going to do with that can of tar?

But Chard resolutely dismissed that thought from his mind. He was going to know nothing—he was not even going to surmise. Puppies who kept senior masters waiting and cooling their heels, could look after themselves.

Suddenly, Mr. Chard gave quite a jump.

The light went out.

Unexpectedly, he sat in complete darkness. He blinked in the dark like an owl! Something had happened to the light—a fuse, perhaps! Or another of those cuts? Whatever it was, the light was gone, and the interior of the Head's study was as black as the interior of a hat.

"Pish!" grunted Mr. Chard.

He waited for a few moments, in the hope that the light would come on again. But it did not come on. It must be a "cut". They were always cutting off the electric current, in these days, and always, of course, at the most inconvenient moments. Chard had no idea of sitting it out in the dark. He heaved

his portly form from the armchair. If the "cut" lasted, fags would be larking in the dark—there would be uproar among thoughtless Lower boys. No doubt McCann would be taking the matter in hand: he could hardly be coming to his study in present circumstances. Chard's interview with the headmaster was unavoidably postponed. He groped to the door and opened it.

He stepped out into the passage.

And then—!

What followed seemed like an awful dream to the master of the Fifth Form at High Coombe. It was real—awfully real—but it did undoubtedly seem like some ghastly nightmare.

What followed seemed like an awful dream

CHAPTER VI

"QUIET!" breathed Aubrey Compton.

He did not need to whisper that warning. They were all very quiet: as quiet as mice with the cat at hand.

They were all ready!

Everything had gone like clock-work. Not a single detail had gone wrong. Aubrey had planned it all carefully, cautiously, efficiently. The whole thing was absolutely fool-proof, and couldn't go wrong!

Carter had cut in, by way of the senior lobby, with the news that the light had come on in the Head's study. He had even seen a shadow on the blind. That was the first essential: the man was where they wanted him!

The next step was up to Corkran of the Sixth. Corkran played his part without a hitch. He strolled away to regions seldom explored by High Coombe fellows, leaving Aubrey, Teddy, Carter, Randal, and Tredegar waiting for the light to go off. They waited in Big Study: to which apartment a can of tar and a bag of feathers had already been conveyed. Other fellows in Big Study grinned and chuckled. Everyone knew what was scheduled to happen: everyone was looking forward to it with pleasurable excitement. Aubrey rather expected Bob Darrell to butt in, at the last moment, with futile remonstrances. But he did not butt in. Bob was up in No. 3 Study, giving rather belated attention to prep.—no longer interested in the proceedings of Aubrey and Co. since he had turned the key of the clock-tower. Bob, deep in Livy, at which he was not half so good as he was at soccer, was not thinking of Aubrey and Co. at all. Not, of course, that Aubrey would have listened to a word of remonstrance. Aubrey was going through with this!

There were exclamations in Big Study when the light suddenly went out. Corkran had done his bit!

In the dark, five fellows slipped out of Big Study, Compton carrying the can of tar, Carter the bag of feathers, the other three following. There was no time to lose—they had to get on the spot swiftly, to catch the victim as he came out of the headmaster's study. There were sounds of confusion all over the House—the sudden blotting out of all lights was startling and a little bewildering. The voice of Ferguson of the Fourth was heard yelling:

"It's another cut, you men! Come on."

There was shouting, and scampering of feet, and loud sounds of expostulation as fellows barged into one another in the dark. Masters' voices were heard calling—unheeded by excited fags secure in the dark. Aubrey and Co. paid no heed to what went on around them. Swiftly, they reached the corridor on which the headmaster's study opened: swiftly, they reached the door of that study: very swiftly indeed were they on the spot, ready for that door to

open. Swift and silent, they gathered about that door—ready! Aubrey whispered "Quiet!"—but really there was not a sound. The man who was to come out of the Head's study couldn't have the slightest misgiving that five fellows, a can of tar and a bag of feathers waited for him in the dark corridor.

The study door was heard to open.

Nothing could be seen in the darkness: not even a moving shadow. Aubrey and Co. had to depend on their ears. Out of the doorway came an unseen figure, and the next moment five fellows were busy. Seymour and Randal groped, and grasped arms: Tredegar pushed against a chest: Aubrey Compton up-ended the can of tar, Carter hurled the feathers from the bag. It all went beautifully according to plan. From an astonished and bewildered recipient of the tar and feathers, came a choked howl, which sounded as if some of the tar and feathers had gone into a mouth. Gurgling, spluttering, a tarry and feather figure staggered in the doorway: while five fellows, their work well and truly done, cut down the corridor in haste—leaving the tarry and feathery figure to stagger, with an empty bag, and a can from which tar was still trickling, to keep him company.

