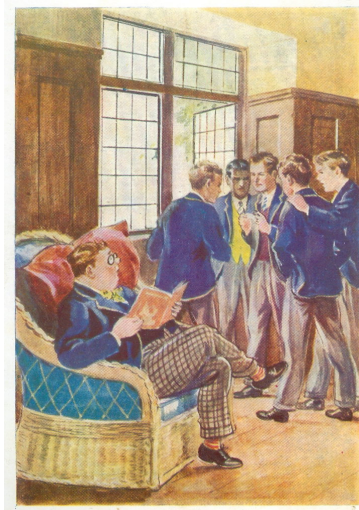


BILLY BUNTER'S FIRST CASE

BY
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BUNTER'S EYES AND SPECTACLES FIXED ON THE
FAMOUS FIVE AND THE MYSTERIOUS PAPER IN
BOB CHERRY'S HAND.

CHAPTER 1

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP

"LEAP-FROG!" said Bob Cherry.

"What—?"

"Follow your leader!"

"But what—?"

"Look at Pricey!" grinned Bob. "Isn't he just asking for it?"

Bob Cherry nodded towards a bending figure under the old Greyfriars elms. Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, all glanced in the direction indicated by the nod.

The Famous Five were sauntering in the quad after tea.

Bob Cherry was in exuberant spirits—his accustomed state. No doubt that was why it occurred to him to play leap-frog over the bent back of Price of the Fifth.

Really, Price did seem to be asking for it, with a playful fellow like Bob Cherry of the Remove about.

A little distance ahead of the juniors, on the path under the branches of the elms, he was moving along very slowly, bent almost double, his small sharp eyes scanning the ground.

Apparently Price had lost something, and was looking for it: and so deeply engrossed was he in the search, that he did not glance up as the Remove fellows came along, or notice that they were in the offing.

"Come on!" said Bob.

Harry caught him by the arm just in time.

"Hold on, you ass—."

"Come on, I tell you, before he spots us."

"Chuck it, fathead! We don't want a row with the Fifth," answered Harry.

"Rot! It's only Pricey!"

Had it been Blundell, or Hilton, or even Coker, of the Fifth, Bob might have thought twice before leap-frogging over his back. Big hefty seniors were not to be leap-frogged over with impunity. But it was, as he said, only Price! A weedy fellow like Price, well known to be a footer funk, was nobody in particular; or rather less than nobody.

"Don't be an ass, Bob," advised Frank Nugent.

"Rot!" repeated Bob. "It's only a lark, isn't it?"

"The larkfulness would probably make the esteemed Price terrifically infuriated," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Rot!" said Bob, for the third time. "Leggo!"

He jerked his arm away from Harry Wharton. Another moment, and he would have been speeding down the path towards the bending figure ahead. But in that moment Johnny Bull caught him by the other arm.

"Ware beaks, fathead!" said Johnny. "There's old Pompous!"

"Oh!" said Bob: and he paused.

A plump and ponderous figure appeared in sight on the path. It was that of Mr. Prout, the master of the Fifth. Even the exuberant Bob did not feel like leap-frogging over the Fifth-form man, under the plump pink nose of the Fifth-form master.

"Blow!" grunted Bob.

Mr. Prout emerged from the elms, into the path, only a few yards in front of Price, whose back was to the juniors. He glanced at the bending senior, and Price straightened up at once, with a flushed face.

"Have you lost something, Price?" asked Mr. Prout, in his deep rich boom.

"Oh! Yes, sir," stammered Price.

"Perhaps I can help you find it, Price!"

"Old Pompous" was a kindly man. Certainly, he couldn't have bent down to scan the earth as Price was doing. It must have been years since Prout had seen his knees. But he was kindly prepared to give what aid he could.

"Oh!" stammered Price. "Thank you, sir! But—."

"What is it that you have lost, Price?"

"Only a-a-a postage-stamp, sir! I—I dropped it. I—I'm afraid it must have blown away, and—and it's not much use looking for it."

Mr. Prout nodded, and elephantined on. There was a rather fresh wind from the sea that afternoon, and if Price had lost so very light an article as a postage-stamp, he certainly was not likely to see it again in a hurry. He remained standing, watching Mr. Prout furtively as he went, and giving the Remove fellows a glance of disfavour.

Mr. Prout passed the juniors, and went into the quad.

Bob Cherry gave a grunt when he was gone.

"That tears it," he said. "Pricey's seen us now. If you fellows hadn't stopped me—."

"Fathead!" said Harry.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, there he goes again," ejaculated Bob. "He doesn't mean to lose that jolly old stamp."

The juniors had heard Price's words to his form-master.

Naturally they supposed, after what he had said, that he had given up the search.

But evidently he hadn't, for when Prout was gone, he bent down and resumed scanning the earth with sharp and anxious eyes, moving slowly along the path, examining every inch as he moved.

Bob Cherry glanced at his bent back, and his eyes glimmered. Plainly he was tempted to leap-frog. But Bob was all good-nature.

"Look here, let's lend him a hand," he said. Harry Wharton laughed.

"More sense than leap-frogging over his back, at any rate," he said.

"Let's, if you like."

The Remove fellows cut along the path, and joined Price. The Fifth-form man straightened up again, and stared at them angrily.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Nothing," answered Harry Wharton. "But if you've lost something, we'll help you look for it, if you like."

"Mind your own business."

"Wha-a-a-t?"

"And get out," added Price.

Harry Wharton and Co. stared at him. They did not like Price of the Fifth, and he did not like them. But this was rather the limit. Most certainly, after this, they were not disposed to render him any assistance.

Price of the Fifth, heedless of their expressive looks, turned his back on them again, and moved off down the path, scanning the ground as before. Harry Wharton, glancing at his bent back, made a motion with his foot.

"I've a jolly good mind—!" he muttered.

"Go it!" grinned Bob. "A kick in the pants would do him good."

"What's the matter with the brute?" said Nugent, in wonder. "Half-a-dozen fellows would have more chance of finding that stamp, if he's still jolly keen on it."

Johnny Bull uttered a sound resembling a snort.

"More likely it's a cigarette, or a note from a bookie!" he said. "We all know Price! He jolly well didn't want old Pompous to help him look for it, whatever it is. He was pulling Prout's leg to get shut of him before he started looking again."

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob. "If that's it—and old Pompous had found it—." He whistled.

Stephen Price had passed out of hearing. That he was intensely keen on his search was clear: and it was equally clear that he objected to getting any assistance in it. The chums of the Remove had little doubt that Johnny Bull's surmise was correct. Price moved further and further along the path, his back to the juniors, quite heedless of them.

"I suppose that's it," said Harry Wharton, with a curl of the lip. "No business of ours—come on, and leave him to it."

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Isn't he asking for it again?" he said. "Follow your leader!"

And Bob cut off at a rapid run down the path towards the bending senior. Price, bent double, his eyes fixed on the ground, was not prepared for what happened next. Hands were dropped on his back, and Bob Cherry, with flying legs, flew over him, and landed on the other side.

"Oh!" gasped Price.

He pitched forward, and fell. If the other members of the Co. had been disposed to "follow their leader", there was nothing doing: Price of the Fifth was sprawling with his face buried in the grass. Even if he had been in a suitable attitude, there was a quite potent reason for not following Bob's example. For hardly had Bob landed than an angular figure appeared round an elm, and Mr. Quelch's gimlet-eyes fixed on him.

"Cherry!"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob. "I-I-I mean, yes, sir!" He stared in dismay at his form-master. It had not occurred to him that Quelch might be in the offing. It was rather like Bob to leap before he looked.

Mr. Quelch gave him a severe frown. Then he glanced at Price of the Fifth, who was staggering up with a face of fury-which he tried to control at sight of a "beak".

"Are you hurt, Price?" asked Mr. Quelch.

"I-I-yes, sir," gasped Price. "My knees-I crashed over—."

"I am sorry, Price, that a boy of my form has played so unthinking a trick. Cherry, you will take a hundred lines! Go to your study at once and write them out."

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

Quelch stalked on, frowning. Price rubbed his knees, giving Bob a venomous look. Bob rejoined his friends, his exuberance considerably dashed.

"Blow!" he remarked.

"Look before you leap, you know," suggested Johnny Bull.

"Oh, blow!"

"The lookfulness before the leapfulness is the cracked pitcher that goes longest to a bird in the bush, as the English proverb remarks," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

Bob Cherry grinned. That English proverb had the effect of clearing the cloud from his brow.

He went into the House to write his lines, and his friends joined a crowd of Removites punting a footer. Price of the Fifth, left to himself, resumed his painful search for the lost article, whatever it was, under the elms. But it did not appear that he had much luck, for half an hour later, tired and exasperated, he slouched away to his study, with a scowling face.

CHAPTER 2

BRAINY BUNTER!

BILLY BUNTER grunted.

He was uncomfortable.

That was a matter of considerable importance. Bunter was fat and lazy, and he liked comfort. True, he could have removed the cause of his discomfort by a little exertion—a very little exertion. But even the very littlest exertion had no appeal for Bunter. He disliked discomfort: but there were worse things, and exertion was one of them.

The fat Owl of the Remove was seated in an armchair in the Rag, close by the wide open window. He had a book in his fat hand, which he was reading attentively. Obviously, it could not be a school book: Bunter had never been known to bestow close attention upon that kind of literature. It was windy in the quad—very windy. Some of the fellows who were punting a footer outside had their caps blown off. Dead leaves floated on the wind that came in at the open window almost like a gale, and blew on Billy Bunter in the armchair. Hence his grunt of irritation.

Bunter had deposited his ample form in that armchair when he came into the Rag, without noticing specially that the big window was wide open. He would not have taken the trouble to close it if he had noticed it. Neither did he heave his weight out of the armchair to close it now. Three or four dead leaves, whistling in on the wind, pattered on his fat face, before they fluttered to the floor. He grunted, raised his eyes and spectacles from his book, and blinked round the room.

There was only one other fellow in the Rag. Lord Mauleverer was stretched elegantly in another armchair at a little distance. He had his eyes on the big window, watching clouds scurrying across a blue sky, enjoying what an Italian would have called "*dolce far niente*". Doing nothing was his lordship's long suit. Billy Bunter squeaked across at him.

"I say, Mauly!"

Lord Mauleverer's eyes shifted from the sky to Bunter. "Yaas?" he answered.

"Mind closing the window, old chap?"

"Yaas."

"Oh, really, Mauly—."

Mauly's glance was transferred from Bunter to the sky again. Possibly he found it a pleasanter view than the fat Owl's plump countenance.

"I say, Mauly, the wind's got up!" squeaked Bunter. "A fellow might catch a cold in this draught. I mean, you might catch a cold, old fellow. Are you going to sit in this draught because you're too jolly lazy to shut the window?"

"Yaas!"

"Beast!" said Bunter, peevishly, and he returned to his book.

Lord Mauleverer smiled gently, and continued to watch the fleecy sky. Perhaps he saw no reason why Bunter, who was nearer the window, should not close it himself if he wanted it closed. Or perhaps, like Bunter, he was too lazy to move. Besides, he liked open windows. Anyhow he did not stir: and William George Bunter continued to receive the benefit of the wind.

More dead leaves floated in, and then a crumpled sheet of paper blew in on a gust, and collided with Billy Bunter's little fat nose. Bunter uttered an angry yelp.

The crumpled paper floated to the floor, and lay there, a few yards from Bunter. He gave it a morose blink, and rubbed the fat little nose. Then he squeaked across at Mauleverer again.

"I say, Mauly, old chap!"

"Yaas," yawned Lord Mauleverer. "See that paper that's just blown in?"

"Yaas."

"Well, it might be a letter or something that some chap has dropped, and the wind's blown it away. Hadn't you better pick it up, Mauly? Chap might want it, you know. While you're up you can shut the window."

Lord Mauleverer smiled gently, but did not answer. He seemed uninterested in discussing the subject of windows with Bunter.

"Mauly!" squeaked Bunter. "You silly ass, are you going to sit there like a dumb dummy when a fellow's speaking to you?"

"Yaas."

"Beast!"

Once more Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles returned to his book. The wind ruffled the hair on his fat head and rustled the leaves of his book; but it could not be helped—unless Bunter got up to shut the window.

Voices floated in on the wind, as well as occasional dead leaves.

"Here, look out, Ogilvy."

"Don't barge, Smithy!"

"Rats!"

"Ow! You landed that on my shin, you goat."

"Keep your silly shin out of the way."

"Look here—."

Snort, from Bunter. How was a fellow to read in peace, with almost a gale blowing on him, and fellows yelling and shouting just under the window?

Once more he concentrated his big spectacles on Lord Mauleverer.

"I say, Mauly, old chap! This is a jolly good book! Awfully interesting, and all that! It's about Sherlock Holmes."

"Eh? Who's Sherlock Holmes?"

"A wonderful detective, you ass! Chap who finds out mysteries by deduction, you know! I mean, suppose you showed him a walking-stick. He could tell you at once that the man it belonged to was six feet high, and had a ginger moustache, and a cast in the left eye, and so on."

"Oh, gad!"

"Chap a bit like me," said Bunter. "Cool, clear, concentrated intellect, and that kind of thing. What are you grinning at, Mauly?"

"Just wonderin' where you parked that tremendous intellect, old fat man."

"Oh, really, Mauly! I fancy I could do it," went on Bunter. "I think I should make a pretty good detective, Mauly. What it needs really is brains. That's where I come in. Not that a fellow has a chance of showing what he can do, at Greyfriars! There ain't any mysteries here to solve."

"Think you could solve the mystery of a mysterious disappearance.

Bunter?" asked Lord Mauleverer.

"Bet you I could!" said Bunter, promptly. "Sherlock Holmes is pretty good, from the way this man Conan Doyle goes on, but I'll bet I could do it just as well as he could. Have you lost anything, Mauly?"

"Yaas."

"Well, give me a few details." said Bunter, sitting up and taking notice, quite in the manner of Sherlock Holmes in his consulting-room at Baker Street. "And I'll jolly well show you. What have you missed?"

"A bag of doughnuts."

"Eh?"

"It mysteriously disappeared from my study this afternoon. Think you could track it down, Bunter?"

"Yah!" snorted Bunter.

Actually, whether Billy Bunter was gifted like the great Sherlock Holmes or not, there was little doubt that he could have elucidated the mystery of the disappearance of Mauly's doughnuts! But he did not seem disposed to take up the case!

"Look here, Mauly, don't be an ass! I say, this really is a jolly interesting book! Sherlock Holmes keeps on penetrating impenetrable mysteries, and every time he does it Dr. Watson says 'Wonderful!' Like to look at it?"

"Oh, all right! Chuck it over?"

"Are you too jolly lazy to come over here and look at it?"

"Yaas."

Billy Bunter gave his lordship an almost devastating blink.

"Look here, will you get up and shut that window or not?" he hooted, coming down to brass tacks, as it were.

"Not!"

Billy Bunter breathed hard, and he breathed deep.

Almost he made up his fat mind to heave himself out of the armchair. But laziness supervened, and he resumed reading the amazing exploits of Sherlock Holmes, with the wind still fanning his fat face and ruffling his hair.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

Bob Cherry came tramping into the Rag. He had finished his lines for Quelch, and was looking for his friends. He glanced round the Rag, and Billy Bunter gave him a blink.

"I say, Cherry, old chap, shut that window, will you? The wind's blowing all sorts of rubbish in—dead leaves and bits of paper and things. It makes the room untidy, you know."

"Couldn't you shut it yourself?" asked Bob.

"I'm sitting down!" said Bunter, with dignity.

"That's all right! I'll tip you out of that armchair, if you like."

"Keep off, you silly ass!" howled Bunter. "Look here, are you as jolly lazy as Mauly? Can't you shut a window?"

Bob Cherry laughed, and shut the window. Then he picked up the dead leaves that had blown in, and pitched them into the waste-paper basket under the table. Then, catching sight of the crumpled paper, he picked that up also, and was about to throw it into the waste-paper basket after the leaves, when he noticed that there was writing on it, and glanced at it. His glance became a fixed stare of astonishment. Apparently what was written on that paper surprised and perplexed him.

"My hat!" he ejaculated. "What the dickens—."

There was a tramp of feet, and a crowd of Removites came in, cheery and a little breathless after the kick-about in the quad.

"Oh, here you are, Bob," said Harry Wharton. "Done your lines for Quelch?"

"Oh! Yes!" answered Bob. "Look at this, you chaps! I've just picked it up—blew in at the window. Can you make head or tail of it?"

Wharton and Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, glanced at the crumpled paper. Then, like Bob, they stared at it. It was certainly a very perplexing document. It was written wholly in capital letters, and ran:—

BIG OAK. W.II. S.P.

The Famous Five all stared at it together. Sherlock Holmes, perhaps, might have discovered what it meant. But it was a complete puzzle to the chums of the Greyfriars Remove.

CHAPTER 3

DETECTIVE BUNTER

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Billy Bunter, still immovable in the armchair, blinked at the Famous Five through his big spectacles, and squeaked.

There were a good many fellows in the Rag now. Harry Wharton and Co. in a group by the window, were examining, in considerable surprise and perplexity, the strange paper Bob had picked up. Herbert Vernon-Smith, the Bouncer of Greyfriars, was talking in low tones with Skinner: even in the Rag Smithy and Skinner lowered their voices to discuss the chances of their favourite "gee-gee" in the two-thirty at Wapshot. Peter Todd, Tom Brown, Squiff, and Ogilvy had put on the gloves for a four-handed mill. Lord Mauleverer, still gracefully reclining, was watching them. Hazeldene was relating, to three or four fellows, how Coker of the Fifth had shoved him on the landing—just shoved him out of the way, as if the landing and the adjacent building all belonged to Coker! Six or seven fellows were discussing whether Wingate of the Sixth, the Greyfriars captain, was likely to play Loder in the match against Carcroft: and agreeing that nothing could be more unlikely, whatever Loder fancied!

In the midst of all which, Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles fixed on the Famous Five, and the mysterious paper in Bob Cherry's hand. Bunter was not interested in the two-thirty at Wapshot Races, or in boxing, or in the shove Hazeldene had had from Coker of the Fifth, or in Loder's prospects for the Greyfriars first eleven. But he was interested in that scrap of paper, as he listened to the remarks of the Famous Five. Bunter wanted to know.

"Queer!" said Frank Nugent.

"The queerfulness is terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Blessed if I make anything out of it," said Johnny Bull.

"Doesn't seem to mean anything, so far as I can see!" said Harry Wharton.

"Bit of a puzzle, and no mistake," said Bob. "It seems to have blown in at the window, which means that some fellow must have dropped it about the quad. If some fellow's lost it, I suppose he wants it. But what the jolly old dickens does it mean?"

"Goodness knows."

"I'd take it to the owner if I knew who it was," said Bob. "But who the dickens? Chap can't have written this out for nothing, I suppose?"

"Hardly," said Nugent. "But—."

"I say, you fellows," howled Bunter, as his first squeak passed unheeded.

"I say, what have you got there? Is that the paper that blew in?"

"That's it," answered Bob. "There's something written on it, old fat man, and nobody can make head or tail of it."

"Bet you I could!" said Bunter. "I expect that all it needs is brains."

"Your long suit!" said Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"Just that!" agreed Bunter, deaf to sarcasm. "If you fellows had half my brains, you'd be twice as clever as you jolly well ain't. Let a fellow have a squint at it!"

There was a sleepy chuckle from Lord Mauleverer. "Give Bunter a chance, you men," he said. "Bunter's been absorbing Sherlock Holmes, and thinks he can beat him at his own game. Bunter will be able to tell you at once where that paper came from, whom it belongs to, what size he takes in collars, and what his grandfather said in 1885."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, Mauly—."

"Must mean something," said Bob, staring at the paper. "Some sort of puzzle, perhaps! I—."

"Do let a fellow have a squint at it," yapped Bunter.

Full of his recent absorption of Sherlock Holmes, and not doubting for one moment that his powerful intellect was at least equal to Mr. Holmes's, the fat Owl was quite keen to show what he could do in the deducing line.

"O.K." said Bob. "Here you are, old fat man! If you can make it out, I'll admit that you're not the fathead you look."

"Yah!" was Bunter's elegant rejoinder to that.

He took the paper in a fat hand, and blinked at it through his big spectacles. Harry Wharton and Co. and several other fellows, watched him with smiling faces. The Famous Five flattered themselves that they were fairly intelligent fellows: but they had to own up that they could not make head or tail of that mysterious document. If Bunter could, he undoubtedly was a more brainy fellow than any Greyfriars man had ever supposed him to be. In fact, they expected Bunter to be at least as hopelessly puzzled as they were themselves, if not more so.

The fat Owl blinked at the paper in astonishment. Certainly its meaning, if any, required some elucidating.

"Big Oak! W.II. S.P." Bunter read it out. "Oh!"

"Construe!" grinned Bob. "We're waiting to say 'Wonderful!' like Dr. Watson."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Let's know what it means, Bunter," said Peter Todd. "Like a wet towel to put round your head?"

"Fat ass!" said Johnny Bull. "If Bunter works it out, I'll eat my hat, and my football boots after it."

"Go it, Bunter!" chuckled Bob. "Pile in, Sherlock Holmes the Second!"

Billy Bunter was "going it". His fat brow was wrinkled over his spectacles, as he concentrated on the mysterious paper. It did not seem, for the moment at least, to come as easy to Bunter as to Sherlock Holmes. Possibly he had over-estimated the extent of his fat intellect!

But suddenly a grin diffused Bunter's plump countenance.

"I've got it!" he announced.

"What?"

"Gammon!"

"Draw it mild!"

Bunter's fat lip curled in a sneer. He had "got it"—or at all events he was satisfied that he had got it! He gave the Famous Five a blink of superior disdain.

"I tell you I've got it!" he said. "You fellows couldn't make it out—well, have you got my brains? I just ask you!"

"Found out whom it belongs to?" chuckled Bob.

Bunter nodded.

"Yes!" he answered, calmly.

"Great pip! Who, then?" yelled Bob.

"Smithy!"

"Smithy!" repeated all the Famous Five together.

They glanced towards Vernon-Smith, still whispering with Skinner about the two-thirty at Wapshot. Then they stared at Bunter. So far as they could see, there was no clue, no shadow of a clue, to the ownership of that queer paper. It was, to all appearance, a leaf tom from a pocket-book, with nothing whatever on it, save that line of capital letters, which so far as they could see afforded no clue at all. If Bunter had, from blinking at that paper, discovered the owner, it had to be admitted that he equalled, if he did not beat, the celebrated detective of Baker Street.

"Just Smithy!" said Bunter, carelessly. "Elementary, my dear Watson—I-I mean, easy enough to me, you fellows. All you need, to work out a mystery, is a cool, clear, powerful intellect—like mine, you know."

"Ye gods!" murmured Lord Mauleverer.

"Is this where we say 'wonderful'?" asked Johnny Bull, sarcastic again.

"Oh, really, Bull—."

"How do you know it's Smithy's, Bunter, if it is Smithy's?" asked Harry Wharton.

"No 'if' about it," answered Bunter. "It's Smithy's. Like me to tell you what it means, too?"

"Oh, my hat! Can you?"

"Of course!"

"I don't think!" remarked Nugent.

"The don't-thinkfulness is terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, run on, Bunter," said Bob. "Construe!"

"All right! Big Oak—that's the name of a racehorse," said Bunter. "Can't be anything else, from the rest of it, you know. W.II. That's Wapshot two—the two o'clock race at Wapshot—I suppose you fellows know that the Wapshot races are on—now. S.P.—that's starting-price. See?"

"Oh, my hat!"

Harry Wharton and Co. stared at Bunter, and at the paper in his fat hand. And they stared at one another. Whether Bunter was right or wrong, he certainly had read a meaning into that mysterious sentence.

Billy Bunter grinned complacently.

Next to eating, in Bunter's list of earthly delights, was showing off! And he was showing off, now, to great effect. His gifts as a Sherlock Holmes had enabled him to elucidate that mysterious paper, which had utterly puzzled every other fellow who had looked at it.

"My only hat and sunshade!" said Bob Cherry. "It might mean that, you fellows—it must mean something, and it might mean that. But you haven't explained how you know it's Smithy's, Bunter."

"Easy!" yawned Bunter. "Every man in the Remove knows that Smithy backs horses. I know jolly well that when he writes a note to Joey Banks he always puts it in capital letters, in case of accidents."

"Smithy isn't the only black sheep here, and any other chap might do the same," said Harry.

"But—but it looks—."

"By gum!" said Bob. "Has Bunter really worked it out? If so, wonders will never cease!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Big Oak-Wapshot two o'clock—Starting Price!" repeated Harry Wharton. "By gum it does look like it! If it's Smithy's, and Quelch saw it and guessed, it would mean the long jump for Smithy. Phew!"

"S.P. always means Starting Price," said Bunter. "It was really that that gave me the clue. Then the rest was easy."

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"Get ready to eat your hat, Johnny, and your football boots after it!" he said.

A snort from Johnny Bull.

"We'll have it clear first," he said. "If that paper's Smithy's, he can say so—he will want it back, if it's anything like what Bunter makes out. Call him."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, Smithy!" roared Bob Cherry. The Bounder, deep in discussion with Skinner, on the urgent and important topic of the two-thirty at Wapshot, looked round irritably.

"What—?" he snapped.

"Come over here, Smithy—something of yours here—."

"What do you mean?" snapped Vernon-Smith.

"Have you lost something?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, come here and look at this."

The Bounder, irritably, left Skinner, and came across to the group by Bunter's armchair. Billy Bunter gave a fat wink.

"All right, Smithy," he grinned. "Nobody's going to give you away, old man! We're keeping it dark."

"What are you driving at, you fat fool?" was the Bounder's ungrateful reply.

"Oh, really, Smithy—."

"Look at that, Smithy." Bob took the paper from the fat Owl's fat fingers, and held it for Vernon-Smith to see. "Is that yours?"

The Bounder stared at it. "No!" he answered.

CHAPTER 4

NOT SO WONDERFUL

"HE, he, he!"

That fat cachinnation came from Billy Bunter. It implied that Bunter, at all events, did not place much faith in Smithy's denial that the paper was his.

Vernon-Smith gave him a dark look, and then glanced round at the other fellows, unpleasantly.

"What's this game?" he snapped. "What's that silly paper, and what makes that fat idiot think that it belongs to me?"

"Somebody dropped it about, and it blew in at this window," explained Bob. "It must mean something—chop wouldn't have written it out just for nothing. If it isn't yours—."

"I've said that it isn't!"

"All right, all right—don't fly off the handle, old bean," said Bob, good-humouredly. "The way Bunter's worked it out, it looks as if it might be. I sort of seem to have heard that you sometimes send little notes to a Johnny who knows about horses—."

"In capital letters—he, he, he!" contributed Bunter. "So you've nosed that out, have you?" said the Bounder, with another dark look at the fat Owl. "You'll do too much nosing one of these days, Bunter." He stared at the paper. "Does that rubbish mean anything?"

"Well, you wouldn't know, if it isn't yours," said Bob, "but Bunter has made it mean something, or fancies he has—."

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Clever lad!" sneered the Bounder. "I can't make head or tail of it—but Bunter, of course, has the brains. What does he make of it? "

"Big Oak, a racehorse—W.II, the two o'clock at Wapshot—S.P., starting price," said Bob. "How's that?"

"The fat fool!"

"You don't think it means that, Smithy?" asked Harry Wharton.

The Bounder laughed contemptuously.

"Does that fat Owl fancy himself a Sherlock Holmes or a Ferrers Locke?" he yapped. "How could it possibly mean that, when there's no two o'clock race at Wapshot at all. The racing begins at two-thirty."

"Oh!" exclaimed all the juniors together.

They were not so well up in such matters as the Bounder. They knew that the races were on at Wapshot, but that was all. Smithy, probably, knew the time of every race, and the name of every horse entered. Such abstruse knowledge often helped him to get rid of his too ample pocket-money. Certainly, Bunter's interpretation of the mysterious document had sounded plausible. But if there was no two o'clock race at Wapshot, it appeared that Sherlock Holmes the Second had not quite hit the nail on the head like Sherlock Holmes the First.

"I shan't be eating that hat after all!" remarked Johnny Bull.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And Big Oak's the name of a racehorse, is it?" went on Smithy. "I've been over the Wapshot list pretty thoroughly, and haven't come across it. I've never heard of a horse named Big Oak, if Bunter has."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. He looked quite blank.

Vernon-Smith gave a contemptuous sniff, turned on his heel, and walked back to the corner where he had been conferring with Skinner. Grinning faces looked at the fat Owl in the armchair.

"Try again, old fat man," chuckled Bob.

"I—I—I say, you fellows," stammered Bunter. "I—I fancy I've got it right, whatever Smithy says. S.P. jolly well means starting price, I know that. If W.II. doesn't mean the two o'clock, it means the second race, see—it might mean that just as well. So it stands to reason that Big Oak must be the name of the horse. Smithy don't know everything."

"S.P. might be the initials of the chap who wrote it," said Johnny Bull.

"And if that's so, it looks as if the paper's Bunter's."

"Mine? " howled Bunter.

"Yes, yours, from the initials at the end—."

"You silly ass, the letters are S.P.—."

"That stands for Stout Porker!" said Johnny.

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

"Why, you-you-you—!" gasped Bunter.

"You're not the only Sherlock Holmes here, Bunter," chuckled Bob. "Now, if this paper's Bunter's—."

"It ain't!" howled Bunter.

"Well, you didn't believe Smithy when he said it wasn't his, so you can't expect to be believed when you say it isn't yours!" said Bob, shaking his head. "Now, if this paper's Bunter's, the 'W' may stand for 'Waddle'. That seems to fit Bunter."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That 'II' might stand for eleven, just as much as for two!" said Nugent. "Think it reads 'Want Elevenses—Stout—Porker'. Looks like yours in that case, Bunter."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!" hooted Bunter.

"Well, we shan't work it out at this rate," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Sherlock Holmes the Second has let us down, and we can't make it out ourselves. Better keep it in your pocket. Bob, till you hear of somebody looking for it."

"Right-ho." agreed Bob, and he slipped the crumpled paper into his pocket, where, as the talk turned on football, he soon forgot all about it.

But a little later, when Bob Cherry was going out of the Rag, Lord Mauleverer quietly detached himself from his armchair, and followed him into the passage. His lordship had listened to the talk on the subject of the mysterious paper, without making any contribution of his own, but with a thoughtful expression on his face. He tapped Bob on the arm in the passage, and Bob looked round.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!"

"About that paper, old bean." said Lord Mauleverer, quietly.

Bob laughed.

"Like to try your hand at the jolly old mystery, Mauly?" he asked. "Here it is! You couldn't do worse than Bunter."

Lord Mauleverer shook his head.

"No! But a chap who writes in that queer style is a chap who has secrets to keep. I imagine." he said. "That sort of jargon is used in case it might fall into the wrong hands."

"Not much doubt about that, I suppose," assented Bob. "But it isn't Smithy's—he said so."

"Whoever he is, he must be a bit worried at losing it," said Mauleverer.

"The initials at the end might be the clue."

"Starting Price!" grinned Bob.

"No: Stephen Price," answered Mauleverer.

Bob gave quite a jump.

"Oh, suffering crocodiles! Price of the Fifth—why, he was looking for something under the elms, about an hour ago, and was very anxious that nobody should find it for him!" he exclaimed. "I wonder—."

"He's a bad hat," said Lord Mauleverer, quietly, "but if he dropped that paper, he won't be feelin' easy about it. Goodness knows what it means—but if it's Pricey's, you can bet that it's something he would be scared for a beak or a prefect to see. They might make it out."

Bob Cherry nodded, slowly.

"Pricey is a worm," he said, "but I wouldn't like to see the Head treading on him, all the same. If it's his, he's going to have it. And he had certainly lost something, and was awfully worried about it. He's rather a rotter—."

"Might do him a good turn, all the same."

"Oh, quite!" agreed Bob. "Thanks for the tip, Mauly—I'll take it up to his study and if it's his, he can have it, and set his mind at rest."

Lord Mauleverer nodded, and ambled back into the Rag. And Bob Cherry, little doubting that Mauly, though no Sherlock Holmes, had hit the right nail on the head, tramped up the stairs, and proceeded to Stephen Price's study in the Fifth: to ascertain whether that mysterious paper belonged to Price, and if so, to hand it over to him and have done with it.

CHAPTER 5

TRIBULATIONS OF A SPORTSMAN

"BRACE up, old man!" yawned Cedric Hilton.

Price of the Fifth did not answer.

He was moving restlessly about his study, his hands driven deep into his trousers' pockets, his narrow face lined with worry. Hilton, lounging elegantly on the settee under the study window, regarded him with an expression half-bored and half-amused.

They were both "sportsmen" in that study. Both fancied themselves at the somewhat uncertain game of "spotting winners". But there was no other resemblance between them. When Cedric Hilton's selected "gee-gee" ran away with his money, Hilton would shrug his shoulders and dismiss the matter from his mind with easy nonchalance. Price would take it almost as a knock-out blow. No doubt the reason was partly because Cedric Hilton had plenty of money, and could afford to throw it away: while Price had very little, and couldn't. Both had lately dropped a "packet", over which Hilton, as usual, shrugged his shoulders, while Stephen Price looked as if he might be going to execution.

"Dash it all, old man," went on Hilton, as Price did not speak. "If it hits you like that, what's the good of goin' on with it? You're gettin' to be rather a pain in the neck in this study, Pricey."

Price scowled, still without speaking.

"We've dropped a tenner each," continued Hilton. "It's hit us both hard—I'm cleared out, clean as a whistle! Same as you are! Am I doin' a song and a dance about it?"

Price came to a halt in his restless pacing, and stood in front of Hilton, staring at him with lowering brow.

"We're not in the same boat," he said, bitterly. "You paid up to Joey Banks on the nail. I didn't! I couldn't."

"Man shouldn't back gees if he can't meet his losses!" remarked Hilton, sententiously.

"Fat lot of good telling me that now! Besides, I was certain—practically certain—that Bonny Boy would romp home. It was money for jam! You thought so too—we both thought we should be rolling in it."

Hilton laughed.

"Happy delusion!" he murmured. "Now old Joey's rolling in my ten quids, and if he isn't jolly soon rolling in yours, Pricey, you'll hear from him."

"Do you think I haven't heard from him already?" snarled Price. "It was a week ago, and I've heard from him more than once. He's made it quite plain that there will be a row if he isn't paid."

"Dash it all, you've got to pay him!" said Hilton.

"The man's square, in his own way—he pays up if he loses."

"How often's that?" sneered Price.

"That's not the point. He doesn't pick your gee for you. You go into it of your own accord, and back your fancy, and he takes you on. Nothin' to make you bet with him if you don't choose to."

"Well. I can't pay."

Hilton sat upright on the settee, and looked directly at Price. His careless face had become very serious.

"Look here, Pricey, that won't do." he said. "If you hadn't the money to meet a possible loss, you were a mad ass to lay ten quid on Bonny Boy. It was two to one, and you'd have bagged twenty if Bonny Boy had pulled it off. You'd have taken it fast enough. Now you say you can't pay! There will be some fat in the fire when Joey Banks gets that into his head."

"I—I thought I—I might be able to—to borrow it, if it turned out badly," muttered Price.

Hilton's lip curled.

"Thanks!" he said, drily. "Well, there's nothin' in that—I'm as stony as you are. You'll have to raise it somehow, and you'd better see Banks and ask him for time. And you'd better brace up, too," he added, with a touch of scorn. "If you go about with a face as long as a fiddle, somebody may begin to take notice—Prout's had an eye on you more than once, and Wingate doesn't trust you as far as he can see you. Pull yourself together."

Price scowled at him.

"That isn't all," he muttered. "I—I—I'm worried about something I've lost—it's been on my mind all the afternoon. If anybody found it—"

"Oh, gad! What's the worry now?" asked Hilton, impatiently. "What the dickens have you lost, then?"

"A note!" muttered Price. "I—I've got to see Banks, and ask him for time, as you've said. Well, I wrote him a note—"

"You ditherin' ass!" exclaimed Hilton, aghast. "You wrote a note to Joey Banks, and dropped it about the school? Mad?"

"It just happened," muttered Price. "Just one of those things! I wrote it on a leaf of my pocket-book and tore it out, and was looking for an envelope, when that fool Coker came into the study—and the sudden draught from the door blew it off the table—the window was wide open, and—and—before I could grab at it, it was gone."

"You ass!"

"Could I help it?" snarled Price. "I—I'd have smashed that idiot Coker—."

"If he'd have let you!" grinned Hilton. "What did you do? You needn't tell me that you didn't smash Coker—I can guess that one!"

"I cut down to the quad at once, to look for it? But you know how windy it's been all day. I couldn't find it. Goodness knows where it may have blown to. I've been hunting for it ever since. Might blow in at Prout's study window for all I know—or the Head's!" muttered Price, desperately.

"I had enough on my mind already—and now this!"

Hilton looked at him, with more than a touch of scorn in his look. He was Price's pal—he was too easy-going to keep the black sheep of the Fifth at arm's length as often he would have liked to do. But his feeling for his "pal" was chiefly a good-natured and tolerant contempt. At the present moment he was feeling much more contempt than tolerance. Price, in his career as a "sportsman", took risks which better fellows might have hesitated to take. But he had not the courage of his misdeeds: the first shadow of danger was enough to shake his nerve.

"So your note to Joey Banks is blowing about Greyfriars somewhere?" said Hilton.

"Yes!"

But for the love of Mike, you weren't fool enough to put in anythin' they could nail you on!" exclaimed Hilton. "Accidents might happen any time."

"Of course not," snapped Price. "It was written in capitals—nobody could possibly know the hand. And it was in the code we always use with Banks—only initials that he understands."

Hilton drew a breath of relief.

"That's all right, then! If nobody could trace it to you, what does it matter? What are you ditherin' about?"

Price gave him an evil look.

"You never know!" he muttered. "Of course, it may blow anywhere, and be lost. But—but if Prout happened to pick it up—or Wingate—or Gwynne—or some fag who showed it round asking fellows what it meant—you never know what might happen. Prout actually came on me while I was looking for it this afternoon, and offered to help me—I told him I'd dropped a stamp—luckily that was good enough for him, and he waddled off."

"Prout couldn't have got on to it, if he'd seen it—at any rate he couldn't have connected it with you—."

"It's not the sort of thing a fellow wants his form-master to see! I know it's all right—nobody could make it out, but—but—."

"But you've got no more nerve than a rabbit!" said Hilton. "For goodness sake, brace up, and—."

Tap!

Hilton broke off, as a tap came at the study door. It opened, and a ruddy face, surmounted by a mop of flaxen hair, looked into the study. It was really quite a pleasant face to look upon: but Hilton gave it a frown, and Price a black, bitter, threatening scowl. Howsoever cheery and pleasant, the face of the Remove junior who had leap-frogged over his back was not likely to please Stephen Price.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" said Bob Cherry, cheerily. Price clenched his hands, hard.

