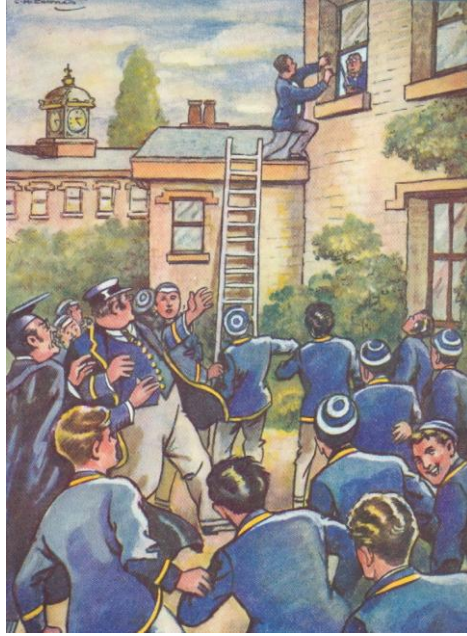


THE BANISHING
OF
BILLY BUNTER

By
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Illustrated by
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THERE WAS A BUZZ OF EXCITEMENT IN THE WATCHING
CROWD

CHAPTER 1

NOT FOR BUNTER!

'LOOK!' ejaculated Bob Cherry.

His comrades, as bidden, looked.

The Famous Five of the Remove were in the quad after dinner. They were filling in the time till the bell rang for class by talking cricket. But Bob, suddenly dropping that interesting topic, bade them 'Look!' and four fellows looked round, expecting to see something unusual in the offing.

But, so far as they could see, nothing of an unusual nature was stirring in the old quadrangle of Greyfriars School.

There were plenty of fellows in sight. Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth were chatting on the Sixth-form green. Hilton and Price of the Fifth were strolling by the elms. Temple Dabney and Co. of the Fourth were in a group. Mr. Quelch and Mr. Prout were walking and talking. Old Gosling was sunning himself in the doorway of his lodge. Coker of the Fifth was crossing to the House with a parcel under his arm, which he had apparently collected at the porter's lodge, and was conveying it to his own quarters. Behind Coker rolled the fattest figure at Greyfriars School, Billy Bunter of the Remove, his big spectacles gleaming back the rays of the sun. Other fellows were in sight, here and there—quite a lot of them. But Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, discerned nothing of unusual or particular interest, to evoke that sudden ejaculation from Bob.

'Look at what?' asked Harry Wharton, after a glance round.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Coker!' he answered.

'Coker!' repeated Frank Nugent. 'What about Coker?' The Co. looked at Coker, as Bob drew their particular attention to that member of the Fifth Form at Greyfriars.

They failed to see anything specially interesting in Coker.

Big, burly Horace Coker looked much the same as usual. He was frowning: but that was nothing out of the common. Probably there had been a spot of bother with Prout in the Fifth-form room in the morning. Coker often had little spots of bother with his form-master, who never seemed quite able to understand what a very important member of his form Coker was.

'Well, what—?' asked Johnny Bull.

'He's got it!' said Bob.

'He's got what?'

'That parcel! One of those whopping parcels from his Aunt Judy. He's taking it to his study now—oodles of tuck!' said Bob.

Bob Cherry's comrades stared at him. They were no more interested in Coker's parcel, than in Coker himself.

'Bless Coker and his parcel!' said Johnny Bull. 'What on earth do Coker and his parcel of tuck matter to us? You're not thinking of snooping his tuck, I suppose, like Bunter.'

'No, ass! But Bunter is!' chuckled Bob. 'Tracking Coker to his lair like a jolly old Red Indian on the trail. Look at him!'

'Oh!' said Johnny. And they looked at Bunter, and grinned. They had noticed the fat figure rolling at a little distance behind Coker of the Fifth. Now that they gave him attention, they noted that Billy Bunter's eyes, and spectacles, were fixed on Horace Coker's broad back, and never left him. Coker stalked ahead, unconscious of Bunter: Billy Bunter rolled behind, very conscious indeed of Coker. No doubt the fat Owl of the Remove had seen Coker collect that parcel at Gosling's lodge, and was deeply interested in it. Billy Bunter knew all about those 'whopping' parcels from Coker's Aunt Judy. Sometimes he had surreptitiously sampled their contents.

'Come on, you fellows: said Bob.

'Where and what—?'

'Follow your leader!'

Bob Cherry walked off, following in the track of Billy Bunter as the fat Owl followed Coker to the House. His comrades followed on.

'Look here, what's the game?' demanded Johnny Bull.

'Bunter!' explained Bob. 'Coker's taking that parcel to his study, and he won't be unpacking it before class, —the bell will be going in a few minutes. What do you think will happen to it when he's left it there?'

'That's an easy one: said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'That fat cormorant's got his eye on it.'

'Exactly!' said Bob. 'Bunter doesn't understand that he can't do these things. We're going to put him wise. See? Bunter needs a tip to leave other fellows' tuck alone. We're, going to give him one.'

'The tipfulness of the esteemed and execrable Bunter is the proper care,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

And the Famous Five, grinning, walked after Bunter.

It was quite a procession to the House. Ahead stalked Horace Coker, with the lofty stalk which seemed to indicate that most of Greyfriars, if not all of it, belonged to him. At a little distance behind Coker rolled the Owl of the Remove, with eager eyes and spectacles on the parcel under Coker's arm. And at a little distance behind Bunter walked the grinning Co. Neither Coker nor Bunter looked back: Horace Coker remained unaware of Bunter, and Bunter remained unaware of the Famous Five.

Coker, arriving at the open doorway of the House, went in and disappeared from view. A minute later, Billy Bunter rolled in, and also disappeared. Then Harry Wharton and Co. went in.

Coker had already gone up the stairs. But they had a back view of the fattest figure at Greyfriars toiling up the staircase. Stairs always told on Billy Bunter. A succession of breathless grunts floated back as he mounted. But he pushed on, and disappeared.

Harry Wharton and Co. waited at the foot of the staircase till Coker of the Fifth came down, which he did in two or three minutes. There was now no parcel under his arm. Evidently he had parked it in his study in the Fifth.

Coker glanced at the juniors in passing, and frowned. 'Don't loaf about there!' he rapped. That was Horace Coker all over. Prefects of the Sixth Form might tell Lower boys not to loaf about, and their behests had to be heeded. Coker, a Fifth-form man, had no more right to tell juniors not to loaf about, than juniors had to tell Horace Coker not to loaf about. But that was one of Coker's ways, which did not make him beloved in the lower forms.

'Fathead!' said Bob Cherry, politely.

'Ass!' added Johnny Bull.

Coker paused in his stride.

'If you fags want your heads smacked—!' he began.

'Smack away!' invited Bob.

'Perhaps the smackfulness will be a boot on the other leg, my esteemed and idiotic Coker!' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

For a moment, it looked like war. But perhaps it dawned even on Horace Coker's somewhat solid brain that smacking five heads in a bunch was a rather large order. He gave a disdainful snort, and stalked on.

'Cheeky ass!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'Serve him right if we let Bunter go ahead.'

'Quite!' agreed Bob. 'But we won't, all the same. Come on.'

The Famous Five tramped up the stairs, as Coker went out of the House. On the study landing, they looked round for Billy Bunter. No fat figure was to be seen. But they did not need telling where to seek it.

'Come on,' said Bob, again. And they walked up the Fifth-form passage to Coker's study. The fat figure they sought was emerging from that study, with a large parcel under a fat arm, as they arrived there.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob Cherry.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. He jumped, and almost dropped the parcel. I—I—I say, you fellows—I—I—'

'What are you doing with that parcel, Bunter?' asked Bob.

'Oh! It—it—it's mine, you know,' stammered the fat Owl. 'It—it was taken to Coker's study by—by mistake—so I—I'm fetching it—'

'Oh, my hat! Sure it's yours?'