"Urrrrgh! Oooooch! Woooooch! Urrgh! Wurrrggh!" Such were the sounds that followed the raggers as they fled!

A minute later, a loud shrill whistle was heard. Whoever it was that whistled was not visible. But a good many fellows knew that it was a signal to Corkran that the deed was done, and that he could turn on the light again. It was the briefest "cut" ever: for the lights had not been out five minutes, and now they flashed on again all over the House.

Bob Darrell was standing in the doorway of No. 3, up in the Fifth studies, when the lights came on. His belated prep. had been interrupted by the light that failed, and he was staring out of the study, wondering what had happened. Two laughing fellows came up the passage, and he stared at Aubrey Compton and Teddy Seymour. They seemed in high feather.

"Coming down, Bob?" asked Aubrey, laughing.

"What's happened?" stuttered Bob.

"Guess!" grinned Teddy.

"The light went out—"

"Didn't you expect it to?" asked Aubrey. "Forgotten what was on, old man? Livy so jolly attractive that you forgot that the Blighter was booked for tar and feathers this evening?"

Bob could only stare blankly.

"Come down," urged Aubrey. "He will be worth seeing! We came up to fetch you, Bob—do come down! Now the light's on again, you'll be able to see the sight of your little life—McCann in tar and feathers!"

"Gone mad?" gasped Bob. "If not, what do you mean? You didn't carry on with that rot, I suppose, without McCann?"

"Hardly! We got him all right."

"You got him!" repeated Bob, like a fellow in a dream.

"Of course we did! The whole thing went without a hitch! He came out of his study, as we knew he would, when the light went. And—"

"He came out of his study?"

"Of course he did—"

"Not McCann?"

"Who else?" asked Aubrey, staring at him. "What are you burblin' about? Carter tipped us when the light went on in his study, and we knew he was there—and the rest went like clockwork. Tar and feathers—"

"Oh, holy smoke!" gasped Bob Darrell. "Was there somebody in the Head's study, and did you think it was McCann?"

"It was McCann—"

"It wasn't, because it couldn't have been!" yelled Bob. "McCann's over in the clock-tower this very minute, and I know he is, because I locked him in there to keep him out of your mad rag. If you got anybody, it wasn't McCann."

"Wha-a-t—?" stuttered Aubrey.

"Oh, jiminy!" gasped Teddy.

They stared at Bob, stared at one another, and then raced away down the passage to the stairs.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Bob.

He went down the staircase after them, but he did not join the buzzing, wildly-excited crowd that had gathered round a strange and startling, tarry and feathery, figure. He slipped quietly out of the House, to cut across to the clock-tower and unlock a door there. But Aubrey and Teddy joined the crowd, and their eyes popped at the tarry and feathery figure; which, now that it could be seen in the light, was seen to be much too ample in its proportions for Jimmy McCann. And its voice, though somewhat disguised by tar and feathers, was now recognizable. And it trumpeted:

"This outrage—this iniquitous outrage on a senior member of the staff—grooogh!—I have been attacked—assaulted—smothered with tar—smothered with feathers—who has done this? Who? Where is Mr. McCann? They must be found at once—flogged—expelled—" Chard trumpeted on.

"Chard!" said Teddy, faintly.

"Chard!" moaned Aubrey.

They faded out of the crowd, anxious not to catch a tarry eye, feeling, and looking, quite sick. That plan had gone like clockwork: there had not been a hitch: only in one single, solitary detail did there seem to have been a slip—they had not got Jimmy McCann with the tar and feathers—they had got Chard!

CHAPTER VII

JIMMY MCCANN never knew who had locked him in the clock-tower. He had been a prisoner there for quite a considerable time, when he heard the key turn in the lock, and guessed that it meant release: but whoever had handled the key, was gone in the darkness before he could emerge. Possibly, when he learned of what had happened in the House during his absence, Mr. McCann was rather glad that he had been locked in the old tower out of harm's way: he might even have guessed that it was a friendly hand that had turned the key on him. However that might be, Bob Darrell's exploit as a locker-in of beaks never came to light: the inquiries on the subject were very perfunctory. But the inquiries into the authors of the tar-and-feather exploit were not perfunctory! Chard was raging. And Chard remembered something he had seen in No. 3 Study on his visit there. He had taken no heed of a can of tar destined, in all probability, for a "puppy": but that can of tar having descended on his own portly head, he heeded it very much indeed. And when a summons came to No. 3 to appear in the Presence, there was only one thing for Aubrey to do: go to his beak, own up, taking the whole thing on his own shoulders: and express his deep, heartfelt regret—which undoubtedly was sincere!—for that sad, sorrowful, lamentable mistake in the dark.

