

***BILLY BUNTER
AND THE BLUE
MAURITIUS***

***By
FRANK RICHARDS***

***Illustrated by
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CHAPTER I

FOLLOW YOUR LEADER

"BUCK up, Bunter!"

"Beast!"

"Put it on, old fat man!"

"Shan't!"

"Look here, you fat ass—"

"Yah!"

It sounded as if Billy Bunter was peeved.

And, in fact, he was!

Bunter was tired. And when William George Bunter was tired, peevishness was wont to supervene.

Six Greyfriars juniors were tramping along the tow-path by the Sark. The sun was sinking. The Sark ran like a stream of gold under the sunset. Shadows were lengthening in the woods along the river.

There was none too much time for Harry Wharton and Co. to reach Greyfriars, if they were to arrive at the school in time for calling-over. Nobody wanted to be late for roll, and face Mr. Quelch's gimlet-eye in his study afterwards. Five fellows were prepared to put their best foot foremost. One was not.

Billy Bunter generally modelled his pace upon that of the tortoise. Now he seemed to have modelled it upon that of a very old, very frail, and very tired tortoise.

Bunter had already walked half a mile. Half a mile, after a picnic up the river, was enough for Bunter. It was yet another mile to Greyfriars by the tow-path. In that mile there were one thousand seven hundred and sixty more yards than Bunter could contemplate with equanimity. It was no wonder that the fat Owl of the Remove was peeved.

Now even his tortoise-like progress had come to a stop.

At a point where a leafy footpath led up through the woods from the river, he halted: and the urgings of the Famous Five passed him by like the idle wind which he regarded not.

"We shall be late for roll, if we hang about, Bunter," said Frank Nugent, mildly.

"Beast!"

"What the thump did you come for if you're too jolly lazy to walk home?" snorted Johnny Bull.

"If that's what you call civil, Bull, after asking a fellow to a picnic—"

"Nobody asked you, sir, she said!" sang Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"There's too much of the picnic inside Bunter, for him to put on speed," said Bob, thoughtfully. "What about up-ending him, and rolling him home like a barrel?"

"Beast!"

"Look here, Bunter, step out," exclaimed Harry Wharton, impatiently. "Do you want lines from Quelch, you fat chump?"

Billy Bunter did not step out. He remained where he was, and jerked a fat thumb up the woodland footpath. That shady path wound through Popper Court Woods: forbidden territory to all inhabitants of the county of Kent outside Sir Hilton Popper's estate.

"Lots of time, if we take that short cut," said Bunter. "It cuts off more than half the distance."

"Out of bounds!" said Nugent.

"Never been out of bounds in your life, I suppose," jeered Bunter.

"We don't want a row with old Popper!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Blow old Popper!" yapped Bunter.

"Well, I suppose we might chance it," remarked Bob Cherry, glancing into the deep, dusky wood that bordered the tow-path.

Snort, from Johnny Bull!

"Oh, let's!" he said, "Let's trespass in old Popper's woods, and have him come yowling up to the school about it, and go up to the Head and explain that we did it because Bunter was too jolly lazy to walk a mile. Never mind if we get six all round from the Head. What does that matter?"

This was sarcasm!

"The short-cutfulness is not the proper caper, my esteemed chums," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head. "The estimable and ridiculous Popper would be terrifically infuriated."

"Nobody's about," said Bunter.

"Might run into one of old Popper's keepers," said Bob.

"Who's afraid of old Popper and his keepers?" sniffed Bunter. "I jolly well ain't, if you fellows are."

"You cheeky fat ass-!"

"Yah!"

"Look here, come on," hooted Johnny Bull, "we're not going trespassing—" "Tain't trespassing," said Bunter. "It's a right-of-way, only old Popper makes out that it ain't."

"It's out of bounds, anyway."

"Who cares?"

"The carefulness would be terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter, if there was a report to our ludicrous head-master."

"Rot!" said Bunter, "I say, you fellows, what you want is a spot of pluck."

"What?" roared the Famous Five, with one voice.

"Pluck!" said Bunter. "I'm ready to chance it. I ain't afraid of a keeper. I'd knock him down as soon as look at him. There's nobody about—I mean, I don't care a bean whether there's anybody about or not. Have a little pluck, and chance it. You'll be frightened of your own shadows, next."

Five separate and distinct glares were concentrated on the fat face of William George Bunter. The Famous Five of the Greyfriars Remove had, in fact, more than a little pluck: while that quality, in William George Bunter, could only have been discerned with the aid of a very powerful microscope. But Billy Bunter feared no foe, when no foe was in the offing. At that moment Bunter was thinking chiefly of an ache in his little fat legs, due to the extensive weight they had to carry. And there certainly seemed to be nobody about, in the silent and solitary wood. So for the moment—Bunter was full of valour.

"You fat, frowsy, cheeky porpoise-!" said Bob Cherry.

"Yah!"

"If you saw a keeper a mile off, you'd bolt like a rabbit!" roared Johnny Bull.

"Yah!"

"We're not going out of bounds," said Harry Wharton. "Step out, Bunter."

"I'm going to take the short cut," said Bunter, obstinately. "If you fellows funk it—"

"Who funks it?" howled Johnny.

"You jolly well do!" retorted Bunter. "Look here, screw up your courage to the sticking-plaster, as Shakespeare says—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. Screw up your courage to the sticking-plaster—"

"Do you happen to mean the sticking-point?" asked Nugent.

"No, I don't! You can't teach me Shakespeare, Nugent.

Look here, you fellows, screw up your courage to the sticking-plaster, and come on! I'm going."

"Look here, you fat ass—"

"Yah!"

"Stick to the tow-path—"

"Rats!"

"You blithering, burbling barrel—"

"You can call a fellow names," said Bunter, disdainfully, "but I'm going by the short cut, and you're too jolly funky. So yah!"

And Bunter settled the disputed point, by turning off the bank, and rolling into the footpath through Popper Court Woods. Harry Wharton and Co. stared after him, as he rolled, and then looked at one another. Their looks were expressive. To be called funks by the fat and fatuous Owl was

exasperating: to hang back where Bunter ventured to lead, was quite intolerable. Bob Cherry stepped into the footpath after the fat Owl. "Come on!" he said. "Rot!" growled Johnny Bull. "It means going up to the Head if we're spotted. Let's get on, and leave that fat ass to it." "That's sense," agreed Harry Wharton. "But—" "But—" murmured Nugent. "The butfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Can't let that fat frowster crow!" said Bob. "Let him crow, and be blowed to him!" growled Johnny. But Bob was already marching on, and Wharton, Nugent, and Hurree Singh followed. Johnny, with his usual solid common-sense, was undoubtedly right: but it was said of old that wisdom cries out in the streets and no man regards it. Four members of the Co. at least, were not going to be outdone by Billy Bunter: and Johnny, finding himself in a minority of one, grunted and followed on. The river was left behind, and six fellows threaded their way through the leafy wood: five of them with wary eyes open for keepers.

CHAPTER II

ONLY A FALSE ALARM

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

It was not Bob Cherry's usual cheery roar. It was a whisper. Even the exuberant Bob realised the need for caution, in the heart of the deep wood surrounding Popper Court. The thick trees and bushes and drooping boughs that bordered the footpath might hide anyone within a yard or two. And it was a sound of rustling close at hand that caused Bob to halt, with that hurried whisper.

"Hold on!" breathed Harry Wharton.

"Oh, crikey!" mumbled Billy Bunter.

"Keep quiet, you fat ass."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Shut up, you blithering owl!" hissed Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

Bunter, however, shut up. So far, the fat Owl had rolled on, regardless of keepers, thinking only of getting in at Greyfriars in the shortest possible time, and bestowing his weary fat limbs in an armchair. But the sound of footsteps close at hand made quite a difference. The fat Owl blinked at the wall of green beside the path, with his little round eyes popping behind his big round spectacles. It dawned upon Bunter's fat brain that a burly keeper was not a trifle light as air, to be lightly disregarded. Billy Bunter's valour, in fact, lasted just so long as no danger was nigh. When danger accrued, it evaporated quite suddenly.

The juniors came to a halt, listening. Someone was close at hand in the wood, a little ahead of them. It could hardly be anyone but one of Sir Hilton Popper's keepers, so far as they could see. Five fellows felt like kicking themselves. Still more they felt like kicking Bunter. They had let the fat Owl lead them into a spot of wholly unnecessary trouble, and, too late, they wished that they hadn't. But it was no time for kicking Bunter. Silence was essential. No doubt it was true that there was a right-of-way through Popper Court Woods. Everyone believed so, excepting Sir Hilton Popper. But that did not alter the fact that Dr. Locke had placed the wood out of school bounds, to avoid friction with a local land-owner who was also a governor

of the school. If the juniors were discovered there, it meant a report to their head-master, with a painful interview to follow. Nobody wanted that: least of all, Bunter, now that he came to think of it!

The rustling came nearer, as the juniors stood listening.

If the unseen man in the wood was heading for the path, he would emerge into it a little distance ahead of them, and in a matter of moments. But there was a good chance that he might pass on without seeing them, in the dusky shade of the thick branches overhead: if they made no sound to draw attention. Five fellows stood as still as mice.

But one fellow did not.

"I say, you fellows—!" breathed Bunter.

"Quiet!"

"But I say, let's bolt—"

"He will hear us, idiot! Quiet!"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter's eyes, and spectacles, fixed on a spot a little distance up the path, where low boughs swayed and rustled, and a glimpse of a form could be seen through the thickets. The man was emerging.

That glimpse was enough for Bunter.

The fat junior backed into the wood on the other side of the path, and plunged away among the trees.

A loud crackling and rustling accompanied his flight, echoing through the wood. Any keeper within a hundred yards could hardly have failed to take warning that trespassers were about.

"Oh! That funky fat ass—!" breathed Bob Cherry. "The game's up now."

"The upfulness is terrific."

"Oh!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, "it's not a keeper!"

The man ahead emerged into the footpath, as Billy Bunter crashed away into the wood on the other side. He turned quickly to stare in the direction of the juniors, with a startled stare.

That he was not a keeper was evident at a glance. He was a small, slim man dressed in dark clothes, with a spotted tie, a bowler hat a little on one side of a bullet head, a pasty-complexioned face adorned by a variety of pimples, and a cigarette, unlighted, hanging in one corner of a loose mouth. Nobody, in fact, could have looked more unlike a gamekeeper: which was a tremendous relief to the Greyfriars juniors. Apparently the man was simply some member of the public who was making his way through the wood—which did not matter in the least to Harry Wharton and Co.

But it was only for a moment, or little more, that they saw him. He gave them a startled stare, like an alarmed rabbit, and then backed quickly into the thickets from which he had emerged.

In a moment more, he was out of sight: and the sound of rustling dying away told that he was departing, in haste.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Only a false alarm!" he said. "That Johnny was more startled than we were—he's trespassing too!"

The juniors laughed. Evidently the pimply man had been startled, indeed alarmed, at being seen, and they could only conclude that he was some trespasser as uneasy about keepers as themselves.

"For this relief, much thanks—Shakespeare!" said Frank Nugent. "But where's that fat idiot Bunter?"

"Oh, the ass!" said Harry.

"The benighted bandersnatch," said Bob. "He's gone!"

Bunter was gone—there was no doubt about that the belief that a keeper was at hand, the fat Owl had go plunging frantically through the wood to escape, quite forgetting that he was tired. Somewhere in the deep wood,

already at a distance from the footpath, was the terrified fat Owl, still on the run.

"The frabjous fathead!" growled Johnny Bull. "That's the chap who was going to knock down a keeper as soon look at him!"

"Oh, the fat chump!"

"The howling ass!"

The juniors stood staring at the wall of greenery. There was nothing to keep them from going on their way, and getting out of those dangerous precincts—and delays were dangerous. But they were reluctant to go on without Bunter, exasperating as the fat Owl was.

"Shall I give him a shout?" asked Bob.

"Oh, do," said Johnny Bull, sarcastically. "We want every keeper at Popper Court to gather round. Go it!"

"The shoutfulness is not the proper caper," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Silence is the cracked pitcher that goes longest to a bird in the bush, as the English proverb remarks."

"Well, we can't go after him, and hunt him through the woods," said Bob, "and he jolly well won't come back, as he thinks that that pimply merchant was a keeper. So what?"

"Push on," said Harry, at last, "Bunter will wriggle out somewhere, I suppose, sooner or later. Bother him, anyway."

"Bother him, bless him, and blow him, and then some!" said Bob. "Come on—the sooner we're out of this, better. The next Johnny who shows up mayn't be a harmless trespasser. Put it on."

The Famous Five tramped on, putting on speed. Billy Bunter had to be left to his own devices. Ten minutes later they were glad to emerge into a lane, leaving the forbidden precincts of Popper Court Woods behind them. They walked on to Greyfriars—minus Bunter.

At the school gates they stopped, and looked back along the road. But there was no sign of a fat figure to be seen.

"That fat chump must have got out of the wood by this time," said Nugent.

"Must have," said Bob. "Even Bunter couldn't lose himself in Popper Court Woods. He'll come rolling home in time for call-over."

"Unless a keeper's got him," said Johnny Bull. "It would be like Bunter to run right into one."

"The likefulness would be terrific."

"Oh, he's all right," said Bob. "Bet you he'll come rolling into hall before Quelchy calls the names."

But in that the cheery Bob was mistaken. When Gosling clanged the gates shut, Billy Bunter was still outside them: and when Mr. Quelch called the roll in hall, the fattest member of his form failed to answer "adsum" to his name.

CHAPTER III

TREE'D

"OH, lor'!" gasped Billy Bunter.

He came to a sudden halt.

The fat junior had run, stumbling and scrambling through tangled thickets, till his fat little legs could run no longer. Then he had dropped into a walk, peering round him through his big spectacles, like an alarmed and wary owl. What had happened to the other fellows, Bunter did not know: and, sad to relate, did not care. He did not, in fact, give them a single thought. His presence of mind had, he had no doubt, saved him from the keeper: and all he had to do now, was to find his way out of the wood, and get clear. That was only a matter of time—if he did not run into a keeper!

Which, unfortunately, was exactly what Bunter did!

Coming round the massive trunk of a big oak tree, he came suddenly in sight of a burly figure in gaiters—not ten feet away from him. The stranger on the footpath hadn't been a keeper: but this man, undoubtedly, was one: and Bunter gasped and halted at the sight of him.

The man stood with his head a little bent, listening: no doubt having heard Bunter stumbling among the bushes. He saw Bunter at the same moment that Bunter saw him, and made a movement towards the fat junior of Greyfriars.

"Oh, crikey!"

Bunter backed hastily round the oak he had just circumnavigated.

"Here! Stop! You!" called out the keeper gruffly.

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

The man was tramping after him, round the big oak. Bunter would have fled, but there was not a run left in his little fat legs. In sheer desperation, he clutched at the gnarled trunk of the ancient oak, and climbed.

Billy Bunter was not much of a climber. It was not really easy to lift his avoirdupois. But the dread of a clutching hand behind spurred him on. How he got into the branches of that oak he hardly knew. But he did get into them, clambering frantically: and he was ten feet from the ground when the man in gaiters came tramping round the oak.

He lay extended on a stout branch, holding on with both fat hands, breathless and palpitating, with the perspiration trickling down his fat face. From the branch he blinked down through his spectacles at the top of a cap.

The man did not look up. He seemed puzzled, for the moment, by the sudden disappearance of the fat schoolboy, but did not immediately guess that he had taken to tree-climbing.

He stood almost directly under Bunter, staring round him, angry and frowning.

"Here, where are you?" he called out. "Where are you hiding, you young limb? I've got you all right."

Bunter hardly breathed. He hoped that the keeper might proceed to search for him in the wood, which would give him a chance of dropping from the tree, and cutting off in the opposite direction. But the man remained where he was, staring round, and listening. He could hear no sound from the thickets, to indicate that a fat schoolboy was scuttling away. Finally, he looked up: and gave quite a start, at the sight of a fat face and a large pair of spectacles just over his head.

"Oh!" he ejaculated. "There you are!"

"Oh! No!" gasped Bunter. "I ain't here! I—I mean—"

"Come down out of that tree."

"Beast!"

"What?" ejaculated the man in gaiters.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter certainly had no intention of coming down.

The keeper was quite near enough—he did not want him any nearer.

The man stood staring up. Bunter squatted on the branch, blinking down.

There was a pause. The keeper looked at his watch. That was a hopeful sign, to Bunter. It looked as if the man had other business on hand, and was not disposed to hang about. If only he went, it was all right for Bunter. If once he got away, he could hardly be reported at Greyfriars, as the man did not know who he was.

"Look 'ere, you come down, you young scamp," said the keeper, at last. "I know you belong to the school."

"Oh! Yes! Highcliffe," said Bunter, astutely. He did not mind if Sir Hilton Popper carried a complaint to Highcliffe.

"'Ighcliffe?" snorted the keeper. "You got a Greyfriars cap."

"Beast!"

"What's your name?" demanded the keeper.

"Smith," answered Bunter.

The man eyed him suspiciously. Certainly, there was no reason why the fat schoolboy should not have borne the ancient and honourable name of Smith. But the man seemed to doubt.

"Gammon!" he grunted.

"Beast!"

"Look 'ere, I've got no time to waste on you," exclaimed the keeper, impatiently. "Come down out of that tree."

"Shan't."

"I'll take you to the master, and he'll find out what your name is soon enough," growled the keeper.

"I've told you what my name is," yapped Bunter, "and if you don't believe that my name's Jones--"

"Jones!" ejaculated the keeper.

"I—I mean Smith," amended Bunter, hastily, "and if you don't believe that my name's Jones—I mean, Smith—you can ask any fellow at Greyfriars—I mean Highhcliffe--"

"Are you coming down?" roared the keeper.

"No, I ain't."

The man glared up at him. He did not seem to fancy tree-climbing in pursuit of the fat schoolboy: but there was no other way of getting at Bunter. He glanced at his watch again, and Bunter's hopes rose. If only he went--!

"I tell you I got no time to waste 'ere" snapped the keeper. "I got to see the master, and I was going up to the 'ouse when I heard you rooting about. You come down out of that tree, and done with it."

If Billy Bunter had needed encouraging to stick where he was, that would have done it. He squatted tight.

The man gave him a glare, and seemed undecided.

Finally he put his fingers to his lips and emitted a shrill whistle.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter, in dismay.

He had no doubt that that whistle was a signal to another keeper. But the sound of a distant bark answered the whistle. It was not another keeper. It was a dog that came scampering through the bushes.

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

"'Ere, Tiger," called out the keeper, and the dog came scampering up. He was a Yorkshire terrier, very lively, and full of beans. Bunter noted, without pleasure, that he had a fine set of teeth.

"Now, then, young feller-me-lad, you coming down?" demanded the keeper.

"If you don't, I'm leaving the dorg to watch you, and keep you safe till I come back."

"Oh, crumbs."

"Now, then, yes or no!" snapped the keeper.

"Beast!"

"You coming down?"

"No!" yelled Bunter.

"That does it! Watch him, Tiger!" The keeper pointed to the fat junior on the branch, and Tiger barked, snapped his teeth, and pranced. "Watch him! You up there, if you come down while Tiger's watching, I'm sorry for your trousis!"

With that, the keeper tramped away, and disappeared into the wood, in the direction of Popper Court.

Tiger remained. He frisked about cheerily under the oak, evidently full of spirits, every now and then giving Bunter a look. The fat junior gazed down at him. If he had not been disposed to descend while the keeper was there, he was still less disposed to do so, with Tiger watching him. It

would have been very unpleasant to be marched into the majestic presence of Sir Hilton Popper, with a report at Greyfriars to follow: but it would have been ever so much more unpleasant to drop within reach of the terrier's teeth.

Billy Bunter's last state, in fact, was worse than his first: as he realised when the keeper was gone. The long minutes passed, and the shadows deepened and deepened in the wood. Bunter realised that it was past the time for calling-over at Greyfriars. From the bottom of his fat heart, he repented him that he had insisted upon taking that short cut through Popper Court Woods. A short cut is sometimes the longest way round: but really this seemed to be the longest way round ever. The hapless fat junior began to wish that the keeper would return. But the keeper did not return. Tiger, tired of frisking around, sat down, and kept a steady eye fixed on Bunter above. Gradually, as the shadows deepened into dark, Tiger became invisible, except for his eyes, steadily watching.

"Oh, lor'!" groaned Bunter.

He had missed lock-ups at Greyfriars—he had missed calling-over—now it was time for prep, and he was missing prep. He began to wonder, with dismay, whether he was going to miss dormitory too. If only that beastly dog would go—

But there seemed no hope of that. Darkness lay on the wood, black as a hat, but whenever the tree'd junior looked down, he discerned two greenish eyes glimmering in the dark, watching. And the hapless fat Owl could only groan, and wonder how it was going to end.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE FOR FIVE

"THAT fat ass!"

"That fat chump!"

"That podgy piffler!"

"That bloated burbler!"

"That terrific fathead!"

Harry Wharton and Co. made those remarks, in the Remove passage, outside the doorway of No. 7 study. They were perturbed and exasperated. There was a small spot of anxiety, and a large spot of exasperation. It was after prep, and Bunter had not come in.

Bunter was well-known in the Greyfriars Remove to be every imaginable kind of an ass. But why even Bunter, ass as he was, should have stayed out of gates till such an hour, was quite a mystery. It was absurd to suppose that something might have happened to him. But if nothing had happened to him, why didn't he come in?

He had cut roll, but it was not uncommon for fellows to be late for roll, and to be duly rewarded with lines. Now the Famous Five discovered that he had cut prep, which was a much more serious matter. They had gone up to their studies to prep, with little or no doubt that Bunter would roll in while they were thus engaged. But when, after prep, Wharton and Nugent came up the passage from No. 1 Study, Bob Cherry and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh came down the passage from No. 13, and Johnny Bull from No. 14, and they all looked into No. 7 to see whether Bunter was there, they found him not at home. Peter Todd and Tom Dutton, his study-mates, were there: but the fattest and most fatuous member of the Remove was conspicuous only by his absence.

To questions, Peter Todd could only reply that he hadn't seen anything of Bunter. Bunter had cut prep. He hadn't come in. Hence the uncomplimentary

remarks the Famous Five were making on the subject of the Owl of the Remove.

"The howling ass!" said Bob Cherry. "Could even Bunter lose himself in Popper Court Woods?"

"Might after dark—" said Nugent.

"But why should he stay there till dark?"

"Goodness knows."

"Might have been copped by a keeper," said Johnny Bull. "But he would be back before this, if that was it. Old Popper wouldn't keep him there."

"Bother him!"

"Blow him!"

"This means a row with Quelch," growled Johnny Bull. "If that fat ass doesn't blow in before dorm, we shall have to tell Quelch where we left him."

"Oh, the ass!"

"Oh, the chump!"

"We'll jolly well boot him, when he does blow in."

"The bootfulness will be terrific."

"But—I—I suppose nothing can have happened to him?" said Harry Wharton.

"What could?"

"Blessed if I know. He's ass enough for anything. It will mean a row if we have to tell Quelch that we came back through Popper Court Woods," said the Captain of the Remove. "Lines all round—after getting through all right!"

"Well, we've asked for that," said Johnny Bull. "We let that fat idiot bamboozle us into going out of bounds. We shouldn't have!"

"Not much use thinking about that now," said Nugent. "It would have been of some use to think of it at the time! Didn't I tell you so?"

Four members of the Co. made no reply to that. Johnny Bull's common-sense had been disregarded at the time. It was really not much use "rubbing it in" now that it was too late. But tact was not included among Johnny's many good and solid qualities.

"I told you so," he went on, "and if you'd listened—"

"We didn't," said Bob Cherry, briefly.

"I know you didn't! But if you had—"

"If 'ifs' and 'ands' were pots and pans" remarked Nugent, "there'd be no work for tinkers. That's a proverb."

"If you had—!" repeated Johnny.

"Give us a rest, old chap."

"If you had—"

"My esteemed Johnny, if the if-fulness and the andfulness were the potfulness and the panfulness—"

"Well, I told you so," said Johnny, stolidly, "and if we have to go up to Quelch, we've got only ourselves to thank."

"Passed unanimously, and now give us a rest," said Bob Cherry. "By gum! Wouldn't I like to be just behind Bunter now, with my football boots on." Vernon-Smith and Tom Redwing came out of No. 4 Study. They stopped, to look at the worried and disgruntled group in the passage.

"Anything up?" asked Smithy.

"Bunter hasn't come in yet," answered Harry Wharton.

The Bounder raised his eyebrows.

"Does that matter?" he inquired.

"Well, it does, as we lost him on the way back," answered Harry. "We shall have to tell Quelch where we lost him, if he doesn't turn up soon."

"You see, we let the fat cormorant hook on to our picnic up the river," said Johnny Bull, "and he was too jolly lazy to walk home. So he took the short cut through old Popper's woods, and we were asses enough not to leave him to it."

"Must have been asses," agreed Smithy.

"Well, I told these fellows so—"

"Is that nineteen or twenty?" asked Bob Cherry.

Johnny stared at him, blankly.

"Nineteen or twenty what?" he asked.

"Nineteen or twenty times you've told us you told us so?"

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

"Well, I jolly well did tell you so—"

"That's twenty, at least," said Bob, "and that's the limit. If you tell us again that you told us so, we'll jolly well bang your head on the wall."

"Hard," said Nugent.

Another grunt from Johnny! But he refrained from stating for the twenty-first time that he had told his friends so.

"Let's go down," said Harry, "may hear that the benighted bandersnatch has blown in."

The Famous Five went down to the Rag, where most of the Remove gathered after prep. But among the crowd of juniors, Billy Bunter did not appear. As the minutes ticked on to bedtime, five members of the Remove grew more and more uneasy.

How any accident could have happened to Bunter in Popper Court Woods, they could not imagine. But if nothing had happened, where was he, and why did he not come in? It was certain that, if any Greyfriars man did not turn up at bedtime, there would be a spot of commotion. The Famous Five would have to state what they knew. That meant admitting that they had gone out of bounds, with a "row" as the result.

It was not a pleasing prospect.

They were getting anxious about Bunter, wondering uneasily what on earth could be keeping him out of gates. At the same time they were yearning to kick him for causing so much worry and trouble. With these mingled feelings, they heard nine o'clock chime out from the clock and still there was no Bunter.

At a quarter past nine, Wingate of the Sixth looked into the rag, and glanced over the juniors there. Evidently, inquiry on the subject of the missing Owl was beginning.

"Any fellow here know where Bunter of the Remove is?" called out the prefect. "He hasn't come in."

There was no reply. Nobody knew where Bunter of the Remove was.

"Was any fellow here out of gates with him after class?" There was no help for it, and Harry Wharton replied:

"Yes: Bunter was up the river with us, Wingate."

"Didn't he come back with you?"

"Um! Only part of the way."

"You'd better go and tell Quelch. He wants to know."

"All right."

Five fellows, not in a happy mood, made their way to the Remove master's study. It was only ten minutes now to dormitory: and obviously their Form-master had to know what they could tell him on the subject. They found Mr. Quelch frowning in his study. The vagaries of the troublesome Owl did not seem to have improved his temper. A pair of gimlet-eyes fixed sharply on the chums of the Remove as they presented themselves.

"Bunter is still absent, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch. "Do you know anything about it?"

"He was out of gates with us, sir, but came only part of the way back with us," answered Harry. "He left us about half a mile from the school."

"Indeed! Exactly where did you part company?" asked Mr. Quelch.

Again there was no help for it!

"On the footpath in Popper Court Woods, sir."

Mr. Quelch's face, already frowning, became very grim. "Wharton! You are aware that Popper Court Woods are out of bounds for Greyfriars boys. You are Head Boy of my form: expected to set a good, not a bad, example to other boys. Yet you tell me—"

Harry Wharton crimsoned with discomfort.

"You have been out of bounds," exclaimed Mr. Quelch "Yes, sir."

"I am surprised at you, Wharton! I am very much surprised, and very displeased. I should not have expected this of you," snapped Mr. Quelch. Wharton made no answer to that. He could not explain to Quelch, that the obstinate fat Owl had taken the bit between his teeth, as it were, and that the others had followed where he led. Neither would it have been of any use: for obviously they should not have followed. In fact, Johnny Bull had told them so!

"Why did Bunter leave you?" asked Mr. Quelch, in the same snappish tone.

"He fancied that a keeper was coming, and bolted into the wood, sir."

"Upon my word! Then that must be the reason why he has not returned—he is doubtless lost in the wood," exclaimed Mr. Quelch, angrily. "This is very serious, Wharton! You are very much to blame for having gone out of bounds, in company with a foolish and thoughtless boy like Bunter."

Wharton was silent.

"I shall have to see what can be done," snapped Mr. Quelch. "You may go now. Each of you will take three hundred lines. Leave my study."

In silence the hapless five left the study. They went down the passage with very expressive faces. A "jaw" for Wharton, and three hundred lines all round, was their reward for having followed Bunter's lead. At the moment, they had no sympathy to waste on a woeful fat Owl wandering in a wood. They were simply yearning to kick Bunter.

"The fat chump!" breathed Bob Cherry.

"The dithering dummy!" hissed Nugent. "We ought to have booted him, instead of following his lead."

"The oughtfulness is terrific."

"Well, I told you so, at the time," said Johnny Bull. "We've asked for this, and got it. I told you—"

"Did you say you told us so?" asked Bob Cherry in a sulphurous voice.

"Yes, I did, and—yaroooooh!"

Four pairs of hands grasped Johnny Bull, as if four fellows had been suddenly moved by the same spring. After that interview with Quelch, patience seemed to have run rather short, in the Co.—and Johnny's reference to the undoubted fact that he had told them so, was the last straw. They grasped Johnny Bull, and banged his head on the passage wall. Crack!

"Yarooooh!" roared Johnny. "Look here—oh, crumbs—wow—you mad asses—leggo—wow—!"

Four fellows walked on, Johnny Bull followed, rubbing his head, in indignant wrath. However, he did not mention again that he had told them so!

CHAPTER V

LOST

BILLY BUNTER groaned.

Only by a dismal groan was Bunter able to express his feelings. How long he had been parked in that oak tree Bunter did not know. It seemed rather like centuries to him. He had not the remotest idea of the time. Bunter had a watch—quite a massive affair: but it was useless to him for two good reasons: it did not "go": and it was too dark to see the

dial, even if it had been a going concern. Darkness lay like a pall of black velvet on the woods, and the hapless fat Owl could see nothing, except the greenish glimmer of eyes from the blackness below, of Tiger patiently watching.

He dared not descend with Tiger on the watch. He straddled a branch, his plump back leaning on the gnarled trunk of the oak, and waited. There was nothing for Bunter to do but to sit it out. He began to long for the keeper's return. Lines from Quelch, even "six" from his form-master's cane, would have been ever so much better than this. If that beastly keeper would only come back and call off his beastly dog—!

It was a great relief when, at last, a sound of rustling in the wood announced that someone was coming. Then he heard the gruff voice of the keeper.

"Tiger!"

A cheery bark replied.

Bunter blinked down.

He could barely make out the burly form of the keeper in the deep gloom. The man was staring up.

"My eye! You still there, you young limb?" he exclaimed.

"Oh, crikey!"

"Getting tired of that tree?" asked the keeper, sarcastically. "Think you'd better come down?"

Bunter, undoubtedly, thought that he had better come down. He was more than tired of the oak tree. But Tiger's bark was not reassuring.

"I say, keep that beastly dog off!" he gasped. "I'll come down, if you'll keep that rotten dog off."

"O.K.! Kennel, Tiger," said the keeper, and Bunter, with immense relief, heard the terrier scamper away through the wood.

The fat junior clambered down. It was really an easy climb down a thick gnarled trunk, but it was like Bunter to miss his hold, and roll down. He landed with a bump almost at the keeper's feet.

"Ow!" howled Bunter. "Wow!"

"Clumsy young idjit!" said the keeper, doubtless by way of sympathy.

"Ow! Beast! Wow!"

A powerful hand on a fat shoulder jerked Bunter to his feet.

"Now, then, come on," grunted the keeper. "I've told the master there's a trespasser in the wood, and I got to take you to him. 'Op it."

"I say, what's the time?" gasped Bunter.

"Turned half-past nine."

"Oh, crikey! That's after dorm!" groaned Bunter. "I—I say, I—I've got to get back to the school—I shall get into a fearful row—"

"You got to see Sir 'Ilton first," said the keeper, stolidly. "Come on with you, you trespassing young rascal."

Bunter had to come on, with that sinewy hand on his fat shoulder. He could not see a yard before his spectacles, but the keeper seemed able to thread his way with ease through the shadowy wood, and he led Bunter on without a pause, winding among the trees and thickets. But although the fat Owl could see nothing, he could guess easily enough that he was being led up to the house, where he was to face the lord and master of Popper Court. That prospect filled him with dread. It was not of much use to tell Sir Hilton Popper that his name was Smith or Jones, or that he belonged to Highcliffe: as Sir Hilton knew him by sight. But now that Tiger was off the scene, Bunter's hope of escape revived.

The keeper kept a grip on his shoulder, prepared for an attempt to dodge away in the dark. The fat Owl stumbled along by his side, till a distant gleam of lighted windows through the night showed that they were nearing Popper Court. Billy Bunter breathed hard through his fat little nose. If he could elude that grip on his podgy shoulder for even a moment, it

would be all right. Once he was on the run, the keeper would never be able to find him in a thick wood as black as a hat. Suddenly Bunter stumbled over, and fell. His fat shoulder slipped from the keeper's hand: but the man bent over him at once.

"Now, then, up with you, you clumsy young hass," he growled. And he grasped the fat shoulder again.

"Ow! wow! I've sprained my ankle," howled Bunter.

"Oh, rubbish!" growled the keeper. "Gerrup!"

"Ow! I-I can't get up!" yelled Bunter. "Wow! The pain's fearful. Ow! You'll have to carry me! Ow!"

"My eye! I can see myself doing it," snorted the keeper. "You look as if you weigh 'arf a ton. Look 'ere, gerrup with you."

"Oh, dear! I c-c-can't! My ankle's sprained," wailed Bunter. "Ow! It's like red-hot daggers-wow!"

"Rubbish!"

The keeper, grasping the fat shoulder hard, heaved.

Bunter made no effort to rise, and his whole extensive weight was thrown on the keeper, who gasped as he heaved. Bunter, at last, was heaved to his feet, whereupon he immediately fell down again.

"Oh, corks!" gasped the keeper. "You weigh something, you do. Look 'ere, if your ankle's really 'urt—"

"Ow! ow! ow!" wailed Bunter.

"Blow my buttons!" said the keeper. He released his grasp of the fat junior at last, and stood looking down at him, puzzled what to do.

"Bother you, you young rascal, giving a man all this trouble."

"Ow! ow! ow!"

"Oh, pack it up," growled the keeper. "I got to get you to the 'ouse somehow. Sir 'Ilton he says, bring him 'ere, he says, and I got to, and that's that. Look 'ere, you can lean on me and 'op it, see?"

"I-I-I c-c-can't!"

"I'm going to pull your ears if you don't," said the keeper.

"I-I mean, I-I'll try."

"You better," said the keeper.

Bunter was heaved up again. This time he stood on one leg, leaning heavily on the burly man, and holding to him.

"Now 'op it!" growled the keeper. "Come on!'Old on to me and 'op it, blow you. 'Old on to my arm—like that—why—what— Oh, corks!—you young villain you—" The keeper gave a roar of wrath, as he was suddenly relieved of Bunter's weight, and the fat junior shot away in the dark.

The sprained ankle, evidently, was a work of fiction!

Bunter had only wanted to get loose from that sinewy grasp: and now he was loose from it. Seldom did Billy Bunter put on speed: but an arrow in its flight had nothing on the fat Owl, as he shot away into the wood.

For a moment, the exasperated keeper stood staring, as he realised that his leg had been pulled, and that, so far from being incapacitated, his prisoner was remarkably active! Then, with an angry snort, he plunged into the dark wood after Bunter.

Bunter ran hard.

He bumped into trees, he stumbled over roots, he tore through thickets, gasping for breath, heedless of scratches.

He could not see where he was going—neither could the keeper see him. It was only by sound that the man was able to follow. Bunter puffed and blew as he fled. His wind, always a little short, was failing him fast. But the crashing of the keeper in pursuit spurred him on. The man was after him—Bunter could hear him—and every moment he dreaded to be clutched from behind. With perspiration streaming down his fat face, his spectacles aslant on his fat little nose, Bunter charged desperately on, gurgling for breath, till suddenly, his feet catching in a sprawling root, he went

over headlong. He rolled into a mass of hawthorns, spluttering. He would have scrambled up and carried on—but every ounce of breath was out of him now, and he could not. He lay in the hawthorns quite spent.

Had he been aware of it, it was the best thing he could have done. It was only by the sound of crackling bushes that the keeper was following him. As soon as Bunter lay still, that guiding sound was lost, and the keeper came to a halt. Bunter, as he lay gasping, heard him move again—but he moved in another direction, at a loss. Then the fat Owl heard his voice: "You young rascal! Where are you?"

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

He realised that the keeper had lost the track. All he had to do was to remain still, without a sound. He remained still, hardly breathing, and listened.

For a good many minutes, he heard sounds from the keeper, as the man tramped to and fro, hunting for him in the dark. But the sounds died away at last. Such a search was hopeless, so long as the quarry kept quiet: and the man gave it up. Silence had never seemed so golden, to Bunter, as it did, when the last sound from the keeper died away in the dark wood. The fat Owl sat up. But he did not stir further, till more than ten minutes of silence had elapsed, and he was assured that the coast, at last, was clear. Then he crawled out of the hawthorns.

Bunter was feeling considerably cheered. All he had to do now was to walk out of the wood, and trot on to Greyfriars. Certainly, a spot of trouble there awaited a fellow who rolled in after every other fellow had gone to bed. But Bunter had his excuses ready—he had lost his way in a wood—not Popper Court Wood—and Quelch could hardly come down heavily on a fellow who had had such an awful experience. He might even be sympathetic! Bunter hoped that that astute yarn would pull him through with Quelch. And he set out to walk out of the wood!

In the daylight, even Bunter could have done so with success. But he now made the interesting discovery that darkness made a tremendous difference. He tramped on in what he supposed to be the direction of Greyfriars, till he suddenly came in sight of distant lighted windows and realised that he was heading for Popper Court, the residence of Sir Hilton Popper. He blinked in dismay at those distant lights, and changed his direction, and the dark woods swallowed him up once more. Onward he dragged his weary fat limbs, winding among dark bushes and bewildering trees, but he did not reach Oak Lane, or the road, or anything else but shadowy trees and thickets.

And at length it dawned upon his fat brain that he could not find his way out of the wood in the dark! The yarn he had intended to spin Mr. Quelch was, in fact, true—Bunter was lost in a wood! He was wandering at haphazard in the dark, without the faintest idea where he was—the lane might be within a few yards, or it might be a mile off—he might be heading for Greyfriars, or he might be turning his plump back on the school—Bunter didn't know and couldn't tell!