"You cheeky young scoundrel!" he said, between his teeth. "What have you come to this study for?"

"Not because it bucks a fellow to see your chivvy, Pricey." answered Bob.

"How're your poor knees? You shouldn't have taken that tumble, you know. You should have tucked in your tuppenny—."

Price made a stride towards him, with clenched fists.

He was in a mood to punch somebody. He would have liked to "smash" Horace Coker, for having been the inadvertent cause of that unfortunate episode. But smashing the hefty Horace was far beyond Price's powers. Punching a Remove junior was a much easier proposition.

Hilton, however, pushed him back.

"Hold on," he said. "Perhaps the kid's come here with a message or something. What do you want here, Cherry?"

"Nothing," answered Bob.

"Take it and go, then!" snapped Hilton.

"Wrap it up for me!" suggested Bob.

"Look here, get out of the way, Cedric," snarled Price.

"That cheeky young cad played leap-frog over my back, while I was bending looking for—for something, under the elms, and I barked my knees. I'm going to—."

"You never found what you were looking for, Pricey?" grinned Bob. "Is this it?"

He held out a crumpled paper.

Price jumped, almost clear of the floor. He could hardly believe his eyes as he stared at that paper, and read thereon: BIG OAK. W.II. S.P. It was the lost paper that had blown out of his study window.

"Oh!" he gasped.

"Oh!" repeated Hilton. He too stared at the paper, and then at Bob Cherry. "Do you know what that means, kid?"

"Haven't the foggiest unless the initials at the end are Pricey's," answered Bob. "If it's yours, Price, here it is."

He held it out, and Price, almost convulsively, snatched it from his hand. Bob grinned. There was no doubt that Maily had hit the right nail on the head, though no rival of Sherlock Holmes like Billy Bunter. That mysterious document certainly belonged to Price of the Fifth.

Price crumpled it in his hand.

"Where did you find it?" he muttered.

"It blew into the Rag—things are blowing about like billy-o to-day," answered Bob.

"Have you been showing it about?"

"Yes! Shouldn't know it was yours if I hadn't. Bunter thought that S.P. stood for starting price: but another chap thought they might stand for another sort of Price!" grinned Bob. "So I trotted it here to ask you." "It—it's a sort of puzzle—a—a cryptogram I was making up," said Price, as carelessly as he could. Then he scowled again. "What are you laughing at, you young rotter?" Bob Cherry chuckled.

"I can just see you rooting all over the shop looking for a bit of a puzzle you'd been making up!" he said. "Sounds sort of probable! I don't know what it means, and don't want to: but you can't gammon me, Price. Cheerio!"

And Bob, closing the door after him with a cheery bang, departed. Price stood with the crumpled paper clutched in his hand, immensely relieved, but none the less in a ratty temper. Hilton yawned.

"Well, you've got it back," he said. "Storm in a teacup! You might have thanked the kid for bringing it to you."

"I'd rather smack his head!"

"Yes, I suppose you would!" said Hilton. "You're rather a worm, Steve, old man."

"Look here—!"

"Oh, nuts!"

And Hilton, in his turn, walked out of the study, and banged the door after him. Price was left with his precious paper, and a black brow. That spot of trouble, at least, was off his mind: and he was free to concentrate on his difficulties with Mr. Joseph Banks. Which he did—though to judge by his looks, he derived no comfort whatever therefrom.

CHAPTER 6

FALSE ALARM!

"COVER!"

"What—?"

"'Ware beaks!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Likewise pre.'s!"

"Oh!"

It was in break on Wednesday morning, Five members of the Greyfriars Remove were where, at the moment, no members of the Remove ought to have been—to wit, in the spinney by the river. They came to a halt, as Bob whispered, under the wide-spreading branches of a high oak, that towered over the lesser trees that surrounded it. Footsteps, and a sound of rustling, gave warning that someone was coming, from the direction of the school.

Which was a little alarming to the Famous Five. Not that there was any harm in their presence in the spinney. In the afternoon, which was a half-holiday, they would have been free to spend all their time there, had the spirit moved them so to do. But it was in "break", and in morning break, juniors were not permitted to wander out of the precincts of Greyfriars. They were breaking a rule. There was absolutely no harm in roaming in the shady spinney, so far as that went. But rules were rules: made, from the schoolmaster's point of view, to be kept: though schoolboys did not always see eye to eye with schoolmasters on that subject. Bob Cherry had suggested a "little run", and clambered over the old Cloister wall without waiting for his comrades to argue the point: and they had followed: and there they were, Break was brief: only fifteen

minutes: but it was easy enough to take a "little run" down to the river, and get back before the bell went—if nothing happened. It looked now, however, as if something might happen!

Under the thick oak branches, they stared back the way they had come. It was a mere track, hardly a path, through the spinney, and the visibility, among trees and thickets, was not good. They could hear somebody coming, but could not see who it was. If it happened to be a master or a prefect, and he came upon them, the inevitable result was lines—it might even be "Extra", which would have been a real disaster on a half-holiday.

"Cover!" whispered Bob, again.

"The coverfulness is the proper caper!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"To be out of sight is to be out of one's mind, as the English proverb remarks."

That English proverb very nearly elicited a chuckle from the other fellows, which might have betrayed them. Fortunately, they suppressed it.

"This way!" breathed Bob.

He jumped at a branch of the oak, and swung himself up from the ground. In a moment, four other fellows had followed his example. Fellows who were out of bounds, and liable to be spotted by master or prefect, with resultant lines, had to be quick on the uptake. The Famous Five were quick enough. They vanished one after another into the thick foliage of the oak, leaving the track below vacant, for the newcomer, whoever he was, to pass. They were in ample time: it was a full minute before there were footsteps under the spreading branches of the big oak.

Unseen in the foliage, five juniors, perched on branches, waited for those footsteps to die away in the direction of the Sark.

The footsteps died away: but not in the direction of the river. They died away altogether, for the newcomer had come to a halt, under the tree.

Harry Wharton and Co. stared downward. But the thick foliage shut off the view. Someone was standing under the old oak: but who it was, they had not the faintest idea. They could not get the merest glimpse of him.

Five fellows exchanged expressive glances.

They could only conclude that they had been either seen or heard, and that the person below guessed that they had gone into cover in the oak. Otherwise, why was he stopping there?

If it was Quelch—!"

"Oh, crumbs!" murmured Bob, inaudibly. He rather wished now that he had not led the way on that little ramble in break. Rules, after all, were rules! Like most of Bob's reflections, this occurred to him too late to be of any use.

Johnny Bull gave him a very, very expressive look. He could not venture to speak, with ears so near at hand. But his look spoke whole volumes. It revealed what Johnny thought of Bob's ideas about taking a little run in break, leaving Robert Cherry in no doubt on that subject.

"Must be a beak." Frank Nugent barely whispered the words. "If it's Quelchy, he's got us."

They listened. Every moment they expected to hear a voice, with an edge on it, calling to them from below. Still, there was a chance yet: and they were not going to ask for it. They remained as silent as mice with the cat at hand, listening almost painfully.

But no call came. A whole minute elapsed—then another! Obviously, if it was Quelch, and he knew they were there, he would call to them to come down. So it couldn't be Quelch: or alternatively, as the lawyers say, he couldn't know that they were there.

Five faces brightened considerably. Why some person unknown had halted there under the oak tree, they did not know, and could not guess. But the dreaded possibility of "Extra" that afternoon faded. They were safe for the present, at least: and had only to wait and hope that the unseen

person would pass on his way, in time to allow them to get back to the school before the bell went for third lesson.

But that hope grew fainter, as more minutes passed.

Third school bell rang at eleven: and it was getting perilously near eleven now. They began to wonder whether, after all, the unseen person belonged to Greyfriars. Masters as well as boys had to be in the form-room when the bell went. It was a most exasperating thought that they might be taking cover from some complete stranger who was absolutely uninterested in them.

Again and again they tried to peer through the thick foliage below them, to glimpse the figure under the oak. But they could not see a spot of him. Once or twice they heard a movement, as if he were stirring restlessly. He was still there! But who or what he was they could get no idea. If it was some stranger, all they had to do was to drop from the oak, and walk away regardless—but if it was some Greyfriars beak—!

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Bob Cherry, almost inaudibly, as other sounds came. "Oh, scissors! Somebody else coming!"

Clearly came the sounds of someone approaching the spot through the spinney. They heard a grunt, which reminded them of a fat member of the Remove. Someone was out of breath.

"Oh! Here you are, Joey!" exclaimed a voice. And as they heard it, Harry Wharton and Co. started, and gave one another eloquent glances.

They knew that voice! It was the sharp, almost shrill voice, of Price of the Fifth! It was Stephen Price, of the Fifth Form, who was waiting under that tree: it was on account of Price of the Fifth that they had taken cover in the oak, and were risking being late for third school! Price of the Fifth—who did not matter a bean! They did not care if Price, or a dozen Prices, saw them out of bounds in morning break. Their feelings, at that moment, were almost too deep for words.

"'Ere I am, Mister Price," came a surly voice. "I got your note, and I come, and if you've got the tenner—."

"Quiet, Banks," came a hurried mutter.

"Cor'! There ain't nobody about, and ain't we met 'ere, in the old spot, more times that a covey can remember? Look 'ere, Mister Price, I got your note all right this morning, and 'ere I am, and you know what I want, and I 'ope that it's all right now."

"Come behind the tree—somebody might pass."

"Oh, all right!"

"I—I want to talk to you, Joey." Price's voice had a tremble in it. "I—I want to explain—."

Price was suddenly interrupted.

Had the juniors in the branches of the oak shared the tastes of William George Bunter, of their form, they might have been interested in a conversation not intended for their ears. But Harry Wharton and Co. had not the slightest desire to hear any of the dingy secrets of the sportsman of the Fifth: indeed, they would have strongly objected to it. They knew now that there was no danger in showing up: they did not care a bean for Price of the Fifth, and not the ghost of a bean for the disreputable racing man he had met under the big oak. Bob Cherry started on the downward path, swinging from one branch to another, and what interrupted Price's remarks to Mr. Banks was the sight of a pair of long legs suddenly swinging out of the branches above him.



PRICE STARED AT THOSE LEGS, HIS EYES ALMOST STARTING FROM HIS FACE.

Price stared at those legs, his eyes almost starting from his face. Mr. Banks stared at them, his eyes popping too.

"Cor'!" ejaculated Mr. Banks.

Price did not stop to ejaculate! Neither did he stop to get a view of the rest of Bob! The legs were enough for him! He knew that someone was in the tree, and coming down. Who it was he did not know, and did not stop to surmise. He knew that the next second somebody, whoever it was, would see him in company with the disreputable bookmaker, which, if talked about in the school, might land him in the biggest spot of trouble of all his career as a sportsman! That was enough for Price. He shot away like an arrow from a bow, leaving Joey Banks gaping, and was crashing away at top speed through the spinney when Bob Cherry, swinging from the branch, dropped to the ground, followed in a few moments by four more breathless juniors.

"Cor'!" repeated Mr. Banks, staring at them. "Come on, you men!" panted Bob.

Five fellows streaked away. They had no more than time—if they had time—to get back to the school before the bell rang. Price had already vanished: Harry Wharton and Co. vanished after him: and Mr. Joseph Banks, who had arrived there in the hope of collecting a "tenner" from the Fifth-form sportsman, was left staring—the sole inhabitant of the spinney.

CHAPTER 7

DROPPING IN ON COKER

"SHUT up. Potter—."

"But—." said Potter.

"I said shut up!" remarked Horace Coker.

"But—!" said Greene.

"Cheese it. Greene." said Coker.

"Look here, the bell's going!" exclaimed Potter.

"I know that!" answered Coker, calmly. "If you think I'm deaf, George Potter, and can't hear the bell, you're mistaken, see? I can hear it all right. Now shut up, and let a fellow speak!"

Potter of the Fifth looked at Greene, of that form. Greene looked at Potter. Both of them breathed rather hard. The bell was going for third school. Most fellows headed for the form-rooms at its clang. That was what Potter and Greene wanted to do, like other fellows. They did not want to be late for Prout. Only that morning, Coker had failed to find his books in time, and had delayed them five minutes for second lesson: and Prout had been crusty. He had rapped at them, all three: in fact he had, as Coker said afterwards with deep indignation, talked to Fifth-form men as Twigg might have talked to fags in the Second form. That, for Horace Coker, was a matter for indignation, and perhaps reprisals! For Potter and Greene it was a tip not to be late again. Still, they shut up, and waited impatiently for Coker to get a move on. They had to be tactful with Coker, for two excellent reasons. It was not because Horace Coker was, as he seemed to imagine, a man having authority, saying "Do this!" and he doeth it. It was not because they were interested in what Coker had to say: indeed they couldn't have been more uninterested. Nevertheless, there were two good reasons for exercising tact towards the rugged Horace. The first was, that Coker was standing a feed that afternoon at the Arcade in Courtfield: one of those lavish spreads which made Coker's friends feel that with all his faults they loved him still! The second reason was, that Coker was hourly expecting a handsome tip from his Aunt Judy, who seldom left her dear Horace short of that necessary article, cash. Tips from Aunt Judy meant that Coker's study, for days afterwards, was like unto a land flowing with milk and honey: and naturally his pals came in for a generous share of the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Two such reasons were sufficient to cause Potter and Greene to shut up, as bidden, and to linger, in momentary dread of the bell stopping, and landing them in another jaw from Prout. But they breathed very hard. Coker of the Fifth was sitting on the old stone seat, under the Cloister wall—a rather secluded spot. Why he had chosen that secluded spot to wander to in break Potter and Greene did not know—yet. But there he was, sitting on the old stone, his long legs stretched out, his hands in his trousers pockets, a dogged expression on his rugged face: apparently a fixture, passing by the bell for school as the idle wind which he regarded not. That old stone seat was sometimes used as a stepping-stone, by reckless fellows who clambered over the wall at that out-of-the-way corner. But that was not why Coker was there. He had no idea of going out of bounds in break. He was there, apparently, to sit on the seat, stretch his legs, frown, and lay down the law to his long-suffering pals. Having reduced them to silence, Coker did not immediately say whatever it was he had to say. He frowned thoughtfully. Potter and Greene would have supposed that he was thinking something out, if they had ever known Coker to do any thinking. They waited with growing impatience: and Potter ventured to speak at last. "The bell will be stopping in a tick, Coker." "Let it!" said Coker, briefly. "Prout will be shirty again!" ventured Greene. "Let him!" said Coker, with the same brevity as before. Potter and Greene looked at each other, and at Coker. Coker seemed a fixture. What the idea was, if there was any idea at all, Potter and Greene could not guess. It seemed improbable that there were any ideas in Coker's head. But clearly he was up to something. "Don't squirm about like cats on hot bricks," said Coker, calmly. "We're not going in yet. At least, I'm not."

"But the bell—!"

"And Prout—!"

"Never mind the bell and Prout," said Coker, with the same calmness. "I can hear the bell, and I don't care a boiled bean for Prout. We were five minutes late in second school. What did Prout do?"

"Jawed us," said Potter. "We don't want any more."

"Might be lines, or Extra," urged Greene. "Old Pompous can be fierce when he's got his rag out."

"He can't scare me!" said Coker, disdainfully.

"Eh? Oh! No! But—let's cut in, old chap—."

"I'm not going to cut in! I'm staying here till ten minutes past eleven," said Coker. "Prout jawed us for being five minutes late, as if we were a parcel of fags in Twigg's form, or a bunch of inky young ticks in the Remove. Let's see how he likes it when we're ten minutes late instead of five."

"Oh!" gasped Potter. "Oh!" echoed Greene.

"That's the idea!" said Coker. "Prout's getting a bit too big for his size in collars. He can't talk to men in the Fifth like Wiggins talks to fags in the Third! He can't jaw me like Quelch jawing Bunter. I'm sitting here for the next ten minutes, and chance it."

"You ass!" gasped Potter.

"What? What did you say, George Potter?"

"I—I—I." Potter remembered the spread at the Arcade, and the coming tip from Aunt Judy. "I—I—I mean, look here, old fellow, you can't defy Prout like that—!"

"Can't I?" said Coker, grimly.

"We can't, anyhow!" hooted Greene. He too, remembered the Arcade, and Aunt Judy's tip! But there was a limit! If Horace Coker fancied that he could erect the standard of rebellion at Greyfriars, Greene did not share that fancy. Spread or no spread, tip from Aunt Judy or no tip, William Greene was not going to be landed in a row with Prout.

Coker gave a contemptuous snort.

"If you funk sticking to a pal, you can cut off!" he said. "I'm sticking here, as I said. Old Pompous can't scare me."

"But, my dear chap—!" pleaded Potter.

"No good arguing!" said Coker. "I've thought it out, and made up my mind—it's time somebody stood up to Prout! It's fixed and settled, like the laws of the Swedes and Nasturtiums. See?"

"But I say—!" moaned Potter.

"Shut up, old chap."

"The bell's stopping!" said Greene. "Let it stop!"

Potter and Greene paused one more moment. To abandon Coker, to leave him alone in his glory, as it were, meant risking that spread at the Arcade, and subsequent spreads in the study when Aunt Judy's tip materialised. But it was only for one more moment that they paused. Fellows in a school really couldn't defy their form-master, though Horace James Coker seemed to fancy that they could. If it was, as Coker said, time that somebody stood up to Prout, Potter and Greene had no desire to do the standing, or any intention of doing it. Just one more moment they hesitated: then, as if moved by the same spring, they bolted together out of the Cloisters, and raced for the House.

A snort of scorn from Coker followed them. He did not stir.

Prout had jawed him, like a fag, before all the Fifth, for being five minutes late that morning! Well, Coker was jolly well going to show him! Deliberately, he was going to sit for ten minutes after the bell: sitting there being his method of standing up to Prout.

Perhaps, after his friends were gone, Coker felt a little inward uneasiness. So long as he had to encounter and overcome opposition, Coker

thought of nothing but encountering and overcoming it. Left without opposition, other aspects of the matter presented themselves to his mind, into which a little doubt crept.

Still, he did not stir! What he had said, he had said!

If he raced after Potter and Greene now, what would it look like? Blowing off his mouth, and then cutting in and kow-towing to Prout like any other fellow! Wouldn't they just grin?

Coker frowned and sat tight. He was jolly well going through with it now. He was going to sit it out for ten minutes.

No doubt he would have done so, had not the unexpected happened. If Coker had thought of all the occurrences that could possibly occur in that secluded spot, the very last he would have thought of was the possibility of some fellow suddenly clambering over the wall against which he sat and swinging down on his head! That really was not the sort of thing that any fellow would have expected to occur.

But that was what occurred.

Suddenly, there was a brushing sound on the wall, and as Coker, in surprise, looked up, a hurried and breathless clamberer came swinging over, right above his head. That clamberer could not possibly have expected the stone seat under the wall to be occupied, as it was five minutes past eleven, and every man at Greyfriars was booked for the form-rooms at eleven o'clock. Naturally, he expected to land on the stone seat. In the unexpected circumstances, he landed on Horace Coker.

Crash!

Coker uttered a startled roar, which the Bull of Bashan could hardly have beaten, as a foot clumped on his head, and another on his ear. Then he was roiling off the stone seat, with a surprised clamberer roiling over him.

"Oh!" gasped the newcomer.

He sat up, dizzily, on Coker's waistcoat. But he sat there only for a breathless moment. Then he jumped up and tore away. Coker, blinking after him with dizzy eyes, recognised Price of the Fifth as he tore.

"Wurrrrrrgggh!" gurgled Coker.

Price vanished. Coker staggered to his feet. He rubbed his head with one hand, his ear with the other, and spluttered for breath. The crash of Price descending on his head, followed by the crash on the old stone flags, had quite knocked Coker out, for the moment.

He tottered to the stone seat under the wall, and sat down there again, his head spinning. Price, apparently, had been out of bounds in break, and had returned in a terrific hurry, late for third school. It did not occur to Coker that other fellows might also have been out of bounds in break, and might also be returning in a hurry. He sat and gasped for breath, and rubbed his damages, in happy unconsciousness of what was coming.

It came suddenly. Again there was a brushing sound on the wall behind him, and before Coker could think of dodging, or even of looking up, the largest pair of feet in Greyfriars Remove swung over and landed on him. The rest of Bob Cherry, followed at once.

"Wha-a-at-oh-oooh-gooooogh-!" stuttered Coker, as Bob, who expected to land on the stone seat, landed on him instead, just as Price had done, and sprawled headlong over him.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Bob, as he sprawled. "What the jolly old thump—who the dickens—look out, you men—!"

But the "men" who were following Bob over the wall had no time to look out. Johnny Bull was already swinging over, and after him came Harry Wharton, followed by Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. Had the old stone seat been unoccupied as naturally they expected it to be at that time, they would have landed on it and jumped to the ground. As it

was, it was occupied by Bob sprawling over Horace Coker, and four fellows added themselves to the mix-up. It was a matter of seconds, and nobody knew what was happening till it happened.

"Look out—oh, my hat—!"

"Who—what—oh, crumbs!"

"Ooooh!"

"Oh, crikey!"

Coker, dizzier than ever, rolled on the stone flags. Five Remove men rolled over him and one another. They rolled, and sprawled, and yelled, in a state of great surprise. "Coker!" gasped Harry Wharton, sitting up. "That fathead Coker! What are you sticking there in the way for, you ass?"

"That terrific fathead Coker!"

"That blithering idiot Coker—."

"Come on!" exclaimed Bob, first on his feet. "We're late! Cut on."

He rushed away and his breathless chums rushed after him. They did not stop to ask Coker whether he was hurt. But no doubt they knew that he was.

They disappeared at top speed.

"Wooooooogh!" moaned Coker. "You young villains! I'll—groogh—smash you! I'll—oooooh!—spiflicate you! Oh, gum; oooooogh."

A rumped, crumpled, untidy, indeed dilapidated Coker, gurgled for breath, and rubbed places, too numerous to enumerate, where he had aches and pains. He was busy for quite a long time—too busy to remember class with Mr. Prout. When at length he tottered away, he was still a little winded, still rubbing aches and pains, and not merely ten minutes, but half an hour late for form with the Fifth.

CHAPTER 8

BUNTER IS OBLIGING!

BILLY BUNTER blinked up at the letter-rack, with a deeply-interested blink. Only one letter, as it happened, was sticking in the rack, and that one was not addressed to W. G. Bunter. It was addressed to H. J. Coker. Nevertheless, the Owl of the Remove was deeply interested in it. The Remove were out after third school: with five exceptions. Harry Wharton and Co. had been six or seven minutes late. It had been past eleven when they cut out of the spinney: and dropping in on Coker had caused further delay. They were kept in for a quarter of an hour after class as a reward. Luckily, it did not occur to Mr. Quelch that they had been out of bounds, or he might have made it "Extra School". But they were late: and Quelch was a whale on punctuality. So the five had to sit it out in the form-room for fifteen minutes: while the rest of the form streamed out into the fresh air. Excepting Billy Bunter, for whom the open spaces had no special appeal, and who was more interested in the letter-rack.

Fellows generally took their letters from the rack in break. Bunter, as usual, had turned up in break, in the hope that a postal order, which he had long been expecting, might have materialised at last. It hadn't! But hope springs eternal in the human breast. It was possible, if improbable, that a letter might have been overlooked, and stuck in the rack later. So the fat Owl gave the letter-rack a hopeful blink, before going out. One blink was enough to cause that faint hope to fade away: there was no letter for Bunter. But he did not roll on his way. He remained with his eyes and spectacles fixed on the letter for Horace Coker.

It had been there in break, and Bunter had noticed it then. Coker had not taken it. Coker of the Fifth, his mind fully occupied with indignation against Prout, and his determination to show Old Pompous where he got off, had not thought of looking for letters. So there it still was, on its lonely own: with Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles glued on it. A fat hand was reaching up to it, when a Fifth-form man came along to the rack. Billy Bunter was tall sideways: and the letter was a little out of his reach. He was standing on his toes, stretching out fat fingers, when Price of the Fifth came up. Price had been too busily occupied in break that morning to look for letters, so he had come along to look now. He stared at Bunter.

"Leave that letter alone, you young tick!" snapped Price. "It's not for you."

Bunter blinked round at him.

"I say. Price, hand it down to me, will you?" he asked.

"I tell you it's not for you! Are you as blind as a bat?" snapped Price, impatiently.

"I know it ain't for me—I'm going to take it to Coker," explained Bunter.

"He must have forgotten to look for letters this morning, and I jolly well know that he will be jolly glad to get that one."

"Mind your own business," suggested Price.

"Well, a fellow likes to be obliging," said Bunter. "If Coker's tenner is in that letter, he ought to have it, you know. I heard him telling Potter yesterday that his Aunt Judy was tipping him a tenner, and that letter's addressed in the old sketch's fist. I'm going to take it to him. Know where Coker is? "

"No: and you'd better leave Coker's letters alone, you young ass!" answered Price. After glancing at the rack, he walked on. There was a scowl on his face as he went. That blockhead Coker, it seemed, was getting a "tenner" as a tip: while he, Stephen Price, was at his wits' end to raise that very sum to keep Joey Banks from making bad trouble. It was very irritating to Price.

"Beast!" murmured Bunter, as Price departed. He blinked up at the letter again.

As likely as not, Aunt Judy's tenner was in that letter.

The old sketch, as Bunter respectfully described her, never thought of registering a letter. If the tenner was there, Coker, of course, would be very glad to have it. He had forgotten, apparently, to look for his letters that morning, and even Coker would feel obliged to a fellow who took him his letter—if there was indeed a tenner in it! Feeling obliged, and being in such ample funds, might he not possibly be "touched" for the loan of half a crown, by a fellow who had been disappointed about a postal order? There was a sporting chance of it, at least: and the fat Owl was going to try it on.

He stretched himself to his fullest extent, and succeeded in getting down the letter. With it clutched in a fat hand, he rolled out of the House, to look for Coker of the Fifth.

Coker, in fact, was in the quad, with Potter and Greene, and not very far away. But the visibility was never good to Bunter, even with the aid of his big spectacles, and he blinked round in vain. Then he jabbed a fat thumb into the ribs of Hobson of the Shell.

"Here, I say, Hobson, know where Coker is?" he asked.

"Over there by the elms, you fat ass. You'd better steer clear of Coker," added Hobson. "He's in a frightful wax—in a row with his beak."

Heedless of that warning, Billy Bunter rolled off in the direction indicated. Even if a fellow was in a frightful wax, he would be bucked to get a letter with a tip of a tenner in it. If Bunter had been in a wax, a

much smaller tip than a tenner would have caused his wax to melt like butter in the sunshine.

Three Fifth-form men were standing in a group under the elms. Coker was talking to Potter and Greene, who were bearing it with great fortitude. Coker's voice was not pitched low: a dozen other fellows could hear what he was saying, and some of them glanced at him and grinned. Coker's voice was seldom low, and in a state of indignation it was louder than usual.

"Three hundred lines!" Coker was saying. "You heard him, you fellows—he gave me three hundred lines! That's Prout!"

"You were jolly near half an hour late in form!" murmured Potter.

"Are you standing up for Prout, George Potter?"

"Eh? Oh! No! But—."

"I hope not!" said Coker, darkly. "If you've got anything to say for Prout, you'd better not say it to me. Three hundred lines! I—."

"I say, Coker!" squeaked Billy Bunter.

Coker glanced, or rather glared, round at him. Coker had no use for fags at the best of times. And certainly he was not in his bonniest mood now.

"Get out of it, you fat freak!" he snapped. "Oh, really, Coker—."

"Cut!" snapped Coker: he made a motion with his foot.

Bunter backed away: but at the same time held out the letter. Coker stared at it.

"I—I say, Coker, you forgot to look for letters, and this was in the rack, so I've brought it to you!" squeaked Bunter. "I say, I thought you might like to have it if that tenner's in it, you know—."

"What do you know about my tenner?" yapped Coker.

"Oh! Nothing! I never heard you tell Potter—," stammered Bunter.

"Better open it, Coker," said Potter. Both he and Greene were interested in that letter. They were finding Coker, at present, a little wearing. If Aunt Judy's munificent tip had arrived, it would be a consolation.

Coker nodded, grabbed the letter from a fat hand, and jerked open the envelope. He unfolded the missive within, and two crisp slips of engraved paper glimmered in the sunshine. Billy Bunter's little round eyes almost bulged through his big round spectacles at the sight of two £5 notes. Potter and Greene, who had been wondering how on earth they could get away from Coker and his tale of woe, felt that, after all, old Horace was a pal, and that it was up to them, as pals, to bear with him. Undoubtedly he had his good points—he had, in fact, two of them in his hand at that very moment!

Fivers, however, were not so much to Coker of the Fifth as they were to Billy Bunter, or to his devoted pals Potter and Greene. He glanced at them, and shoved them carelessly into the pocket of his blazer, and proceeded to look at Aunt Judy's letter. Coker was an affectionate nephew: and he really was fond of the kind old lady whom Billy Bunter described as a "sketch". Bunter could never have understood how Coker could be more interested in the letter than in the tip: but so it was.

"I say, Coker—!" he squeaked. "Shut up!"

"Oh! Yes! But I say. I brought you that letter just to oblige you, you know, and there's your tenner in it. and if you could lend a chap half a crown till his postal order comes—."

Coker looked at him.

"You fat tick!" he said. "What do you mean by messing about with my letter? If you'd lost it, with that tenner in it—."

"I—I say—!"

"You keep your fat paws off Fifth-form letters," said Coker. "You mess about with my letters again, and I'll smack your silly head."

"Oh, really, Coker."

"I'll smack it now," added Coker, apparently thinking it a good idea.

Smack!

"Yaroooooh!" roared Bunter.

"Now if you want another—!"

"Beast!" yelled Bunter.

He did not want another! He faded promptly out of the picture, rubbing a fat head: and wishing from the bottom of his plump heart that he hadn't been quite so obliging.

CHAPTER 9

TROUBLE IN THE FIFTH

"Looks sort of jolly!" remarked Bob Cherry.

His comrades smiled.

Price of the Fifth, at that moment, looked anything but "jolly". If all the worries and troubles of a weary world had descended, in one huge heap, on the shoulders of Stephen Price, he could hardly have looked less "jolly".

Harry Wharton and Co., strolling in the quad after dinner, came on him, leaning on a buttress, his hands driven deep into his trousers pockets, his eyes on the ground, his brow puckered and lined with troubled thought. So deep was he in his gloomy meditations, that he seemed wholly lost to his surroundings, and did not look up as the juniors came by at a little distance.

They glanced at him rather curiously. They had not forgotten the incident in break that morning, when their sudden descent from the branches of the big oak in the spinney had interrupted his interview with Joey Banks. He had vanished from the spot too promptly to have seen them: and certainly was not aware that five Remove juniors knew anything about his surreptitious meeting with the racing man in the spinney. Perhaps he was wondering who had been in that oak tree, and whether they had heard anything, as in fact they had! Not that the Co. intended to say a word about it. Price's dinky affairs were no business of theirs.

"Who wouldn't be a sportsman?" murmured Bob, with a cheery grin. "Must be sort of bracing—judging by Pricey!"

"Silly ass to show a chivvy like that about the school!" grunted Johnny Bull. "If old Pompous saw it, he might want to know."

Harry Wharton's lip curled.

"Looks like a bundle of nerves," he said. "That blackguard Banks was saying something about a tenner—looks as if Price owes him money. Blessed if I see anything in it—he would be sacked, if it came out: and he certainly doesn't look as if he was enjoying it!"

"The enjoyfulness does not appear to be terrific," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

"No doubt now what that jolly old note meant," remarked Bob. "Sherlock Holmes Bunter deduced that Big Oak was a racehorse, that there was a race at two, and that S.P. stood for 'starting price'. But when we find Pricey meeting old Banks on Wednesday morning at eleven o'clock, it sort of leaps to the eye that W stood for Wednesday, and 'II' for eleven—and 'Big Oak' was that jolly old big tree in the spinney, where they meet to talk horses. What?"

"Wonderful!" grinned Nugent.

"Elementary, my dear Watson!" chuckled Bob.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Price looked up, at the sound of laughter, and stared at the Remove fellows. He gave them a black scowl. Not that he had the remotest idea that they had been in the big oak that morning. But that was how he was

feeling. The sight of five cheery, laughing boyish faces did not seem to afford him any pleasure whatever.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob, as Price scowled. "Enjoying life, old man?"

Price's scowl grew blacker.

"Come on," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "We don't want a row with Price, fathead. Time we got changed for footer, too."

The Famous Five were passing on, when Price, his expression changing, called out.

"Here, stop a minute, Wharton."

The captain of the Remove turned back. He did not want to have anything to say to Price of the Fifth, or anything to do with him: but he stopped, to hear what he had to say.

Price detached himself from the buttress against which he had been leaning and came towards the juniors. His look was that of a fellow in a bitter evil temper who was trying to be civil. That, in fact, was precisely the state of affairs.

"Hold on a minute," he said. "Do you know whether your beak's gone out? I thought I saw him—."

"Quelch?" said Harry, in astonishment. Why Price was interested in the movements of the Remove master that afternoon was quite a mystery to the Remove juniors.

But apparently he was. "Yes, he's gone out."

"Know if he's likely to be long?" asked Price, while the Famous Five stared at him.

"Hour or two, I expect," answered Harry. "Quelch is always an hour at least when he goes on a grind. What the dickens—?"

"Oh! Nothing," said Price, and he turned his back on the juniors and walked away to the House.

"Well, my hat!" said Bob Cherry. "What is Pricey worrying about our beak for? I suppose he isn't going to put gum in his inkpot while he's out, like that fat ass Bunter."

"Hardly," grinned Frank Nugent, "but he's up to something. Jolly old mystery for Sherlock Holmes Bunter, what?"

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

"Plain enough, I think," he said. "Pricey was interrupted this morning in his pow-wow with that worm Banks. Bet you what he wants is a telephone. He can't borrow his own beak's—old Pompous is sticking in his study—we saw him at his window."

"Oh!" said Harry. "I shouldn't wonder. Must be a mad ass to risk phoning Banks from the school, if that's the Idea. Br-r-r-r! That fellow leaves one with a nasty taste in the mouth! Let's get down to the footer."

"Let's!" said Bob. And the Famous Five, dismissing Price and his dingy affairs from mind, headed for the changing-room. In the quad they passed three Fifth-form men: Coker, Potter and Greene. Potter and Greene were looking worried: Coker wrathful and disdainful. Coker was talking—his usual state. His loud voice could be heard at quite a distance.

"I said no, and I mean no! When I say a thing, I usually mean it. I've said that I'm not sticking in to do those lines for Prout! Didn't you hear me?"

"Yes, but—!" said Potter, "but—but Prout said this afternoon—."

"Oh! Yes! But—!" mumbled Greene. "Prout will expect those lines, Coker."

"I'm going down to the Arcade," said Coker. "If old Pompous thinks he can muck up my arrangements for a half-holiday, he's got another guess coming. See?"

"But, old chap," pleaded Potter. "You've simply got to do those lines. Prout's shirty already. Look here, we'll help, and we can go down to the Arcade afterwards."

"Yes, come on, and we'll all pile in," said Greene. Coker gave his anxious pals a freezing look.

"I've said that I'm going down to Courtfield now!" he retorted. "You fellows don't seem to understand plain English! I'm going—you can come or not just as you please—."

"But look here, old fellow—."

"Rot!"

Having shot out that emphatic monosyllable like a bullet, Coker turned from his friends and stalked away—and almost stalked into the Famous Five. He paused, and gave them a glare.

"Oh! You!" he exclaimed. "You jumped down on my head this morning, you cheeky young ticks."

"Nothing in it to damage, was there?" asked Bob. That question did not soothe Coker!

"Well, I'm going to smack your heads all round," he said. "I'll jolly well show you whether you cap jump on a Fifth-form man. Take that—and that—and yaroooooh!"

Coker landed one smack, of which Bob Cherry was the recipient. But he had no time to land another. The Famous Five collared him as one man, and Coker, with a roar of indignant wrath, rolled over in their grasp. A puddle left by recent rain was at hand, and Horace Coker's broad shoulders landed in it, sending up a muddy splash. Coker bellowed. Leaving him to bellow, the Remove fellows cut away to the changing-room. Coker sat up—in the puddle.

"Oh!" he gasped. He staggered to his feet, spluttering.

"Oh!" He gave Potter and Greene an almost deadly look. "What are you grinning at?"

Potter and Greene instantly ceased to grin. They realised that what had just occurred was not comic from Coker's point of view.

"Funny, ain't it?" hooted Coker. "A mob of fags up—end a Fifth-form man, and all you can do is to stand and grin. Look at me—dripping!"

Potter and Greene very nearly grinned again, as they looked. Coker certainly was rather muddy. Muddy water streamed down his back, and his trousers were in a shocking state.

"Well, you can stick here and grin, if you like!" hooted Coker. "I'm going down to the Arcade—."

"Hadn't you better change first?" asked Potter. "You look a bit damp, old man."

"Oh! Yes! I suppose so! By gum, I'll spiflicate those fags. I'd better cut in and change. I suppose."

"What about those lines, old chap—?"

"Shut UP!" roared Coker. Evidently, he had heard enough about those lines. He stalked away to the House, muddy water dripping from the tail of his blazer as he stalked.

Harry Wharton and Co. dismissed Coker from mind as easily as they had dismissed Price. There was a Form match on that afternoon with the Shell, which was quite enough to occupy the thoughts of the heroes of the Remove. In the Fifth Form there was trouble: Coker in a state of rebellion against his beak, Price in a state of torment over his debt to Joey Banks and his dread of the outcome. Happily, regardless of troubles in the Fifth, Harry Wharton and Co. played Soccer and found life quite an enjoyable proposition.

CHAPTER 10

DOWN AND OUT!

STEPHEN PRICE'S hand was shaking as he stood at the telephone in Mr. Quelch's study, and dialled a number.

Johnny Bull's guess had been correct: it was a telephone that Price had wanted.

He had not had time to talk to Joey that morning. The interruption had come too soon and too suddenly. Whether it would be of any use to talk to him, Price did not know: but he had to know what the man was going to do. His last reckless plunge had fairly landed him. He had been certain, so very certain, that his selected "gee" would romp home. No doubt the wish had been father to the thought: but the wretched black sheep of Greyfriars had had no doubts. A win would have set him up so handsomely; and Price, like so many others, contrived to believe what he wanted to believe. But that dead cert had let him down, as dead certs so often do: and he owed Joey Banks ten pounds—a sum which was utterly and hopelessly beyond his resources. That sum had been owing for a week: and Price, with hardly a few shillings in his pocket, had no prospect whatever of paying it.