What view Chard would have taken of the episode, had the tar and feathers landed on McCann, his form had been able to surmise. But the tar and feathers had not landed on McCann: they had landed on Chard, and he took them to heart, as it were. It was a very painful interview: and Aubrey went away after it with the knowledge, for what that was worth, that Chard, portly and short of wind as he was, could whop as effectively as Jimmy McCann.

But there was at least one satisfactory outcome of the affair: after what had happened, nobody was ever likely to be tarred and feathered again in the dark by the slackers of High Coombe!

THE END

"BWANA, MY EARS do not hear you."

Bobolobo of the Kikuyu stood quite still.

The black man, tall, muscular, brawny, magnificent in his fighting-garb of black-and-white monkey-skins, looked a giant beside Lyn Strong, though Lyn was sturdy. With his rhinoceros hide shield on his left arm, his three spears in his right hand, Bobolobo was equipped for war. Lyn was armed with the white man's weapon: a rifle under his arm.

They stood in a narrow forest path, where interlacing branches overhead shut out the blaze of the African sun, though not its heat. It was a path trodden through forest and jungle by the feet of countless animals going down to the banks of the Popolaki river to drink. Generations of wild creatures, antelopes, gorillas, hyenas, lions, and many others, had trodden that path, and the treading of many years had marked it plainly.

Where Lyn Strong and the Kikuyu had halted, another path branched off, leading away through the tropical forest at right angles, in the direction of the distant low foot-hills. In that direction, though far away. Mount Kenya

soared to the sky, where, as Bobolobo did not doubt, the great god N'gai dwelt on the snowy summit amid the clouds.

Lyn, about to take the second path, looked back, as the Kikuyu spoke, and his boyish brow wrinkled in a frown. Lyn, the son of Grant Strong the hunter of Masumpwe, was accustomed to give orders: Bobolobo, the native tracker, to obey them.

"Have I not spoken plainly, Bobolobo?" demanded Lyn. "Here we must separate. You will take the path to the river, I the path to the hills. It is two days since we left Masumpwe, to look for sign of the Mau Mau men who have been driving cattle and burning the crops in the shambas. We have found nothing: and we must go two ways to look for the Mau Mau."

Still the Kikuyu did not stir.

"Do not your ears hear me, Bobolobo?" exclaimed Lyn, sharply.

"Bwana, my ears do not hear," answered the Kikuyu. "When we left Masumpwe, the Bwana M'kubwa bade me care for his son in the forest: and it is not written that the young Bwana shall go alone, for the Mau Mau are fierce and terrible men, and the young Bwana is but a boy."

Lyn Laughed.

"I have my rifle, and I do not fear the Mau Mau, Bobolobo," he said. "We must find sign of them before we return to Masumpwe, for I cannot tell my father that we have failed. Go you by the path to the river, while I take the other path. Your ears must hear, for it is a command."

Lyn's hand rose to point.

For a moment longer, the Kikuyu did not stir. Then he bowed his tall head, and without another word, strode away by the path of the river. In a few moments the thick bush encroaching on the narrow jungle-path hid him from Lyn's sight.

Lyn, with a smile, turned to take the other path. Bobolobo of the Kikuyu was loyal and devoted, and anxious for his safety: but the hunter's son was well accustomed to taking care of himself: and in point of fact, he relied more on his own rifle than on Bobolobo's spears. With his eyes and ears on the alert, watchful and wary for enemies lurking in the thick forest, Lyn Strong tramped along the tangled path towards the distant hills, nothing doubting that the Kikuyu had obeyed his instructions, and was heading for the river.

But for once, if for once only, Bobolobo was deaf to the young Bwana's commands: or as he expressed it in his own picturesque way, his ears did not hear. Hardly a dozen paces had the Kikuyu taken along the path to the river, when he halted, and bent his tall head to listen. Faintly to his ears came sounds which told that the young Bwana was going: and in a few moments, those sounds died away in the silence of the forest.

Then Bobolobo, turning, retraced his steps to the parting of the ways. There he stood, looking the way Lyn had gone. To follow, against orders, was to incur his young master's anger. But to leave him to go his way alone in the

shadowy depths of the forest, where Mau Mau raiders lurked with murder in their hearts, was not in the thoughts of the loyal Kikuyu. He stood in doubt, with a clouded brow, while long minutes passed, and he was still in doubt. And then suddenly from afar, ringing and echoing through the giant trees of the Kenya forest, came the crack of a rifle.

CHAPTER II

"N'KAZI!" breathed Lyn Strong.

He came to a sudden halt, and his rifle flew to his shoulder. The man who barred his path was scarcely three yards in front of him: he had stepped as silently as a ghost from the bush. N'kazi was tall and muscular, almost as big a man as Bobolobo, and he carried a long spear in his hand. Lyn knew the fierce, savage black face: N'kazi, the leader of the Mau Mau gang in the Popolaki valley, was a known man: long sought by the askaris and the white soldiers from Nairobi.