The dismal Owl, tired in every fat limb, came to a dismal halt, and leaned on a tree, and groaned. Once more, he would have been glad to see even the keeper! But there was no sight or sound of the keeper. He was alone in the wood in the dark night: utterly lost! And he leaned on the tree and groaned. Then, too weary to make another effort, he slid down into a sitting position, and leaned his back on the trunk.

From somewhere in the far distance a chime came through the night. It was midnight.

"Oh, lor'!" mumbled Bunter. And his eyes closed behind his spectacles.

CHAPTER VI

BILLY BUNTER'S NIGHT OUT

"THIS way!"

"I saw him—"

"Follow me!"

"This way. This way!"

"There he goes!"

"This way!"

How long Billy Bunter's little round eyes had been shut behind his big round spectacles, he did not know. Loud sounds of crashing in the under-woods, and shouting voices, startled him out of the slumber into which he had fallen, and he sat bolt upright, blinking round him like a startled owl.

For a moment or two, he wondered where he was, and whether he had been dreaming, and was still in a dream.

Then he remembered that he was lost in the wood. But the dark, silent wood in which he had sunk down to slumber was no longer silent, and not so dark. Lights flashed before his dazzled eyes, and voices shouted, footsteps thudded, bushes crackled and crashed. Men, shouting to one another, were running to and fro: and among three or four breathless voices, Bunter, as he gathered his fat wits, recognized the sharp, strident tones of Sir Hilton Popper, which he had heard a good many times before.

He sat and blinked in amazement.

What was going on, he had not the faintest idea. He remembered that he had heard the chime of midnight before he closed his eyes; so it must be some time past midnight now. Such an outbreak of excitement, after midnight, in the dark and lonely wood, was enough to make the dizzy fat Owl wonder whether he was still dreaming.

But it was no dream!

Men with lanterns or flash-lamps were running about.

In the light of a lantern, Bunter caught a sudden sight of Sir Hilton Popper—long, lean, with a leathery brown face, and sharp eyes. But he saw that the baronet of Popper Court was not dressed with his usual meticulous care. He was bare-headed: the neck of a pyjama jacket showed over the collar of a half-buttoned coat, and he had a boot on one foot, and a shoe on the other. Sir Hilton looked as if he had been suddenly roused from bed, and had thrown on the first garments that came to hand. His mastiff face was red with excitement and anger. He was brandishing a big stick, as the light fell on him. Bunter blinked at him in terror. Then the light passed, and Sir Hilton was lost in shadow again. But the fat Owl heard his voice, on its top note.

"Did you see him? Hansom—Jenkins—Joyce—where is the rascal? He has the stamp—I tell you, he has stolen the stamp—do not let him escape—"

"This way, sir!" shouted a gruff voice, which Bunter recognized as that of the keeper whose acquaintance he had recently made.

"Jenkins! Did you see him, Jenkins?"

"Yes, sir! This way."

More trampling of feet, rustling and crackling of bushes, and excited shouting. Bunter blinked and listened in quite a daze.

Evidently, they were searching for somebody. Bunter had dreaded, for a moment, that they might be in search of him. But he realised that it was not that. Somebody, according to Sir Hilton's words, had stolen a stamp—though why the baronet and his household should turn out in the middle of the night, in such a state of excitement, on account of a stamp, was quite a mystery to Bunter.

They had not come near enough to discern the fat junior sunk in grass and ferns close to the trunk of a shadowy tree. The chase passed quite close to him, and thundered on into the wood.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

Somebody, who had apparently stolen a stamp, was running, and Sir Hilton and his followers were in fierce pursuit of him: that much was clear to Bunter. And the fat junior picked himself up, to move away, and keep clear of them. They had not seen him: and the sound of the hunt was now at a little distance. Bunter turned his back on that sound, and groped away in the dark. Distant voices echoed through the wood, more faintly now to his fat ears. He groped hurriedly on.

The fat junior found himself in an open glade, where the branches were not so thick above, and a glimmer of starlight came through. But it was not light enough for him to see his way, even if he had known which way to go. He stood in the glade, blinking round him: when suddenly, the crashing of the hunt drew nearer again—crackling bushes, thudding footsteps, shouting voices: all sweeping through the darkness towards the hapless Owl.

No doubt the fugitive, whoever he was, had dodged his pursuers, and doubled back. But they were after him swiftly.

A shadow loomed up in the dusky glade. Bunter's startled blink fell on a dim figure—that is a running man, with a set desperate face, panting and panting for breath, running as if for his life, directly towards the fat junior.

Close behind the running man, came the roar of the hunt, filling the wood with din.

Bunter blinked at that desperate running figure in the dim starlight that filtered through branches overhead. But he had only a glimpse of it. For the next moment, the running man crashed fairly into him, and the fat Owl, with a gasping yell, went spinning, and rolled over. The running man even more taken by surprise than Bunter by that sudden collision, sprawled headlong over him, winded to the wide.

"Oooogh!" spluttered Bunter. "Ow! Help! Yaroooh! Wooh! Help! Oh, crikey!"

"This way!" came a roar from Sir Hilton Popper.

"Quick: I see him—by gad! There are two of them—quick—seize him—"

The winded man, groaning for breath, struggled off Bunter. But he had no chance. Before he could gain his feet, the hunters were on the spot. Lanterns and flash-lamps concentrated on him: hands grasped him on all sides: and as he feebly resisted, his arms grasped by Jenkins and Joyce, Sir Hilton Popper brandished the big stick over his head.

"Ow! ow! wow! Bunter sat up. "Ow! wow! Where's my specs? Mind you don't tread on my specs—!"

"Secure him!" roared Sir Hilton Popper, heedless for the moment of Bunter. "Hold him fast! Rascal! Attempt to resist and I will stun you!"

"We got him, sir," said Jenkins.

"Got him safe, sir," said Joyce.

The wretched man seemed safe enough, with a burly keeper grasping either arm, and two or three men gathering close round him. Sir Hilton's big stick was not needed and he lowered it. '

"Ow! Look out! Where's my specs?" howled Bunter. Sir Hilton, assured that the hunted man was safe bestowed an angry and astonished glance on the fat Owl. "Who is this?" he rapped. "He looks like a schoolboy— Boy! Stand up! Who are you? An accomplice of this burglar, hey?"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

All the party, even the prisoner, were staring at the fat Owl, as he groped in the grass for his spectacles, knocked off in the collision. Recognition came into Jenkins' face.

"That's the boy I told you of, Sir Hilton" he said.

"The young trespasser."

"Oh! That young rascal!" exclaimed Sir Hilton. "Still in my woods—after my birds, I suppose. What? what? What are you groping there for, you young scoundrel? What?"

"Ow! My specs!" wailed Bunter. A glimmer of lantern-light caught the lenses of the spectacles in the grass, and Bunter spotted them, and grabbed them up. He jammed them on his fat little nose and blinked at Sir Hilton Popper. The long lean baronet frowned down on him.

"I've seen you before," he snapped. "I think I know you—you are a Greyfriars boy—your name is Grunt—or Hunt—or Shunt—what is your name?"

"Oh, crikey! Bunter, sir," groaned the fat Owl. "That beast ran into me and knocked me over—ow!"

The prisoner in the grasp of the keepers gave him a glare.

He was a squat, low-browed man, with a most unpleasant face, and Bunter, as he blinked at him, edged a little further away. He did not like that man's looks at all.

"You silly young 'ound!" said the prisoner, in concentrated tones. "If I'd a 'and loose, I'd wring that fat neck of yours. I'd 'ave got clear if you 'adn't been in the way! Blow yer!"

"Silence, you!" rapped Sir Hilton Popper. "Hold him, Jenkins, Joyce! He has the stamp—I know that he has the stamp—hold him while I search him for the stamp."

Why the lord of Popper Court was so deeply concerned about a stamp was still a mystery to Bunter. But it was clear that he was very deeply concerned indeed, as he proceeded to search the prisoner. The man made no resistance, only giving Bunter evil looks: evidently attributing his capture to the fat junior who had been so unexpectedly in his line of flight.

There was a sudden exclamation from Sir Hilton Popper.

It was almost a crow of relief and satisfaction. Something that he had taken from the prisoner was in his brown palm. It looked to Bunter like a postage-stamp, so far as he could see it. Whatever it was, it obviously afforded the lord of Popper Court the greatest and deepest satisfaction.

"This is it! Show the light here, Hansom! Yes, yes, this is it! Take that rascal away—he must be handed over to the police—I shall charge him, by gad! Grunter!"

He turned to the fat junior.

"Grunter—did you say your name was Grunter—?"

"Bib-bob-Bunter, sir."

"Yes, yes, I mean Bunter. Bunter, you have been caught trespassing in my woods—you are a young scoundrel Bunter. What are you doing here at this time of night? After my birds, what—what? Poaching young scoundrel! What?"

"Ow! No!" gasped Bunter. "I—I lost my way—I—I couldn't get out of the wood—oh, lor'!"

"What? What?" From his height, nearly a couple of feet over Bunter's fat head, the lord of Popper Court stared down at him. "Lost your way! Gad! The boy is a fool—an idiot—a nincompoop!"

"Oh, really, sir—"

"However, you have been partly the means of catching this rogue who burgled my house, Stunter. I shall overlook your rascality for that reason, Stunter. Did you say your name was Stunter?"

"B-b-b-b-Bunter, sir."

"Oh! Yes! Follow me, Stunter—I mean, Grunter—that is, Bunter—follow me, and I shall send you back to Greyfriars. You are a young rascal, Gunter, but I shall pardon you, in the—the circumstances. Take care of that

scoundrel, Jenkins—keep safe hold of him, Joyce—keep an eye on him, Hansom! Punter, you young rascal follow me." Billy Bunter rolled after the baronet, as the party headed for Popper Court. His night out was over at last!

CHAPTER VII

BUNTER TELLS THE TALE

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" murmured Bob Cherry, drowsily. He opened his eyes, as the light flashed on in the Remove dormitory. Several other fellows awakened, at the sound of footsteps and voices. It was a couple of hours after midnight, and the Remove had been fast asleep, when the door opened, and Mr. Quelch came in with Billy Bunter. "Lose no time, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch, in a voice rather like the filing of a saw. Quelch, plainly, was not in a good temper. "Oh! Yes, sir," mumbled Bunter. "I—I say, sir, it—it's awfully late—" "I am aware of that, Bunter. You need not speak." "I—I mean, sir, m-m-may I stay in bed after rising-bell—" "You may not, Bunter," answered Mr. Quelch, grimly. A dozen fellows sat up in bed, staring. Bunter, evidently, had got home at last. Apparently Quelch had sat up for him: which accounted for the exceedingly grim expression on his speaking countenance. It was not a light matter for a hardworking form-master to sit up till two in the morning, waiting for a wandering Owl to roll in. It was a relief to Harry Wharton and Co. to see the fat Owl, safe and sound. Evidently nothing had happened to him. They did not venture to speak while Mr. Quelch was present: and Bunter lost no time turning in: Quelch did not look as if he had much patience to waste on him. In a few minutes, the light was switched off again, and the door closed on the Remove master. Then five or six voices were heard at once. "Bunter, you fat ass—" "You benighted owl—" "Where have you been all this time?" "You potty porpoise—" "You terrific fathead—" "I say, you fellows, it's all right," said Bunter. "I can tell you I'm jolly sleepy. But it's all right. I say, did that keeper get you?" "It wasn't a keeper, fathead—only some chap taking his pimples for a walk," said Bob Cherry. "If you hadn't bolted, it would have been all right." "Oh! I thought it was a keeper! I say, you fellows, I've had an awful time. But it turned out all right. I got lost in the wood after dark—" "What the thump did you stay in the wood till dark for, you fathead?" "How could I help it, when I was up a tree, and a beastly keeper set his dog to watch me?" demanded Bunter. "Oh, my hat!" "After that he came back, and walked me off," went on Bunter. "Only I got away." "Knocked him down as soon as looked at him?" inquired Johnny Bull, sarcastically. "Exactly," said Bunter. "Wha-a-t?" "Fat lot I care for keepers," said Bunter disdainfully. "He had hold of my shoulder. I gave him a punch, and hooked it. He didn't let go because he thought I'd sprained my ankle, or anything. I just knocked him over, and went." "Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle," said Bunter, warmly. "But I'll bet any of you fellows would have thought twice before knocking a keeper over--"

"And you'd have thought three times, or three hundred, you fat Ananias," said Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry--"

"Well, I'm glad you've got home all right," said Bob.

"But I've a jolly good mind to get up, and kick you all round the dorm." "Beast!"

"Didn't Quelch whop you?" asked Vernon-Smith.

"No jolly fear!" said Bunter. "Quelch has let me off! You see, he practically had to, old Popper being a governor of the school, and putting in a word for me."

"Popper did!" exclaimed a dozen fellows.

"Yes, rather! He's a crusty old bean," said Bunter. "Still, there is such a thing as gratitude, you know, and after I'd caught the burglar for him--"

"After you'd whatted the whatter?" howled Bob Cherry.

"The burglar--"

"What burglar, you howling ass?"

"Oh! I haven't told you that bit yet," said Bunter.

"You see there was a burglary at Popper Court--an awful ruffian broke into the place and pinched a stamp--"

"A stamp?" gasped Bob.

"Yes--that was what old Popper said! I thought it was an awful fuss to make over a stamp, but that was what he said. He was frightfully excited about it. From what I heard, they seem to have got after the burglar just as he was getting away with the stamp--"

"Penny one?" asked Johnny Bull, with a snort.

"I don't know whether it was a penny stamp or a two-penny one, Bull. I know that old Popper was boiling over about it. He was awfully grateful when I caught the burglar, and he got it back."

"So you caught the burglar, did you?" chuckled Vernon-Smith. His chuckle was echoed up and down the row of beds. The Remove fellows could not quite picture William George Bunter catching burglars!

"I jolly well did!" declared Bunter, "and this is how it happened. I fell asleep under a tree--"

"That sounds true," remarked Peter Todd. "You'd fall asleep anywhere."

"Oh, really, Toddy--"

"And when you'd fallen asleep, you dreamed that you'd caught a burglar?" asked Skinner.

"I jolly well did caught him--I mean caught him--I mean--"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I was woken up by an awful row going on--old Popper, and three or four keepers and footmen, with lanterns and things, chasing after that burglar. He would have got away but for me. Seeing him coming, I leaped at him--"

"We can see you doing it!" remarked Skinner. "Sort of!" chuckled the Bounder.

"Well, I jolly well did! Leaping at him like a--a tiger, I bore him to the earth, and shouted 'This way! I've got him!' Then they all came up and collared him! Mind, the burglar never fell over me in the dark, or anything like that! I sprang at him like a--a lion, and held him till they came up. Old Popper put his hand on my shoulder, and said 'Splendid! Plucky lad!' Those were his very words. I said 'Oh, it's nothing, old chap!' Just like that."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And old Popper said 'Come along with me, my dear fellow'. And they jolly well stood me some supper, too, and sent me home in the car," said

Bunter. "And old Popper sent a note to Quelch, too. Quelch looked like biting me when I came in, but after reading old Popper's note he just said 'I will take you to your dormitory, Bunter'. So I'm all right." "Is that the lot?" asked Bob Cherry. "That's all, old chap." "And now tell us what's happened." "Eh? I've just told you what happened, haven't I?" "I mean what really happened." "Beast!" "Something must have happened, if Bunter's let off," remarked Peter Todd. "Quelch was looking about as amiable as Rhadamanthus, when he brought him up. Can't you tell us what happened, Bunter?" "I've told you!" yelled Bunter. "If you don't believe me, Peter—" "Ha, ha, ha!" "Well, it seems that the fat oyster is let off, anyway," growled Johnny Bull, "and we've got three hundred lines all round." "Eh! What have you got lines for, if you weren't copped?" asked Bunter. "We had to tell Quelch where we'd left you, you fat ass, when you didn't turn up for dorm," said Harry Wharton. "Quelch gave us three hundred lines each for going out of bounds in Popper Court Woods." "He, he, he!" "Think that's funny, you fat chump?" hooted Bob Cherry. "He, he, he!" Apparently, Bunter did think it funny! "He, he, he!" cachinnated the fat Owl. "Fancy you fellows telling Quelch, and getting lines all round! He, he, he! You must have been a lot of fatheads! He, he, he!" There was a creak of a bed. "Well, I'm going to sleep. He, he, he! I haven't got any lines! He, he, he! I say, is that some fellow getting up?" "Yes," came Johnny Bull's voice, "I'm getting up, Bunter." "What are you getting up for?" "I'm going to swipe you with my pillow." "Eh? What! Look here! Keep off, you beast—wow! Will you keep off?" roared Bunter. "You swipe me again, and I'll jolly well—yaroooh!" Swipe! swipe! "Ow! wow! I say, you fellows—yarooop! Will you stoppit?" shrieked Bunter. Swipe! swipe! swipe! "Oh, crikey! ow! Gerraway! Will you keep that pillow away, you beast? Wow!" The pillow swiped, and swiped, and swiped again. Johnny Bull seemed to be putting his beef into it, and the fat Owl wriggled and roared, "Wow! Stoppit! Yaroooh!" "There!" gasped Johnny. "Think that's funny, too?" "Yaroooh!" "Ha, ha, ha!" Billy Bunter seemed no longer amused. Johnny Bull went back to bed, feeling better. Bunter, to judge by his remarks, was feeling worse.

CHAPTER VIII

THE SLEEPING BEAUTY

CECIL REGINALD TEMPLE, of the Fourth Form, stared. Snore! "My only summer hat!" said Temple. Snore! "Fast asleep!" said Fry, in wonder.

"Oh, rather," said Dabney.

Snore!

"The sleeping Beauty!" remarked Temple.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Snore!

A snore was an unusual sound to be heard in morning break. It was no wonder that it drew the attention of Temple, Dabney, and Fry, as they came across the landing from the Fourth-form studies. They gazed at the plump figure of Billy Bunter, extended at ease on the settee on the study landing: his mouth open, his eyes shut behind his big spectacles: sleeping, and snoring.

In break, on a fine sunny morning, almost everybody was out of the House. Bunter had the study landing to himself, till Temple, Dabney and Co. came by.

Bunter, it was well known, could do with lots of sleep.

In that respect, Rip Van Winkle was a mere amateur compared with Bunter. Epimenides himself had nothing on him. The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus were merely also rans. Still, it was surprising for even Bunter to be fast asleep and snoring at ten-fifty on a bright and sunny morning.

Any Remove man, of course, would have known why Bunter had gone to sleep in break. They knew that the fat Owl had missed a lot of sleep the night before. But Temple, Dabney and Co. knew nothing of Bunter's wild adventures out of bounds, and they were mystified.

"He's going it!" remarked Fry. "I've heard that that fat chap has nodded off in the form-room in the afternoon. But in morning break—"

"It's the jolly old limit," said Temple. "Oh, rather," said Dabney.

Footsteps on the landing, voices and chuckles, did not awaken Billy Bunter. Unaware of the three Fourth-formers, he slept and snored on.

"Looks as if he won't wake till the bell goes for third school," remarked Cecil Reginald. "Perhaps not even then! He's some sleeper!"

"Might give him a shake," said Fry. Temple shook his head.

"I'm goin' to give him somethin' else," he said. "A tip not to slack about goin' to sleep in the mornin'. Cut off to the study, Dab, and get me the tube of sky-blue from my colour-box."

Dabney stared.

"What on earth for?" he asked.

"Bunter," answered Temple.

"Oh, my hat!" said Dabney. And he chuckled, and cut back to the study in the Fourth-form passage.

He returned under a minute, with the tube of colour.

Cecil Reginald Temple took it, and unscrewed the cap.

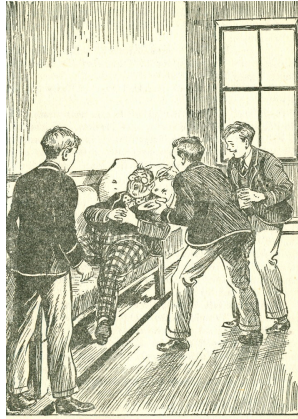
Fry and Dabney watched him, grinning. He squeezed out sky-blue water-colour from the tube, on Bunter's little fat nose. Any fellow but Bunter, doubtless, would have awakened, as the paint trickled on his nose: but the fat Owl of the Remove did not even stir.

Bunter's nose, generally, inclined to red in hue. But as Temple spread the paint over it, it looked blue-blue as the summer sky. The change in the fat Owl's appearance was quite startling. Fry and Dabney chuckled explosively, as they gazed at a fat Owl with a sky-blue nose.

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Fry.

"Oh, scissors!" said Dabney.

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever!" said Temple.



THE CHANGE IN THE FAT OWL'S APPEARANCE
WAS QUITE STARTLING

"That's Keats—we've had it in class with Capper. Bunter isn't a thing of beauty, as a rule: but I'm going to make him a joy for ever."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Don't wake him," admonished Temple, "I'm not finished yet. There's a lot of colour in this tube, and Bunter's goin' to have it all."

"Oh, he won't wake," chuckled Fry. "Carry on, old man."

There seemed little danger of Bunter awakening. He did not stir under the decoration of his nose. Neither did he stir as Temple drew two large blue circles round his eyes, giving him an extraordinary appearance of wearing an extra pair of spectacles, twice as large as his own.

"Oh, crikey!" said Fry.

"Oh, jiminy!" said Dabney.

Spurred on, no doubt, by the appreciation of his artistic efforts by his two comrades, Cecil Reginald carried on with the good work. A sky-blue moustache was imprinted over Bunter's capacious mouth. Then both his ears were tinted sky-blue. The fat Owl's ears were not small: in fact, they provided quite an extensive ground for an artist to work upon, and the tube of colour was nearly empty by the time his ears matched his nose. Happily unaware of the artist at work, Bunter slumbered on, snoring. Temple squeezed the last remnant of colour from the tube in a daub on his plump chin.

Then he stepped back, to admire his handiwork. Fry and Dabney were almost weeping with merriment by that time.

"Does he look a beauty?" asked Temple.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Think he'll make a spot of sensation when he goes down like that?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"He will have to wash," said Temple, thoughtfully.

"They don't wash much in the Remove, and Bunter never, so I've heard. But he will have to wash before he goes into form—even Bunter! I don't know whether such a sudden and complete change will be good for him—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Hallo, there goes the bell! Time we travelled!" drawled Temple, as the first clang was heard of the bell for third school. "Come on, dear boys. The sleeping beauty will be wakin' up."

Temple, Dabney and Co. went down the stairs, chuckling.

Billy Bunter was left alone on the study landing once more, still sleeping and snoring. The grinning Fourth-formers supposed that he would awaken at the clang of the bell for school. But even the clang of the bell did not awaken Bunter. His snore continued, like a bass accompaniment to the bell!

Snore!

At a distance, downstairs, were hurrying feet, as the Greyfriars fellows went to their various Form-rooms. Harry Wharton and Co. and the rest of the Lower Fourth, gathered at the door of the Remove room, where Mr. Quelch let them in. But the gimlet-eye of the Remove master noted the absence of one member of his form. That member was still snoring on the settee on the study landing. The last clang of the bell died away, but the snore of the fat Owl went on, and on, and on! unending as the music of the spheres, though considerably less musical. Indeed the fat Owl might have slept and snored on through third school, had not Trotter, the House page, chanced to cross the study landing on his lawful occasions. Trotter gave quite a convulsive jump at the sight of Bunter. His eyes bulged at the sleeping beauty.

"Oh, corks!" gasped Trotter.

He stood spell-bound for a long moment. Why Bunter had done this, Trotter could not guess—some sort of a lark, he supposed. So far as Trotter could see, Bunter had made himself up in that extraordinary manner, and then gone to sleep on the settee. It was quite amazing.

Trotter was good-natured, and Bunter was already ten minutes late for class. He gave the fat Owl a shake.

Snore!

Shake! shake! Snore!

"Oh, my eye!" said Trotter. And he gave Bunter another shake, so energetic that it roused even the fat Owl from his slumbers.

Bunter's eyes opened drowsily behind his big spectacles.

He blinked at Trotter, drowsily and inimically.

"Lemme alone! Tain't rising-bell! Beast!" mumbled Bunter. Then he realised that he was not in bed in the Remove dormitory, and sat up. "Oh! Oh, crumbs! I say, has the bell gone?"

"Ten minutes ago, Master Bunter," answered Trotter.

"Oh, crikey!" Bunter bounded up from the settee "I shall be late—and Quelch is pretty crusty with me already!" Bunter rolled hurriedly towards the stairs.

"Hold on, sir," gasped Trotter. "You can't go into form like that, sir! Hadn't you better get a wash first?" Bunter stared round at him, with an angry and indignant stare.

"What?" he snapped.

Bunter was accustomed to little jokes in the Remove on the subject of washing. He did not want any little jokes on that subject from a House page!

"A-a-a wash, sir—hadn't you better wash your face—?"

"You cheeky fathead!" hooted Bunter. "Mind your own business! Of all the cheek—"

He wasted no more words on Trotter. Unaware of the unusual and extraordinary state of his fat visage, Bunter did not realise that Trotter was giving him good advice. It was sheer cheek, so far as Bunter could see. He gave Trotter a devastating glare through his big spectacles, and rolled away to the stairs: descended the same in great haste, and tore off to the Remove Form-room.

CHAPTER IX

BUNTER LOOKS BLUE

MR. QUELCH was frowning.

Quelch's brow was often severe. Now it was more severe than usual. The Remove master was not, in fact, at his bonniest that morning.

He had sat up to a late—a very late-hour, the previous night, on account of Bunter. A dutiful form-master like Henry Samuel Quelch could hardly go to bed, while a boy of his form was out of gates at night, wandering in parts unknown. He had been anxious about Bunter: and probably rather more angry than anxious. And when Bunter had, at long last, blown in, the note from Sir Hilton Popper that accompanied him made it necessary for Mr. Quelch's cane, which he had thoughtfully placed ready on his study table, to remain there unused!

Quelch could not keep such late hours without feeling the effects in the morning. And Quelch could not feel the effects in the morning, without passing on some of the same to his form.

Not that Quelch, a very just man, would have dreamed of dropping on any fellow because he was feeling tired, and peeved, and disgruntled. Quelch was always just. But when he was feeling like that, he was perhaps a little more just than usual! Little sins of omission or commission, which might have passed unnoticed in happier moments, drew Quelch's particular attention. Not for worlds would he have been unjust. But he was awfully just!

Lord Mauleverer had a hundred lines for yawning behind his hand. Vernon-Smith had two hundred for quite a small slip in con. Bob Cherry was almost scarified by the sharpest edge of Quelch's tongue for shuffling his feet. Skinner had an imposition for whispering to Snoop: and Squiff had one for whispering to Tom Brown. In third school, the Remove were very much on their best behaviour. Nobody wanted to attract Quelch's gimlet-eye. And in third school, one member of the form was late—very late! Fellows who liked Bunter least felt sorry for him when he did at last show up, with Quelch in his present mood.

But Bunter did not seem in a hurry to show up. It would hardly have been safe to be a minute late in the circumstances. Bunter was many minutes late. As the hand of the Form-room clock crawled round from eleven to eleven-fifteen, the frown on Mr. Quelch's brow grew deeper and deeper, grimmer and grimmer: and no fellow in the Remove would have been willing to be in Bunter's shoes for a term's pocket-money.

It was at eleven-fifteen that scuttling footsteps were heard in the corridor. Bunter was coming at last—a quarter of an hour late. At the sound of footsteps, Mr. Quelch picked up the cane from his desk.

Apparently he was going to lose no time!

The Form-room door hurriedly opened. Every eye in the Remove turned on the fat figure that rolled breathlessly in.

Then there was a general gasp.

It was Bunter! There was no doubt that it was Bunter. Bunter would have been known anywhere if only by his circumference. But the fat face from which his spectacles gleamed was unrecognizable.

Fellows gazed at him like fellows in a dream.

Mr. Quelch's mouth was already open to address Bunter.

But he did not address Bunter. He remained with his mouth open, staring, petrified, dumb.

Bunter rolled in.

Utterly unconscious of Cecil Reginald Temple's artistic work on his fat face, Bunter was naturally unaware of anything out of the common. He knew that he was late—very late. But that was all he knew. Why his entrance caused all the Remove to stare at him, transfixed, as if he had been the grisly spectre of a Bunter, he did not know.

He blinked anxiously at Mr. Quelch. The petrified gaze of his form-master surprised him. But the cane in Quelch's hand did not. He had a dire anticipation of establishing contact with the cane.

"I—I—I'm sorry I'm late, sir," stammered Bunter. "I—I—I never heard the bell, sir."

Mr. Quelch did not answer. He just gazed. All the Remove gazed, at a fat face decorated with a sky-blue nose, blue circles round the eyes, blue ears, and a blue spot on the chin. The ghost of Banquo did not startle Macbeth more than the blue-visaged Owl startled the Remove and the Remove master.

Bunter blinked at Quelch, puzzled.

"Kik-kik-kik-can I g-g-go to my place, sir? " he stammered.

Mr. Quelch found his voice at last. "Bunter!" he gasped.

"Oh! Yes, sir! I-I never heard the bell, sir--"

"How dare you?" shrieked Mr. Quelch. "Bunter, how dare you enter the form-room like this?"

Bunter could only blink at him. He had to enter the form-room, to join up with the Remove. It was difficult to understand Quelch's question.

"Is he crackers?" whispered Bob Cherry. "Is he off his onion?"

"Is he ever on it?" murmured Nugent.

"The crackerfulness must be terrific."

"Mad as a hatter," murmured Peter Todd. "Potty!" said Skinner.

"Is it a rag?" asked the Bounder. "Is Bunter ragging Quelch? Some nerve!"

For once, Mr. Quelch was deaf to the murmur of voices in his form. All his attention was concentrated on the blue-faced Owl.

He did not suppose that Bunter had suddenly gone "crackers". Still less was he likely to guess that Bunter had gone to sleep in the morning, and that a playful fellow in another form had decorated him while he slumbered. To Mr. Quelch, this was a "rag"--an extraordinary rag: an unprecedented rag! Bunter was not only late for class: but he had turned up, perpetrating the most audacious rag that had ever been perpetrated in the Remove form-room. Quelch's amazement turned into towering wrath.

"Bunter! I repeat, how dare you? How dare you walk into this form-room in such a state?"

"Eh? I--Is anything the matter, sir?" stammered Bunter. The fat Owl was not quick on the uptake: but he realised that something was the matter, though he had no idea what it was. What Mr. Quelch meant by his "state" Bunter did not know. He could not see his own face!

"The matter?" gasped Mr. Quelch. "How dare you come into this form-room, Bunter, looking like that?"

"Like what, sir?" stuttered the amazed Owl.

"Like that!" shrieked Mr. Quelch. "Your face!"

"My fuf-fuf-face!"

"Are you in your senses, Bunter?"

"Eh? Oh! Yes!"

"Then why is your face like that?" thundered Mr. Quelch. "How dare you appear here, or in public at all, with such a face?"

Bunter blinked at him. Bunter's own opinion of his face was that it was unusually good-looking. No other fellow in the Remove shared that opinion: and indeed there were fellows who had told Bunter that his face would stop a clock. But Bunter certainly had never expected remarks from his form-master of that kind. Remove fellows might jest about his face, but it was amazing from the Remove master. Bunter's blink was indignant.

"What's the matter with my face?" he exclaimed.

"What is the matter with it?" repeated Mr. Quelch. "If you are in your senses, Bunter, you must know what is the matter with your face."

"I jolly well don't!" retorted Bunter. "My face is all right, I suppose. You let my face alone."

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Quelch. "Is this boy wandering in his mind? Bunter, are you not aware of your extraordinary face?"

Bunter crimsoned under blue paint. This was really too much! He forgot even his dread of his form-master's cane, in his indignation.

"You let my face alone," he hooted. "What about yours, if you come to that?"

"Wha-a-at?" gasped Mr. Quelch.

"My face is all right. Best-looking in the Remove, and chance it," exclaimed Bunter, indignantly. "I jolly well know that Dr. Locke wouldn't like you to make jokes about a fellow's face in form, sir!"

"Bless my soul! Bunter, your extraordinary face—"

"'Tain't extraordinary!" yelled the indignant Owl. "Not so jolly ugly as yours, anyhow."

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Remove.

"Bunter! How dare you—?"

"Well, you let my face alone," howled Bunter. "Making jokes about a fellow's face—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence! Silence in the class! Bunter, if you have not taken leave of your senses, what does this mean? Why have you painted your face in this extraordinary manner?" roared Mr. Quelch.

Bunter jumped.

"Pip-pip-pip-painted!" he stuttered. "Who's pip-pip-painted his face? I don't know what you're talking about, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

It dawned on the Remove and the Remove-master, that Bunter was unaware of the remarkable state of his fat countenance. How he could be unaware of it was a mystery, but it seemed that he was!

"Bunter!" gasped Mr. Quelch. "Your face is painted—"

"'Tain't!" yelled Bunter.

"I repeat that your face is painted—"

"'Tain't!"

"It is painted blue—"

"'Tain't!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" shrieked all the Remove, as they listened to that duet.

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Quelch. "The boy seems unaware of it, though how he can be unaware of it passes all comprehension. Bunter, are you not aware that your face is painted blue? "

"'Tain't!" bawled Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Lord Mauleverer stepped from his place, taking his little pocket-mirror from his waistcoat-pocket. He did not speak: he held it up before Bunter. Bunter blinked at him, and then blinked into the little mirror. What he saw there made him bound clear of the form-room floor.

"Oh! Oh, crikey! What-what's that?" spluttered Bunter. "That—that ain't my face! Why, it's all blue! Oh, jiminy."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I—I say, you fellows, who did this?" yelled Bunter. "Some beast has been painting my face—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bunter! Do you mean to say that your face was painted in this absurd manner without your knowledge?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Oh, crikey! Yes, sir! Oh, jiminy! Some beast must have done it while I was asleep— I—I—I went to sleep in break, sir—I was sleepy after last night, and you wouldn't let me stay in after rising-bell—and some beast—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence!" roared Mr. Quelch. "Such a jest upon this foolish boy is not a laughing matter."

"Isn't it?" murmured Skinner.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence! The next boy who laughs will be detained for the half-holiday this afternoon!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

Sudden gravity descended on the Remove.

"Bunter! You will take three hundred lines for being late for class, and you will stay in this afternoon until you have written them. Now go and wash your face, you foolish and absurd boy."

"I—I—"

"Go!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

Billy Bunter went. He was glad, at any rate, to escape Quelch's cane: but three hundred lines on a half-holiday, and an extra wash, were almost as bad. It was a dismal and disgruntled Owl that returned to the form-room, newly swept and garnished. The paint had been washed off, but Bunter was still looking blue!

CHAPTER X

A RUSH JOB

"CUT!" suggested Bob Cherry.

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull.

"Um!" said Frank Nugent.

"What do you think, Inky?" asked Harry Wharton. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh shook his dusky head.

"The cutfulness is not the proper caper, my esteemed chum! The worthy and ludicrous Quelch would be infuriated."

"Let him!" said Bob.

"Rot!" repeated Johnny Bull. Bob gave a disgruntled grunt.

Five fellows were faced with a problem. It was Wednesday, a half-holiday. The arrangements for that half-holiday had been made long since. Harry Wharton and Co. not being prophets, had been quite unable to foresee the consequences of letting the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove join their picnic after class the previous day. The consequences had been three hundred lines each, all round. Those lines had to be handed in to Mr. Quelch before they sallied forth to carry out the plans already made for that half-holiday.

Quelch, perhaps, fancied that the leisure of a half-holiday gave those members of his form an excellent opportunity for getting their lines done! Certainly he was not likely to go easy, if they went out with the lines undone. He was not in the best of tempers with those members of his form—the escapade in Popper Court Woods had drawn upon them his grimmest disapproval. If Quelch did not receive those lines on time, he was likely to be, if not exactly infuriated as the nabob of Bhanipur expressed it, at least grim and unbending. Quelch, especially in his present mood, was not a "beak" to be trifled with.

On the other hand, an appointment was an appointment: and had to be kept. And the appointment was with certain members of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School—to wit, Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn. And Bob Cherry, for reasons which seemed good to himself, was very anxious not to miss seeing Marjorie. Hence his suggestion of "cutting".

"It's all that fat idiot Bunter's fault," growled Bob. "We ought to have kicked him, instead of letting him roll along yesterday."

"Well, it was our fault we didn't, not Bunter's," Johnny Bull pointed out. Johnny was always ready to contribute solid common-sense: not always at the most propitious moment.

Snort, from Bob.

"Perhaps it was our fault too that the fat idiot insisted on coming back through Popper Court Woods," he yapped. "It was our fault we followed his lead," answered Johnny, stolidly, "I told you so at the time, and—"

Johnny Bull did not finish the sentence. He jumped back out of reach. He was in danger of having his head banged on the wall again. Bob Cherry was giving him a most unchummy glare.

"Chuck it, Johnny," said Frank Nugent, laughing, "we've heard that one-oftener than we want to."

"Speech is silvery, my esteemed Johnny, but silence is the bird in the bush that makes Jack a dull boy, as the English proverb remarks," murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "A still tongue is an Englishman's castle, as another proverb remarkably observes."

Bob Cherry's frowning face melted into a grin, under the influence of those English proverbs.

"Well, look here, never mind whose fault it is, but we've just got to go," he said. "Marjorie and Clara will be walking back from Courtfield by the tow-path this afternoon, and we're to join them on the tow-path and trot on to Cliff House with them. Is that so or isn't it?"

"It is," agreed Harry Wharton. "But—"

"Marjorie said they leave Court field at four—"

"Might be late," said Johnny Bull.

"Marjorie's never late," said Bob.

"Well, they're going to the milliner's," said Johnny. "You know what girls are when they get among hats."

"Rot!" said Bob. "They have to get back to Cliff House for tea, too, and they've asked us. Marjorie will be on time, and so will Clara, as she's with Marjorie. They'll be looking out for us, and we can't let them miss us. They'll expect to see us at Courtfield Bridge, as we arranged. Are we going to let them down?"

"No!" said Harry. "But—"

"Well, we can't get the lines done in time," said Bob. "That's that!" Harry Wharton wrinkled his brows. Three hundred Latin lines was a large order. It was possible, of course, to put on speed. But it was a doubtful proposition. No member of the Famous Five, especially Bob, wished to fail to keep the tryst. On the other hand, Quelch had to be considered.

"Look here, we've got to do the lines," said the captain of the Remove, at last. "Quelch is shirty already, and we can't have another row with him. We shall have to rush them through."

"The rushfulness will have to be rather terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, dubiously.

"And Quelch is quite capable of giving us the job over again, if he fancies that they're done too badly," grunted Johnny Bull. "Any job that's worth doing at all is worth doing well."

"Got anything better to suggest, fathead?"

"Well, we could ask Hazel to cut over to Cliff House on his bike, and tell his sister that we're kept in," suggested Johnny.

"Fathead!" said Bob Cherry. "Look here—"

"Ass!"