Vaguely, at the back of his mind, had been the idea that Hilton would come to the rescue, as he had often done before if luck went against him. But there was no hope in that direction now. Hilton had been equally hard hit, and was as "stony" as Price. In whatever direction the miserable fellow looked, there seemed not a glimmer of hope.

It was no wonder that he was, as Harry Wharton had said, a "bundle of nerves". He had not the courage of his reckless folly. Joey Banks was suspicious and "ratty" already. Joey was, in his own dingy way, "straight": he paid if he lost. Price could not pay. What he had done was, in fact, a swindle: he would have taken his winnings if he had won, and he could not pay his losses if he lost. Joey Banks' feelings, when he realised that he had been "diddled" by a schoolboy, were likely to be very deep. He had come to that rendezvous under the big oak in the spinney, in response to Price's note, expecting to collect a "tenner". He knew now that Price had only been going to make excuses and plead for time. What was he going to do?

"Hallo!" A hard beery voice came through, and Price started out of his miserable thoughts. He was through to the "Three Fishers", where Joey was putting up during the Wapshot races.

It was, as Harry Wharton had said, a risky business to ring up such a place on a school telephone: and Price was not the fellow to take risks if he could help it. But the risk, after all, was small, with Quelch out of gates on one of his long walks. Anyhow Price had to take it: he had to get a word with Banks.

"Is Mr. Banks about?" He almost whispered into the transmitter.

"Eh? Can't 'ear you."

"I want to speak to Joe Banks," said Price, a little more loudly.

"'Oo's speaking?"

"Tell him S.P."

"All right! 'Old on: I think he's in the bar."

There was a pause, and Price stood with the receiver shaking in his hand. If Quelch should come in—if another beak, not knowing that he was out, should come to the study to speak to him—if-if-if—. A score of alarming "ifs" shook the wretched fellow's nerves as he waited. He was cautious by nature, but he had to take risks now. Neither had caution and cunning served his turn, if it came to that. He had fixed his meeting with Banks that morning at eleven o'clock, when all Greyfriars would be going into

form, prepared to be late for class himself, in order to be absolutely certain that nobody belonging to the school could possibly be in the spinney when he met Banks! Yet some juniors had been there—it was a junior schoolboy's legs he had glimpsed swinging down from the branches of the big oak, before he darted away: and he had heard, or thought he had heard, others scrambling in the tree. He wondered who they were, and whether possibly they might have heard him speaking to Banks!

"Is that you, young Price—!"

Joey's voice was gruff. It was not "Mr. Price" now, in respectful tones: far from that! It was "young Price". That alone was enough to reveal that Joey knew that his "client" either could not or would not pay, and that he was in a bitterly resentful mood about it. Price gulped for breath.

"Yes, Banks! Just a word—."

"If you want a word, wouldn't you come along 'ere, as you've done before? And bring the tenner with you."

"I—I—!" stammered Price.

"Couldn't face a man without his money, what? Did you give me a long walk this morning to tell me that you wasn't squaring? What? You can save your breath if that's it now, young Price."

"For goodness sake, don't mention names on the telephone," breathed Price, in terror.

"I'll mention 'em fast enough off the phone, if you fancy you can get away with this!" came a threatening growl. "P'raps you'd like me to give your 'eadmaster a call."

Price trembled so that the receiver almost dropped from his hand. He tried to speak, but his voice dried in his throat.

"Now we're talking, you listen ter this young Price," said Joey Banks.

"You owe me ten quids, fair and square. You ain't paid! You ain't going to pay if you can 'elp it! Don't I know? Well, you 'ear this—."

"I—I'm only asking for time!" Price moaned into the receiver. "It—it's rather a big sum, for me, Joey—."

"It ain't any bigger now than it was when you laid it on a 'orse last week, is it?" sneered Joey. "You 'ear this young Price! I've been welshed in my time, but I ain't never been welshed by a schoolboy, and it ain't going to 'appen now. You get that into your 'ead! I'll give you till this evenin'. You turn up 'ere with a tenner, and it's all right. If you don't, you can expect me to walk in at your school to-morrow morning. That's the lot!"

"Joey—listen—I say—oh, listen—Oh!"

There was no sound on the telephone. The man at the "Three Fishers" had cut off. Joey Banks had said his say: and evidently he did not want to hear anything more from Price.

The sportsman of the Fifth stood staring blankly at the silent telephone. He was not feeling much like a "sportsman" now. He was feeling like a frightened and cornered rat. His heart almost died within him, at the thought of the book-maker carrying out his threat. It meant going up to the Head—it meant the whole wretched story coming out—it meant the "sack" from the school—it meant going home in disgrace to face an angry father. That was what Price had risked in his career as a "bad hat": and now the risk had come home to roost.

For several minutes he stood there, as if stupefied, staring at the telephone. Then, remembering that he was in a form-master's study, and that Quelch might come in, he put up the receiver with a trembling hand, and almost tottered to the door. He tried to pull himself together as he slipped out of the study, and went down the passage. But his face was like chalk: if Prout had chanced to see him, Prout would certainly have taken notice. Luckily for Price, Prout was "sticking", as Johnny Bull had

expressed it, in his study: and if he was thinking about a member of his form, it was not Stephen Price, but that troublesome and headstrong and disobedient fellow, Horace Coker.

Price went out almost dazedly into the quad. He had had his word with Joey Banks now, and knew the worst—and it overwhelmed him. Another Fifth-form man was coming in, as Price went out, and he stared at him for a moment—it was rather uncommon to see a senior man of Greyfriars with mud dripping from the back of his blazer, and the seat of his trousers looking as if he had sat in a puddle. Evidently, Horace Coker had been somewhere where there was mud, wet mud and plenty of it.

Coker glared suspiciously and belligerently at Price as he passed, perhaps expecting Price to grin, as several fellows had done when Coker passed them. But Price was not feeling like grinning, and Coker's damp and muddy state did not interest him. He went on his way, and forgot Coker's existence.

Cedric Hilton was lounging in the quad, and Price hurried over to him. Hilton was smiling: he had been one of the witnesses of Coker sitting in the puddle. But his face became serious enough as he looked at Price.

"You ass!" he muttered, before Price could speak.

"Pull yourself together! Have a spot of nerve! Do you want the whole school to read in your face what you've been up to? "

"You've got to help me out, somehow, Cedric! I—I've had a word with Banks—he—he—he's coming here to-morrow if I don't pay him—," breathed Price. "You must help me somehow—."

"You know I can't."

"If you can't, I'm for it!" groaned Price.

"Well, I can't, and you know it. And don't take too much stock in what Banks says—he's ratty, and I've no doubt he believes you could pay if you liked. But he will think twice before showing his nose here—what would he get out of that? "

"It would finish me here."

"Only gas, I expect," said Hilton. "Hallo, there's old Blundell callin' me—I told him I'd play footer this afternoon."

"Look here—."

"Blundell's callin' me, Brace up: I tell you ten to one it's only gas," said Hilton, impatiently: and he walked away to join the captain of the Fifth. Price cast a glance almost of hatred after him as he went.

He wandered dismally away, and sat, or rather sank, on one of the old oaken benches under the elms. Hilton could say that it was "only gas" on Joey's part: that was easy enough for Hilton, who was not in danger. It was not easy for a fellow in sickening fear and dread.

Price sat there, trying to think it out. A little later he had a view, which did not interest him, of Horace Coker, coming out of the House newly swept and garnished. Coker, having changed, rejoined Potter and Greene, and they went out of gates together. From the direction of Little Side a cheery yell reached Price's ears.

"Goal!"

"Good old Smithy!"

Price did not even hear. Any fellow who had noticed him sitting there under the shady tree might have remarked that he looked as sick as a boiled owl. That, at any rate, was what he was feeling like, as he sat there, the most miserable fellow in Greyfriars School or out of it, thinking and thinking, wondering and wondering, what he was going to do.

CHAPTER 11

UNEXPECTED!

BILLY BUNTER looked thoughtful.

There was quite a wrinkle in his fat brow.

He was sitting in an armchair in the Rag, the only occupant of that apartment. Every other fellow was out of doors, on that crisp, golden October afternoon. Even Lord Mauleverer had ambled down to Little Side to watch his form playing Hobson and Co. of the Shell.

Bunter was not thinking about the Form match. He was not interested in soccer. Neither was he thinking about lines he had on hand for Quelch. Quelch would wait! Nor was he reflecting upon the wonderful gift he had so happily discovered himself to possess in the Sherlock Holmes line. There was only one subject that could have brought that expression of deep thoughtfulness to Bunter's fat face. That subject was food.

With practically every fellow out of the House on that fine half-holiday, opportunity knocked, as it were. There was hardly a fellow in any study. Two studies were of special interest to the tuck-hunter of the Lower Fourth—Smith's, in the Remove, and Coker's in the Fifth. Both of them were always well supplied with the things in which Bunter's fat soul delighted: And both were at his mercy.

Smithy was playing football for his form, and his study-mate, Redwing, had gone up to Hawkscliff for the afternoon. Coker of the Fifth had gone out with Potter and Greene. So there was nobody to bother Bunter, if he visited either study. The fact was, that Bunter was spoilt for choice. Like Desdemona, he did perceive a divided duty! In Smithy's study, he knew, there was a cake—in Coker's, jam—one of those large jars of home-made Jam which Aunt Judy sent to her dear Horace. Cake and jam both appealed to Bunter with a deep, strong appeal. He loved jam. On the other hand, cake was more substantial. The problem he was thinking out was the choice between cake and jam—Smithy's study, or Coker's study. There were certain details that had to be considered.

He had seen Smithy's cake—a luscious, scrumptious cake: indeed, the Bounder had almost flaunted it under his eyes, as if to tantalise him. He had told Redwing, in Bunter's hearing, that he had a cake for tea in No. 4—and he had let Bunter see him unpacking that cake, careless of the avid eyes that almost bulged through Bunter's spectacles. Bunter's eyes, and spectacles, had followed that cake hungrily, when Smithy took it up to his study. The mere thought of it made the fat Owl's mouth water.

But Smithy was one of those suspicious beasts—he often locked his study cupboard: just as if he fancied some fellow might be after his tuck! If that cake was locked in, it was beyond Bunter's reach. Coker of the Fifth was nothing like that—he never locked up anything, indeed he had been known to leave his wallet, with more pound notes in it than any other Fifth-form man ever possessed, lying on the table in the games-study: and as for his tuck, he would never have dreamed of turning a key on it. Bunter did not like Coker personally: but he did like that trait in Coker. Undoubtedly he was not a suspicious beast like Smith.

With a wrinkled fat brow, Bunter thought out that problem: and at last heaved his weight out of the armchair. He had decided on Smithy's study. If that suspicious beast had locked up that cake, Coker's came next. Bunter hoped that he hadn't.

Having negotiated the staircase at the speed of a very old and very tired tortoise, Billy Bunter rolled across the landing into the Remove passage. The door of No. 4 Study stood open.

He blinked into that study—and grinned.

One blink was enough. The study cupboard was not locked. So far from that, the door of it was a couple of inches ajar. Smithy had not even taken the trouble to snap the latch shut.

Really, it was tempting Bunter!

Bunter was not the man to resist that kind of temptation.

Smithy could have left his wallet on the table without danger: but he couldn't leave a luscious, scrumptious cake in the cupboard without the deadliest peril! The fat Owl rolled joyfully into the study.

It was wonderful luck, really. Indeed, the Bounder's carelessness was hard to understand, for he certainly had seen Bunter's greedy eyes on that cake, and he was only too well aware of Bunter's manners and customs. Often and often had he kicked the fat junior for nosing into his study cupboard. Yet, knowing that Bunter knew all about that cake, he had left it there with the cupboard door ajar, while he went down to play football! Soccer, perhaps, had occupied his mind to the exclusion of other matters. Anyhow, if that cake was there, in an unlocked cupboard, there was not going to be cake for tea after the football match. There was going to be cake for Bunter while the football match was going on. Bunter rolled across the study to the cupboard. His fat fingers grasped the handle, and jerked it wide open.

He expected, in another second, to be feasting his eyes upon that scrumptious cake! But it was the unexpected that happened.

Swooooooosh! Splash!

"Gurrrrrrrrrrrrgh!"

Billy Bunter hardly knew what happened. A wet flood suddenly smote him full in his fat face. He did not see the cake. He did not see anything. His eyes and his spectacles swam in ink!

"Wurrrggh!" gurgled Bunter.

He staggered back. A tin dish clanged unheeded. Gurgling, the fat Owl grabbed and dabbed at an inky face.

"Oh, crikey! Ow! Grooogh!" gasped Bunter.

"What—oh—oh, crumbs—oooogh—gurrrrrrrrgh!"

His face swam in ink. Ink ran down his neck. He grabbed off his spectacles and gouged ink from blinking eyes. He was smothered with ink—of the ink inky! And he was as astonished as he was inky. How a flood of ink could suddenly have descended upon him, on opening the door of a study cupboard, Bunter simply could not comprehend. All his powers as a Sherlock Holmes failed to elucidate that strange mystery.

However, as he cleared his inky vision, he began to discern what had happened. A tin dish, dripping ink, hung from a string to the inside of the cupboard door-handle. It was evidently from that tin dish that the inky flood had come.

He blinked at it with a dizzy and inky blink. Slowly he began to understand.

"Beast!" he breathed. "Oh, the awful beast! That was why he let me see the cake—urrrrrggh—he jolly well knew I should be after it—urrrrrggh—and he jolly well fixed that up—groooooogh! Beast!"



BILLY BUNTER HARDLY KNEW WHAT HAPPENED. A WET FLOOD SUDDENLY SMOTE HIM FULL IN HIS FAT FACE.

It was painfully clear at last. That tin dish, full of ink, had been perched on the top shelf in the cupboard. It was connected by a string with the inside of the door. Obviously, as soon as the door was pulled open, the string would tauten, and jerk the tin dish off the shelf—hurling its contents over the fellow who opened the door! Smithy, evidently, had planned this: no doubt as a warning to Bunter not to nose into other fellows' study cupboards! If nobody had come to the cupboard during Smithy's absence, nothing would have happened. But Bunter had come! And it had worked like a charm!

Billy Bunter dabbed an inky face with a handkerchief that was soon reduced to an inky rag. He breathed fury as he dabbed. He saw it all now—that unspeakable beast, Herbert Vernon-Smith, had laid this trap for him—and he had walked right into it!

Inky as he was, there was one consolation—one spot of balm in Gilead—the cake! Inky as he was, Bunter was prepared to devour cake.

But alas for Bunter! An inky blink into the interior of the cupboard revealed no cake, or anything else of an edible nature! That indescribable beast, Smithy, had not only laid that inky trap for Bunter, but he had parked the cake somewhere else for safety: perhaps in the locker under the window, which, as it was locked, was of no use to Bunter.

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

The cupboard was as bare as Mother Hubbard's. All that the fat Owl had gained by his surreptitious visit to Smithy's study was a flood of ink over his fat face, and the unwelcome necessity of washing the same—even Bunter realised that he needed a wash!

His feelings could hardly have been expressed in words as he rolled out of Smithy's study. True, still a ruby kindled in the vine, as old Omar expresses it: there was yet Coker's jam! Coker was not the fellow to think of playing rotten tricks like this. Coker's jam would be a consolation. But even Coker's jam had to wait till Bunter had had a wash! With inexpressible feelings, an inky and infuriated Bunter rolled away in search of soap and water.

CHAPTER 12

TWO OF THEM

"OH!" breathed Stephen Price.

He gave a little start, and then sat very still, his face white, his narrow eyes dilated: frightened by the thought that had come into his mind.

How long he had sat there, on the bench under the elm, he did not know. He had sat there thinking—thinking—thinking—till his brain seemed to reel and ache. And he could think of no way out.

Hilton did not think that Joey Banks would keep his threat. Price did not know, and could not tell. He only knew that he was scared to the very marrow of his bones. The sight of his head-master, crossing the quad in company with Mr. Prout, made him tremble. Dr. Locke did not glance in his direction—neither did Prout! But if they had known—!

And they would know! Hilton could dismiss the matter and go down to the football ground: it was not his way to worry. But he hadn't Price's cause for worry. He made little secret of the fact that he was fed up with Price and his dingy, mean, wretched troubles. He was no keen footballer, and very likely he was playing for Blundell that afternoon more to keep away from Price than for any other reason. Price, when he thought of him, felt that he hated him. Indeed, in that hour of misery, he hated everybody, including himself. What was he going to do?

He had no more chance of raising ten pounds, since Hilton had failed him, than of raising ten thousand. Even if Banks gave him time, he could hardly hope to scrape up the money by the end of the term. And Banks would not give him time. Ten pounds! And that fool, that ass, that goat, Coker, had ten pounds in his pocket—shoved carelessly into the pocket of his blazer, as if he hardly valued it—a sum sufficient to save Stephen Price from ruin. A dozen fellows had seen Coker carelessly shove those notes into his blazer pocket, Price among them—Coker did not care if all Greyfriars saw him. That ass—that goat—that fool—that hot-headed nitwit, who had nothing better to think of than a silly row with his beak—had ten pounds in his pocket, and was quite capable of forgetting that it was there, till the pound notes in his wallet ran out. Price found a little solace in mentally calling Coker all the unpleasant names he could think of.

And then, suddenly, the dreadful thought flashed into his mind, that made him start, and then sit still as if petrified. For a long, long minute he sat, motionless: and then he stirred, and glanced round him stealthily, as if he feared that some fellow passing might read that awful thought in his face.

He remembered that Coker had got muddy somehow, and had gone in to change. He must have left his muddy blazer in the House. Had he thought of transferring the banknotes from the discarded blazer? He had been excited, and he had been in a hurry; it would be like him not to think of it. If that was so, there was a "tenner" in a blazer lying about somewhere in the House, and Coker was miles away.

Price trembled.

Only in desperate extremity could such a thought have entered the mind of even a mean and unscrupulous fellow like Price of the Fifth. But it entered now, and it stayed.

If Coker had left that tenner in the blazer! Had he? Was he careless fool enough for that? He was, and more!

Indeed, if it came to that, why should he have cared? It was not likely to occur to him that money would be unsafe in a fellow's pocket, wherever

he might leave his jacket. Probably he had chucked it on his bed in the dorm, never giving it a thought. No doubt he would have transferred those banknotes to his wallet had he thought about it. But it was very likely he hadn't.

Had he or not?

Price, without actually any fixed intention in his mind, rose from the bench, and walked away to the House. With as careless an air as he could assume, he strolled in, and went up to the study landing. Coker must have changed in the dormitory. Fellows had to ask leave to go up to the dormitories in the daytime—but there was nobody about, and Price cut up the dormitory staircase at a run. Still his intention was unfixed: he was only going to ascertain whether the banknotes were there! If they were not, that settled the matter: and he almost hoped that they were not, for he knew what would happen if he found them.

He went quietly into the Fifth-form dormitory.

Coker, certainly, must have changed there, for he had to take the things from his box, to change into. Also, several spots of mud on the floor indicated that someone with mud on him had been there. But there was nothing to be seen of the muddy clothes he had taken off. He was not likely to pack garments dripping with wet mud into his box. But there was nothing to be seen of them.

Price's brow darkened. What had the fool done with them? He might have taken them down to the House dame to be cleaned. But that was not likely. The mud would brush off easily enough when it was dry. Most likely he had taken them down to his study, to be brushed when dry—they would be dry by the time he came back from Courtfield.

Price left the dormitory as quietly as he had entered it. It was easy enough to look into Coker's study: it was next to Price and Hilton's, in the Fifth-form passage. Nobody was likely to heed Price, in that passage near the door of his own study, even if anyone saw him. But the place was absolutely deserted: not a single fellow was about.

Coker's study door stood half-open.

Price paused there, and looked in.

Almost the first objects that met his eye were a blazer, and a pair of trousers, sprawling in the window-seat. They looked as if Coker had chucked them in, from the doorway, before he hurried away to join Potter and Greene in the quad.

Price drew a quick, sharp breath.

He gave one swift, stealthy glance up and down the passage. Then he slipped into the study and closed the door after him, softly, without a sound.

He stood in the study, trembling.

His eyes fixed on the clothes lying at the sunny window.

The mud on them was almost dry now. Had that idiot, that insensate

dunderhead, left two £5 notes in the pocket of the blazer? Had he?

If only he hadn't. Price would leave the study as he came: his problem unsolved, his dread as oppressive as ever, but with clean hands. But if he had—!

The wretched fellow stretched out his hand at last, to the blazer. He almost hoped that he would find nothing there. His fear of what he was going to do, if he found the "tenner", was almost as great as his fear of the "sack" from Greyfriars School. But he had to know! With trembling hands he picked up the blazer, with shaking fingers he groped in a pocket.

"Oh!" he breathed.

Something crisp rustled in his fingers. He drew out his hand with two £5 notes in it! Coker, unthinking as usual, had left them there: now they were in Price's hand.

"Oh!" he repeated, half choking.

He stared at the "tenner": all that he needed to satisfy Joey Banks, and to lift that incubus of fear and dread from his harassed mind. Who would know? Who could know? He had not been seen. Nobody could know. Banknotes had numbers, certainly: but Banks would pass them on the racecourse: they would disappear, and could never be traced back. It was safe enough; and he was saved: only—only—only—. Only he would be a thief, an unclean creature unfit to look decent fellows in the face. Could he do it? But could he not?

He hardly knew how long he stood there, the banknotes in his hand, his tormented mind swaying in doubt.

But he made up his mind at last. He crammed the banknotes into the inside pocket of his jacket. The die was cast!

Sick at heart at what he had done, but resolute now, with a kind of cat-like obstinacy, he turned to the door. His hand was on the door-handle when, with a thrill of horror and fear, he felt it stir, as another hand was laid on it from the outside.

Someone was about to enter the study, and he was there—there, with the stolen banknotes in his pocket! The dreadful terror that seized on him, in that moment, was perhaps a full punishment for what he had done.

But even in his terror he acted. He must not be seen there—he must not be found there—!

Instinctively, he backed behind the door as it opened. It was his only chance.

It could not be Coker who was coming in: Coker and his friends were at Courtfield. Some fellow who wanted to speak to Coker—or, possibly, Prout, who was rather on the trail of that obstreperous member of his form.

Whoever it was, he would see from the doorway that the study was empty—or seemed so—and go—surely! The sweat ran down Price's face as he stood behind the door. If he was seen there—!

Someone was looking into the study. Then, to Price's horror, footsteps came in. Was it, after all, Coker—could it be Coker? If he shut the door, Price would stand revealed, hiding behind a door—. His brain almost swam.

The footsteps crossed the room.

Whoever had come in, did not take the trouble to shut the door. Probably he did not intend to remain. Somebody had come in for something, and would go—perhaps a fellow to borrow a book—anyhow, he did not shut the door, and Price remained hidden, sweating, scarcely breathing.

There was a sound of a handle turning, a door jerking open. That could only be at the study cupboard. Then Price heard a muttering fat voice:

"All right! He ain't a beast like Smithy!"

The sound of rummaging in the cupboard followed.

Price knew now what was happening. That fat voice was familiar to his ears. It was Billy Bunter at Coker's cupboard. Only Bunter, the fat Owl of the Remove, and after Coker's tuck, of course. Only Bunter—but that did not diminish his danger. For if Billy Bunter discovered a Fifth-form man hiding behind the door in another Fifth-form man's study, he was not likely to keep that curious incident to himself—rather he was likely to relate it all over the school.

Still, it was a relief, for evidently Bunter had come there to pilfer tuck, and was not likely to linger: neither was he likely to shut the door until he had gone out of the study. An unmusical sound came to Price's ears.

"He, he, he! Lots and lots!"

Bunter had found the jam! He had better luck in Coker's study than he had had in Smithy's! Price suppressed his breathing. If the fat brute would

only go! Price did not care what he might take with him, so long as he went. He could not mean to stay there—. Neither did Bunter intend to stay. He was there to walk off with a jar of jam. Had the jar been unopened, Bunter might have walked it off as it stood, and restrained his natural desire to sample the contents till he was at a safe distance. But the jar had been opened—Coker and Co. had had jam at tea the day before. It was not even covered, and jam—gorgeous jam—glimmered at Bunter from the jar. That was more than flesh and blood could resist—at least Billy Bunter's flesh and blood. There was cutlery in the cupboard: Bunter grabbed up a tablespoon, and helped himself to jam.

One big spoonful to go on with, was the idea. But a tiger who had tasted blood was not more ravenous than a fat Owl who had tasted jam. One spoonful followed another, and another, and another, and a sticky fat junior gurgled happily over a large jam-jar, of which the contents grew smaller by degrees and beautifully less.

Price perspired behind the door, listening to a series of grunts and gurgles, as Billy Bunter consumed jam.

He would go when the jam was gone—it was all right—he had only to wait. He was safe enough—the fat idiot would never dream of looking behind the door, and he would go out and shut it after him. But every moment was one of tense anxiety to Price as he huddled behind the door and listened to grunts and gurgles. And then—!

Up the passage from the direction of the landing came a heavy tread. Bunter, busy as he was with jam, heard it, and spun round from the cupboard with a squeak of alarm. Price, as he heard it, felt his heart sink. For there was no mistaking that elephantine tread. It was the tread of his form-master, Mr. Prout: in another moment, Mr. Prout was looking in at the open doorway.

CHAPTER 13

THREE OF THEM

MR. PROUT stood in the doorway of Coker's study, his ample proportions almost filling it from side to side, and stared in.

He stared quite blankly at Billy Bunter—for a moment. He had certainly not expected to see Bunter of the Remove there. He had expected—and indeed hoped—to see Horace Coker, of the Fifth.

Prout's brow was grim.

Coker had confided to his friends that he was fed up with Prout. There was no doubt that Prout reciprocated that feeling. He would not have described it as fed up: but undoubtedly he was at the end of his patience. Often and often had the headstrong Horace given him trouble. Coker was dense: but Prout could make allowances for that. He was obstinate: for which less allowance could be made. On this particular day Coker had quite touched the limit. Twice he had been late for class in one morning: five minutes for second school, nearly half an hour for third school. Added to that, he had had a surly, dogged sort of look, which hinted of defiance.

Prout had no use for insubordination in his form. He had come down heavily: three hundred lines of Virgil to be delivered by tea-time that day: a task which would keep Horace Coker occupied during a half-holiday and perhaps impress upon him that he was, after all, only a schoolboy, and that schoolmasters had to be respected.

If those lines were duly done, and handed in before tea, all was well. The incident would be closed and Prout would be glad of it, for "Old Pompous" really did dislike making himself unpleasant in his form. But if

Coker carried his obstinacy, his disrespect, his contumacy, to the length of neglecting to perform the imposed task, the thunder was going to roll. Coker was going to learn that, senior as he was, and almost unknown as it was at Greyfriars for a senior man to be caned, nevertheless the cane in Prout's study was not there wholly' for ornamental purposes—it had a use! That was Prout's grim determination. So there he was, looking in at Coker's study to see whether Coker was busy there with his lines, as undoubtedly he ought to have been—and as Prout hoped that he would find him. Prout was a just man, and indeed a kind man; if he had found Horace Coker in the study, labouring through interminable Latin lines on a half-holiday, probably he would have taken compassion on him, and let him off the remainder of his task—giving him a lecture instead: and even one of Prout's "jaws" was better than grinding at unending lines.

But Coker was not there!

A fat junior, blinking in alarm at Prout through a pair of big spectacles, was there! Coker was not.

Prout breathed hard, and he breathed deep. Apparently that rebellious, insensate boy had disregarded his authority, and gone out for the afternoon, treating his form-master as a trifle light as air—which Prout certainly was not! For the moment, Prout gave Bunter only a glance. He was thinking of Coker. Possibly—barely possibly—Coker might have done his lines already, in which case they would be there, on the study table: he had been instructed to deliver them by tea-time, and it was not yet tea-time. If the lines were there, once more all was well: and certainly it would have been a relief to Prout to see them, and the end of that spot of trouble in his form. He elephantined into the study to look.

Billy Bunter regarded him with a terrified blink. Behind the door, another fellow listened to that elephantine tread with sickening fear. If Prout glanced behind that door—

But there was no reason, of course, why Prout should glance behind the door. He went straight to the study table, and looked over it.

There was no sign to be seen of lines there. That last possibility vanished. Coker had not touched his task. In sheer obstinate hot-headed folly, he had gone out that afternoon, leaving his task undone.

"Upon my word!" said Prout.

He glanced round at Bunter. That fat and fatuous youth was making a stealthy movement towards the doorway, with a faint hope of getting by while old Pompous was staring at the things on the table, whatever he might be staring at them for. But that faint hope dissolved into thin air, as Prout fixed him with a stern eye.

"Bunter!"

Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"You are a Remove boy, I think."

"Oh! Yes! Yes, sir."

"What are you doing here in a Fifth-form study, Bunter?"

Possibly Prout was aware of Billy Bunter's reputation.

Certainly his presence in a senior study, in the owner's absence, required explaining.

"I—I—I came here—!" stammered Bunter. It was a little difficult to explain. Jam had drawn Bunter to that study like a powerful magnet. But obviously jam would not do as an explanation for Prout.

"I can see that you came here, Bunter, as I see you here!" snapped Prout.

"I asked you what you were doing here."

"I—I—I—."

"Well?" Prout began to boom. "Well?"

"I—I—I came to coke to Speaker—," stuttered Bunter.

"What?"

"I—I mean, to speak to Coker—."

"Coker is not here, Bunter."

"No, sir, that's why I came, sir—I—I mean that's why I didn't come—I mean I didn't come—I mean I wasn't—I—I—."

"It is apparent to me, Bunter, that your motive for entering this Fifth-form study is not one that you care to explain to me!" boomed Prout.

"Leave the study at once! I shall mention this to your form-master, and you may explain to Mr. Quelch!"

"Oh, really, sir—."

"Go!"

Billy Bunter rolled dismally to the door. He was jammy; he was sticky, he had half-emptied a large jar of Aunt Judy's best home-made jam: all of which, of course, was so much to the good. But it was very, very unfortunate that Prout had caught him there. Quelch would be annoyed by a complaint from Prout: and Bunter could already see the glint in the gimlet-eye. And he hadn't even finished the jam: which was the unkindest cut of all.

Prout's stem eye watched him roll out of Coker's study.

Bunter having disappeared, Prout gave one more glance round the room, to make doubly sure that Coker's lines were not there. Angry as he was, and he really had reason to be, he wanted to be just, even to an obstreperous and troublesome member of his form like Coker. But there were no lines to be seen; and Prout, at length, elephantined out of the study, to the immense relief of a white-faced, trembling young rascal screened behind the open door.

The Fifth-form master closed that door after him, with a bang that expressed his feelings, and his heavy tread died away down the passage. Stephen Price leaned weakly on the wall. The ordeal he had been through had shattered his last rag of nerve.

His knees were sagging under him. With a shaking hand, he drew out his handkerchief, and wiped the perspiration from his damp brow.

But he was safe!

Bunter, intent on jam, Prout, intent on Coker, had never dreamed that there was another fellow in that study all the while. Only the open door, turned back against the wall, had screened Price: but it had hidden him as effectively as a wall of strong oak and triple bronze. One glance behind that door would have discovered him: but neither Bunter nor Prout, naturally, had even dreamed of glancing behind the door. But it had been an awful ordeal: and the wretched fellow's nerves were in a state of wreckage when it was over.

But he was safe now: safe, and that knowledge enabled him to pull himself together a little, at last. He stirred, shoved his damp handkerchief back into his pocket, and listened at the door, to make sure that the coast was clear. Prout's heavy footsteps had long died away—there was no danger from that quarter. Bunter was not likely to be hanging about, after being caught there by a beak, with a report to his own beak hanging over his fat head. But if any fellow happened to be coming up the passage—if a single eye spotted him leaving Coker's study—even Hilton's! Not even to Hilton would he dare let the faintest hint escape him of what he had done. He listened at the door like a frightened rat, but there was no sound in the passage. He ventured at last to open it a few inches, and peer out. The coast was clear.

There was no eye to see him: and he lost no more time: he whipped out of Coker's study and darted into the next, his own. He shut the door, and threw himself on the settee under the window, breathing in gasps.

Coker's banknotes were crammed in his inside pocket.

Light and flimsy as they were, he seemed to feel them there like a heavy weight. His miserable thoughts were in a turmoil. He hated himself for what he had done: it was even in his mind to cut back to Coker's study,

while there was yet time, and replace the banknotes where he had found them.

But at that thought, the surly, threatening face of Joey Banks rose before his mind's eye. He had to keep Banks away: he had to save himself: he had to! He was too deep in the mire to be particular how he got out of it. It was that fool Coker's fault—careless with money as with everything else—leaving banknotes about in a blazer pocket—the idiot! But even Price realised that he was trying to delude himself by thinking up such idle excuses for an act for which there could never be any excuse. He was still there, on the settee, a prey to miserable and conflicting thoughts, when there was a tramp of feet in the passage. Fifth-form men were coming up to the studies after the football: it was too late now, if he had seriously thought of undoing what he had done.

The door opened, and Hilton came into the study. He looked fresh and ruddy after football. He frowned as he glanced at Price, and his white drawn face, at the window. He was sick and tired of Price's long face and endless harassing worries. He stopped, looking at Price, and then, without speaking, walked out of the study again.

Apparently he had had enough of Price and his long face, and was looking for more cheerful company.

Price cast a bitter glance after him: but he was glad to be left alone. He had to think out his next step. He knew what the next step must be: to slink by devious ways to the "Three Fishers", see Joey Banks, pay him and have done with him. That was what he had to do: that was what he was going to do: but that step was so irrevocable, so fatal, that his mind still swayed in doubt. It was more than an hour later that he dragged himself, at last, from the study, and hurried out of the House, and out of gates.

CHAPTER

14

AFTER THE FEAST!

"I SAY, you fellows."

Harry Wharton and Co. did not heed Billy Bunter's fat squeak. They did not heed the cloud on Bunter's fat brow. They were not, in fact, interested in Bunter. At the moment, they were rather interested in Mr. Prout.

"Does old Pompous look waxy?" whispered Bob Cherry.

His comrades grinned. There was no doubt—no possible, probable shadow of doubt—that old Pompous looked "waxy". "Waxy", indeed, was putting it mildly. The Lord High Executioner himself never frowned so frightfully and fearfully as Mr. Prout just then, standing on the steps of the House. Prout was looking towards three Fifth-form men who had just come in at the gates, and it was the sight of one of them that had evoked that portentous frown. Indeed the sight of Horace Coker was, to Prout, like unto the sight of a red rag to a bull. There was Coker of the Fifth, walking in cheerfully, just as if nothing was the matter. He was soon to learn that something was the matter!

"I say, you fellows!" squeaked Bunter again. "I say—!" He jerked at Harry Wharton's sleeve, and the captain of the Remove glanced round at him. "I say—."

"It's all right, Bunter—we beat them."

"Eh?" Bunter blinked at him. "Wharrer you mean?"

"We beat the Shell, if that's what you want to know." explained Harry.

"Three goals to two, old fat man!" said Bob.

"Blow the Shell, and blow your silly soccer!" hissed Bunter. "Think that's what I'm worrying about?"

"Jolly good game," said Johnny Bull. "Smithy got the first goal, in the first half—."

"Blow Smithy!"

"Not interested?" grinned Bob.

"No, you silly ass."

"Then run away and play, and don't bother."

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter did not run away and play. Bunter had a worry on his fat mind. Mr. Quelch had come in from his walk long ago: and Prout had a report for Quelch, which concerned Billy Bunter: and was, therefore, of much more importance than anything else that might be going on in the universe. In such circumstances, lesser matters, such as football matches, were not likely to interest Bunter.

"I say, you fellows—."

"Oh, shut up, Bunter," urged Bob Cherry. "We're watching the circus." And his comrades chuckled.

Prout, majestic on the steps, certainly did not dream that he was providing a "circus" for the Remove fellows. He did not heed them, or notice that they were there. His eyes were fixed balefully on Coker, coming towards the House with Potter and Greene. It was long past tea-time now, and Coker, who had been out all the afternoon, had come in at last: obviously without any lines for Prout! Prout was ready for him!

"I say, you fellows, do listen to a chap," urged Bunter.

"I say, I'm in a row."

"So's Coker, to judge by old Pompous's chivvy!" remarked Frank Nugent.

"Blow Coker!" hissed Bunter. "Can't you listen to a chap? I tell you Quelch may send for me any minute, if Prout has told him."

"You fat villain, what have you been up to, while we've been playing soccer?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Nothing! Nothing at all, only Prout found me in Coker's study, and he said he would report it to Quelch, just as if a fellow was up to something there, you know. And if Coker makes a fuss about the jam, Quelch may think that I had it—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! Who'd have thought that old Pompous would come up to the study at all? But he did, and—and he found me there. He said he would report it to Quelch. I say, Quelch came in a good time ago, but he hasn't sent for me yet. Think Prout's forgotten?" Billy Bunter blinked anxiously at the Famous Five.

"After all, he's in a bait with that ass Coker," he went on. "He must have been after Coker when he came up to that study. Look at him now—glaring at Coker like a guggle—."

"Like a whatter?"

"A guggle."

"Do you mean a gargoyle, or a gorgon?" asked Nugent. "I mean a guggle," yapped Bunter. "Glaring at him like a guggle, and he hasn't even squinted at me. Think he's forgotten me?"

"Shouldn't wonder," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "He certainly seems more interested in Coker than in anybody else this afternoon."

"Oh!" said Bunter. "Well, he's rather an old donkey, you know, and he does forget things. If he's only thinking of Coker, and forgotten about me, it's all right—jolly lucky that Coker's in a row with him, ain't it, if that's how it is."

"Not for Coker!"

"Oh, blow Coker!" said Bunter. "I say, you fellows—."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! The thunder's going to roll!" murmured Bob Cherry. "Shut up, Bunter, will you, like a good owl!" Coker, Potter and Greene were in the offing now. They had seen Prout on the steps, and noted the thundercloud on his brow. Potter and Greene looked uneasy. Not so Coker! He was quite calm. If he felt an inward tremor, he was not the man to let it show in his rugged face. He marched on regardless.

"Coker!" It was a deep rumble from Prout. "Yes, sir!" said Coker.

"I gave you three hundred lines this morning, Coker! You were directed to hand them in before tea-time. You have not done so."

"I've been rather engaged this afternoon, sir," said Coker.

That reply did not diminish the frown on Prout's brow.

It made Potter and Greene exchange a sort of hopeless look. Horace Coker, undoubtedly, was the man to ask for it!

Prout seemed to choke, for a moment. Indeed, for that moment the Famous Five, looking on from a respectful distance, almost thought that he was going to smack Coker's head. But if so undignified an idea occurred to Prout, he dismissed it. He raised his hand, but it was only to point to the doorway.

"Go to my study at once, Coker," he boomed.