Lyn had been hunting for sign of the Mau Mau: and unexpectedly, he had come on their leader. N'kazi, from his great height, looked down on the boy hunter, with a savage grin and a flash of white teeth. The levelled rifle that looked him full in the face did not seem to daunt him. That rifle was steady as a rock in Lyn's hands, and his finger was on the trigger.

"Drop that spear, N'Kazi!" rapped Lyn.

"The Small One speaks with a big voice," said N'Kazi, derisively. "Did he come into the forest to seek for me?"

"I came to hunt for sign of you and your gang," answered Lyn, "and I have found you, and shall take you a prisoner back to Masumpwe, or leave you dead for the hyenas to pick. Drop that spear, or I pull the trigger."

"The Bwana M'kubwa will wait long to see his son again!" jeered N'kazi, and even as he spoke the words, there was a sudden rustle in the bushes behind Lyn, and unseen hands grasped him.

In a flash he realized how he had been trapped. He had passed hidden enemies on the forest path and the cunning N'kazi had held his attention while they closed in behind him.

As the hands behind him dragged him over, he pulled the trigger. The bullet grazed N'kazi's cheek, cutting a strip of skin, and spattering a bare black shoulder with blood. The next moment the rifle was wrenched away, and Lyn was struggling desperately in two pairs of brawny hands. Two brawny blacks had grasped him, and either of them was more than a match for the boy hunter. They flung him to the earth, and a knee was planted on him, pinning him there, two fierce black faces grinning down at him.

N'kazi, dabbing blood from his cheek with the back of his hand, looked down at him, with smouldering eyes.

"O Small One," he said. "You came to seek me, and you have found me. But it is not N'kazi whose bones will be left for the hyenas."

Lyn lay silent, in a grasp that was too strong for his resistance, expecting instant death. And for the moment, it seemed that N'kazi would thrust with his long spear. Its broad blade flashed before Lyn's eyes: but he did not close them: he had courage to face death. But N'kazi did not thrust with the spear. He muttered to his followers in the native dialect, and Lyn was dragged to his feet. With a grasp of iron on either arm, they forced him away into the forest, following N'kazi, who lead the way.

Lyn stumbled along between his captors, wondering what it was that they intended. Not for a moment did he expect to escape alive from the hands of the Mau Mau. Death to the whites was their slogan: even if he had not wounded N'kazi, they would not have spared him. But the gash on his cheek, the blood that trickled over his bare shoulder, had roused all the savage ferocity in N'kazi, and it was not the thrust of a spear that was in his thoughts. Several times he looked back at Lyn, and his black eyes smouldered, as the boy hunter was led away into the forest. Lyn could only wonder, with a heavy heart, what savage vengeance was in his mind. He thought of Bobolobo, the brave Kikuyu, whom he had commanded to leave him: but it was useless to think of him: he was far, far away by this time. And he wished that he had heeded Bobolobo when he said that his ears did not hear. But it was too late now.

At a little distance from the forest path, the Mau Mau gang came to a halt in an open glade, circled by giant trees and thorny bush. At a muttered word from N'kazi, Lyn was slammed against the trunk of a tree, with his back to it, and a leather cord bound him there, with such cruel tightness that he could not stir a limb.

N'kazi, still dabbing blood from his cheek, stood looking at him, his dark face wrinkled in a savage grin. With his long spear, he pointed to a little earthen mound at a short distance from the tree.

"Do your eyes see, O Small One with the big voice?" he asked, mockingly.

Lyn stared across at the mound.

"My eyes see, N'kazi," he answered. "It is an anthill—the home of the red ants that I see."

"Naam! And soon you shall see the red ants also!" said N'kazi. "It is not the hyenas that will pick your bones."

"Oh!" breathed Lyn. And the colour wavered in his cheeks. He knew now the terrible intention of the Mau Mau leader, whose savage face had been gashed by his bullet. It was not death by the thrust of a spear that he had to look for: it was a torture known to the savages of Central Africa: and in spite of his courage his heart almost failed him.

One of the blacks had taken a gourd of honey. He spilled it over Lyn's mosquito-boots, and then receded towards the mound, dripping a trail of honey as he went. Lyn watched him in dumb despair. From the prisoner tied to the tree, to the anthill in the glade, lay the trail of honey: and a sudden thrust of a spear into the mound, brought a swarm of its tiny inhabitants pouring forth.

Lyn's eyes were upon them. They had found the trail of honey. Soon they would be following it: and, soon or late, they would reach the prisoner bound to the tree, and swarm over him, biting with tiny but pitiless bites. Only too well Lyn Strong knew what the fierce red ants were like: he had seen the bones of an elephant, picked clean in a single night by the tiny savage creatures, in their countless swarms. And the colour drained from his face as he watched, and knew what was coming to him. Minutes—perhaps half-an-hour—before the red ants reached him, but then—

A shudder ran through him from head to foot.