"If you've got nothing better to do than to call a fellow names—"

"Idiot!"

"Pack it up, Johnny," grinned Nugent. "Bob isn't reasonable on that subject. You see, he doesn't want to miss Marjorie at Courtfield Bridge."

"I don't see that it matters a lot, so long as we let them know," answered Johnny Bull.

"You wouldn't," said Bob. "That's because you're a silly ass, and a fathead, and a born idiot, and—"

"Speech may be taken as read!" interrupted Harry Wharton. "If we're going to do the lines, and get done in time to meet Marjorie and Clara, the sooner we get going the better."

"We can't get through in time," growled Bob.

"Let's try, anyway."

"Oh, all right."

"I say, you fellows." Billy Bunter rolled up to the worried and troubled group in the Remove passage. "I say—"

"Blow away, barrel," snorted Bob.

"Oh, really, Cherry! I say, you fellows, you heard Quelch give me three hundred lines this morning," said Bunter. "It was all his fault that I was late for class, as he wouldn't let me stay in after rising-bell this morning—"

"Give us a rest!"

"Beast! I mean, look here, old chap! Who's going to help me with my lines?" asked Bunter. "Quelch wants them this afternoon. I can't do three hundred lines in one afternoon. I think you fellows ought to help, after all I've done for you. Suppose you do fifty each—"

"What?" yelled Bob.

"Fifty," said Bunter, blinking at him. "If you fellows do fifty each, that's two hundred and fifty out of the three hundred, see? I'll do the other fifty. I'm not lazy, I hope! I'll do as much as you fellows. What about it?"

The Famous Five did not answer in words. They were overwhelmed with lines of their own, owing to Bunter: and the idea of doing Bunter's lines in addition to their own did not seem to attract them in the very least. Instead of answering Bunter in words, they grasped the fat junior, and sat him down in the Remove passage, with a bump.

"Yaroooh!" roared Bunter. "Wharrer you up to? I was only asking you to do my lines, you beasts—"

"Get up!" roared Bob, "and we'll give you another."

"Beast!"

Bunter did not seem in a hurry to get up. Probably he did not want another. He sat and spluttered for breath: and the Famous Five dispersed to their various studies to get on with their own lines—not Bunter's. There was quick work in three Remove studies that afternoon. Seldom, if ever, had Virgil been transcribed at such a rate. But it was a long journey from "Arma virumque cano" to "finibus arceret": and it was four when, at last, the lines were done, and delivered in Quelch's study. And when Bob Cherry shot out of the old gateway of Greyfriars, his comrades had hard work to keep up with the strides of his long and sinewy legs.

CHAPTER XI

OUT OF BOUNDS

"THE short cut," said Bob Cherry.

"What?"

"The short cut!"

"You silly ass!"

"Come on!"

"Stop!" exclaimed four fellows together."

Bob Cherry did not stop. He tramped on, and his friends hurried to keep up. He explained, over his shoulder, as he tramped with long strides.

"The short cut takes us out close by Court field Bridge. No other way of getting there in time."

"Why not walk up the tow-path from the boat-house?" demanded Johnny Bull.

"It's past four already."

"Well we shall meet them on the tow-path, sooner or later—"

"We fixed to meet them at Courtfield Bridge."

"If they don't see us there, they'll walk on."

"I know that."

"Well then what does it matter?"

"Fathead!"

Bob tramped on. His friends followed him, with worried looks. It was true that if the party walked up the tow-path from the school boat-house, they would not reach Courtfield Bridge, by the time Marjorie and Clara reached it from the other direction. The short cut through Popper Court Woods saved more than half the distance, for the Sark had a winding course, and the tow-path, of course, followed the bank of the river. That short cut solved the problem: so far as turning up on time at Courtfield Bridge was concerned.

Four members of the Co. considered it judicious to walk up the tow-path, sure of meeting the Cliff House girls somewhere on the way. Bob seemed to have no use for judiciousness. He was going to keep the appointment, and he was going to keep it on time. He had yielded to his comrades in the matter of the lines, though reluctantly. He was not going to yield now. He was going to be at Courtfield Bridge on time, if ten thousand Sir Hilton Poppers stood in the way, backed up by a legion of Quelches. But the prospect of going out of bounds again in Popper Court Woods, after what had happened only the day before, was quite dismaying to Bob's chums. Having been called over the coals by their form-master for that very act on Tuesday, it was wildly reckless to repeat it on Wednesday.

"Look here, Bob—," urged Harry Wharton.

"Have a little sense!" urged Johnny Bull.

"After yesterday—!" said Nugent.

"Quelch will go right off at the deep end, if he hears of it," said Johnny. "As likely as not to send us up to the Head!"

"If we're spotted—!" said Harry.

"The spotfulness is a terrific probability—"

"Hold on, Bob," urged Nugent. "We're losing time if we're going the other way—"

"And we jolly well are!" said Johnny Bull.

"Bob, old man—"

Bob Cherry certainly heard all those remarks from his friends. But he did not heed them. He turned a deaf ear—in fact, two deaf ears. Instead of heeding remonstrance and argument, he stepped aside from the lane, and made a jump at the fence bordering it. In another moment, his leg was over the top. On the other side of that fence, were the forbidden precincts of Popper Court.

"Stop, you ass!" hooted Johnny Bull. "Come down, fathead!"

"Are you going to play the goat just as Bunter did yesterday, you duffer?"

"Haven't you any more sense than Bunter?" demanded Johnny.

Bob glanced down at them.

"You fellows go the other way, if you like," he said. "I'm going this way. I'm going to be at Courtfield Bridge on time, as I said I would. See you later."

"Look here—"

"Stop!"

Bob dropped on the inner side of the fence, and disappeared. His friends heard him pushing through bush and bracken. They exchanged glances. Bob had taken the bit between his teeth: and that was that.

"Well, are we going on?" asked Nugent. "I suppose we're sticking to him."

"The stickfulness to the esteemed and idiotic Bob is the proper caper," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton nodded.

"Oh, come on," he said. "What about you, Johnny?"

Snort, from Johnny Bull.

"Oh, let's!" he said. "We let Bunter land us in a row yesterday—why not let Bob land us in another row to-day? It's a silly-ass thing to do: but we are a lot of silly asses, aren't we?"

And having delivered this opinion, Johnny clambered up the fence. A minute more, and all four were over it, and pushing through the underwoods after Bob, who was already well on his way towards the forbidden footpath that led to the bank of the Sark.

"Easy does it, Bob," called out Harry.

"Oh, come on, if you're coming," answered Bob, over his shoulder.

"If you crash along at that rate, you'll have every keeper at Popper Court on your neck!" snorted Johnny Bull.

"Blow the keepers!" answered Bob.

However, he slackened pace a little, and ceased to crash through bush and bramble. The wood, at that spot, was very thick, and care was required to progress, without announcing their presence to the keepers. Bob was quite determined to go by the forbidden footpath: but he realised that he did not exactly want another interview with an incensed Quelch. Caution was indicated: and Bob consented to be cautious.

The five juniors picked their way through the thick wood and soon glimpsed the leafy footpath, which they had followed the day before, when they had encountered the trespassing gentleman with the pimples. But before stepping out into the open path, Harry Wharton stopped Bob by catching his arm, and came to a halt.

"Look before you leap, fathead" he said.

"Looks clear enough," grunted Bob.

"Make sure, ass."

"The lookfulness before the leapfulness is the sine qua non, my esteemed Bob," murmured Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. "It is no use locking the stable door after the cracked pitcher has gone to the well."

"Quiet!" whispered Nugent.

"Oh, what—?" began Bob.

"Quiet, you rhinoceros! I can hear somebody."

"Rot!"

"Listen, ass!"

Bob Cherry grunted, but he listened. Keeping back in the thick underwood, invisible from the footpath, the juniors all bent their ears to listen. And an unmistakable sound of footsteps reached their ears. Someone, not yet in sight, was coming along the footpath.

"Oh, blow!" muttered Bob.

But he remained very still. To be caught at that point certainly was not the way to reach Courtfield Bridge on time. Jenkins, or Joyce, or Hansom, would not have been likely to allow the schoolboys to proceed on their way. Impatient, but cautious, Bob listened to the approaching footsteps, and waited for the unseen pedestrian to pass and leave the way clear.

"Must be a keeper," muttered Nugent.

"Quiet, for goodness' sake. Might be old Popper himself."

"Might only be that pimply chap we saw mooching here yesterday," grunted Bob.

"Think he takes his pimples for a walk in this wood regularly every day?" inquired Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

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

"Quiet!" whispered Harry Wharton. "Look!"

The juniors were still as mice as they caught the gleam of an eyeglass, in the sun-rays that filtered through the branches over the footpath. A long lean gentleman, with an eyeglass stuck in his eye, came into sight: and they were thankful that they were invisible. It was not a keeper: and it certainly was not the pimply trespasser: it was Sir Hilton Popper, the lord of Popper Court, himself!

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Bob. "Old Popper!"

"The old-Popperfulness is terrific."

"Quiet!"

Sir Hilton Popper came on, with his jerky strides. His brown old crusty face was clearly seen, and its expression was very far from amiable. Sir Hilton's temper was never very pleasant at the best of times: he was an autocratic old gentleman with a sharp temper and a sharp tongue. But it seemed unusually irascible at the moment, to judge by his look. His brows were knitted, his eyes glinted, and his lips were hard set. Whatever thoughts were passing through his mind, they seemed to be of a disturbing and irritating nature. But he did not glance towards the spot where the bushes screened the Greyfriars juniors. He had no suspicion that they were there.

As he was coming from the direction of the river, the juniors had only to wait quietly till he had passed, and then their way would be clear. They waited in breathless silence.

Sir Hilton came jerking on, till he was almost abreast of the spot where the thickets hid the Famous Five. Then, to their dismay, he halted.

For a moment, they had an impression that he had spotted them. But that was not the case. He did not glance towards their cover. He stopped on the other side of the footpath, where a fallen log lay under the branches of a spreading beech. And, to the utter dismay of the juniors, he sat down on that log, leaned his bony back against the trunk of the beech, and lighted a cigarette.

As he smoked the cigarette, the baronet sat facing the thicket that screened the Greyfriars juniors. They were not ten or twelve feet from him. A single movement must have drawn his attention. They did not venture to make a single movement. With deep feelings, they remained perfectly still, watching the baronet through the interstices of the thicket, and waiting for him to finish his smoke and go on his way. And their feelings became deeper, when, having finished his cigarette, Sir Hilton Popper, instead of going on his way, lighted another!

CHAPTER XII

THE BLUE MAURITIUS

"WRETCHES!"

Five fellows very nearly jumped.

That sudden exclamation, from Sir Hilton Popper, shot out suddenly like a bullet, startled them. It seemed certain that, staring directly towards their thicket, he must have spotted them, and that his remark was to their address.

But again it was only a false alarm. Sir Hilton was not addressing them: he was still happily unconscious of their presence. He was speaking to himself-referring to some persons unknown of whom he was thinking!

Bob Cherry winked at his comrades, who grinned. Sir Hilton little dreamed that his self-communings reached the ears of five schoolboys.

To whom he was alluding they had not the faintest idea.

Probably any person who caused Sir Hilton the slightest spot of bother was, in his autocratic opinion, a wretch!

"Rats!" said Sir Hilton.

Greyfriars fellows sometimes said "Rats"! But Sir Hilton was evidently not using that expressive word in a slangy sense. The "rats" were apparently the same persons as the "wretches".

The lord of Popper Court threw away the stump of his second cigarette, and the hidden juniors hoped that this meant that he was going on his

way. But he did not rise from his seat. Instead of that, he took out a pocket-book from an inner pocket, and opened it. From the pocket-book, he drew a folded printed paper. Five pairs of eyes being on him at such close range, the juniors could not help catching sight of the words "Income Tax", in larger print than the rest.

They suppressed a chuckle.

This was the clue to Sir Hilton's ire.

It is improbable that any citizen was ever really pleased to receive a demand from his Inspector of Taxes for nearly half his income. If such a citizen existed, his name certainly, was not Popper! Sir Hilton was evidently displeased—and not only displeased, but extremely irritated, annoyed, and exasperated.

A gentleman whose estate was covered by mortgages almost as thickly as by oaks and beeches, and who was trying to keep up the appearances of thirty years ago, in an age of excessive taxation, could hardly be expected to smile amiably when he received official documents from Tax Inspectors. Certainly Sir Hilton Popper was not smiling. He was scowling almost like a demon in a pantomime.

Really, that Income Tax Demand Note might almost have curled up, and withered away, under the deadly glare Sir Hilton gave it.

"Spendthrifts! Wasters!" barked Sir Hilton.

In public, the lord of Popper Court certainly would never have dreamed of applying such opprobrious expressions to the great statesmen who handle the national finances. But Sir Hilton supposed that he was alone in the wood, and felt that he might let himself go a little, with no hearers but oaks and beeches.

"Pah!" snapped Sir Hilton.

He scanned the document with a malevolent eye, and laid it on his knee. Then he sat glaring, directly towards the juniors' thicket, luckily without his glare penetrating their cover. He had looked unamiable at the first view: but he was looking positively dangerous, since he had scanned that Income Tax Note. Only too clearly, Sir Hilton was in difficulties about raising the sum required of him by his Inspector of Taxes. Indeed he looked as if that official, had he been on the spot, would not have been quite safe from Sir Hilton's bony knuckles!

"How is a man to meet such demands?" asked Sir Hilton, apparently addressing that question to the green thicket where the juniors were still as mice. "Last year I had to sell a farm! The year before, to let my house to a bounder. This year I must sell the stamp."

The word "stamp" rang a bell, as it were, to the juniors.

They remembered Billy Bunter's story of the burglar, and his extraordinary statement that that nocturnal marauder had stolen a "stamp" from Popper Court. Stamps, to the Remove fellows, were postage-stamps on letters, and they could not imagine the most enterprising burglar taking the trouble to burgle a postage-stamp. But they remembered now that there are stamps—and stamps!

If Sir Hilton Popper was thinking of selling a stamp, to pay his Income Tax, obviously it was not such a stamp as adhered to letters delivered at Greyfriars by Bloggs, the postman!

Rare stamps, worth only a few pence at the date of issue, might run into hundreds, sometimes thousands, of pounds, in value, according to the state of the philatelic market. Enthusiastic stamp-collectors, excited philatelists, had been known to give two or three thousand pounds for a rare stamp! Apparently it was such a stamp as this to which the lord of Popper Court was now referring.

"My stamp!" Sir Hilton's tone was now more mournful than angry. "My Blue Mauritius! The gem of my collection! There is no other resource! The Blue Mauritius will have to go."

He shook his head sadly.

Evidently the Blue Mauritius was dear to Sir Hilton's heart, and though it was going to be lost to sight, it was going to remain to memory dear! Harry Wharton and Co. not being stamp-collectors, did not perhaps fully grasp what a blow this was to a keen philatelist. They knew little of philately and of the value of rare stamps. But the fact was that Sir Hilton, in younger days, had bought that Blue Mauritius stamp for a mere five hundred pounds, and it had been the apple of his eye ever since. It had been a great bargain at the time—he had been in luck. Now his luck was out—the Blue Mauritius had to go, to meet the ravenous demands of the tax-gatherers. Really, Sir Hilton was still in luck in one way, for the Blue Mauritius had increased in value during the passing years, and was now worth at least four times as much. But Sir Hilton did not look at it in that way. He was only feeling the wrench of parting with the gem of his stamp-collection—his beloved Blue Mauritius!

"It will have to go," said Sir Hilton, still apparently addressing his remarks to the juniors' thicket. "And to think—" He drew a deep breath. "To think that that burglar—that scoundrel—that crook—that iniquitous ruffian—nearly had it last night—that he got out of the house with it—that he might have escaped with it, had he not fallen over that stupid boy Punter in his flight! A two-thousand pound stamp. Good gad!"

Again the hidden juniors barely repressed a chuckle.

This was the other side of Bunter's tale of burglar-catching!

"The wretch! The villain! The rascal!" Sir Hilton's opinion of burglars seemed even worse than his opinion of tax-gatherers! "The dastard! The knave! The—the—" Epithets seemed to fail Sir Hilton. "Luckily, he is now safe in the cells, and my stamp is safe! But—it must be sold!"

From a little socket in the pocket-book, Sir Hilton Popper drew a small object. The juniors could see that it was a postage-stamp. But they realised now that it was something very special and precious in the postage-stamp line. They were able to discern that it was blue in colour, and that it showed a profile of Queen Victoria. They also caught the words "TWO PENCE".

It was, in fact, a "Post Office" Blue Mauritius: worth the humble sum of twopence when issued a hundred years earlier in the British Colony of Mauritius: worth at the present day at least £2,000, its "scarcity" value.

Sir Hilton sat with the stamp between finger and thumb, gazing at it. Only a fervid philatelist could have fully understood and sympathised with his feelings as he gazed! Harry Wharton and Co. were not unsympathetic. But they did wish that Sir Hilton would pack it up and go.

"Oh!" breathed Nugent, suddenly.

"Quiet, old chap!" whispered Harry. "Look!"

"Oh, gum!"

"Pimples!" breathed Bob Cherry.

The juniors stared blankly across the footpath, past the baronet sitting on the log under the beech tree. From behind that tree, a face had appeared. There had not been a sound—not the faintest rustle: the man moved as warily as a fox. Sir Hilton, unaware of him, did not stir. But all five of the Greyfriars juniors saw him, and recognised at once the man they had seen in the wood the previous day—pasty face, pimples, spotted necktie, bowler hat at a rakish angle, and all. And they saw that his narrow foxy eyes were fixed upon the precious stamp in Sir Hilton's brown fingers, with an intense gaze, his unpleasant face eager with greed.

Possibly the man had heard Sir Hilton's mutterings and mumblings. No doubt he knew the value of a Blue Mauritius, better than the schoolboys did. There was no mistaking the greed in his face. The juniors stared across the footpath at him, hardly knowing what to do. They did not want to reveal their presence—very much indeed they did not—but they could scarcely have allowed the man to snatch at that precious stamp, without warning Sir Hilton. And he looked like it. But at the point, the baronet rose from the log, apparently to resume his walk along the footpath. He slipped the precious stamp back into the pocket-book, dosed it, and, as he rose, slipped the elastic band round the pocket-book, to return it to the pocket from which he had taken it. Then, with a suddenness that took even the watching juniors entirely by surprise, the foxy-faced man with pimples acted. With a spring as swift as that of a panther, he was out of the wood into the footpath: and before the baronet even realised that he was there, he had snatched the pocket-book from Sir Hilton's hand: and, rushing on without a pause, shot across the footpath, and plunged into the thicket on the opposite side. It was all so sudden, and so swift, that Sir Hilton had hardly a glimpse of him. Sir Hilton, so startled and taken off his guard that he did not seem even to understand what was happening, staggered against the beech. The thief, with the pocket-book in his hand, crashed through the thicket. Had that thicket been untenanted, as the man naturally supposed, certainly he would have escaped with his precious plunder. But five Greyfriars juniors were in that thicket: and the thief, crashing through, crashed right into them. He gave a gasping yell of amazement and alarm as hands grabbed him on all sides, and he went heavily to the ground, Harry Wharton snatching the pocket-book from his hand as he crashed.

CHAPTER XIII

SAVED

"GOOD gad! What—who-how-what— Gad!"

Sir Hilton Popper was spluttering wildly.

"What-what-who—!"

"Collar him!" shouted Bob Cherry, breathlessly. "We've got him!"

Sir Hilton, his old mastiff-face dizzy with astonishment came striding across the footpath. The Popper intellect did not work quickly: but Sir Hilton realised that a thief had snatched his pocket-book and bolted into the wood with it, and in a startled, flabbergasted state, he was starting in pursuit. But the rustling, panting, scuffling, in the thicket bordering the path was quite a puzzle to him. He plunged on, and almost stumbled over a bunch of schoolboys clinging to a wriggling, struggling, panting man, who was fighting like a tiger to escape.

"What-what-what—!" stuttered Sir Hilton. He stared dazedly.

He had hardly seen the man who had robbed him so swiftly had the rascal appeared and disappeared. But he knew that this must be the man—and he knew Harry Wharton and Co. by sight. How they came there, with the panting thief struggling in their grasp, was a mystery to him.

"We've got him, sir," panted Bob.

"By gad! What-what—"

"The gotfulness is terrific."

"By gum! He's like an eel," gasped Johnny Bull. "Keep hold of him!"

"Good gad! That man has robbed me!" gasped Sir Hilton Popper. "What are you Greyfriars boys doing here? Good gad! Give me a hold of him—you may stand back—I will secure the scoundrel—"



"WE'VE GOT HIM, SIR," PANTED BOB

The baronet's grasp closed on the collar of the man's coat. He dragged him up, in a grasp that was much too strong for the slight, slim man to resist.

The juniors let go. Sir Hilton was more than able to deal with the sneak-thief, who was hardly more than half his size and weight: and the baronet evidently wanted to take matters into his own hands.

With a grip of iron on the little man's collar, the long lean gentleman held him rather like a big dog holding a rat. The prisoner panted and panted, and sagged in his grasp.

"By gad! My stamp—scoundrel—rascal—no doubt a confederate of that rascal last night—my stamp—my pocket-book—rascal— Oh!" gasped Sir Hilton, "stop him! Good gad! Stop him!"

With eel-like agility, the little slim man suddenly wriggled out of his coat, and, leaving it in the astonished baronet's hands, darted away—so suddenly and swiftly, that the juniors had no chance of grabbing at him as he went.

In a split second, he vanished into the wood, running like a deer.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob.

"That old ass—!" breathed Johnny Bull.

Sir Hilton staggered, with the empty coat in his hands.

He stared at it, glared at it, almost gibbered at it: as if hardly able to understand, for a moment or two, that it no longer contained its former inhabitant!

"Good gad! The villain—my stamp—my pocket-book—"

"Here it is, sir!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"What? what?" Sir Hilton, about to rush into the wood after the fleeing sneak-thief, whom he would have had about as much chance of catching, as a tortoise would have had of catching a hare, turned back. "What—?"

"Here's your pocket-book, Sir Hilton." The baronet blinked at it.

"My—my—my pip—pip—pocket-book," he stuttered.

"How—what—how—who—that is my pocket-book—how—how—"

"I grabbed it when the man ran into us, sir," explained Harry, with a smile. "It's all right, sir."

"Good gad!"

Sir Hilton almost snatched the pocket-book from the junior's hand. Taking no further heed of the fleeing man, already far away in the wood, or of the bunch of breathless schoolboys, he opened it, to make sure that the precious stamp was still safe within. His gasp of relief, as he saw the Blue Mauritius safe and sound, was like the air escaping from a punctured tyre.

Harry Wharton and Co., breathless, and more than a little untidy, after that sudden and unexpected struggle, grinned at one another. The thief had escaped, but they had saved Sir Hilton's pocket-book for him, containing the stamp which they could guess to be of considerable value, though its actual fantastic value they did not know. In the circumstances, Sir Hilton could hardly cut up crusty, they considered. For the moment, he had forgotten their existence.

However, having ascertained that the Blue Mauritius was still in his possession, Sir Hilton restored the pocket-book to his pocket, and became aware of the existence of the Greyfriars juniors again.

"Thank you, Warley," he said. "I think your name is Warley."

"Wharton, sir," said Harry, meekly.

"Oh! Yes! Wharton! I am much obliged to you, Wharton. You acted very promptly in getting the pocket-book away from that rascal—very promptly, very sensibly, very sensibly indeed. It contains an article of great value, Warley."

"Does it, sir?" murmured Harry, and the other fellows contrived not to smile. Sir Hilton was evidently unaware that they had heard his remarks on the subject of Income Tax and Blue Mauritius stamps!

"Yes, yes! Very great value indeed," said Sir Hilton.

"By acting so promptly and sensibly, you have saved me from a very serious loss, Warley. Did you say your name was Warley or Warburton?"

"Wharton, sir."

"Oh! Yes! Wharton! Quite. But what are you doing here, in my woods?" added Sir Hilton. The Blue Mauritius being safe, the lean gentleman remembered that he was lord of Popper Court, fierce on trespassers. "You must be aware, Warburton, that these woods are not open to the public." But the frown passed from Sir Hilton's mastiff face the next moment. If the juniors were trespassing, it had been a very fortunate circumstance for him: the gentleman with the pimples would certainly have got away with the Blue Mauritius otherwise. The frown gave place to a smile: or as near a smile as the baronet's crusty old face could get.

"Well, well, well, never mind that, he said, quite genially, "I am glad you were here—very glad, by Jove.

Go away at once, and we will say nothing more about it. And I am very much obliged to you, Warfield."

"Thank you, sir," said Harry, rather wondering how many more variations of his name he would hear, if the conversation continued. "Come on, you men— We'll get out at once, sir."

"We'll run all the way, sir," said Bob Cherry.

"Very good—very good—I excuse you, but go away at once," said Sir Hilton, with a wave of the hand. "I am very much obliged to you, Warrington, and your friends: but go away at once."

And Harry Wharton and Co. went away at once—that being the very thing they were most desirous of doing. They pushed on up the footpath towards the river, at a trot. Bob Cherry had said they would run all the way, for the excellent reason that only by keeping on the trot could they make up for lost time, after losing a quarter of an hour owing to Sir Hilton Popper turning up on the footpath.

They came out in a cheery if rather breathless bunch on the bank of the Sark, with Courtfield Bridge in view up the river. They kept on the trot until they reached the bridge.

"On time," said Bob, breathlessly.

At a little distance, coming from Courtfield, two graceful girlish figures could be seen approaching. Bob waved his cap to Marjorie and Clara. It had been a near thing: but the chums of the Remove were on the spot, waiting for the Cliff House girls when they came up.

CHAPTER XIV

HARD LINES

"REDDY, old fellow."

Tom Redwing smiled, and Herbert Vernon-Smith sniffed.

Billy Bunter addressed Tom Redwing in the most cordial, indeed affectionate tones. It might have been supposed that he loved him like a brother.

Which, to anyone who knew Bunter, indicated that the fat Owl wanted something!

Smithy and his chum were on the way to the bike-shed, when Bunter happened. Redwing stopped, and Smithy snapped:

"Come on!"

"Oh, there's no hurry, Smithy," said Redwing, always good-natured. "What is it, Bunter?"

"Can't you guess what it is?" snapped the Bounder.

"That fat ass has been mooching about for hours asking fellows to help him with his lines."

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"Isn't it that?" snapped Smithy.

"I'm speaking to Redwing, Smithy! I know you're too jolly selfish to lend a fellow a hand," said Bunter, scornfully. "I say, Reddy, old chap, you heard Quelch say that I've got to hand in my lines before I go out—"

"You could have done them by this time," said Vernon-Smith. "Wharton's gang had the same lot, and they've done them and gone out. Come on, Reddy."

The fat Owl gave Smithy an inimical blink. No doubt he could have followed the industrious example of the Famous Five, had the spirit moved him so to do. But it hadn't!

It was one of Billy Bunter's happy ways to take more trouble to dodge a job of work, than would have been required to get it done. Not a single line of his three hundred had been written, so far.

He had asked fellows up and down the Remove to help him with those lines. But not a man in the Lower Fourth seemed disposed to use up a half-holiday doing lines for Bunter. With the selfishness to which he was sadly accustomed, they went about their own affairs, heartlessly regardless of a lazy fat Owl and his woes.

It would not have mattered so much had it not been urgent and important for Billy Bunter to get out that afternoon. But it was both important and urgent. His sister Bessie, at Cliff House, had had a hamper, from home. So the urgency of the matter could hardly be exaggerated. Added to that, if it needed adding to, Peter Todd had gone out to tea, and there was likely to be short commons, if any commons at all, in No. 7 Study at tea-time. The matter was, indeed, so urgent, that Bunter had almost made up his fat mind to get those lines done without delay, by his own exertions. But not quite!

"You see, I've simply got to get across to Cliff House Reddy," he said. "I've got to see my sister Bessie. She's had a—I—I mean, she ain't well, and I'm very anxious about her."

"Oh!" said Redwing. His sympathies were easily touched.

"What's the matter with her?" asked Vernon-Smith whose sympathies were not touched easily, if at all. "Eating too much?"

"Oh, really, Smithy! If you had a sister, you'd understand a brother's feelings," said Bunter, reproachfully.

Poor Bessie ain't at all well, and I'm—I'm very anxious. I can't go out till those rotten lines are done—"

"Go and tell Quelch that your sister's ill at Cliff House and he'll let you off," suggested the Bounder, sarcastically.

"Oh! She—she ain't so ill as all that" said Bunter hastily.

"I fancied not," jeered the Bounder.

"I say, Reddy, you'll lend me a hand, won't you?" asked Bunter. "You ain't selfish like Smithy. Do lend a chap a hand, old fellow."

Redwing hesitated. He was booked for a spin with his chum, and he certainly did not want to write lines. But he was all goodnature: which, in Billy Bunter's opinion, was synonymous with being "soft". If Redwing was "soft" enough to sit in a study writing lines, instead of going out on his bike, William George Bunter was the man to take full advantage of it.

"Gammon!" said the Bounder. "Come on, Reddy."

"Well," said Redwing, slowly. "If—"

"If rats!" snapped Smithy. "Is there a feed on at Cliff House, Bunter? I've heard that Wharton's gang are going over there this afternoon."

"They jolly well won't come in on Bessie's hamper," said Bunter warmly.

"If they jolly well think they're coming in on it, they're jolly well mistaken—"

"Oh, my hat! Has Bessie had a hamper?"

"Oh! No! I—I mean—'tain't anything to do with a hamper—I ain't going over to see Bessie because she's had a hamper—nothing of the kind—I say, you fellows, don't walk off while a chap's talking to you— Beast!" howled Bunter.

Smithy and Redwing did walk off, laughing: and Billy Bunter was left with his problem of lines still unsolved.

He blinked up at the clock-tower. It was half-past four.

It was too late for Bunter to hope to get through three hundred lines, unaided, in time to get over to Cliff House for tea.

"Beast!" groaned Bunter. Sad to relate, he was referring to his form-master by that description.

He made a few steps towards the House, dismally making up his fat mind to get on with the lines. But he paused again.

There was a hamper at Cliff House. There was nothing for tea in No. 7 Study. And Bunter was in his accustomed state—stony! Not for the first time, he had been disappointed about a postal-order. He came to a desperate resolution. He was going to "cut".

There would be a row if he went out with his lines undone.

But that would come later. In the meantime, there was the hamper.

He turned his footsteps in the direction of the gates.

He was going over to Cliff House to claim his "whack" in that hamper from home, chancing it with Mr. Quelch afterwards!

But alas for Bunter! Just as the fattest figure at Greyfriars School was rolling out of the gateway, there came a sharp voice: "Bunter!"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter, spinning round like a fat humming-top, at the voice of his Form-master.

Mr. Quelch was standing at the door of the porter's lodge, speaking to Gosling. Bunter hadn't noticed him as he passed. But Quelch had noticed Bunter. It was like the fat Owl to "cut" under the very nose of his beak! A pair of gimlet-eyes almost bored into the fat Owl. "Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" groaned Bunter. "Have you done your lines?"

"Oh! Yes! No! I—I'm just going to, sir," gasped Bunter.

"You were going out, Bunter!"

"Oh! No! Yes! I—I mean no, sir! I—I wasn't gig-gig-going out, sir. I—I-I was just going to—to—to look at the scenery, sir—"

"Go into the House at once, Bunter, and write your lines. If you leave the school before you have handed them in to me, I shall cane you most severely, and double your imposition."

"Oh, lor'!"

Wearily Bunter turned back from the gates, and rolled away to the House. It really seemed as if the stars in their courses fought against Bunter, as against Sisera of old. In the most pessimistic mood ever, he rolled into the House, and into No. 7 Study in the Remove.

But his fat dismal face cleared a little, as he found Tom Dutton in the study. Dutton was deaf, and it was rather a labour of love to talk to him—which was doubtless the reason why Bunter had not yet asked his aid with those lines. Now it was a last chance. Dutton was adjusting trouser-clips, apparently with a view to cycling. Bunter gave him his most ingratiating grin.

"I say, going out?" he asked.

Dutton glanced round at him.

"Well what do you expect?" he said. "A fellow who scoffs tuck like you must expect to e growing stout."

"I didn't say growing stout—I said going out," howled Bunter. "I say, will you lend me a hand with my impot?"

"There's one on the table."

"Eh? One what?"

"Inkpot."

"Oh, crikey! I never said inkpot, you fathead! I've got three hundred lines to do for Quelch, and I've got to get over to Cliff House to see my sister."

"Better go to the matron, then."

"Eh?"

"Mrs. Kebble will give you something for a blister, if you've got one. Where have you got it? "

"Oh, crumbs! I haven't got a blister!" hooted Bunter. "I've got to go over and see my sister."

"Eh? Did you say your sister?"

"Yes I did."

"Well, I'm sorry," said Dutton, staring, "but I can't help it if your sister's got a blister, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey! I've got to go and see Bessie. She's had a hamper—I mean, she's ill, and I'm very anxious about the hamper—I mean about Bessie. If you'll do some of my lines for me, old chap—"

"It's downstairs."

"What's downstairs?" shrieked Bunter.

"My cap."

"I wasn't talking about your cap," yelled Bunter. "Blow your cap! Will you help me with my lines, so that I can get over to Cliff House and see my sister Hamper—I mean my Hamper Bessie—I mean, hold on, you deaf ass—I—I mean, old fellow—will you help me with my lines—"

"Eh? Have you got lines?"

"Yes, three hundred—"

"Well, if you blundered, you must expect lines, Bunter. You know what Quelch is like when a fellow blunders. You should be more careful."

"Will you do some for me?" howled Bunter.

"I've got no time to do sums for you, Bunter—I'm going out on my bike. You said lines, not sums."

"Three hundred lines," raved Bunter. "Will you do half, so that I can cut over to Cliff House in time for tea—I mean, to see Bessie. You do half, and I'll do the rest—"

"Better do your lines before you rest," said Dutton. "Take my tip, Bunter, and get your lines done, and leave resting till afterwards."

And having given Bunter that sage advice, and having adjusted his trouser-clips, Tom Dutton left the study.

"Beast!" hooted Bunter.

There was no help for a lazy fat Owl. If those lines were going to be written at all, it was evident that they had to be written by the fat hand of William George Bunter himself.

With a lugubrious fat face, he propped Virgil against the inkstand, and sat down to lines. And never had the deathless verse of P. Vergilius Maro been so utterly and thoroughly unappreciated by any fellow at any school.

CHAPTER XV

HOT CHASE

"THAT old ass!" said Herbert Vernon-Smith.

"Eh?"

"Old Popper!"

The long white road across Courtfield Common, with the town in the distance, stretched before the two cyclists, bordered by clumps of hawthorn. Ahead of them on the road—a long way ahead—the Bounder sighted a tall figure. Its back was to the cyclists—Sir Hilton Popper was apparently walking to Courtfield—but it was easy to recognise the lord of Popper Court, from a back view.

A mischievous gleam came into the Bounder's eyes, as he watched the tall, lean figure walking, or rather stalking, ahead. He gave Redwing a grinning glance.

"Rather a lark to make the old ass jump, Reddy," he said.

"Eh! What?" asked Tom Redwing, startled.

"Keep quiet till we're just behind him, and then bang on your bell like billy-O, and I'll do the same—"

"Smithy!"

"Make him jump, what?" grinned the Bounder.

"Don't be an ass, Smithy! Old Popper's a governor of the school—"

"I know that! I got a detention last week for landing on his dashed island in the Sark," said Vernon-Smith.

"One good turn deserves another."

"Ten to one he will report you to the Head if you cheek him."

"My dear man," drawled the Bounder, "a cyclist's bound to ring his bell to warn a pedestrian walking in the road in front of him. Don't you know the rules of the road?"

"There's bags of room to pass him. He will know it was cheek."

"I don't care if he does."

"Don't play the goat, Smithy. Look here—"

"Sermon may be taken as read," drawled Smithy. "No end of a lark to make the old ass jump! It will be a tip to him not to stalk about with his nose in the air as if the whole county of Kent belonged to him. Are you on, Reddy? "

"No! I tell you—"

"Then watch me."

"Look here, Smithy—"

"Rats!"

The Bounder put on speed, and shot ahead of his comrade, Redwing pedalled on at the same pace as before, watching him with an anxious look. He was not to be drawn into a disrespectful practical joke on the lord of Popper Court and he was worried about the possible consequences for Smithy. Sir Hilton Popper was far too lofty and important a gentleman to be made to jump like a kangaroo with impunity.

But Smithy, as usual, was reckless of possible consequences.

Sir Hilton had a way of making himself unpleasant, and Smithy did not see why he should not make himself unpleasant in his turn.

He put on a burst of speed, leaving Redwing behind, and then free-wheeled, his machine making scarcely a sound as it whizzed on. Sir Hilton Popper remained quite unconscious of the cyclist behind him.

He was likely to remain in that blissful state of ignorance, till the bell suddenly banged. Then he was only too likely to Jump! Smithy grinned with cheery anticipation.

But, as it happened, it was not Sir Hilton Popper who jumped. Smithy himself suddenly jumped, in his saddle, in surprise.

He was within twenty yards of the unsuspecting baronet, and his hand was ready on the bell. Another minute—but, in that minute, something quite unexpected happened.

Suddenly, from the clumps of hawthorns beside the road, as Sir Hilton strode past, a figure shot out, and leaped right at the baronet.

The amazed Smithy glimpsed a pimply face and a spotted necktie. Harry Wharton and Co. would have known the man at a glance. But he was a stranger to Vernon-Smith's eyes.

In utter amazement, the Bounder stared, quite forgetful of his intended prank on the lord of Popper Court.

Sir Hilton was a big man, and the man with the pimples was small and slim. But the sudden and unexpected rush up-ended the tall baronet, and he went sprawling headlong over on his back, in the dust of the Court field road.

He crashed and spluttered.

Even as he crashed, the pimply man was upon him, thrusting a thievish hand into a pocket—evidently aware of the pocket he wanted—and jerking therefrom a pocket-book.

"Oh, gad!" gasped the Bounder.

The pimply man had not looked towards him. He was too concentrated on the work in hand to heed cyclists on the road. The Bounder's astonished eyes saw all that passed, and Redwing, further back, saw it all as clearly. Both would willingly have intervened: but there was no time. The whole thing passed in a flash. The pimply man, leaping up from the sprawling, dizzy baronet, thrust the pocket-book into his own pocket, and sprang back into the hawthorns that bordered the road. He was gone in the twinkling of an eye, reappearing on the further side of the hawthorns, and running across the open common like a deer.

Hardly a couple of seconds later, Vernon-Smith jammed on his brakes, and jumped down, at the side of the spluttering lord of Popper Court. Sir Hilton sat up in the dust, his hat off, his eyeglass streaming at the end of its cord, his hand going to the pocket from which the pocket-book had been snatched.

"Oh! Oh, gad! Urrgh! I have been robbed—it was the same man—the man in the wood—he has robbed me—my pocket-book—my stamp—the Blue Mauritius—good gad! Where is he?"