'Yes, old chap, it's mine all right. You see—'

'I see that it's addressed to Coker! Queer that a parcel should come for you, with Coker's name on the label, what?'

'The queerfulness is terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jam set Ram Singh.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter, again, 'I—I—I mean—I—I mean, Coker asked me to fetch it for him—I—I'm just taking it down to him—.'

'You fat Ananias! Right about turn!' said Bob. 'Look here, you jolly well mind your own business,' hooted Billy Bunter, indignantly. 'I tell you, it's my parcel,—I mean, Coker asked me to fetch it for him, and—will you stop shoving a chap?'

Bob Cherry did not stop shoving a chap. He shoved Billy Bunter back into Coker's study, vigorously. Harry Wharton hooked the parcel from under a fat arm, and dropped it on the study table. Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Five, his very spectacles gleaming with wrath.

'Now travel!' said Bob, cheerily.

'Beast!'

'I'm going to pull your ear till you do.'

'Yaroooh! Leggo my ear!' yelled Bunter.

Bob did not let go the fat ear. He compressed it between finger and thumb, and led it out of Coker's study. The rest of Bunter had to go with it.

'Now all boot him together!' said Bob. 'Stand steady, Bunter.'

'Beast!' roared Bunter.

He did not stand steady. He flew. The Famous Five followed him, laughing, as a bell began to ring. Horace Coker's parcel from Horace's Aunt Judy reposed in safety on Coker's study table, safe from the fat hands of the voracious Owl: at least till after class.

CHAPTER 2

COKER ASKS FOR IT

'COKER, old man—!'

'You can't do it, Coker.'

Potter and Greene, of the Fifth Form, spoke earnestly, —indeed almost tearfully. Other Fifth-form men, at the door of the form-room, grinned.

The bell had ceased to ring: but Mr. Prout had not yet arrived. Quite unlike Quelch, the master of the Remove, Prout was sometimes unpunctual.

Horace Coker had a paper in his hand. That paper was covered with inky trails, looking as if a spider, recently escaped from an inkpot, had crawled over it. Such, however, was not the case: it was merely Coker's handwriting.

It was quite a remarkable paper to look at. Apart from the 'fist', which was fairly unique, it was quite remarkable. It was covered with repetitions of one word: and that was the very unusual word 'AXIDENT'.

'You can't show that up to Prout!' Potter fairly pleaded. 'Better not have done the paper for Prout at all, than that!' said Greene.

'Don't we have to do what our beak tells us?' asked Coker, sarcastically. 'Prout's an ass! But he's our beak! Both you fellows were jawing me to write out that paper, as Prout told me to write it. Well, I've done it. Now what's the matter?'

There was a chuckle from the Fifth-form men waiting at their form-room door. Potter and Greene were alarmed for their comrade: but the other senior men seemed amused.

'Is that how you spell accident, Coker?' asked Hilton. Coker gave him a cold stare.

'Perhaps you fancy that you can spell better than I can, Hilton!' he snapped, scornfully.

'Perhaps!' grinned Hilton. 'Don't be an ass, Coker, old bean. Prout will go right off at the deep end, if you show that up.'

'Let him!' said Coker.

'Prout will take it for cheek!' urged Potter.

'Why?' jeered Coker. 'Didn't he tell me to write out that word a hundred times? Haven't I done it?'

'*Accident* is spelt with a double C, not with an X!' hooted Greene.

'Don't be an ass, Greeney, if you can help it.'

'Look it out in the dick—!' urged Potter.

'I don't have to look words out in the dick, like you chaps, to know how to spell them,' said Coker. 'Prout said this morning that I had it wrong. I knew that I had it right! Prout can't spell for toffee.'

Horace Coker was quite firm. Prout could order him to write that word a hundred times, if he liked. But he couldn't make him put in a double C when Coker knew jolly well that it was spelt with an X.

'Oh, dear!' moaned Potter. 'I—I say, old chap, spell it Prout's way, just to—to give him his head, you know. You have to give a beak his head. Just cut off and do it over again—Prout's late, and—'

Coker shook his head. Coker was adamant, in this.

There was no uncertainty about Horace Coker of the Fifth. Coker always knew that he was right, and had no use for the opinions of lesser mortals.

That word had cropped up in third school. Coker had spelt it *axident*, which was in accord with Coker's ideas of orthography. He had argued the point when Prout pointed out the error. Whereupon Prout had ordered him to write out the word 'accident' a hundred times, and bring it with him into form. Coker had written it out—in his own way. His friends had been relieved when they saw the paper in his hand, ready for delivery to Prout. But they were alarmed when they looked at it, and saw that Coker was adhering to his own orthographical notions. What the effect of that paper was likely to be on Prout, when he saw it, they hardly dared to think. Probably it would be like the effect of a red rag on a bull! 'Prout's shirty with you already, Coker!' pleaded Greene. 'What's the good of asking for more?'

Coker's lip curled.

'Isn't he always shirty with me?' he asked. 'Fat lot of good trying to please Prout! Didn't he jump on me in con, making out that *lucus in urbe* meant a grove in the city, when I jolly well knew it was a light—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Coker frowned round at the laughing faces. There was a heavy tread in the corridor, which indicated either that an escaped elephant had wandered into Greyfriars School, or that Mr. Prout was coming. A portly form loomed into view.

'Here comes Prout!' murmured Blundell, the captain of the Fifth. 'For goodness' sake, Coker, shove that paper in your pocket, and don't let Prout see it.'

'Rats!' said Coker.

Coker was as firm as a rock. Coker had done what was right in his own eyes, and if Prout did not like it, Prout could lump it.

'Coker, old fellow—!' Potter made a last effort.

'It's no good jawing, Potter,' said Coker. 'Prout's down on me. I know that. He made out that I was skewing in con. Now he makes out that I can't spell a simple word that a fag in the Second could spell. Every fool knows that accident is spelt *Axident*—.'

'Not every fool!' murmured Hilton. 'Only one!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Look here, Hilton, you cheeky smudge—.'

'Shut up, Coker—here's Prout!' whispered Greene. Coker relapsed into indignant silence, as Mr. Prout arrived. All the Fifth-form men noted that Prout's eyes sought out Coker, and dwelt grimly on him for a moment. There was no doubt that that member of his form was not in Prout's good graces. Obtuseness Prout could bear with: but obstinacy added to obtuseness was too much for his patience.

Prout would not have been surprised had Coker failed to turn up with the paper he had been bidden to write. Indeed, he would hardly have been surprised at anything from Horace Coker. His look indicated that, had Coker failed to obey orders, there would have been trouble ahead.

But the grim look faded from his portly face, as he noted the paper in Coker's hand. He did not see what was written on it!

Prout gave the Fifth-formers a genial nod and smile.

Prout liked to be genial with his boys. Prout was a plump and good-tempered gentleman, who disliked spots of trouble in his form-room. He was really relieved to see that Coker had done as bidden, and that there would be no occasion for the thunder to roll.

Coker, paper in hand, marched into the form-room with the rest. Potter and Greene exchanged a hopeless look, as they went to their places. They had done their best to save Coker from himself, as it were. Now he had to be left to his fate!

Coker, however, was quite unperturbed. Coker was clad in self-satisfaction as in armour of triple steel. While every other man in the Fifth knew that he was booked for a fearful row with Prout, Coker did not seem to realize it in the very least. He was cheerfully calm.

'Coker!' Prout's fruity voice was quite kind.

'Yes, sir!' said Coker.

'I see that you have written your paper, Coker.'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

'You may place it on my desk, Coker.'

'Certainly, sir.'

Coker placed his paper on Prout's desk, under Prout's eyes. The Fifth-form master glanced at it. Then he gave quite a violent start. The geniality faded from his face as if wiped away by a duster.