"O Bobolobo!" he muttered. The brave Kikuyu would have died to save him: and his own order had sent Bobolobo far from him in his hour of desperate need. If but Bobolobo could have known—

Something stirred in the bush on the edge of the glade. Lyn's eyes widened, and N'kazi stared round amazed, as one of the blacks uttered a sudden hoarse cry, and fell headlong. He lay still where he fell, and the haft of a throwing-spear was sticking up from the black body. And even as the Mau Mau realized that an enemy lurked in cover on the edge of the glade, another throwing-spear came whizzing, swift and accurate as a bullet in its flight, and a second black went down, transfixed.

N'kazi uttered a yell of fierce wrath and alarm, grasping his long spear, and staring round him with blazing eyes. Both his men lay speared in the glade: and as he stared, a tall figure in black-and-white monkey-skins came leaping from the bush, and Lyn's eyes danced as he shouted:

"Bobolobo!"

And the next moment Bobolobo of the Kikuyu, and N'kazi the chief of the Mau Mau, were fighting desperately, spear to spear.

CHAPTER III

LYN WATCHED, his heart beating in great thumps.

Only a few yards from him, under the mighty branches of the tree to which he was bound, the two black men were fighting a desperate duel to the death. On the outcome was staked Lyn's life as well as Bobolobo's. He strained at the cords that bound him to the tree, but in vain: he could give no aid to the brave Kikuyu. But his faith in Bobolobo was strong.

The red ants were crawling, myriads of them, along the trail of honey. One tiny creature, in advance of the rest, reached Lyn, and he felt a sudden sharp pang in his leg. But it would be minutes—long minutes—before they swarmed on him, and if Bobolobo was victorious, he was saved. With his heart in his eyes he watched the Kikuyu. Bobo, he knew, must have disregarded his order: his ears, after all, did not hear! From the bottom of his heart Lyn was glad of it. If there was yet a chance that he might see his father again, in the shady streets of Masumpwe, it depended on the faithful Kikuyu who had followed him his ears deaf for once to his young master's orders.

There had been three of the Mau Mau, but the Kikuyu was cunning. He had tracked them with the silent tread of a leopard, and from cover his two throwing-spears had each claimed a victim. Now his fighting-spear was in his sinewy grasp as he rushed on N'kazi.

Bobolobo was attacking . . . N'kazi was driven back.

But N'kazi was strong and muscular and powerful, and looked a match even for the giant Kikuyu. His face, streaked with blood from the gash of Lyn's bullet, was like that of a hyena in its savage fury. Spear to spear, the two powerful black men fought: trampling, springing, winding, watching each other with burning eyes, thrusting and warding and thrusting again.

"O Bobo!" breathed Lyn, in anguish, as a fierce rush of the Mau Mau outcast drove the Kikuyu back, and back, and Bobolobo's foot caught in a trailing vine, and he staggered.

N'kazi, with a fierce yell of triumph, bounded on him, thrusting. But Bobo caught the thrust on his rhinoceros-hide shield, and turned it aside: and then, with a spring as active as a leopard's, recovered himself. And Lyn breathed again.

And now Bobolobo was attacking, and it was N'kazi who was driven back. The spears flashed like lightning, in the sunlight that filtered through the branches overhead. Suddenly there was red on the broad blade of N'kazi's spear: it had grazed the Kikuyu's shoulder and drawn blood.

The Mau Mau chief made a spring like a lion. His reddened spearblade flashed under Bobolobo's eyes. Lyn felt his heart sick within him as he watched. But again the rhinoceros-hide shield caught the spear and turned it aside, and Bobolobo thrust in his turn.

With one terrible cry, the chief of the Mau Mau fell.

Bobolobo stood over him as he crashed, his spear ready for another thrust. But another thrust was not needed. N'kazi of the Mau Mau lay like a log, and did not stir again.

Bobolobo lowered his fighting-spear. The fierce excitement died out of his face: and his voice was low and grave as he spoke, his eyes on the slain enemy stretched at his feet.

"Speak well of me, O N'kazi, in the land of the shadows!" said Bobolobo. And he turned to his master, bound to the tree.

"O Bobo!" panted Lyn.

The cutting edge of the Kikuyu's spear slashed through the cord. Lyn Strong staggered from the tree, and stood panting, almost dizzy with the relief. The red ants that crawled and crawled along the trail of honey had no terrors for him now.

"O Bobo, I sent you away from me, and you have saved me," panted Lyn.