"Let me help you, sir." Smithy lent a helping hand, and the dizzy old gentleman tottered to his feet, gasping for breath.

"Where is he? My pocket-book—" Sir Hilton fairly shrieked. "The stamp! He has robbed me! Two thousand pounds—good gad—where is he?" Redwing came whizzing up.

"After him, Smithy!" he shouted. And without waiting for a reply, Tom Redwing whirled his bike off the road shot through the clumps of hawthorns, and disappeared behind them, on the track of the fleeing pickpocket.

"Coming!" yelled the Bounder, his eyes ablaze with excitement.

"Boy! Did you see—where is he—what—"

"He's cut across the common, sir—we're getting after him," called back the Bounder, as he jumped on his machine and tore after Redwing.

Sir Hilton was left standing in the road, gasping and spluttering. Sir Hilton, certainly, would never have had the remotest, chance of recovering the purloined pocket-book. He did not even know in what direction the pick-pocket had fled. But the two schoolboys on bicycles had more than a chance. The Bounder drove hard at his pedals, and overtook Redwing.

Far in the distance, running like a deer could be seen the little slim figure, vanishing across the common.

"Put it on, Reddy," panted the Bounder. "He's got the old bean's pocket-book—we're going to get it back."

"We'll jolly well try."

"We'll get him all right! Put it on."

The green expanse of Courtfield Common was rough and bumpy, for cycles. The machines fairly rocked, as Redwing and Smithy drove at the pedals. But they did not heed the rough going. Rough as it was, a bicycle covered the ground faster than the swiftest runner could hope to cover it, and they gained on the running man at every whirl of the pedals.

They saw him look back, and a blaze of rage and alarm came into the narrow foxy eyes as he saw the two riders behind. One glance told him that they had witnessed the robbery, and were in pursuit. He tore on again.

But for the two Greyfriars juniors, it would have been easy money for the pimpled man. He would have disappeared into space with Sir Hilton Popper's pocket-book, and its precious contents, and Sir Hilton would have been extremely unlikely ever to see his foxy face or his, pimples again. But with two sturdy fellows on bicycles behind him, it was a very different proposition. Either of them was a match for him, physically: but if he could have handled one of them, assuredly he could not have handled the two: and Slim Judson's only hope was in his legs. And muscle, in the long run, had no chance against machinery.

He tore on desperately, with the two cyclists rocking and bumping behind, but gaining fast. He disappeared from sight in a clump of trees, on the border of Oak Lane, and the Bounder gave a breathless chuckle.

"We've got him now, Reddy! He won't get far along that lane! We've got him, old man! Put it on."

"Looks like it," panted Redwing.

Even on the rough common, the cyclists had gained fast.

In the open lane it was likely to be a very brief matter. They drove at their pedals, and whizzed on, nothing doubting now that they had their man, pocket-book and pimples and all!

CHAPTER XVI

ANY PORT IN A STORM

CECIL REGINALD TEMPLE, of the Greyfriars Fourth, had the surprise of his life that afternoon. Life is full of surprises and the unexpected often happens: but what happened to Temple of the Fourth was so very

surprising, and so very unexpected, that it left him in quite a dizzy state. Indeed, as Temple told Dabney and Fry in the study later, a fellow could hardly believe that such things happened.

Temple was out on his jigger that afternoon. He was looking his usual spotless and rather dandified self and his gleaming bike reflected back the rays of the sun. At a leisurely pace—Cecil Reginald never hurried even on a bike—he was progressing along Oak Lane, from the direction of the river, and towards the Courtfield road: the wide common on his left, the high fence of the Three Fishers on his right. In a cheery frame of mind, satisfied with himself and things generally, Cecil Reginald pedalled gently on thinking about nothing in particular. And when a slim, slight, hatless man, panting for breath and red with haste burst suddenly into the lane from a clump of trees on the edge of the common, Cecil Reginald gave him only a careless disapproving glance, not in the least interested in him.

But the slim man was interested in Cecil Reginald.

He bolted into the lane like a scared rabbit stood staring up and down it for a moment, and spotted the Fourth-former of Greyfriars on the bicycle. It was then that the surprising and unexpected thing happened, which Temple told Dabney and Fry afterwards that a fellow could hardly believe. Temple, indeed, was so utterly taken by surprise, that he did not know what was happening until it had happened. He couldn't have foreseen such a happening. Temple of the Fourth was not, perhaps, very bright: but the brightest fellow at Greyfriars could hardly have guessed that an absolute stranger would suddenly rush at him, knock him off his bike, and grab the machine away. So wildly lawless an act had never come within Temple's experience before. It was, indeed, hard for a fellow to believe.

But it happened!

There was no doubt about that, for Cecil Reginald Temple found himself suddenly sprawling in dust, while a slim man with a pimply face was shooting away on his bike, going like the wind for the Courtfield road. Temple sat up, with the earth and the sky spinning round him. The expression of bemused astonishment on his face was almost idiotic.

"Oooooogh!" was all Temple said. It was all that he could say. He sat and gazed after his disappearing bike like a fellow in a dream.

But in less than a minute, two cyclists came whizzing off the common into the leafy lane. Temple transferred his dizzy gaze from the disappearing bike, to Vernon-Smith and Redwing.

They braked, and stared round for the pimply man.

The trees had hidden him, for a minute or two, from their sight. Now he seemed to have vanished.

Temple staggered up.

"You fellows—!" he gasped.

"Seen a man running?" shouted the Bounder. "Oh, crumbs! Yes! He's got my bike—"

"What?" yelled Smithy.

"Look!" Temple pointed with a shaking finger. "He—he—he—he pitched me off, and pinched my bike! I say, lend me your jigger to get after him—"

"Come on, Reddy."

"I say," gasped Temple, as Smithy and Redwing whirled in pursuit again, "I say, he's got my bike—lend me a jigger—"

Temple's voice died away behind two Remove fellows grinding at their pedals. The Bounder knitted his brows as they tore on.

"We had him, Reddy—fairly had him—and that blithering nincompoop had to let him pinch a jigger! But by gum, we'll get him yet."

"Put it on, old chap."

The bicycles fairly raced. It was good going in Oak Lane, quite a change from the rugged common, and the riders went all out. The man ahead was

riding as if for his life, in the hope of shaking off pursuit. But neither Redwing nor the Bounder was likely to be shaken off. Redwing was determined, if he could, to run down the thief and recover the stolen pocket-book: while the Bounder was thrilling with the excitement of the chase, and would not have missed it for worlds. They were good men on a jigger: certainly equal to the pasty-faced pimpled man in that line, if not a little better. The pickpocket had a start: but he did not lengthen it, with all his efforts: and he had no chance whatever of getting out of sight.

"We'll get him!" said the Bounder, between his teeth. "A spot of luck for him to bag that booby's jigger—but we'll get him. Nobody about in this lane—but when we get out on the road—"

"Go it!" breathed Redwing. They whizzed on.

At the corner, where Oak Lane joined the high road, the hunted man cast desperate glances to and fro. On his left the high road ran towards Courtfield—with Sir Hilton Popper somewhere along it. On his right, it ran towards the village of Friardale, passing the gates of Greyfriars School. The man was, for the moment, doubtful in which direction to turn. But that was settled for him, by the sight of three schoolboy cyclists coming from the direction of Courtfield—Peter Todd, Tom Brown, and Squiff, of the Remove. Smithy and Redwing sighted them at the same moment, and the Bounder yelled, at the top of his voice: "Stop thief!" The three juniors stared round. "Stop him!" roared Redwing.

"Stop thief!"

Peter Todd waved his hand: Squiff and Tom Brown shouted back. But they had no chance of stopping the fugitive, for he turned in the other direction, and tore away towards Greyfriars.

Smithy and Redwing reached the corner, from Oak lane, as Peter, Squiff and Tom Brown reached it, on the high road.

"What's up?" shouted Squiff.

"Pickpocket—he's got old Popper's pocket-book—and Temple's bike," shouted back the Bounder. "Come on."

Five cyclists careered on after the man with the pimples. Peter Todd and Co. were keen enough to join in the chase.

The hunted man cast a glance back over his shoulder.

If he had had a thought of turning on his pursuers, he had to give it up now that there were five of them. He rode on at a frantic speed again.

"We've got him!" chuckled Smithy. "Got him by the short hairs! There'll be a dozen fellows to stop him when we get near the school."

A tall spire was in sight, over the trees. They were nearing Greyfriars. The school gates came in sight: wide open on a half-holiday. A big senior was standing there, with his hands in his pockets, looking out. It was Coker, of the Fifth Form, and he stared at the chase as it came sweeping into sight—the pimply man, red and panting and thick with perspiration, going all out in his frantic endeavour to escape with his plunder: Smithy, Redwing, Peter Todd, Squiff, and Tom Brown strung out behind him, all going like the wind. Coker stared in astonishment.

They were not near enough for shouting, but the Bounder released one hand from his handle-bar, pointed to the fugitive, and waved to Coker. The big Fifth-form man could have rushed out of the gateway in the fugitive's path.

But Coker of the Fifth was not quick on the uptake. He only stared, as the chase came rushing on.

"Idiot!" breathed the Bounder.

"Look!" yelled Squiff. "There's Wingate—"

"And Gwynne—"

"We've got him now."

Ahead of the hapless fugitive, coming up the road from Friardale, Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth-Form appeared in sight. The captain of Greyfriars and his companion were walking back to the school from the village, with the sedate and stately pace that became Sixth-Form men and prefects. But they became suddenly alert at the sight of the chase rushing towards them.

"Stop thief!" yelled the Bounder. "Stop him, Wingate!"

"Stop thief!"

The shouts reached the ears of the two Sixth-Form men: but even without that warning, they could see how the matter stood. They were rather quicker on the uptake than Coker of the Fifth.

"Stop him, Gwynne," said Wingate.

And they stood in the middle of the road, hardly a dozen yards from the gateway, from which Coker was staring, ready to grasp at the fugitive as he came whizzing by.

The pimpled man stared at them. Then he stared back over his shoulder, at five cyclists coming on. He was caught between the two parties, and his game was up. If he carried on, he was running into the grasp of the two big Sixth-Form men—if he stopped for a single minute, five eager pursuers would be all round him. For a moment he was nonplussed: and then, swinging round his machine, he shot in at the great wide-open gateway on his left. What that gateway was, and to what it gave admittance, Slim Judson did not know: probably he had never even heard of Greyfriars School. What it was to him, at the moment, was the only escape from clutching hands, whatever might be beyond it: it was a case of any port in a storm. His machine spun in at the gateway: and Coker of the Fifth, realising at long last what the matter was, grabbed at him, and missed and Slim Judson careered onward into the Greyfriars quad—where a shout of astonishment greeted his unexpected appearance.

CHAPTER XVII

NO SALE

"FISHY, old man—"

"Yep!"

"Come in, old fellow."

Fisher T. Fish grinned. He was aware of the value of "old fellow" from Billy Bunter. And he guessed, reckoned, and calculated that he was wise to why the fat Owl was addressing him so cordially.

Fishy was coming down the Remove passage, when Bunter's fat voice hailed him from the open doorway of No. 7 Study. He paused: but he did not "come in". Fisher T. Fish was one of the few fellows in the Remove whom Bunter had not asked for help with his lines that afternoon. And if Fishy's turn was coming, he was prepared to reply with a brief and emphatic "Nope!"

"I say, come in—I want to speak to you, old chap," urged Bunter.

At which Fishy's grin widened. Looking past Bunter, he could see a sheet of impot paper on the table. On that sheet seven lines of Latin were written. Billy Bunter had started at "arma virumquo cano" and arrived at "moenia Romae". Then laziness had supervened. Of the three hundred lines that impended over the fat head of the Owl of the Remove, seven had been written, and two hundred and ninety-three remained yet to write. To that two hundred and ninety-three, Fisher T. Fish had no intention of contributing so much as a semi-colon.

"I guess I can year you from yere, old fat piecan," said Fisher T. Fish.

"Cut it short! There's somethin' going on in the quad, and I'm going down to see what's on. Make it snappy."

"You see, old fellow—"

"If it's them lines, "forget it," said Fisher T. Fish" briefly. "I guess I ain't looking for work, Bunter. Not so's you'd notice it."

"'Tain't the lines," said Bunter. "The fact is, Fishy, I've been disappointed about a postal-order—"

"Aw! Carry me home to die!" said Fisher T. Fish.

"If that's all you've got to spill, you fat clam—"

"I've got something I want to sell—something jolly valuable, Fishy. Come in, old chap."

"I guess I'll give it the once-over, said Fisher T. Fish, more cordially, and he stepped into No. 7 Study.

Fisher T. Fish, the business-man of the, Remove, was always ready to do business. Fishy couldn't wait till he grew up before he exercised his gifts in that line. He guessed and reckoned that a cute guy who had been raised in New York could turn his dimes into dollars, even within the limited scope of school. At all times was Fishy prepared to buy any article for a quarter its value, and keep it in hand till he could dispose of it for twice as much as it was worth.

Sounds of excitement, shouting and calling voices, could be heard in the distance, from the quadrangle, and Fishy was curious to learn what was going on. But curiosity took second place when his business instincts were aroused. If Bunter had a cricket bat, or a camera, or bicycle-bell, or even a dictionary, to sell, Fishy was the man to give him next to nothing for it.

"Trot it out, big boy," said Fisher T. Fish.

"I hate parting with it, old chap," said Bunter, sadly, "but my postal-order hasn't come—"

"I guess I've heard that one."

"And that beast Quelch won't let me go out till my lines are done," groaned Bunter. "My sister at Cliff House has got a hamper, Fishy, and I can't go over just because that beast Quelch—"

"Make it snappy."

"And Toddy's gone out on his bike with Field and Brown, and never bothered his head about a fellow in his own study," went on Bunter, too full of grievances to make it snappy. "Nothing for tea, Fishy, and I'm actually stony—"

"You keeping me here till the cows come home, while you chew the rag?" asked Fisher T. Fish.

"Oh, really, Fishy! I just hate selling my gold watch—"

"Your whatter?"

"My gold watch! It was a present from my Uncle Carter—my rich uncle, you know—and I believe he gave twenty guineas for it—"

"Then they did him out of twenty pounds fifteen shillings!" said Fisher T. Fish, derisively. "I've sure wondered more'n once why that watch of yours hasn't rolled away, Bunter—rolled gold ought to roll—"

"Beast!"

"If that's the lot, I guess I'll absquatulate," remarked Fisher T. Fish, and he turned to the door. Fishy was prepared to do business, if business was to be done: but Bunter's gold watch did not seem to attract him.

That gold watch of Bunter's, in fact, was a little too well known in the Remove. If Bunter believed that it was made of gold, he was the only fellow in his form that did. So far as quantity went, that watch was all right—there was quite a lot of it. But the quality was not on a par with the quantity. If it had ever kept time, it must have been before Bunter came to Greyfriars School: nobody there had ever heard it tick. Once or twice Bunter had opened the case, and jerked a fat thumb into the works, in an attempt to get it going. But even that heroic method had never had any success. The watch, at the moment, indicated twelve o'clock. It had indicated twelve o'clock for whole terms. And the great probability was

that it never would indicate anything else. It was, in fact, some terms since Bunter had taken the trouble to wind it. Something was wrong with the winder, among other things: it would turn and turn for ever and ever, without producing any effect on the watch.

Bunter held it out for Fishy's inspection, and Fishy condescended to give it a contemptuous glance.

"Just look at it, old chap," urged Bunter. "Even if it ain't solid gold, it looks just as if it was--"

"It sure looks as much like solid gold as a brass poker," said Fisher T. Fish, taking the watch, and turning it over in his bony fingers. "Has it ever kept time?"

"Splendid time-keeper," assured Bunter. "It doesn't exactly go, but--but when it does go, it's a splendid timekeeper. And--and there's a lot of metal in it, Fishy."

"There sure is," agreed Fisher T. Fish, "it only wants to be just a leetle bit bigger, and a guy could use it to carry coals in."

"Look here, what will you give me for it?" yapped Bunter. He would gladly have punched Fisher T. Fish's head for his remarks about that watch. But he had to restrain that natural desire, in the circumstances. "I'll take a pound."

Fisher T. Fish blinked at him.

"Say, whadyer know!" he ejaculated. "Did you say a pound, Bunter?"

"Yes, I'll take a pound, old chap--"

"I guess you'd have to look for a genuine bonehead to give you one," grinned Fisher T. Fish, "and then you'd have to catch him with his eyes shut."

Billy Bunter breathed hard.

In his dire circumstances, cut off from Bessie's hamper, disappointed about a postal-order, and with neither of his study-mates available to stand tea in the study, Bunter had made up his mind to part with that watch. He felt that it was hard to part with it. But parting with it was, apparently, going to be harder than he had anticipated!

"Well, look here, what will you give me for it?" he demanded.

Fishy's reply was concise but clear. "Nix!" he said.

"Oh, really, Fishy--"

"I guess I wouldn't take it as a gift, old-timer." Fisher T. Fish dropped the watch on the table. "So-long."

"Look here, you cheeky beast--!" roared Bunter.

But Fisher T. Fish was gone. There was no business to be done in No. 7 Study, and Fishy was not wasting any more time there. He jerked away down the passage, interested once more in the uproar that was going on below.

"Beast!" hissed Bunter.

He blinked out of the study after the departing Fishy, and shook a fat fist after him. That valuable watch had been his last hope of raising the wind in time for tea. His last hope had departed with Fisher T. Fish. Bunter was strongly tempted to follow Fishy down the passage and punch his bony head. Indeed he would have done so but for the probability of a return punch from a bony set of knuckles. So he contented himself with shaking his fist after Fishy, and glaring after him with a glare that almost cracked his spectacles.

But the next moment he burst into a fat chuckle.

Fisher T. Fish had reached the end of the passage, when a figure came suddenly bolting across the landing into the passage, crashing right into Fishy. There was a fearful howl from Fisher T. Fish as he went sprawling under the collision, and spread out on the old oak floor.

"Aw! Wake snakes! Great John James Brown, whadyer know! Whooop!"

"He, he, he!" cachinnated Bunter.

Fisher T. Fish sprawled on his back, and over him sprawled the figure that had crashed into him and Billy Bunter, blinking from the doorway of No. 7 Study, chuckled loud and long.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN A HORNET'S NEST

"STOP thief!"

"Look out!"

"Stop him!"

"Collar him!"

"Bag him!"

It was a roar in the old quadrangle of Greyfriars. A hundred fellows were staring, shouting, calling. Seldom had the old quad seen such a spot of excitement.

"Oh, my eye!" gasped Slim Judson.

He glared round him like a trapped animal.

In sheer desperation, to escape immediate capture, he had turned in at that wide gateway, not knowing whither it led. But a few moments later he realised that he had got out of the frying-pan into the fire. In the Greyfriars quad he was in the middle of a hornet's nest.

The sight of a strange man, hatless, his face ablaze with exertion, careering into the quad on a bike, drew every eye at once. Fellows ran up from all sides—masters stared from study windows—even the Head looked out from his window in amazement. One stare round told Mr. Judson what he had done—plunged into a school: about the last spot he would have ventured into willingly. Mr. Judson longed for the open spaces—and he had landed in an extremely thickly-populated spot.

"Gum!" breathed Slim. "Strike me pink and blue! It's a blooming school—oh, strike me blue and crimson!"

Behind him, the pursuers came crowding in at the gateway: Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth, Coker of the Fifth, Vernon-Smith, Redwing, Peter Todd, Squiff, and Tom Brown of the Remove. They were all shouting, pointing, or yelling.



SLIM JUDSON CAREERED ON, ON TEMPLE'S BIKE, WILDLY

"Stop thief!"

"Collar him!"

"Stop him!"

Slim Judson careered on, on Temple's bike, wildly. Mr. Quelch stared from one study window, Mr. Hacker from another, Mr. Wiggins from a third: and from the big bay window of Common-Room, Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth, leaned out staring with popping eyes.

"Stop thief!"

"Bag him!"

Potter of the Fifth jumped in the way of the bike, and grabbed at the rider. Mr. Judson swerved to avoid him, and fairly ran into Greene of the Fifth.

Greene yelled and went over. The bike wobbled wildly, and curled up. Slim Judson landed on his feet, with the activity of a cat. He dodged Potter's clutching hand, and ran.

"After him!"

"Collar him!"

"Bag him!"

No doubt Slim Judson still hoped to find some way out of the hornet's nest into which he had inadvertently run. Crowds of fellows were after him, round him, running to intercept him, and there really seemed no chance. But with a Blue Mauritius worth two thousand pounds in his pocket, Mr. Judson clung to the faintest wisp of hope. He ran and twisted and doubled like a hunted animal.

But there was no escape for him. He came to a panting halt under the big bay window of Common-Room, from which Mr. Prout leaned, and stared, and boomed.

"What is all this?" boomed Prout. "What is all this unprecedented uproar? Who is this man? What is the meaning of this unparalleled disturbance? What—"

Prout was suddenly interrupted.

Slim Judson stood, for a moment, panting, staring back at the Swarm of fellows rushing him down. He had only a moment. Then, in sheer desperation, he leaped up on the low sill of the bay window, and plunged headlong in, knocking Mr. Prout aside as he did so. '

"Oh!" gasped Prout, as he staggered. "What-what—Oh!"

"Stop him!" came a roar from the quad.

"Stop thief!"

"Collar him, Prout!" yelled the Bounder.

Faces swarmed at the window. Slim Judson, plunging in, landed on hands and knees, but he bounced up like a ball. But as he bounced, a plump hand descended on his shoulder. Prout grasped him.

"Stop!" boomed Prout. "Who are you? How dare you— Whooo-hooop!"

Mr. Prout had not expected to receive a vicious jab on the widest part of his circumference. In the exciting circumstances he might, perhaps, have expected something of the sort. But he hadn't! He staggered back from that jab, gasping for wind, his grasp slipping from Slim's shoulder.

"Oooooooooogh!" gurgled Mr. Prout.

Slim Judson cut across the room to the door.

"Urrrggh! Stop! Ruffian!" gurgled Prout. "Stop! I order you to—oogh—stop—!"

Slim was not likely to stop! He fairly whizzed across Common-Room.

Monsieur Charpentier jumped out of an armchair to intercept him. A swing of Slim's arm sent the little French gentleman toppling.

"Mon Dieu!" gasped Mossou, as he toppled. "Ciel! Wow!" Monsieur Charpentier sat down quite suddenly.

Slim tore open the door of Common-Room and tore out. He found himself in a wide passage, with many doors on it.

Some of those doors were open, and from one, Mr. Quelch was coming out, from another, Mr. Hacker.

"Bless my soul! Here is the man!" exclaimed Mr Quelch.

"Stop him!" exclaimed Mr. Hacker.

Slim, panting, cast a wild glance around him. He had some vague hope of dropping out of a back window, and resuming his flight for parts unknown. But there was no chance of that.

Quelch strode at him, with a grim brow, followed by Hacker. Quelch was not a man to be jabbed like Prout, or toppled over like Monsieur Charpentier. Quelch could have handled Slim as easily as a terrier dealing with a rat. Slim did not wait to be handled. He darted frantically away. He found himself crossing a wide hall, from which a great staircase led to the regions above. There was a roar of voices. The Bouncer and some other fellows were clambering in at Common-Room window: a whole horde rushed round to the door, and there was a roar as the breathless, panting fugitive was sighted within.

"Here he is!"

"Collar him!"

"Bag him!"

Slim darted at the staircase. Again it was a case of any port in a storm! He bounded up the stairs like a kangaroo, as a score of fellows rushed at him. He did those stairs in record time, and was well ahead of pursuit as he bounded on the study landing.

The interior of Greyfriars was, of course, quite unknown country to Slim Judson. His only hope was to escape from some window, before hands could be laid on him. He stared round him on the study landing, to get his bearings—and found himself staring at Fitzgerald of the Fifth, in the doorway of the games-study, at the corner of the Fifth-form passage.

"Howly mother at Moses!" ejaculated Fitzgerald.

Slim did not wait for further remarks from Fitzgerald of the Fifth. He cut across the landing in another direction, and ran up the three steps to the Remove landing. From that landing a passage opened, and Slim bolted into it like a hunted rabbit into a burrow.

Crash!

Mr. Judson was much too pressed for time to take note whether anyone might be coming down the passage into which he bolted. Fisher T. Fish, though he knew that some unaccustomed uproar was going on below, naturally was not expecting a hunted man to shoot into the passage like a bolt from a cross-bow. Both of them were taken by surprise.

Fishy yelled and crashed, and over him crashed Mr. Judson. They mixed up in a yelling heap. And from the doorway of a study up the passage, a fat Owl blinked at them through his big spectacles, and cachinnated:

"He, he, he!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE LAST CHANCE

"HE, he, he— Oh!"

Billy Bunter suddenly ceased to chuckle. Instead of chuckling, he jumped. His little round eyes nearly popped through his big round spectacles, in his astonishment and alarm.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

It had been fearfully amusing to see Fisher T. Fish knocked over, and sprawled over, by someone suddenly running into the passage. But as that someone bounded up, with a red furious face and blazing eyes, Bunter ceased to be amused. It was not someone belonging to Greyfriars, as he would naturally have supposed, who had crashed into Fisher T. Fish. It was a stranger to Bunter's eyes—a panting, furious, desperate-looking man, the mere sight of whom was terrifying to a fat Owl.

Slim Judson, almost winded by the shock, stood panting.

He gave Fisher T. Fish an almost murderous glare—which caused Fisher T. Fish to squirm away from him and scramble up in frantic haste and bolt across the landing. Who he was, what he was, Fishy didn't know and couldn't guess: but his fierce and savage look was enough for Fishy. Panting, the hunted man stared up the passage. He could not turn back—the roar of pursuit was behind him. His stare revealed only one person in the passage ahead of him—a fat junior, who was blinking at him in amazement and terror. The desperate look on Slim's face might have scared a stouter heart than Billy Bunter's.

Only for a second the man stood there, panting: then he came running up the passage. Bunter, certainly, could not have stopped him, if the thought of doing so had occurred to him.

But that thought did not occur to Bunter. What occurred to Bunter was to take to his heels—which he promptly did!

With a gasp of terror, the fat Owl flew up the passage, with a speed that would have done him credit on the cinder-path. He knew no more than Fisher T. Fish who or what the man was: but he knew that he was scared out of his fat wits as the man came running up the passage towards him: and his feet hardly touched the old oak planks as he fled.

Slim came speeding on behind him. His pattering footsteps gave the last touch to Bunter's terror. He was not in the least interested in Bunter: but to the fat Owl it was pursuit. Few Greyfriars fellows would have deemed Bunter capable of the speed with which he flew up the Remove passage, and bolted up the box-room stair at the end.

Utterly unheeding him, Slim Judson hurtled on. But as he reached the open doorway of No. 7 Study, where the fat Junior had been standing, he paused. For a fraction of a second he paused: then he darted into the study. Slim's peculiar way of life had taught him to take quick decisions. For the moment—though only for the moment—no eyes were on him—Bunter's back was to him, as the frightened fat Owl bolted, and the pursuers were not yet across the landing: and the Idea of hiding, and watching for a chance to escape later, flashed into Slim's wary mind. He shot into the study. Swiftly, but softly, he shut the door after him. Then he stood gulping in breath, in great gasps, while the perspiration streamed down his face.

Just within the door, standing close to the wall so that the door would hide him if it opened, he stood—and listened. He had been only in time—barely in time. A roar of voices, a trampling of feet, sounded from the direction of the landing, and surged up the passage.

"This way," the Bounder was shouting.

"Where is he?"

"He ran up this passage—"

"Come on!"

Slim suppressed his panting breathing, as the uproar of shouting voices and innumerable footsteps surged up the Remove passage from the landing. If they looked into that study, he was cornered, like a rat in a trap. But the rush went by the door of No. 7 Study, as it went by the doors of the other studies. For the moment, at least, it did not occur to the pursuers that the hunted man had sought cover in a Remove study. The chase thundered on up the passage to the further end.

A sharp voice came to Slim's ears: so near, that it made him catch his breath. Only the shut door was between him and Mr. Quelch!

"Vernon-Smith! Redwing! Todd! Have you seen the man?"

"He ran up this passage, sir—"

"I guess he bowled me over, sir—the piecan sure did bowl me over—"

"He's here somewhere—"

"He's got old Popper's—I mean Sir Hilton Popper's—pocket-book, sir—and he pinched Temple's bike to get away—"

"He must be found and secured! The prefects will look for him! All the juniors will remain in this passage, or go into their studies—"

"We can handle him all right, sir—"

"That will do, Vernon-Smith."

"But, sir—"

"Silence! Wingate—" Mr. Quelch was interrupted, by a shout from up the passage.

"This way! Somebody's in the box-room."

"Come on, you fellows—"

"I have told you to be silent, Vernon-Smith. Remain where you are.

Wingate, Gwynne, Loder, please search the box-room for the man. I will come with you. All the juniors will remain here."

Every word came clearly to the breathless man listening inside the study door. Mr. Quelch stalked on up the passage, and ascended the box-room stair with Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder. The Remove master, and three hefty men of the Sixth, were certainly enough to deal with the fugitive, if they found him: but they left a noisy and discontented crowd of juniors in the passage.

"Cheek! He's our game, not Quelch's." Herbert Vernon-Smith waited, judiciously, till his form-master was out of hearing, before he made that remark. "Like his dashed cheek—"

"They'll get him all right, Smithy."

"If he's dodged into the box-room—"

"Somebody's there—"

"They'll get him!"

Some of the speakers were quite near the door of No. 7 Study. Slim Judson gritted his teeth as he listened. For some reason, unknown to Mr. Judson, they supposed that he had dodged into a box-room, and for the moment, no one was thinking of looking into the studies. It was a respite: but likely to be only a brief one, for certainly they would not find him in any box-room: and a search of the other rooms was sure to follow.

On tiptoe, fearful of being heard by the buzzing crowd in the passage, Slim crossed to the window of No. 7, and looked out.

One look was enough for him. There was a drop of thirty feet outside the window: and, as if that was not enough, there were a dozen or more Greyfriars fellows in sight below. He backed quickly from the window. There was no escape that way.

It was borne in upon the wretched thief's mind that there was no escape at all. For the moment he had a respite: but sooner or later—probably rather sooner than later—they would have him. He could not escape by the window, and to leave by the door was to walk into the hands of the hunters. With deep feelings, Slim had to realise that the game was up, and that he was booked to join his confederate in the cells at Court field Police-Station.

And in his pocket was Sir Hilton Popper's pocket-book, containing the Blue Mauritius, worth two thousand pounds: the biggest prize Slim had ever landed in all his career as a snapper-up of other people's property! A tiny thing—a mere wisp of printed paper—but worth two thousand pounds to a collector—and when Slim was collared, as collared he must be, it would be found on him. His confederate had got away with it the previous night, only to be captured and lose it again: Slim, with what had seemed to him a great spot of luck, had got away with it in his turn, only to meet with exactly the same fate! Slim could not help feeling that it was very rough luck.

But—!

But Slim's cunning brain was working actively. They were going to get him—that was certain. Probably it was only a matter of minutes. But those minutes were his.

If he could hide the stamp somewhere—

They would find the pocket-book on him, but not the Blue Mauritius. So small an object could easily be hidden. And later, when he came out of the "stone jug", he had a chance of recovering it.

It was a dubious hope. But it was all that remained to Mr. Judson. It was a chance, at least.

He grabbed the fat pocket-book from his pocket, and opened it. There were a good many papers in it, including the unwelcome missive Sir Hilton Popper had received from his Inspector of Taxes, and a wad of currency notes. Slim did not heed the papers, or even the notes. From a small socket, he extracted the blue-printed stamp, and returned the pocket-book to his pocket.

Outside the study, voices were buzzing. He did not heed them. He stared round him, in search of a hiding-place for the stamp. And a sudden hopeful gleam came into his eyes, as they fell upon a big watch lying on the table.

Some schoolboy—no doubt that fat fellow he had seen at the study door—had left that watch there. Slim snatched it up.

The value of Billy Bunter's big gold watch did not appeal to Mr. Judson. Even if he had been free to pick it up and depart with it, he would not have taken the trouble. It was of quite other things that he was thinking. He had found the hiding-place he wanted for the stolen stamp! He snapped open the case at the back. There was plenty of space for so small an article as a stamp to be hidden within—more space than Mr. Judson needed.

In another moment, the case was snapped shut on a Post-Office Blue Mauritius Twopenny, worth two thousand pounds!

Slim replaced the watch on the table.

It was a wrench—a tough wrench—to part with the Blue Mauritius, even with a sporting chance of getting it back again later. But it was the only chance he had of getting his thievish fingers on it again. If they found it on him it was gone for good: now, at least, a chance remained.

Who would dream of looking for it in a schoolboy's watch? They would search for it, there was little doubt about that—search high and low. But the last place they would think of looking into would be a schoolboy's watch. And sooner or later, Mr. Judson would interview the owner of that watch, in some quiet spot outside the school! If it was that fat fellow he had seen at the door of the study he would know him again easily enough. If it was some other fellow, his task would be more difficult: but two thousand pounds was worth a spot of trouble. It was a chance, at least—but there was not the ghost of a chance, if they found the stamp on him.

Feeling slightly relieved in his mind, Mr. Judson listened to the buzz of voices outside the study. They would have him—they had as good as got him already—but they couldn't keep him for ever in the "jug". There was still an ultimate hope of getting away with the Blue Mauritius. Mr. Judson drew what comfort he could from that hope, as he waited for what was coming to him!

CHAPTER XX

ONLY BUNTER

"OH, crikey!" gasped Billy Bunter.

He flew up the Remove passage, and bounded up the box-room stair like a fat kangaroo. That awful-looking man with his glinting eyes and desperate face, was behind him: and a bulldog on his trail could not have made the fat Owl put on more speed. He fairly whizzed. He shot into the box-room

like an arrow from a bow, and slammed the door after him. He groped for the key, remembered that it had long been missing, grabbed the bolt, and jammed it home. Then, and not till then, did he totter towards one of the boxes, sit down on the same, and gasp and gasp and gasp for breath, quite winded by his wild flight from that unknown and awful man.

Footsteps on the stairs made him jump like a startled rabbit. His fat heart almost died within him, as the door-handle was turned from outside. Only the bolt kept the door from opening: and it certainly did not occur to Billy Bunter that it was Bolsover major, of the Remove, who was turning the door-handle. He had no doubt that it was that awful man: and he sat on the box, and quaked, his eyes and spectacles fixed apprehensively on the door.

Then there was a shout, followed by more shouting, a trampling of feet, and again the door-handle was turned. Bunter, with quaking heart, watched the door with popping eyes. It seemed that there were more than one of them—and the fat Owl's terrified imagination peopled the landing outside the box-room door with a swarm of desperate-looking men like the one he had seen in the Remove passage.

"Oh crikey!" groaned Bunter.

There was a heavy shove at the door outside, which made it creak, and almost made Bunter's fat heart jump into his mouth.

Then came a voice, which to Bunter's utter amazement, was that of George Wingate, of the Sixth Form, captain of Greyfriars.

"The door's fastened inside, sir."

"Then the man must be here." This, to Bunter's further amazement, was the well-known rap of his form-master, Mr. Quelch. "The door must be forced."

"Oh, scissors!" gasped Bunter.

Knock! knock! came sharply on the panels.

"Open this door at once!" came Mr. Quelch's sharp voice. "We know you are here! Open this door immediately."

"Oh, crikey!"

"Otherwise the door will be forced. I advise you to open it," snapped the Remove master. "Answer me."

"Oh, lor'!"

Billy Bunter tottered off the box. That awful man, apparently, hadn't pursued him up to the box-room: it was Quelch, and Wingate, on the landing. The fat Owl tottered to the door.

Knock! knock!

"Will you open this door immediately!" snapped Mr. Quelch. "Answer me at once! Do you hear?"

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

He dragged back the bolt. The door flew open: and Wingate of the Sixth appeared in the doorway. The stalwart captain of Greyfriars had his fists clenched and his hands up, ready to tackle the hunted intruder, if the latter showed fight. He jumped almost clear of the floor at the sight of Billy Bunter.

"Oh! What-how-where—" stuttered Wingate. "Bunter! It-it-it's Bunter here, sir—only Bunter—"

"What?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

He rustled in after Wingate. He gave the gasping fat Owl a stare, or rather a glare, and his sharp glance shot round the box-room. That room was fairly thickly populated by boxes and trunks: but it contained only one human inhabitant: William George Bunter of the Remove. There was no sign of the hunted man.

"Upon my word!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "Where—?"

"Not here, sir," said Gwynne of the Sixth, looking in.

"Only Bunter!" grinned Loder.

"Bunter! What are you doing here? Why was the door bolted?" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"I-I-I—"

"Where is the man? Was he here? Have you seen him?"

"Oh-yes-no-oh, crikey—"

"Explain yourself, you stupid boy," thundered Mr. Quelch. "Why are you here? What—"

"He-he-he—"

"What?"

"He-he-he was after me," stuttered Bunter. "An awful-looking man-oh, crikey- I-I-I thought he was after me-oh, lor'—"

Mr. Quelch gave an angry snort.

"Pah! No one is here, Wingate, excepting that foolish boy. It must have been he whom Bolsover heard in the box-room, not the man we are seeking at all. This utterly stupid boy has caused us to waste time. The man must be found and secured—come at once. He may be in one of the attics."

Mr. Quelch whirled round and departed. Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder followed him. Evidently, the elusive intruder had to be sought for elsewhere. Several small rooms opened from the landing outside the box-room.

Billy Bunter rolled after them. Even the fat Owl realised that there was no danger, with his form-master and three hefty prefects on the spot. There was a shout from the Bounder, in the Remove passage. He was looking up the stair.

"Haven't you got him, Wingate?"

The Greyfriars captain did not answer: but it was evident that they had not "got" him. Mr. Quelch's brows were knitted. Minutes had been wasted owing to Bunter's antics, and it seemed probable that the fugitive had been making use of them.

"Search the attics at once," rapped Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir."

Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder proceeded to search the attics. Mr. Quelch stood on the little landing, frowning. Billy Bunter edged past him, and rolled down the stair to the Remove passage.

"That fat ass!" exclaimed the Bounder, staring at him.

"Was it you in the box-room, you piffling porpoise?"

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"That blithering chump!" said Peter Todd. "But where's the pickpocket? Have you seen him Bunter?"

"He-he-he was after me," gasped Bunter "An awful-looking ruffian-he-he was after me—oh, crikey! I-I say, you fellows, who-who was it?"

"Only a pickpocket, fathead! He snooped old Popper's Pocket-book, and he's got it on him. If you saw him, why didn't you collar him?"

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"Up in the attics, most likely," said Vernon-Smith

"He can't get out—if he dodges the pre's he will have to make a break this way. Look out."

"What-ho!" said Squiff, "we'll get him if he comes this way."

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

He rolled hurriedly down the passage to his study. Smithy, and most of the other fellows were quite keen to collar the intruder, and rather hoped that he would dodge the prefects and give them a chance. Billy Bunter did not share that keenness in the very least. If there was the remotest chance of that desperate-looking man reappearing in the Remove passage, Bunter preferred to be safe in his study, with the door shut and locked!