Prout had expected to see the word 'accident' written on that paper a hundred times. What he saw was the remarkable word 'AXIDENT'. It was written a hundred times. But it was not 'accident'. It was *Axident*.

Prout gazed at it.

His face, always ruddy, became purple. He gazed at that paper: then he lifted his eyes from it, and gazed at Coker. He seemed at a loss for words. Even Coker felt a slight qualm, at the expression on Prout's face. Among the other Fifth-formers, a pin might have been heard to drop. The dead silence in Prout's form-room was quite painful. It could almost have been cut with a knife.

Prout found his voice at last. 'Coker!' he articulated.

'Yes, sir!' said Coker, calmly.

'I directed you to write out the word "accident" a hundred times, Coker.'

'That's what I've done, sir.'

'You have spelt the word "A-x-i-d-e-n-t", Coker.'

'Yes, sir, that's right.'

'Upon my word! Coker, your spelling is a disgrace to a senior form. It would be a disgrace to the Second or Third Form, Coker. You made this absurd error in form this morning, Coker, and I gave you the correct spelling of this simple word. Yet you persist in spelling the word a-x-i-d-e-n-t. Coker this is not merely obtuseness. It is not merely stupidity. It is impertinence—it is unparalleled impertinence. Coker! I shall deal severely with you for this, Coker.'

Mr. Prout picked up the cane from his desk.

Coker gave quite a start. He had not expected that!

Really, he might have! But he hadn't! The cane that lay on Prout's desk was seldom, if ever, used in Prout's form-room. Senior men were not caned, as a rule. Caning was all very well in Quelch's form-room, or Capper's, or Hacker's. Not in Prout's. It was beneath the dignity of the Fifth Form and the Fifth-form master.

But evidently, for once, Prout was going to use that cane! He gripped it with an almost convulsive grip. He swished it in the air.

'Coker!' The thunder rolled! 'Coker! Bend over!'

Coker stared at him.

He did not obey. It seemed difficult for him to assimilate the fact that he, Horace James Coker, of the Fifth Form, was bidden to bend over, like a junior in the Remove, or a fag in the Third.

'Do you hear me, Coker?' thundered Prout.

'Did-did-did you say bend over?' gasped Coker. He still seemed unable to get it down. What Coker had expected, when he showed up that remarkable paper to Prout, would be hard to say. Perhaps he had not expected anything at all. At all events he had not expected this!

'I said bend over. Coker! I am going to cane you, severely! Bend over this instant. Coker!' thundered Prout.

For a moment longer Coker hesitated. All eyes in the Fifth were on him. All could see that Coker was thinking of disobeying that order. The Fifth-form men watched him, breathless. a moment. Perhaps some remnant of common sense lingered somewhere in Coker's solid head. Slowly very slowly, in deep, deep indignation Coker bent over.

Whop! whop! whop! whop! whop! whop!

It was a full 'six'. It was six of the very best. Prout was portly. He was plump. He was a little short of wind. But he put his beef into it. The cane fairly rang on Coker's trousers: every whop accompanied by a gasp from Coker.

Prout stopped at six: the immemorial limit. He looked disposed to go on: indeed, he looked like making it sixty. However, he stopped at six, and laid the cane on his desk. 'Go to your place. Coker!'

Coker, speechless, went to his place.

CHAPTER 3

BUNTER KNOWS HOW

'If you please, sir—.'

'What is it, Bunter?'

'I—I—I haven't got my book, sir.'

'You should have your book, Bunter.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! May I fetch it from my study, sir?'

'Very well, Bunter.'

Billy Bunter rose from his place in the Remove form-room.

Five fellows, in that form, looked at Bunter quite expressively. It was history in that class, and every fellow was expected to bring in his book. Billy Bunter was going to get out of the form-room while every other fellow was in form. Five fellows did not need telling that William George Bunter was more interested in a parcel in a Fifth-form study, than in a book in a Remove study!

'By gum!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'That fat villain's got away with it.'

There was no doubt about that!

Billy Bunter gave the Famous Five a grinning blink, as he rolled away to the door. Those interfering beasts couldn't butt in now. The artful fat Owl had beaten them to it!

The form-room door closed after Bunter. Harry Wharton and Co. exchanged expressive glances: but there was nothing that they could do. Billy Bunter's fat paws could no longer be kept at a safe distance from Coker's parcel.

The fat Owl grinned as he rolled away down the corridor, and headed for the stairs. He lost no time. Quelch would expect him back in a few minutes with the book. He had no time to lose.

He heaved his weight up the staircase at uncommon speed. On the study landing he did not head for the Remove passage. He had no time to bother about history books! He rolled up the Fifth-form passage to Coker's study.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter, as he rolled into that study.

There was the parcel on Coker's table, just as it had been left! Billy Bunter's little round eyes fairly danced behind his big round spectacles. Only too well, he knew what that parcel was likely to contain: it was the parcels from Aunt Judy that made Coker's study like unto a land flowing with milk and honey, and had a considerable influence in helping Horace Coker to retain the loyal friendship of Potter and Greene.

Billy Bunter fairly jumped at that parcel. He clutched it.

He was tempted to unpack it on the spot, and sample the contents. But he dared not lose time. That parcel was well and truly packed, with plenty of string and innumerable knots. No time was available for unpacking, and feasting in Coker's study. That joy was to come later. All that Billy Bunter could do at the moment was to make sure of the parcel, leaving the feast till he had leisure for it.

He rolled out of Coker's study with Coker's parcel under his arm—no longer Coker's.

Possession is said to be nine points of the Law: and Bunter did not bother about the other point. The parcel was in his possession: and nine points of the Law were good enough for Billy Bunter, in matters of tuck.

In such matters Billy Bunter seemed constitutionally unable to see any difference between *meum* and *tuum*. Coker could have left his wallet, stuffed with Aunt Judy's currency notes, on his table, and Bunter would not have given it a single blink. But where tuck was concerned, William George Bunter was nothing more or less than a bold bad bandit. Tuck was irresistible. Somehow or other, it always seemed to Bunter that if there was tuck about, he was entitled to devour it. Unnumbered currency notes would not have tempted him an inch from the straight and narrow path of rectitude. But a single chunk of toffee was too much for his powers of resistance. He did not even think about it. Thinking was never Bunter's long suit. He just rolled off with the parcel.

On the study landing he paused.

His first idea had been to convey the parcel to his own study, No. 7 in the Remove, to be dealt with later. But it occurred to his fat brain that, while it might be safe there from Coker, it might not be safe from Harry Wharton and Co. It would be just like those beasts to butt in again, and make him walk that precious parcel back to Coker's study! He shook his fat head. Next he thought of the Remove box-room as a hide-out. But again he shook a fat head. Ten to one those beasts would be after him: quite likely to surround him, the minute the Remove came out of form. That parcel was unsafe anywhere within the walls of the House.

But the answer to that one was quite simple. All he had to do was to convey it out of the House, conceal it in some quiet spot: and, after class, retrieve it, and get out of gates with it. A picnic in Friardale Wood was quite an attractive idea, far out of reach of Coker of the Fifth, and interfering beasts in the Remove. Bunter rolled down the staircase with the parcel under a fat arm.

The coast was clear. He passed Trotter, the House page, who stared at him, no doubt wondering why a Remove man was out of form. But Trotter did not matter. Bunter rolled out into the quad. Already he had been long enough out of the form-room to fetch his book: and he did not want Quelch to make inquiries.

Seldom had the fat Owl moved so swiftly. In little more than a minute, he was in the old Cloisters. There, at a point well known to fellows who sometimes slipped out of bounds, was a stone seat, against an ivy-covered wall. From that seat, even the fat Owl could clamber over the wall, and drop into the lane outside. That was the way he, and the parcel, were going —after class! In the meantime, the thick old ivy was as secure a hide-out for the parcel as he could have desired.