Coker hesitated, for just one second! Prout's countenance, always rich in hue, empurpled. That hesitation, brief as it was, seemed to indicate that Coker was actually considering whether to obey his beak or not.

But it was very brief. Perhaps there was some lingering remnant of common-sense somewhere in Horace Coker's solid head. Just one second—and then Coker went into the House.

Prout, purple, followed. Nobody who witnessed that little scene envied Coker his interview with his beak in Prout's study!

"Poor old Coker!" murmured Potter.

"Poor old fathead!" sighed Greene.

They went sadly into the House. It had been a topping spread at the Arcade: Coker had expended upon it one of his many pound notes, and they had enjoyed it. After the feast came the reckoning: for Coker at least. Really and truly, Potter and Greene had done their best to save old Horace from himself: even to the extent of offering to whack out his impot. It quite saddened them to think of what he was going to get from Prout. At the same time they hoped, charitably, that it would do him good: that it might even teach him a little sense!

"Poor old Horace!" said Bob Cherry. "He's for it! Did Prout look shirty?"

"Just a few!"

"The fewfulness was terrific!"

"I say, you fellows—."

"Oh, my hat! Are you still there, Bunter?" exclaimed Bob. "Do buzz off, like a good bluebottle."

"Oh, really, Cherry. I say, you fellows, do let a chap speak!" hooted Bunter. "What does Coker matter, I'd like to know? I say, what do you think Quelch will think of my being in Coker's study, if Prout tells him?"

"He won't think—he will know!" grinned Bob. "If you have tears, prepare to shed them now, as jolly old Mark Antony put it."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" said Bunter, bitterly. "Quelch has whopped me before, because he fancied I snooped tuck from the studies. There was that row about Coker's pineapple the other day—as if I'd touch his pineapple! I can get all the pineapples I want from the pineries at Bunter Court. It was rotten sour, too—I couldn't have eaten it at all if I hadn't found some sugar in Wibley's study. If Prout has told Quelch about my being in

Coker's study, he just won't listen to me—he will think I was after something—."

"Weren't you?" grinned Bob.

"But he's jolly well got his teeth into Coker to-day, and he may have forgotten all about me!" said Bunter, hopefully. "I say, you fellows, think Prout may have forgotten to mention it to Quelch? If—if I have to go to Quelch, what had I better tell him?"

"What about the truth?" suggested Harry.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" howled Bunter. "Think I can tell him about the jam? Not that I had it, you know! So far as I know, there wasn't any jam in Coker's cupboard at all—I never saw any when I looked in: besides, I never went near the cupboard, or noticed it, or thought of it. If there was any jam there, I never touched it. Besides, I left more than half of it in the jar, owing to Prout coming in—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you fellows are going to cackle like a lot of parrots every time a fellow opens his mouth—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beasts! Lot you care if I get whopped, after all I've done for you!" yapped Bunter. "But I think it's all right—if Prout had told Quelch, I should be sent for, and I haven't been sent for, so—."

"Bunter!"

"Oh!" The fat Owl spun round, and blinked at a Sixth-form prefect who had just come out of the House. "Yes, Loder! Did—did you call me?"

"Quelch's study—at once," said Loder.

"Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter gave the Famous Five a dolorous blink.

His delusive hope faded away. Evidently Prout, preoccupied as he was with Coker, had not forgotten to mention that little matter to the master of the Remove. Slowly, very slowly, a dispirited fat Owl rolled away to that unwelcome interview with his form-master.

Whereupon, sad to relate, the Famous Five forgot his fat existence. From an open study window—Prout's window—floated a sound as of the beating of carpet. The chums of the Remove could guess that it was not carpet that Prout was beating!

"Poor old Coker!" said Bob.

It was sadly clear that Horace James Coker was learning, painfully, that it was not a paying proposition to erect the standard of rebellion in the Fifth Form at Greyfriars!

CHAPTER 15

"SIX!"

HORACE COKER came into his study, rather slowly, walking a little painfully. He gave Potter and Greene a glance, and they gave him sympathetic looks in return. Obviously, what they had expected, had happened. Really, what was any fellow at any school to expect, when he deliberately defied orders and walked out on his form-master? Coker did not seem to have expected it—but his friends certainly had. And clearly it had happened. Prout practically never handled a cane: it was beneath the dignity of a senior Form. But Coker was rather an unusual fellow, and required unusual methods.

Prout, for once, had handled the cane: and, Coker having driven him to it, as it were, no doubt he had handled it hard. Coker looked as if he had.

The suffering senior did not speak. He walked across the study in silence, and threw himself into his armchair. Then, suddenly, he became vocal. With a sharp yelp he bounded out of the armchair again.

Potter and Greene were sympathetic: but they smiled. It was a very easy and very comfortable armchair—especially provided by Aunt Judy for her dear Horace. But the easiest of easy chairs did not tempt a fellow fresh from Prout's study and Prout's cane.

Coker leaned on the mantelpiece. He regarded his friends with a gloomy brow, and an occasional wriggle.

"Did Prout lay it on?" asked Potter, at last.

"Six on the bags!" said Coker, in almost a hollow voice.

"Me—a Fifth-form man—six on the bags! Like a fag in the Remove! That's Prout!"

"Rough luck!" murmured Greene.

Coker's pals wondered whether he could possibly have expected Prout to put up with his "side" and say and do nothing. Possibly Coker had! There really was no telling what Horace Coker might or might not have expected.

"When he told me to bend over," continued Coker. "I came jolly near knocking him across his study."

"Oh!" gasped Potter and Greene, together. "But I didn't!" added Coker. Potter and Greene could have guessed that one!

"He jawed me," went on Coker. "Making out that I was headstrong and obstinate and undisciplined—that sort of thing! Me, you know! If there's one thing I'm strong on, it's discipline. Look how I keep the fags in order! But that's Prout!"

"It will wear off in time, old chap," said Potter, comfortingly.

"I don't need you to tell me that, George Potter. Think I'm made of putty, and can't stand a whopping?" demanded Coker.

"Oh! No! I mean—."

"I'm not worrying about that—wow!" Coker squeaked inadvertently. "I can stand all that Prout can give me. That old ass can't whop!" added Coker, contemptuously. "Nothing like I got from Hacker when I was in the Shell. He can't whop for toffee! Ow! Wow!"

Those involuntary ejaculations seemed to indicate that, whether Prout could whop or not, he had put some beef into it. Potter and Greene were careful not to smile. It was no time for smiling.

"What I'm thinking about," went on Coker, "isn't old Pompous's silly fiddling about with a cane, which he fancies is whopping. It's what I'm going to do about it."

"Do about it?" repeated Potter, while Greene stared.

Neither of them could see anything that Coker could "do" about it.

"Just that!" said Coker. "Punching his head won't do—."

"Eh?"

"A man at Greyfriars can't very well punch his beak's head!"

"Oh! Hardly!" gasped Potter.

"Not quite!" gurgled Greene.

They were not always in agreement with Coker. But on that point, they agreed quite heartily. Indubitably, a man at Greyfriars couldn't punch his beak's head!

"I've thought of that!" said Coker. "But it wouldn't do! It's not quite the thing! Besides, a man would be sacked for it. There's that!"

"Yes, there's that!" agreed Potter, with a private wink at Greene, which caused Greene to utter a sudden gurgling sound, in an effort to turn a chuckle into a cough.

"But he's got something coming to him!" said Coker, darkly. "I'm not the man to take this lying down."

"Didn't you take it bending over?" asked Potter, innocently.

"I mean I'm not the man to take it without hitting back. You're rather dense, George Potter. Prout's got something coming to him all right. I shall have to think it out, of course. But he's got it coming." Coker detached himself from the mantelpiece, and moved restlessly about the study. Although he stated contemptuously that Prout couldn't whop, he evidently did not want to sit down. He glanced at the muddy blazer and trousers in the window-seat, as he roamed, and picked them up. "That mud's dry," he remarked. "They want a bit of brushing." "They do!" agreed Potter. "I think I'll get out for a bit," said Coker. "I don't feel like sitting about. Got a clothes-brush?" "Here you are!" said Greene. He sorted out a clothes-brush, and extended it to Coker. Horace Coker glanced at it, but did not extend a hand to take it. He was not, apparently, thinking of mud-brushing himself. He pitched the muddy trousers and blazer on the study table. "You chaps can brush them for me, while I take a turn in the quad," remarked Coker. "Mind you get all the mud off." Potter and Greene gave him slightly expressive looks. But after all, it had been a lavish spread at the Arcade, and poor old Coker was suffering severe twinges from Prout's cane. They nodded. "Right-ho, old man," said Potter. "Does it still hurt?" asked Greene, sympathetically. Coker gave him a freezing look. "I think I mentioned that I can stand a whopping, Greene," he said, "and Prout can't whop, either. I'm going to take a turn in the quad because I want a spot of fresh air." Coker walked out of the study, and banged the door after him. Potter and Greene looked at one another, and smiled. Now that Coker was gone, they were at liberty to smile. "Of all the fatheads—!" remarked Potter. "Of all the chumps—!" concurred Greene. "He really seems to have thought that he could cheek Prout and get away with it!" said Potter. "What a brain!" "Did he think at all?" asked Greene, doubtfully. "Has he anything to do it with?" "Well, I'm sorry he's whopped: but it may do him good!" said Potter. "Between ourselves, Greeney, that's what old Horace has wanted for a long time." "A jolly long time!" agreed Greene. "Still," said Potter, tolerantly, "he's got his good points." Possibly he was thinking of Aunt Judy's tenner. "Oh, quite!" agreed Greene. "After all, he can't help being a born idiot—it's just one of those things! Like his cheek to expect us to brush his clobber! You do the bags, and I'll do the blazer." They proceeded to wield clothes-brushes: Horace Coker, walking in the quad, succeeded at last in walking off the effects of Prout's cane.

CHAPTER 16

THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

STEPHEN PRICE stood in the falling dusk, under a tree in the weedy garden of the "Three Fishers", leaning weakly on the trunk. Even in the thick dusk under the tree, his face showed white and sickly. He was waiting there for Joey Banks. He had sent in word to Mr. Banks, that he was waiting there to see him. Banks was keeping him waiting. There was quite a change in Mr. Banks since he had learned that his young sporting friend either would not or could not pay him his due. Banks was

in the billiard-room, and not in the least disposed to break off the game, in order to listen to further excuses from "young Price". Every minute that he waited was a torment to the wretched black sheep of Greyfriars. He had taken the plunge—in fear and trembling, but he had taken it. He had in his pocket the sum necessary to settle with Banks, and get rid of him and his threats. He loathed himself for what he had done: he shuddered to think of the possible consequences. And as he stood there, white-faced and with jangled nerves, it came into his mind more than once, to hurry away, before Banks came, and so save himself from the pit he had dug for his own feet. There was still time to replace those hateful banknotes where he had found them—if he dared!

But he did not dare. Hilton might be right—Banks might not venture to carry out his threats. But if he did? If he did, it was disgrace and ruin: utter and overwhelming disaster. He had not the nerve to face that—he hardly dared even think of it. He had to go through with this—he had to! Feverishly, he waited for the racing man to come. He would try pleading once more—but with little hope: if that failed, the die was cast! Why did not the brute come? The dusk was falling—he would be late for lock-ups at Greyfriars: if he was late he would have to go to Prout, and he did not want to draw Prout's attention now. That evening, or on the morrow at the latest, it would be known that money was missing from a Fifth-form study: it was a time for Price to lie very low, not to draw attention. Why did not the man come?

He came at last.

A red face loomed in the dusk, and there was a will of whisky unpleasantly mingled with tobacco. Price jerked himself from the tree-trunk, his dilated eyes on that unpleasant red face.

"You've kept me waiting, Joey," he muttered.

"And why not?" grunted Joey. "Ain't you kep' a man waiting for his money, young Price? I ain't got a lot of time to waste on bilks."

"I-I-I—!" stammered Price. He had to swallow insults from the man: that was a small part of his penalty.

"I-I-I—," mimicked Joey Banks. "Ain't you got nothing else to say? Not that I want to 'ear anything from you, if you ain't going to square."

"If you give me time—" muttered Price.

"I've 'eard that one!" said Mr. Banks, contemptuously. "Nor I don't want to 'ear it agin! Was you going to 'andle twenty quid from me if your 'orse had got home?"

"Yes, yes: but—."

"You was!" sneered Mr. Banks. "And when you lose, you come stammering and asking for time! Fat lot I'd see of my money!"

"Look here—!"

"'Nuff said!" interrupted Joey. "'Ave you got the tenner you owe me? If you 'ave, cough it up, and 'ave done! If you 'aven't, look out for me at your school to-morrow morning." Joey Banks turned on his heel to walk away. Price, in desperation, caught him by the shoulder.

"Stop! I-I-I've got the money!" he said, in a husky whisper.

Mr. Banks turned back. "You've got it?" he repeated.

"Yes, it's here!" muttered Price.

Banks peered at him, in the dusk under the tree. A rather strange look came over his red face, as he read the drawn fear and misery in Price's. His bullying manner became subdued.

"If you've got it, let's see the colour of it." he said.

"It's here!" repeated Price.

He groped in his pocket, and drew out two crisp, crumpled £5 notes. His hand shook so much, as he held them out to the bookmaker, that one of them fell to the ground, and he stooped hastily to pick it up. Then he held them out to Banks again.

To his surprise, Joey Banks did not stretch out his flabby hand to take them. Banks had come a little nearer, and his eyes were fixed on Price's ghastly face, scanning it intently. Joey Banks seemed uneasy, indeed a little alarmed, at what he read there. Instead of taking the notes, he put his hands into his pockets.

"Here you are!" muttered Price. "Ten pouds—."

"Where'd you get it?" asked Joey Banks, very quietly. Price stared, at that unexpected question. He stood with the notes in his shaking hand, at a loss for a moment. "What does that matter?" he muttered, at last. "I've got the money—I've got all I owe you—here it is—. Isn't that good enough?"

"No, it ain't!" said Mr. Banks. "You young idjit you. Where did you get that money? Is it yours? "

Price stared helplessly, his knees knocking together. It had not occurred to him that Banks might be suspicious. He did not realise that his ghastly face would give away the whole story, even to a much less keen eye than Joey's.

"You tells me you can't pay, and you turns up with ten quids all of a sudden." said Banks. "You young idjit! Where'd you get it?"

"That doesn't matter—."

"Don't it?" said Mr. Banks, with emphasis. "You fool you, do you think I want to go to quod along with you?"

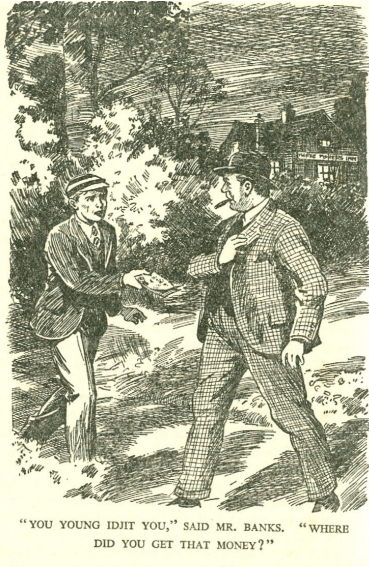
"I got it from home—!" stammered Price.

"You could 'ave told me that afore, if it was true." said Joey Banks.

"Nice 'ole you'd land me in, if I touched that money, You young lunatic, take it back and put it where you pinched it. Do you want a copper's 'and on your shoulder?"

"Oh!" gasped Price.

Banks scanned him, angrily and contemptuously. That the money was not Price's, that he had somehow possessed himself of it dishonestly, was written in every line of the wretched fellow's ghastly face. Banks wanted his money: he had, in the course of his dingy career, sometimes sailed very near the wind, but this was a little too near the wind for him. Most emphatically Mr. Banks did not want Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, calling on him to inquire after banknotes stolen at Greyfriars School. Mr. Banks realised that he had driven the wretched fellow too hard, and had in fact brought himself within measurable distance of the unpleasant abode he called "quod". If those banknotes had been worth twice or thrice their face value, Joey Banks would not have touched them with a billiard-cue.



Price stood shaking and trembling. He was at the end of his tether—at the end of his wits. He was overwhelmed. Banks knew that the money was not his, and would not take it! He was lost. He groaned aloud.

"Then—then I'm done for! I'm finished! Oh, what a fool I've been—what a fool! I'm finished!" He tottered against the tree, hardly able to stand.

"Pull yourself together," grunted Joey Banks. "Put them notes back in your pocket, and go straight back to your school, and put them where you found them. And you needn't worry about what you owe me—I can wait. I ain't a covey to push a client 'ard! Let it stand over."

Price panted.

"If you mean that, Joey—."

"Course I mean it," grunted Mr. Banks. There was no doubt that Joey meant it. He was alarmed at the effect his threats had had on his nerveless victim, and his chief desire, at that moment, was to get rid of his "client" and the stolen notes: to keep clear of him and anything he might do in his terrified folly. "You go 'ome, Mr. Price, and keep away from 'ere—I'll wait till I 'ear from you, see? "

"Oh!" gasped Price. The relief almost made him giddy.

"And you'd better 'urry!" snapped Mr. Banks. "I—I—I'll do as you say,

Joey," panted Price. "And—and I'll pay you later—on my word—I—I—."

"O.K. You get orf, and don't you lose a minute getting shot of them notes, you mad young idjit! Get to it."

With that, Mr. Banks turned and walked back to the public-house. Price watched him go, dazedly, but with a feeling of immense relief. He could scarcely believe in his good luck. Banks had been frightened—he could see that—frightened for himself. The brute would give him time now. All he had to do was—if he could—to get those loathsome banknotes back where he had found them! If there was yet time!

He hurried away in the dusk. He was saved—saved from Banks, saved from himself: on the very edge of the abyss, he was saved—if there was yet time! If—!

CHAPTER 17

MONEY MISSING!

"THAT'S queer!" said Coker.

He seemed surprised.

"Eh?" said Potter, absently. Greene glanced round, uninterestedly. They were talking football when Coker came back to the study. Coker looked, and no doubt was feeling, a good deal better. The severest effects of that whopping had worn off. A few twinges still lingered, but Coker was tough, and a few lingering twinges did not worry him unduly. He grunted, as he looked at the blazer hanging on the hook on the inside of the door. There were still traces of dried mud on it. Greene had brushed it, but perhaps in a slightly perfunctory manner. However, it was not the state of the blazer that caused Coker to remark that it was "queer". He had remembered the banknotes he had left in the pocket of that blazer, and now that he remembered them, even Coker was not quite careless enough to leave them there. He groped in the pocket for them: and, to his surprise, no crisp rustling of banknotes met his groping fingers. Whereupon he remarked that it was "queer": undoubtedly it was. A fellow who left articles in his pocket naturally expected to find them there when he groped for them. In surprise, Coker groped again. But the result was the same: there were no banknotes in that pocket. He pulled out the lining and stared at it. "What the dickens—!" said Coker, blankly. "Anything up?" asked Potter. "There's nothing in that pocket," said Coker. "Well, had you put anything into it?" asked Greene. "I put that tenner into it." Potter and Greene stared across at Coker. "That tenner?" repeated Potter. "Yes! You remember, when I had my aunt's letter—I shoved them in that pocket while I read the letter, and forgot afterwards." "They must be there if you put them there." said Greene. Snort, from Coker. "It's no good saying that they must be there. Greeney, when they ain't there. Think I'm blind?" "But if you left them there—!" said Potter. "There's no 'if' about it, Potter. You were with me, and you saw me shove them into that pocket, if you ain't as blind as Greene seems to think I am." "If you ask me," said Greene, "you shouldn't leave money in the pocket of a blazer, lying about in any old place." "I haven't asked you, Greene, and don't intend to. Look here, where are those fivers?" "You put them into another pocket when you changed!" suggested Potter. "I tell you I'd forgotten all about them! I had enough to think about, with those cheeky Remove ticks up-ending a man, and you fellows arguing!" snapped Coker. "I never thought of them again till this minute." "Look in your wallet." "They're not in my wallet." "Look!" yapped Potter. "What's the good, when I know they're not there?" "You silly ass—!" said Potter. Coker's chums were generally very tactful with Coker. It was but seldom that they told him what they thought of him. Coker was, in the opinion of his friends, capable of any kind or variety of fatheadedness. But if he was carrying fatheadedness to the length of losing banknotes about the place, it was the limit and time for plain speech. "What? What did you say, Potter?" exclaimed Coker. "I said silly ass!" snapped Potter. "Look in your wallet, and see if you put the fivers there. Have a little sense." "I tell you I never even thought of them—," roared Coker. "I forgot all about them. I tell you!"

"Well, if you forgot once, perhaps you forgot twice!" yapped Potter. "You fathead, do you want a yarn getting round of money missing in this study? Look in your wallet."

Coker gave an indignant snort. However, he condescended to drag out his wallet, and all three looked into it. It contained several pound notes, and several ten-shilling notes. But there were no £5 notes in it—not the ghost of a £5 note.

"Go through all the pockets you've got on," said Potter. "Satisfied now?" jeered Coker.

"What's the good of that, when I left the fivers in that pocket when I changed?" hooted Coker. "Think I'm fool enough to shove them into another pocket and forget all about it?"

"You're fool enough for anything," retorted Potter.

"Go through all your pockets, and let's see."

"And sharp!" snapped Greene. "You've got to find those fivers, Coker, whatever you did with them."

"I tell you I left them in that pocket, and never thought of them afterwards till now!" bawled Coker. "Look here!" He dragged out the lining of all the pockets of the clothes he was wearing. "Look! Perhaps you'd better borrow a microscope to make sure! Are they there?"

Undoubtedly, they were not there. Those banknotes were not in the garments Coker was wearing, and they were not in the garments he had discarded. Where they were was a puzzle.

"If you've dropped them about somewhere—!" said Potter, at last.

"How could I drop them about?" hooted Coker. "Think they could fall out of that pocket of their own accord?"

Potter made no reply to that. Obviously, the banknotes could not have fallen out of that pocket of their own accord.

"But they're gone!" said Greene.

"I know that! What I want to know is, where?" growled Coker. "They were in that blazer and I left it in this study. Now they're gone."

"But—but—!" stammered Greene. He was quite pale. "If—if—if they were there, and they ain't there now, they must have been taken out while we were in Courtfield this afternoon—!"

"Looks like it!" said Coker. "It's pretty thick, but that's what it looks like. Banknotes can't walk away. I suppose."

"Oh, you idiot!" breathed Potter. "You unmitigated ass! You and your fivers! If they ain't found, this will be all over the school. You had to leave banknotes lying about, as if they were threepenny-bits! Look here, Coker, you've got to find them, before a yarn starts that somebody's been pinching—."

"Oh, you born idiot!" said Greene.

"Is it my fault if some sneaking tick pinched my tenner while I was out?" demanded Coker.

Potter and Greene gave him very expressive looks. It certainly did look as if those fivers had been deliberately taken from the pocket of the blazer: indeed, there seemed no other way of accounting for their disappearance. But that was an awful idea—and particularly uncomfortable for Potter and Greene.

"It couldn't have happened if you hadn't been a careless ass," said Potter. "It's all your own fault."

"Look here. George Potter—."

"You've got to find them," said Greene.

"How can I find them if they've been pinched? They've been taken out of that pocket." said Coker. "That's plain enough! Somebody must have known they were there, and came up for them when we went out. I wonder who could have known!"

"About twenty fellows!" hooted Potter. "Didn't you flourish them in the quad for all Greyfriars to see?"

"No. I didn't!" roared Coker. "But come to think of it, some fellows may have seen them. But who'd pinch them?"

Potter and Greene had no reply to make to that. That "tenner" had been taken from the pocket of the blazer. That fact admitted of no doubt. But who could have done it—what Greyfriars man could have been capable of so base an act?—was a puzzle of which the answer could not even be guessed. There was a long pause, in Coker's study. Coker was disturbed and angry: Potter and Greene dismayed and uneasy. It was the most unpleasant thing that could possibly have happened in the study: the most unpleasant and dismaying thing that could have happened anywhere.

"You'll have to report this to Prout, if the banknotes don't turn up," said Potter, at last.

"They can't turn up, if they're in somebody else's pocket," said Greene.

"And—and they must be!"

"I—I don't want to see Prout!" muttered Coker. "I've seen enough of Prout, to-day. He would make out that it's my own fault, too! You know him! That's Prout—!"

"So it is your own fault!" snapped Greene.

"Look here, Billy Greene—."

"You thumping idiot—leaving banknotes lying about all over the shop," said Potter. "You'd better go to Prout at once. If it ain't reported at once, he will want to know why, when he hears."

Coker gave a growl.

"I'm not going to Prout if I can help it," he said.

"Look here, somebody sneaked up to the study while we were out and snooped those fivers. Well, we may be able to find out who it was. Let's ask the fellows in the games-study whether they saw anybody prowling about here this afternoon. "

"He would let fellows see him, of course!" said Potter, sarcastically.

"This can't be kept dark, Coker! Take my tip and go to Prout at once."

"When I want advice, George Potter, I'll ask for it! Pack it up till then," snorted Coker.

"You silly, cheeky, asinine, fatheaded, blithering, dithering, dunderheaded, foozling, howling, yammering—."

Slam!

No doubt Potter had intended to wind up that list of adjectives with a noun. But he was interrupted by the slamming of the door. Coker seemed to have had enough of Potter's adjectives: and he stamped out of the study and slammed the door after him.

Potter and Greene glared after him, and then looked at one another, in deep exasperation. Often and often had they been exasperated with Coker: but never quite so much as now.

"The born idiot!" breathed Potter. "Isn't this Coker all over?"

"Just Coker!" said Greene.

"There will be a frightful row about this—."

"Awful!" sighed Greene.

"This study will be in the news!" said Potter, bitterly. "Every fag in the school chortling about it, and saying that banknotes are pinched in this study. That ass—!"

"That fathead!"

"That benighted cuckoo!"

"That frabjous, footling fathead! Perhaps Prout will whop him again!" said Greene, hopefully. "Another six will do him good."

"Lots of good!" agreed Potter.

Which was, at least, a consolatory thought!

TOO LATE!

"HOLD on," said Bob Cherry.

"Come in, you ass—!"

"Want to be locked out?"

"Nunno! But hold on, all the same!" said Bob. He came to a halt in the ancient gateway of Greyfriars School, and his comrades, rather impatiently, did the same.

The Famous Five had been out of gates, and had returned in time—just in time—for lock-ups. They arrived at the gates as Gosling came down from his lodge, jingling his keys.

Gosling's eye was on them.

In some respects, perhaps, William Gosling, the ancient porter of Greyfriars School, was not a whale on duty. But there were some duties that Gosling performed with alacrity and zest. Shutting the school gates exactly on time was one of them. A breathless fellow might be only a couple of yards away when Gosling did his duty: but in such circumstances he might as well have been a couple of miles: for Gosling would clang the gates fairly on his nose. Then the hapless fellow, late for gates, would have to ring and give his name for report to his "beak". Indeed, old Gosling was reputed, among the juniors, to take a fiendish pleasure in shutting the gates on a fellow who was as good as in. Certainly he was as exact as a mathematician in closing the gates without a split second to spare.

So it was no time for fellows to hesitate, with Gosling's eye on them, and the jingle of his keys in their ears.

Nevertheless, Bob Cherry did stop. He was looking up the road in the direction of Courtfield, and seemed interested in something that he discerned in the falling dusk.

"Look here, Bob—!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"If you want lines from Quelch, we don't—!"

"That's Pricey!" said Bob.

"Eh? Who? What?"

"Give him a chance," added Bob.

"Oh!"

Four fellows put their heads out of the gateway again, and saw what Bob had seen. At a little distance, a hurrying figure in the dusk was visible. It was that of Stephen Price, of the Fifth Form.

Price was hurrying. He had, in fact, run a good part of the distance back from the "Three Fishers". But he was too weedy and seedy to keep up much of a pace. Frowsting and smoking cigarettes in the study were not good for a fellow's wind. But he was hurrying as fast as he could, anxious to get in before lock-ups: doubly anxious not to be missed at roll, and draw attention to himself. But though he hurried, he had no chance whatever of reaching the gates before they were shut, if Gosling shut them on time. For which reason the good-natured Bob, overlooking the fact that he disliked Price and regarded him as poisonous, was bent on giving him a chance.

"Oh! Him!" grunted Johnny Bull. "Bother him! Do you want Gosling to bang the gate on the back of your head, ass?"

"Price will never make it!" said Frank Nugent.

"Better come in, Bob."

"Here is the esteemed and ridiculous Gosling!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Now, then, h'in or h'out?" demanded Gosling, jingling his keys. "I got to shut these 'ere gates, as you knows well. H'in or h'out?"

"Hold on a tick, Gosling," said Harry Wharton.

"There's a chap just in—."

"H'in or h'out?" repeated Gosling. Possibly the fact that a chap was "just in" spurred him on, to the exact performance of his duty. "If you're still standing there when I shut this 'ere gate, you'll be pushed h'out. Now, then! Wot I says is this 'ere-h'in or h'out? "

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

He made a jump, and clamped down his foot in the middle of the gateway.

"Any of you fellows dropped a ten-shilling note?"

"No!" answered four fellows together.

"Did you, Gosling?"

William Gosling, about to swing the gate, which certainly would have pushed Harry Wharton and Co. "h'out", as they did not choose to come "h'in", paused. He was interested.

"Did you say a ten-shilling note, Master Cherry?" he asked. "Mind it don't blow away in this 'ere wind."

"Nothing will blow away from under my boot," answered Bob. "Sure you didn't drop a note, Harry?"

"As I hadn't one, I couldn't have," answered the captain of the Remove.

"What about you, Nugent?"

"I hadn't one, either."

"What about you, Johnny?"

"Fathead!" answered Johnny Bull.

"Does that mean yes or no?"

"Neither! It means that I'm not ass enough to drop ten-shilling notes, or anything else, about!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"What about you, Inky?"

"The dropfulness was not terrific, my esteemed Bob."

"Well, I never dropped one," said Bob Cherry.

"Nobody here has lost a ten-bob note. Have you been scattering your hard-earned wealth about, Gosling? "

Gosling was no longer jingling his keys. He was no longer grasping at the gate to shut it. His eyes, under his gnarled brows, were fixed on Bob Cherry's foot, firmly planted on the ground in the middle of the gateway. Nothing, even the flimsiest article, could have blown away from under that firmly-planted foot. There was just a hint of stealthiness in Gosling's look. He was not aware, certainly, that he had dropped a ten-shilling note. Still he might have—any man might have!

"Well, if it don't belong to any of you young gents—!" said Gosling, slowly.

"None of us!" said Harry Wharton.

"Then I expects I must 'ave dropped it," said Gosling. "P'raps you'll be kind enough to 'and it up to a man, Master Cherry. Don't let it blow away."

"It won't blow away, that's a cert," said Bob. He cast a glance over his shoulder. Price was quite close at hand now. He could see the juniors and Gosling at the gate, and put on all the speed he could. But he still required half a minute. "Sure it's yours, Gosling?"

"Well, 'oos else could it be, blowin' about jest by my lodge?" argued Gosling. "Now I come to think of it, I 'ad a ten-shillin' note in my trousis' pocket—."

"Feel if it's still there," suggested Bob.

"I must 'ave dropped it," said Gosling. "Now I come to think of it, there's a 'ole in the lining."

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob.

"You jest 'and it up, sir, or shift your foot and let a man pick up the ten-shillin' note he's dropped," said Gosling.

"Well, if you've really dropped a ten-shilling note—," said Bob, slowly. "Don't I keep on tellin' you that I 'ave?" demanded Gosling. He was quite sure, by this time! "Move your foot and let a man pick up his note afore it blows away in this 'ere wind."

There was a hurrying footstep and a panting breath close at hand. Price had arrived! Breathlessly, he passed the juniors—giving them a scowling glance as he passed—and hurried in. Gosling hardly noticed him, in his keen interest in the ten-shilling note.

"Come on, Bob," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Let Gosling have his note, and come in."

"Now, then, Master Cherry—!" grunted Gosling.

"Jest move your foot." He bent down, with a horny hand ready. "I'll get it afore it blows away. Look 'ere, you goin' to take your foot orf it?"

"Right-ho!" said Bob, cheerfully. And he moved his foot at last.

Gosling stared at the uncovered spot. His horny hand was ready to grab. But there was nothing to grab. The spot was bare. The Co. stared also. Up to that moment, they certainly had believed in that ten-shilling note, just as Gosling had. But there was no ten-shilling note to be seen.

"Where's that blinkin' note?" ejaculated Gosling. Bob Cherry winked at his friends.

"What note?" he asked.

"The one what you 'ad your foot on!"

"My dear man, I never had my foot on a ten-shilling note," said Bob, affably. "If you've lost one, you'll have to look somewhere else for it."

"Ha, ha, ha!" came a sudden yell from the Co. They understood now.

Gosling resumed the perpendicular, with an extremely expressive expression on his gnarled face. He breathed hard, and he breathed deep.

"You young limb!" he said. "Didn't you say that there was a ten-shillin' note there, and you 'ad your foot on it? "

"Certainly not! I asked these fellows if they'd dropped one. Quite a different thing."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My eye!" said Gosling. "Pullin' a man's leg! There ain't no blinkin' note at all—."

"Hard luck, as you lost one through that hole in the lining of your trousers' pocket," said Bob, sympathetically.

"Ha, ha, ha,!" shrieked the Co.

"Wot I says is this 'ere—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Five fellows, laughing, cut on into the dusky quad.

Gosling stood staring after them, with deep feelings. It had long been Gosling's opinion that all boys ought to be "drowned": he was now more confirmed in that opinion than ever. Late for once in closing the gates, Gosling fairly banged them shut, while Harry Wharton and Co., still chuckling, sauntered into the House, and went up to the Remove.

Price of the Fifth had preceded them by some minutes.

Quite unaware of the little comedy Bob Cherry had played for his behalf, but extremely glad not to be late for gates, Price had hurried in, and up the staircase. One hand, in his pocket, was on those wretched notes. One thought was hammering in his mind. If only the theft had not yet been discovered! If only he had a chance of replacing those hateful notes whence he had taken them, before anything was known. If only—!

The door of the games-study, at the end of the Fifth-form passage, stood wide open. Almost a babel of voices proceeded from that apartment. Some spot of excitement seemed to have accrued among the Fifth-form men. Price checked his hurrying pace, and listened, with beating heart. Was anything known—had it come out—was he too late—? Cedric Hilton's drawl came out of the hubbub to his ears.

"I daresay he's lost them in his trousers' pocket."

"Look here—!" came Coker's bawl.

"You look here, Coker!" It was the voice of Blundell, the captain of the Fifth. "You're such a silly ass. Are you sure the notes have been taken? If they have—."

"I tell you they've been snooped out of my blazer pocket, that I left in my study when I went to Courtfield this afternoon—."

"Well, if that is so—!"

"It is so!" hooted Coker. "And I want to know whether anybody saw anybody prowling about my study while I was out—."

Price almost staggered. He turned away, weakly, his face like chalk, his knees almost giving way under him! He was too late—too late! He put his hand on the wall to steady himself.

Five fellows, coming up the stairs, looked at him, almost in alarm. Harry Wharton ran towards him.

"Price! What's the matter? Are you ill?" he exclaimed.

Price gave him an unseeing stare, turned away, and went up the Fifth-form passage without replying. The juniors heard his study door shut, up the passage. They looked at one another.

"What on earth's the matter with Pricey?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Looked pretty sick!" said Nugent.

"The sackfulness was terrific!" murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Perhaps the absurd and ridiculous smokefulness has been too muchful."

"Too many smokes!" grunted Johnny Bull. "That's it."

"I say, you fellows!" Billy Bunter rolled across the landing, blinking inquisitively through his big spectacles. "I say, is anything up? What's going on?"

"We are!" answered Bob.

And they went on.

CHAPTER 19

BUNTER IS WANTED

"BUNTER!" rapped out Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir! I wasn't speaking, sir! I only said to Toddy—!"

"Bunter, you will go to your headmaster's study after this lesson."

"Oh ! Yes, sir!"

The Remove were in form, in third school, the next day.

A good many fellows had noticed that Mr. Quelch gave the fattest member of the form a very keen and very searching look, when they came in. And they all sat up and took notice, as it were, when Quelch announced that the fat Owl was to go to Dr. Locke after the class.

Skinner winked at Vernon-Smith, who grinned. Snoop giggled and suppressed that giggle very swiftly, as a gimlet-eye turned in his direction. Lord Mauleverer raised his eyebrows. Harry Wharton and Co. looked very grave. Every fellow seemed interested, in one way or another, in the Remove master's announcement. Naturally, there could be few who failed to connect it with the startling story that was now going the rounds at Greyfriars School. All Greyfriars knew that there had been a theft in a Fifth-form study.

Coker, in the vain hope of spotting some surreptitious snooper who might have been seen prowling about his study the previous afternoon, had told all the Fifth. From the Fifth the story had spread in all directions. By bedtime, most Greyfriars fellows knew. In the morning, every fellow in the school knew; from the smallest fag in the Second Form to the captain of Greyfriars. And as soon as it reached Wingate's ears, he had tackled Coker on the subject at once: told him what he thought of him for not

having reported the matter immediately, and directed him to go to Prout on the spot. Which Coker, reluctantly, had done: and now the matter was in official hands. And during that morning, Greyfriars fairly hummed and buzzed with the startling news.

A "tenner"—or, to be exact, two fivers, which amounted to a tenner—had been "pinched" in Coker's study! An earth-tremor under the ancient school could hardly have startled Greyfriars more. Nobody could begin to guess who had done it: but somebody, evidently, had; and as soon as the beaks or the prefects spotted that somebody, he would go up to the Head to be sacked. So quite a thrill ran through the Remove when Quelch announced that Billy Bunter was to go up to the Head after third school.

Billy Bunter sat and blinked at his form-master, through his big spectacles, with a blink of dismay.

There were many sins on Bunter's fat conscience, though "pinching" banknotes certainly was not one of them. He wondered dismally which of those many sins might have come to light: deemed sufficiently serious by Quelch for a visit to his head-master.

"I—I—I say, sir—!" stammered Bunter.

"You need say nothing, Bunter."

"But—but you said I'm to go up to the Old Man, sir—."

"What?"

"I—I—I mean the Head, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I—I didn't mean to say the Old Man, sir—I never call the Head the Old Man, sir, like other fellows do—I—I mean the Head, sir—:"

"You may be silent, Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! But—but it wasn't me, sir," stammered Bunter. "I never had it, sir."

Every eye was on Bunter. This, to the ears of the Remove fellows, sounded remarkably like a confession. Perhaps it impressed Mr. Quelch in the same way, for his look at Bunter became very grim.

"You had better be silent, Bunter! What you have to say upon the subject must be said to your headmaster."