He opened the door of No. 7 Study and rolled in.

A brassy glimmer on the table, from the sunlight at the window, caught his eyes and his spectacles. He remembered that big gold watch, which he had utterly forgotten in his terrified flight from the awful-looking man who had so suddenly appeared on the scene.

He rolled across to the table and picked up the watch.

Fisher T. Fish had disdained it, and appraised its value at "nix". But it was Bunter's gold watch: and he hooked it on the chain and restored it to his waistcoat pocket.

Then he turned to shut the door, and turn the key.

But he did not shut the door, neither did he turn the key. For as he turned, he became aware of another inhabitant of the study—a slight man with a pimply face and a spotted necktie, backing against the wall beside the doorway.

For a single instant, Slim Judson looked at Bunter, and Bunter looked at Slim Judson—his eyes popping through his spectacles. Then a yell of terror woke every echo of the Remove passage.

"Yaroooh! Help! He's here! I say, you fellows!

Help! help! help! Fire! Murder! Help! Yaroooooh! Help!"

CHAPTER XXI

CAPTURED

"WHAT the thump—?"

"What the jolly old dickens—"

"That's Bunter—"

"What—!"

There were twenty or thirty fellows in the Remove passage, and they all jumped, and stared, and exclaimed, at the sound of a frantic yell from Bunter's study. That frantic yell rang and echoed, along the passage, from the landing at one end, to the box-room stair at the other. Bunter was putting on steam.

"Help! Help! Help! Help!" came Bunter's wild yell. "He's here—he's got me— I say, you fellow—Help!"

"Oh, gad! He is in a study—Bunter's study!" yelled the Bounder. "Come on, you men!"

Smithy led a rush to No. 7.

He hurled the door open, and rushed in. Peter Todd, Squiff, Tom Brown, Bolsover major, were at his heels. Fry and Dabney of the Fourth, Coker and Potter and Greene of the Fifth, came running up, and poured in after them. A score of fellows crammed round the doorway. If the fugitive was in that study, there was no escape for him.

And he was!

From Bunter's frantic yelling, it might have been supposed that the fat Owl was struggling for his life in the grip of a desperado. But it was not quite so bad as that. Bunter had backed as far as the window, to get as far as possible from the man in the spotted necktie, on whom his eyes and spectacles were fixed in terror. But the pimply man had not made a motion towards him. Slim Judson knew that the game was up, and he was not in the least disposed to make a fight for it against overwhelming odds. He was leaning on the wall beside the door, with his hands in his pockets, scowling across the study at the yelling fat Owl, but making no movement towards him.

"Here he is!" roared Smithy. "That's the man!"

"We've got him!"

Slim Judson gave the crowding schoolboys a black look.

Ten minutes ago, Slim had been making desperate efforts to escape: he had jabbed Prout, and toppled over Monsieur Charpentier: and certainly he

would have put up any amount of jabbing and toppling now, had it been any present help in time of need. But as it could only have led to rough handling, with not the remotest chance of getting away, Slim scowled, but was otherwise quite lamb-like.

"'Ere I am," he said, "that blinking winder's too 'igh from the ground to give a covey a chance!'Ere I am."

The Bounder paused. He was ready to rush and grasp, and so were the other fellows: but evidently it was not necessary. The cornered rascal was not thinking of resistance.

"We've got you, my man," he said.

"You 'ave!" agreed Slim.

"And you've got old Popper's pocket-book," added Smithy.

Slim gave him a sharp look, and recognised him as one of the two schoolboys on bikes who had started the pursuit. His foxy eyes glinted at Smithy.

"You was quick off the mark, you was, young gentleman," he said. "If you hadn't been so 'andy, I wouldn't be 'ere now. I'd jest like to meet you in some quiet place on a dark evening, I would."

The Bounder laughed.

"I fancy I could handle you, if you did," he said.

"I say, you fellows, get hold of him," howled Billy Bunter, from the window. "I say, that's the man—"

"Coming quietly?" asked Smithy.

"Quiet as a lamb," answered Mr. Judson. "Jest my luck to run into a blinking school! Who'd have thought it? Out of the blinking frying-pan into the blinking fire! It's 'ard luck on a covey!"

"Take his other arm, Reddy."

Vernon-Smith took one arm of the captured pickpocket, Redwing the other. They marched him out of the study—much to Billy Bunter's relief—into the passage, into the midst of a buzzing swarm of fellows of all forms.

Mr. Judson did not resist. He was, as he had said, as quiet as a lamb.

The Bounder was grinning gleefully. Mr. Quelch was on the box-room landing—the three prefects were searching the attics. Quelch had taken the matter out of Smithy's hands: but it was Smithy who had made the capture, after all, while Quelch and the prefects were on a false scent.

"Somebody had better call Quelch," chuckled the Bounder. "He might be interested to hear that we've got the man."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Peter Todd ran up the passage, and mounted the box-room stair. From the landing, Mr. Quelch turned a freezing eye on him.

"Todd! Go down at once."

"But, sir—"

"No juniors are required here," snapped Mr. Quelch.

"I have told you to remain in the passage, Todd."

"Yes, sir! But—"

"Go back at once!"

"Oh! But—but I came to tell you, sir—!" gasped Peter.

"Another word, Todd, and—!"

"Oh, crumbs! We've got the man, sir!" shrieked Peter.

"Eh! What! What did you say, Todd?"

"We've got him, sir! He was hiding in a study—!"

"Oh!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch, "I—I—I see! Oh! Quite! Wingate! Gwynne! Loder! Come this way! The man has been found."

Mr. Quelch hurried down the box-room stair. Wingate and Gwynne and Loder hurried after him. The loud voice of Coker of the Fifth was heard, as they descended into the Remove passage.

"You fags get away! Do you hear? I'll take charge of that pickpocket—"

"Mind your own business, Coker."

"If you want me to smack your head, young Vernon-Smith—"
"Barge that Fifth-Form ass out of the way, you men."
"Look here—!" roared Coker.
"That will do, Coker!" Mr. Quelch arrived on the scene. "Stand aside, Coker! Wingate-Gwynne—take charge of this man, and bring him downstairs. I will telephone for a constable immediately."
Vernon-Smith and Redwing handed the prisoner over to the two prefects. If Mr. Judson had been lamb-like before, he was doubly lamb-like now, with the two big Sixth-Form men gripping his arms.
Mr. Quelch rustled away. Wingate and Gwynne followed him with the prisoner between them. Loder brought up the rear. Half an hour later Mr. Judson, in charge of a constable from Courtfield, was gone: leaving Greyfriars still in a buzz of excitement.

CHAPTER XXII

MISSING

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"
"Old Popper!"
"Popping up again!"
"The popfulness of the esteemed Popper is terrific."
"Looks jolly fierce!"
Harry Wharton and Co., as yet unaware of the spot of excitement at the school during their absence, were walking back to Greyfriars from Cliff House, after tea with Marjorie and her friends. They had almost reached the school gates, when the Popper Court car whirled into sight, with Sir Hilton sitting in it as bolt upright as a ramrod, and with an expression on his face that was inadequately described as "fierce."
The Famous Five had often seen Sir Hilton Popper, and, almost as often, they had seen him looking grim, or grumpy, or fierce: and occasionally in a very bad temper. But they had never seen him looking quite like this before. His shaggy grey brows were knitted, and under them his eyes gleamed and glinted: his lips were set in a hard line: his whole look was that of a man in the worst temper ever. Probably others, as well as the Famous Five, glanced at him curiously as the car whirled past: but the lord of Popper Court was far too lofty a personage to care what the public might think of his black looks. Utterly regardless, and probably contemptuous, of all other inhabitants of the earth, Sir Hilton sat with knitted brows, glinting eyes, and set teeth, as the car whirled on—and the whole world if it liked was welcome to discern that something or other had come between the wind and his nobility!
"I wonder what's biting him now," remarked Bob. "He looked almost good-tempered when we left him in the wood this afternoon."
"On somebody's track," said Johnny Bull, with a grunt. "Perhaps somebody else has been in his dashed woods—some other silly ass taking a short cut—"
"He's going to Greyfriars," said Harry Wharton, as the car slowed to turn in at the gates. "Somebody's booked for trouble."
"Can't be us!" said Frank Nugent. "The old bean was kind enough to forgive us, after we stopped that pickpocket and he got his stamp back. Even old Popper wouldn't rake it up again."
"Not our esteemed selves this time," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But the esteemed and ridiculous Popper looks terrifically infuriated."
"Hallo, hallo, hallo. He wants us!" exclaimed Bob. The car about to turn in at the school gates, had stopped, as Sir Hilton sighted the five juniors in the road. He leaned from the window and waved an imperious

hand, evidently as a sign for the schoolboys to come up. Apparently he desired to speak to them. .

"Come on!" said Harry: and the Co. hastened their steps. What Sir Hilton wanted, they could not guess. Irritable and truculent old gentleman as he was, he could hardly be thinking of calling them to account, after all, for having taken that short cut through his woods that afternoon: after having magnanimously pardoned them, for services rendered. But it was clear that somebody, or something, had stirred his deepest ire.

They "capped" the baronet respectfully as they came up. He gave them a glare. But they were able to discern that that was merely because he was in a state of excitement and wrath. They were not the objects of his ire. Sir Hilton glared at them, simply because in his present frame of mind he could not have looked at anybody without glaring.

"Has the stamp been found?" barked Sir Hilton.

"The—the stamp," stammered Harry, astonished by the question. Unaware of the wild adventures of the Blue Mauritius since they had seen Sir Hilton in the wood that afternoon, the Famous Five were quite at a loss.

"Yes! The stamp! Do you not know what a stamp is?" Sir Hilton almost roared. "Are you a fool, boy?"

"Oh! I—I hope not," gasped Harry. "But—I don't understand—"

"The stamp that was in my pocket-book!" barked Sir Hilton. "The Blue Mauritius stamp! Has it been found? Its value is two thousand pounds! Has it been found?"

"I—I—I—" stammered Harry. "Has—has it been lost?"

"The boy is a fool! The stamp was not in the pocket-book when the man was searched at the police-station," hooted Sir Hilton. "Has it been found in the school? Cannot you understand, boy? The stamp is of great value — enormous value! It has not been found on him. From all accounts, he cannot possibly have got rid of it before he reached the school. Has it been found here?"

"I—I—I—" Wharton could only stutter. His comrades could only stare. No member of the Famous Five was able to make head or tail of this.

"Are you a blockhead?" exclaimed Sir Hilton. "I am asking you a plain question. Has the stamp been found? It is a matter of the greatest importance. Were you among the boys who seized him in the school?"

"Eh! What—?"

"Cannot you answer a simple question?" bawled Sir Hilton. "Good gad! What is my old school coming to, when a Greyfriars boy cannot answer a simple question? Has the stamp been found in the school?"

"We—we've been out all the afternoon—" gasped Harry. He realised that something must have happened at Greyfriars that afternoon, of which he as yet knew nothing. "We're just coming back from Cliff House—"

"What? what? Then you know nothing of the matter—"

"Nothing at all—"

"Then why did you not say so?" hooted Sir Hilton. "Pah! You are wasting my time with your stupidity! Pah! Drive on, James. Pah!"

Sir Hilton sat back and the car turned in at the gates.

Harry Wharton and Co. stared after it, and stared at one another.

"What on earth's been going on here this afternoon, while we've been at Cliff House?" asked Bob.

"Goodness knows."

"Old Popper expects us to know, as well as goodness," remarked Johnny Bull, sarcastically. "Nobody's got anything to think of except his affairs. If he's lost his silly stamp again, the whole county of Kent ought to be sitting up and taking notice."

The Famous Five went in at the gates, extremely curious to know what had happened during their absence. They found a crowd of fellows in the quad, and a buzz of excited voices.

"I say, you fellows, you've missed it!" squeaked Billy Bunter. "I say, they got him in my study—"

"Got who?"

"Him!" said Bunter. "He was hiding in my study, behind the door, you know, and I never saw him when I went in, and then I turned round and saw him, and—"

"And yelled for help!" chuckled Peter Todd.

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"He got my bike." This came from Temple of the Fourth. "Pitched me right off my bike in Oak Lane, and mizzled on it—the neck, you know—! I can tell you, I was jolly glad to find it here when I got back—my jigger, you know—"

"I say, you fellows, old Popper's here—I saw him in his car— I say, he was looking awfully shirty about something—"

"But what's happened?" roared Bob Cherry.

"You fellows missed the circus," chuckled the Bounder. "We've been having no end of a time, haven't we, Reddy?"

"But what—?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"A man picked old Popper's pocket, on the Courtfield road, and cut across the common," said Redwing. "Smithy and I saw him, and got after him, on our bikes—"

"A fat pocket-book," said Smithy. "They must have found it on him at the police-station, when they searched him."

"We were after him," said Squiff, "and Wingate and Gwynne headed him off at the gates, and he dodged into the school—"

"Couldn't have known what he was dodging into," said Tom Brown, "all Greyfriars was after him in a minute."

"Nearly had him, when he bounced in at Common-Room window—knocked old Prout out of the way," chuckled the Bounder.

"Chased him all over the House—"

"He cut up to the studies—"

"Quelch and the pre's rooted after him in the attics—"

"And we got him, in a Remove study—"

"I say, you fellows, it was my study, and when I found him there, I just called out to the fellows—"

"Yelled like mad for help, you mean—"

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

The Famous Five pieced it together, from what a dozen or more fellows were telling them, all at once. It was startling news: but, from what Sir Hilton had said at the gates, they had a still more startling spot of news, of which the others were not yet aware.

"I wonder if it was the same man," said Bob, "might have kept an eye on old Popper, after getting away in the wood— What was he like, Smithy? "

"Skinny little blighter, in a spotted tie—"

"Pimples?" asked Bob.

"Eh! Yes! All over his chivvy! Have you seen him?"

"I rather think we have," chuckled Bob. "He was after old Popper's pocket-book in the wood this afternoon, and nearly got it. So he had another shot at it, and got away with it—"

"They must have got it back, when they searched him at the station," said Vernon-Smith. "Old Popper's got it back all right."

"Something missing from it, though," said Bob.

"How the thump do you know?"

"I say, you fellows, you don't know anything about it! You've missed the whole show, and you don't know a thing—"

"My dear chap, we get the latest official news," said Bob, cheerily.

"There was a stamp in that pocket-book—"

"A stamp?" repeated the Bounder, staring. "I expect there was something more valuable than a stamp."

"Not a common or garden stamp," chuckled Bob. "It was a Twopenny—"

"A twopenny stamp?"

"Just that!"

"And what the thump does a twopenny stamp matter, even if it's missing? Think old Popper's hard up for two-pence?"

"There are twopennies and twopennies," explained Bob, "this one happened to be a Blue Mauritius Twopenny—"

"What about it?"

"Worth two thousand pounds—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"And it's missing from the pocket-book—"

"How do you know?" yelled a dozen fellows.

"Oh, we get the latest news," said Bob, cheerily, "official, I assure you. There's a two-thousand pound rare stamp missing from old Popper's pocket-book, and he's just hiked over to see whether it has been dropped about Greyfriars—"

"How do you know?" yelled the Bounder.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Easy!" he said. "Old Popper told us, as we came in. That's why he's here."

"So if any fellow spots a blue twopenny stamp spotted about the school, it's worth picking up!" said Bob.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Billy Bunter, his eyes popping behind his spectacles. "Did-did you say two thousand pounds? Oh, crumbs."

"A Blue Mauritius—"

"Twopenny stamp—"

"Worth two thousand quid—"

"Dropped about the school—"

"Oh, my hat!"

There was a buzz of excitement and astonishment. That item of news, supplied by the Famous Five, put the lid on, so to speak.

"I-I say, you fellows, he-he-he was in my study—we-we—we caught him there!" gasped Billy Bunter. "I say, old Popper will have to come down with something if a fellow finds his stamp for him! I say, he was in my study—he-he-he might have dropped it there—"

Billy Bunter left the crowd in the quad, and shot away to the House. If there was an article worth two thousand pounds lying about Bunter's study, Billy Bunter was going to be the man to find it—if he could! But Billy Bunter was only the first in the field. As the news spread, there was a crowd, not to call it a cram, in No. 7 Study: and another crowd queuing up in the Remove passage eager to take a turn. With so many eager searchers, the precious stamp, if there, seemed certain to be discovered.

But it was not discovered!

CHAPTER XXIII

BUNTER ASKS FOR IT

"I SAY, you fellows—that old ass Popper—"

"Shut up, you ass!" hissed Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"He might hear you, fathead."

"Oh!" ejaculated Billy Bunter, blinking round in alarm.

Bunter was pleased to regard the lord of Popper Court as an old ass: and, that being his opinion, he saw no reason why he should not express the

same. But he certainly did not want Sir Hilton to hear him. Exactly what Sir Hilton would have done, had he heard the fat Owl describe him as an old ass, Bunter did not know: but he knew that it would be something painful.

It was morning break at Greyfriars, a couple of days later.

During those days, the excitement of Slim Judson's incursion into the school, and the loss of the precious stamp, had rather died out.

A hundred fellows, at least, had searched for the missing stamp.

Policemen from Courtfield had searched for it. Inspector Grimes himself had gone over No. 7 Study, almost with a small comb. And the result had been precisely nil.

If that Blue Mauritius was really at Greyfriars, nobody had the faintest idea where to look for it. Most fellows doubted whether it was there at all.

Harry Wharton and Co. had their own affairs to think of, and had rather forgotten Sir Hilton's: till they were reminded by the sight of the lord of Popper Court in the Greyfriars quad.

He had been there when the fellows came out in break.

He was still there, unheeding the many curious glances that were cast towards him.

At the moment, he was rooting over the spot where Slim Judson had fallen from Temple's bike, after colliding with Greene of the Fifth. It was on the edge of a grass-plot: and the tall baronet was leaning over, stirring the grass with a stick—apparently in the remote hope of stirring up a Blue Mauritius stamp. A dozen times, at least, Sir Hilton had been seen about the school, poking and peering, in that delusive hope.

"Poor old Popper!" murmured Frank Nugent. "It's tough."

"I say, you fellows—"

"The toughfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The esteemed Popper is a preposterous Tartar, but—"

"But we'd jolly well like to find his stamp for him!" said Bob.

"Yes, rather."

The Famous Five really were sympathetic. Tartar as Sir Hilton undoubtedly was, it was tough. They knew—though they had tactfully kept the knowledge to themselves—what Sir Hilton had been going to do with that stamp owing to the mumblings and grumblings they had heard from him in the wood. It looked now as if his Inspector of Taxes was booked for a long wait!

He had nearly lost that precious stamp, on the occasion of Billy Bunter's night out. It had transpired, since Slim Judson had been in the hands of the police, that he was the burglar's confederate: his business being to spy out the lie of the land for his associate the cracksman. No doubt that was his occupation when Harry Wharton and Co. had come upon him lurking in Popper Court Woods. Had the precious stamp remained in its place in the library at Popper Court, it would probably have been safe from Mr. Judson, who was no cracksman.

But Sir Hilton had placed it in his pocket-book, for conveyance to a philatelic dealer—the Famous Five knew why. That had given Mr. Judson a chance of trying his luck.

This time the stamp was gone. Mr. Judson had joined his confederate in the "stone jug": but the precious Blue Mauritius was missing. The pocket-book had been recovered—without the stamp! Slim affected to know nothing of it—and certainly it was not in his possession.

"It's a giddy mystery," said Bob Cherry. "From what we hear, the man was on the run all the time, and never had a split second to open the pocket-book—"

"Until he was in the study," said Nugent.

"Yes: so if he took it out, it must have been there—and the study has been searched all over twenty times, and it ain't there."

"Old Popper seems to think that he may have dropped it when he pitched off the bike," said Johnny Bull, "but—"

"I don't see how he could have."

"I say, you fellows—" hooted Billy Bunter. "Do let a chap speak! I say, if a fellow found that stamp, old Popper—" The fat Owl blinked round again, to make sure that Sir Hilton was not within hearing. "I say, old Popper would have to stand him something—a fiver at least—but look here, it's no good a fellow looking for a thing that ain't there—"

"It must be about somewhere, if that rascal brought it here parked in the pocket-book," said Bob. "But where—?"

"The wherefulness is terrific."

"Well, look here," said Bunter, "that's the point. Was it in the pocket-book at all, or has that old ass made a mistake? You know what an old donkey he is. Might have shoved it in his pocket, or something, and forgot where he put it."

"Fathead!"

"Well, I've often forgotten where I put things," said Bunter.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Very likely, fathead: but even you wouldn't forget where you put two thousand pounds, if you had it."

"That's all very well," said Bunter. "But if it was in the pocket-book, where is it now? Are you fellows sure you saw him put it back into the pocket-book, that day you saw him in the wood—?"

"Quite!" said Harry.

"He seems to have walked on to Courtfield after we left him," said Bob

"I've heard that he was going to the station, for a train. The stamp was in the pocket-book all right."

"You fellows saw him take it out and look at it in the wood," said Bunter. "He might have done it again and shoved it back into another pocket."

"Not likely."

"Well, if it's spotted about Greyfriars, it's jolly well worth looking for," said Bunter. "He would have to come down with a pretty decent tip, if a fellow found it. But a fellow doesn't want to take a lot of trouble for nothing."

Bunter, evidently, was in a state of doubt and perplexity. He was very keen to annex a handsome tip from Sir Hilton, for finding the stamp, if it was to be found. On the other hand, he had a very strong objection to exerting himself for nothing. He blinked at the Famous Five with owl-like seriousness.

"Might be in his waistcoat pocket all the time," he argued. "He's donkey enough—"

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Better ask him," he said. "You can point out that he's donkey enough—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I expect he would get shirty, if a fellow put it like that," said Bunter, shaking his fat head, sagely.

"Go hon!" murmured Bob.

"But I'll bet you he's got it somewhere all the time," declared Bunter.

"It couldn't have dropped out of the pocket-book, and if that pickpocket took it out in my study, it would be there now, and it jolly well ain't. Suppose he's got it in another pocket all the time—"

"I suppose it's possible—!" said Nugent.

"Not likely," said Bob.

"Jolly likely, I think," said Bunter, "and I'm jolly well going to put it to him. He couldn't make it less than a fiver if he finds the stamp—"

"Fathead!"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter left the juniors, and rolled towards the tall baronet who had now finished stirring the grass with his stick and was moving away. He gave the fat junior a far from encouraging look as he rolled up. Bunter's solution of the mystery did not seem probable to Harry Wharton and Co., but the fat Owl had little doubt of it. He was going to put it to Sir Hilton Popper, anyway.

"Well?" rapped Sir Hilton, before the fat Owl could speak.

"I've been looking for your stamp, sir—" began Bunter.

"Have you found it?"

"Nunno!"

"Then what do you want?" rapped Sir Hilton. It was only too clear that the lord of Popper Court was not in a good temper.

"Suppose—suppose it wasn't in the pocket-book at all, sir—"

"What?" barked Sir Hilton.

"I—I mean, suppose you put it in another pocket, sir, and—and forgot all about it—" stammered Bunter.

Sir Hilton Popper stared at him.

"Might be in your pocket all the time, sir," went on Bunter. "If—if you go through all your pockets, sir—"

"Good gad!" said Sir Hilton. "Do you think, you stupid boy, that I could have forgotten where I had placed an article of such value?"

"Well, old people do forget things, sir," Bunter pointed out. "Lots of old people keep on forgetting things, sir—"

"What?"

"What?"

"My grandfather was always forgetting where he put things, sir," explained Bunter. "Very old people do, sir—"

Billy Bunter got no further than that. For some reason, unknown to Bunter, Sir Hilton did not seem pleased by the suggestion that he had reached the age of forgetting things, like Bunter's grandfather. He did not speak: he reached out with his left hand, and grasped Bunter's collar. The stick, in his right hand, landed with a swipe on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School.

Swipe!

"Yaroooh!" roared Bunter. "Ow! wow! Oh, crumbs! Whooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" came from the Famous Five. "Yow-ow-ow! Wow!" roared Bunter. Sir Hilton put his stick under his arm, and stalked away.

Billy Bunter was left wriggling, and the other fellows laughing. The lord of Popper Court was very anxious to find that Blue Mauritius, but evidently he had no use for suggestions from Billy Bunter.

CHAPTER XXIV

BUNTER ON THE WAR-PATH

"WILL you lend me—?"

"Sorry, old fat man—"

"Lend me—"

"Stony!" said Bob Cherry, with a sad shake of the head.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Try Smithy!" suggested Bob. "Smithy's caked with oof—and he might lend you some—perhaps!"

"The perhapsfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

Billy Bunter in the doorway of No. 13 Study, blinked at the occupants of that study, with a devastating blink.

"You silly ass!" he hooted, "think I've come here to borrow money?"

"Eh! Haven't you?" exclaimed Bob, in surprise.

"No!" roared Bunter.

"Well, wonders will never cease!" said Bob. "I'd better put that down in my diary, as it's a thing that's never happened before. Friday—Bunter didn't want to borrow any money—!"

"You—you—you—!" gasped Bunter. "Look here, you silly, cackling ass, will you lend me your alarm-clock?"

"My alarm-clock?" repeated Bob, blankly.

There were four fellows in No. 13 Study: Bob, and the nabob, Mark Linley, and little Wun Lung. All four stared at Billy Bunter. All were surprised. Billy Bunter was a borrower of deadly skill, and there was hardly a fellow in the Remove from whom he did not extract little loans. How many half-crowns he owed to Lord Mauleverer he could not have counted, without going into high figures. How many "bobs" and "tanners" he owed to other fellows he could hardly have computed at all. He had even, on one historic occasion, borrowed a shilling from Fisher T. Fish: a really remarkable feat. At the word "lend" Bob had naturally supposed that it was a question of cash. The very last thing he would have expected Bunter to want to borrow was an alarm-clock.

The use of an alarm-clock was to wake a fellow up. Bunter hated being woke up. If there was one thing at Greyfriars that Billy Bunter loathed with a deeper loathing than lessons, it was the rising-bell in the morning. So his request for the loan of an alarm-clock was really astonishing.

"Yes, your alarm-clock, blow you," grunted the fat Owl. "Look here, will you lend it to me?"

"Do I hear aright?" ejaculated Bob. "Do mine ears deceive me? Do I sleep, do I dream, do I wonder and doubt— Are things what they seem, or is visions about? "

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You silly fathead!" hooted Bunter. "I want that alarm-clock—"

"But you can't eat an alarm-clock—!" argued Bob. "What on earth do you want it for? Can't you wait for rising-bell in the morning?"

"'Tain't for the morning, yapped Bunter." I want to wake up at ten to-night."

Which reply caused No. 13 Study to gaze at him in intensified astonishment. Dormitory for the Remove was nine-thirty. At nine-thirty-five, as a rule, Billy Bunter's deep snore was heard, and it went on like an unending melody till the rising-bell clanged in the dewy morn. The very last thing Bunter had ever desired before, was to be awakened from balmy slumber.

Certainly, if he wanted to wake, after once his eyes had closed, an alarm-clock was needed. But why Billy Bunter wanted to wake up half an hour after bedtime, was a deep mystery—it was a new and astonishing departure from the usual manners and customs of the fat Owl.

"You want to wake up at ten to-night?" repeated Bob, almost dazedly. "You fat ass, if you're thinking of sneaking down to the pantry after lights out—"

"'Tain't that!" yelled Bunter. "I want to turn out at ten! They'll all be fast asleep in the Fourth-form dorm at ten."

"Oh, my hat! Is there anything to eat, in the Fourth-form dorm?"

"No!" howled Bunter, "'tain't that! It's that cheeky beast Temple! You know what he did when I was asleep on Wednesday morning on the landing—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle," hooted Bunter. "If you think it's funny for a chap to have his face painted blue while he's asleep—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Apparently the fellows in No. 13 Study did think it funny!

"Well, Temple won't think it so jolly funny, at ten to-night," said Billy Bunter. "I never knew who it was the other day, but I've found out that it was Temple of the Fourth—those Fourth form smudges have been cackling over it, and I jolly well know it was Temple. I'd jolly well thrash him, only—only I couldn't, you know! But he's jolly well got it coming! If he thinks it funny to paint a fellow's face while he's asleep, perhaps he'll think it funny to get a pot of paint on his chivvy while he's asleep himself—he, he, he!"

"Oh!" gasped Bob.

Billy Bunter, apparently, was on the war-path. The remarkable appearance he had presented in the Remove form room, with his decorated fat countenance, had evoked merriment, in everyone but Bunter! Bunter, it seemed, was not amused. And having learned that it was Cecil Reginald Temple of the Fourth Form, who was the guilty man, Bunter had made up his fat mind to give Cecil Reginald "some of the same."

Cecil Reginald had caught him napping—and he was going to catch Cecil Reginald napping! Temple, certainly, was not likely to fall asleep anywhere in the daytime: but after lights out, it was easy. That was why the fat Owl had rolled along to No. 13 after prep to borrow the alarm-clock. Without some such aid, Temple of the Fourth would certainly have been quite safe from hostilities on Bunter's part, after lights out.

"Better give it a miss, Bunter," said Mark Linley, laughing. "If you wake Temple up with a pot of paint, something will happen to you soon afterwards."

"Didn't he jolly well paint my face?" demanded Bunter.

"Making a fellow walk into the form-room painted blue—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I shan't be there more than a minute," went on Bunter, "I'm not going to paint him as he did me—only just up end a pot of paint over his chivvy, see? I've borrowed a pot of paint from Gosling's shed—that's all right!—and I've borrowed Toddy's flash-lamp. Now all I want is your alarm-clock, Bob—you see, I might not wake up—"

"The might-notfulness is terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Well," said Bob, laughing, "you can borrow the alarm-clock, old fat man: but I'd advise you to chuck it—"

"I'll watch it," said Bunter.

And he rolled away from No. 13 Study, with the alarm-clock under a fat arm, leaving the study chuckling.

When the Remove went up to their dormitory that night, there were three perceptible bulges on Billy Bunter's plump person. In one pocket was a pound pot of paint, requisitioned from Gosling's shed. In another, was Bob Cherry's alarm-clock. In a third, was Peter Todd's flash-lamp.

A good many Remove fellows, who were aware that the fat Owl was on the war-path, grinned as they noted those bulges. Luckily, Wingate of the Sixth, who saw lights out for the Remove, did not note them.

After the lights were out, and the prefect gone, Billy Bunter sat up in bed, and there was a sound of groping. Bunter was disinterring the alarm-clock from a pocket.

Crash! smash!

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! what's that?" came from Bob Cherry's bed.

"Only that beastly clock! I've dropped it—I think the glass is broken—"

"You fat chump!"

"Beast!"

There was more groping, as Bunter leaned out of bed, and fished for the fallen clock. His fat paw contacted it, and he picked it up.

"It's all right—it's still going," said Bunter. "It doesn't matter about the glass, as the clock's going—"

"You blithering owl—"

"Oh, really, Cherry! I'll pay for a new glass, when my postal-order comes—"

"You burbling bloater!"

"Well, it's going all right," said Bunter. "I've set the alarm for ten, and it's bound to wake me, close to my pillow. Now shut up and let a fellow go to sleep!"

"You clumsy fat foozler—"

"Oh, really, Cherry, I think you might shut up, and let a fellow go to sleep, when a fellow's turning out at ten o'clock."

Bob Cherry did not immediately shut up. He seemed more concerned about the damage to the clock than Bunter was. He continued, for several minutes, to tell Bunter what he thought of him.

Only a deep snore from Bunter's bed answered. Lulled, perhaps, by the ticking of the clock close to his pillow, the fat Owl slid into happy slumber, and Bob's remarks passed him by like the idle wind which he regarded not.

Billy Bunter slept, and he snored: and if he dreamed, he did not dream that that bang on the dormitory floor had disarranged the alarm which he had carefully set for ten o'clock, and that it was now set for ten minutes to two! That was an interesting discovery that the fat Owl of the Remove had yet to make!

CHAPTER XXV

THE MAN IN THE DARK

Buzzzzzzzz!

"Urrrggh!" grunted a sleeping fat Owl.

Buzzzz!

"Yaw-aw-aw-aw-aw!"

Buzzz!

Billy Bunter was a sound sleeper. It was one of the things that Bunter could do really well. But even Bunter emerged from slumber as the alarm-clock buzzed and buzzed within a foot of his fat head.

He grunted, yawned, and sat up.

He groped for his spectacles, and perched them on his little fat nose, and blinked round him in the gloom like a drowsy owl.

Buzzzzzzz!

That alarm-clock had awakened Bunter. It had also awakened several other fellows, which was only to be expected. Three or four voices came from the shadows, addressing Bunter.

"Shut up that row!"

"Is that that fat idiot Bunter? Stop that row, you fat chump!"

"Do you want me to heave a boot at you, Bunter?"

"Can't you let a fellow sleep?"

"I say, you fellows, it will stop in a minute," answered Bunter peevishly. He was not disposed to worry about fellows suddenly awakened from balmy slumber. He was already sufficiently worried by the prospect of turning out of bed—never a welcome prospect to Bunter.

Planning that just retaliation on Cecil Reginald Temple, earlier, had seemed quite a good idea to Bunter. Carrying it out did not seem too attractive, when the time came to turn out of a warm bed.

Bunter was strongly tempted to let the alarm run down, replace his fat head on the pillow, and go to sleep again, leaving Temple of the Fourth unpunished for his sins. Really, he could hardly be expected to bother about fellows who did not like being woke up in the middle of the night.

"Will you shut up that row?" came a howl from Bolsover major.

"I tell you it will stop in a minute," snapped Bunter. Whiz! A boot sailed through the air, guided by Bunter's voice. Bang! "Yaroooh!"

Bunter had not expected that. It took him quite by surprise when the boot banged on his ear, and tipped him over. He plunged wildly in the dark, tipped off the edge of the bed, and bumped on the floor, in a tangle of bed-clothes.

"Oh! Beast! Ow! Who chucked that boot? Wow!"

"Do you want the other one?" hissed Bolsover. "You'd better shut off that row, if you don't."

"Beast!" howled Bunter.

Luckily, the alarm sputtered to an end. The raucous clatter ceased, and the silence was broken only by the spluttering of the fat Owl as he disentangled himself from sheets and blankets, and scrambled up.

Other fellows settled down to sleep. But Billy Bunter, being now out of bed, ceased to debate whether he should chuck it up and go to sleep again. Bolsover's boot had settled that point for him.

He groped for his trousers in the faint glimmer of star-light from the high windows, heaved his fat legs into them, and tucked in his pyjamas. Then he groped for slippers and put them on. That was sufficient attire for the trip from the Remove dormitory to the Fourth. Then he groped in pockets for the pot of paint and Peter Todd's flash-lamp.

The latter was required to pick out Temple's bed in the Fourth-form dormitory: the former, to decorate Cecil Reginald's countenance when found. With the paint pot crammed into his trousers pocket, and the flash-lamp in his hand, the fat Owl groped away to the dormitory door. He blinked out cautiously into the passage. At ten o'clock, lights were out in the dormitories, but not downstairs. Masters had not yet gone to bed at ten: and probably many of the Sixth were still up. But not the faintest glimmer of light, not the faintest sound, reached the fat Owl as he blinked out. The deep silence and stillness of the House seemed to indicate a later hour than ten. However, Bunter knew that he had set the alarm for ten, so he had no doubts. He crept forth from the dormitory, without bothering to shut the door after him, and tiptoed away down the passage to the landing.

From that landing, several passages opened: one of them leading to the Fourth-form dormitory. Another led to the rooms of several of the masters. It was necessary for Bunter to be very cautious. He was surprised to see not a glimmer of light from the staircase. Usually a light burned on the stairs till the last bedroom door had closed. But there was not the faintest glimmer now: the staircase was a well of solid darkness. Only here and there a glimmer of starlight came ghostly from a high window.

On tiptoe, the fat Owl trod out on the landing. He could not venture to turn on the flash-lamp there, lest, at an unlucky moment, a "beak" might be coming up. He would have hated to meet the gimlet-eyes of his form-master just then.

But he did not need a light on such familiar ground.

Cautiously, on tiptoe, he groped on the landing.

A chime came through the night, from the Greyfriars clock-tower: faint but clearly audible from the distance. It was followed by the striking of the hour. Boom!

The fat Owl started, stopped, and listened. He was sure that he had set the alarm for precisely ten, so it should now have been six or seven minutes past. But the clock was striking the hour: there was no mistake about that. He concluded that he must have set it a few minutes early. Boom! Came a second time. As the fat Owl had no doubt that it was ten o'clock, he expected eight more strokes to follow.

But the rest was silence!

Billy Bunter stood quite still. It dawned upon his fat brain that something must have gone wrong with that alarm-clock. The deep darkness and dead silence of the House were explained now. It was not ten o'clock at night. It was two o'clock in the morning!

"Oh, crikey," breathed the startled Owl.

In the deep silence that followed he listened uneasily with both fat ears, and blinked round him in the gloom with uneasy eyes.

Two o'clock in the morning was a very different proposition from ten o'clock' in the evening.

Even Billy Bunter did not feel nervous about venturing out of his dormitory, when lights were on and masters up downstairs. But at an hour when all were sleeping, when nobody but himself was awake in the whole of the great building, it was quite different. A very unpleasant eerie feeling came over Bunter.

Instead of progressing towards the Fourth form dormitory, he stood where he was on the dark landing, hesitating. He was powerfully inclined to give up his expedition, and scuttle back to his dormitory. At such an hour, the darkness and silence were full of vague terrors—there might even be burglars. He remembered, quite unpleasantly, the recent burglary at Popper Court. Suppose—!

Creak!

It was only a faint creak from the staircase. But a roll of thunder could not have startled Bunter more.

He stood rooted, hardly breathing.

Creak!

All his vague terrors crystallized, at that faint sound. For he knew what it was—what it could only be!—the creak of ancient wood under a soft and stealthy footstep! Someone—unseen in the dark—was on the stairs. The fat Owl's fat heart almost died within him.

It could not be a master coming up late to bed—nobody could have stayed up till two in the morning. Besides, a master would have turned on a light. It could not be some breaker of bounds, like Smithy of the Remove or Price of the Fifth, creeping cautiously home—at that hour! With a shudder of horror, Billy Bunter realised what it was—the stealthy footstep of some intruder from without! Terror rooted him to the floor. A faint sound on the landing came to him. The unseen intruder had reached the landing, and was quite near him. A beam of light flashed in the darkness, and circled—the unseen man had turned on a flash lamp, to get his bearings.

The light moved round in a slow circle. A glimmer of it revealed the man who was holding it, to Bunter's terrified eyes. He glimpsed a slight figure, and a face with narrow foxy eyes—and pimples!

He could have fancied that he was dreaming.

For it was a face he had seen before—the face of a man who had been captured a few days ago in No. 7 Study: the face of the man who had been taken, in charge of a constable, to Courtfield Police-Station: the foxy, pimpled face of the man Bunter, and everyone else, supposed to be safe under lock and key.