Breathlessly, Billy Bunter shoved the parcel deep into the thick ivy at the back of the old stone seat. He arranged the ivy carefully to screen it from sight. There it was to remain, until Bunter was at liberty to convey it to the dusky shades of Friardale Wood, after class, for a joyous picnic on his own.

Grinning breathlessly, the fat Owl rolled back to the House. He arrived in the Remove form-room panting for breath.

A gimlet-eye fixed on him severely as he rolled in. 'Bunter!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'You have been absent from the form-room for more than ten minutes, Bunter. Two or three minutes would have been ample, more than ample, to fetch a book from your study, Bunter!'

'I—I—I can't find it, sir!' stuttered Bunter. 'I—I've had to come back without it, sir! I—I—I think I must have left it out of the House, sir, after dinner—I—I was reading it there, sir—.'

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry.

Mr. Quelch looked at the fattest member of his form, long and hard. But Bunter's breathless state indicated, at least, that he had been busily occupied during his absence from the Remove form-room.

'I—I've been hunting for it everywhere, sir!' gasped the unveracious Owl. 'I—I'm sorry I can't find it, sir—.' 'Very well, Bunter, you may go to your place, and you may use Todd's book. Todd, will you let Bunter use your book?'

'Yes, sir!' said Peter Todd.

'You fat villain!' whispered Johnny Bull, as Bunter rolled to his place. 'If you've been snooping Coker's parcel, we'll scrag you.'

'Beast!' whispered back Bunter.

And he sat down. History, in the Remove room, resumed the even tenor of its way. But there was at least one member of Mr. Quelch's form who failed to take the slightest, remotest interest in the annals of his native land. Billy Bunter's fat thoughts were elsewhere. Kings and queens, and battles long ago, were very small beer, in comparison with that gorgeous parcel hidden in the old ivy in the Cloisters. Harry Wharton and Co. might suspect that Bunter had snooped that parcel—they were suspicious beasts! —but they could never suspect where Bunter had parked it. They could look in his study, if they liked! Even if they booted him on suspicion, Coker's parcel was worth it. It was a happily anticipative Owl who sat through that history lesson—hearing hardly a word from Mr. Quelch! Billy Bunter was not bothering about historical dates: he was counting the minutes till the welcome moment of dismissal: and his eyes and his spectacles wandered continuously to the form-room clock.

CHAPTER 4

PERPLEXING TO PROUT

'EXTRAORDINARY!' said Mr. Prout.

The Fifth-form master was surprised, and perplexed. What had occurred was, in fact, quite enough to surprise and perplex any form-master.

Mr. Prout had taken a walk after class. With slow and ponderous steps, he walked in the old Cloisters: a quiet and rather secluded spot.

His plump brow wore a frown. He was in a somewhat disturbed frame of mind. That obtuse and obstinate member of his form, Horace James Coker, had considerably perturbed him.

'Old Pompous' was a kindly man. It was quite painful to be driven to wield the cane in his form-room: though doubtless less painful to him than it was to Horace Coker.

Nor was he sure that he was through with Coker, even yet. Coker had been 'kept in' after class, with orders to write out that simple word 'accident' a hundred times over again—in Prout's spelling, not his own. Coker was not to leave the form-room until he had done so.

Was Coker capable, even after that 'six', of persisting in spelling that word a-x-i-d-e-n-t?

Prout did not feel at all sure about it. The doubt made him breathe very hard.

It was thinking of that troublesome member of his form, that brought a frown to Prout's plump brow, as he walked in the Cloisters after class. Really, a fellow like Horace Coker was rather a problem.

Arriving at the spot where the old stone seat jutted from clustering ivy, Mr. Prout sat down on it, to repose his plump person. He leaned a plump back on the ivy on the wall behind the stone seat. To his surprise and annoyance, something jabbed into that plump back.

He stared round to see what it was. His plump back had rather disarranged the ivy that had been carefully drawn over a large parcel to conceal it. The corner of that large parcel protruded into view.

Prout stared at it! He blinked at it! Quite astonished, he drew the ivy tendrils further aside, and scanned that mysterious parcel, packed under the ivy close to the wall. It was then that he ejaculated, 'Extraordinary!'

Undoubtedly it was extraordinary. It was a large parcel that had, evidently, arrived by post: and the label was addressed to Horace J. Coker—the member of his form of whom Prout had been thinking. It had not been opened—wrapping and string were intact. How and why that parcel was packed away in so unusual and unexpected a spot was quite a mystery.

'Amazing!' said Mr. Prout, apparently addressing the parcel.

Why Coker had parked such an object, in such a spot, was beyond Prout. Coker was an unusual fellow, in many ways: but this was extraordinary, even in Coker!

A fag of the Second or Third Form might conceal a parcel of tuck. There was supervision in such matters, so far as small boys were concerned. But there was no such supervision in the Fifth. Prout would have scorned the idea. Senior men in the Fifth Form could be trusted not to make themselves ill with too many apples, or sick with too many jam-tarts. Coker's object in hiding that parcel away was simply inexplicable!

Prout expressed his feelings further with a snort. Then he sat down again, deciding to speak to Coker about it later.

About five minutes had elapsed, and Prout was still resting with his plump person on that old stone seat, when a fat figure rolled into view.

Prout eyed that fat figure disapprovingly.

Billy Bunter was in breathless haste. He was panting as he came. He was anxious to get out of the danger-zone with that parcel.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter, as he saw the portly form of Mr. Prout on the stone seat, sitting there in front of the parcel parked in the ivy.

He halted, in dismay, blinking at the Fifth-form master through his big spectacles. It was quite a secluded spot. Bunter had selected it for that reason. He had not expected to find anyone there when he came for the parcel.

But he found Prout!

Obviously, he could not disinter Coker's parcel from the ivy under the eyes of Coker's form-master! It was an unexpected blow!

Prout stared at him. Why that Remove junior hurried up to within a few yards of him, and then came to a sudden halt, blinking at him like a startled owl, Prout did not know. But he did not like it.

'Bunter!' boomed Prout.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'What do you want?'

'Oh I Nothing, sir!' stammered Bunter.

'Then do not stand there staring, Bunter. Go away.'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' moaned Bunter.

He rolled away. Evidently, he had to wait till Prout was gone. But he did not roll far. He rolled away behind one of the old stone pillars of the Cloisters, at a little distance, to wait there in cover till Prout was gone.

Prout grunted. He disapproved of Quelch's boys in general, and of Billy Bunter in particular. He was annoyed.

His annoyance increased and intensified, a few minutes later, when his eyes fell on a fat head and a large pair of spectacles, projected from behind a stone pillar at a little distance. As his eyes fixed on it, that fat head popped back behind the pillar, like that of a tortoise into its shell. But Prout had seen it.

Prout breathed hard.

That impertinent Remove junior had not gone away.

He was behind that pillar, watching Prout! Why he was watching him, Prout could not begin to guess: but there was no doubt about the fact—Bunter was watching him! Prout's ruddy complexion began to approximate to purple. Such inexplicable antics were quite intolerable.

Several more minutes elapsed. Then the fat head was projected again, on the other side of the stone pillar. Once more Prout's wrathful eyes fell on it: and once more Bunter popped swiftly back out of view.

'Upon my word!' breathed Mr. Prout.

He rose to his feet. He elephantined along to the stone pillar behind which the fat Owl had taken cover, circumnavigated it, and glared at Bunter.

'Oh!' ejaculated Bunter.

He jumped back. He did not like the look in Prout's eye.