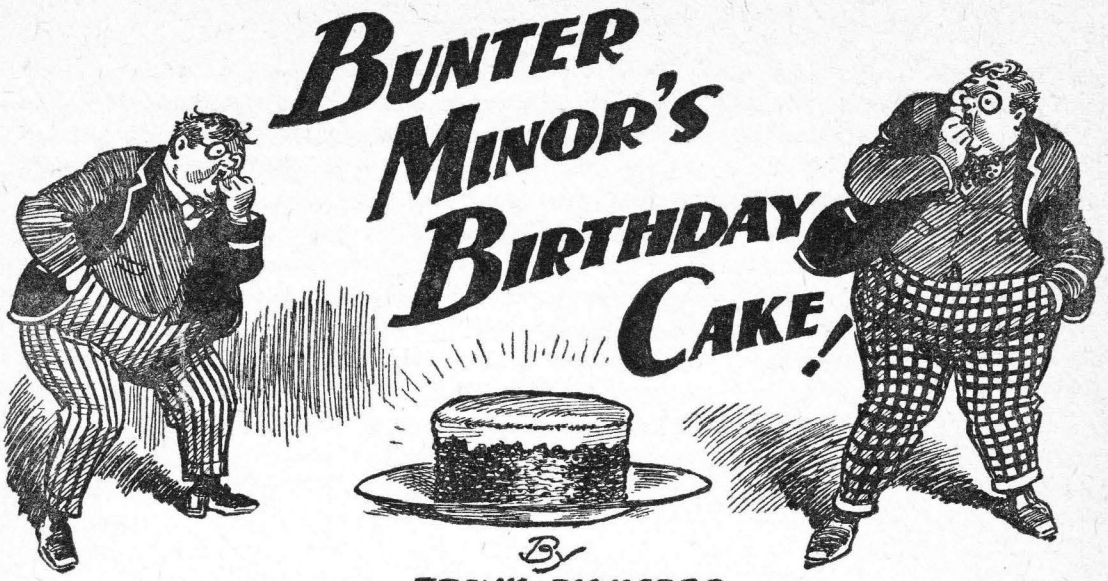
"My ears did not hear the words of the Bwana!" said Bobolobo. "But my ears heard the shot of the Bwana's rifle, and I came. And the Bwana M'kubwa will know that Bobolobo was faithful to his trust. And we have found the enemies we sought, O Bwana, and behold they lie slain by my spears, and we may return to Masumpwe, and tell them that the cattle will be safe, and that N'kazi of the Mau Mau will no longer burn the crops in the shambas. And they will know that I, Bobolobo of the Kikuyu, am a great warrior."

Bobolobo swelled out his broad chest

"Am I not a great warrior, Bwana? There were three of the Mau Mau, and I was but one, and they lie slain by my spears, to feed the hyenas and the jackals. In all the lands that N'gai sees with his eyes from the height of the Great Mountain, even among the tribes of the Masai, who are terrible in war, there is no greater warrior than Bobolobo of the Kikuyu!"

And Lyn nodded, and was careful not to smile.

THE END



CHAPTER I

"I SAY, BILLY!"

Sammy Bunter, of the Second Form at Greyfriars, squeaked his loudest squeak.

Billy Bunter, of the Remove, certainly heard that squeak.

But he did not heed it.

Billy Bunter was just emerging from the tuck-shop at Greyfriars when Sammy's eyes, and spectacles, fell on him. Under a fat arm he had a parcel of considerable bulk.

That parcel, obviously, contained tuck of some kind. It looked, to Sammy, like a big cake. Which looked, also, as if Billy Bunter was in unusual funds. No doubt he had been exercising his skill as a borrower in the Remove. Anyhow there he was, with a parcel, probably a cake, under his fat arm, rolling out of the tuckshop, and rolling on, heedless of the fraternal squeak.

"Billy!" howled Sammy.

Still Billy did not heed. Neither his eyes nor his spectacles turned on his minor. Indeed, so far from heeding Sammy as an affectionate elder brother might have been expected to do, he accelerated. He rolled on, and like Iser in the poem he rolled rapidly.

Sammy was left blinking after him with an indignant blink. Billy Bunter disappeared into the House, leaving him indignantly blinking.

Sammy Bunter breathed very hard.

This was the limit.

Sammy had been looking for his major. Sammy was in a state not uncommon among fags of the Second-form, which he would have described as "stony". In such circumstances it was seldom of any use to apply to his major. Billy seldom had any money, and when he had any, it always went without delay to the tuckshop. But, as it happened, the morrow was Sammy's birthday. Sammy remembered that, whether Billy did or not. At such an auspicious time, Sammy considered, Billy might have been good for a "bob" at least—possibly half-a-crown, if he chanced happily to be in funds.