Bunter could not stir. He could hardly breathe. Terror chained him. The glimpse of that rascally face was brief, but he knew the man—knew that Slim Judson was within six or seven feet of him. The slowly-circling light was approaching him, but he could not stir. It reached him—!

It flashed full on a fat, terrified face, with open mouth and starting eyes. There was a startled gasp from the man with the light.

"You!"

Evidently he knew Bunter again, as Bunter knew him.

The exclamation was followed by a swift movement towards the fat Junior.

A wild yelp of terror escaped Billy Bunter as he fled. His feet hardly touched the floor as he flew up the passage to the Remove dormitory. Whether the man followed him or not, he did not know. He careered frantically into the dormitory, yelling at the top of his voice. "Help! I say, you fellows! Burglars! Yaroooh! Help! Keep him off! I say, you fellows! Oh, crikey! Help!"

CHAPTER XXVI

DOUBTING THOMASES

MR. QUELCH sat up in bed.

Something had awakened him—suddenly. It seemed to him that there was a sound of distant yelling, in the silence of the night. That seemed improbable, and he wondered for a moment whether he was dreaming. But as he listened, he realised that, improbable as it seemed, it was a fact. Indubitably, unmistakably, someone was yelling, in the middle of the night. He fancied that the uproar came from the direction of the Remove dormitory. An expression resembling that of the fabled Gorgon came over Mr. Quelch's face, as he stepped out of bed, and hurriedly grabbed up a dressing-gown.

He opened his door. Undoubtedly there was yelling: and a hubbub of excited voices: more clearly heard now that his door was open. With the Gorgonic expression intensifying on his face, the Remove master stepped out, and hurried across the dark landing. What hour it was, he did not know: but he knew that it was very late. If there was a disturbance in the Remove quarters at such an hour, Quelch was the man to deal with it promptly and drastically.

He flashed on the light, on the landing, and hurried up the passage to the Remove door. That door was wide open: and from within, came a perfect Babel of voices. Loudest of all were the dulcet tones of William George Bunter.

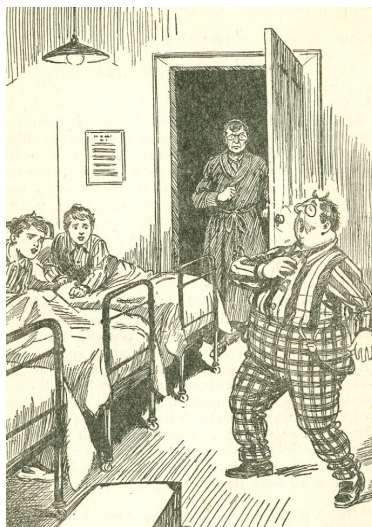
"Help! I say, you fellows, it's that man! I say, he's after me! Help!"

"What the thump—"

"Is that Bunter?"

"What's that fat idiot yelling about?"

"Put a sock in it, Bunter."



THERE WAS A SUDDENBLAZE OF ILLUMINATION
IN THE REMOVE DORMITORY

"Shut up, you ass! You'll have Quelch here."

"For goodness sake, shut up, Bunter. Do you want to wake the House?"

"I say, you fellows, I saw him! Oh, crikey! Help! I say, he's after me!" yelled Bunter. "I can hear him coming up the passage—"

"Fathead!"

"Chuck it!"

"The fat chump's been frightened of the dark—"

"The frightfulness seems to be terrific."

"You'll have Quelch here, you howling lunatic—"

"Yaroooh! He's coming! Help!" shrieked Bunter.

Undoubtedly there were footsteps in the passage, and Bunter did not guess that they were Quelch's. "I say, you fellows, he's coming after me—"

There was a sudden blaze of illumination in the Remove dormitory, as Mr. Quelch, in the doorway, turned the switch.

Every eye turned on the doorway: and there was sudden silence, as the grimly frowning face of the Remove master was seen there. Only Bunter continued to yell.

"He's coming! I say, you fellows, keep him off! It's him—"

"Bunter!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"Ow! Help! Burglars! Oh!" Bunter blinked at his form-master. "Is-is-is that you, sir? Oh, crikey! I-I say, sir, look out—he-he may be just behind you—"

"Silence, you stupid boy! How dare you make such a disturbance?" Quelch fairly roared. "What are you doing out of bed, Bunter, "at this hour? Have you been out of your dormitory?"

"Oh! Yes! No! Yes!" gasped Bunter.

Mr Quelch gave a grim glance at a crowd of fellows, sitting up in bed and staring. Nobody was out of bed excepting Bunter. Bunter, evidently, was the cause of the uproar: and that he was frightened almost out of his fat wits, was clear at a glance. He was fairly babbling with terror.

"You have been out of your dormitory, Bunter?"

"Oh! Yes! I-I saw him, sir—"

"You saw whom?" snapped Mr. Quelch.

"Him, sir!" gasped Bunter. "It was him, sir."

In his excitement and terror, the fat Owl recklessly disregarded grammar.

"Him, sir—it was him!"

"Who?" almost shrieked Mr. Quelch.

"That man, sir—oh, crikey! He was on the landing—he turned on a light—oh, jiminy! Then I saw him—that man, sir, the pickpocket—the man who pocked old Popper's picket—I mean the man who popped old Picket's pocker—"

"Will you tell me who or what you fancy you have seen, Bunter?" asked Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice.

"I'm tut-tut-telling you, sir. It was that packpicket—I mean that pickpocket—the man who got old pipper's popper-book—I mean his pocket-book—the man who was copped in my study, sir—"

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Bob Cherry. All the Remove stared at Bunter. That the fat Owl had been badly frightened in the dark, everyone could see. But that he had encountered Mr. Judson within the walls of Greyfriars no one was likely to believe. Mr. Quelch's gimlet-eyes almost bored into the fat junior.

"You utterly ridiculous boy," he exclaimed. "The man you speak of is under lock and key at the police-station—"

"But I did saw him, sir—"

"What?"

"I-I mean I did seed him, sir—I mean I sawed him—I mean—"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch. "You have been frightened by some shadow, you utterly stupid boy. How dare you leave your dormitory at this hour? Explain yourself! Why are you not in bed?"

"Because—because I—I got up, sir—"

There was a chuckle from some of the beds. It was stilled immediately by a glare from the Remove master. Only too plainly, Mr. Quelch did not consider this an occasion for chuckling.

"Bunter, you obtuse boy, if you do not explain at once why you left your dormitory—!" rumbled Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I thought it was ten o'clock, sir," groaned Bunter, "the—the alarm-clock went wrong, sir! I—I was going—I—I mean I wasn't going—I—I-I wasn't going to the Fourth-form dorm to jape Temple, sir—I—I never thought of anything of the kind. I—I—I—"

"You were going to another dormitory, to play some foolish trick at this hour of the night!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"I—I thought it was only ten, sir," groaned Bunter. "I—I wouldn't have got up if I'd known it was the middle of the night—"

"What?"

"I—I mean the middle of the night, sir. Then I heard it strike two, sir, and—and that man came up the stairs—him, sir—" The fat Owl shivered. "I—I thought he was after me—oh, lor'!"

"You incredibly stupid boy!" hooted Mr. Quelch.

"The man Judson is in a cell at Courtfield— You have been frightened in the dark. I shall punish you most severely for causing this disturbance, Bunter. You will come to my study after prayers in the morning, and I shall cane you."

"Oh, crikey!"

"Now go back to bed, and be quiet," said the Remove master, sternly.

"There is no occasion for alarm, my boys," added Mr. Quelch. "There is nothing whatever the matter. Bunter, go back to bed at once."

"But I—I say, sir, ain't you going to telephone the police—?" gasped Bunter. "Suppose he's still in the House—?"

"Shut up, you fat ass," breathed Peter Todd.

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"There's nobody, you fat chump," said Squiff.

"Oh, really, Field—"

"I have told you to go to bed, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch, in a voice resembling that of the Great Huge Bear. "If you utter another word, Bunter, I shall send for my cane, and chastise you on the spot."

Billy Bunter blinked at him. His terror of the pimply man lurking in the dark was great. But Quelch was a nearer danger! He did not utter another word. He plunged into bed.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard, and he breathed deep. His expression left no doubt that he was going to deal faithfully with the fat Owl, after prayers in the morning. He shut off the light, drew the door shut, and walked away: and Bunter's voice was not heard again till he was off the scene. Then it was heard.

"I say, you fellows—!"

"You blithering, burbling, benighted bandersnatch," said Bob Cherry.

"Shut up and go to sleep, and let other fellows do the same."

"But that burglar—I tell you I saw him—"

"Fathead!" said Harry Wharton.

"It was that man—"

"Can it, ass," said Johnny Bull. "How could the man be here when he's in chokey?"

"I tell you I saw him—"

"Pack it up!" said Vernon-Smith.

"The packupfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed jawful Bunter," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Speech is silvery, but silence is the bird in the bush that makes Jack a dull boy, as the English proverb remarks."

"I—I say, Wharton, suppose—suppose he comes in here—I say hadn't you better shove a bed against the door, or something—?"

"You benighted ass, if there was a burglar, what would he want in a junior dormitory?" hooted the captain of the Remove.

"After Bunter's gold watch, perhaps!" suggested Skinner.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I tell you he was on the landing, and he turned on a light," hissed Bunter, "I saw him as plain as my own face."

"Well, that's plain enough, goodness knows," remarked Bob Cherry.

"The plainfulness is terrific."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at, with a burglar in the house—" howled Bunter. "Think I can go to sleep, with a burglar burgling about? I shan't be able to close my eyes."

"You mayn't be able to close your eyes," said the Bounder. "But you'd better be able to close your mouth: for if you don't shut up, I'll get up and give you a spot of my bolster."

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"Shut up, Bunter."

"But I say—!"

"Shut up!" howled a dozen fellows. At a quarter past two in the morning, the Removites seemed to prefer slumber to Billy Bunter's conversation.

"Beasts!" groaned Bunter.

But he shut up, at last. Evidently, nobody was going to heed his burglar story. And even Bunter realised that, after the alarm had been given, that nocturnal intruder was fairly certain to have taken himself off. The Remove settled down to sleep once more: and Bunter laid his fat head on his pillow, convinced that he would not be able to sleep a wink. But that was an error on Bunter's part. In less than five minutes, a sound resembling the murmur of distant thunder was rumbling through the Remove dormitory. It was Billy Bunter's snore—and it went on non-stop till the rising-bell rang in the sunny morning.

CHAPTER XXVII

LUCK FOR BUNTER

TAP!

"Come in!" said Mr. Quelch, in his grimmest tone. After prayers in the morning, Mr. Quelch had gone to his study. It was Bunter's duty, according to instructions, to follow him there, to take the painful consequences of causing a disturbance in the middle of the night. Bunter, never a whale on duty, was not at all anxious to carry out that particular duty. There was delay, and Mr. Quelch's eyes were already glinting, when the tap came at his study door. The Remove master rapped out "Come in," nothing doubting that it was Bunter: and as he spoke, he grasped the cane that lay ready on his table, and rose to his feet. Cane in hand, with frowning brows, he stood ready for Bunter, as the door opened—and Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, presented himself!

"Oh!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch, involuntarily. He was taken quite by surprise.

He had expected Bunter. He had not expected Mr. Grimes, especially at such an early hour in the morning.

Mr. Grimes started a little, at the sight of the Remove master's attitude. He was about to say "Good morning!" Instead, he stared.

"Oh!" repeated Mr. Quelch. He had taken it for granted that it was Bunter, and he realised that he had taken too much for granted. The colour flushed into his cheeks, and he hurriedly dropped the cane on the table. It was quite disconcerting for a moment.

"Oh! G-g-good morning, Mr. Grimes! I-I was expecting—I mean—pray come in!" Quelch fairly stammered. "This is a very early hour—I-I was not expecting—" His colour deepened, as he detected a faint smile that flickered for a moment on the Courtfield inspector's stolid face.

"Really, Mr. Grimes, at this very early hour—"

"Please excuse this very early call, sir," said Mr. Grimes. "I desired to see you as early as possible this morning—" Mr. Quelch recovered himself.

"Pray sit down, Mr. Grimes. What is it?" His manner was as polite as he could make it. But he was disconcerted, and he had not yet had his breakfast.

However, Mr. Grimes did not appear to notice the edge on his voice. He sat solidly down.

"I am afraid, Mr. Quelch, that the recent occurrence here has caused a good deal of unusual disturbance," said Mr. Grimes, apologetically.

"It has, undoubtedly," said Mr. Quelch. "I may say that I had hoped to have heard the last of it."

Mr. Grimes coughed.

Greyfriars fellows had rather enjoyed the episode of Mr. Judson. They had rather liked a spot of excitement. But a school-master had no use for spots of excitement. School-masters preferred to keep on the even tenor of their way undisturbed. Mr. Quelch, no doubt, sympathised with Sir Hilton Popper, over the loss of his rare and precious Blue Mauritius. But he was chiefly desirous of hearing no more of Sir Hilton, no more of the Blue Mauritius, no more of the pickpocket, and no more of Inspector Grimes and the Courtfield policemen. More especially he did not want to hear anything more about any of them before breakfast.

"I am sorry, sir, that the matter is not quite at an end," said Mr. Grimes. "The loss to Sir Hilton Popper, sir, is of course very serious. I understand that the Blue Mauritius stamp, now missing, is worth upwards of two thousand pounds: and Sir Hilton has no doubt that it is to be found somewhere about the school—"

"Extremely improbable, in my opinion," said Mr. Quelch. "If your visit this morning means that further search is to be made, Mr. Grimes—"

"Not at all, sir," said Mr. Grimes, hastily.

"I am glad of it," said Mr. Quelch.

"I will speak frankly to you, sir," said Mr. Grimes, "more frankly than I care to do to Sir Hilton. I am not absolutely assured that the stamp was in the pocket-book at all, when it fell into the man Judson's hands. It was not found either in the pocket-book, or on the man, when he was searched: and from all the accounts I received the man's flight was so hurried, so breathless, that he had no opportunity of removing it and concealing it—except during the few minutes he was out of observation in a schoolboy's study here. That study has been searched with meticulous care, and the stamp certainly is not there. Sir Hilton is positive on the point, but—" Mr. Grimes coughed again.

"Sir Hilton is occasionally somewhat forgetful, Mr. Grimes," said the Remove master, acidly. "Although he has known me for many years, he has addressed me as Mr. Welsh, and even Mr. Squelch: and a gentleman who cannot even recall a name—"

"Precisely so, sir," said Inspector Grimes "Sir Hilton is quite positive about it, but I cannot feel equally positive myself."

"Nor I," said Mr. Quelch.

"But, sir, it happens that the matter may be put to a test, which may clear up doubt," continued the inspector. "If the man Judson did actually find an opportunity of concealing the stamp, while he was in the school, it can only have been in the hope of recovering it later, when he came out of prison—"

"No doubt! I presume that that will not be for six months, at least." Once more the inspector coughed.

"I regret to tell you, sir, that it may be much sooner. In fact, the man escaped last night—"

"What?"

"I regret to say that he is now at liberty, sir," said Mr. Grimes. "He escaped from his cell, and is now at large."

Mr. Quelch uttered a sound strongly resembling a snort.

Then he gave a sudden start, as Bunter's strange story of the night before came back to his mind.

"Bless my soul! You say that the man is at large!" he exclaimed. "Bless my soul! Then it is possible—"

"It is possible, sir, that he may lurk in the vicinity of this school, if in fact he did conceal the stamp here, to make some attempt to recover it," said Mr. Grimes. "That is why I am here so early, sir. Many of the boys of your form, Mr. Quelch, came into contact with the man, and would know him again at once if they saw him. You will appreciate how important it is for the police to be notified at once if he should be seen, anywhere near Greyfriars. If he knows nothing of the stamp, he is fairly certain to quit the neighbourhood, thinking only of his safety. But if he should be seen anywhere about the school, it will indicate beyond doubt that the stamp is indeed here, and that he hopes to lay hands on it. You see my point, sir?"

"Bless my soul!" repeated Mr. Quelch.

"If any boy who knows the man by sight should see him again—!" continued Mr. Grimes.

"It is possible that that stupid boy was stating the facts," said Mr. Quelch. "I had no idea, of course, that the man was at large, and when Bunter stated that he had seen him—"

Mr. Grimes gave quite a little jump.

"He has been seen?" he exclaimed.

"A foolish boy, named Bunter, left his dormitory at a late hour last night, to play some insensate trick in another dormitory," said Mr. Quelch. "He was frightened in the dark—as I supposed—and caused a disturbance. He stated that he had seen the man Judson, on the dormitory landing—a statement which I attributed to terrified fancy— But in view of what you now tell me—it is possible—"

"I must see the boy, sir," exclaimed Mr. Grimes.

"1—"

Tap!

"That, I think, is the boy in question," said Mr. Quelch, as a tap came at the study door, and he rapped out "Come in!"

The door opened. A fat figure, a fat dolorous face, and a big pair of spectacles, were revealed. It was Bunter this time!

"Come in, Bunter," rapped Mr. Quelch.

Billy Bunter rolled reluctantly in. He blinked dismally at Mr. Quelch, then at the cane on the table, and then, in surprise, at Inspector Grimes.

"Bunter—!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Yes, sir," groaned Bunter. "I—I—"

"Mr. Grimes desires to ask you some questions. You will tell him exactly what happened last night when you were out of your dormitory."

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I-I really did see that man, sir—he had a light, and he turned it on, and—and—I-I saw his face, sir—and—and—it was that pockpicket—I mean that pickpocket—who popped Sir Hilton's picket, sir—"

"Tell me exactly what occurred, Master Bunter," said Inspector Grimes, encouragingly.

"Oh, certainly, sir," gasped Bunter. And he proceeded to stutter out the tale of his thrilling adventure in the dark.

The Courtfield inspector listened attentively, putting in a sharp question now and then when the fat Owl wandered from the point. When Bunter came, at last, to an end, Mr. Grimes turned to the Remove master. "There can be no doubt now, sir," he said. "The man was here, and he can have been here with only one object."

Mr. Quelch nodded.

"It would certainly appear so," he said. "If the man was here he can have had but one motive—to recover Sir Hilton's stamp—"

"Exactly! The information Master Bunter has been able to give, clears up the doubt on the point, and is, indeed, extremely useful," said Mr. Grimes.

Mr. Grimes had a kindly heart. He had not failed to observe how the matter stood, and he was tactfully putting in a word for the unfortunate fat Owl. Mr. Quelch gave him a rather sharp look: and then gave Bunter a grim one. There was a moment's silence, and then he said: "You may leave my study, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. And he left it. A split second was sufficient to see Bunter out of the study! It was a happy and relieved fat Owl that rolled away down the passage.

Mr. Grimes rose.

"The matter is now clear, sir," he said. "The man Judson was here, within a few hours of escaping from his cell: he lost no time. The Blue Mauritius stamp, Sir, was his object, and it must now be taken as a fact that he succeeded in concealing it somewhere in the school. And his haste to make an attempt to recover it, Mr. Quelch tells us something more—it indicates that he fears that it may be found—that its hiding-place may be discovered."

"It would seem so," said Mr. Quelch. "I conclude, sir that measures will be taken to keep watch for the man, in case he should make another attempt to enter these premises—"

Mr. Grimes smiled faintly.

"You may be assured of that, sir! We shall take all necessary measures, and I trust, sir, that the matter will soon be at an end."

"I sincerely hope so," said Mr. Quelch.

The inspector took his leave: considerably to Mr. Quelch's relief, as the breakfast-bell was ringing: As Mr. Grimes crossed to the gates, a fat voice reached his ears.

"I say you fellows, it was all right, after all. Quelch looked as if he was going to bite, but he didn't whop me. Old Grimes was there, and I told him about it, and he jolly well believed me, if you fellows didn't! I can jolly well tell you that old Grimes isn't such a silly old ass as he looks!"

Which perhaps made Mr. Grimes, as he marched on, think that it was rather a pity that Mr. Quelch's cane had not, after all, come into action!

CHAPTER XXVIII

SQUIFF TAKES A HAND

SQUIFF of the Remove stared.

Squiff, at the moment, was perched on a high branch, in a massive old beech tree, that shaded the stile in Friardale Lane. From the summit of that massive and ancient tree, there was a wide view over the surrounding country: the woods and fields and meadows of Kent on the one hand, the rolling sea on the other beyond the white cliffs: Greyfriars School, and Highcliffe, and the town of Courtfield, and many other objects of interest. It was said that the spire of Canterbury Cathedral could be seen from the top of that tree: and it was not uncommon for Greyfriars juniors to clamber into the high branches, for a bird's-eye view of the countryside. So there was Sampson Quincy Iffley Field of New South Wales, taking a rest on a branch, leaning back against the massive trunk, after a clamber to the top.

From that point of vantage, Squiff had a view of the footpath and the stile below, and of Friardale Lane winding away towards Greyfriars. And in the lane, he had also a view of a fat figure rolling along from the direction of the school towards the stile, with a big pair of spectacles flashing back the rays of the sun.

The view of Billy Bunter did not particularly interest Squiff. He considered whether to drop a handful of twigs on the fat Owl's head as he passed below, and make him jump. Otherwise, he was not interested in Bunter.

But a few moments later, he was interested.

Another figure came in sight, at a little distance behind Bunter. It was that of a short man, with a beaky nose, and very sharp little narrow eyes set very close on either side of it.

Squiff gave him a careless glance: and then fixed his eyes upon him, curiously.

There was nobody else to be seen in the leafy lane.

Bunter, a little breathless as usual, with spots of perspiration on his fat brow, rolled on unconscious of the man behind him. That man's eyes were fixed on Bunter's podgy back, with such a furtive, stealthy expression, that the Australian junior, in the branches of the beech, could not help noticing it. He noticed, too, that when Bunter slowed down—as he frequently did—the man behind slowed down too. When Bunter accelerated again, the man behind accelerated again. And his narrow sharp eyes never left Bunter.

Squiff stared—and stared harder. It leaped to the eye that the man with the beaky nose was following Bunter—not merely walking in the same direction, as anyone might have been doing, but deliberately following him, keeping him in sight, and keeping always at the same distance behind him.

Which was remarkable, and drew Squiff's special attention.

As he scanned the hard, narrow, beaky face, he remembered that he had seen the man before—hanging about the school gates. The beaky man had been there, when Squiff had come out, more than an hour ago. Squiff had noticed him in passing, and forgotten him again.

It seemed improbable that the man had been waiting there, till Bunter came out, with the intention of following the fat junior. Yet it looked like it.

Had it been Lord Mauleverer, or the Bounder, or Temple of the Fourth, or Monty Newland, or any such wealthy fellow, Squiff would have wondered whether the beaky man was a pickpocket, following a Greyfriars fellow to a lonely spot with the intention of relieving him of his cash. That was really what it looked like. But the most enterprising pickpocket could hardly have chosen Billy Bunter for a victim. Billy Bunter did not look wealthy. Remove fellows often heard of the wealth of Bunter Court, and of Bunter's rich relations. But they never saw any sign of it about Bunter.

He was hardly worth the while of any professional snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. Yet undoubtedly it did look like it.

Bunter equally unconscious of the Astrakhan junior in the branches of the beech, and of the beaky man shadowing him rolled on towards the stile. It was Saturday afternoon, a half-holiday at Greyfriars, and Bunter was rolling over to Cliff House to see his sister Bessie—perhaps with a faint hope that something might yet survive from Wednesday's hamper.

The fat Owl arrived at the stile, at length. He did not immediately clamber over it. He leaned on it to get his breath: always in short supply with William George Bunter.

Squiff, from above, watched the beaky man, curiously.

The beaky man came to a halt, as Bunter stopped at the stile, still watching him. No doubt he could see that Bunter was about to take the footpath through the wood, which, if his purpose was robbery suited him admirably. It was obvious to the watching eyes from the beech that the man was waiting for Bunter to get over the stile.

Squiff's face set grimly.

A pickpocket or footpad who set out to pilfer from Billy Bunter was simply wasting his time. If Billy Bunter had any cash about him, it was not likely to amount to much. True he had a watch and chain, and the beaky man couldn't know that the value thereof was what Fisher T. Fish described as "nix". But he was not going to help himself even to Bunter's rolled-gold watch, if Squiff could stop him—and he had no doubt that he could. The sturdy Australian junior would not have hesitated for a moment to tackle him, and land a set of hefty knuckles on a beaky nose.

Bunter clambered over the stile at last, and dropped, with a grunt, on the inner side. At the same moment, the man in the lane got into motion. He shot forward, and reached the stile. Bunter was not six feet from it, when the beaky man leaped lightly over.

Squiff, watching him from the branch almost over his head, saw him shoot a wary glance up the footpath: obviously to make sure that nobody was in sight there. Then he ran at Bunter, and caught the fat Owl by a fat shoulder.

Billy Bunter spun round, with a startled squeak.

He blinked in surprise, and a little alarm, through his big spectacles, at the beaky face.

"I—I say—what—who—what—?" stuttered the fat Owl. "I say, you leggo! What do you want? What—?" The beaky man did not trouble to speak. Grasping Bunter's fat shoulder with his left hand, he snatched at the watch with his right.

There was a brassy gleam, as Bunter's watch came out of his pocket, and a snap, as the chain parted.

Bunter gave a yell.

"Oh, crikey! You gimme my watch—why, you beast, you ain't going to pinch my watch—help— Yaroooh!"

With a swing of his arm, the beaky man sent Bunter spinning. Bunter rolled in the grass and roared.

It was at that moment, that Squiff, on the branch above, went into action. He had been sitting astride of it. Now he swung with his hands, and dropped, fairly on the man below.

Crash!

A thunderbolt dropping from a clear sky could not have taken the beaky man more by surprise.

He was wary and watchful: his sharp eyes had ascertained that nobody was in sight—nobody on the footpath, nobody in the lane. He had been absolutely sure that no one was on the spot, or near at hand, excepting himself and Bunter. Squiff came like a bolt from the blue.

He landed on the beaky man's shoulders, fairly crumpling him up. One startled sputtering yell escaped the beaky man, as he crumpled. He pitched into the grass, Bunter's watch flying from his hand, and landing two or three yards away, his beaky face buried in grass roots. Squiff dropped on his knees on the sprawling back, pinning him down.

"Urrrrrrrrgh!" came an anguished gurgle from the beaky man. "What—what—oh, crimes!—gurrrggh—ow.

My back!—urrrggh!"

He wriggled like an eel under Squiff's sinewy knees, gasping, and twisting his head round to stare up at his unexpected assailant. Squiff gave him a cheery grin.

"Knocked you sideways, what?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Urrggh! Gerroff my back!"

The man struggled fiercely. But he could not dislodge the knee that pinned him down. Squiff had him down, and kept him there.

Billy Bunter sat up, spluttering. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at the Australian junior.

"Oooogh!" gasped Bunter, "is—is—is that you, Squiff? I—I never saw you—"

"Neither did this Johnny," chuckled Squiff.

"I—I say he's got my watch!" gasped Bunter. He heaved himself to his feet. "I say, he's pinched my watch! My gold watch— I say, Field, you make him gimme my watch—"

"There it is, fathead, where he dropped it. You can pick it up," said Squiff. He pointed to a brassy glimmer in the grass and the fat Owl pounced on the watch. Fisher T. Fish might pronounce its value to be "nix," but Billy Bunter was very glad to recover his gold watch!—a poor thing, but his own, as it were.

"I say, that beast's broken the chain!" said Bunter. "Snatching a fellow's gold watch, you know—it's worth pounds and pounds, Field—"

"I don't think!" chuckled Squiff.

"Oh, really, Field—"

"Well, you've got your watch," said Squiff. He jammed a powerful knee a little more firmly into a wriggling back. "I'll look after this rat while you clear off, Bunter, but I can't kneel on him for ever. Hook it."

Bunter slipped the precious watch back into his pocket.

But he did not hook it. He eyed the wriggling pickpocket dubiously.

"I—I say, suppose he gets after me again, in the wood!"

"That's all right," said Squiff, reassuringly. "Show him that gold watch, Bunter—once he's seen it he won't want to get after it again!"

"You silly ass!" roared Bunter.

"Will you gerroff my back?" came in tones of fury from the beaky man, heaving under Squiff's pinning knee like the stormy ocean. "I'll push your face through the back of your 'ead when I gerrup."

"I'll be there when you do it," answered the Australian junior, cheerfully. "You hooking it, Bunter, with that valuable gold watch of yours?"

"I—I say, you—you won't let him get after me?"

"Five minutes, start, old fat man! Mizzle!"

Billy Bunter gave the wriggling man another dubious blink. Then he started. This time he did not proceed with his usual leisurely roll. Bunter was very anxious to get through the wood, and out of it, before Squiff's knee was withdrawn from the wriggling back under it. He started at a run, and in a few moments disappeared from view up the leafy path. Squiff rocked, as the man under him made a tremendous effort. Evidently it was not the beaky man's view that Bunter's big gold watch was a thing of little value, for as the fat Owl disappeared up the path, he exerted every ounce of his strength to throw the Australian junior off—obviously with the intention of getting after Bunter, if he could.

Squiff, strong and muscular as he was, had hard work to hold him down. But he did hold him down—grinding his knee into the small of his back till he howled with pain.

For a long minute, the man strove, fiercely and savagely: then, quite spent with his efforts, he collapsed in the grass, and lay panting and gasping, almost groaning for breath. After that, it was easy enough to hold him: and Squiff kept him pinned, till a good five minutes had elapsed. Then he removed his knee, and rose to his feet.

The beaky man staggered up, panting, his eyes smouldering at the Greyfriars junior. Squiff, standing between him and the way Bunter had gone, watched him coolly, quite ready for more trouble if the rascal wanted it. For a moment or two, it seemed that the man would spring at him: but a pair of very useful fists were ready if he did, and he seemed to think better of it. He gave the Australian junior a black scowl, and made a movement to pass on up the footpath.

Squiff stood like a rock in the way.

"No, you don't!" he said, coolly.

"I'm going through the wood—"

"You're mistaken—you're not! You're not going after Bunter," said Squiff.

"Hop over that stile, and clear." He came a step nearer the beaky man.

"Now, then, sharp's the word! Get going, before you get hurt."

The beaky man eyed him almost wolfishly. But no doubt he realised that the fat Owl was at a safe distance by that time, and that a scrap with the sturdy Australian junior would not serve any useful purpose. For a moment he hesitated, then he swung himself over the stile, and slouched away in the direction of Friardale. Squiff, with a cheery grin, sat on the stile, and watched him out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIX

A WILD NIGHT FOR SMITHY

HERBERT VERNON-SMITH caught his breath. His brows knitted darkly, and his eyes glinted under them. It was the sound of a dog's scampering feet under the old Cloister wall, that startled him, and brought that look of angry dismay to his face.

That sound would not have been alarming in the daytime.

Gosling's mastiff might have run loose at any hour of the day, and the Bounder would have given it no heed. But it was a different matter when midnight had chimed from the old clock-tower. A Greyfriars fellow who was out of bounds at that hour of the night required to be very cautious about it, and to keep his proceedings exceedingly secret: the alternative being a painful interview with his head-master, and a morning train home. After what had happened a few nights ago, wild horses would not have dragged Billy Bunter from the Remove dormitory after lights out. He was no longer planning nocturnal retaliation on Cecil Reginald Temple of the Fourth Form. Even a spread would not have tempted him forth. But the Bounder of Greyfriars was made of sterner stuff than the fat Owl. On Monday night, Smithy had an appointment with certain sporting friends at the Cross Keys: and the possibility of running into a shadowy form in dark passages or on dark staircases, did not make him think for a moment of washing it out.

Now that it was known that Slim Judson was at large, and had penetrated into the school in the dark hours, no one doubted that the Blue Mauritius was, after all, hidden somewhere in Greyfriars School, and that the pimpled man was after it. It was hardly to be doubted that he would make another attempt, unless the police succeeded in laying him by the heels in the meantime: and of that, there was as yet no news. But the hardy

Bounder did not give that matter a single thought, when he crept silently from his dormitory, and slipped out of the House by way of the Remove box-room window. Smithy had the courage of his misdeeds: and he was not afraid of the dark, or of anything that might lurk in the dark. Neither was he alarmed now, as far as any midnight intruder was concerned. What alarmed him was the danger of discovery by those set in authority over him. He had returned later than was his wont from his dingy excursion: tired, sleepy, not much comforted by having lost several pounds at banker to Mr. Joe Banks: and longing for bed and sleep. And, as he clambered on the cloister wall from the little shady lane outside, and was about to drop within, that sudden scampering in the shadows made him pause. Bunched on the wall, under the shadow of thick branches, he stared down into the gloom, gritting his teeth. He had to cut across a corner of the quad to get back to the House: and now he made the disagreeable discovery that there was, so to speak, a lion in the path!

He guessed at once why Gosling's dog was loose. It was a precaution against another surreptitious visit from Mr. Judson. After the last door had closed, and the last light was out the mastiff had been loosed—for Slim Judson's behoof, if he came! In the daytime, Biter would have taken no heed of Smithy, or any other Greyfriars man. But at midnight the matter was very different. A footstep would be enough to bring the mastiff careering up, waking the echoes with his barking. He might or might not sample the Bounder with his teeth: but he would indubitably draw attention to the fact that someone was there in the dark. And attention, out of bounds at midnight, was the very last thing Herbert Vernon-Smith wanted.

"The old fool!" breathed Smithy. He was referring to Sir Hilton Popper, whose missing Blue Mauritius was the cause of the trouble.

He could have wished, at that moment, that he had not taken up the chase of Mr. Judson on Courtfield Common. If the pickpocket had got away with the Blue Mauritius Smithy would not have been in his present scrape. But it was rather too late to think of that!

He listened intently.

The scampering died away in the distance. Biter had not spotted him, so far, and had scampered off.

If he had gone to a safe distance, Smithy could make the venture. He had to make it, sooner or later: he could not stay where he was. He could have kicked himself for having left his dormitory at all. But again, it was too late to think of that.

A sound came to his ears, as he listened, and he gave a start. It was a sound, not from within, but from without—a stealthy step in the little lane outside the wall. Someone was there, in the dark.

Smithy's heart beat unpleasantly. He stared from the dark shadow of the branches over him, and discerned a stout figure, looming dimly in the night, a few yards from him. Another figure loomed still more dimly. A faint voice came to the Bounder's ears in the stillness.

"Did you hear something, Rance?"

"I think I did, sergeant."

Smithy hardly breathed. He realised that he might have guessed that a watch was kept on the school, after Mr. Judson's visit: but he had not given it a thought. There were two policemen in the lane outside the cloister: and he might have walked into them! Certainly, they were on the watch for a pimpled pickpocket, not for a Greyfriars fellow out of bounds: but if they found him—It seemed to Smithy, for a moment, that he could already see his head-master's stern face, and hear Dr. Locke pronounce the words "Vernon-Smith, you are expelled!" He scarcely dared draw a breath, as he stared into the shadows at the two dim forms.

One of them moved closer to the wall, staring up.

Obviously, they had heard some faint sound from the Bounder as he climbed, and were suspicious. If they turned on a light— He dared hesitate no longer. He dropped within the wall, hardly a moment before a beam of light flashed out. He had been barely in time. He had to take the chance of the mastiff now. Swiftly, but lightly, he ran in the shadows, only hoping that he would reach the House before Biter heard or scented him. Smithy had had more than one escape in his career as a "bad hat": and this looked like being the narrowest of all—if he did escape! Scamper! Bark! Bark! It was Biter again, at a little distance, but only too evidently aware that someone was about. Then, to his astonishment, the Bounder heard a sound of rapidly running feet. Someone else was out in the quad—running! It flashed into his mind who it must be! But he had no time to think, for a moment later someone unseen crashed fairly into him, and sent him spinning.

"Oh," gasped the Bounder, as he spun.

He went over helplessly, sprawling on the ground. He heard a startled gasp from the unseen man who had crashed into him, and who was reeling from the shock.

"Oh! Strike me pink and blue! Ow!"

But in a second, the man was running again. Biter was careering on his track, and he had no time to lose.

The Bounder sat up, dizzily.

Running footsteps died away in the dark. If it was Judson, he was gone. But scampering feet, and two eyes that looked like green fire in the gloom, were terribly near: and Vernon-Smith bounded up, and ran.

Bark! bark! bark!

The dog was behind him. Biter had been chasing an intruder, and, as the Bounder ran, doubtless Biter took him for that intruder. The unseen man had vanished, and Herbert Vernon-Smith now had Biter's particular attention.

And, remembering what Biter's teeth were like, the Bounder ran as he had never ran on the cinder-path, his feet hardly touching the ground. From somewhere he heard a calling voice, and then another, without heeding them. The Bounder raced on, and reached the outhouse below the box-room window. There a rain-pipe was the means of ascent to the leads under the window by which he had left, and by which he had planned to return. That rain-pipe required rather careful negotiation by a climber. But Smithy had no time for care. The mastiff's jaws were snapping below him, as he made a desperate spring, caught the pipe, and dragged himself up.

Bark! bark! bark!

Biter had missed him only by inches. He was jumping, prancing, barking, making the night ring with his deep voice. There were footsteps, and flashing lights, in the distance. Breathless, panting, the Bounder clung to the rain-pipe: but he dared not pause. Up he went, wildly clambering, in terror every moment lest a light from below should flash upon him and reveal him. Almost winded by his frantic efforts, he dragged himself on the leads, and sprawled there panting for breath.

"'Ere, Biter! Good dorg!" It was Gosling's voice.

"Wot I says is this 'ere, Mr. Rance, Biter was after somebody—"

The Bounder crawled along the leads to the box-room window. He was thankful that it was a dark night. Otherwise, he must have been seen, as he pushed up the sash he had left unfastened, and plunged in at the window. Breathless, panting, his forehead wet with perspiration, he closed the window and fastened the catch, and sank down on a box to recover his wind.

He was almost giddy with his narrow escape. But he had escaped: and in less than a minute, he was stealing on tiptoe down the box-room stair, and creeping past the Remove studies. Another minute, and he was

tiptoeing up the dormitory staircase, hardly able to believe in his good luck when he reached the door of the Remove dormitory. All were sleeping there. The Bunter crept quietly into bed: but it was long before he could sleep—after the wildest night out that he had ever had.

CHAPTER XXX

BUNTER IS WANTED

"HALLO, hallo, hallo! Grimey again!"

Bob Cherry made that remark, in break on Tuesday morning. And the Famous Five glanced at a solid stolid figure that came in at the school gates. They smiled a little as they glanced.

Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield had become quite a familiar figure at the school, of late. And here he was again: on the track, the chums of the Remove had no doubt, of that elusive Blue Mauritius stamp. He had had no luck, so far: but evidently the plump inspector was a sticker!

That the Blue Mauritius was somewhere about Greyfriars, few now doubted. But spotting it was quite another matter. It looked rather like making a search for a needle in a haystack. Even Sir Hilton Popper, who, as the Famous Five knew, had been relying on the sale of that Blue Mauritius to satisfy the demands of his Inspector of Taxes, had ceased to wander about the school, poking into odd corners. So small an object, in so extensive a place really needed a lot of looking for: and the lord of Popper Court had apparently given up the faint hope of discovering it.