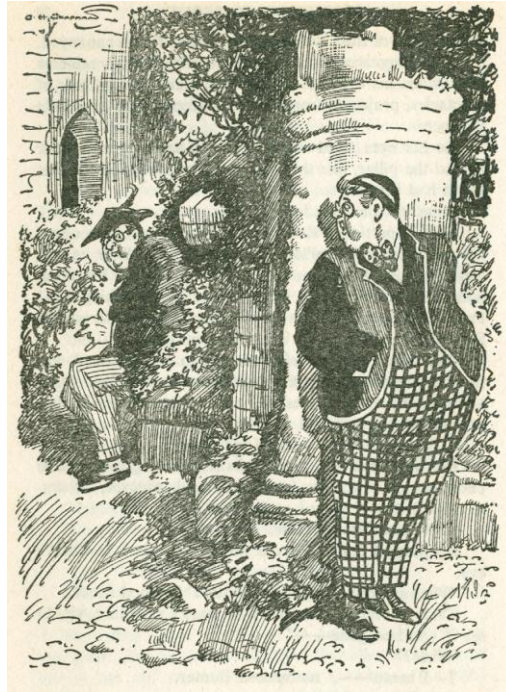
'What are you doing here, Bunter?' boomed Prout. 'Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I—I wasn't watching, sir, to see if you had gone—.'

'What?'

'I—I mean—,' stammered Bunter.

'Pah!' snapped Prout.

He turned, and elephantined away: and this time, to Billy Bunter's immense relief, he elephantined out of the old Cloisters. The fat Owl's eyes and spectacles watched, till the portly form was gone.



AS HIS EYES FIXED ON IT, THAT FAT HEAD POPPED BACK BEHIND THE PILLAR, LIKE THAT OF A TORTOISE INTO ITS SHELL

Then Billy Bunter made a nose-dive for the stone seat where Prout had been sitting. With eager fat hands he dragged Coker's parcel from its hideout. It was already partly uncovered by the disarrangement of the ivy.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter. 'Lucky old Pompous was sitting with his back to it, or he'd have seen it! Oh, crumbs!'

He grabbed up the parcel, and mounted on the stone seat. From that coign of vantage, it was easy to clamber over the wall. Bunter lost no time in clambering over it, and dropping outside. Billy Bunter was not very bright: but he was too bright to think of walking out of gates with that parcel under his arm. A surreptitious exit was much more prudent. Harry Wharton and Co. were now welcome to look for him all over Greyfriars, if they liked: Coker of the Fifth was equally welcome to search the old school from end to end for his parcel. Billy Bunter rolled down the lane with that parcel. And he did not breathe quite freely, till he was in the dusky green shades of Friardale Wood.

CHAPTER 5

HARD LINES!

'I'M going—!' said Coker.

'Going!' repeated Potter and Greene, like an echo: or rather, like two echoes blended into one.

'Yes, going—.'

'Bunked?' asked Potter and Greene, breathlessly.

They had feared it.

How a fellow fancied that he could carry on, at school, as Horace James Coker fancied that he could carry on, they really did not know. Something, they could not help feeling, was bound to happen to Coker, sooner or later. That afternoon, Prout had 'whopped' him in form: an almost unprecedented occurrence in the Fifth-form room. If Coker had asked for more, what more could be awarded him, but the 'sack'? And Coker was exactly and precisely the man to ask for more. Coker never knew when he had had enough.

Coker had been 'kept in', after class: kept in like a fag in Twigg's form. He had had to write out that obnoxious word 'accident' a hundred times. Potter and Greene, when they found him up in the study, hoped that he had done it, and not in his own original orthography.

But his announcement that he was 'going' did not look like it.

Horace Coker was sprawling in the window-seat in his study, when his study-mates came in. His brow was moody. Obviously, he was in a gloomy mood. Potter and Greene, who had heard that a parcel was expected that day, had rather hoped to find Coker unpacking it in the study. But there was no sign of a parcel to be seen: and Coker, as he sprawled and frowned, was evidently not thinking of parcels. Much deeper matters were in his mind. 'I say, I'm sorry, old chap!' said Potter. 'It's tough!

But if you checked Prout again, you know—.'

'Did he take you to the Head?' asked Greene. Coker stared at them.

'What are you two fellows babbling about, if you happen to know?' he asked.

They stared in their turn.

'Didn't you say you were going?' asked Potter.

'Yes, I did.'

'Well, if you're going, I suppose you're bunked—.'

'Bunked?' repeated Coker. 'Mad?'

It dawned on Potter and Greene that they had jumped to too hasty a conclusion. Coker, it seemed, was 'going'. But he was not 'bunked'.

'I'd like to see them bunk me!' said Coker, derisively. 'Don't talk rot.'

'But what are you going for, in the middle of the term, if you're not bunked?' asked Potter.

'Getting a rest from Prout,' said Coker.

'Did you do that paper for Prout, then?'

'Yes, I did, as I had to stay in till I'd done it. And I've put it in Prout's spelling!' added Coker, sardonically. 'After all, he's our beak—if he wants bad spelling, he can have it.'

Potter and Greene were glad to hear that, at all events, Coker, 'kept in' like a fag of the Third, had apparently decided to toe the line in orthographical matters. If Prout wanted *axident* spelt 'accident', he could have it—Coker did not want any more whops from his cane!

'But I'm getting a rest from Prout,' he went on. 'After I got out of the form-room, I phoned my Aunt Judy. Prout was out somewhere, so I was able to borrow his phone. She's going to write to the Head and ask leave for me to go home for her birthday. Jolly good sort, my Aunt Judy—does anything I ask her. I shall be away a couple of days this week. You fellows must get on the best you can without me.'

Potter smiled at Greene, and Greene smiled back at Potter. Both of them seemed to take this news quite cheerfully. Possibly they liked the prospect of a rest from Coker, as much as Coker liked the prospect of a rest from Prout.

'Have a good time, old chap!' said Potter, cordially. 'Speaking of Aunt Judy,' remarked Greene, in a casual sort of way, 'didn't you mention something about a parcel—?'

'Eh? Oh! Yes.' Coker sat up, in the window-seat. 'I'd forgotten it, with that old ass Prout bothering me. What have you fellows done with it?'

'Haven't seen anything of it—.'

'Rot!' said Coker. 'I brought it up to the study just before class, and left it on the table. Is it there now?' Plainly, the parcel was not there now! There was no parcel on the study table: not the ghost of one.

'I suppose one of you shoved it in the cupboard,' said Coker. 'Get it out, and we'll unpack it.' Potter opened the door of the study cupboard, and stared in.

'Nothing here,' he said.

'Well, what have you done with it?' yapped Coker. 'Don't we keep on telling you that we haven't seen it!' hooted Greene.

'Think it walked away?' snorted Coker. 'I left it on this table. Have you fellows hidden it? If that's your idea of a joke—.'

'We've not seen it!' shrieked Potter.

'Well, where is it, then?' demanded Coker.

Horace Coker breathed wrath. He was already exasperated—with Prout. Now his exasperation intensified. He wanted to know what Potter, or Greene, or both, had done with that parcel!

'Where is it?' he bawled. 'If this is a joke, I don't see where it comes in. That parcel was here, while I was kept in by that old ass Prout—.'

'COKER!'

It was a boom at the doorway.

Horace Coker jumped, almost clear of the floor! Potter and Greene jumped too, and stared round, in dismay. Three Fifth-form men gazed in horror at Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth, framed in the doorway, staring in.

How often Coker had alluded to his form-master as an 'old ass', he could hardly have remembered. But he had never before confided that opinion of Prout to Prout personally.

Now, inadvertently, he had!

Obviously, Prout had heard. Indeed he could hardly have failed to hear Coker's bawl. Coker had done it, now!

'Coker!' gasped Mr. Prout. His plump face was purple.

'Oh, crumbs!' breathed Coker. Potter and Greene stood in silent dismay.

'I heard you, Coker—!'

'Did-did-did you, sir?' stuttered Coker.

The fat was in the fire now, that was clear. As a rule, Prout could be heard coming: his elephantine tread was generally very audible. But with three fellows all shouting together in

the study, they hadn't heard Prout. They had not, of course, expected Prout to come up—why should he? But he had come: and Coker's roar had greeted his plump ears as he came. He could not have come at a more unfortunate moment for Horace Coker.