"But I never had it, sir!" bleated Bunter. "I never went down to the kitchen at all yesterday, sir."

Quelch gave almost a jump. "The kitchen!" he repeated.

"Yes, sir! If Mrs. Kebble has said anything about a pie, I never had it—I—I haven't tasted pie this week, sir—."

"Pie!" repeated Mr. Quelch, almost dazedly.

"Yes, sir! If it's about the pie—."

"Bless my soul! Are you so stupid, Bunter, as to suppose that your headmaster's time would be wasted on such a subject as a—a—a pie!"

"Oh! But I never had anything else, sir! If it's about my being in Coker's study, sir, you gave me lines for that, sir—you remember, sir—."

"Silence, Bunter."

"Yes, sir! But, sir—"

"I shall cane you if you speak again, Bunter."

"Oh, lor!"

Billy Bunter realised that silence was golden. He relapsed into it, with a worried fat brow.

"Oh, crumbs!" Skinner whispered to Snoop. "So he was in Coker's study, was he? No need for the beaks to look much further."

The lesson proceeded. It was not a very quiet lesson.

There was excitement in the Remove, and whispering was almost incessant. Fellows simply could not keep their attention fixed on the valuable instruction they were receiving from their form-master, when there had been a theft in the school, and a member of the form was booked to go up to the Head. By the time the Remove dismissed, a dozen fellows were the richer for lines. It was noticed, however, that Quelch passed over Billy

Bunter very lightly. No doubt his view was that Bunter had enough coming to him. But the circumstance confirmed the view, if it needed confirming, that Bunter was going up to the Head to be questioned about those missing banknotes.

Bunter sat through that class with a wrinkled and worried fat brow. He cudgelled his fat brains to elucidate what the Head could possibly want him for. It wasn't the pie-Quelch had said so. It couldn't be Prout's report of finding him in a Fifth-form study-Quelch had "lined" him for that, and a fellow couldn't be punished twice over. It could hardly be Coker's pineapple-that was days and days ago. Nor could it be the biscuits he had found in Temple's study: Temple of the Fourth would think that Fry or Dabney had had them: anyhow it wouldn't get to the Head. There were quite a number of similar sins that Bunter was able to call to mind-but they certainly were not matters for so very busy a man as a headmaster to take personal cognisance of. In fact, Bunter began to wonder whether it was a "row" after all. Headmasters, of course, were dangerous animals whom any fellow preferred to keep at a safe distance: nevertheless, they did sometimes send for a fellow without hostile intentions. It was possible, if not probable, that the Head was pleased with Bunter, and had words of commendation to utter. That was quite a soothing idea, and caused Billy Bunter to unwrinkle his fat brows. Still, he was not feeling at ease when the Remove came out, and in the corridor he gave the Famous Five an anxious inquiring blink.

"I say, you fellows, what do you think the Head wants me for?" he asked. "Think it's something nice?"

"Nice?" repeated Harry Wharton, blankly.

"Well, he may have noticed me, you know," explained Bunter. "Headmasters ain't really the dummies fellows often think they are-the Old Man is jolly sharp really. He may have noticed me, and-and may be going to tell me that I'm a credit to the form, or something like that, you know."

"Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"It isn't the pie-Quelch said so-and it can't be going to Coker's study yesterday afternoon-I've had lines for that-so-."

"You utter chump," said Frank Nugent. "What did you go to Coker's study yesterday afternoon for?"

"Oh! Nothing! I didn't take anything-."

"Wha-a-t?"

"Not a thing," said Bunter. "I wouldn't, you know. It was all Smithy's fault, too-fixing a booby-trap in his cupboard, just as if he fancied a fellow might be after his cake-suspicious beast! I say, you fellows, do you think the Old Man's going to give me a pat on the back? After all, he may have noticed that I'm a cut above the Form in most ways-headmasters do notice things, you know-."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Bunter!" It was a deep voice from the door of the Remove form-room. Quelch was looking out.

Bunter spun round like a fat humming-top.

"Oh! Yes, sir! I'm just going, sir-."

"Go to your headmaster's study immediately, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

Billy Bunter rolled away, in a state of mingled fear and hope. The Famous Five gazed after him as he rolled. Bunter, apparently, was quite unaware of the reason why the Head wanted him. If so, he was the only fellow in the Remove in that happy state of ignorance.

"Well," said Bob Cherry, with a deep breath. "This beats it!"

"The beatfulness is terrific!" agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Was it Bunter?" said Nugent.

"Goodness knows!" said Harry Wharton. "It was somebody! That's what the Head wants to see him about, at any rate! I wonder—!"

The chums of the Remove went out into the quad—wondering! Billy Bunter was wondering, too, as he tapped at his headmaster's door. Was it, after all, the pie, or some similar transgression—or was it that the Head had noticed what a fine fellow he was, a credit to the school generally? He was soon to know!

CHAPTER 20

BUNTER BEFORE THE BEAK

DR. LOCKE eyed Billy Bunter as he rolled into the study. His brow was unusually severe in expression, and his glance very searching. Mr. Prout was in the study, and he also eyed Bunter, with considerable disfavour. If the Head was calmly severe, Prout was perturbed and flustered. Such an occurrence as a theft in a Fifth-form study was very upsetting to the Fifth-form master. So dreadful a thing was utterly out of keeping with Greyfriars and its traditions. It was almost unbelievable: but it had to be believed, as it had happened. The mere thought of a boy of his Form being expelled for theft made Prout quite faint. It had been a great relief to Prout to remember that he had caught a Remove boy in Coker's study at the material time.

Prout had no doubt on the subject. He had had no doubt at the time that the young rascal had been there for some surreptitious purpose—why else was a Lower Fourth boy in a senior study at all during its owners' absence? Now he had no doubt what that purpose was. Someone had taken banknotes from Coker's blazer while he was out. Bunter had been there while Coker was out, and unable to explain his presence there. What could be clearer? And the more Prout had looked into the affair, the clearer it seemed to him that Bunter was the culprit. And the dread possibility of an expulsion in the Fifth—his Form—Prout's Form—faded, when he concentrated on Bunter. Looking at him now, with a very disfavouring glance, he had no doubt that he was looking at the purloiner of those banknotes—probably in the young rascal's pocket at this very moment! But though Prout's mind was made up on the subject, the Head's certainly was not. The Head was going to investigate this shocking and disgraceful occurrence, and sift it to the very bottom before he passed judgment. His face was severe—but his mind was quite open, as yet.

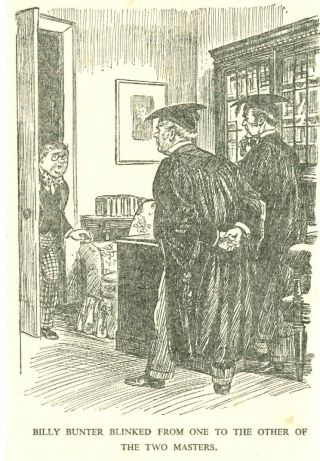
Billy Bunter blinked from one to the other of the two masters, wondering why Prout was there. If old Pompous was going to raise that trifling matter of his visit to Coker's study, after Quelch had given him lines for it, it was, in Bunter's opinion, altogether too thick.

"Bunter!" The Head's voice was deep. "I have sent for you to put some questions to you, in a very serious matter. I trust that you will answer me directly and truthfully."

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Bunter. He realised now that it was not words of commendation to which he had to listen. The Head had not sent for him because he had noticed what a fine fellow and what a credit to Greyfriars he was. It was a "row" of some sort: though Bunter did not as yet comprehend how very grave a row. As he knew nothing whatever about Coker's tenner, it did not occur to him that others might suspect that he did!

But he was very wary. Whatever might be laid to his charge, he was prepared to disclaim it. So long as he could get out of the Head's study without being whopped, Bunter was prepared, like Mr. Jagggers' celebrated witness, to "swear, in a general way, anything!"

"Yesterday afternoon, Bunter, you visited a Fifth-form study, while the boys of that study were out of gates."
Automatically, as it were, Bunter was on the verge of replying, "No, sir". But he recollected himself in time. "No, sir", was not very useful, when Prout had caught him there. So, checking the "No, sir", just in time, Bunter stammered:
"Yes, sir."



"Mr. Prout found you there, Bunter, when he came up to the study to speak to a boy of his Form. He asked you why you were there, and you could give no explanation."

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I told Mr. Prout that I came up to speak to Kik—Kik—Coker, sir," stammered Bunter.

"Coker had gone out, Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I never knew he had gone out, sir! I—I never watched him go out with Potter and Greene."

"What?" ejaculated the Head. "I—I—I mean—."

"You were aware that Coker was not there, Bunter."

The Head's voice was growing sterner. "Yet you tell me that you went to the study to speak to Coker. Cannot you understand that this matter is very serious, Bunter? Tell me the truth immediately. Why did you go to Coker's study?"

"I—I never took anything, sir!" groaned Bunter. "I—I never knew there was anything there, sir, and I never touched it, sir. I—I thought Coker wouldn't miss it, sir—."

"You thought that Coker would not miss it!" exclaimed the Head, while Prout stared at the fat Owl of the Remove.

"Well, it—it wasn't much, sir, and—and—and Potter or Greene might have had it, sir—."

"Potter or Greene might have had it!" repeated the Head, aghast. "Bunter! Do you venture to tell me that you took something belonging to Coker, thinking that he might suppose that his study-mates had had it?"

"Well, he wouldn't mind, sir! Coker lets those fellows have a free run of everything in his study—all the fellows know, sir! I jolly well know they had more of his Aunt Judy's jam than Coker had himself."

"That would not apply to such a thing as money, Bunter."

"Oh, no, sir!" agreed Bunter. "Of course not!"

"Then what do you mean, Bunter?"

"I—I—I mean I—I never had anything, sir, it—it was all a mistake! I—I never went to Coker's study, sir, I—I mean, I wouldn't have gone if I'd known that Mr. Prout was coming up, sir!" babbled Bunter. "And—and I

didn't touch anything, sir, and—and I thought Coker wouldn't miss it, and—."

"I think the matter is clear now, sir!" said Mr. Prout. "It would indeed seem so, Mr. Prout," said Dr. Locke.

"But no doubt must remain in so very serious a matter, involving the expulsion of a Greyfriars boy."

Billy Bunter jumped almost clear of the floor.

His little round eyes almost bulged through his big round, spectacles, in sheer horror, at his headmaster.

"Oh, sir!" he gasped. "Oh, lor'! I—I say, I—I ain't done anything to be sacked for, sir. Oh, jiminy!"

"Bunter, I warn you to answer me truthfully. If you utter a single untruth again, I shall refuse to listen to you further," said the Head, sternly.

"Oh, yes, sir!" groaned Bunter.

"You went to Coker's study in the Fifth Form yesterday afternoon, knowing that he was absent, and that the study would be vacant."

Bunter hesitated a moment. But the Head's stern warning had its effect.

It was but seldom that the fat Owl had recourse to the truth. It was a strange and unfamiliar thing to him. But it was borne in upon his obtuse brain that he had better tell the truth now .

"Yes, sir!" he gasped.

"You went there," continued the Head, with increasing sternness, "with the deliberate intention of taking something belonging to Coker?"

Again Bunter hesitated. But again the truth came out: " Yes, sir!"

"And you did take it!"

For the third time Bunter hesitated. But it had to come. "Yes, sir."

"You admit this, Bunter?"

"Oh, lor'! Yes, sir."

"And what did you do with it, Bunter?"

"I—I—I—."

"Answer me, Bunter!"

"I—I—I ate it, sir!"

CHAPTER 21

JUST JAM

DEAD silence reigned in the Head's study, for a long moment.

Dr. Locke gazed at Bunter. Mr. Prout almost goggled at him. Bunter's answer was about the last that they could possibly have expected to hear.

There was, in fact, a slight misunderstanding. While the Head was, of course, referring to Coker's missing "tenner", Billy Bunter, naturally, was thinking of the article that he actually had abstracted in Coker's study—jam! It had not yet dawned on Bunter's fat brain that his visit to the Head had any connection with the missing tenner. Naturally he was thinking of what he had done: not of what he hadn't done. He stood blinking at Dr. Locke and Mr. Prout, quite astonished by the blank astonishment in their faces.

He had, for once, told the truth. And after all, what would a fellow do with jam, but eat it? Bunter saw nothing to cause astonishment, in the plain statement of a simple fact.

Dr. Locke broke the silence, at last. "Bless my soul!" he said.

"Upon my word!" breathed Prout. "Is—is this boy in his right mind? It is quite impossible, sir, that he can have done as he says."

"Quite!" said the Head.

"But I-I-I did, sir," stammered Bunter. "That's what I wanted it for, sir. And there was lots and lots! I hadn't finished when Mr. Prout came in, sir—there was a lot left."

"A lot left?" repeated the Head. "Oh, yes, sir! Lots."

"Absurd!" exclaimed Mr. Prout. "There was nothing else to take, and certainly nothing was left."

"Oh, really, sir—."

"Bunter!" said the Head, in a deep voice, "the statement you have made is too absurd for a moment's consideration. I warn you once more to tell me the truth. What have you done with the banknotes?"

Billy Bunter jumped.

"The—the—the what, sir? he stuttered. "The banknotes."

"What banknotes, sir?" gasped Bunter, bewildered. "I-I ain't got any banknotes, sir! I was expecting a postal order, sir, but I haven't had any banknotes—."

"The banknotes you abstracted from Coker's study yesterday afternoon, Bunter," said Dr. Locke, sternly.

Bunter almost fell down.

At last—at long last it dawned on him why he was before the Head!

His eyes popped at his headmaster.

"Oh, crikey!" he gasped. His fat face was the picture of horror. His plump knees sagged under him. "Oh, crumbs! I-I-I never—."

"You have admitted it, Bunter."

"I haven't!" yelled Bunter. "I didn't! I wasn't! Oh, crikey! I-I-I never wasn't didn't—oh, lor'!"

"You had admitted, Bunter, that you deliberately went to Coker's study, knowing he was out of gates, with that purpose in mind—."

"I didn't!" shrieked Bunter. "Nothing of the kind, sir! It wasn't the banknotes, sir! I didn't know you were talking about banknotes, sir! It was the jam—."

"Wha-a-t?"

"Jam!" gasped Bunter.

"Jam!" repeated the Head, dazedly. "What do you mean—jam?"

"Just jam, sir!" gasped Bunter. "Coker's jam, sir! Strawberry jam, sir! I-I thought Coker wouldn't mind—I-I mean I thought he'd think that Potter and Greene had scoffed it—I-I mean—I-I-I only just tasted it, sir—I-I hadn't taken more than a dozen tablespoonfuls when Mr. Prout came in, sir—. It was jam, sir—only jam, sir—just jam—."

"Bless my soul!" said the Head. He began to grasp it! "Is it possible there is a misunderstanding? It is not a question of—of jam, Bunter. If you abstracted jam in a Fifth-form study, that is a matter for your form-master to deal with."

"Quelch—I mean Mr. Quelch, gave me lines, sir—."

"Did you suppose for one moment, Bunter, that I had sent for you in connection with—with jam?" exclaimed the Head.

"Yes, sir!"

"You utterly absurd boy."

"Oh, really, sir—."

"Kindly dismiss such absurd matters from your mind, Bunter, and answer my questions directly. Did you, or did you not, abstract banknotes from the pocket of a blazer in Coker's study? "

"No! " howled Bunter.

"The matter is not so clear, after all, Mr. Prout," said the Head. "It appears that this almost incredibly stupid boy supposed that I was questioning him on the subject of—of jam! But the fact remains that he was in the study, and that the banknotes are missing."

"I never touched them, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I wouldn't! You ask any fellow in the Remove, sir. They make out that I'd snoop a fellow's tuck,

but—but that's only their little joke, sir—they'd trust me with untold gold, sir! I—I never knew that Coker had any banknotes, either—."

"If that is the case, Mr. Prout—."

"That is not the case, sir!" boomed Prout. "Bunter was perfectly aware of the fact. I have questioned Coker very closely on the subject, sir! Yesterday morning he forgot to look for letters, and Bunter found one for him in the rack and took it to him in the quadrangle, where he opened it. That was how the banknotes became known to a large number of boys—and Bunter certainly saw Coker take out the banknotes and transfer them to his pocket."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, "I—I—I mean—." Billy Bunter belonged to the class who should, proverbially, have good memories! But he had a very bad one!

"I—I—I mean, I—I did know about the banknotes, sir, but—but I never thought about them when I went to the study, sir—it was the jam—."

"Why did you meddle with Coker's letter at all, Bunter? "

"I—I didn't, sir—."

"What?"

"I—I mean, I—I just wanted to oblige Coker, sir! I never thought he might lend a fellow half a crown if there was a tip in the letter. Nothing of that kind, sir! I—I—."

"You saw Coker place the banknotes in the pocket of the blazer he was wearing at the time?"

"No, sir—I—I—I mean, yes, sir."

"Coker had occasion to change before he went out, and the blazer was lying in his study—!"

"W-a-w-as it, sir?"

"Did you not see it there, Bunter?"

"I—I never noticed it, sir. I—I wasn't thinking about Coker's blazer, sir, I—I—I was thinking about the jam, sir—."

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Prout.

"Bunter! Answer me carefully, and truthfully! Do you, or do you not, know anything about the banknotes missing from Coker's study?"

"No, sir!" moaned Bunter. "Not a thing, sir!"

There was a pause. The Head and Mr. Prout eyed Bunter doubtfully. That no reliance could be placed upon a single word he uttered, was evident: nevertheless, the impression of both masters was, that Bunter was not the man! It was clear enough that he had come to the Head's study without the faintest idea that he was called there in connection with the missing banknotes: which, of course, would have been the uppermost thought in the mind of the guilty man. Bunter's untruthfulness had very nearly landed him: but his stupidity had saved him! It was, in fact, plain that he had gone to Coker's study for jam—just jam! That was plain to the Head, and even Mr. Prout, anxious as he was for the culprit to prove to be some fellow outside his own Form, could not help inclining to the same view. "Very well, Bunter!" said the Head, at last. "For the present, you may leave my study."

Billy Bunter did not waste time in replying. He shot out of the Head's study like a bullet from a rifle, gasping with relief to find himself outside the dreaded door.

"Oh, crikey!" he gasped, in the corridor.

Then he rolled away: and, like Iser in the poem, he rolled rapidly, lest the Head should call him back.

CHAPTER 22

THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

CEDRIC HILTON strolled up the Fifth-form passage, after class that day, his hands in the pockets of his elegant trousers, easy and nonchalant as usual: but with a rather unusual cast of thought on his handsome, rather vacant face. Hilton, that day, had had food for thought, which he did not find quite pleasant.

The door of Horace Coker's study stood half-open, as he passed, and voices came from that study. Coker and Co. were at tea there: but not, it seemed, quite so amicably as was their wont.

"The old ass!" It was Coker's voice, with a note of indignant resentment. "He jawed me—jawed me right and left! Just as if it was a fellow's own fault, you know. That's Prout!"

"Wasn't it?" came a snap from Potter.

"What do you mean, George Potter? Think I asked that snooper, whoever he was, to sneak up to this study while I was out, and snoop my banknotes?" bawled Coker.

"As good as!" snapped Greene. "Think any chap with a spot of sense would leave banknotes in a blazer pocket, lying about any old place?"

"I tell you I forgot—."

"You shouldn't have!" said Potter. "If you had to forget them, pity you didn't forget them altogether. This is going to make a regular row. There's been a fag up before the Head about it already—."

"I know that—that fat pilferer Bunter! I don't believe it was him did it," said Coker, with his usual lofty disregard of grammar. "He would snoop anything he could eat, but that's his limit. But the fact is, I can't think of any fellow who would! When you think of any fellow in particular, it just seems impossible. But that tenner was snooped. It's got to be got back! If you fellows think that I can afford to chuck tenners about like tanners, you're making a mistake, see?"

"You shouldn't have—!" began Potter.

"Oh, shut up, Potter."

"I jolly well think—!" began Greene.

"Oh, shut up, Greene."

Cedric Hilton passed on, to his own study, leaving Coker and Co. to it. The affair of the missing banknotes had evidently caused discord. Coker, the loser of so considerable a sum as ten pounds, naturally expected a spot of sympathy from his friends. Instead of which, Potter and Greene seemed to take the view that the whole thing was largely Coker's own fault. Which was very annoying to Coker, who knew, if nobody else did, that if any fellow in the affair was absolutely and wholly blameless, it was Horace James Coker.

Cedric Hilton went into his own study, and closed the door after him. Price leaning back in an armchair, with a half-smoked cigarette hanging from his mouth, looked up quickly, almost stealthily. His sharp narrow eyes scanned Hilton's face, almost as if in fear of what he might read there.

Cedric Hilton sat on the corner of the table, looking at Price: with a gaze as searching as Price's own. He did not speak, and under his intent scrutiny, Price coloured, and then became pale. He shifted in the armchair, and struck a match to re-light the cigarette; Hilton's lip curled. It was palpable that Stephen Price did not want to meet his eyes. "Well," said Price, restively. "What's up?"

"Coker's lost a tenner."

"What the dickens do you mean? That's ancient history—it was all over the school last evening."

"A Remove kid has been up to the Head about it," Price started. In his deep concern and anxiety for himself, in the haunting fear that shook every nerve in his wretched body, he had not thought of Bunter. But he

remembered now the scene in Coker's study—Prout coming in and catching the fat junior there, while he was in hiding behind the door.

"Oh!" he said. He almost uttered Bunter's name, but checked himself in time. "A Remove kid, did you say?"

"Just that!"

"Then it was a Remove kid that snooped Coker's tenner, was it?" Price spoke as carelessly as he could. "How do they know?"

"They don't know," answered Hilton. "Bunter was up to the Head, but the Old Man seems satisfied that it wasn't Bunter. There's been nothing about it since, anyway, that I've heard of."

Price drew a very deep breath. Bad as he was, unscrupulous, mean, stealthy, this was a relief to him. It would have added a pang of remorse to his fear and apprehension, had his guilt fallen upon innocent shoulders. Not that he would have dared to speak out, had it been so. But it was a relief to him that it was not so.

"They've not thought of anyone else, so far, that I've heard of," continued Hilton. "But you can bank on it that the matter won't drop. It's the kind of thing that has to be thrashed out to the very end."

"I suppose so." Price blew out a little cloud of smoke.

"Nothing to do with us specially, is it?"

"Not with me." said Hilton, pointedly. Price gave him a stealthy, sideways look.

"I don't quite know what you mean by that, Cedric. No more to do with me than with you, I suppose."

"You don't know anything about it?" Price almost choked over his cigarette.

"I! How should I know anything about it?" he asked.

"What the dickens do you mean? I know no more than you do."

"Coker was asking fellows last night, whether they'd seen anyone prowling about his study while he was out. You didn't?"

"I was out myself! I went out soon after you left me to play soccer. I could hardly have seen anyone prowling about, as I never came up to the studies."

Hilton sat silent on the corner of the table, his eyes still intently on Price's pasty face. Price threw away the stump of his cigarette, and lighted another, with an unsteady hand.

"Look here, Steve," said Hilton, at last. "If you've been a mad fool—"

"What do you mean?" muttered Price, huskily. "How are you getting on with Joey Banks? You were frightened out of your wits of him yesterday. You don't seem so to-day. Have you paid him?" That question revealed plainly enough what was in Cedric Hilton's mind.

"No!" breathed Price.

"You haven't?"

"No. I tell you."

"You were in a twittering funk yesterday, because you thought he might come here to-day, as he threatened. What's braced you?"

"I've seen him, and he's given me time to pay," Hilton eyed him very doubtfully.

"Is that all?"

"That's all! It's off my mind now," said Price. He sneered. "You can ask him if you like whether I've paid him. I don't mind."

"Well, it was exactly the same sum!" said Hilton, slowly. "You were almost off your nut with funk because you couldn't pay Joey ten quid—and the same day, ten quid disappear from the next study to this! If the beaks knew, who do you think they'd nail for snooping that tenner?"

"The beaks don't know," sneered Price, "and you're not going to tell them. I suppose?"

"Don't be a fool! If you haven't paid Banks, all right! But—look here. Steve, if you've done a silly mad thing—."

"Pally, I must say!" sneered Price. "Somebody pinches a tenner, and you come and ask me if I'm the man! I might as well ask you!"

"I couldn't help it coming into my mind." said Hilton, half-
apologetically. "But if you haven't paid Banks after all—."

"I've told you I haven't. He's promised to wait. Why don't you ask him?"

"I think I will!" said Hilton, eyeing Price narrowly.

"Do!" said Price.

Hilton slipped off the corner of the table.

"Well, that's that," he said. "I just couldn't help thinkin'—. It was such a ghastly coincidence—it was a tenner you wanted, and it's a tenner that's missin'—and you were in a blue funk—I couldn't help—."

"Thanks," sneered Price. "Much obliged to you for thinking that I might do anything of the kind."

"I didn't think so, unless you were scared so stiff that you hardly knew what you were doing. And you were scared stiff—twittering with funk. It looked—dash it all, Pricey, you know how it had to look to anyone who knew how you were fixed. Thank goodness there's nothin' in it."

Hilton left the study again: relieved in his mind, but perhaps still with a lingering doubt. Price stared at the door, with evil eyes, when it had closed on him. He threw away his cigarette, and groped in an inner pocket with a shaking hand. There was a faint rustle of crisp paper. The contact seemed almost to burn his fingers. All over Greyfriars School fellows were discussing the theft in Coker's study: it was the one topic. No one suspected him—even Hilton, who had half-suspected, seemed satisfied. But he was haunted with fear. He had been too late to restore the stolen notes before the theft was discovered—but they had to be restored somehow—somehow, in some manner, by some device, wholly unconnected with himself. But how?

He had sat there, trying to think it out before Hilton came in. He resumed his uneasy miserable reflections after Hilton had gone. It was true, as Hilton had said, that he would not have done that dreaded thing, had he not been scared stiff—twittering with funk. If the banknotes went back to their owner, he could feel that he was not a thief and gradually the whole ugly business would fade from his mind, like a nightmare. But how—how? He had to think of safety first—he dared not run the slightest risk. Time was passing—he might be suspected—he knew that Prout had often had a doubtful eye on him: he was only too well aware that Wingate and Gwynne, and other prefects, more than half-suspected his dingy pursuits outside the school. If they thought of him—if they fancied—!

What was he going to do? He lounged there in the armchair, smoking cigarette after cigarette, trying to think it out. But his smokes seemed to bring him little comfort.

The way of the transgressor was hard!

CHAPTER 23

DETECTIVE BUNTER TAKES THE CASE

"I SAY, you fellows!"

"Too late!" said Bob Cherry, with a shake of the head. "The too-latefulness is terrific!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Billy Bunter, in the doorway of No. 1 Study in the Remove, blinked at five fellows in that study. He seemed puzzled.

"Wharrer you mean—too late?" he demanded. "We've finished tea!" explained Bob. "Not a crumb left! Absolutely nothing to eat in the study at all! You're too late, old fat man."

"Now we're going to lose Bunter's company!" sighed Frank Nugent.
"Try Smithy's study!" suggested Johnny Bull. "He may still have some of that cake left—the one you didn't snaffle yesterday."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, really, you fellows! Did you think I'd come to tea?" snorted Bunter.

"Did we not?" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Well, I jolly well didn't!" grunted the fat Owl. "I've tea'd with Mauly. Think I'd be found dead in this study at tea-time, when Mauly asks a chap to a spread? You can keep your tin of sardines and your spot of marger. Yah!"

Bunter rolled into the study. Although tea was over, and nothing remained, it appeared that the Famous Five were not going to lose his fascinating company, after all.

William George Bunter, for once, was not on the prowl for provender.

"Splendid spread in Mauly's study, you chaps!" said Bunter, with a reminiscent smack of the lips. "Decent chap, Mauly—though you never really know how to take him. More'n once he's sported his oak, you know, just as if he didn't want to see a chap—and then this time he comes up to a fellow before a crowd of chaps and asks him to a spread in his study. Topping spread, too."

The Famous Five smiled. Bunter did not know why Lord Mauleverer had specially asked him to tea in his study that day, before a crowd of fellows. But Harry Wharton and Co. could guess. There was rather more than a rumour in the Remove that Billy Bunter knew what had become of Coker's missing banknotes. It was like Mauly, who normally was wont to dodge round corners to keep the fat Owl at arm's length, to ask him specially to a study spread, in the presence of a crowd: nobly enduring Bunter's company just to make it clear that he, at least, had no suspicion on the subject.

Neither had Harry Wharton and Co. themselves. Certainly, Bunter seemed to have done his best to make himself an object of suspicion. He had been in Coker's study at the material time: and it had not transpired that anyone else had. True that Bunter had no limit in matters of tuck. Nothing eatable was safe from his fat paws. But money was a very different thing: even Bunter understood the distinction between "meum" and "tuum" where cash was concerned. They just did not and could not believe that Bunter had done it: confirmed in that favourable view by the fact that Bunter had been up to the Head about it, and had been dismissed by him. They had no doubt that, if Bunter had been the man, the Head would have extracted the truth from him: so it followed, in their opinion at least, that Bunter was not the man. That opinion, however, was not shared by all the Remove: hence Lord Mauleverer's kindly act: an example which the Co. felt that it was up to them to follow. So, though they were talking football, and Bunter, always superfluous, was more superfluous than ever, they were rather unusually polite to the fat Owl: and did not request him to buzz off, mizzle, bunk, or hook it.

Ham, and cake, and real butter, and two kinds of jam!" said Bunter.

"Raspberry jelly, too, and a pineapple. And dough-nuts! And a box of chocolates! And meringues! I can tell you, it was a feed! Old Mauly's rather an ass—."

"What?"

"But he can stand a spread." said Bunter. "I'll say that for him—he knows how to stand a spread! I'm going to ask him back to a spread in my study when my postal order comes. I believe I told you fellows I was expecting a postal order."

"I believe you did!" agreed Bob Cherry.

"I seem to remember hearing something of the sort!" assented Harry Wharton.

"But I say, you fellows, that ain't what I came here to speak to you about," went on Bunter. "It's about Coker's banknotes."

"Oh!" said the Famous Five, all together.

"Somebody's boned them," said Bunter.

"Somebody certainly has!"

"That old ass Prout thought it was me," said Bunter.

"Did-did-did he?"

"He jolly well did! He as good as said so, Of course, the Head wasn't standing for that! He's got more sense than Prout. Old Locke's no fool. A chap who's thoroughly decent, upright and honourable in every way, hasn't much to be afraid of, you know. It was all right for me."

"Oh!"

"All the same, some of the fellows are hinting at things," said Bunter.

"Me being in Coker's study, where he left his blazer with the tenner in it, looks as if I might have had it, to a nasty suspicious mind, you know."

"Oh!"

"Nobody seems to have an idea who did it," went on Bunter. "The pre.'s are buzzing over it like bees, but they can't do anything. They haven't the brains, you know. Now, that's where I come in!"

"You!" ejaculated Harry Wharton.

"Well, those banknotes have got to be found, and the snooper nailed down," explained Bunter. "So long as he ain't found out, fellows like Skinner will be making out that it was me. I jolly well know what Skinner thinks, and I'd jolly well punch his head for it, too, only—only he would punch mine, you know. It's got to be cleared up, and I fancy I'm the man to do it."

"Great pip!"

"You see. I've been reading up Sherlock Homes, and that kind of thing comes easy to a brainy chap!" further explained Bunter. "Actually, I'm cut out for a detective! Cool, clear, concentrated intellect, and all that—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at." Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Five through his big spectacles, in annoyed surprise. "What are you fellows cackling at, I'd like to know?"

"Cool, clear, concentrated intellect!" gurgled Bob Cherry. "If you've got it, Bunter, why don't you use it sometimes?"

"Yah! The fact is, I think I could handle this case, and I'm taking it up!" said Bunter. "You fellows can cackle—."

"Thanks: we will! Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll jolly well see!" snorted Bunter. "You jolly well know what I can do, already! That paper that Bob picked up the other day, and not a fellow could make out—didn't I work it out right on the spot?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Famous Five. If they doubted Billy Bunter's gifts as a Sherlock Holmes, that specimen of his elucidatory powers was not likely to convince them.

"Well, didn't I?" hooted Bunter. "Didn't I work out that Big Oak was the name of a racehorse—."

"But it wasn't!" gurgled Bob.

"Yah! And W stood for Wapshot, and 'II' for the two o'clock race—."

"But 'W' didn't stand for Wapshot!" chuckled Nugent.

"We found out afterwards that it stood for Wednesday."

"Rot!" said Bunter.

"And 'II' stood for eleven o'clock," said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Rubbish!" said Bunter. "There was 'S.P.', too, and not a fellow knew that it stood for 'starting price' till I worked it out."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, you fellows can cackle," said Bunter, "but you jolly well know what I can do, whether you own up or not. Look here, you chaps, you needn't be jealous about this! I'm not bragging about what I can do—it just happens that I'm more brainy than other fellows in the Form, that's all. Any fellow with my brains could do it, if there was such a fellow about, which there isn't of course. Well, I'm going to work out the mystery of the missing banknotes, just as I worked out the mystery of that paper, see?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Of course, it ain't so easy here, as it was for Sherlock Homes in Baker Street," said Bunter, thoughtfully.

"Holmes did a lot with tobacco-ash, and there wasn't any tobacco-ash in Coker's study. Just a spot of tobacco-ash, you know, and Holmes could tell that the man who had been there was five feet seven, with tweed trousers, and that he came from Manchester and had a return ticket in his waistcoat pocket. That sort of thing, you know. But there's no clue of tobacco-ash in Coker's study! But there's the system of elumperation."

"The whatter?" yelled Bob.

"Elumperation!" said Bunter. "I think that's the word! You elumperate all the fellows who couldn't have done it, and when there's only one left, that's the man, see? That's elumperation."

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

"Look here, if you're going to cackle every time a chap opens his mouth—."

"Oh, dear!" gasped Bob. "Do you mean elimination, old fat man?"

"No, I don't," answered Bunter, promptly. "I said elumperation, and I mean elumperation. Now, I don't think any of you chaps did it—."

"What?" yelled the Famous Five, all together.

"But a detective can't afford to be a respecter of persons, you know," said Bunter, blinking at the astonished five. "I hope I shall be able to elumperate you fellows, as you're pals of mine—."

"You fat, frabjous, footling, flabby freak—!" roared Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—."

"Oh, let him get on," chuckled Bob Cherry. "If we're on Detective Bunter's list of suspects, we'd better be elumperated at once, before he claps the darbies on us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Mind, I don't think any of you chaps did it," reassured Bunter, "but I've got to work up my case, you know. Four of you were playing football, so you couldn't have done it. But Nugent wasn't playing soccer. Where were you at the time, Nugent? Mind, I don't suspect you—."

"Thanks," said Nugent.

"I just want to elumperate you from my list—that is, if you didn't do it, of course. Can you explain exactly what you were doing yesterday afternoon?"

"Easily!"

"Go ahead, then," said Bunter, encouragingly. "What are you picking up that cushion for, Nugent? You're wasting time. What were you doing yesterday afternoon?"

"I think you'll be more interested in what I'm going to do this afternoon," answered Frank Nugent.

"Eh? What are you going to do, then?"

"Wallop you with this cushion."

"Here, I say—yaroooooh!" roared Bunter, as the cushion landed on the fattest head at Greyfriars School. "Keep off, will you? Ow! Wow! Oh, crikey! I say, you fellows, lug him off."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Swipe! Swipe! Swipe!

"I say—oh, crikey! Keep off!" yelled Bunter. "I say—yarooooop! Oh, crumbs."

Swipe! Swipe!

"Yooo-hooooop!"

Billy Bunter dodged out of the study. Quite forgetting, for the moment, that he was a detective, engaged in the important process of elimination, or as he preferred to call it, elumperation, he bounded out of the doorway, a final swipe catching him as he bounded. A frantic yell floated back, and Detective Bunter disappeared: leaving the Famous Five laughing.

CHAPTER 24

DETECTIVE AT WORK

STEPHEN PRICE came quietly out of his study, and stood in the Fifth-form passage, looking about him and listening. Like Moses of old, he looked this way and that way: and there was no man! Very quietly he moved along to the next study—Coker's. There he paused again, listening like a startled stoat. His face was pale and harassed: his thin lips set tight. At that moment, he was very anxious for no eye to fall upon him. Had any Fifth-form man come up the passage, Price would have strolled on, with as indifferent an air as he could have mustered. But no one came.

It was a chance—a chance for which he had been waiting and watching. It was not yet time for prep, and few fellows were up in the studies. Coker, Potter and Greene, were in the games-study at the end of the passage: Price, with his door ajar, had watched them go there. They were still there: the door of the games-study was shut, but a sound like the distant trumpeting of an elephant indicated that Coker was talking. And Price needed only a minute or two, while the coast was clear.

He had thought it out, and made up his mind at last.

He had to get rid of those loathsome banknotes—he had to get them back to their owner. Then, and only then, would he be rid of the fear and dread that haunted him like a grisly phantom. If only he could have restored them before the theft was discovered—but it was useless to think of that. He had to restore them, but there was no satisfactory way. All that he could do was to get them back into Coker's study, and so long as no one dreamed of him in connection with them, at all events he would be able to breathe freely.

That was what he was going to do. It would be easy to conceal them in the study—in some spot where they would be bound to come to light sooner or later. Ten to one, everyone would conclude that Coker had put them there, and forgotten doing so—indeed, what else could anyone think?—and that there had been no theft at all. A fellow who left banknotes in a blazer pocket and forgot them, might very likely shove them into a drawer or a desk, and forget them! Ten to one, a hundred to one, that would be the general conclusion. Anyhow Price personally would be safe, and that torturing load would be off his mind.

This was his opportunity: Coker and Co. in the games-study, nobody else about: and he needed only minutes. But his heart was beating uncomfortably and there was perspiration on his forehead, as he turned the door-handle, very quietly, stepped into Coker's study and as quietly, shut the door after him.

His hand, in his pocket, was on the banknotes: his uneasy eyes roved about the room for a hiding-place for them. But he did not draw out the banknotes from the pocket; and his roving glance suddenly became fixed on a fat figure near the window.

With Coker and Co. at a distance, he had taken it for granted that their study would be vacant. But it was not vacant. A fat figure was bending over the window seat, blinking at it through a pair of big spectacles. "Oh!" breathed Price.

"Oh!" ejaculated Bunter, as he became aware that someone had entered the study. He spun round, blinking at Price.

Price gave him an almost deadly look.

Why Bunter was there, he could not begin to guess.

Had the fat Owl been nosing into the study cupboard, he could have guessed easily enough. But he was not near the cupboard. He was blinking inquisitively over the window-seat, the very spot where Price had taken the banknotes from the blazer the day before. For whatever unknown purpose he was there, his unexpected presence was extremely disconcerting to Price. He trembled to think that he might have drawn the banknotes from his pocket, and that Bunter might have seen them.