"Grimey is a sticker," remarked Johnny Bull, as the inspector from Courtfield walked across to the House "He's sticking to it."

"The stickfulness is terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But the findfulness of the absurd stamp is a boot on the other leg."

"Pimples knows where it is, I suppose," said Bob, "but they've let Pimples slip through their fingers. His coming here the other night shows that the jolly old stamp is spotted about Greyfriars somewhere. It seems that that fat ass Bunter did really run into him on the dormitory landing—"

"That's queer, too," said Harry Wharton, thoughtfully.

"What the dickens was the man doing up in the dormitories? He was cornered in the Remove studies, and never went up the upper staircase at all: so he can't have hidden the stamp up there."

"Hardly," said Nugent. "I daresay he would pick up anything that came handy, while he was on the spot: but there's nothing up in the dormitories—"

"Except Bunter's gold watch!" grinned Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows." Billy Bunter rolled up. "I say, old Grimey's here again—he's just gone in to Quelch. I wonder if he wants to see me."

"Well, if he wants to see you, old chap, there's one thing you'd better do at once," said Bob.

"Eh? What's that?"

"Wash!" said Bob. "He won't be able to see you otherwise."

"You silly ass!" yelled Bunter. "I say, I think very likely Grimey wants me. He said the other day that I had been very useful—"

"Well, you couldn't expect him to say that you were very ornamental—"

"Yah! I shouldn't wonder if he wants to see me," declared Bunter. "I'd be jolly glad to help, you know. Old Grimey isn't very bright, and a fellow with brains might be jolly useful, if he could only see it. It was me who

spotted that pimply beast the other night, when you fellows were snoring in bed—"

"Better not let Quelch hear you put it like that," chuckled Bob.

"Eh! Why shouldn't I?" demanded Bunter.

"Quelch might expect you to say 'It was I who spotted the pimply beast'," explained Bob.

Bunter blinked at him.

"Well, I like that!" he exclaimed, indignantly. "It wasn't you, Cherry—it was me."

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

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. It was me" hooted Bunter.

"Cherry wasn't out of bed at all—it was me—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Making out that it was him!" Bunter was almost breathless with indignation. "It was me all the time—"

"You blithering burbler," roared Bob. "Quelch wouldn't let you say 'It was me—' "

"I didn't say it was you! I said it was me."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No wonder Quelch is going a bit grey!" gasped Bob.

Teaching Bunter grammar is enough to turn a beak's hair white in a single night."

"What's the matter with my grammar, I'd like to know? We ain't talking about grammar. We're talking about that pimply beast that I spotted the other night. You never spotted him, Bob Cherry—you jolly well know it was me—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Why not make it I?" chuckled Nugent. "But it wasn't you—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Are you going to make out that it was you, Nugent, as well as Bob making out that it was him?" hooted Bunter. "Why every man in the Remove knows that it was me. Me all the time."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle," snorted Bunter "but it was me as you jolly well know! And if Grimey wants to see any chap here, it won't be one of you fellows, but me, so you can put that in your pipe and smoke it."

At which the Famous Five chuckled again. It did not seem probable to them that the Courtfield inspector wanted to see Bunter, or had any use for his brain work. But a surprise was coming. It came in the shape of Trotter, the House page, who emerged from the House, glanced round, and then came across to the group of juniors.

"Master Bunter—!" said Trotter. "If you please, sir, Inspector Grimes would like to see you, in Mr. Quelch's study, sir."

Billy Bunter grinned. He grinned so widely that his fat grin extended almost from ear to ear. He gave the Famous Five a vaunting blink.

"He, he, he! I say, you fellows, what do you think now? What? He, he, he! Who is it Grimey wants to see? He, he, he!"

And Bunter, greatly bucked, rolled off to the House, in high feather: leaving five astonished juniors staring.

But Trotter's mission was not yet finished. He went further afield, to apprise Peter Todd that he also was required. Then he looked for Tom Dutton, to give him the same information. From which it appeared that Inspector Grimes desired to see all the inhabitants of No. 7 Study in the Remove. Dutton had to be told three times, crescendo, before he heard aright: then he told Trotter that there was no need to shout, and followed Peter Todd into the House.

Billy Bunter, at the door of Mr. Quelch's study, blinked round, surprised and not pleased, to see his study-mates coming up the passage.

"I say, you fellows, wharrer you want?" he asked. "Think Grimey wants to see you?"

"Sort of," assented Peter.

"Well, that's rot!" said Bunter. "He wants to see me! No need for you fellows to barge in. You'd better clear off, Toddy, and you too, Dutton."

"Eh?"

"Clear! You're not wanted to see Grimes."

"They have one in Common-Room, I believe," answered Dutton, staring.

"What do you want *The Times* for, Bunter?"

"Oh, crikey! I didn't say Times-Grimes!" hooted Bunter.

"Rot!" said Dutton. "You don't get much about crimes in *The Times*. One of the cheaper papers, if you want to read about crimes."

"Not crimes-Grimes!" shrieked Bunter. "You're not wanted to see Grimes."

"Talk sense, Bunter! You don't see chimes-you hear them! Besides, you weren't talking about chimes at all—"

Peter Todd, grinning, tapped at the study door, and opened it. Bunter had to give it up, and the three inhabitants of No. 7 in the Remove entered Mr. Quelch's study together.

CHAPTER XXXI

DRAWN BLANK

INSPECTOR GRIMES was standing by the window, in Mr. Quelch's study, solid and stolid. He was looking out into the quadrangle: but his ruddy face turned towards the three juniors as they entered, and he gave them a genial nod. His eyes, very keen under his plump brows, scanned them. Mr. Quelch, who was seated at the study table, rose.

"Here are the boys, Mr. Grimes," he said. "Todd! Dutton! Bunter! Inspector Grimes wishes to speak to you. You will tell him anything you can."

"Yes, sir," said Peter and Bunter. Tom Dutton looked puzzled.

"Did you say can, sir?" he asked.

"Certainly," rapped Mr. Quelch.

"What can, sir? Do you mean a water-can?"

"Bless my soul! Inspector Grimes, I should explain that this boy, Dutton, is somewhat deaf, and liable to mistake what is said to him." And with that, Mr. Quelch quitted the study, without explaining to Dutton whether he had meant a water-can or not.

Mr. Grimes smiled faintly. There was a slight edge on Mr. Quelch's voice, which indicated a little edge on his temper. Possibly Mr. Grimes guessed that the Remove master was fed up with the affair of Sir Hilton Popper's missing stamp, and considered that enough of his valuable time had been wasted on it. However, Mr. Grimes had his official duty to do, even if it irked Mr. Quelch, and he proceeded stolidly with the business in hand.

"You three boys belong to the study, Number Seven, in which the pickpocket Judson was captured last week?" asked Mr. Grimes.

"Yes, sir," said Peter.

"I was there, Mr. Grimes," said Billy Bunter. "Toddy and Dutton were out—they don't know anything about it—"

"I think you were one of the boys on bicycles who joined in the chase of the pickpocket, Master Todd," said Mr. Grimes, apparently not hearing Bunter.

"Yes—I was with Field and Brown, and we joined up with Smithy and Redwing, sir. We were after him when he dodged in at the gates."

"I found him in the study—!" recommenced Bunter. "If there's anything you want to know about that, Mr. Grimes—"

"From the various accounts I have received," said Mr. Grimes, still deaf to Bunter, "the man was hotly chased, and hardly out of sight for a moment until he hid in that study. It appears to be certain, as doubtless you know, that he removed a valuable rare stamp from Sir Hilton Popper's pocket-book while it was in his possession."

"We know all about the Blue Marumptious, sir—!" said Bunter.

"Now, listen to me carefully," said Mr. Grimes. Bunter wondered whether the inspector had become as deaf as Tom Dutton. He did not seem to hear the fat Owl at all. "It appears that the man removed the stamp from the pocket-book, and concealed it: apparently in the hope of finding an opportunity of recovering it later. From all appearance, he can have concealed it only in the study in which he was out of sight for a few minutes."

"Oh, it ain't there, Mr. Grimes," said Bunter. "I've looked."

"The study has been searched with such thoroughness, that we are satisfied that it is no longer there," went on Mr. Grimes, "that is why I desire to question you boys, as belonging to the study."

"I've looked everywhere—" Bunter re-started.

"On Friday night," resumed the inspector, still ruthlessly regardless of Bunter, "the man is known to have entered this building, at a late hour—"

"I saw him, sir! It was me! If Nugent or Bob Cherry make out that it was them, it's all gammon. It was me all the time."

"On that occasion, the man was seen on an upper landing, a flight of stairs above the Remove studies," said Mr. Grimes, stolidly. "He could easily have entered the study undetected, but he had some reason for going up to the dormitory floor instead. This would seem to indicate that he had some cause to think that the hidden stamp, though undiscovered, might have been transferred from the study to a dormitory."

Peter Todd gave a quick nod, as he saw the inspector's point. Billy Bunter blinked at him, through his big spectacles, wondering what on earth the old ass was driving at. Tom Dutton gave no sign. He had not heard a word, so far.

"You see what I mean, Master Todd," went on the inspector. "The stamp may have been hidden in something, such as the pocket of a blazer hanging on the door, or some other garment that may have been left about the study, and that may have been removed by the owner before the search was made for the stamp."

"I get you, sir," assented Peter.

"Oh !" said Bunter. The fat Owl understood now what the "old ass" was driving at. Indeed, it was clear that something of the kind must have occurred if the Blue Mauritius had been hidden in No. 7 at all, since it was no longer there. "Oh! I see! I wonder you didn't think of that before, Mr. Grimes."

Inspector Grimes breathed rather hard for a moment.

But he did not yield to his natural impulse to box Bunter's fat ears.

"Now, I want you boys to make an effort to recall that afternoon," he went on. "You seem a very intelligent boy, Master Todd: and I have no doubt you will remember whether you removed anything from that study—any article whatsoever—after the man Judson had been there, and before the study was searched for the stamp."

Peter Todd wrinkled his brow. But he had to shake his head.

"Nothing at all, sir," he said. "I've an old blazer hanging up in the study, but it's still there. Nothing at all."

"Not even a book you may have borrowed from another boy?" suggested Mr. Grimes. "A book, or a box of instruments—or anything? The stamp may have been in it."

"Nothing at all, sir," said Peter. "Bunter may have. He's always leaving things lying about—"

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"Now, Master Bunter." Mr. Grimes took cognizance of the fat Owl's existence, at last. "Can you remember whether you removed anything from your study, after the man Judson had been there?"

"Oh, yes, sir," answered Bunter, cheerfully. "What was it?"

"My lines, sir."

"Your lines?" repeated Mr. Grimes.

"I had lines for my form-master," explained Bunter. "Quelch wouldn't let me go out till they were done, and so I couldn't go over and see my sister Bessie at Cliff House—she had a hamper—"

"Keep to the point, Master Bunter."

"That's the point, sir—I had to stick in the study and do my lines, and I did them after that man Judson was there, and took them down to Quelch, but it was too late then to go over to Cliff House, and—"

Mr. Grimes breathed hard again.

"The stamp can hardly have been concealed in your lines, Master Bunter, if you did them after the man was gone," he said. "Did you take anything else from the study before the search was made? A jacket—a blazer—a cap—a book—even a handkerchief—?"

"Oh, no, sir, only my lines. Quelch said—"

"That will do, Master Bunter." Inspector Grimes turned to Tom Dutton: his last hope. "Now, Master Dutton—"

"Did you speak to me, sir?" asked Tom.

"Oh! Yes!" Inspector Grimes remembered what Mr. Quelch had told him, and put on steam a little. "Do you remember removing anything from your study last Wednesday afternoon—?"

"I don't think so, sir. It was quite a fine afternoon. I was out on my bike, and never noticed that it was muddy, at all."

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Grimes, "I was speaking of your study."

"Yes, sir, I heard you. It wasn't, that I know of. Did you notice whether it was muddy, Toddy? You were out on your bike, too."

"Oh, my hat!" murmured Toddy.

"He, he, he!" from Bunter.

"Do you remember last Wednesday afternoon?" bawled Mr. Grimes.

"Oh, yes, sir! That was the day that pickpocket dodged into the school—they found him in my study."

"Somewhere in that study, he is known to have concealed a stamp."

"I shouldn't wonder, sir. All the fellows said he was a pickpocket, but he may have been a tramp too."

"I said stamp!" roared Inspector Grimes.

"Eh?" Tom Dutton looked bewildered. "Did you say stamp?"

"Yes: stamp!"

"I don't think Mr. Quelch would like me to stamp in his study. What do you want me to stamp for?"

"Upon my word!" gasped Mr. Grimes. He put on full steam, and roared, "A stamp—a rare stamp—was concealed in your study."

"Oh, yes, I've heard about that, sir! There's no need to shout at a fellow—I'm not deaf—"

"The stamp may have been hidden in some article, removed from the study before the search was made by the police. Did you remove any such article?" bawled Mr. Grimes.

"Oh! No!"

"Such a thing as a book, or a cap, or a blazer—?"

"I don't use an ink-eraser. If I did, I shouldn't take it out of the study—I should want it there!"

"Or a book—?"

"Did you say cook?"

"No! Book!"

"Oh, hook! Yes, there's a hook on the door—Toddy keeps his old blazer hanging on it. That's the only hook I know of in my study."

"I—I think that will do," gasped Inspector Grimes.

"You may go, my boys. If you should learn, Master Todd, that any article was removed from your study, at the material time, you will inform your form-master, who will communicate with me."

"Certainly, sir," said Peter.

The three juniors left Inspector Grimes with a knitted thoughtful brow. He had no doubt that Mr. Judson had concealed that precious stamp in No. 7 Study in the Remove: and he deduced that it must have been concealed in some article removed from the study before the police came. From the circumstance that Mr. Judson, on the occasion of his later visit, had been up among the dormitories, he deduced further that the article was probably something that would not be left permanently in a study, but might be carried up to a dormitory. He had hoped for confirmation of that theory from the occupants of No. 7 Study—and he had drawn completely blank!

He might have been enlightened, had Billy Bunter remembered that his gold watch had been left lying on the study table during Mr. Judson's brief sojourn there. But that trifling circumstance had not lingered in Bunter's memory. It was a puzzled, perplexed, and somewhat irritated police-inspector who watched the three juniors leave the study—little dreaming that one of them was carrying away with him the precious Blue Mauritius of which he was in search!

CHAPTER XXII

BUNTER IN LUCK

"HARRY, old chap—!"

"How much?" asked Harry Wharton, resignedly.

Billy Bunter blinked at him.

"Eh? Wharrer you mean—how much?" he demanded.

"Think I was going to ask you to lend me some tin?"

"Oh! Weren't you?" asked Wharton, in surprise.

"No!" roared Bunter.

"Then why did you call me Harry old chap?"

"Oh, really, Wharton! It's Wednesday, you know—"

"I had an idea that it was, as it was Tuesday yesterday," assented Wharton. "Did you work that out in your head?"

"I mean, it's a half this afternoon, you silly ass," howled Bunter, "and Bessie's got tickets for the circus at Courtfield. I've got to meet her in Courtfield at a quarter to three."

"Then you'd better be a little more careful than usual with your con in third school," advised the captain of the Remove. "If you get put into Extra—"

"Never mind that," said Bunter, peevishly. "I shall want to know the time, you know. Bessie won't wait for me if I'm late, I know that. My watch has stopped—"

"Why not wind it up?"

"I keep on winding it, and it doesn't make any difference," explained Bunter, "the beastly winder goes round and round and round, but the watch doesn't go! It's a jolly good watch, you know—"

"Must be," agreed Wharton. "Sounds good!"

"I believe my Uncle Carter gave twenty guineas for it—"

"They must have seen him coming!"

"Or twenty-five," snapped Bunter. "It's a jolly expensive watch, thirty-five carat gold—"

"Oh my hat!"

"Or forty," said Bunter, "but—it doesn't keep time, at—at present. I'm going to have it repaired when I get a postal-order I'm expecting. But—it isn't going now. Will you lend me your watch for to-day?"

"Oh!"

"Only for to-day, you know," said Bunter. "I've just got to keep time this afternoon, or Bessie will hike off without me. You know what girls are! I know it's only a paltry cheap watch you've got, old chap—"

"Eh?"

"Nothing to look at, compared with my splendid gold watch. But it does keep time, doesn't it, and that's what I want. I don't mind it being a cheap old turnip, really. Lend it to me, will you?"

"You put it so nicely," said Harry. "Can't you borrow somebody else's watch, you fat ass?"

"Well, I asked Smithy—I'd rather wear his watch than yours, of course—but he only laughed. I asked Mauly, too, but he walked away before I'd finished speaking. That's why I'm asking you, old chap. You can wear mine for to-day, if you like," added Bunter, temptingly, "you needn't mention that it's mine, either—you can let the fellows see you swanking with a magnificent gold watch, for once."

Harry Wharton laughed. If he had been, disposed to "swank" with a gold watch, Billy Bunter's big brassy specimen was not the one he would have selected for the purpose.

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at," said Bunter, irritably. "Look here, the bell will be going for third school in a minute. Will you lend me your watch for to-day? "

"Oh! Yes, if you like," said Harry. "Mind, if you lose it, or break the glass, or anything else, I'll burst you afterwards. Here it is!"

The captain of the Remove detached the watch, and Billy Bunter—with a disparaging blink—slipped it into his waistcoat pocket. Certainly, it was not an expensive watch: not at all the watch Bunter would have chosen, had Smithy and Lord Mauleverer been more amenable. Still, it had the modest merit of keeping time.

"Not much of a thing, is it?" said Bunter. "Not the sort of watch a fellow would care to wear, really! Still, nobody will see it, in my pocket," added Bunter, apparently drawing comfort from that circumstance.

"You fat ass—!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! You needn't call a fellow names, because he's got a splendid gold watch, and you've only got this tin thing, or whatever it is. Look here, if you wear my watch, mind you take jolly good care of it—it's not cheap tin like yours, you know—"

"Thanks: I wouldn't be found dead with it," answered the captain of the Remove, politely, and he walked away.

"Beast!" yapped Bunter, no doubt by way of expressing thanks for the loan of the watch. And he rolled up to his study, to deposit in the table-drawer his own imposing gold watch, which, magnificent as it was, in Bunter's estimation at least, was useless for the purpose of keeping an appointment on time.

That worry off his fat mind, another took its place, when the bell rang for third school. Bunter could not help feeling a little uneasy about his "con". True, in a numerous form like the Remove, a fellow could always hope to escape being called upon to translate. That hope was always with Bunter, springing eternal in his podgy breast. Under its influence, he had spent "prep" the previous evening in the armchair in No. 7 Study,

while Toddy and Dutton were working at the table, "chancing" it with Quelch once more.

Now, he rather wished that he hadn't chanced it. Quelch might not call on him to construe: but, again, he might!

He was beast enough, as Bunter knew only too well. And if the fat Owl handed out "howlers", it was quite on the cards that Quelch might give him Extra School. Which would wholly, completely, and totally "dish" the circus at Courtfield that afternoon.

There was a wrinkle of unusual thought in Bunter's fat brow, when Mr. Quelch let the Remove into their form-room for third school. Prepared Latin was tough going, for Bunter: unprepared Latin was an insoluble problem. He could only hope that Quelch would pass him over.

Quite unaware of that worry on the fat mind of the fattest member of his form, Mr. Quelch did not even glance at the Owl of the Remove. Wharton, Nugent, Johnny Bull, Bob Cherry, were called on in turn: Mark Linley Hazeldene Squiff, Tom Brown, Wibley, Ogilvy, Russell, Fisher T. Fish, Micky Desmond, and Peter Todd. And then—!

"Bunter!"

"Oh, crikey!"

"What? What did you say, Bunter?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I never said 'Oh, crikey', sir! I—I didn't speak—"

"You will go on, Bunter."

Billy Bunter could have groaned. He blinked at his book.

He did not even know the place.

"Lucus in urbe—" whispered Peter Todd, over a fat shoulder.

"Lucus in urbe fuit media—!" mumbled Bunter.

"Construe!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

There was nothing for it but to make a shot at it! Billy Bunter was about to make a shot, which would have missed the mark by a very wide margin, when a tap came at the form-room door.

Tap!

Never had Bunter been so glad of an interruption. It was a respite, at least. The form-room door opened and Trotter appeared.

Mr. Quelch gave him a sharp, not to say an irritable, glance.

"What is it, Trotter?" he rapped, before the page could speak.

"If you please, sir, a servant from Popper Court, with a message for Master Bunter from Sir 'Ilton, sir."

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips. He did not like interruptions in lesson time. Sir Hilton Popper, if he had a message to send to a member of Mr. Quelch's form, should obviously have chosen a more appropriate moment. However, Sir Hilton was a member of the governing Board of Greyfriars School, and not to be disregarded.

"Very well!" snapped Mr. Quelch. Trotter departed. "Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter, his little round eyes dancing behind his big round spectacles.

What message Sir Hilton Popper could have sent him, Bunter could not guess. An invitation to tea up at the Court, perhaps, in acknowledgment of his usefulness on the occasion of his night out in Popper Court Woods. True, the last time Sir Hilton had seen him, he had whopped him with his stick, which perhaps made an invitation to tea at Popper Court improbable. But whatever the message was, it called Bunter away from the form-room, just in time to escape "con".

It was sheer luck for Bunter, for he had been about to construe that passage, "There was a light in the city", which certainly would not have satisfied Mr. Quelch, and might have put him in danger of Extra. Now it did not matter a boiled bean to Bunter whether there was a light or a grove, or indeed anything else, in the city. Bunter was in luck!

"Where is the man waiting, Trotter?"

"In the visitors' room, sir."

"You may go to the visitors' room, Bunter, to receive the message from Sir Hilton Popper."

"Yes, sir," trilled Bunter.

And he rolled joyously out of the Remove form-room, leaving less lucky fellows to carry on with "con". With a cheery fat face he rolled into the visitors' room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE WATCH THAT WENT

THE man standing by the window in the visitors' room was quietly dressed, with a clean-shaven face, and his manner was deferential as he turned towards the fat Owl of the Remove. He looked a respectable man-servant, and Gosling had had no doubt when he let him in, neither had Trotter doubted for a moment that he was other than he stated. Neither did a doubt cross Billy Bunter's fat mind, as he blinked at him through his big spectacles. There were at least six or seven men-servants at Popper Court, and this, so far as Bunter knew, was one of them. Not for a moment, did William George Bunter dream that he was about to have the surprise of his fat life.

The window, which looked on the quadrangle, was wide open. Nobody was to be seen in the quad: only Gosling, in the distance, standing by the door of his lodge, stolidly contemplating the pigeons. The man had been looking from the open window, with very keen eyes in a smooth sleek face. But he turned at once as Bunter rolled in.

"Master Bunter, sir?" he asked, deferentially.

"Yes!" Bunter gave him a patronising blink. "Trotter says you've got a message for me from Sir Hilton Popper?"

"Precisely, sir! You are the young gentleman in whose study a pickpocket was caught on Wednesday last week sir?"

"That's me," agreed Bunter. He was quite interested.

Apparently the message from Sir Hilton had reference to the affair of Slim Judson and the missing Blue Mauritius. "Then this note is for you, sir," said the sleek man.

He came deferentially towards Bunter, taking an envelope from his pocket. Bunter held out a fat grubby paw for it.



THE WATCH WHISKED OUT OF BUNTER'S
WAISTCOAT-POCKET IN HIS HAND

What happened next seemed to Billy Bunter like a fantastic vision from some extraordinary nightmare.

The sleek man, as he drew nearer, did not place a note in the fat hand. Instead of doing that, he made a sudden snatch, and the watch whisked out of Bunter's waistcoat-pocket in his hand.

With the watch in his right hand, he gave Bunter a violent shove, with his left, sending the fat junior sprawling on his plump back on the floor.

There was a heavy bump as Bunter landed. Utterly amazed and dazed, the fat junior sprawled on his back, gasping.

The sleek man did not waste even a glance on him.

Leaving Bunter sprawling, he thrust the watch into his pocket, and ran to the window. Bunter's dizzy blink glimpsed him jumping out into the quad. Almost in the twinkling of an eye, he was gone.

"Urrrrrrggh!" gurgled Bunter.

He sat up dazedly.

So utterly unexpected and extraordinary was that sudden happening, that he could hardly believe that it really had happened! His fat brain was in a whirl. A man-servant from Popper Court, with a message from Sir Hilton, pinching a fellow's watch and knocking him over! It was amazing—astounding—stupefying!

The fat Owl staggered to his feet, spluttering for breath.

He stared from the window through his big spectacles. The sleek man, running, was almost at the gates: Gosling staring at him, no doubt wondering why so respectable-looking a man-servant was putting on such undignified speed.

"Stop him!" yelled Bunter. He waved excited fat hands from the window.

"Gosling! Stop him! Stop thief! He's got my watch! Stop him!"

Gosling, at the distance, did not even hear. He stared blankly at the running man, who was past him in another moment, and whizzing out into the road. He vanished from Gosling's eyes and Bunter's spectacles.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

The man was gone! He was gone with the watch he had so suddenly and unexpectedly snatched from Bunter—the watch Harry Wharton had lent the fat Owl just before third school. Billy Bunter was not destined to keep his appointment with Sister Bessie with the aid of that watch! That watch had vanished into parts unknown with the sleek man who had snatched it.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Bunter.

He stood blinking, almost dithering. The amazing occurrence made his fat head feel as if it was turning round. He tottered out of the room at last, and made his way breathlessly back to the Form-room.

Monty Newland was on "con" when Bunter rolled gasping in. He was interrupted.

"I-I-I say, sir—!" spluttered Bunter, in wild excitement. All eyes turned on his fat excited face.

"You need not speak, Bunter," rapped Mr. Quelch.

"But, sir—I-I—he—he—I—"

"You may go to your place, Bunter."

"But—but I've had my picker pocked," gasped Bunter. "I mean, my packer packed—I mean my pocket picked—"

"WHAT!"

Even Quelch forgot construe, at that startling statement.

His gimlet-eyes fixed on the wildly-flustered fat Owl. "What did you say, Bunter?" he rumbled.

"That man, sir—that man from Popper Court—he—he—he—he pinched my watch, sir, and—and knocked me over, and—and—and bolted with it!" stuttered Bunter. "He—he—he's gone, sir, and—and he's got the watch—He jumped out of the window, and bi-bub-bob-bolted, sir—"

There was a general jump, in the Remove. Even Lord Mauleverer came out of his placid accustomed calm, and jumped. Every man in the form stared at the fat Owl. Quelch's eyes almost pierced him like gimlets.

"Bunter! What do you mean? Explain yourself at once. It is impossible that anything of the kind can have occurred. What do you mean?"

"It—it did, sir—he's got the watch—Wharton's watch—Wharton lent it to me because mine doesn't go, and he's got It—"

"Impossible!"

"He did, sir—he snatched the watch, and biffed me, and wumped out of the jindow—"

"What?"

"I mean, jumped out of the window—"

"Bunter, collect yourself, and tell me at once what has occurred, if indeed anything has!" snapped Mr. Quelch.

Bunter babbled it out, breathlessly. The Remove listened in sheer amazement. Quelch listened, quite as astonished as his form. It was hard to believe that such an occurrence, utterly unprecedented in the history of Greyfriars School, really had occurred. But, evidently, it had!

"Upon my word! Extraordinary! The man cannot have come from Popper Court—that is impossible—a pretext to obtain admission—but—but— Extraordinary! Most extraordinary! I shall notify the police at once—Wharton, I shall leave you in charge of the Form for a few minutes."

"Yes, sir!"

Quelch, convinced at last that the almost impossible happening had happened, hurried from the Form-room, to get on the telephone to Courtfield police-station. There was an excited buzz in the Form-room, as the door closed after him. Billy Bunter, seldom the cynosure of all eyes, "had the house". Every fellow wanted to hear every possible particular.

"I say, you fellows, he can't have been a man-servant from Popper Court, after all, just as Quelch said—that was just an excuse to butt in— I say, Wharton, wasn't it jolly lucky I had your watch on, and not my splendid gold watch—?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Rightfully lucky, you fat idiot," said Harry Wharton.

"I told you I'd burst you if you lost my watch—"

"Well, I couldn't help that man pinching it, could I? Who'd have thought it, you know? Man coming here making out that he had a message from old Popper, and pinching a fellow's watch and bolting—"

"Blessed if I half believe it," said Skinner.

"Oh, really, Skinner—"

"Well, it seems to have happened," said Bob Cherry "but I'm blessed if I can make it out. Can anybody?"

Nobody could! How the man even knew Bunter's name was a mystery. Nobody was likely to guess that a man with a beaky nose, who had snatched Bunter's watch at the stile in Friardale Lane on Saturday afternoon, and had heard Squiff address the fat junior by name, had passed the information on to a friend in the same line of business! The whole episode was astonishing and almost incredible. But—it had happened! Mr. Quelch came back to a buzzing, excited form. But one grim glance from the gimlet-eyes stopped the buzz and subdued the excitement: and, after that thrilling interlude, P. Vergilius Maro resumed the even tenor of his way in the Remove.

CHAPTER XXXIV

BEASTLY FOR BESSIE

"MARJORIE!"

"Yes, Bessie."

"Can I borrow your mac?"

"Oh! Yes, if you like."

"Clara!"

"Well?"

"Can I borrow your broolly?"

"No!"

"Cat!"

Those remarks were exchanged at the doorway of No. 4 Study, in the Fourth Form at Cliff House School.

Bessie Bunter, whose ample proportions and big spectacles gave her a remarkable resemblance to her brother William George, blinked into the study through the said spectacles, at Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn. To her two requests, Marjorie had replied in the affirmative, Clara in the negative. Marjorie always found it difficult to say "No!"—Clara, evidently, found it less difficult.

"You can see that it looks like rain, Clara," said Bessie, reproachfully.

"Perhaps you'd like me to be caught in the rain without a broolly."

"Why can't you take your own broolly?" demanded Clara.

"Because it's broken in three places, and split up, and the handle's come off," snapped Bessie. "That's why I want you to lend me yours."

"Then I'll lend it to you, when I want it broken in three places, split up, and with the handle off," said Clara. "Not till then!"

"Cat!"

"I've heard that one!" Clara pointed out.

"Look here, I've got to walk as far as the Courtfield road to get the bus," said Bessie. "If it comes on to rain I shall be drenched, without a broolly. And you can see it's going to rain. There's a few drops already. I simply must go—I've got tickets for the circus. Billy's meeting me in Courtfield to go with me, at a quarter to three. Will you lend me that broolly or not?"

"Not!"

"Cat!" said Miss Bunter, for the third time. "Keep your old umbrella! I shouldn't care to be seen with your shabby old broolly, anyway. I can borrow Barbara's. She said she wouldn't lend it to me, but she's gone out with Mabel, and she hasn't taken it. Where's that mac Marjorie?"

Miss Elizabeth Bunter rolled away, provided with a mac, though minus an umbrella. In the lobby downstairs, she selected Barbara Redfern's umbrella, which Babs so luckily had not taken with her when she went out with Mabel Lynn. But Bessie's luck was out!

"Bessie!"

"Oh!" Bessie Bunter blinked round at the voice of her Form-mistress. It was just like Bellew to have an eye on her at the most inopportune moment. "Yes, Miss Bellew."

"Is that your own umbrella you are taking from the stand, Bessie?" asked Miss Bellew.

"Oh! Yes! I mean, no," stammered Bessie.

"Put it back at once."

The word "Cat" trembled on Bessie Bunter's lips. But she did not utter it. Miss Bellew could be characterised as a cat only when she was safely out of hearing. With deep feelings, Bessie Bunter replaced Barbara's umbrella, and extracted her own.

But, an umbrella broken in three places, split up one side, and without a handle, did not seem very useful if it rained. Having blinked at it, Bessie put it back, and sallied forth umbrella-less, trusting to Marjorie's mac.

It was extremely irritating, for the weather to turn rainy, on a half-holiday, when she had to cover the distance to Courtfield. More than a

few drops were falling, as Bessie rolled down Pegg Lane: and the drops increased in number as she proceeded. They spattered on a fat face, and dimmed a pair of big spectacles.

The rain was coming down quite hard, by the time she reached the stile that gave access to the footpath through the wood. At the stile Miss Bunter paused, undecided whether to carry on. It would be all right when she reached the bus-stop on the high-road, but that was at a considerable distance. One of the winding footpaths in Friardale Wood led to it: but the falling rain and dripping branches did not look inviting.

On the other hand, Miss Bunter had tickets for the circus, and they were available only for that afternoon. Billy, too, would be waiting for her at the corner of the Market Place in Courtfield. Billy, it was true, could wait!—Miss Bunter was not deeply concerned about Billy. But she did not want to waste the circus tickets. So, clambering over the stile, she pushed on.

Ten minutes later, in the middle of a drenching, dripping wood she rather wished that she had turned back, after all.

It was a regular downpour, now. Clara's or Barbara's umbrella would not have been of much use, with the rain coming down in a flood, and the wind blowing among the trees. Hoping that it was not likely to last long, Bessie parked herself under a tree, to wait for it to stop.

But, as if specially to annoy Bessie, it did not stop. It came down harder. It poured. Wet and dripping branches were little protection. Bessie realised that she had to make for shelter, and, leaving the tree, she headed for the old wood-cutter's hut. It was merely an open shed, where old Joyce, the wood-cutter, piled logs: but it was a shelter from the rain, and Bessie was very glad to reach it.

The hut had three walls and a slanting roof. The interior was more than half full of piled logs, and was dusky and shadowy. Certainly it was not such a spot as Bessie would have chosen for shelter: but it was the only shelter available for a mile or more: and she plunged into it, glad to get out of the rain.

But the rain and the wind followed her in: and the fat junior of Cliff House threaded her way through the stacked logs, to the furthest extremity of the hut, and sat down on a dry log there, between the rear wall and the piles of fuel.

There neither the wind nor the rain reached her: and the fact that Marjorie's natty mac was becoming considerably smudged and stained by contact with the logs, did not worry Miss Bunter. She was thinking of her own discomfort; of being late for the circus, and of that beastly rain which seemed as if it would never stop, and had no leisure to bother about other people's macs.

Pat-pat-pat-patter came the rain on the roof. It pattered, and splashed, and almost banged, on the corrugated iron, and ran down in floods, drenching the earth in front of the open hut, and forming in pools. For a good half-hour it went on, Miss Bunter's feelings growing deeper and deeper as she listened to it.

But at last, at long last, it slackened.

The pat-pat-patter grew lighter: the water no longer ran in floods from the roof. Bessie began to think of venturing forth again. She was still thinking of it, when a footstep splashed in a puddle in front of the hut, and a surly voice reached her ears:

"Cor! What weather! Strike me pink!"

"It's leaving orf, now we got 'ere," said another voice.

"It would!"

Bessie Bunter gave a little jump. Then she sat very still!

Tramps! was the terrifying thought that flashed into her fat mind.

Tramps—in the middle of a lonely wood! Bessie hardly breathed.

She could hear two men pushing into the hut. Had the rain still been falling heavily, possibly they would have followed Bessie's example, and pushed on to the rear of the hut, and indubitably found her there. But the rain was almost over now, and they remained near the entrance. A smell of tobacco penetrated to her. They had lighted cigarettes.

"You wet, Slim?"

"Ain't I just!"

"Shiny don't seem to be coming yet. 'Arf-past two was the time, and it's past that now. Think he's got it?"

"I shouldn't wonder! He's got nerve, Shiny has, jest the man for it. After all, it's easy. That fat cove don't know a thing about it. It's still where I put it—we should 'ave 'eard if it had been found. It ain't been found—so it's still there."

"Cor! That fat covey's watch is worth something!"

"You was a fool to lose it Saturday, Beaky, after getting your 'ands on it. You couldn't show up after being seen, no more than I could, and we had to let Shiny in on it. That makes three for the divvy."

"There's enough to go round, Slim."

"Yes—if he's got it!" Slim gave a grunt. "If he ain't, I shall 'ave to try it on again at the school: but I tell you, Beaky, it ain't easy, with that blinking dorg loose. He'd have had me, Monday night, only there was some other covey about in the dark, and the dorg got after him instead. Cor! I can tell you, the sooner I get away from 'ere, the better I shall feel—too many coveys about these parts know a bloke's face. If he's got it—!"

Slim interrupted himself, to strike a match and light another cigarette. Every word came clearly to the plump schoolgirl behind the stacks of logs. Bessie hardly dared to breathe. They had, evidently, no suspicion that anyone was there: she had only to keep silent. That "Beaky" and "Slim" were discussing some robbery, she could not fail to be aware: they were not merely tramps: they were thieves. If they found her there—! Silence was not one of Miss Elizabeth Bunter's gifts: but she was as silent as a mouse with the cat at hand.

"'Ere he is, Slim!" came a sudden exclamation.

Bessie heard a sound of tramping feet in puddles. A third man had joined the two lounging in the entrance of the wood-cutter's hut: a man, if Bessie could have seen him, with a sleek smooth face, and the look of a respectable man-servant.

"Got it?"

"I got it all right, Slim! But—"

"But what?"

"There's nothing in it! I opened it and looked! It's the fat covey's watch all right—he was wearing it, and I got it—but there's nothing in it—nothing but the works—Look!"

"Strike me pink and blue! That ain't the watch!"

Slim's voice was almost a yell. "'Tain't anything like it!"

"That's the watch he had on."

"You fool you, it ain't the watch! Not the one that I see him put on! Nor anything like it," howled Slim.

"I tell you it's the one he had on, and I snatched it, and—"

"Strike me blue and crimson! Cor! First Beaky lets a schoolboy scare him off it, and then you goes and pinches the wrong watch! Cor!" Slim's voice thrilled with anger and indignation. "Fat lot of use you are to a covey, you two! I lets you in on a big thing, and this 'ere is 'ow you 'andle it! Strike me pink!"

"Sold!" said Beaky, dismally.

"I tell you this was the watch he had on—" persisted Shiny.

"Then he must have changed it! Look at this—H.W. engraved on the back. Think a covey named Bunter would 'ave H.W. on his watch? He must have borrowed it—'tain't his watch! Cor! If this 'ere ain't enough to make a man chuck up the 'ole game and turn honest! It is that!" Slim almost wailed.

"The game ain't up yet, Slim," said Beaky, comfortingly.

"We got to get 'old of the right watch—"

"We 'ave that!" said Slim. "We got to get after that fat covey Bunter and get that watch off 'im, and we got to do it quick, afore he 'appens to open it! Cor!"

There was a shuffling of feet in wet grass and puddles.

The three rascals who had met at the solitary wood-cutter's hut were going—much to Bessie Bunter's relief.

The last words she had heard had made Bessie almost forget her terrors, in her astonishment. She did not need telling who the "fat covey" named Bunter was! These three rascals—Slim, Beaky, and Shiny—were after Brother Billy's watch—why, was a mystery that a more powerful brain than Bessie's might have failed to fathom. She knew that watch: and that its actual value was precisely as appraised by Fisher T. Fish, "nix". Yet these three lurkers of the under-world wanted that watch, and wanted it bad—had evidently made attempts to possess themselves of it, and were planning to make further attempts! It was just amazing to Bessie

!