Instead of which, there was Billy, heedless of Sammy and of the anniversary on the morrow, rolling off with a big cake under his arm: not even asking his minor up to his study to share it with him!

Brotherly love was not highly developed in the Bunter clan. But this really was the limit. At that moment, Sammy Bunter would have been quite pleased to smack the fattest head in the Remove!

CHAPTER II

"BILLY, OLD chap!"

The fact that he would rather have liked to smack the fattest head in the Remove, could hardly have been guessed from the affectionate tone in which Sammy Bunter spoke, as he blinked into No. 7 study in the Remove passage.

"I say, you know, it's my birthday to-morrow, and—"

Sammy broke off at that. He discerned that he was addressing empty space. Billy Bunter was not in his study.

Sammy had followed him up, after thinking the matter over. He expected to find his major dealing with that cake: and a reminder that the morrow was Sammy's birthday might have its effect. It was a surprise to find that Billy was not there.

"Oh, crikey!" ejaculated Sammy.

He rolled into the study.

On the table lay the parcel he had seen under Billy Bunter's arm. He blinked at it with keen interest. On closer inspection, there was no doubt that it contained a cake. From a large cardboard box, wrapped in paper and tied with string, a faint but delightful aroma was perceptible. It was a cake—a large cake—a luscious cake!

Sammy's eyes gleamed behind his spectacles, and his extensive mouth watered.

That cake was at his mercy!

Why Billy Bunter had not started on it yet was quite a puzzle. Sammy had taken it for granted that Billy had conveyed it to his lair to devour it without

delay. But he had not even unpacked it. There it was, still tied up in the box, as when he had carried it out of the tuck-shop. Possibly he was going to call other Remove fellows to the feast. If so, his minor evidently was not to be included—he had passed his minor by like the idle wind which he regarded not.

Such unbrotherly conduct naturally moved Sammy's indignation. He was still more deeply moved by the cake! In about a hundredth part of a second, Sammy's mind was made up. He was going to snoop that cake! Billy Bunter, in the Remove, was well known as a snooper of tuck. For once he was going to be, so to speak, the snoopee instead of the snooper! Serve him jolly well right, was Sammy's opinion.

In a matter of moments, the string was untied, the paper unwrapped, and the cardboard box opened. Sammy's eyes danced behind his spectacles, as he gazed at a large, luscious, scrumptious cake. Shillings and shillings must have been expended on that cake: Billy Bunter must have "touched" three or four fellows in the Remove for small loans to make up the sum! And he had been going to keep it all for himself, regardless of fraternal claims, caring nothing for Sammy's imminent birthday! Not if Sammy knew it!

Fat fingers lifted the cake from the box.

Sammy was about to roll doorward with it, but he paused.

He did not want that cake's disappearance to be discovered too soon. Billy might suspect who had been there, and follow the trail! He was welcome to do so after Sammy had disposed of the cake. But not before that.

The fat fag turned back to the table.

A dusty old hassock, on which Billy Bunter was accustomed to rest his feet when he sprawled in the study armchair, was close at hand. Sammy lifted it into the cardboard box. It weighed more or less the same as the cake. Then swiftly he wrapped up the box in the paper again, and retied the string.

That parcel now looked exactly the same as when Billy Bunter had deposited it on the table. Until he unwrapped it, he could not know, or suspect, that any change had taken place in its contents.

Sammy chuckled.

He was through now in No. 7. With a big cake under a fat arm, he rolled out of the study, and rolled down the passage to the stairs.

CHAPTER III

"HALLO!"

"Whose cake?"

"You fat sweep!"

"Bag him!"

It was sheer ill-luck for Sammy Bunter, that as he rolled across the Remove

landing to the staircase, four Remove fellows came up the stairs in a bunch. Bolsover major, Skinner, Snoop, and Stott, all stared at Sammy: and closed round him promptly. A fag of the Second-form, rolling out of the Remove studies with a cake under his arm, was an object not of suspicion but of certainty.

"Whose cake?" grinned Skinner.

"By gum!" exclaimed Bolsover major. "That fat villain Bunter snoops tuck in the studies—now his minor seems to be starting on the same game. Where did you get that cake, young Bunter?"

"I—I—I—!" stammered Sammy.

"Snooped it, of course," said Skinner. "Whose is it?"

Sammy Bunter, instead of answering that question, made a wild rush to dodge Bolsover and Co. and escape. But he had simply no chance. Skinner

"Serve him jolly well right," was Sammy's opinion.

and Snoop grasped him, while Bolsover major jerked away the cake. Only too clearly and sadly Bunter minor was not going to enjoy that luscious cake snooped from his major's study.

"I—I say, you gimme my cake!" gasped Sammy.

"Yours?" grinned Bolsover.

"More ours than yours, I fancy!" chuckled Skinner.