"You fat rascal!" Price hissed the words. His hand came out of his pocket empty, and he clenched it. "What are you doing here?"

Billy Bunter gave him an independent blink.

"Oh, really, Price! What are you doing here, if you come to that?" he retorted.

Bunter had been alarmed for a moment. He had his own reasons—reasons which Sherlock Holmes or Dr. Watson would have understood, if Price did not—for visiting Coker's study. But, like Price, he preferred to visit it surreptitiously. Although he was concentrating his remarkable intellectual powers on the task of tracking down Coker's missing banknotes, Coker was not likely to regard him as "persona grata" in that study. He preferred to call while Coker was not at home. But though he would have been alarmed if Coker had come in, he was not alarmed by Price. He had as much right to be in the study as Price had, anyhow. Price clenched his hands almost convulsively. He could not carry on under the eyes and spectacles of Billy Bunter. His chance was gone. And he had been seen, now, in Coker's study: which he had been very anxious to avoid. If looks could have slain, William George Bunter's fat career might have come to a sudden termination on the spot. Fortunately, looks couldn't!

"I—I came to borrow Coker's Virgil—I've lent mine," he said. He knew that no other Fifth-form senior would have deigned to reply to Bunter's question. Yet he felt that he had to account for his presence there, lest that fat young rascal should suspect something. "What are you doing here, you pilfering young scoundrel? Are you after Coker's tuck again, as you were yesterday?"

"Oh, really, Price—!"

"You'd better get out!" muttered Price. "I—I've heard that Prout caught you here yesterday, tucking into Coker's jam—."

"'Tain't your study," answered Bunter. "If you want a book, you can take it and go, can't you? I'm busy."

"Busy?" repeated Price, blankly. "What do you mean, you young ass? What are you doing in Coker's study at all?"

"I don't mind telling you, Price. I'm looking for clues."

"Clues!" repeated Price, still more blankly.

Billy Bunter nodded, and grinned complacently. If no one else was likely to take Bunter seriously as a second edition of Sherlock Holmes, the fat Owl was at least taking himself seriously—very seriously indeed.

"Those banknotes, you know," he explained.

"Those banknotes?" said Price, faintly. His nerves were in rags: and for a second, he had a spasm of fear that Bunter knew that they were in his pocket!

"That's it," said Bunter. "I'm after them, you know!"

I'm going to clear up the mystery."

"Wha-a-t?"

"I suppose you know what happened yesterday, Price," said Bunter, blinking at him, and little dreaming what excellent reasons Stephen Price had for knowing exactly what had happened. "Some sneaking rotter came up here while Coker was out and pinched his banknotes—some frightful cad, you know, who's going to be sacked for it when he's found out. Might be sent to chokey, too!" added Bunter, thoughtfully. "Think he might be sent to chokey, Price?"

Price gasped for breath.

"Well, they haven't found him yet, or the banknotes either," went on Bunter, as Price did not reply, "and my opinion is that they won't, see? That's why I'm taking it up! I'm jolly keen on it. Mind, nobody in my Form thinks I had that tenner—they know me too well. All the same, Skinner will have to shut up when I work it out who had it, see? I'm looking for clues to the villain now—."

"The—the what?"

"The villain! Stands to reason he must have left some clues behind him," explained Bunter. "Don't you think it jolly likely that the villain left a clue of some sort, Price?"

Price fervently hoped not!

"No tobacco—ash!" said Bunter, regretfully. "The villain wasn't smoking when he pinched those banknotes. Sherlock Holmes spots a lot of things from tobacco—ash. But I've looked all over the place, and there isn't any. But I fancy I'll pick up a clue all right, and follow it up. I can elucidate a clue!" said Bunter, possibly meaning elucidate, "I elucidated that paper that Bob Cherry picked up the other day—."

"What? What paper?" Price gave quite a jump. He had reason to remember a paper that Bob Cherry had picked up.

"Sort of secret message," explained Bunter. "Big Oak—W.II—S.P. Nobody could make it out, but I read it off as easily as anything."

"You—you did?"

"What do you think?" said Bunter. "Elementary, my dear chap! Big Oak was the name of a horse—."

"Eh?"

"W.II meant Wapshot two o'clock—."

"Oh!"

"And S.P. stood for starting-price," said Bunter. "It was easy! I knew it was Smithy's."

"Smithy's!"

"Yes! Smithy makes out that it wasn't, and he's rather ratty about it—but I know!" said Bunter. "I can do these things, just like Sherlock Holmes! And I'm jolly well going to find a clue here, and follow it up. I've got to get on."

Billy Bunter, apparently considering that he had wasted enough of a detective's valuable time on Price, turned to the window-seat again, and concentrated his little round eyes and his big round spectacles in search of a clue. Stephen Price gazed at him. Probably he was not much in fear of Billy Bunter's powers as a detective: especially after the sample to which he had just listened. But his look was malevolent. He could not carry on with Bunter about, and he had to leave the study, as he had come, with the purloined banknotes still in his pocket. He was strongly tempted to collar the fat junior, and bang his fat head on the study table. But he did not want to draw attention to the fact that he had been in Coker's study himself. However, there were other ways, and Price stepped quietly out, and strolled along to the games-study at the end of the passage.

He looked into that apartment. Coker was still talking.

"I tell you fellows—!"

"Coker!" called out Price.

"Don't interrupt me, Price—," yapped Coker.

"Do!" said Hilton. And there was a laugh in the games-study.

"I passed your study a minute ago, Coker, and noticed a Remove kid there—that fat tick Bunter—!" said Price. "Wasn't he after your tuck yesterday? "

"Oh!"

Coker stayed only for that one ejaculation, before he rushed out: perhaps to the relief of the listeners! He charged up the passage, to his own study. The next moment, a fat figure came hurtling out of that study, yelling. Billy Bunter had no time to explain that he was engaged on detective work. He had no time for anything but a startled squeak when Coker charged in. Then he landed in the passage with a bump that almost shook the Fifth-form studies. He did not linger there. Coker's foot followed him—and it followed him all the way down the passage to the landing. By the time Billy Bunter escaped into the Remove quarters, it was borne in upon his fat mind that the next time he looked for clues in Coker's study, he had better be very, very careful to select a time when Horace Coker was not likely to materialise.

CHAPTER 25

GOT IT!

"I'VE got it!" said Horace Coker.

Potter and Greene gave a simultaneous jump.

They were getting out their books for prep. But they forgot prep, and stared round at Coker, as he made that unexpected announcement.

Coker, extended in the armchair, with long legs stretched out, and a wrinkle in his brow, had apparently been thinking—a somewhat unusual process on Coker's part. Neither Potter nor Greene thought of offering him a penny for his thoughts: or, indeed, would willingly have taken them at a gift. They were only too glad that Coker was silent, and hoped that he would continue so while they got on with preparation. But his announcement that he had "got it" fairly made them bound.

The missing tenner was in their minds. Their own position was really uncomfortable. Greene was quite painfully conscious of the fact that he had actually been brushing that blazer for Coker before the tenner was missed. The inquiry that had been going on had not elicited any news of anyone who had been to that study on Wednesday afternoon, excepting that fat young ass, Bunter of the Remove; and the Head seemed satisfied about Bunter. Nobody in the Fifth hinted, or probably thought, that Potter or Greene had had anything to do with the missing tenner: still, it was missing, and undeniably they had had every opportunity. With money missing, and nothing known of the culprit, all sorts of vague suspicions might float about: most uncomfortably for Coker's study-mates.

So Coker's sudden announcement that he had "got it", came as a tremendous relief to them: while at the same time it added to their exasperation. It did not occur to them, for the moment, that Coker might be thinking of something other than the missing tenner.

"You've got it!" repeated Potter, blankly. "I've got it!" said Coker, with a nod.

"Well, you dummy!" said Greene. "You unmitigated chump!"

"Wha-a-a-t!"

"You've got it, have you?" roared Potter, with a glare at Coker that a gorgon might have envied. "After all this bother, after all this jaw, after all this upset, you just sit there and say you've got it!"

"Eh?" Coker seemed surprised. "What are you getting excited about?"

"Enough to make a fellow excited, I think!" howled Greene. "Do you really mean that you've got it all the time?"

"Not all the time," said Coker. "It wanted thinking out, of course. But I've thought it out, and I've got it."

"Catch you thinking!" scoffed Potter. "If you could think, you wouldn't leave banknotes lying about in a blazer. But if you've got it, all right. Thank goodness for that, at least."

"Yes, that's good," said Greene. "Dashed if I know how you could have thought it out, Coker, or what you did it with. But thank goodness you've got it! Sure you've got it?"

"Haven't I said so?" snapped Coker. "I'm just going to tell you fellows, if you'll give a fellow a chance to speak—."

"Cut off and tell Prout at once!" said Potter. It was Coker's turn to jump!

"Tell Prout!" he ejaculated. "Yes, this minute—."

"Mad?" asked Coker. "Catch me telling Prout!"

"You howling ass!" bawled Potter. "Go and tell Prout this minute, so that he'll know and we shall hear the end of it."

"This minute!" insisted Greene.

Coker blinked at them.

"You silly asses!" he said. "Prout's not going to hear a syllable about it. Tell Prout, by gum! All the fat would be in the fire, I fancy!"

"You benighted chump!" shrieked Potter. "Prout's got to know at once! I hope he'll whop you for making all this fuss for nothing! Hilton's been saying all along that it's one of your idiotic bangles, and that the dashed thing would turn up in your trousers pocket, very likely. Is that where you found it?"

Coker looked bewildered. "Found what?" he asked.

"That tenner, of course, you bandersnatch! Did you find it in your trousers' pocket, or tied up in the tail of your shirt, or what?"

"Eh?"

"Anyhow, now you've got it, Prout's got to know at once, and the Head. I was half-thinking that fat little tick Bunter might have had it—and I shouldn't wonder if fellows might think we'd had it—and now you tell us you've got it! Oh, you ought to be scragged. Where is it?"

"Where's what?"

"That tenner," raved Potter. "If you've got it, where is it?"

"I haven't got it."

"You haven't?" yelled Greene.

"No! How could I have it, when it was snooped yesterday, and I've heard nothing of it since?"

"You said you'd got it!" bawled Potter. "Weren't you speaking about the tenner?"

"Eh? Oh! No! Did you think I was?" asked Coker.

Potter and Greene looked at Coker as if they could have eaten him. It seemed that there had been a misunderstanding, Coker, apparently, had "got" something, according to his statement. But it was not the tenner! He had not "got" the missing tenner. It was something else that he had "got".

"Blessed if I make you fellows out," said Coker, testily.

"Getting excited, and yelling at a fellow, before he has a chance to speak. I tell you I've got it—."

"You thundering idiot!" gasped Potter. "Look here, George Potter—."

"Well, what have you got, you ass, if it's not the tenner?"

"What do you mean, if you mean anything, you chump?"

"You'd better be a bit more civil, Potter, if you don't want your head banged on that door," said Coker, darkly. "What I meant was, about Prout—."

"What about Prout, then?" asked Greene.

"You know he whopped me yesterday—."

"Yes: and we know it served you jolly well right."

"Well, whether it did or not, Prout's got something coming back for it," snapped Coker. "I've been thinking it out, and I've got it! Prout thinks he can whop a Fifth-form man, just like Quelch with a fag in the Remove! That's Prout! Well, he can't, see! I told you fellows that Prout was going to have something coming to him. That's what I've been thinking out."

Potter and Greene gazed at him, at a loss for speech.

They had forgotten Coker's whopping of the previous day, under the stress of what had happened since—also perhaps regarding it as a far more trivial episode than it seemed to Coker. Coker, it appeared, had not forgotten it. While all the school buzzed with the story of money missing in that study, while Potter and Greene were all hot and bothered and uneasy about it, while every prefect and every master, including the majestic Head himself, was deeply concerned, the ineffable Horace was thinking about that whopping from Prout, and scheming schemes for getting back on the whopper! Words failed Potter and Greene. They could only gaze at Coker. They gazed almost wolfishly.

"I've got it!" resumed Coker. "I've got it all right! Treacle! That's the idea! Treacle in Prout's bed!"

"Treacle in Prout's bed!" repeated Potter, mechanically.

"There's that big jar of golden syrup that my Aunt Judy sent me," went on Coker. "Pity to waste it, perhaps—but it won't be really a waste—on Prout! Easy enough—now I've thought it out. Prout never goes to bed before eleven. That's more than an hour after lights out for us. Well, I nip down from the dorm, about half-past ten—."

"Oh!" gasped Potter. Greene shrugged his shoulders in a hopeless sort of way, as if he gave Coker up.

"Nip into this study and get the treacle," continued Coker. "Nip up to Prout's room. Matter of minutes. Perhaps Prout may be sorry for whopping a Fifth-form man, when he goes to bed in treacle! I'd jolly well like to let him know I did it, too—but that wouldn't do! But will he like sticking his fat legs into treacle? What? Ha, ha!"

Coker laughed, much entertained by the picture of Prout sticking his fat legs into treacle. He seemed to expect Potter and Greene to laugh too. But they did not. They only gazed at him.

"Well, that's the idea!" said Coker. "Think old Pompous will be sorry for himself, when he wallows in treacle? What?"

"That's the idea, is it?" gasped Potter, at last.

"That's it!" said Coker, cheerily. "I told you old Pompous had something coming to him! That's what's coming! About a quart of treacle—ha, ha!"

"You blithering idiot!" said Potter.

"That will do, Potter."

"You dithering dummy!" said Greene.

"Look here, Greene—."

"Well, if you get a Head's flogging to-morrow, I hope it will do you more good than Prout's whopping did!" said Potter.

"Look here, Coker, can't you understand that you can't do this?"

"I know I'm jolly well going to," said Coker.

"But look here—!" urged Potter. He could not help thinking that a Head's flogging might do Coker good. Nevertheless, he would have saved the headstrong Horace from himself, if he could.

"You can shut up, Potter!" said Coker.

"But, Coker, old man, look here—!" urged Greene.

"You can shut up too, Greene."

Potter and Greene shut up. Evidently, it was futile to argue with Coker. And after all, if he insisted upon getting a flogging from the Head, why not? It could scarcely fail to benefit him! So they shut up, abandoning Coker to his own extraordinary devices, and sat down to prep.

Over prep, that evening, Coker burst into occasional chuckles, no doubt thinking more of treacle and Prout than of prep. It was a very cheery and anticipative Coker who went up to the dormitory with the Fifth that night.

CHAPTER 26

TURN OUT, BUNTER!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Nobody in the Remove dormitory would have expected to hear Billy Bunter's fat voice just then. It was five minutes after lights out. Wingate of the Sixth had seen lights out for the Remove, and gone: all was dark, and though there were still occasional remarks from bed to bed, fellows were settling down to sleep. Billy Bunter's eyes generally closed as soon as his fat head was on the pillow, and seldom opened again till rising-bell in the morning. So, though the other fellows might have expected to hear his snore, they would not have expected to hear his voice. But it was his voice that they heard.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Talking in your sleep, Bunter?" yawned Bob Cherry.

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Can't sleep after that supper?" asked Frank Nugent.

"I thought that eleventh helping was a mistake."

"I never had eleven helpings, you beast! Only seven—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, stop cackling," said Bunter. "I say, you fellows, which of you is going to give me a call at half-past ten?"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Which?"

There were quite a number of surprised ejaculations.

It was surprising that Billy Bunter was still awake five or six minutes after lights out. But it was quite astonishing if he wanted to be called at half-past ten! If there was one thing to which, as a rule, Bunter strenuously objected, it was being awakened at all, at any time, once he was asleep. The rising-bell was the most unwelcome sound that ever impinged upon his fat ears.

"You see, I'm turning out at half-past ten," explained Bunter. "But I might be fast asleep, you know."

"The mightfulness is terrific!" chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I want some fellow to wake me up," went on Bunter. "It's rather important—."

"Had news of a pie in the pantry?" asked Vernon-Smith, sarcastically.

"Oh, really, Smithy—."

"You howling ass," said Harry Wharton. "What on earth do you want to turn out at half-past ten at night for?"

"Detective work!" said Bunter.

"Oh, my hat!"

"You see, it's like this," explained the fat Owl. "I told you fellows that I've taken up the case of those missing banknotes—."

"Still at it?" chuckled Bob. "How's the process of elumperation getting on?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"After all, Bunter's the man to find those banknotes, if anyone can!" remarked Harold Skinner.

"Do you really think so, Skinner?" asked Bunter, rather flattered by that remark. Skinner was not a flatterer, as a rule.

"Yes, rather," said Skinner. "Ain't there an old proverb that those who hide can find?"

"Why, you beast!" roared Bunter. "If you make out that I had them, I—I—I'll—I say, Bob, old man, will you punch Skinner's head for me?"

"I jolly well will, if he cuts any more little jokes like that," said Bob Cherry. "You'd better shut up, Skinner."

"I say, you fellows, you jolly well know that I never—."

"Of course we do, old fat man. But what do you want to turn out at half-past ten for, you fat ass?"

"Clues!" explained Bunter. "Nobody's been able to find a clue in Coker's study. But there's always a clue to a crime, you know. You can read that in Sherlock Holmes. Of course, the beaks or the prefects wouldn't notice it—it needs brains—."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"That's where I come in," said Bunter. "If there's a clue there, I shall pick it up all right. Only I can't get into Coker's study in the daytime, see? I tried it on to-day, and he came in, and chucked me out—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! The beast booted me as far as the landing—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Well, Coker will be in bed after lights out for the Fifth, and I can get down to his study and investigate. But—I might be asleep—."

"Quite likely," said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Sort of probable!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

"That's why I want one of you fellows to call me at half-past ten," said Bunter. "Which of you fellows will stay awake and call me?"

"The whichfulness is terrific!"

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob. "Bunter wants one of us to stay awake till half-past ten and call him! Sounds sort of attractive, doesn't it? Don't all speak at once!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You'll do it; Bob, old man, won't you?"

"Not in these pyjamas," answered Bob.

"What about you, Harry, old chap?"

"I'm going to sleep, and you'd better do the same."

"I say, Smithy, what about you? You wouldn't mind staying awake, old fellow—you often do, when you're going out of bounds after lights out, don't you? He, he, he! It won't hurt you, old chap."

"You fat ass!" growled the Bounder.

"Oh, really, Smithy! I think you might oblige a fellow, when you're used to keeping awake. You can fancy you're staying awake to sneak out to the 'Cross Keys,' you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Shut up, you fat chump!" said Tom Redwing.

"Shan't! Look here, Smithy, one good turn deserves another, you know. I haven't said anything about that paper of yours, that Bob picked up the other day in the Rag, and that I elucidated—."

"It wasn't mine, you fat idiot."

"He, he, he!"

"Shut up, Bunter, and let a fellow go to sleep," grunted Bolsover major.

"Oh, really, Bolsover—."

"Go to sleep, fathead!" said Tom Brown.

"Yah! I say, Smithy, will you call me at half-past ten?"

"Yes, if you like," answered the Bounder, rather unexpectedly. "I'll stay awake specially, and call you at half-past ten. That all right?"

"Thanks, old chap!"

"Oh, not at all," said Smithy.

"You silly ass, Smithy," said Bob Cherry. "At half-past ten Bunter will be as fast asleep as Rip Van Winkle, and he won't want to turn out."

The Bounder laughed. No doubt he was as well aware of that as Bob.

"You shut up, Bob Cherry!" yapped Bunter.

"Smithy's going to call me at half-past ten, ain't you, Smithy?"

"I am!" said the Bounder, quite emphatically. "And you're going to turn out when I call you, Bunter. Now go to sleep."

Billy Bunter, assured that he would be called at the appointed time, was quite ready to go to sleep. His little round eyes closed on his pillow:

and hardly a minute later, a rumble like distant thunder indicated that he was safe in the embrace of Morpheus. Bunter was asleep: and snoring.

Slumber, and silence—save for Bunter's snore—reigned in the Remove dormitory. The hour of ten chimed from the clock-tower, unheard, unless

by the Bounder. But when the half-hour chimed, there was a stir.

It seemed to Billy Bunter that he had only just closed his eyes, when a shake caused him to reopen them.

He blinked irritably in the darkness.

"Ooogh! Leggo! 'Tain't rising-bell!" he mumbled.

"Wharrer you waking me up for, you beast."

There was a chuckle in the darkness.

"Half-past ten!" came the Bounder's voice: accompanied by a vigorous shake of the fat shoulder.

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. He remembered. "Oh! I—I—I—I say, Smithy, it's—it's all right—I—I—I—I've changed my mind."

Very promptly had Bunter changed his mind. Planning to turn out at half-past ten was one thing. Turning out at half-past ten was quite another.

The bed was warm—the night was cold. Bunter was asleep—and lazy.

Investigating for clues in Coker's study had seemed quite a bright and attractive idea when he went to bed. Now it had lost its attraction.

Indeed, nothing, at the moment, could have seemed more utterly and absolutely unattractive to Billy Bunter.

He heard the Bounder laugh. "Changed your mind?" asked Smithy.

"Yes, old chap! You go back to bed."

"I haven't changed mine," answered Smithy.

"Eh?"

"I said I'd turn you out at half-past ten! I'm going to."

"Leggo my shoulder, you beast! Look here, you leave a chap alone! I suppose I needn't get up if I don't want to!" howled Bunter.

"That's your mistake, you fat foozler. Out you get!"

Shake! Shake! Shake!

"Beast!" roared Bunter. "I tell you I ain't getting up! Leggo!"

"You are!" chuckled Smithy.

Shake! Shake Shake!

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, what's that row?" came a sleepy voice. "That Bunter?"

"Will you leggo, Smithy?" yelled Bunter. "I keep telling you I ain't getting up—I won't get up—I shan't get up, so yah!"

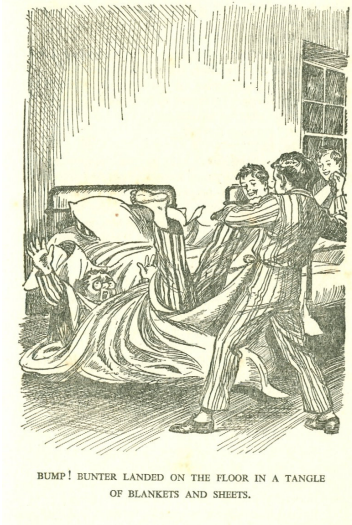
"Turning out?" asked the Bounder.

"No!" raved Bunter.

"Then I'll turn you out."

"Beast! Leggo!"

"Dash it all, Smithy, don't kick up such a row at this time of night," came Harry Wharton's voice.
"Didn't I say I'd turn Bunter out at half-past ten? My word's my bond, you know! Out you go, Bunter."
"I say, you fellows, stoppim! I don't want to turn out!" howled Bunter.
"It's kik-kik-cold! I say, you fellows—."



"Ha, ha, ha!"
"Oooooogh!" Billy Bunter shivered, as his bedclothes were whipped off." Smithy, you beast-yarooooh!"
Bump! Bunter landed on the floor in a tangle of blankets and sheets. He roared as he landed.
"That all right?" asked Smithy.
"Beast!" shrieked Bunter.
"Ha, ha, ha!"
Smithy, chuckling, went back to bed, leaving the fat Owl to sort himself out. Billy Bunter gasped and spluttered wildly, as he rolled in tangled bedclothes. Smithy, certainly, had kept his word: Bunter was quite thoroughly awake now, and up. Smithy had obliged him, as requested, but never had the Owl of the Remove felt less obliged in his life. He tottered to his feet at last, spluttering.
But he did not totter back to bed. He reached for his ample trousers. Now that he was so thoroughly awakened, and had got through the awful and unwelcome process of getting out of bed, he was going to carry on. His plan for the night revived in his fat mind.
While the other fellows chuckled, Billy Bunter half-dressed himself in the dark, and groped away to the door. He was going down to Coker's study, in quest of clues: Detective Bunter was on the trail again.

CHAPTER 27

IN THE DARK

STEPHEN PRICE lifted his head from the pillow in the Fifth-form dormitory, peered round him in the dark, and listened. All was silent and still.
Price had not slept, since lights had been turned out for the Fifth by Mr. Prout. He had lain silent, waiting for the rest to sink into slumber, and he had no doubt that all were now fast asleep. No one was to hear him creep from the dormitory: no one was to suspect that he had been out at

all. It was safe enough: a matter of only minutes to creep down the Fifth-form passage and conceal the banknotes in Coker's study, and rid himself of that awful incubus that weighed upon him. But for that fat fool, Bunter of the Remove, it would have been done already. That opportunity had been lost: and there had been no other before dorm. But it was easy enough to creep down in the dark, after lights out, and accomplish his purpose, and that was what he was going to do. But easy as it was, safe as it was, the wretched fellow lay quaking and listening for long minutes before he ventured to stir.

He stirred at last. There was a faint creak, as he slipped out of bed. It would not have awakened the lightest sleeper. But it reached ears that were not sleeping.

Little as Price guessed it, or dreamed it, another fellow was awake in the dark dormitory: another fellow who also had his plans for that night. Price was thinking of Coker's study: but he certainly was not thinking of Coker himself and he gave a jump, and his heart thumped, as Horace Coker's voice came through the gloom.

"Who's that?"

Coker was awake! That ass, that blockhead, who generally slept like a log of wood, was awake! It was the last thing that Price would have expected! He trembled in silence.

"That you, Potter?"

No reply.

"That you, Greeney?"

No answer from Greene. Potter and Greene were fast asleep. But there came a drowsy drawl from Hilton's bed.

"Who's that burblin'? Can't you let a fellow sleep?"

"I thought I heard somebody getting up!" yapped Coker.

"Oh, rot! Go to sleep, and let other fellows do the same."

Coker grunted, but he said no more. Price waited, with beads of perspiration oozing on his brow. Full five minutes he waited, with the cold draught chilling his bare feet, before he ventured to stir. And when, at length, he did stir, it was with infinite caution. That blockhead, Coker, might be still awake—perhaps Hilton also. Price moved slowly, cautiously, in the dark: stealthy as a cat, and he made no sound. He tucked his pyjamas into his trousers, slipped on a jacket, and slipped his feet into rubber shoes that he had placed in readiness under his bed. Then, silent as a spectre, he flitted to the door. If Horace Coker was still awake, he did not hear the dormitory door open and shut. A thief in the night could not have been more stealthy and silent than Stephen Price.

With scarce a sound, if a sound at all, he crept away down a dark passage to a dark landing. As he reached it, there came, faintly through the night, the chime of the half-hour. It was in his ears as he crept down the dormitory staircase to the study landing below.

He did not guess, and did not dream, that that chime was the signal for Horace Coker to bestir himself in the Fifth-form dormitory, or that while he crept down the stairs, Coker was turning out of bed, and that he also was tucking his pyjamas into trousers, and slipping his extensive feet into large slippers. Price gave no thought to Coker, as he crept on his way, and groped along the Fifth-form studies. He had taken a flash-lamp from his pocket, and a tiny gleam, immediately shut off again, showed him the door of Coker's study.

He opened that door, softly, stepped in, and shut it after him.

He was panting now, and perspiring, though the night was cold. He repeated to himself that all was safe—quite safe—nothing could happen. But if anything did happen—if he was caught there! The stolen banknotes

were in his pocket. But how could anything happen, at half-past ten at night?

Safe in the study with the door shut, he turned on a tiny gleam of light from the flash-lamp. It swayed and shook in his unsteady hand.

In the trembling light, he peered about the study, with frightened eyes. Where was he to place those wretched banknotes? He dared not leave them where they would be easily found. If he did, everyone would guess that the thief had taken fright and replaced his plunder: and if by some awful chance it was discovered that he had left his dormitory that night—if by some unlooked-for ill-luck he was seen before he could get back—! He told himself again and again that it was all safe, but he could not feel safe.

Replacing the stolen notes was not enough. The search for the thief would go on, so long as it was believed that there had been a theft at all. But if they were placed in some recess, where Coker might have placed them and forgotten them—! That was the idea.

But where?

The flash-lamp glimmered round the study. Price's eyes at last fixed on the table-drawer. It had been left a couple of inches open by the last fellow who had used it. It was full of various articles: paper, envelopes, blotting-paper, a box of pen-nibs, pens and pencils. The three occupants of the study used that drawer in common, and all of them had some odds and ends in it.

That was the place!

Was not Coker the very man to shove those banknotes in a drawer, and forget where he had put them? Coker, no doubt, would be puzzled when they were found, but everyone else would think that he had put them there and forgotten them—a fellow who forgot banknotes in a blazer pocket might very likely forget them in a drawer.

Sooner or later they would be found there—it might be days: but that mattered little: they would be found, and everyone would believe that Coker had put them there and forgotten; that they had, in fact, never been outside Coker's study at all. It seemed to the wretched Price that a crushing weight was lifting from his heart and his mind, as he put his hand to the table-drawer to pull it out further.

A minute or two more, and it would be done—the banknotes concealed under the odds and ends in that crowded drawer: and then he would creep back to his dormitory as silently as he had left it. No one would know that he had been up; no one would or could connect him with this—how could anyone? Once he was safe back in bed, unseen and unsuspected—!

His heart gave a sudden leap, and he shut off the flash-lamp. There was a sound in the passage. He let go the drawer, and listened.

Price stood frozen, the banknotes still in his pocket. What was that?

Who, in the name of all that was unexpected and terrifying, was coming to the Fifth-form studies at that hour of the night?

He listened like a frightened rabbit.

The sound from the passage was a cautious footfall; or rather, a footfall that was intended to be cautious, but was nevertheless quite audible to startled ears. There was no glimmer of light under the door—whoever was coming up the passage was coming in the dark. It was not a master or a prefect—either would have switched on a light. In his sudden and dreadful terror, Price thought of burglars. But he knew it was not that. Some fellow coming down to the studies after lights out—that must be it! He hardly breathed.

If it was not Coker, or Potter, or Greene, it did not matter—no one else would come to that study. But if it was—!

He remembered that Coker had been awake. Was it possible that that fool, that idiot, that dunderhead, was coming down, for some utterly

inexplicable reason? Price could have groaned aloud in his fear and dismay. But he had no time to think, or to act. The footfall was close outside the door: and the door opened. Price stood rigid. If there had been a light, he must have been seen—standing there in full view. But there was no light. Someone came in. Price could not have stirred, even if he had wanted to. With the terror almost of death in his heart, he stood there, clamped to the floor. If he was seen in that study, late at night—and if the light was turned on, he must be seen—.

But a fellow coming down from the dormitory at a late hour was not likely to switch on the light, to stream from the window into the quadrangle. And a fellow who belonged to the study and knew every inch of it, did not need a light. Someone unseen groped across the study, passing within a yard of Price, and he heard the cupboard door open. He hardly breathed. Some fellow after tuck—that must be it—he knew that it was the cupboard door that had opened. If the fellow went in the dark, as he had come—! He heard a sound of groping—by a clumsy hand. Then there was a sound as something fell over, knocked by that clumsy hand.

"Oh, blow!" came a muttering voice. It was only a mutter, but it was enough: Price knew that this was Coker. So this was why the blockhead had remained awake—to sneak down to his study at half-past ten after tuck?

"Ah! Here it is!" came another mutter. Two large hands, unseen by Price in the dark, lifted from the cupboard a large jar. Coker turned away from the cupboard with the jar of treacle that was intended for Prout's bed in his hands. The next moment he bumped into Price, invisible in the dark, and jumped almost clear of the floor, startled almost out of his wits.

"Ooooh!" gasped Coker. "What—who's that—what—."

Price did not stop to think. He put out both hands, giving Coker a violent shove, sending him spinning backwards. There was a crash as Coker went over on his back, and a gasp, and a horrible gurgle, as the jar of treacle went over his face, streamed stickily over Coker's features. Price did not waste a second. He darted out of the study, and tore away down the dark passage at a speed he had never equalled on the cinder-path—leaving Coker sprawling on his back in the study, gurgling treacle, breathing treacle, living and moving and having his being in treacle!

CHAPTER 28

NO CLUES FOR BUNTER

BILLY BUNTER did not know what hit him. It was so very unexpected. For how could any fellow possibly foresee that suddenly, out of the darkness, something would come hurtling like a charging hippopotamus, crash into him, and hurl him headlong over? Certainly no such anticipation was in Billy Bunter's mind, as he groped across the study landing into the Fifth-form passage. When it happened, it came like a bolt from the blue. Bunter, of course, knew nothing of Coker's plans for that night, or of Price's: any more than Coker and Price had known of one another's. Not for a moment did it occur to him that the Fifth-form passage at Greyfriars was inhabited, at that late hour.

But for the delay caused by his unwillingness to turn out of bed, the fat Owl might have arrived in Coker's study while Coker and Price were both there. As it was, he was just groping into the passage, when Price tore out of the study after up-ending Coker, and raced down it to the landing. Bunter had no time even to heed the patter of running feet. He did not see Price in the dark—Price did not see him. Neither dreamed that the other was there! In full career, Stephen Price crashed into the fat junior. As meets a rock a thousand waves, so Inisfail met Lochlin: and so Billy Bunter met Price of the Fifth.

It was quite a terrific crash.

Billy Bunter, with one brief gasping yelp, spun over, and rolled on the landing. Price, as amazed and disconcerted as Bunter by the unexpected collision in the dark, reeled against the wall and almost fell, dazed and dizzy and winded.

"Oooooogh!" Billy Bunter, rolling on the floor, spluttered, and yelled, startled and scared and bewildered. "Oooooogh! Oh, crikey! Whoozat? Oh, wow! Ow! Wow!"

Price panted, tottering dazedly against the wall. He realised that he had run into somebody in the dark, and floored him, whoever he was: though how and why that somebody was there he could not begin to guess. As Bunter's frantic yells rang through the silent night, he pulled himself together, realising further that those frantic yells would be heard all over the House, and that others would very quickly be on the spot. He resumed his flight, panting as he went. It was dark on the landing, but spluttering howls from an unseen figure that sprawled and rolled enabled him to steer clear of Bunter. He circumnavigated the fat Owl and sped on to the dormitory staircase. He went up that staircase two at a time, running like a hare.

Swift as he was, he was only just in time.

A light flashed on, on the lower staircase. Voices floated up. Price did not hear them. Breathless, panting, quaking, his heart thumping in great throbs, he reached the Fifth-form dormitory, and darted in. In a matter of seconds he was slipping into bed. There he lay palpitating, perspiring: but silent.

Billy Bunter, on the study landing, was far from silent!

The fat Owl was too startled and terrified to remember that caution was necessary, when a fellow was out of his dormitory after lights out. He was yelling and howling at the top of his voice.

"Ow! Oh! Wow! Ooogh! Help! I say, you fellows—yaroooh! I say, bib-bub-bob-burglars! I say-wow! Ow! Help! Oh, crikey! Wow!"

Somebody had knocked him over in the dark. Unless it was a burglar, Billy Bunter could not guess who or what it was. At that moment the dark shadows on the landing were peopled with burglars, to the fat Owl's terrified mind. He sat up, spluttered for breath, and fairly roared.

"Ow! Burglars! Help! I say, you fellows! Wow! Hurglars-Belp! Wow!"

The light flashed on, on the landing. There were voices and footsteps. Billy Bunter blinked like a startled owl in the sudden light, set his spectacles straight on his fat little nose, and blinked again. He blinked at Mr. Quelch, at Mr. Prout, at Mr. Hacker, at Wingate of the Sixth, at Gwynne and Loder of that Form. Quite a number of persons had hurried upstairs at the startling sound of frantic yelling when all should have been calm and silent.

"Bunter!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. His gimlet-eyes fairly glittered at the fat Owl.

"Bunter!"

"Ow! Keep him off!" yelled Bunter.

"Bunter!" boomed Prout. "Bunter! What is this boy of your Form doing out of his dormitory, Quelch, at this hour of the night?"

"A Remove boy!" said Mr. Hacker, just as if that was really what might have been expected, and he shrugged his shoulders.

Quelch's eyes glinted at Hacker for a moment, and then, with a deadly glint, at Bunter again. "Bunter-what—?"

"Help! Bib-bub-bob—!" stuttered Bunter.

"Is the boy sane?" ejaculated Mr. Prout. "What does he mean-what can he mean-by that insensate repetition of an unmeaning monosyllable?"

"Bunter! Speak! What—?" "Bib-bob-bub-bubblers—I mean burglars!" Bunter got it out. "A bob-bob-bub-bubbler-burglar biffed into me, sir, and knocked me over—oh, crikey! Ow!"

"You utterly absurd boy—!"

"Bib-bob-but he did, sir!" gasped Bunter. His eyes and spectacles roamed round the landing, but there was no sign of burglars to be seen. "He—he—he banged right into me, sir, and knocked me over—oh, lor'! Wow! I—I—I'm hurt, sir!"

Quelch's look seemed to indicate that Bunter was going to be hurt some more, shortly! Prout boomed again.

"Really! Upon my word! This is really insufferable, Quelch! This boy of your Form makes a disturbance at this late hour—."

"It was a bib-bob-bub-burglar, sir—."

"Silence, Bunter!" Quelch's voice was like a file. "Do not talk nonsense. Why did you leave your dormitory, Bunter?"

"I—I—I didn't, sir—."

"What?"

"I—I—I mean, I—I wasn't going to Coker's study, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I—I mean, I was only going there to—to—to cook for a loo, sir—I mean, to look for a clue—and he—he—he ran into me—he burglar, sir—ran right into me and—and—and—."

"I have told you not to talk nonsense, Bunter!" hooted Mr. Quelch.

"Apparently some other boy is out of his dormitory, as Bunter appears to have been knocked over. Someone, I think, is in the Fifth-form passage—."

"No boy of my Form, sir, is out of his dormitory at this hour!" boomed Prout. "Certainly no Fifth-form boy—."

"I can hear someone!" snapped Mr. Quelch. "Kindly listen, Mr. Prout!"

Prout snorted: but he kindly listened. Certainly there was something to be heard. From the Fifth-form passage came strange sounds—strange half-suffocated sounds, of gasping, gurgling, and guggling! Someone there seemed to be in the throes of semi-suffocation.

"Bless my soul!" said Prout, blankly. "What-what-is that another boy of your Form, Quelch, playing some extraordinary prank—?"

Quelch's only answer was a snort. He gave Billy Bunter a perfectly deadly glare.

"Bunter! Go back to your dormitory at once! I shall deal with you in the morning!"

"B-b-but, sir, the bub-bub-bub—!" stuttered Bunter. He got no further.

Mr. Quelch made a stride towards him, and Bunter bounded away just in time. Burglars or no burglars, the Remove dormitory was evidently the safest place for Bunter: and he headed for it without delay. Wingate ran up the Fifth-form passage. Horrid sounds of gurgling guided him, and he switched on the light in Coker's study. What he beheld there made him jump.