'Coker!' Prout seemed to gasp for breath as he spoke. 'I heard you. Coker! I heard you apply an—an—an epithet to me—your form-master!'

'I—I—I didn't know you were there, sir!' stammered Coker. 'I—I—I—.' His voice trailed away.

'No doubt!' said Mr. Prout. 'No doubt! I came here, Coker, to inquire why a large parcel, addressed to you, is hidden in the ivy behind the stone seat in the Cloisters. That is why I came here, Coker.'

'Oh!' gasped Coker. It was unexpected news of the missing parcel. Coker was glad to get news of it, so far as that went. But he did wish that Prout had not brought the news at that precise moment!

'That, however, is a matter of small moment!' said Mr. Prout. 'If you conceal a food parcel, Coker, like some foolish boy in the Second Form, no doubt it is in keeping with your accustomed obtuseness—.'

'I—I—I didn't, sir!' gasped Coker. 'Somebody's taken that parcel from my study, sir, and we—we were just looking round for it, sir—.'

Prout waved that aside.

Coker gave a reminiscent wriggle. He was still feeling twinges of that 'six' in the form-room. Was another six coming?

But it was not as bad as that.

'I have already caned you to-day,' said Mr. Prout. 'But for that, Coker, I should now cane you most severely. I shall not do so, Coker.'

Coker breathed more freely.

'I shall give you a book!' said Mr. Prout. 'I am very much disposed, Coker, to take you to your headmaster, and request Dr. Locke to send you away from the school, as a boy who is beyond me. But I hesitate to take such extreme measures, Coker. I warn you that this may come, if you try my patience further. For the present, I shall give you a book. You will write out the whole of the First Book of *Aeneid*, Coker.'

'Oh!' gasped Coker.

With that, and a last petrifying glance at Coker, Mr. Prout revolved in the doorway, and elephantined away.

He left Coker overwhelmed.

'A—a—a book!' breathed Coker. 'Did you fellows hear him? A book! If Prout thinks I'm going to write out a dashed book—.'

'You've got off cheap! It's jolly decent of old Pompous,' hooted Potter. 'Some beaks would have taken your skin off. Quelch would.'

'Or Hacker,' said Greene.

'A—a— book!' repeated Coker. 'Hundreds and hundreds of lines! He's given me a book! Why, I—I—I—.' Words seemed to fail Coker. Really, it was rather overwhelming. Seldom, or never, was such an imposition handed out at Greyfriars. But seldom, or never, did a form-master hear himself described as an old ass by a member of his form.

Coker seemed almost dazed by Prout's sentence. Potter and Greene, however, were more inclined to give attention to something else that Prout had said. They knew now where to

look for the missing parcel. And after all, it was tea-time: whether Coker had a 'book' to write or not.

'Some ass must have been larking with that parcel,' said Potter. 'But if it's where Prout said, we've only got to fetch it.'

'A—a—a book,' articulated Coker.

'Let's!' said Greene. 'Coming, Coker?'

'A—a—a book!' Coker came back to that, as to a haunting refrain. 'A—a—a book! A whole book of the Aeneid! A—a—a book!'

'We'd better get that parcel!' murmured Potter.

'A—a—a book! If I do a book for Prout, I'll jolly well give him something else too!' breathed Coker. 'I'll make him sit up! I'll make him cringe! I—I—I'll—I'll—I'll—.' Again words failed Coker.

Potter and Greene made a movement doorward. No doubt they sympathized with Coker: the hapless recipient of a whole book of the Aeneid. Still, there was the parcel, and it was tea-time.

'We'll fetch it for you, old chap,' said Potter. 'It must be there all right, as Prout said—.'

'Come on,' said Greene.

Potter and Greene sidled out of the study. Coker, however, followed them. If his parcel, as Prout had said, was hidden in the ivy over the old seat in the Cloisters, Coker wanted to recover it: though it weighed little in the balance against a whole book of the Aeneid.

He followed Potter and Greene down the stairs, and they went out of the House. As they walked away to the old Cloisters, Horace Coker's voice ran on like an unending melody: all on the subject of Prout and that book. Potter and Greene bore it with fortitude: there was 'the parcel to come, as a consolation.

But was there?

They reached that old stone seat in the Cloisters. They found the clustering ivy behind it looking disturbed and disarranged, as if it had recently been dragged about. But they did not find a parcel. Aunt Judy's parcel was no more visible there, than it had been in Coker's study. Prout had seen it there: there could be no doubt about that. But it was not there now! As a matter of fact, it was a quarter of a mile away, under Billy Bunter's fat arm.

CHAPTER 6

TUCK FOR TWO

'OLD on, young covey!'

Billy Bunter gave a startled jump.

A moment before, the fat face of the Owl of the Remove had been irradiated by a grin of happy anticipation. He was rolling cheerily along the shady footpath in Friardale Wood, blinking round him through his big spectacles, for a comfortable spot where he could sit down and revel in tuck. Danger, he had no doubt, had been left behind him: whether from Coker of the Fifth, or Harry Wharton and Co. of the Remove. That other dangers might lurk ahead of him, did not cross Billy Bunter's fat mind for a moment.

But, as a matter of fact, there was danger ahead for Bunter, little as he dreamed of it. From the thickets beside the footpath, a figure suddenly emerged, and a rough voice rapped out to him "old on".

The figure was that of a thickset man with a pug nose and a blue chin, and—a startling sight to Bunter—a red-spotted muffler drawn across his face. Why a man wore a muffler across his face, instead of round his neck, was a puzzle to Bunter, for the moment. Over that muffler showed a pair of beetling brows, and a pair of sharp little piggy eyes, that glinted at the fat junior. The muffled man raised a hand, much in need of soap and water, as a sign to Bunter to halt. Billy Bunter halted, blinking at him in surprise and uneasiness.

'I—I—!' stammered Bunter.

Bunter did not like the look of the muffled man at all.

He remembered that the races were on at Wapshot, a few miles from Greyfriars: and that the races always brought a crowd of rough characters to the neighbourhood. On such occasions the local inhabitants often had spots of bother, in the shape of 'rows' in the 'pubs', and sometimes petty pilfering, such as chickens missing from the yard, or even washing from the line. Bunter could guess that the man who had so suddenly and unexpectedly appeared from the thickets, was one of the 'roughs' attracted to the vicinity by the 'sport of kings'. And he recalled, with a sudden spasm of dread, that there had sometimes been footpads about, when the race-gangs were at Wapshot.

He backed away hurriedly.

'Did you 'ear me say 'old on, young covey?' growled the man in the muffler: in a deep, threatening growl.

'Oh! Yes!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I say, wharrer you want? I—I'm in rather a hurry—.'

Billy Bunter had been seeking a quiet, secluded, remote spot, to devour his prey in security. Now he wished that the spot was not quite so quiet, secluded, and remote! If this man was a footpad, there was no help anywhere at hand for the fat Owl.

'Only all you've got about you, young covey!' said the muffled man. "And over that there bundle to begin with.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. There was no doubt of it now: the man was a footpad. The muffler was tied over his face to conceal his identity: he did not want a constable looking for him among the crowd at Wapshot. Bunter blinked at him in horror and dismay.

But he was not going to hand over Coker's parcel if he could help it. He backed another step, and then, suddenly turning, bolted back the way he had come.

He dreaded to hear the muffled man rushing in pursuit.

But the man did not stir. He only called out:

'Stop 'im, Mouldy!'

'Oh, crikey,' gasped Bunter, coming to a sudden halt again, as he almost charged into another man who emerged from the thickets in his rear, also with a muffled face.

'I got him, Pug!' called back the second man, who was apparently called by his associate by the euphonious name of 'Mouldy'.

Billy Bunter stood rooted.