"Much more!" said Snoop. "Boot him out! Give him a tip about snooping tuck in Remove studies."

"What-ho!"

Bolsover major, Skinner, Snoop, and Stott, all kicked together. A fat fag, yelling, fled down the staircase—minus the cake. That prize was left in the hands of Bolsover and Co.

"I wonder whose it is!" remarked Stott.

"Ours!" said Skinner, positively. "Come along to my study, you fellows, and we'll whack it out."

They went along to Skinner's study. Ten minutes later, that cake had disappeared from existence, to the last crumb and the last plum.

CHAPTER IV

"HOW MANY 'n's' in 'many', Toddy?"

Billy Bunter asked that question, the following morning.

Peter Todd had come up to the study for his books. He found his fat study-mate there—standing by the table, blinking through his big spectacles at a parcel thereon, and with a label in one fat hand, a pen in the other.

"Eh! One for choice," answered Toddy.

"Sure?" asked Bunter, doubtfully. "I fancy there are two, Peter."

"Put as many as you like!" said Peter.

"Well, I want to get this right," said Bunter. "I've got to put a message on a birthday present, you know. It's my minor's birthday to-day, and I'm giving him a cake! I say, Sammy saw me getting it at the tuck-shop yesterday, but I'll bet he never guessed that it was for him! Of course I never told him—it's a surprise for him, you know. I'm going to take it down and give it to him before class. Think there's only one 'n' in 'many'?"

"Yes, ass."

"Well, if you think there's only one, I expect there's two," said Bunter. "You can't spell, old chap."

Toddy chuckled, and quitted the study with his books. Billy Bunter proceeded to write on the label:

MENNY HAPPEY RETERNS OF THE DAY.

Then he rolled out of No. 7 with the wrapped cardboard box. Many times since he had invested in that birthday cake, Billy Bunter had been tempted to unpack it, and park it in his extensive interior. But with quite unusual self-denial, he had manfully resisted that temptation. W. G. Bunter was generally chiefly concerned about W. G. Bunter: but blood, after all, was thicker than water: it was Sammy's birthday, and Bunter was going to present him with a cake. He had borrowed "bobs" and "tanners" up and down the Remove for that purpose: and he was not going back on it. This was going to be a happy surprise for Sammy: though, had Billy Bunter unpacked that box, its contents would certainly have been a surprise for Billy! Happily unaware of any change in the contents of that cardboard box, the Owl of the Remove rolled away with it, to look for his minor, and make the presentation before the bell rang for class.

CHAPTER V

"SAMMY!"

Sammy Bunter eyed his major warily.

He was ready to dodge.

Billy Bunter rolled up to him, with a parcel under a fat arm. Sammy knew that parcel. Why Billy had not yet unpacked it, and discovered a dusty old hassock within, Sammy did not know. But evidently Billy hadn't, for the parcel looked exactly as Sammy had left it the day before. But it seemed to Sammy that Billy must suspect something, or why had he come up to him with that parcel? So Sammy Bunter was wary.

"Looking for you, Sammy," said Bunter, cheerily. "Forgotten that it's your birthday to-day, old chap?"

"Eh?"

"I've got a present for you."

"What?"

"A cake!" said Bunter, beaming. "And a jolly good cake, Sammy! You know those seven-and-six cakes at the tuck-shop?"

"Oh!" gasped Sammy.

"I've spent all my pocket-money on it," continued Bunter. "I didn't borrow a bob each from Wharton and his gang, and a tanner from Smithy, and a couple of bob from Mauly—nothing of the kind. And here you are, Sammy! Take it!"

Billy Bunter handed over the parcel. Sammy Bunter mechanically took it, in his fat hands, his eyes almost popping through his spectacles.

He blinked at the inscription on the label: "Menny happey reterns of the day." The dreadful truth dawned on him. The cake he had snooped in his major's study, and which Bolsover and Co. had long since devoured had been

intended for him—a birthday cake! If he hadn't snooped it, it would have been still in that box, presented to him by his major!

Sammy could have groaned. If ever a snooper of tuck repented him of his snooping, Sammy Bunter did at that moment.

"Oh, crikey!" he said, faintly.

"Open the box, old chap!" said Bunter, encouragingly. "You'll see that it's a topping cake!"

Sammy seemed in no hurry to open the box. He was only too sadly and sorrowfully aware of the contents: and he was not interested in dusty old hassocks!

"It's really topping," said Bunter. "One of those seven-and-sixers, you know—lots of plums, and marzipan on top! Hallo! there goes the bell—I've got to cut—can't be late for Quelch."

Billy Bunter rolled away, to join the Remove fellows heading for their form-room. Sammy Bunter was left with his birthday present in his fat hands, and an expression on his face that might have touched a heart of stone!

THE END

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