Prout and Quelch followed him up the passage. Prout was booming as he came.

"Such a disturbance at this hour, Quelch—these boys of your Form, Quelch—someone is here—another Remove boy, I have no doubt, and I shall insist, sir—I shall most emphatically insist, sir, that Remove boys be not

permitted to disturb the whole House at such an hour—I shall insist—I shall—." Prout broke off suddenly, as he stared into Coker's study. Quelch stared in also, and smiled sarcastically.

"Not a boy of my Form, I think, Mr. Prout," he said.

"I will leave you, sir, to deal with this boy of your Form, who has caused such a disturbance, sir, at this hour of the night!"

With that Parthian shot, Quelch stalked away: leaving Mr. Prout to deal with that boy of his Form!

Prout gazed at that boy of his Form! He recognised Coker, though really Coker was so clothed in treacle that he was not easy to recognise. Treacle was caked on his face, thick in his hair, trickling down his neck: he was clawing at it with sticky hands, while he gurgled and guggled with a mouth full of treacle. Coker of the Fifth was of the treacle treacly.

"Coker!" gasped Prout.

Wingate and Gwynne and Loder faded away, grinning.

Prout was left gazing at Coker, who blinked back at him with a treacly blink, and still gurgled.

"Coker! I am amazed—astounded—disgusted—."

"I—I—I—urrrrh—wurrgh—!"

"A boy of my Form—a senior boy—a Fifth-form boy—leaving his dormitory at night to guzzle treacle—."

"I—I—I—urrrh—I didn't—I—I—," gurgled Coker.

"You have come down, after lights out, like some greedy boy in a junior form, to devour treacle! Treacle!" gasped Prout. "You have upset the treacle you came down to eat, Coker—."

"I—I—I—." Coker gurgled helplessly. Certainly he could not explain to Prout what he had intended to do with that treacle! Prout had to draw his own conclusions.

"Disgusting!" boomed Prout. "Revolting! A Fifth-form boy eating—devouring—guzzling treacle, at this hour of the night! Are you not ashamed of yourself, Coker? Have you no sense of dignity as a member of a senior Form?"

"Oh, crikey! I—I—I—."

"Such greed—such infantile greed—it would be inexcusable even in a greedy junior boy like Bunter, but in a Fifth-form senior boy—a boy in my Form—I am amazed—disgusted—revolted! Coker, you are in a disgusting state! In your greed you have upset the treacle! Go and clean yourself at once, Coker, and then return to bed. I shall see you in the morning, Coker! Go!"

"I—I—I—."

"Go!" thundered Prout.

Horace Coker trailed out of the study, still gurgling, and still clawing at treacle. Prout stalked after him, with a knitted brow and a glittering eye.

The hapless Horace was no longer thinking of treacling Prout's bed. There was, in fact, no treacle left for Prout, if he had thought of it: Coker had had it all. Coker's masterly scheme for getting back on Prout had come to a sticky end!

CHAPTER 29

ON TRACK

SQUEAK! Whistle! Whirrrrr!

Tom Brown was twiddling the dials of his radio in his study, No. 2 in the Remove. The radio seemed to be in rather a jibbing mood. Quite near the

sea, with the North Foreland in the offing, there was often interference: undesired signals would come through, and sometimes quite a torrent of Morse. Sometimes a sweet Italian aria might sound quite mixed, such as "Caro nome che tick-tick-tack, festi tick-tick-tick palpitar-tack-tack-tack-tack." When there were high winds over the cliffs, the atmospheric were frequent and painful and free. On such occasions the sounds from No. 2 Study did not in the least resemble the music of the spheres. Squeak! Gurgle! Whirr! Howl! Squeak! It was no wonder that Billy Bunter, rolling past the study, blinked in with an irritated blink through his big spectacles.

Bunter was not in a good temper that day, anyhow.

He had had quite a painful interview with Quelch in the morning, in which the Remove master's cane had been featured. Even after class in the afternoon, the fat Owl was still feeling some twinges. Neither was he making much progress in his role as Sherlock Holmes II. The mystery of the missing tenner was still a mystery: and Skinner, and one or two other fellows, made themselves unpleasant on the subject. Skinner, indeed, had advised Bunter to look for clues in No. 7 in the Remove—Bunter's own study—while Snoop had suggested his own pockets as a promising trail to follow. Which was very annoying and exasperating to Bunter, and made him keener than ever to out-do the great Sherlock at his own game. But in the total absence of anything in the nature of a clue, what was even a gifted fellow like Bunter to do? In an irritated and disgruntled mood, that volley of squeaks, howls, and whistles from No. 2 Study put the lid on, as it were.

"I say, Browney, shut up that row!" hooted Bunter, from the doorway.

Tom Brown turned a rather red and bothered face from the wireless, and gave Bunter a glare. The New Zealand junior was generally one of the best-tempered fellows in the Form. But too large a dose of atmospheric will ruffle the serenest temper. A solo by the famed Italian tenor, Signor Gigli, was almost due, and Tom was anxious to get the radio going in order by the time it materialised. He did not want interruptions from Bunter.

Bunter blinked at him indignantly.

"If you like that Third Programme stuff, I jolly well don't!" he hooted.

"Oh, my hat!" gasped Tom Brown. Bunter, apparently, was mistaking the atmospherical effects for the classical renderings of the Third Programme!

"What is it—Russian music?" snorted Bunter. "For goodness sake shut it off, and turn on a tune or something, if you want to turn the dashed thing on at all. Shut off the Third Programme, anyway."

"You howling ass!" roared Tom Brown. "Get out, and shut the door after you."

Lot of good shutting the door—that row can be heard at the end of the passage," grunted Bunter. "I never could stand that classical stuff." Squeak! Howl! Whistle! Browney was twiddling dials again. To Bunter's fat ears it sounded more classical than ever.

"Will you shut it off?" he howled.

"Get out!"

"Beast!"

There was a step in the passage, and Ogilvy of the Remove looked in over a fat shoulder. Ogilvy was musical, and he too was going to listen in to Signor Gigli, if the radio behaved.

"Hullo, Browney! Got that tenor?" he asked. Billy Bunter fairly jumped. He blinked round at Ogilvy, his little round eyes almost popping through his big round spectacles.

Tom Brown glanced round again from the radio.

"That you, Oggy? Kick Bunter out, will you, and come in and shut the door."

Billy Bunter did not wait to be kicked. He backed away in a hurry, and Ogilvy, laughing, went into No. 2 Study and shut the door after him.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Bunter.

He gasped in his astonishment. Detective Bunter had been without a clue: and now a clue had dropped into his fat hands, like a ripe apple as it were.

Unless his fat ears had deceived him, he was on the track at last! It did not occur to Bunter, for the moment, that there were tenners and tenors! He was not thinking of Signor Gigli. He was thinking of Coker's tenner—the reigning topic at Greyfriars at the moment.

"Browney!" breathed Bunter, "and Ogilvy! The pair of them! They're in this together—and they've got it!"

There was no room for doubt! The amazing thing was that Ogilvy should have spoken so carelessly in Bunter's hearing, as if he did not care a bean who heard him. But there was no mistaking what he had said. He had asked Browney, perfectly plainly, "Got that tenner?" At least Bunter was certain that he had. Browney had the tenner—and Ogilvy was "in it" with him! Nothing could be plainer! Bunter saw it all.

It was surprising. Tom Brown, the cheery and popular New Zealand junior, was not the sort of fellow to be suspected of "pinching". But for what he had just heard, Detective Bunter would certainly have "elumperated" Browney from a list of suspects. And Ogilvy, too—Oggy was almost the last fellow to be thought of in such a connection.

But Bunter could believe his fat ears! If what he had just heard meant anything, it meant that Tom Brown had that tenner in his study, and that Ogilvy was "in it" with him. What else could it mean?

Astonished as he was, Billy Bunter grinned with satisfaction. He was on the track now—at the end of the trail, in fact. No need to search in Coker's study for clues. He knew where that tenner was, and who had it! It only remained, like Sherlock Holmes, to announce that he had completed his case, to the astonishment and admiration of less gifted fellows. He rolled along to No. 1 Study, almost breathless with excitement. He burst into that study gasping. Harry Wharton and Co. who had come up to tea, stared at him.

"I say, you fellows!" spluttered Bunter.

"Anything up?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Yes, rather!" gasped Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Spotted any clues yet, Mr. Holmes?" grinned Bob Cherry.

"Yes!" gasped Bunter. "That's it."

"Know who's got that tenner?" grinned Nugent.

"Yes!"

"What—a—a-t?" The Famous Five all ejaculated together, at that reply in the affirmative. Detective Bunter had added considerably to the gaiety of existence in the Greyfriars Remove, since he had set out to rival Sherlock Holmes. But nobody had expected to hear that he had trailed down the missing tenner.

"You know who's got it?" exclaimed Harry Wharton, blankly.

"Don't I?" chuckled Bunter. "Didn't I tell you fellows that I could handle this case? Well, I've got my man!"

"Fathead!" grunted Johnny Bull. "Oh, really, Bull—."

"The fatfulness of the esteemed Bunter's head is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Oh, really, Inky—."

"Well, if you know who it was, who was it?" grunted Johnny.

"Browney!" said Bunter, triumphantly. "He's got it in his study now, and Ogilvy's in it with him—the pair of them, you know!"

Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Five with a triumphant blink. He expected them to be astonished at that announcement. And they were—there was no doubt about that! Perhaps he also expected them to say "Wonderful!" like five Dr. Watsons! If so, he was disappointed. They all spoke together, but they did not say "Wonderful". They said:

"Idiot!"

"Oh, really, you fellows!" protested Bunter. "Look here, I've completed my case, just like Herlock Sholmes—I mean Sherlock Holmes. I've tracked them down! I know who's got that tenner! Browney and Oggy—."

"You fat, foozling, footling, frabjous Owl!" roared Harry Wharton.

"Oh, really, Wharton—."

"You unmitigated idiot!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"What's put that potty idea into that chunk of solid oak you call a brain?"

"Kick him!" said Johnny Bull.

"I say, you fellows, I tell you it's so!" yelled Bunter. "And I jolly well want you chaps to come with me, and get hold of that tenner. They may be going to take it out and change it. And—and they might kick me out if I went in on my own—."

"Jolly likely, I think," said Frank Nugent.

"Well, you fellows come with me," urged Bunter. "I tell you it's there. I heard Oggy ask Browney quite plainly if he'd got the tenner—."

"Rubbish!"

"Rot!"

"The rotfulness is terrific."

"I jolly well did!" yelled Bunter. "And if they've got a tenner in that study, it's Coker's, ain't it? Think there's oodles of tenners sprinkled all over Greyfriars, or what?"

"If there's a tenner about, it's Coker's all right," said Harry Wharton.

"But there isn't and can't be one in Browney's study, and you must have mistaken what Oggy said—."

"He said quite plainly, 'Got that tenner?'" howled Bunter. "Could anything be plainer than that? Look here, you fellows, you come to the study with me, and get hold of that tenner while we know where it is. Perhaps I'd better call Quelch up—."

"You burbling bandersnatch!" yelled Bob Cherry. "If you say a word to Quelch about this idiotic mistake of yours—."

"Well, Coker's got to have his tenner back," said Bunter. "Quelch will have to know! If you fellows won't come—."

"Let's go, you fellows, and see what sort of a potty mistake that fat chump has made," said Harry. And the Famous Five crowded out of No. 1 study, and hurried along to No. 2, Billy Bunter rolling breathlessly after them.

CHAPTER 30

MERELY A MISUNDERSTANDING!

"Why not?" asked Browney, staring.

"Why not?" repeated Harry, blankly. He turned to the Scottish junior.

"Look here, Oggy, I jolly well know that you don't know anything about the tenner."

Ogilvy gave him a stare.

"More than you do, I shouldn't wonder," he answered, rather tartly. "Why shouldn't I?"

"If you know, why haven't you told Quelch?" demanded Nugent.

"Quelch? What would Quelch care about it?"

"Well, Prout, then?"

"Prout!" Ogilvy blinked, in his surprise. "Why the dickens? Think old Pompous cares a bean about tenors?"

"I should jolly well think so," exclaimed Johnny Bull, "and you'd hear from him fast enough, if he knew that you knew anything. Look here, Browney, you can't really mean that you've got the tenner?"

"I say, you fellows—."

"Shut up, Bunter."

"Beast!"

"I've been having a spot of trouble with the radio—!" Tom Brown began to explain. But he was interrupted.

"Blow the radio! Bunter's brought us along here because he thinks you've got the tenner—."

"I jolly well know—."

"Shut up, Bunter."

"Oh, really, Wharton—."

"Have you got it or not?" demanded Harry Wharton. "I tell you I've had a spot of trouble with the radio—atmospherics and things, and—."

"Bother the radio! Bless the radio! Who's talking about the radio?"

roared Bob Cherry. "If you know anything about it, where's the tenner?"

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

Bob Cherry's voice, at the door of No. 2 Study, drowned even the squeaks and squeals of a jibbing radio. Tom Brown switched off, and glanced round. He gave the crowd of juniors in the doorway a nod. Ogilvy, sitting on the corner of the study table swinging his legs, gave them another. Certainly neither of the two juniors looked like the unlawful possessor of somebody else's tenner!

"Oh, it's you chaps!" said Tom Brown. "Trot in! You interested in the tenor, like Oggy?"

Five fellows jumped. They had not expected that. Certainly, there was a slight difference in the pronunciation of "tenor" and "tenner". But the Remove fellows did not notice that at the moment. Billy Bunter's amazing tale of a tenner had brought them to that study, and with Coker's tenner in their thoughts, Browney's question was quite startling.

"Did—did you say tenner?" stuttered Bob. "Yes! That's what Oggy's come up for—."

"Oh, my hat!"

There was a triumphant squeak behind the Famous Five.

"I say, you fellows, you hear that? Didn't I jolly well tell you they knew all about the tenner? Didn't I—?"

"Blessed if I make this out," said Harry Wharton. "Are you pulling our leg, or what, Browney? What do you mean by saying that Oggy's come up here for the tenner?"

"Look in the *Radio Times*".

"In the *Radio Times*!" stuttered Bob.

"Yes, you'll see it there."

"Oh, crumbs! What did I tell you fellows?" gasped Bunter. "He's jolly well owned up now. I jolly well knew—."

"Shut up, Bunter!" roared Bob. "Look here, you beast—."

"This must be some sort of a joke," said Bob. "They jolly well don't know a thing about that tenner. Chuck over that *Radio Times*, Oggy, and we'll see."

"Here you are!"

A copy of the *Radio Times* lay on the table. Ogilvy tossed that informative periodical over, and Bob opened it. Five fellows stared at it, amazed, and hardly knowing what to think. Only Billy Bunter was not surprised. Having tracked down the missing tenner to its lair, as it

were, Detective Bunter was quite prepared to see it hidden in the pages of the Radio Times."

"It's not here!" exclaimed Bob.

"Must be there," answered Tom Brown. "Look in the Home Service.

"There's nothing here, I tell you. And I jolly well know that you haven't got the tenner, either."

"Don't I keep on telling you about the atmospherics—."

"Blow the atmospherics. Who's talking about atmospherics? If you really know anything about it, where's that tenner?"

"If it's not in the Radio Times, I don't know! Might be at Broadcasting House, or a concert, or anywhere—."

"Wha-a-a-t?"

"Anyhow, what does it matter where it comes from, so long as we get it?" said Tom Brown. "Now shut up, and I'll try again,"

Squeak! Whistle! Rumble! Squeak! But as Tom Brown adjusted his dials, those sounds of revelry died out, and a clear melodious voice, singing in Italian, came through. Browney held up his hand for silence.

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

"Quiet!" hooted Tom Brown. "That's the tenor,"

"What?" yelled Bob Cherry.

"Can't you hear him? It's Gigli, the tenor! For goodness sake shut up, and let's hear him?" exclaimed Tom Brown.

"That—that—that's the tenor!" gasped Harry Wharton. He grasped it at last. "Is that the tenor you came up for, Ogggy?"

"That's it! Quiet!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled the Famous Five. They really could not keep quiet, as requested, for the moment. As that absurd misunderstanding dawned on them, they yelled.

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

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Quiet, will you?" hooted Tom Brown. "What the dickens are you cackling at? Nothing funny about a tenor solo, is there?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Haven't you any ear for music? How often do we get a tenor like this on the radio? Will you shut up? "

"Quiet!" exclaimed Ogilvy. "Don't you want to listen-in?"

Harry Wharton and Co. subdued their merriment at last. They were, in fact, quite pleased to listen-in to Gigli, as the melodious voice rolled on the air. But they could not help grinning. This was the tenor—quite different from Coker's tenner! This was the amazing discovery that the Sherlock Holmes of Greyfriars had made in No. 2 Study! But though the Famous Five had grasped how the matter stood, Billy Bunter hadn't. Bunter was still thinking of tenners, not tenors.

"Look here, you fellows—!" he squeaked.

"Shut up, Bunter."

"But look here—."

"Kick that fat chump, will you?" snorted Tom Brown.

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter contrived to shut up, till the melodious voice ceased to stream from the radio, and was heard no more. Tom Brown shut off.

"Jolly good, what?" he said.

"Jolly good," agreed Harry Wharton. "Thanks for the treat, Browney! May as well go back and finish our tea now, you fellows—now we know the sort of tenor Bunter's nosed out in this study."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows, don't go!" exclaimed Billy Bunter.

"It wasn't in the Radio Times—that tenner—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Browney's got it and Ogilvy jolly well knows. Look here, we've jolly well come here for that tenner! If you fellows go away without it, I'll jolly well go to Quelch—."

"You howling ass!" roared Bob Cherry. "That was the tenor—that chap on the radio-Gigli—."

"Jeelyee?" repeated Bunter.

"What do you mean by Jeelyee?"

Bob Cherry jammed the Radio Times almost on Bunter's little fat nose, and pointed to the announcement of the famous singer. Bunter blinked at it.

"Look, ass! Understand now?" hooted Bob.

"Eh? Something about Giggley," said Bunter.

"What's that got to do with it? I ain't talking about Giggley, whoever Giggley is—."

"It's pronounced Jeelyee, fathead—."

"Rot!" said Bunter. "You can't teach me French, Bob Cherry."

"It's Italian, ass—."

"I don't care whether it's French or Italian! I pronounce it Giggley," said Bunter, "but I ain't talking about Giggley, I tell you! I'm talking about that tenner—."

"Gigli's the tenor!" shrieked Bob. "That's what Browney said—t-e-n-o-r, not t-e-n-n-e-r. Got it now?"

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"What's that about a tenner?" asked Tom Brown, staring.

"You jolly well know!" hooted Bunter. "You and Oggy have got that tenner between you, and Skinner makes out it was me, and it wasn't, and—."

"What?" yelled Tom Brown and Robert Donald Ogilvy together. Browney bounded away from the radio: Oggy jumped off the table. Both looked excited.

"I say, you fellows, don't you go without that tenner," howled Bunter, as the Famous Five, laughing, crowded out of the study. "I say, they've got Coker's tenner, and if you go without it, I'll go straight to Quelch and say—yarooooooooooh!"

As if moved by the same spring, Tom Brown and Ogilvy jumped at Bunter. Harry Wharton and Co. as they went back to No. 1 Study, heard sounds from No. 2 which might almost have made them suppose that the Bull of Bashan, famed in old time for his roaring, had somehow got loose in the Remove passage at Greyfriars. It has been said that a policeman's lot is not a happy one: Billy Bunter, just then, was finding that of a detective far from enjoyable!

CHAPTER 31

COKER'S PROBLEMS—AND PRICE'S

"A GEORGIC!" said Coker.

Coker of the Fifth had made that remark at least six or seven times: which was perhaps the reason why Potter and Greene did not heed when he made it again.

Potter helped himself to jam—excellent jam made by the fair hands of Aunt Judy, and still in supply in the study because Prout had interrupted Billy Bunter on Wednesday afternoon. Greene helped himself to cake; also excellent, made by the same fair hands. Coker, who had finished tea, sprawled in the window-seat, at full length, his long legs outstretched, his hands in his pockets, a grim and pessimistic frown corrugating his rugged brow.

"A Georgic!" he said, once more. "That's Prout!"

"Tough, old chap," said Potter, in rather a perfunctory way. Potter and Greene were not very sympathetic.

They were, in fact, rather fed up with Coker, though not with his jam and cake. The affair of the missing tenner was altogether too discomfoting for Coker's study-mates to allow them to feel very pally: indeed, it made them feel rather like boiling Coker in oil.

No doubt it was tough for any fellow to be given a Georgic to write. But if a fellow asked for such things, indeed begged and prayed for them, what was he to expect! Really it was rather absurd for Coker to ask, beg, and pray, for a Georgic, and then sprawl scowling in the window-seat because he had got one. Potter and Greene had heard all they wanted to hear, and more, about that Georgic: they were rather anxious to get through tea and get out of the study, lest Coker should ask for helping hands with the Georgic. A Georgic was a tremendous imposition, and no fellow could find time for it—unless, of course, he had to. Coker had to! "Prout!" said Coker, bitterly, while his friends absorbed jam and cake. "He fancied that I came down last night to guzzle treacle! That's Prout!" "Jolly lucky for you he thought so!" remarked Greene. "If he'd guessed what you were going to do with that treacle—." "If you hadn't fallen over with it—!" sighed Potter. "I didn't fall over with it, George Potter! Somebody was here in the dark, and pushed me over," snorted Coker. "I wish I knew who it was—I'd alter his features for him."

"I expect you stumbled over a chair, old chap—."

"I did not stumble over a chair, George Potter."

"Or walked into the table!" suggested Greene.

"Don't be an idiot, if you can help it, Greene."

Greene left it at that, and devoted himself to cake.

Neither of Coker's friends had any doubt that he had stumbled over something in the dark with the treacle. It would have been like him, at any rate.

"But that Georgic!" said Coker. He came back to the Georgic as to a haunting refrain. "Prout said Saturday—that's to-morrow. Hand it in by tea-time. A whole Georgic! Not a hundred lines, you know—not even two hundred. A whole Georgic! That's Prout! He's improving!" Coker was sardonic. "A whole blithering Georgic from end to end! The long and the short of it is, that old Pompous had a down on me. He even makes out that it was my own fault that tenner was snooped! He's said that he's going to write to my Aunt Judy about sending too much pocket-money to a boy in his form. That's Prout!" Coker frowned; a frown that the Lord High Executioner might have envied. "What's a fellow to do, with a beak like that?"

"The Georgic!" suggested Potter. "Don't be an idiot, Potter."

"Did Prout say which Georgic?" asked Greene.

"No: he said a Georgic."

"Do the first Georgic, then—it's the shortest."

"If I do it at all!" said Coker, darkly.

"Oh! Um! Yes." Greene rose from the table.

"Coming, Potter? Blundell will be expecting us about the footer."

"Coming," answered Potter.

They left the study. But Potter turned back at the door.

It looked as if the whopping from Prout had not done Coker so much good as his friends had hoped that it might, and that he was meditating rebellion again. Potter kindly essayed a last effort to reason with him. "Look here, Coker, you'd better start on that Georgic," he said. "You've got to do it, you know."

"Have I?" said Coker: as if he doubted it. "Prout whopped you last time—"

"Yes!" said Coker, bitterly. "That's Prout!"

"Well, what's the good of asking for more?" urged Potter. "Do be a sensible chap, and get that Georgic done on time."

"I'll please myself about that," said Coker. "Prout can't walk over me as he does over you fellows. It's about time that somebody in the Fifth stood up to Prout!"

Potter shrugged his shoulders, banged the door, and followed Greene down the passage. If the headstrong Horace chose to ask, beg, or pray for more trouble, he had to be given his head.

Coker, left alone in the study, remained sprawling in the window-seat, his rugged brow knitted in a thoughtful frown. He was in an uncertain frame of mind.

Prout had given him a Georgic for coming down from his dormitory the previous night after lights out. A Georgic was a very, very heavy imposition, and it showed how exasperated Prout was with that member of his form. The briefest of Virgil's Georgics ran to over five hundred lines.

Every minute of Coker's time out of form would be taken up in writing out that awful Georgic. Coker's time was of value, as Coker knew if Prout did not.

And it was Coker's considered opinion that it was high time that somebody in the Fifth "stood up" to Prout. But standing up to Prout, though an attractive idea, was not really a very hopeful proposition. Nevertheless, all the obtuse obstinacy in Horace Coker urged him to do that very thing. It was said of old that fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Any other fellow with a Georgic on hand, which had to be delivered by tea-time the next day, would have sorted out Virgil and a block of impot paper, and started on that Georgic. Not so Coker! Coker felt that he had to think this thing out: not an easy matter, for thinking was far from being his long suit. He remained sprawling in the window-seat, with a gloomy brow, while the dusk fell and deepened in the study. Coker did not take the trouble to rise and turn on the light. He sprawled and reflected in the deepening dusk.

Was he going to do that Georgic? Was he not?

Every minute that evening, every minute of the half-holiday on Saturday, spent in grinding out Latin lines: and why? Because old Pompous had a "down" on him! It was as simple as that.

Coker was quite unconscious of any adequate reason why "old Pompous" should be down on him. In all matters of dispute, Coker always had the happy assurance that he, Horace James Coker, was blameless.

If he was going to do that rotten Georgic, the sooner he got going, the better. Coker realised that. But was he? He sprawled in the window-seat in glum and gloomy doubt.

The door of the study opened so softly and quietly that he did not hear it, and did not look round.

The dusk was thick now, and Coker, sprawling below the level of the window, was as good as invisible. Any fellow coming to the study, and finding it in the dark, would naturally suppose that it was unoccupied. Price of the Fifth certainly did.

There was no light under Coker's door. That a fellow sprawling in the window-seat, thinking out a deep and urgent problem, had not bothered to get up and turn on the light, naturally did not occur to Price. He found the study dark, and had no doubts. This was his opportunity—his chance, at last, to get rid of those loathsome banknotes.

He stepped in without a sound, and without a sound closed the door after him. He stepped to the table, and put his hand to the drawer, his other hand in his pocket grasping the banknotes.

The glimmer from the window gave him as much light as he needed. He had been interrupted the night before, but now—

He pulled open the table-drawer.

It made a slight sound as it opened, and Coker, for the first time, looked round. He gave quite a jump at the sight of a shadowy figure in the deep dusk in the study.

He sat up and stared blankly.

Some fellow was in his study, bending over the table-drawer, which he had pulled out. It was quite startling.

"Who's that?" exclaimed Coker. "Oh!"

Price whirled round, his heart leaping to his mouth. His eyes popped at Coker's head, visible now he had sat up, above the window-level. The terror that gripped the wretched Price, at that moment, almost made him faint. He tottered against the table. The banknotes were in his hand: fortunately for him, they were invisible to Coker in the dusk.

"Is that Price?" Coker peered at him, surprised and angry. "What the dickens are you sneaking into a fellow's study like that for, Price?"

Price stood dumb.

His fingers closed convulsively on the banknotes. Had Coker seen them? If he had—!

But it was clear that Coker hadn't. He was staring in angry surprise at Price's face, glimmering white in the dusk, and was unaware of anything clutched in Price's hand. That hand shot to a pocket, and the banknotes were safely out of sight. Price stood with his knees sagging under him, staring at Coker's head outlined against the dim window.

Coker heaved himself out of the window-seat.

"Gone dumb?" he snapped. "Can't you answer a chap? What are you up to here, Price? Sneaking into a fellow's study in the dark—."

"I-I-I—!" stammered Price.

"I-I-I—," mimicked Coker. "Taken to stuttering? What have you pulled that drawer open for? After my tuck, like that fat young tick Bunter? Think I keep tuck in the table-drawer, or what?"

Price panted.

"I-I-I only wanted to—to borrow a pen-nib—I-I thought you wouldn't mind, Coker—."

"You can borrow a pen-nib if you want to, but you needn't sneak about in the dark like a cat, and make a fellow jump!" snapped Coker. He stepped across to the switch by the door, and turned on the light. Then he stared at Price's sickly face. "Great pip! What's the matter with you, Price? You're as white as a sheet."

"I-I—." Price muttered huskily. "I-I—was startled when you spoke—I-I didn't know you were here—I—."

"Well, I'm not going to eat you," said Coker, contemptuously. "No need to look as if you'd seen a ghost! If a pen-nib's all you want, you can take it, and cut."

"Oh! Thanks!" gasped Price.

He hardly knew how he got out of the study. His shaking legs almost refused to support him. Coker, with a contemptuous grunt, kicked the door shut after him.

That unlooked-for interruption of his meditations irritated Coker, with his problem yet unsolved! He gave Price no further thought, and certainly never dreamed that Stephen Price, also, had a problem on his mind—of a rather more serious nature. The wretched Price almost limped back to his own study, with something like despair in his heart. Thrice he had striven to get rid of the banknotes: and thrice he had failed. He dared not think of venturing down from the dormitory again at night. It seemed to him that Coker's banknotes were fated to cling to him like the Old Man of the Sea to Sinbad the Sailor.

Coker, if not Price, found that he could handle his problem. When Potter and Greene came up to prep, they found Coker in the study: but not occupied in writing lines for Prout. They looked at him.

"Started on that Georgic?" asked Potter.

"No!"

"It will keep you pretty busy to-morrow afternoon," said Greene.

"It won't," said Coker. "I'm going to see my Aunt Judith to-morrow afternoon. That will hardly leave me time to do Georgics for Prout."

"Coker, old man—!" began Potter and Greene together.

"That's that!" said Coker. "But Prout—!"

"Blow Prout!"

Potter and Greene gave it up. Horace Coker had decided to "blow" Prout: and that, as he had said, was that!

CHAPTER 32

DETECTIVE BUNTER'S LATEST

"I SAY, you fellows—."

"Prep!" said Harry Wharton. "Yes; but I say—!"

"Prep!" said Frank Nugent.

"Never mind prep now," said Billy Bunter. "This is rather more important than prep, I think."

And Bunter rolled into No. 1 Study and shut the door after him. Then he stood blinking at Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, through his big spectacles, like a very serious owl.

"It's about that tenner!" he said, impressively.

"Give us a rest!" said Harry.

"Oh, really, Wharton—."

"On the trail again?" asked Frank Nugent, laughing.

"Better steer clear of Browney's study, Mr. Holmes."

Billy Bunter gave a reminiscent wriggle. His investigations in Browney's study had produced results, only in the shape of a collection of aches and pains. And even Bunter had realised that he had followed a false scent to No. 2 Study.

"It wasn't Browney and Oggy after all," he said. "Of course I thought they were talking about Coker's tenner, but it turned out to be that Italian tenor named Giggley—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fellows can cackle, if you like, but I jolly well know that I can handle this case, just like Sherlock Holmes, you know. I ain't going to have fellows making out that it was me," said Bunter, warmly. "That cad Skinner will have to shut up when I get my man."

"When!" chuckled Nugent.

"The beaks and pre.'s can't do anything," said Bunter.

"They haven't so far, at any rate. The Head knows it wasn't me, but I noticed that Quelch was looking very odd at me, in form to-day. You fellows know that I went down last night to look for clues in Coker's study, but that beast Skinner makes out that I went down to see if there were any more banknotes about! Suppose Quelch thought so—!"

"Well, you do ask for it." said Harry. "Why not chuck playing the giddy ox? Go and get on with your prep, and let us get on with ours."

"Blow prep!" said Bunter. "I ain't going to have this put on me, and I'm on the track this time. I've got a clue, see?"

"Fathead!"

"O, really, Nugent—."

"Who's the happy man this time?" asked Harry.

"What about Smithy?" said Bunter.

"Smithy?" exclaimed the captain of the Remove, blankly.

"Smithy?" repeated Nugent, like an echo.

They stared at Detective Bunter. In one respect, at least, it seemed that Bunter resembled the famous Baker Street detective whom he had taken for a model: he was never at a loss for a theory! Apparently he was prepared to suspect anybody and everybody, till at last he "got his man". Smithy, it seemed, was the latest!

"You unutterable idiot!" said Harry Wharton, in measured tones. "If Smithy heard that, he would skin you alive."

"I ain't going to mention it to Smithy," said Bunter, hastily. "I'm telling you fellows, so that we can consult what to do about it, see? If Smithy's got that tenner of Coker's—."

"He hasn't, you burbling chump!" exclaimed Nugent.

"What on earth's put that potty idea into your idiotic head?"

"I've got a clue!" explained Bunter. "I've been thinking it out, you know, and I fancy I've got it clear!"

"And what's the clue, you howling ass?"

"That paper that Bob picked up in the Rag the other day," explained Bunter. "Look at it! That was Smithy's—."

"It wasn't Smithy's!" howled Nugent. "We found out whose it was, and it was a Fifth-form man, and Bob took it back to him."

"Oh, really, Nugent—."

"Is that all, you unmitigated burbler?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Enough, I think," said Bunter. "Look at it! Smithy was backing a horse called Big Oak, at starting-price—you remember I was able to make that paper out, though you fellows couldn't. Well, fellows who back horses jolly often get in need of money, don't they? Then a tenner suddenly disappears from a study! What does it look like?"

"That paper wasn't Smithy's!" shrieked Nugent.

"It jolly well was," said Bunter. "No good arguing about that, Nugent: it was Smithy's all right! And what sort of a fellow is Smithy? Look how he bumped me out of bed last night, after I'd jolly well told him that I didn't want to get up, the beast! I jolly well know that he was ratty because I found out that that paper was his—."

"But it wasn't his!" yelled Wharton.

"Oh, yes, it was!" declared Bunter, "and that clue points to Smithy, and to nobody else. Now the question is, what are we going to do about it?" Billy Bunter blinked inquiringly at Wharton and Nugent.

They gazed at him.

Bunter, evidently, was satisfied with his latest theory!

The Remove detective had as good as "got" his man! All that remained, so far as Bunter could see, was to decide what was to be done, now that he had tracked down the culprit. Perhaps he had expected Wharton and Nugent to ejaculate "Wonderful!" If so, it was the unexpected that was scheduled to happen.

Harry Wharton drew a deep breath.

"This is about the limit!" he said. "There's only one thing to be done, Bunter, and I'm going to do it."

"Go to Quelch?" asked Bunter.

"No!"

"The Head?"

"No."

"What are you going to do, then?"

"I'm going to bang your head on this table, and see if I can bang a little sense into it."

"What?" yelled Bunter.

"Good egg!" said Nugent, heartily.

"Go it!"

"I-I say-leggo!" roared Bunter, as the captain of the Remove grasped him. "Leggo, you beast! I tell you it was Smithy—."

Bang!

"Yaroooooh!"

Bunter's fat head was hard: but the study table seemed harder. The contact elicited a frantic yell from the fat Owl, which rang far beyond No. 1 Study. Remove fellows in the passage, coming up to prep, stopped, and stared at that study, wondering what was happening there. Something, clearly, was!

"Now, you fat ass—!" hooted the captain of the Remove.

"Yow-ow-ow! Leggo!"

"Do you still think it was Smithy?"

"Ow! Wow! Yes! Ow!"

Bang!

"Yoo-hoop! I say, you fellows-wow-wow! Oh, crikey! Will you leggo?" raved Bunter. "Yow—ow—ow! Leggo my neck! Wow!"

"Still think it was Smithy?" demanded Harry Wharton.

"Beast! Ow! Yes—." gasped Bunter.

Bang!

"I-I-I mean no," shrieked Bunter. "It wasn't Smithy, if you like, you beast! Oh, crikey! Wow! Yaroooooooop!"

"Sure 'you've changed your mind about it?" asked Harry.

"No—!" Bang!

"Yaroooh! I mean yes!" yelled Bunter. "Will you leggo? Yow—ow—ow!"

The door of No. 1 Study was pitched open, and Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in, with five or six staring fellows behind him. The Bounder sneered, as he looked at the crimson, breathless Owl wriggling and yelling in the grasp of the captain of the Remove.

"You'd better chuck that, Wharton," he said. "What are you handling Bunter like that for, I'd like to know."

"Find out!" was Wharton's brief answer.

"Ow! Leggo! Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow!"

"If he's been after your tuck—."

"He hasn't been after my tuck."

"Well, what's he done, anyway?"

"Nothing!"

"You're handling him like that when he's done nothing?" exclaimed the Bounder.

"Exactly."

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

"It's what he said!" exclaimed Nugent, hastily.

"Rot!" said Smithy. "Wharton's no right to handle the fat frump like that, whatever he may have said."

"Think so?" asked Wharton, savagely. "Yes, I do! What did he say, anyway?"

"Only that you'd had Coker's tenner."

"Wha-a-a-t?"

Vernon-Smith seemed afflicted with a stutter. The change that came over his face was quite startling. Never had a fellow been so thoroughly taken aback.

There was a laugh from the fellows behind him in the passage. They seemed to be amused.

But the Bounder was not amused. He stared blankly at Harry Wharton, and then at Bunter, with an expression on his face that made the fat Owl squeak with alarm.

"He-he-he said—!" stuttered Smithy. "He-he said I-I-why. I'll-I'll-I'll—!" Words failed Smithy, and he proceeded to rapid action.

"I say, you fellows, keep him off!" yelled Bunter, as Smithy rushed into the study and grasped him.

Bang! Bunter's fat head smote the study table again.

It sounded like the contact of a coke-hammer. Smithy had a heavier hand than Harry Wharton.

"Yoo-hooooop!" roared Bunter.

Wharton and Nugent grasped the Bounder, and dragged him back by main force. Bunter yelled, frantically.

"Cut, you fat ass!" snapped Harry.

Billy Bunter gave the angry Bounder one blink, and bolted from the study. Not till the door of No. 7, up the passage, was heard to slam did Wharton and Nugent release the Bounder. Then Smithy was allowed to stamp out of the study, and Harry Wharton, laughing, threw the door shut after him. Prep, at last, started in No. 1.

But there was a thoughtful wrinkle in Harry Wharton's brow, as he sat down with his books, and the attention he gave the section of the *Æneid*, assigned by Mr. Quelch for that evening's preparation, was rather desultory.

"Look here, Franky—!" he said, at last, "Something that fat ass said sticks in my mind. That paper Bob picked up in the Rag—."

"That was Price's," said Nugent. "Bob took it to him—."

"I know! That's what I'm thinking of! We know to whom that paper belonged, if Bunter doesn't."

"What about it?" asked Nugent.

"We know it was Price's, and that he met that black-guard Banks under the big oak in the spinney, and—and he owed Banks a tenner—."

Nugent gave a jump.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, startled. "I remember—Banks said something of the kind—."

"And Coker's tenner disappeared the same day!" said Harry.

Nugent whistled.

"It looks—!" said Harry, in a low voice.

"By gum, it does."

There was a silence, as they looked at one another across/the table.

Nugent broke it, at last.

"We couldn't be sure," he said, slowly, "and we're not pre.'s: and we're not playing detective like that ass Bunter! It's up to the beaks, Harry—not us."