Evidently, there were two of the footpads: lurking in the thickets, at a little distance from one another, watching the footpath for any pedestrian who might come along. Bunter, unfortunately for himself, was the pedestrian who had come. With 'Pug' ahead, and 'Mouldy' behind, there was no escape for the hapless fat Owl caught between the two.

'I—I say, I—I haven't got any money!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I was expecting a postal order, but—but it hasn't come! I—I—.'

The two footpads closed in on him, from either side.

Billy Bunter blinked from one to the other and from the other to the one, in terror. What they were like, under those spotted mufflers that masked their faces, he did not know: but he could see enough of them to know that they were dangerous characters. Both of them were brawny and burly, and either of them could have knocked out the fat Owl of the Remove with one hand, or rather with one finger.

"And over that there bundle,' rapped Pug.

'I—I say, tain't mine!' gasped Bunter. 'You see—.'

'Tain't!' agreed Pug. 'It's ourn! You 'anding it over, or waiting to 'ave your face pushed through the back of your 'ead?'

Billy Bunter handed over the parcel. It was a wrench, but there was no help for it. He did not want his face pushed through the back of his head. Very much indeed he did not.

Pug grabbed the parcel, and grabbed it open. Possibly he expected to spot something of value inside. Then he gave an angry snort.

'Prog!' he said.

'Prog!' repeated Mouldy. 'Well, we can do with a spot of prog, Pug, arter the luck we've 'ad at Wapshot.'

'Mebbe he's got something better in his pockets,' growled Pug.

'I—I—I say—!' stammered Bunter.

'You 'old your row,' said Pug. 'Old his blinking neck, Mouldy, while I go through his pockets.'

Mouldy took a firm grasp on a fat neck. Pug proceeded to go through Billy Bunter's pockets. Billy Bunter was rather glad, at that moment, that his celebrated postal order had not yet arrived! It would have passed into the possession of Messrs. Pug and Mouldy.

As it was, Pug's search was drawn blank. Nothing in the nature of coin of the realm was discovered in Bunter's pockets.

'There's 'is ticker, Pug,' said Mouldy.

Snort, from Pug! One glance at Bunter's watch seemed enough for him, and he did not take the trouble to appropriate it. According to Billy Bunter, that big watch of his was of solid gold, of ever so many carats. On the other hand, Fisher T. Fish had valued it at 'nix'. Pug's opinion seemed to coincide with Fishy's: for he did not seem to want that 'ticker'.

'Nothing about the covey!' growled Pug. 'All our trouble for nothing,—'cept the prog! You fat rabbit you, I've a blinking good mind to knock your ugly face through the back of your silly 'ead arter all!'

'Oh, crikey; I—I—I say—.'

'Oh, park it!' growled Pug. 'All this 'ere trouble for nothing, and now we've got to 'op it, Mouldy, arter this, we can't 'ang on 'ere waiting for some other covey now. I've a blinking good mind—.'

Billy Bunter quaked. Pug, evidently, was annoyed.

After this exploit, the two racing roughs could not venture to linger on the spot and watch for another victim. And they had drawn Bunter blank—excepting for Coker's parcel. It was a bitter disappointment for two welshers who had been out-welshed at Wapshot races. Pug seemed inclined to 'take it out' of Bunter.

However, luckily, he refrained from pushing the fat Owl's features through the back of his head. He gave him a threatening scowl, and left it at that.

"Ook it," he snapped. Mouldy released the fat neck. Billy Bunter was quite eager to 'hook' it. But his eyes and his spectacles lingered on the parcel. He had had to exercise a great deal of strategy to annex that parcel.

His momentary hesitation was enough for the incensed Pug. He drew back a big knuckly fist.

That, in his turn, was enough for Bunter! He made a frantic bound, and ran! The footpath in Friardale Wood might have been the cinder-path, from the speed with which Billy Bunter covered it.

Bunter flew. The two roughs slouched away through the wood, with Coker's parcel. They gave the flying Owl no heed, But Billy Bunter did not pause. He surged on, panting, gasping, perspiring, spluttering, and did not stop for breath till he came out into Friardale Lane. There he leaned on the stile and gurgled for wind.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Pug and Mouldy were gone. Coker's parcel was gone—gone from Bunter's gaze like a beautiful dream! Very probably there was a 'row' ahead for Bunter with nothing whatever to show for it! It was a weary and hungry and disconsolate fat Owl that plodded sadly back to the school, with no hope left except that he might still be in time for tea in hall. Really, it was quite harrowing. And if Billy Bunter had reflected that it was exactly what he deserved, even that would not have comforted him.

CHAPTER 7

ONCE TOO OFTEN!

'MR. QUELCH!'

Quelch frowned slightly, at the sound of Prout's fruity voice.

It was the following day. The Remove were out after third school.

Mr. Quelch was standing at his open study window, looking into the quadrangle. The expression on Quelch's somewhat crusty countenance was genial. It was quite a pleasant view that met his eyes from his window. Many of the boys of his form were in sight. Harry Wharton and Co. were sauntering in the sunshine, and as they passed, at a little distance, Quelch caught the words, 'Felgate have got a jolly good bowler —man named Warren,' from which he deduced that the chums of the Remove were talking cricket. Under one of the old elms, Herbert Vernon-Smith was chatting with Skinner and Snoop: and Quelch certainly did not guess that they were discussing the three-thirty at Wapshot! Further off, the fattest member of Quelch's form was bearing down on Lord Mauleverer: and Lord Mauleverer, at the same moment, was hastening his leisurely footsteps, apparently to avoid contact. Squiff, Tom Brown, Peter Todd, Ogilvy, and other Remove fellows, in a group, were grinning,—and Quelch discerned that their grins were directed towards a big, burly Fifth-form man stalking across the quad with a frowning brow. Coker of the Fifth did not seem aware that his frowning aspect was causing merriment among the juniors: not, of course, that Coker would have cared a boiled bean for any number of such inconsiderable microbes as Lower boys.

Quelch, looking out at the pleasing scenes, had a quite genial look, till he heard Prout's fruity voice, and turned, to find that the master of the Fifth had entered his study.

Just a slight frown came over his face. Prout's aspect was serious —almost portentous.

Obviously he had not dropped in for one of his chats, which would have been bad enough, for Prout's chats were lengthy and of little interest to anyone but Prout. Something was amiss: and Quelch scented a complaint of some sort. If that was what was coming, Quelch was prepared to be grim.

'Well, Mr. Prout?'

'I have to acquaint you with a serious matter—a very serious matter indeed, Mr. Quelch,' said Prout. 'Nothing less than a case of pilfering in a Fifth-form study.'

'Whatever may occur in your form, Mr. Prout, can hardly concern me!' remarked Quelch.

'That is a matter for you to deal with, surely.'

Prout gave him a look. He knew Quelch was only affecting to misunderstand. It must have been clear to Quelch that a Remove boy was concerned, from the fact that Prout had come to his study about it.

'The pilferer, Quelch, is a boy in your form!' boomed Prout. 'A boy named Bunter. A parcel—a large parcel—is missing from a Fifth-form study, and I have the best of reasons to believe that it was surreptitiously abstracted by Bunter.'

Mr. Quelch drew a very deep breath.

It was, as he had suspected, a complaint, concerning a boy in his form. He would have been very glad to retort that no boy in his form could know anything of a parcel missing from a Fifth-form study: as certainly he would have done if Prout had named anyone but Bunter.

But Quelch was aware—only too well aware—of the peculiar manners and customs of that particular member of his form. He had a misgiving that Prout's complaint was well-founded. 'The parcel,' resumed Mr. Prout, 'arrived by post yesterday and was taken to Coker's study and left there. It contained, I understand, food of some kind. It was taken from Coker's study apparently while he was in class yesterday afternoon.'

Again Quelch drew a deep breath. He remembered that Billy Bunter had been allowed to leave the form-room, in search of a book, the previous afternoon.