Footsteps died away in the wood. But it was long minutes after the last footstep had died away, that Bessie Bunter ventured to peer out of the wood-cutter's hut through her big spectacles, and finally venture forth, and resume her way to Court field.

CHAPTER XXXV

IT HAPPENS AGAIN

"FRANKY, old fellow—"

Frank Nugent grinned.

"No!" he answered, without waiting for Bunter to continue.

"Beast! I say, Bull—"

"No!" said Johnny Bull. "Yah! Inky, old chap—"

"The answer is in the esteemed negative," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I say, Bob—"

"Bow-wow!" said Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton laughed. Billy Bunter did not address him, alone among the members of the famous Co. He was, at the moment, of no use to Bunter.

Bunter had already had his watch!

They were in the Rag, looking out at a quad shining with rain. Bunter, really, should have started for Courtfield before this: but he was not likely to start in a heavy down-pour of rain. Bessie had had to start earlier, as Cliff House was twice the distance from Courtfield. The fat Owl waited in the Rag for it to stop. Now, at last, it was stopping, and Bunter was prepared to get a move on. But, owing to the strange and startling occurrence in the visitors' room, that morning, the fat Owl was still in want of a watch.

Watches were made to go: and Harry Wharton's had gone! No other member of the Co. seemed disposed to trust his time-keeper in Bunter's fat hands. The fat Owl blinked at them reproachfully: but, like Pharaoh of old, they hardened their hearts.

"I say, Smithy—"

"Rats!" said Smithy.

"Toddy, old chap—"

"Watches ain't safe with you, old fat man," said Peter, shaking his head. "You'd have lost your own watch the other day, but for Squiff—now you've lost Wharton's. I'd rather you didn't lose mine."

"Well, there ain't likely to be another pickpocket about," argued Bunter. "I wouldn't mind wearing that old tin turnip of yours, Peter, if you'd lend it to me. I simply must know the time this afternoon—I'll bet Bessie wouldn't wait a minute for me, and she's got the tickets. If I had the tickets, it would be all right, and it wouldn't matter if I missed her, you know—but she's got them. I say, dear old Bob—"

"I'll tell you what," said Bob, "I'll lend you—"

"Your watch?"

"No: my alarm-clock! It keeps jolly good time, and you can have a new glass put in, while you're in Courtfield."

"You silly fathead!" roared Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter certainly wanted to make sure of the time that afternoon. But he did not seem to like the idea of carrying an alarm-clock in lieu of a watch! He gave Bob Cherry a devastating blink through his big spectacles.

"Well, I've got to get off," yapped Bunter. "If I miss Bessie, and don't get to the circus, it will be your fault. Blessed if I ever came across such a selfish lot! Selfishness all round, as usual! It's enough to make a fellow grow selfish himself, mixing with you lot! Yah!"

The fat Owl turned to roll doorward. Peter Todd glanced after him, hesitated, gave an expressive grunt, and called out: "Here you are, fathead!"

"Oh!" Bunter revolved on his axis, blinked at the watch Peter was holding out to him, and grabbed it. He gave it a disparaging blink—even more disparaging than the one he had given Harry Wharton's that morning. Undoubtedly it was not an expensive watch. Wharton's at least was silver, with a monogram on the back. Peter's was a Waterbury of uncertain age. It kept time: and Fisher T. Fish would probably have valued it at considerably more than "nix". But compared with Bunter's own splendid gold watch, it was, in the fat Owl's opinion, as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine. He gave a sniff as he put it into his waistcoat pocket, thereby expressing his opinion of the watch, and his grateful appreciation of the loan.

"Mind you don't lose it," said Peter.

"Blessed if I see that it would matter much, if I did," said Bunter, agreeably. "If I lose it, Toddy, I'll buy you another just like it—I can afford half-a-crown! He, he, he!"

With that gracious and grateful remark, Billy Bunter rolled out of the Rag, with Peter's Waterbury in his pocket. Peter's glance followed him, as he went, with quite an expressive expression!

"Nice chap, Bunter," remarked Bob Cherry. "How they must love him at home, and what a pity they don't keep him there! Well, the rain's stopped, my beloved 'earers, and we can get out and breathe."

Sunshine followed the rain: and the crowd of juniors in the Rag were glad to stream out into the quad. Billy Bunter was rolling cheerfully down to the gates.

He did not observe a man loitering on the other side of the road, as he rolled out. Had he observed him, he would not have recognised him as the sleek man who had called at the school that morning: for Shiny now had an artificial moustache gummed to his upper lip, and a cap pulled low over his forehead, which gave him, quite a different look.

Bunter, quite uninterested in a man loitering by the roadside, rolled out unregarding.

But if Bunter was not interested in the loiterer, the loiterer undoubtedly was interested in Bunter. His eyes snapped at the sight of the fat junior coming out at the school gates.

Shiny, indeed, could hardly believe in his good luck!

He had been there hardly ten minutes, since leaving his associates in Friardale Wood. He was hanging about the school on the mere chance of the "fat covey" coming out that afternoon. And here was the fat covey! Shiny had got the wrong watch once! He was going to get the right one this time!

Then, as if to exasperate Shiny, the fat covey stopped, took a watch from his pocket and blinked at it, and then, rolled in at the gateway again! Shiny breathed hard and he breathed deep, and his eyes fairly glittered at the back of Billy Bunter's fat head.

Oblivious of Shiny, Bunter rolled in again, and blinked round him through his big spectacles. He spotted the Famous Five and rolled up to them.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Lost Toddy's watch already, and want to borrow another?" inquired Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry! I say, I shall be late if I walk it," explained Bunter. "I'm late already, really, but I expect Bessie's late too, as it was raining. Who's going to lend me a tanner for the bus?"

"The who-fulness is terrific."

"I say, if I don't go by bus, it's no good going at all, and—"

"Dash it all, it's worth a tanner not to see Bunter again this afternoon," said Johnny Bull.

"Beast! I—I mean, if you've got a tanner you don't want, old fellow—"

"I haven't! I've got one I do want—here it is."

A fat paw closed on the sixpence, and once more Billy Bunter revolved, and rolled. He disappeared out of gates, leaving the Famous Five discussing what they were going to do with the remainder of the afternoon. Bob Cherry's suggestion was a ramble on the cliffs: at which Nugent winked at three other members of the Co., and there was a smile. The way to the cliffs lay past the gates of Cliff House School!

But the discussion was suddenly interrupted. Having seen Billy Bunter roll out at the gates, Harry Wharton and Co. supposed that they had seen the last of him for the afternoon: agreeing unanimously that it was well worth a "tanner". But that was quite an error. Hardly two or three minutes had elapsed since Billy Bunter had rolled out of view, when he came into view again—bolting in at the gates at top speed, his little round eyes almost bulging through his big round spectacles, and yelling at the top of his voice.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob, staring. "What—"

"That fat ass—!"

"What the dickens—?"

"I say, you fellows," Bunter yelled frantically. "I say I've been robbed—my picket's been popped—Woddy's totch—I mean Toddy's watch—oh, crikey—I say he's got it—he snatched it—oh, crumbs—!"

"Who's got it?" yelled Bob Cherry.

"That man—a man—he rushed at me in the road and snatched it—I say, you fellows, he snatched it and pushed me over, just like that beast this morning—I say, he's wot the gotch—I mean he's got the watch—" Billy Bunter babbled, breathlessly and incoherently. "I say, he's got it—he patched it and snushed me over—I mean he snatched it and pushed me over—I went down bump—oh crikey—"

"Come on!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

He ran for the gates, with his comrades at his heels. A dozen other fellows had heard Bunter's startling announcement, and they rushed after the Famous Five—among them Peter Todd, anxious for his Waterbury. They came out of the gates into the road in a breathless crowd. But there was no "man" to be seen.

Shiny, with a snatched watch in his pocket, was already heading for the open spaces, and he was well out of sight. The Greyfriars fellows stared up and down the road, round and about, in vain. There was no pickpocket in view—not the ghost of one.

"Gone!" said Bob Cherry.

"The gonefulness is terrific."

"And he's got my watch!" gasped Peter. "Why, that fat villain hadn't had it more than ten minutes—and it's gone! My watch—"

"This beats the band," said Vernon-Smith. "Why is somebody after Bunter's watch specially? This is the third go—"

"Goodness knows!"

"I say, you fellows." Bunter rolled out. "I say, have you got him?"

"No, a

"With my watch!" roared Peter. "You fat ass—!"

"Oh, really, Toddy! I can't help pockpickers packing pickets, can I—I mean pickpockets picking pockers—I mean pockets! And it wasn't worth much, was it, old chap? You haven't lost much, you know—"

"You fat, frabjous, footling fathead—"

"Well, I think you might be a bit sympathetic, Toddy, when a fellow's been pushed over, and had his picket packed—I mean his pocket picked. But I say, you fellows," Bunter remembered the circus, "I've got to get off—I say, who's going to lend me a watch?"

"What?"

"A watch—!"

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Bob Cherry. "Who's going to lend Bunter another watch to be pinched? Don't all speak at once!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, I think one of you fellows might lend a chap a watch, when he's got an appointment to keep. That cheap one of yours will do, Bob, if it keeps time."

"That cheap one of mine is staying in my pocket, old fat man," chuckled Bob Cherry. "You'll have to manage with that splendid gold watch of yours, Bunter."

"Well, it doesn't keep time, you know. I've wound it up dozens of times, but it won't go! Will one of you fellows lend me a watch?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! A fellow must wear a watch," snapped Bunter. "If you won't lend me your watch, Bob—"

"No 'if' about it."

"Well, will you cut up to my study and get mine? It's in the table-drawer?" snapped Bunter. "I may as well put it on."

"And you may as well fetch it," grinned Bob. "Beast!"

"You'd better let Quelch know what's happened," said Harry Wharton.

"I've no time. You can tell Quelch if you like. Cut up to my study first, and get my gold watch for me—"

"Fathead!"

"Beast!"

Nobody, it appeared, was going to lend Bunter another watch. Nobody was even going to cut up to his study and fetch his gold watch for him. It seemed hardly worth while to cut up to the study himself, for a watch that wouldn't go. So the fat Owl rolled away for the bus, watch-less: and at least safe from pickpockets. And by good luck he found Miss Elizabeth

Bunter in the Market Place: so the loss of Peter Todd's watch really didn't matter after all!

AND while Brother Billy and Sister Bessie were rolling into the circus at Court field, three men—one with pimples, one with a beaky nose, and one with a sleek smooth face—in a secluded spot in Friardale Wood, were gazing, with an expressive gaze, at a Waterbury watch—the second wrong watch that had fallen into their hands!

CHAPTER XXXVI

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

"I SAY, you fellows."

"Oh, blow away, Bunter!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Shut the door after you!"

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"Buzz off, bluebottle!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

It was quite a party in No. 1 Study in the Remove. The Famous Five were all there, and Smithy, and Tom Redwing, and Peter Todd, and Squiff. No. 1 Study was fairly roomy, but nine fellows filled it almost to capacity: and nobody present seemed to think that there was room for a tenth—especially one who was double-width! Billy Bunter, as he blinked into that study through his big spectacles, could not, by the widest stretch of his fat imagination, have fancied that he was persona grata there. But he did not blow away. Neither did he buzz off. He shut the door, as requested: but he remained on the inner side thereof.

"I say, you fellows," squeaked Bunter.

"Hook it!"

"I've got something to tell you—"

"Go and tell somebody else."

"I've just got back from the circus—"

"Queer they let you get away!"

"Beast! I say, Bessie told me something— I say, I wish you'd let a fellow speak!" howled Bunter. "It's about my watch—"

"Bother your watch!"

"And bother you!"

"Blow away!"

Billy Bunter's fat face was excited. Apparently, he was full of news. He had come there to surprise and startle the Remove fellows. But not a fellow in No. 1 Study was interested. Nobody wanted to know. They seemed interested only in seeing Bunter's podgy back!

But that view was denied them. Bunter's podgy back remained in the door, and his fat face and spectacles remained on view.

"I say, you fellows—"

"Oh my hat!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Is that fat bluebottle still there? Won't somebody swat it? "I say, you fellows—"

"Beast!" roared Bunter. "I tell you—"

"Travel!"

"You'd better go down and see Quelch, Bunter," said Harry Wharton. "He wants to see you—"

"Blow Quelch!"

"I've reported to him about Toddy's watch going—"

"Blow Toddy's watch!"

"Grimey is coming over about it—"

"Blow Grimey!"

"He won't go till he's fed," said Squiff. "Give him a bun and roll him out."

"Oh, really, Field—"

"Will you blow away if we give you a bun, Bunter?"

"Beast! I haven't had tea," said Bunter, "it was too late for the scrum in hall when I got back from the circus. You've got a spread here. I think you might ask a fellow to join up, after all I've done for you. That looks a decent cake. I say, you fellows, I'm going to ask you all to a topping spread to-morrow. I'm expecting—"

"If you say 'postal-order', I'll buzz this loaf at you!" said Johnny Bull.

"I'm expecting a lot of money to-morrow. I'm going to sell my gold watch," said Bunter, impressively.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle—!"

"Thanks: we will! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you jolly well wouldn't cackle, if you knew!" snorted Bunter.

"Fishy wouldn't give me anything for that gold watch when I asked him last Wednesday. I'm jolly glad now that he wouldn't! Of course I always knew that it was jolly valuable—forty-four carat gold, and all that. But now that I know that a gang of crooks are after it—"

"A which?"

"A whatter?"

Bunter seemed to have interested the tea-party in No. 1 Study at last. They all gazed at him as he made that startling statement.

"A gang of crooks," said Bunter. "Bessie heard them, and she told me at the circus. She said they must be off their chumps to want my watch—I mean, she said I'd better take jolly good care of it, as it was so valuable—You see, she got into old Joyce's wood-shed out of the rain, and they met there and she heard them—there were three of them, she said—she didn't see them but she heard them—talking about my watch—three crooks, or gangsters, or something—they're after my fifty-six carat gold watch—" Bunter gasped for breath.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Did Bessie go to sleep in old Joyce's wood-shed?" asked Squiff.

"Eh? No."

"Did she dream all that awake?"

"You silly ass! " howled Bunter. "She didn't dream it at all! I can tell you she was jolly scared! Only she was behind the logs, you know, and they never saw her. Three of them—and one was that man with the pimples, because she heard the others call one of them Slim, and you know that pimply beast was called Slim Judson, it came out after he was run in— So it must be the same man, the one I found on the landing that night, you know, and she said the others were called Beaky and Shiny, and I expect one of them was that beast with a beaky nose who tried to pinch my watch on Saturday, when Squiff jumped on him, and the other's the beast who came here this morning, I expect, making out that he had a message from old Mopper—I mean a message from old Popper—and he hadn't all the time, and—" Again Bunter paused for breath.

Harry Wharton and Co. gazed at him.

Now that Billy Bunter was able to get his story out, it was coming out with a rush. And they were interested at last, and considerably astonished.

"They're after my watch!" said Bunter, "and it must be awfully valuable for a gang of crooks to get after it, see? I mean to say, they've got

hold of Wharton's watch, and Toddy's watch, but it's my watch they want—my splendid gold watch, you know. Well, they wouldn't take all that trouble for nothing, would they? They jolly well know how valuable that watch is, see?"

"My only blue bonnet!" said Bob Cherry. "Is it possible that somebody's seen that watch of Bunter's, and fancied it was gold—"

"Oh, really, Cherry, I know jolly well that it's sixty-two carat—"

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull. "A blind mole with its eyes shut could see that it wasn't, Bob. It's not worth anything at all."

"I tell you, they're after it!" hooted Bunter. "Bessie heard them say they'd got to get after Bunter—that's me—and get that watch off him. One of them said they'd got the wrong watch, with H.W. engraved on it—"

"Mine!" said Harry Wharton.

"And now they've got Toddy's, too," said Bunter. "But you can see now that they were after my watch all the time. They didn't want your cheap one, Wharton, or your old turnip, Toddy—they wanted my valuable gold watch. And now I know it's so jolly valuable, I'm jolly well going to take it down to old Lazarus in Courtfield to-morrow and sell it, see? I may get fifty pounds for it! Or—or a hundred—!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, if you get a hundred quid for it, you can square that tanner," remarked Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows, don't you think it shows that my gold watch is jolly valuable after all?" asked Bunter. Perhaps a spot of doubt lingered in his fat mind. "I mean to say, why should three packpickets—I mean pickpockets—get after my watch, unless they knew it was awfully valuable?"

"Beats me!" said Bob Cherry.

"The beatfulness is terrific."

"Blessed if I make it out," said Harry Wharton, wrinkling his brows. "It really does look as if somebody's after Bunter's watch specially. Squiff stopped a man grabbing it last Saturday. Then that blighter barged into the school this morning, and snatched my watch—he must have supposed that it was Bunter's, as he was wearing it—and then this afternoon, Toddy's watch—he must have supposed that that was Bunter's, too, as he had it on—"

"But what the jolly old thump could anybody want Bunter's watch for?" asked the Bounder. "I suppose he's not short of tuppence to buy one like it, if he wants one."

"Oh, really, Smithy! My seventy-two carat gold watch—"

"Beats me hollow," said Tom Redwing. "We all supposed that that man Slim Judson was hanging about after old Popper's precious Blue Mauritius stamp—now it looks as if he wants Bunter's watch—but why—"

"The whyfulness is preposterous!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

"Well, I fancy it's like this," said Bunter. "He was after old Popper's stamp at first, but that's lost, and he's chucked it up: and now he wants to get hold of my watch instead."

"And go home loaded with loot, after all!" remarked the Bounder, sarcastically.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, if the watch ain't jolly valuable, what do you think they're after it for?" hooted Bunter. "Think a crunch of books—I mean a bunch of crooks—would waste their time getting after a watch unless it was worth lots and lots."

"But it isn't!" said Nugent.

"It jolly well is! Why, old Grimey is after that man Slim, and it's jolly dangerous for him to hang on in this neighbourhood, with the bobbies

after him, and he's doing it just to get after my gold watch! I say, you fellows, I want you to come with me to-morrow when I go to Courtfield to sell that watch—half a dozen of you, see—they might get after it again—in fact I'm pretty sure they would—I ain't going out alone with that watch, I can tell you— And you can see me safe home with the money, see?"

"The whole threepenny bit you'll get for it?" asked Squiff.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"It's all rot," said Peter Todd. "I can't make it out, but we jolly well know that that man Judson is after old Popper's stamp—"

"He's after my watch! Bessie heard him say so, quite plain. That's why he's still hanging about. He was jolly well after it the other night, when I saw him on the landing—I see that now!" declared Bunter. "A fellow takes his watch up to bed, and he was going to root through the dorms till he found me—and my watch! Ain't that plain enough?"

Bob Cherry whistled.

"By gum! It does look like it!" he said.

"It does—it do!" said Squiff. "He couldn't have been after old Popper's Blue Mauritius up in the dormitories, if he hid it in a study."

"Hardly," agreed Harry Wharton.

"Grimey thinks so," said Peter Todd. "That's why he was asking us questions yesterday in Quelch's study. He thinks the man hid it in something that might have been taken up to a dormitory afterwards—such as a blazer, or anything—"

"That's possible," said Harry. "Old Grimey's got his head screwed on the right way. That might easily have happened—"

"He was after my watch—!" yelled Bunter.

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull.

"The rotfulness is terrific."

All the fellows in No. 1 Study shook their heads. Undoubtedly, it looked as if Slim Judson and Co. were after Bunter's watch. All that had happened to Bunter looked like it, and it was confirmed by what Bessie had overheard in the wood-cutter's hut in Friardale Wood. Judging by the look of the thing, Slim Judson had forgotten all about Sir Hilton Popper's precious Blue Mauritius, and was concentrating on Bunter's watch, and had called in the aid of two rascals of his own kidney to help him in obtaining possession thereof. But as Billy Bunter's famous gold watch was only worth the sum named by Fisher T. Fish, "nix", how could it be so?

The fat Owl blinked at them in angry indignation.

"I say, you fellows, you'll jolly well see to-morrow, when I take that watch to old Lazarus in Courtfield," he yapped. "It's as plain as anything that it's awfully valuable, with those three pickpockets after it. That man Slim jolly well knows what it's worth."

"You fat ass, he's never even seen it." said Bob.

"He jolly well has," retorted Bunter. "I'll bet he saw it on the table in my study the day he was here."

"Well, if he saw it, he knows it's worth about three-pence—"

"Twopence!" said Johnny Bull.

"Catch me giving twopence for it," said the Bounder. "Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!" exclaimed Peter Todd. He jumped up from the table, his face ablaze with excitement. "Bunter, you fat fozzler—"

"Oh, really, Toddy—"

"You frumptious chump—"

"Look here—"

"Mean to say that that watch was on the study table when that man Judson was in the study last Wednesday?" shrieked Peter.

"Yes, it jolly well was! You see, I'd shown it to Fishy, and he wouldn't buy it, and he chucked it on the table, and then that man came racing up the passage, and I cut off to the box-room and forgot it—"

"Oh, holy smoke!" gasped Peter. "Then it was in the study with him—"

"Eh? Yes!"

"And you put it on afterwards?" yelled Peter.

"Yes, when I got back to the study, before I saw him there! So he jolly well saw it, and of course he knew at once how valuable it was, and that's why he's been after it ever since—"

"Where is it now?" shrieked Peter.

"Eh? I left it in the table-drawer in my study when I went out—"

Peter did not wait for more. He rushed to the door, and darted out into the passage.

Billy Bunter blinked after him, in astonishment.

"I say, wharrer marrer? What—oh, crikey! I say, you fellows, where are you all going?" yelled Bunter.

His eyes popped behind his spectacles, as the whole crowd of juniors in No. 1 Study rushed after Peter Todd.

Bunter was left alone in the study. "I say, you fellows," he yelled.

But answer there came none! Why Harry Wharton and Co. had all rushed out of the study in that extraordinary way, Billy Bunter had no idea. But, as it happened, nothing could have suited Bunter better. He was left alone—with the spread on the study table! He dropped into one of the vacant chairs, and the next moment the most capacious jaws at Greyfriars School were working to capacity! Where they had gone, and what they were up to, Bunter didn't know—and he couldn't have cared less. Wherever they were, he only hoped that they would stay there long enough to give him time to deal faithfully with the good things on the table. And he lost no time!

CHAPTER XXXVII

AT LAST

HARRY WHARTON and Co. fairly hurtled into No. 7 Study. Peter Todd was first man in: but the Famous Five were at his heels, and Smithy, and Redwing, and Squiff, close behind.

Every face was wildly excited.

Billy Bunter had come up to No. 1 Study, with the intention of startling the inhabitants thereof. But he had startled them more than he could have dreamed. Quite unintentionally and unexpectedly, he had given the whole party an electric shock.

For the same idea had leaped into all minds. The Blue Mauritius had been hidden in No. 7 Study. Inspector Grimes surmised that it must have been put into some article later removed from the study—such as a blazer, or a cap, or even a handkerchief—anything that might have been left about a study and taken away afterwards. And now the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove had revealed, quite casually, and with no idea whatever that it was a matter of any importance, that his big gold watch had been in the study at the time, lying on the table while Slim Judson was there, and that he had put it on again.

Mr. Grimes had not thought of so unlikely an article as a watch, but of more likely things like a blazer, or a cap, or a book. But the watch had been there—Judson must have seen it—must have known that the room would be searched for the Blue Mauritius—that it would be safe only in an article likely to be taken from the study. Nothing could have suited him better than a watch which, as it happened, had been left on the table,

but which obviously the owner must intend to put in his watch-pocket again.

Judson had hidden that stamp in something—and it was not a cap, or a blazer, or a book, or a handkerchief—was it in that watch?

Was that why the pickpockets were, so inexplicably, so desperately, in quest of a watch which, on its intrinsic merits, was worth precisely "nix"?

It had not, of course, occurred to Bunter. But it occurred to all the other fellows in No. 1 Study: and they poured helter-skelter into No. 7. Peter, first in the field, grabbed the table-drawer, and pulled it open—so energetically that it came out, scattering its contents over the study carpet.

Papers, a gum-bottle, an indiarubber, several pens and pencils and other such articles, rained on the floor—and among them, a heavy object thudded down—Billy Bunter's big gold watch.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There it is—"

"That's Bunter's ticker—"

Peter whipped it up.

Eight eager fellows gathered round him, treading recklessly on papers and pens and pencils. The excitement was quite at fever heat. Did that glimmering old brassy turnip of Bunter's contain a rare stamp worth two thousand pounds? Certainly there was room for it inside—lots of room. Skinner, indeed, had said that Bunter's watch was big enough to take in a lodger. But was it there?

"Quick, Toddy—"

"Get it open—"

"Let's look—"

"We are on the esteemed tender hooks, Toddy—"

"Buck up!"

Peter Todd snapped open the case. The works—such as they were—of Bunter's big watch were revealed. But not wholly. A fragment of paper was there. It glimmered blue.

"Great pip!" gasped Peter.

"Oh, gad!" said the Bounder.

"My only hat!"

"The stamp—!"

"The jolly old Blue Mauritius—!"

"Eureka!"

"The Eurekafulness is terrific!"

They had more than half expected it. But it was a thrill to see it. And there was no mistake about it. It was a postage-stamp: once upon a time worth the humble sum of twopence: worth, at the present moment, at least two thousand pounds, and probably more.

The Famous Five had had a glimpse of that stamp before, in Sir Hilton Popper's hand in Popper Court Woods. The other fellows saw it for the first time. But they all knew what it was. They gazed at it.

That celebrated stamp, of which only a dozen are known to be in existence, showed a left profile of Queen Victoria, the word "Post Office" on the left-hand side, "Mauritius" on the right, "Postage" across the top, and "Two Pence" along the bottom of the stamp, with a rather crude ornament in each corner. It was printed in a deep blue. It looked, to non-philatelic eyes, worth nothing at all; but the eyes of any philatelist would have lighted up at a glimpse of it. It was one of the dreams of a stamp-collector's life! In the philatelic world, it was worth the huge sum of two thousand pounds, that being its rarity value. And there it was—sticking in Billy Bunter's gold watch, where the cornered pickpocket had hidden it a week ago!

"So that's it!" said Bob Cherry.

"That's it!" said Peter.

"Two thousand quid!" said the Bounder, with a whistle. "Worth no more than the watch we've found it in, really, if it wasn't for collectors—" "Good news for old Popper!" said Tom Redwing. "The goodfulness of the news is terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The smile of benevolent equanimity will replace the preposterous frownfulness on the absurd countenance of the esteemed Popper."

"Better take it down to Quelch at once," said Harry Wharton. "The sooner it's in safe hands the better."

"Come on," said Peter. "We'll all go, as we all found it. Quelch will be jolly glad—I fancy he's fed up to the back teeth with Popper and his stamp."

"March!" said Bob Cherry.

Nine fellows crowded out of No. 7 Study, and marched down the passage: Peter in the lead, carrying Bunter's gold watch, the other fellows in procession behind him.

A fat junior, busy at the table in No. 1 Study, gave a jump of alarm, at the sound of many footsteps coming down the passage. But to Billy Bunter's relief, they passed the door of No. 1, and tramped onward to the landing. Apparently the tea-party had forgotten the spread, and forgotten Bunter. Bunter, only too glad to be forgotten, continued to deal with the spread: while Harry Wharton and Co. marched across the landing to the stairs.

Coker of the Fifth, at the corner of the Fifth-form passage, stared at them.

"What's that game?" he called out.

"Oh, we've found old Popper's stamp for him," answered Bob Cherry, carelessly. "There's been such a fuss about it, you know, we thought we'd take it in hand."

And the procession marched on down the stairs, leaving Horace Coker staring.

At the foot of the staircase, they came on Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth. The two prefects turned a severely inquiring gaze on the mob of hilarious juniors.

"What do you fags fancy you are up to?" asked Wingate.

"Snuff!" answered Peter.

"What?"

"There's been such a spot of bother about old Popper's stamp that we thought we'd find it for him—" explained Peter.

"You've found it!" exclaimed Wingate and Gwynne together.

"Sort of! We're taking it to Quelch."

"How on earth did you find it?" exclaimed the Greyfriars captain.

"Oh, we just looked in the place where that man Judson hid it, you know. Elementary, my dear Watson!" said Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The procession marched on, to Masters' Studies. Harry Wharton tapped at his Form-master's door.

"Come in!"

There was a snap in the voice within. It did not sound as if Mr. Quelch was in his bonniest temper. However, Wharton opened the door, and Peter marched in with the watch, and the rest followed him in. Then they became aware that Mr. Quelch was not alone in the study. Inspector Grimes of Court field was with him.

The inspector glanced at the crowd of juniors, and raised his eyebrows slightly. Mr. Quelch fixed his gimlet-eyes upon them, with a grim and portentous frown. Indeed he seemed, at the moment, to be trying to reproduce the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High

Executioner, as he stared, or rather glared, at this unexpected and numerous invasion of his study. Quelch was not, in fact, in a good temper. Mr. Grimes was there again—and while he had a proper esteem for that efficient officer of the law, he was quite tired of seeing him at Greyfriars. Now, added to the troublesome affair of the missing stamp, was the puzzling and irritating affair of the pickpockets who seemed to be making the fattest member of his Form the object of their very special attention. It was all very annoying to Mr. Quelch: and while he contrived to be polite to Mr. Grimes, he seemed to have no politeness whatever left over for the swarm of juniors crowding into his study.

"What does this mean?" he rapped.

"Why have you all come here? Wharton—!"

"If you please, sir—"

"I am engaged at the moment! What do you mean by crowding into my study in this manner? Eight—nine of you—upon my word! Go away at once."

"But, sir—"

"Take a hundred lines, Wharton—"

"Oh! Yes, sir! But—"

"You see, sir—!" gasped Peter.

"Take a hundred lines, Todd!"

"But, sir—!" exclaimed Squiff.

"Take a hundred lines, Field."

"Esteemed sahib—!"

"Take a hundred lines, Hurree Singh."

Mr. Quelch rose to his feet. He pointed to the door. "Go! All of you! At once! Not a word more! The next boy who speaks will be caned! Leave my study instantly."

Nine fellows became dumb, on the spot. Quelch's hand was already reaching for the cane on his table. Really, it looked as if the heroes of the Remove, having marched Sir Hilton Popper's precious stamp into their Form-master's study, would have to march it out again!

But Peter, without speaking, laid the Blue Mauritius on the table, almost under Mr. Quelch's nose.

The Remove master stared at it.

He was no philatelist. On other subjects his knowledge was wide and extensive: but he had yet to learn the value of a scrap of paper a hundred years old. Having stared at that scrap of paper, he gave Peter a grim look.

"What is this? What do you mean by bringing a used postage-stamp to me? Are you in your senses, Todd?"

Inspector Grimes jumped. He jumped as if he had touched an electric wire. He fairly bounded. Portly as he was, with plenty of weight to lift, Mr. Grimes was on his feet in a fraction of a split second, bending over Quelch's table, and staring at the stamp. Then he clutched it up.

"The boys have found it!" he gasped. "What—?"

"This is Sir Hilton Popper's lost stamp, sir," said Mr. Grimes. "The Blue Mauritius, worth two thousand pounds, and these boys appear to have found it—"

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Quelch. He understood.

The thunder cleared from his brow. No doubt he was glad that the lord of Popper Court would now recover his lost property. Probably he was gladder that the troublesome affair was now at an end. Peter had not exaggerated in stating that Quelch was fed up to the back teeth with old Popper and his stamp!

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch, quite genially.

"That—that is Sir Hilton's stamp— I—I—I see— I quite understand! You have found the missing stamp—"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh! Hem! Um! You—you need not do the lines, my boys, of —of course! I—I did not understand, for the moment! I am very glad that the stamp is found! Please tell Inspector Grimes and me where you found it."

Which the juniors were only too pleased to do. Inspector Grimes' eyes opened wide, and Mr. Quelch's wider, as the tale of the discovery of the stamp was told.

"In Bunter's watch!" said Mr. Quelch, with a deep breath. "Upon my word! That stupid boy—"

"That utterly stupid boy—!" said Mr. Grimes.

"However, all is well that ends well," said Mr. Quelch, with a smile. "I am much obliged to you, my boys. Inspector Grimes is much obliged to you. And I am sure that Sir Hilton Popper will feel much obliged to you. You may leave my study."

And Harry Wharton and Co. left the study, taking Bunter's watch with them, and leaving the precious Blue Mauritius in the official hands of Mr. Grimes. In a cheery crowd they tramped up the stairs, to carry on with the spread in No. 1 Study, and tell Bunter the thrilling news: and, in view of the great occasion, to welcome the fat Owl to a "whack" in the spread!

But they need not have bothered to think of Bunter in connection with the spread. Bunter had done all the thinking that was necessary in that matter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

"Bunter—"

"We've found it—"

"In your preposterous watch—"

"And we—"

"Here! What? Where's Bunter?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"And where's the spread?" roared Johnny Bull.

Bunter was gone! The spread was gone! It was easy to guess where the spread was. It was inside Bunter! It was no use looking for the spread. And it was not much use looking for Bunter. Like the hunter of the Snark who suddenly beheld the Boojum, he had silently vanished away! —and with him had vanished the spread, to the last plum and the last crumb.

CHAPTER XXXVII

BILLY BUNTER'S REWARD

"FAIR play's a jewel!" said Billy Bunter.

"Eh?"

"What?"

"I say fair play's a jewel. Ain't it?" demanded Bunter. He blinked at Harry Wharton and Co. in the Greyfriars quad. The Famous Five had come out of the House, and were glancing, in passing, at a car on the drive. They knew the car from Popper Court. The lord of that demesne, apparently, was at the school.

Billy Bunter was blinking at the car, through his big spectacles. But he turned his little round eyes, and his big round spectacles, on the chums of the Remove as they came out: and, rather to their surprise, propounded the indubitable proposition that fair play was a jewel.

"What do you mean, you fat ass?" inquired Johnny Bull. "If anything!" remarked Nugent.

"I mean what I say—fair play's a jewel!" said Bunter.

"Old Popper's with Quelch now. He's come about that stamp being found, of course."

"What about that?" asked Bob.

It seemed probable that Sir Hilton, now in possession once more of his Blue Mauritius, and in the happy state of being able, at long last, to meet the demands of his Inspector of Taxes, had called at Greyfriars, to acknowledge, with a few gracious words to Mr. Quelch, the service rendered by boys of his Form. But why Bunter was interested was rather a puzzle.

"Well," said the fat Owl, "he's got his stamp back, hasn't he? It wasn't my watch those pickpockets were after, as it turns out, but that stamp! I thought I was going to get a lot for that watch—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean to say, anybody would have thought it was worth a lot, with three pickpockets after it—"

"They won't be after it any more, old fat man" chuckled Bob "Now it's known that the stamp is found, they wouldn't take it as a gift. I expect they've mizzled before this—but if they haven't, you could walk that watch right under their noses, and it would be as safe as houses."

"Well, it's a jolly good watch," said Bunter. "Eighty-six carat gold, and all that. It would keep jolly good time, too, only it won't go. But I ain't going to sell it, now. After all, a fellow likes to wear a gold watch! But I was saying that fair play's a jewel! Ain't it?"

"Passed nem. con.," assented Bob.

"Old Popper's got his stamp, worth two thousand pounds, so they say. Well, fair play's a jewel—"

"We've had that!"

"And he's jolly well bound to stump up something for getting his stamp back, said Bunter. "That's fair ain't it?"

"Rot!" said Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"The rotfulness is terrific."

"Oh, really, Inky—"

"Bosh!" said Nugent.

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"Piffle!" said Bob.

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"You fat chump!" said Harry Wharton. "Do you think we're going to stick the old bean for spotting his stamp?"

"Eh! I wasn't speaking of you—"

"If you mean Toddy—"

"I don't mean Toddy! I mean me," yapped Bunter.

"You!" exclaimed all the Famous Five, together.

"Me!" said Bunter "Wasn't it in my watch? Wasn't it to me that those crangsters and gooks I mean gangsters, and crooks—got after? Me all the time! If I'd lost that watch, where would old Popper's stamp be? Look what I've been through, all on account of his blessed stamp! Now it's been found in my watch: and my opinion is, that old Popper ought to stump up something, and I'm jolly well going to speak to him when he comes out to his car. There jolly well ought to be a reward, and if old Popper doesn't think of it for himself, I'm jolly well going to remind him, see? Fair play's a jewel! "

"You howling ass—!"

"You preposterous fathead—"

"Well, that's what I think," said Billy Bunter. "You fellows had nothing to do with it, except that you spotted the stamp. It was in my watch. And when old Popper comes out—"

"Shut up, you ass!" breathed Bob Cherry, as a tall and angular figure appeared in the doorway, and an eyeglass glimmered.

"Shan't!" retorted Bunter.

"I tell you I'm going to speak to old Popper—"

"He's coming, you burbling ass, and he can hear you—"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter.

He spun round.

Judging by the knitted grey brows over the eyeglass, Sir Hilton had heard Bunter. The eyeglass, and the eye behind it, glinted at the fat Owl.

Harry Wharton and Co. faded out of the picture. But Billy Bunter had no idea of fading out. Bunter's idea was that there ought to be a reward: and he had worked it out, to his own satisfaction, that that reward was due to him, William George Bunter, in whose watch the lost stamp had been found. And if there was a chance, even a remote one, of bagging a reward, William George was not the man to let his chances like the sunbeams pass him by.

He rolled up to the tall baronet, heedless of the grim frown over the glinting eyeglass.

"If you please, sir, I'm jolly glad that stamp was found sir!" bleated Bunter. "I expect you know, sir, that it was found in my watch, sir—"

"I am aware of it, Punter!" snorted Sir Hilton Popper.

"I have been informed of the circumstance. Of all the crass stupidity—"

"Eh?"

"Of all the insensate obtuseness—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"For a whole week, Gunter, that stamp was missing, causing me great suspense and anxiety. And it was in your watch, and about your person, all the time!" thundered Sir Hilton. "If you had had as much intelligence as the average rabbit—"

"Oh, really, sir—"

"If you had been anything but an utter blockhead! Grunter, the stamp would have been found long ago. You deserve to have your foolish head smacked."

"But I-I-I say—"

"I have a great mind to smack your foolish head, Punter."

"I-I—"

"In fact," added Sir Hilton, apparently thinking it a good idea, "I will do so!"

Smack!

"Yaroooooh!"

Sir Hilton Popper strode away to his car. From five fellows, looking on from a little distance, came a howl of merriment.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Yow! yow-ow-ow! Wow!" roared Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Sir Hilton Popper, frowning, departed in his car. Billy Bunter, neither pleased nor gratified by the reward he had received, was left rubbing a fat head, and the Famous Five yelling with laughter. Only the fat Owl was not amused by the final episode in the strange eventful history of the Mystery of Bunter's Study!