"Quite!" agreed Harry.

No more was said on the subject: and they settled down to prep.

CHAPTER 33

AT LAST!

"STEVE, old man."

Stephen Price looked round, furtively, at Hilton's voice. It was Saturday afternoon: a clear bright autumn afternoon. Many, if not most, Greyfriars men were thinking of soccer that afternoon: but there was no thought of anything so healthy and carefree in Price's mind. He was leaning on a tree at a little distance from the bike-shed, his hands in his pockets, his eyes on the doorway of the shed, when Hilton came up. Every now and then a fellow came along to wheel out a machine, and Price seemed interested in watching them come and go: though why, it would have been difficult to say. His look showed that he was not pleased to see Cedric Hilton, when that elegant youth joined him under the tree.

"Well?" he snapped.

"I've been lookin' for you." Hilton's voice was his usual careless drawl, but his eyes were keen on Price's face. "What are you hangin' about here for?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"Somethin' better to do, I should think. What about a spot of soccer this afternoon?"

"Oh, don't be an ass."

"Do you more good than moochin' about lookin' as if you were goin' to be hanged! Look here. Steve, you'd better brace up. I know soccer's not much in your line, but it's only a pick-up game to-day, and Blundell would shove you in if I asked him."

"You needn't trouble to ask him."

"I've said you'd better brace up." said Hilton. "Have a little sense, Price. Do you want old Pompous to notice that you've been lookin' as sick as a dog ever since what happened on Wednesday afternoon?"

Price gave him a black and bitter look. But his lip trembled.

"So you've still got that in your mind?" he sneered. "I don't know what to think! But if it's not that, what's the matter with you?"

"Nothing!"

Cedric Hilton stood silent, looking at him very dubiously. The fellow who shared Price's study could not fail to be aware that something was on his mind: something that made him as nervous and jumpy as a rabbit, and made him look, as Hilton expressed it, "sick". And the dandy of the Fifth could not help thinking that he' had guessed what it was.

Price leaned back on the elm again, evidently impatient for Hilton to go. But Hilton did not go. He stood looking at Price, who glanced round at him again with smouldering eyes.

"Hadn't you better get off to the footer?" he asked.

"You won't come?"

"No, I won't."

Cedric Hilton shrugged his shoulders.

"O.K.," he said. "Please yourself! But if you'll take a tip from me, you'll try to brace up, and not make every fellow in the form wonder what's bitin' you."

Price scowled without replying.

There was a tramp of feet, and three fellows came along towards the bike-shed. Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form, stalked ahead: Potter and Greene were following him. Hilton glanced at them, with a smile: Price with a stealthy intentness.

"That ass Coker!" remarked Hilton. "I hear he's been braggin' that he won't do that Georgic for Prout—he's goin' out on his stink-bike! Jevver hear of such a howlin' ass?"

Price did not reply. His eyes were fixed on the three Fifth-form men. Coker's loud voice was heard as he came along—speaking to Potter and Greene over his shoulder. They were rather pushed to keep pace with the long-legged Horace as he stalked ahead.

"You shut up, Potter."

"But look here, Coker—."

"I said shut up!"

"Coker, old man, you can't do it," said Greene.

"Look here, old chap—."

"Shut up, Greene."

Hilton laughed, as the three disappeared into the bike-shed. Horace Coker, evidently, was going on his own lofty way, regardless of consequences—his anxious friends making a last effort to dissuade him. Price did not laugh, but his face seemed to brighten, as if what he had heard, gave him satisfaction.

He detached himself from the tree, at last, and moved off. Hilton walked by his side.

"Comin' along to the changin'-room?" he asked.

"No!"

"More ass you, then," said Hilton, and he walked away, leaving Stephen Price to his own devices.

Left to his own devices, Price of the Fifth strolled, with as casual an air as he could, into the House. He hardly noticed a little crowd of Remove fellows who passed him, coming out as he went in: and was unaware that, in that little crowd, Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent gave him curious looks, as he passed. Stephen Price little dreamed what was in the minds of the two juniors: he gave them no thought as he went up the staircase to the study landing. He was thinking wholly of his own dingy concerns.

This was his chance, at last. That ass, Coker, should have been in his study that afternoon, grinding out lines for Prout: instead of which, he was going out, as regardless of Prout as of a buzzing insect. The consequences were certain to be somewhat serious for Coker: but nothing could have suited Price better. Coker was going out of gates: Potter and Greene would be playing in the Fifth-form pick-up: even Hilton's eyes would not be upon him, for luckily Hilton was playing in the pick-up too. Hardly a fellow in the Fifth would be indoors: and the coast was absolutely clear for the wretched fellow who was waiting and watching for a chance to get a few minutes in Coker's study unseen and unsuspected. All, so far as Price could see, was plain sailing now.

He had watched at the bike-shed, to make assurance doubly sure that Coker was going out. There was no doubt about that now. His heart was almost light as he walked into the Fifth-form passage.

Fitzgerald and Tomlinson, of the Fifth, were chatting in that passage. But both of them were booked for the pick-up: Price had only to wait till they were gone. He loafed along to his own study and went in: but did not shut the door. Just within the room, he waited.

He waited impatiently: Fitzgerald and Tomlinson seemed in no hurry to go. But at length, a calling voice was heard from the staircase, and the two Fifth-form men moved off. Price, peering from his doorway, saw them disappear across the landing.

All was clear now. He waited a few more minutes, to make sure. Then he stepped out of his study, and whipped into the next. Softly, he closed Coker's door behind him. He looked round the study, his hand on the banknotes in his pocket. He stepped towards the table to pull out the drawer: but paused. Coker had seen him at that drawer the previous evening: he might remember—and guess! Price did not touch the table-drawer. He looked round him again, and stepped across to the window-seat. That was where the blazer had been lying, when he had abstracted the banknotes. That was the place! The window was in an alcove, which was filled from side to side by the long wooden seat. The wood was covered by a long thick cushion, like a narrow mattress. Suppose those banknotes had fallen out, when Coker pitched the blazer there—suppose they had somehow slipped behind the cushion—what else was anyone to think, if they were found there?

Price leaned over the window-seat, the banknotes in his hand. He pushed them down behind the cushion, between its edge and the wall under the window.

He straightened up again, with clots of perspiration on his forehead. It was done—done at last. The banknotes were out of sight: and how long they remained hidden there he did not care: they were in Coker's study, and no one could dream of him in connection with them: that was all that mattered to Price. All he had to do now was to slip quietly from the

study, that nightmare at an end, and dismiss the whole incident from his mind—he could do that now. He might join Hilton, after all, and play football, if Blundell would give him a place in the pick-up. No one would know, or could know, that he had been anywhere near Coker's study that afternoon. With a deep, deep breath of relief, he turned—and as he turned, the door was flung wide open, and a crowd of fellows tramped into the study.

CHAPTER 34

GOOD SAMARITANS

"LISTEN to the band!" murmured Bob Cherry.

Harry Wharton and Co. smiled.

It was not really a "band". It was the voice of Horace Coker, proceeding from the open doorway of the bike-shed.

Six fellows were coming down to the bike-shed for their machines. That afternoon, the Remove were playing Cecil Reginald Temple and Co. of the Fourth at soccer: a match which the mighty men of the Form were content to leave to lesser lights. The Famous Five were going out on a long spin on their jiggers: and Bob Cherry had rounded up Lord Mauleverer to join in the spin. His lazy lordship was not keen on it: but as Mauly never said "No" to anybody if he could help it, there he was. The powerful voice of Horace Coker, of the Fifth Form, greeted their ears as they came into the offing.

"For goodness sake, you fellows, shut up! Haven't I told you that I'm going on my motor-bike? Have I or haven't I?"

"Coker, old man—." It was Potter's voice, in almost pleading tones.

"Dry up, Potter."

"Coker, old chap—!" came Greene's voice.

"Pack it up, Greene."

"Won't you have just a spot of sense, Coker?" pleaded Potter. "You just can't treat old Pompous like that."

"Can't I?" Coker seemed to think that he could.

"You've got to do that Georgic, old man. Prout said this afternoon. He will expect to see that Georgic on his table when he comes in for tea."

"Let him expect," snorted Coker. "Prout can whistle for his Georgic!"

Bob Cherry winked at his comrades, and there was a chuckle.

"Asking for it again!" murmured Bob.

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

"The ass!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"The silly ass!" remarked Frank Nugent.

"The howling ass!" agreed Harry Wharton.

"Frightful fathead!" murmured Lord Mauleverer.

"Prout's awfully shirty with him already! If he does this—!" Mauly shook his head.

Evidently the headstrong Horace was on the track of trouble again. Having thought out the problem of that Georgic, Coker had decided to let Prout whistle for it! It was no wonder that his friends were anxious about him. Really and truly, a form-master could not be left to whistle for his Georgic: though Coker seemed to fancy that he could.

"But, old chap—!" said Potter and Greene, together. "It's no good talking!" Coker's voice had a tone of finality. "Prout's down on me! He's given me a Georgic for nothing—well, next to nothing! If he'd got that treacle, it would be different, but he never got it—I got it—. What are you grinning at?"

"Oh! Nothing! But look here, Coker—."

"A Georgic!" said Coker, in tones of deep and almost thrilling indignation. "Not two or three hundred lines, like the last lot—a whole Georgic! And I'm booked to see my Aunt Judith this afternoon—it was fixed up a week ago! A bit more important than Georgics for Prout, I think!" "Prout won't think so—."

"I'm fed up with Prout! I've said more than once that it's time some man in the Fifth stood up to Prout! Don't say any more! If you're playing football, you'd better cut off, or Blundell will be yelling for you."

"Do listen to a pal, Coker," Potter fairly pleaded. It was true that Coker's pals were in rather a fed-up state with him, but they felt that they could not let him rush upon his fate, without a last effort to save him from himself. "I tell you, Prout will go right off at the deep end if he doesn't get his Georgic to-day—. Do the first Georgic: it's the shortest—."

"I'm not getting into a flap about Prout, Potter."

"Have a little sense—."

"If you had as much sense in your head, George Potter, as I have in my little finger, you'd be a brighter chap than you are."

"Look here, you silly fathead—!" Potter seemed to be losing patience: which perhaps was not surprising.

"That will do, Potter."

"Well, if you're going to beg and pray for it—!" yapped Greene.

"Give a chap a rest."

"Oh, rats!" said Potter and Greene together: and they came out of the bike-shed, frowning: passing six smiling juniors as they walked off, leaving the headstrong Horace to his fate.

Coker followed them out with his motor-bike. Coker's rugged face was set in an expression of grim determination. His mind, such as it was, was made up. It was time that somebody stood up to old Pompous: Coker was going to do the standing-up. Prout could whistle for his Georgic! There was not, perhaps, room for more than one idea at a time in Coker's solid brain. At the moment, his fixed idea was that old Pompous could whistle for his Georgic: and that was that!

He glanced at the Remove fellows, and gave them a frown in passing. He had not forgotten sitting down in that puddle. However, he did not want to sit down in another, so he contended himself with a frown, and passed on, and left them smiling. The gug-gug-gug of the stink-bike was heard from the road.

"Poor old Coker!" sighed Bob Cherry, as the juniors went into the bike-shed. "Fancy even that ass being ass enough to go out for the afternoon, when he's got a Georgic to do for his beak."

"Isn't he ass enough for anything?" grunted Johnny Bull.

"The esteemed Prout will be terrifically infuriated!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "There will be a preposterous row when the idiotic Coker comes back. But what cannot be cured must go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks."

The Famous Five lifted down their machines. They could not help feeling a little concerned for Coker. A Greyfriars man who defied his beak, as Coker proposed to do, was undoubtedly booked for extremely serious consequences: though probably Coker did not realise how extremely serious those consequences might be.

Lord Mauleverer put his hand to his gleaming bike, but dropped it again. There was a very thoughtful shade on his lordship's noble brow. Five other fellows, ready to wheel out, glanced at him.

"Get a move on, Mauly," said Bob. "Too lazy to lift your jigger off the stand? Or gone to sleep standing up, like a horse?"

"Yaas—I mean, no! I was just thinkin'—." Lord Mauleverer paused. "Hold on a minute, you fellows. Look here, are you awfully keen on a spin this afternoon? "

"Yes, rather," answered Bob. "Tired already, old man? Think of the fifteen miles we're going to do. It will brace you up."

"Oh ! Ah! Yaas! But that ass Coker—!"

"He's gone," said Johnny Bull. "What about him, anyway?"

Five fellows looked at Lord Mauleverer, puzzled.

Coker of the Fifth was gone, with undoubtedly a royal row awaiting him on his return. The Famous Five saw no reason in that for delay in starting on their spin.

"Prout's fearfully fed up with him," said Lord Mauleverer. "You saw him, the other day, boilin' over—and then Coker goes and gets his tenner snoopied, shakin' up the whole school; then he plays potty antics in the middle of the night, rousin' out the beaks—Prout's fed right up to the back teeth."

"No wonder!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Well, old Coker's a born idiot, and a cheeky ass, and all that. But—."

"But what?" asked Bob, as Mauly paused.

"What about doin' him a good turn?" asked Lord Mauleverer.

"Nothing we can do, is there?" asked Bob. "No good talking to him! Besides, he's a mile away by this time."

"Oh! Yaas! But—." Mauleverer paused again, eyeing his friends doubtfully. "Suppose—suppose we did his Georgic for him?"

"WHAT!!" Five fellows ejaculated together, staring blankly at Mauly.

"That's what I was thinkin'—."

"Do his Georgic for him!" said Johnny Bull, almost like a fellow in a dream. "Stick indoors writing Coker's lines, instead of going out on a spin! Mad?"

"My esteemed and idiotic Mauly—."

"Oh, scissors!" said Frank Nugent. Harry Wharton laughed.

"I thought Coker was the biggest ass at Greyfriars," he remarked. "But he's got to pass it up to you, Mauly."

"He's booked for a frightful row," urged Mauleverer.

"Prout will send him up to the Head—."

"Do him good!" said Johnny Bull.

"Well, it might be a flogging—or even the sack," said Mauleverer. "A chap can't carry on like that, you know, though Coker seems to think he can. And he can't help bein' a howlin' ass—stands to reason he wouldn't be, if he could help it—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If Prout finds that Georgic on his table, when he comes in, it will be all right for Coker," went on Lord Mauleverer. "The fist will be easy enough—we can find some samples of Coker's fist in his study: besides, if we make the writin' look as if a fly had ducked in the inkpot and crawled over the paper, it will look like Coker's fist. We can put in enough smears and bad spellin' to make it look genuine. Look here, it's hardly a hundred lines each for the half-dozen of us, and if Prout gets his Georgic, he won't ask Coker for it: and if Coker ain't asked for it, he will think that Prout has forgotten it, or let him off—if he thinks at all, which doesn't seem likely. The whole thing's as easy as fallin' off a form. What do you fellows think of the idea?"

"Rotten!" said Johnny Bull.

"The rottenfulness is terrific."

"Putrid!" said Nugent.

"Mouldy!" said Harry Wharton.

"All that and more," grinned Bob Cherry. "But we're going to do it all the same, my beloved 'earers, just as Mauly says. Back up, old beans."

There was a moment's pause, and then four heads nodded assent. That scheme, as outlined by Lord Mauleverer, certainly was practicable. Prout would get his Georgic, and he would be satisfied: Coker would escape the awful consequences of not having written that Georgic. Certainly there would be a spot of trouble for the juniors if it came out: for schoolmasters assuredly did not see eye to eye with schoolboys in such matters; still, fellows often did help one another with lines. The whole thing was easily done, at the cost of half a dozen fellows sticking in Coker's study, instead of going out on a spin; for which, perhaps, having acted like Good Samaritans, instead of passing by on the other side like the Pharisee, might be a consolation! Bob Cherry put his bike back on the stand, and the other fellows followed his example.

"Come on," said Harry Wharton. "After all, a hundred lines each won't kill us, and we can get out afterwards. Mind you don't make your fist look as if you'd ever learned to write, or Prout may smell a rat."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the half-dozen juniors left the bike-shed, and headed for the House. In the doorway they passed Billy Bunter, who gave them an inquiring blink through his big spectacles.

"I say, you fellows, know where Coker is? I say—hold on—don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you. "Beasts!"

The chums of the Remove had no time to waste on Bunter. They hurried up to the studies. Nobody was to be seen in the Fifth-form passage: the coast was clear. They arrived at Coker's study, and Bob Cherry hurled open the door, and they tramped in.

Price of the Fifth, at the window-seat, stared at them with popping eyes, and a face white as chalk.

CHAPTER 35

ALL HANDS!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

The whole party stared at Price. They were surprised to find him in Coker's study: and still more surprised by the sudden, ungovernable terror that blanched his face.

Price stood weakly, unsteadily. For a moment—a long, dreadful moment—he feared that his actions had been seen: that all was known. And indeed a minute earlier, he would have been caught in the very act of hiding the banknotes.

But that minute had saved him. He realised that the juniors had seen nothing—could have seen nothing. But he was there—standing within a yard of the banknotes jammed down between the cushion and the wall.

He tried to pull himself together, as he read the surprise, not unmixed with suspicion, in the crowd of faces staring at him. What Price was afraid of, the juniors did not know: but they could not fail to see that he had been terribly startled and scared by their sudden entrance.

"What—what do you fags want here?" muttered Price, huskily. He tried to speak naturally, but without much success. "What are you butting into a Fifth-form study for? You've no business here."

Harry Wharton gave him a very steady look.

"What have you butted in for, if you come to that?" he answered. "What are you up to, in Coker's study?"

"I—I—what do you mean, you cheeky young rascal?" Price made an attempt at bluster.

"I mean what I say," retorted the captain of the Remove. "What are you looking like a frightened rabbit about?"

"We're not going to eat you?" said Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"The eatfulness will not be terrific, my esteemed Price!" grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I—I'm waiting here to speak to Coker, if you want to know," snarled Price. "I can wait in his study without asking leave of Remove fags, I suppose."

Harry Wharton's lip curled.

No other Fifth-form senior, questioned by Lower boys, would have taken the trouble to explain. But no other Fifth-form man would have looked like a frightened rabbit. Price was explaining, to disarm suspicion: though of what, Wharton could not guess. But he was sure of at least one thing; Price had not been waiting there to speak to Coker. There was some reason—some deep and serious reason—for the sudden terror that had leaped into his sickly face when the juniors tramped in.

"If that's it, you're booked for a long wait!" said Bob Cherry. "Coker's gone off for the afternoon on his stink-bike."

"Oh! Has—has he gone out?" stammered Price.

"You didn't know he had?" asked Harry Wharton, with unconcealed contempt.

"That isn't why you're here?"

"You cheeky young cub—."

"Oh, cut it out!" snapped Wharton. "I don't know what you've been up to here, and don't care, but you jolly well knew that Coker had gone out, and you wouldn't be here if he hadn't."

Price clenched his hands, hard.

"If you're asking to have your cheeky head smacked—!" he muttered.

"Go it—if you like."

"What do you mean by crowding in here?" Price tried bluster again.

"Larking in a senior study while the fellows are out, I suppose? You'd better clear off."

"We'll please ourselves about that," answered Harry Wharton.

"Perhaps you'd like to turn us out?" suggested Johnny Bull, jutting out his chin.

"I'd like to see you doing it."

"The likefulness would be terrific!" remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin, "but the turnfulness out might be a boot on the other leg."

Price stood looking at them. Coker, in his place, would probably have essayed to smack half a dozen heads, all round. But Price was not the man for such heroic methods. Neither did he wish a tremendous row in Coker's study to draw attention to his presence there. Indeed his chief desire was to get out of the study, and out of sight. He moved across to the door at last, the Remove fellows moving aside to let him pass.

All eyes were upon him, as he went. His face was still sickly, but his ears burned, as he walked out of the study.

Harry Wharton threw the door shut after him, and the juniors looked at one another, very curiously.

"What on earth has Price been up to here?" asked Nugent. "He's been up to something—you could see that."

"Plain enough," said Johnny Bull.

"The plainfulness was preposterous."

"Can't have been after Coker's tuck, like Bunter, I suppose?" said Bob—at which suggestion there was a general grin. Price, unmistakably, had been "up" to something in Coker's study: something that had caused him to blanch with terror when he was suddenly discovered there. But it was hardly to be supposed that he had adopted the manners and customs of the Owl of the Remove, and had come to that study with designs on Coker's jam!

"We scared him out of his wits, coming in suddenly," said Harry, "but why the dickens?"

"The whyfulness is—!"

"Terrific, not to say preposterous!" chuckled Bob Cherry.

"Not our bizney, you fellows!" murmured Lord Mauleverer. "Anyhow he's gone now. What about gettin' on with that jolly old Georgic?"

"O.K.," said Bob. "Let's get going."

The juniors could not help wondering about Price: why he had been there, and why he had looked so scared. But as Mauily remarked, it was not their "bizney", and they were there to write Coker's Georgic, not to bother about Stephen Price. And they proceeded to get on with that self-imposed task.

Bob Cherry sorted out a block of impot paper from the table-drawer. Frank Nugent sorted out half a dozen pens. Three Virgils, belonging to Coker, Potter and Greene, were found. Three more were wanted, as the work was to be done in sections, six fellows working at the same time: it was easy to borrow the required books from adjoining studies. Harry Wharton looked for a sample of Coker's "fist", and found an unfinished Latin exercise, and held it up for his comrades' inspection. They chuckled as they looked at it. There was no doubt that Horace Coker's calligraphy did bear a remarkable resemblance to the trail of a fly that had crawled out of an inkpot: and that any "fist", so long as it was a sufficiently rugged and irregular round-hand, would do for Coker's Georgic. Fellows in the Remove had to be rather careful with hand-writing that was to meet the gimlet-eye of Mr. Quelch, but in the present case, the less careful they were, the more successful they were likely to be.

Really, it was a fairly easy task that the Good Samaritans of the Remove had set themselves. It was not even necessary to observe the niceties of spelling too closely: for Prout might have become suspicious if he had received a paper from Coker without any orthographical aberrations. And any little accidents in the way of blots, smudges, and smears, could only make the impot look more than ever like Coker's handiwork.

Six Virgils were opened at the first Georgic. Lord Mauleverer sighed gently as he looked at the Latin lines. But he braced himself nobly to the task.

"Five hundred and fourteen lines!" said Harry Wharton. "By gum! Old Pompous did come down heavy this time on poor old Coker!"

"That's eighty-five lines each for six fellows, and four over!" said Johnny Bull, after some rapid mental arithmetic.

"Mauily can do the odd four, as it's his idea!" suggested Bob.

"Hear, hear!"

"Oh, gad!" said Lord Mauleverer. "O.K. Let's get goin'! I'm feelin' a bit tired already!"

"I'll mark off the sections," said Harry. "I'll begin at the beginning—with 'Quid faciat'. You begin at line 86, 'sive inde', Bob."

"Thank goodness we haven't got to construe it!" said Bob.

"The thankfulness is terrific."

"You at line 171, 'huic a stirpe', Franky."

"Any old thing!" said Nugent.

"You at 256, 'aut tempestivam', Johnny."

"What a life!" sighed Johnny Bull.

"You at 341, Inky—' tum pingues'—."

"Quitefully, my esteemed chum."

"You at 426, Manly, 'hora neque insidiis'."

"Yaas."

"And now, all hands on deck, and get going!" said Bob Cherry: and six fellows sat down round Coker's table, and got going.

Lines ran rapidly under active pens. Five of the Good Samaritans, at least, made good progress. Lord Mauleverer started with quite a rush, but after a dozen lines or so, slowed down a little—and after two dozen,

slowed down quite a lot. Perhaps his lazy lordship even began to wonder a little whether it was, after all, such a bright idea, to do that Georgic for Coker! True, it was deathless verse, and well worth a fellow's while: but there is always a possibility of having too much even of a good thing!

However, Mauly braced himself, and kept on, though slowly. Harry Wharton was well ahead of the rest, and looked likely to win the race, so to speak. But he had still a couple of dozen to do, when the door opened, and a fat figure rolled into the study, and a pair of little round eyes blinked in astonishment at the busy half-dozen through a pair of big round spectacles.

CHAPTER 36

A STARTLING DISCOVERY!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

"Buzz off, Bunter."

"But I say, what are you fellows up to?" exclaimed the astonished fat Owl. He blinked at six Virgils propped open on the table. "Is that a Georgic you're doing? What the dickens are you fellows doing a Georgic for, in Coker's study? "

"Coker!" answered Bob Cherry. "Now dry up."

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Shut that door after you!" said Frank Nugent, over his shoulder.

"Get on the other side of it first!" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—."

"What do you want here, you fat ass?" exclaimed Harry Wharton, impatiently. "If you're after Coker's tuck, forget it, and get out."

"Oh, really, Wharton—!"

"Shut up anyway!" said Bob.

"Speech is silvery, my esteemed Bunter, but silence is the stitch in time that saves ninepence, as the English proverb remarks."

"Mean to say you're doing Coker's Georgic for him?" exclaimed Bunter. He was quite mystified. Then a sudden light seemed to dawn on him. "Oh! Is Coker standing a spread, if you do his Georgic for him? I say, I'll come!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I suppose you ain't doing it for nothing!" yapped Bunter.

"Just that!" answered Bob. "So roll away, like a good barrel, and leave us to get through."

"Well, you must be a lot of silly asses!" said Bunter.

"Catch me doing a fellow's Georgic for nothing."

"You wouldn't like to lend a hand, Bunter?" asked Lord Mauleverer, glancing up.

"No jolly fear!" answered Bunter, promptly.

"Besides, I've got something else to do here. Look here, you fellows are in the way—."

"I shouldn't wonder!" grinned Bob. "You go anywhere near that cupboard, you fat cormorant, and you get this inkpot in the back of your neck."

"Beast! 'Tain't that!" snapped Bunter. "I've got some detective work to do here, now Coker's out and a fellow has a chance—."

"Oh, my hat! Give us a rest!"

"I've found out that Coker's gone off on his stink-bike." explained the fat Owl, "and his pals are playing football, see? I've been trying to get the run of this study to look for clues—."

"Fathead!"

"Now I'm going to investigate, just like Sherlock Holmes, you know. I'm pretty certain I shall pick up a clue of some sort!" said Bunter. "Of course, nobody else has—but what it needs is brains, you know. You fellows remember how I elumperated that paper of Smithy's the other day—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" sniffed Bunter. "I've got a chance to go ahead, at last, if you fellows will clear off. I don't want you here while I'm investigating—you're in the way. Mind, I'm not thinking of scoffing any of Coker's jam before I begin, or anything of that kind."

"Better not," chuckled Bob. "You get the inkpot, if you do. We won't clear off, old fat man, but I'll tell you what I'll do—if you don't shut up, I'll get up and boot you all round the study and back again!"

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter blinked morosely at the busy six. With Coker careering across Kent on his motor-bike, and Potter and Greene playing in the pick-up, it was a chance at last for the Sherlock Holmes of Greyfriars to look for clues in that study: but it was probable that Bunter had intended to begin with a little light refreshment.

However, he did not want the inkpot in the back of his fat neck, so he gave up the idea of preliminary refreshments. Having surveyed the busy six with a devastating blink, he rolled across to the window-seat. That was the scene of the crime, so to speak; and that was where clues—if any!—were to be picked up. Grunting as he bent over the window-seat, the fat Owl proceeded to scan it through his big spectacles, in search of a clue! Heedless of the fat and fatuous Owl, Harry Wharton and Co. continued to scribble Virgilian verse. The captain of the Remove laid down his pen, at last.

"Done!" he said.

"Lucky bargee!" said Bob. "I've twenty more to do! How are you getting on, Mauly?"

"Oh! Fine! I think I've done nearly thirty," yawned his lordship.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"At that rate, Prout will have to whistle for his Georgic after all," he said. "I'll lend you a hand, fathead."

"I say, you fellows—," came a fat squeak from the window.

"Shut up, Bunter."

"But I say, I can't see anything here," said Bunter. "It's rotten luck, you know. Sherlock Holmes always finds a spot of cigarette-ash, or a letter torn in half, or a walking-stick left behind, or something like that—but there doesn't seem to be anything here—but I say—."

"Pack it up!"

"Beast! I say, think they've shifted anything in this study since the tenner was snooped?" asked Bunter. "Things ought to be left untouched for a detective to get to work—Sherlock Holmes always insists on that! If they've moved this cushion since Wednesday—."

"Chuck something at Bunter, Mauly! You're doing nothing."

"Beast!"

Five pens scribbled busily on. Harry Wharton was lending Mauly a hand: and his lordship sat placidly and watched him. Bob Cherry was the next man home, so to speak. He wrote his last line, threw down his pen, and rose, with a deep yawn of relief.

"By gum, I shall be glad to get out!" he remarked.

"Buck up, you slackers."

"I say, you fellows—."

"Put a sock in it, Bunter."

"But if this cushion's been moved—."

"Doesn't look as if it's moved once in a term, Shut up!"

Billy Bunter blinked at the long heavy cushion that covered the wide window-seat like a mattress. Neither his little round eyes nor his big round spectacles had been able to pick up anything in the nature of a clue. But if that cushion had been moved—turned over, perhaps—. It looked too large and heavy for any fellow to be keen on shifting it: still, one of the maids might have turned it over for dusting purposes. Bunter was extremely unwilling to abandon his quest of a clue while a hope remained!

"I say, Bob, old chap—."

"Wound up?" asked Bob.

"Beast! I mean, look here, dear old chap, you might shift that cushion for me. It's too heavy for me to handle. Don't you want me to spot the man who snooped that tenner?" demanded Bunter. "Do you want that cad Skinner to keep on saying that it was me? Smithy's been saying the same, too, since last night—."

"Well, one good turn deserves another," said Bob.

"You said it was Smithy, you fat ass."

"If it was Smithy, I might find a spot of cigarette-ash, like Sherlock Holmes, you know, and that would be a clue!" said Bunter. "I ain't going to have those beasts saying it was me. Look here, lend me a hand."

"Fathead!"

"Beast!"

Several busy pens ceased to scribble. Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, finished their tasks in turn. Harry Wharton, still busy on Lord Mauleverer's section, fairly raced, with the result that his "fist" looked more like Coker's than ever. He was through at last, and rose from the table.

The task was done. A complete Georgic, complete from "Quid faciat" to "neque audit currus habenas", lay on Coker's table, only needing to be put together, and transported to Prout's study: there to meet the eyes of old Pompous when he came in at tea-time. Nugent gathered up the sheets.

"Coker would thank us prettily for this, if he knew!" remarked Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"And Prout would walk us to the Head, if he knew!" said Bob. "Six all round! Never mind—what's the odds so long as you're 'appy? Let's get out—better kick Bunter out first, or he will be wolfing Coker's jam—."

"Oh, really, Cherry—."

"Roll a way, barrel!"

"Look here, will you shift that cushion for me?" howled Bunter. "If it's been turned over, there might be a clue on the other side—."

"Ass!"

"A spot of cigarette-ash, or the fellow may have dropped a stud, or a tie-pin, or something—Sherlock Holmes often found clues like that! —all sorts of clues, just as if they were put there on purpose! Look here, you lug that cushion over, Bob."

"Oh, all "right—anything for a quiet life!" said Bob, and he stepped to the window-seat, grasped the long heavy cushion, and heaved.

It was much too heavy for Bunter, but the sturdy Bob handled it with ease. It swung up, and the edge—perhaps by accident—caught Billy Bunter under a fat chin. Bunter sat down quite suddenly on Coker's carpet.

"Yaroooh!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ow! Beast! Wow!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry, in sudden surprise. "Oh. suffering cats and crocodiles! What's that? Look!"

"What—." began five fellows together.

"Look!" roared Bob.

He pointed.

Then there was a chorus of exclamations, as all eyes followed the pointing finger. The lifting of that big cushion would naturally have been expected to reveal nothing but the bare wood of the window-seat. But it had revealed something else. At the back of the seat, close by the wall under the window, there was a glimmer of something white against the dark wood. It looked like crumpled flimsy paper. But all the juniors knew what it was.

Billy Bunter scrambled up.

"I say, you fellows, what is it--is it a clue--what—" he spluttered.

"Look!"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, as his eyes and spectacles fixed on the flimsy paper. "Oh, crikey!"

He made a bound, and clutched it up. Two five pound notes, crumpled together, rustled in his fat fingers. Billy Bunter's eyes popped at them, almost popping through his spectacles.

"I-I-I say, you fellows," he gurgled. "I say, it's Coker's tenner."

And there was no doubt that it was!

CHAPTER 37

WONDERFUL?

HARRY WHARTON and Co. stared blankly at the rustling banknotes in Billy Bunter's fat fingers. There was no doubt about it: it was Coker's tenner, and it had been found at last—in Coker's study! It was amazing, but there it was—the fattest and grubbiest paw at Greyfriars was holding up the missing "tenner" to a crowd of staring eyes.

"Two fivers!" gasped Johnny Bull.

"Coker's tenner, by gad!" murmured Lord Mauleverer. "Then—then it wasn't snooped, after all!" exclaimed Bob. "It must have been here all the time—that ass Coker must have dropped it—."

"That fathead Coker—."

"That terrific ass, Coker—."

"That unmitigated duffer, Coker!" said Lord Mauleverer. "We came here to do his Georgic, and we've found his tenner—."

"You mean I've found it!" hooted Bunter. "Don't you fellows get making out that you've found it! It was me all the time—."

"And it wasn't snooped after all," said Bob. "That's the best of it!"

Couldn't have been, as it's here, in Coker's study—."

"Couldn't have been," agreed Lord Mauleverer.

"That unspeakable ass must have dropped those notes, and they got wedged behind the cushion somehow," said Bob. "The howling chump!"

"The chumpfulness of the esteemed Coker was terrific!"

"Like him!" grunted Johnny Bull.

Harry Wharton did not speak. His eyes, involuntarily, met Nugent's, and in Nugent's he read the same suspicion that had come into his own mind. What had Price of the Fifth been doing in that study?

It looked—undoubtedly it looked—as Bob said, as if the banknotes had been in Coker's study all the time: that Horace Coker, with a fatheadedness extraordinary even in him, had somehow dropped them there, and that somehow they had become wedged behind that big cushion. That, certainly, was likely to be the general impression, amazing and almost inexplicable as it was. But what had Stephen Price been doing in that study?

Harry Wharton drew a deep breath.

He was not sure. He could not be sure: he did not want to be sure. If Price had "snooped" those banknotes, it was clear that he had changed his mind and returned them: it was all that the wretched fellow could do. The less said, the better: so Harry Wharton said nothing.

"I say, you fellows." There was a triumphant trill in Billy Bunter's fat voice. "I say, didn't I jolly well tell you that I was going to track down that tenner? Didn't I?"

"You did!" chuckled Bob.

"And haven't I jolly well done it?"

"Have you?" grunted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull! Didn't I come here after a clue? Didn't I jolly well make Bob shift that cushion?" demanded Bunter, warmly. "I jolly well knew—."

"You knew the banknotes were there?" asked Johnny, sarcastically.

"Well, not exactly—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle!" snorted Bunter, "but I've jolly well tracked that tenner down and nobody else could. I've been on the track all the time, and now I've found it—here it is, ain't it? If you fellows make out that you had anything to do with it, when it was me all the time—."

"Fathead!"

"The—the fact is, I—I had a theory that that silly ass Coker might have made a mistake about the tenner being snooped. I haven't only just thought of it, you know—I had a theory—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Cackle as much as you like," hooted Bunter. "But here's the tenner, and it was me all the time: and I'm jolly well going to take it down to Quelch, and I'm jolly well going to tell him how I tracked it down and found it. You fellows can come if you like: but don't you get saying that it wasn't me all the time, when it was! Perhaps you'll believe that I'm a pretty good detective now!" added Bunter, scornfully.

"Perhaps!" chuckled Bob.

"The perhapsfulness is terrific."

"Ain't seeing believing?" demanded Bunter. "Here's the tenner, that I've tracked down just like Sherlock Holmes—."

"Wonderful!" grinned Bob. "Play up, you fellows—this is where we say 'Wonderful' like Dr. Watson, you know."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Better get that Georgic down to Prout's study," said Harry Wharton. "You fellows help Bunter take that tenner to Quelch—he might wander off to the tuck-shop by mistake—."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

The juniors crowded out of Coker's study. Billy Bunter marched ahead, with an air of tremendous importance, the missing tenner—no longer missing—clutched in a fat hand. Harry Wharton slipped away quietly to Prout's study, where the Georgic was deposited on the table, to meet the eyes of "Old Pompous" when he came in to tea: while the rest of the party marched to Quelch's study to announce the discovery and recovery of Coker's tenner—much to the astonishment of the Remove master.

"That ass, Coker!"

Almost everybody at Greyfriars made that remark, not once but many times. Possibly Hilton of the Fifth, like Wharton and Nugent of the Remove, had doubts, and wondered whether the "snooper" had changed his mind and restored the loot. But to everybody else it seemed a clear case.

That ass Coker, known to be every variety of an ass, had excelled even himself in the asinine line: losing a tenner in his study and fancying that it had been snooped. That was the view taken by almost everyone: much to the relief of the wretched Price.

Coker himself was quite bewildered when he came in on his motor-bike, and learned how and where the missing tenner had been found. He simply could not make out how the tenner could possibly have got behind that cushion

in the window-seat in his study. Coker just couldn't understand it. But nobody expected Coker to understand anything. Coker expected trouble with Prout that evening: and he duly had it. But it was not on the expected subject. Prout gave him a royal, indeed an imperial, "jaw", but it was on the subject of his carelessness with banknotes: the Georgic was not even mentioned. Coker left Prout's study surprised but considerably relieved. He could only conclude that Prout had forgotten the Georgic, and had invited Potter and Greene, who had fully expected him to be sent up to the Head, had to come to the same conclusion. It was fortunate for Coker, and for certain members of the Remove, that Prout, when he found the Georgic on his study table, never dreamed that it was the work of many hands. Billy Bunter expected something in the way of gratitude from Coker of the Fifth, after his eminent services as a detective. When he came on Coker in hall that evening, he stopped to speak, with a cheery fat grin. "I say, Coker, old chap—I found that tenner for you! Don't you believe the other fellows if they say they had anything to do with it— it was me all the time. I say, old fellow—." Coker glared. "And what do you mean by rooting about in a fellow's study while a fellow's out?" he demanded. "Oh, really, Coker—." "Take that!" "Yaroooh!" Billy Bunter roared, as he took it: and departed in haste, quite abandoning any expectation of grateful demonstrations from Coker. Neither did the Sherlock Holmes of Greyfriars receive in his own form the admiration which was his due. Nobody in the Remove followed the example of Dr. Watson: not a single fellow said that it was either "Wonderful" or "Marvellous!" Only the fat Owl himself realised with what amazing ability he had handled Billy Bunter's First Case.

THE END