'I will send for Bunter, Mr. Prout!' he said, curtly. 'Whatever charge you have to make, had better be made in the boy's presence.'

'Very good, sir.'

Mr. Quelch turned back to the window. The Famous Five were near at hand, and he beckoned to Harry Wharton, who came up at once.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir?'

'Please send Bunter to my study immediately.'

'Certainly, sir.'

The captain of the Remove cut off. At a distance, Billy Bunter was rolling in the wake of Lord Mauleverer, who was keeping well ahead, deaf to a series of breathless squeaks behind him. Bunter's pursuit of his elusive lordship was destined to be cut suddenly short.

Quelch turned from the window again.

'Pray sit down, Mr. Prout,' he said with icy politeness. 'Bunter will be here in a few moments.'

Prout deposited his ample weight on a chair.

'I regret very much, Quelch, to be compelled to bring such a matter to your notice!' he said.

'But so serious a matter as pilfering—.'

Mr. Quelch winced. He did not like that word at all.

Fellows were 'bunked' for 'pilfering', if such an unheard-of thing occurred. But Quelch was aware, if Prout was not of the impenetrable obtuseness of Bunter of the Remove, and his constitutional inability to realize that there were rights of property in tuck. He knew that Bunter, though he could not resist a jam-tart or a dough-nut, would no more have 'pilfered' anything of value, than he would have washed behind his ears. Prout expressed 'regret', but it seemed to Quelch that he was 'rubbing it in'.

The Remove master did not answer: and they waited in silence till there was a tap at the door, and a fat figure rolled in.

That fat figure rolled in very reluctantly.

A summons to his form-master's study made Billy Bunter feel extremely uneasy. Which of his many sins had come to his form-master's knowledge, he did not know: but he dreaded that one of them had.

For the moment, he did not observe Prout. His eyes and spectacles fixed on Mr. Quelch.

'If you please, sir, it wasn't me,' said Bunter: provisionally, as it were. He did not know yet what it was: but in any case he was ready to assure Mr. Quelch that he, William George Bunter, was wholly and completely innocent.

'Bunter—!'

'Yes, sir! It—it wasn't me, really, sir!' stammered Bunter. 'I never—.'

'Did you abstract a parcel from a Fifth-form study yesterday afternoon, Bunter, while you were out of the form-room?'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He knew now what it was! It was that beastly parcel of Coker's, from which he had not been able to extract so much as a plum or a crumb. Now he was called to account for the parcel that had been walked off by Pug and Mouldy in Friardale Wood!

'Answer me, Bunter!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! No, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'Nothing of the kind, sir! I—I never knew Coker had a parcel yesterday—I never saw him take it at Gosling's lodge, sir—and I never knew that it was a parcel from his Aunt Judy, sir—I never heard him telling Potter and Greene that it was coming, or—or—or anything, sir.'

He blinked round at Mr. Prout.

'I—I—I hope you didn't think I had it, sir,' he gasped. 'I—I never went to Coker's study, sir—I—I was booking for a look—I—I mean looking for a book, while I was out of my form-room, and I never—.'

'If you will kindly state, Mr. Prout, the reasons you have for believing that Bunter removed the parcel from Coker's study—!'

'I will do so, sir!' said Mr. Prout, with a glance of very strong disfavour at the apprehensive Owl. 'Yesterday afternoon, sir, I sat down on the stone seat in the Cloisters, and was much surprised to find that a large parcel, addressed to Coker, was hidden in the ivy at the back of the seat.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Prout had seen the parcel there!

'I assumed at the time, sir, that Coker, for some incomprehensible reason, had placed it there. Later, I went to Coker's study to speak to him about it. The three boys there, sir, were discussing a missing parcel. Afterwards, sir, it occurred to me that the parcel had not, as I had at first supposed, been placed there by Coker, but by some person who had abstracted it from his study and concealed it. For this reason, sir, I questioned Coker this morning, and learned that he did not find the parcel in the spot indicated by me—it had been removed, sir, and has not been seen since. The parcel, sir, has disappeared.'

'I fail to see how that involves Bunter, Mr. Prout.'

'I will explain, sir!' boomed Prout. 'While I was seated there, sir, this boy, Bunter, was haunting the spot. He did not go away, sir, when I told him to do so, but remained watching me in a surreptitious manner. The explanation of his conduct, sir, did not occur to me at the time: but it is quite clear to me now, sir, that Bunter was waiting for me to go, in order, sir, to secure possession of the parcel he had hidden there, sir!'

'Oh, lor'!' breathed Bunter.

'Such, sir, are the facts!' boomed Mr. Prout. 'I have no doubt, sir, that this boy, Bunter, was the person who pilfered—who purloined, sir, a parcel from a Fifth-form study: and if it prove so, sir, I recommend that this boy, Bunter, be taken to his headmaster, to be expelled, sir, for pilfering.'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He gazed at the Fifth-form master in horror. His fat knees almost bent under him. His little round eyes fairly bulged through his big round spectacles. His fat head almost swam. Often and often had Billy Bunter 'snooped' tuck in the studies. Now it looked awfully as if he had done so once too often!

CHAPTER 8

WHOPS FOR BUNTER

'BUNTER!'

'Ow!'

'You have heard what Mr. Prout has said, Bunter.'

'Oh,lor!'

'Now answer me, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch, sternly. 'Did you, or did you not, abstract a parcel from Coker's study yesterday?'

'I—I—I—Oh, lor!' gasped Bunter. Truth and Bunter had long been strangers. He was not likely to think of the truth as a resource now. 'Oh! No, sir! I never went to Coker's study, sir, when I was out of the form-room booking for that look—I mean looking for that book! I never went near Stoker's cuddy, sir—I mean Coker's study, and the parcel wasn't there, either, sir—there wasn't a parcel on the table at all—.'

'Wha-a-at?'

'If—if there was, I—I never saw it, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'Besides, I never touched it—I left it just as it was, sir.'

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Quelch.

'I—I hope you take my word, sir!' groaned Bunter. 'I—I expect Coker put that parcel somewhere and forgot it, sir! I certainly never hid it in the ivy in the Cloisters, sir. Besides, I—I never knew Mr. Prout would be there when I went for it, sir—never thought of it. I—I hadn't any idea that Mr. Prout had found the parcel there, sir—not the foggiest. I—I wouldn't have gone for it, if I had. But I never—.'

Snort, from Prout.

'I think the facts are clear now, Mr. Quelch!' he said. 'Quite!' said Mr. Quelch. 'Bunter, you utterly obtuse and untruthful boy—.'

'Oh, really, sir—.'

'Where is the parcel now, Bunter?'

'I—I don't know, sir.'

'No doubt the wretched boy has devoured the contents!' said Mr. Prout, with a sniff.

'I—I haven't!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I never—.'

'Bunter, if you restore what you have taken from the study of a boy in Mr. Prout's form, I may be able to take a more lenient view!'

'I—I can't, sir!' groaned Bunter. 'They—they—they took it away from me, sir.'

'Who did?' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'Two roughs, sir, in Friardale Wood. I—I never had anything from it, sir. They took it away from me before I opened it.'

Another sniff from Mr. Prout. Apparently he did not believe that statement. Really, it was a little difficult to believe any statement made by Billy Bunter. It was only too sadly evident that Bunter was prepared to make any statement whatsoever, which he fancied would help him out of his present scrape. For once, Bunter was telling the truth. But the truth was mingled with too much fiction to obtain credence, from Prout at all events. The hapless fat Owl's reliance upon 'fibbing' as a resource had often let him down. Now it was letting him down once more.

'It is futile to listen to this boy, sir!' boomed Prout. 'He appears to be incapable of veracity. It is established, sir, that he abstracted the parcel from Coker's study. That was an act of pilfering. Pilfering, sir, is not an offence that can be tolerated at Greyfriars.'

Billy Bunter quaked. He blinked at his form-master like a terrified fat rabbit.

'I—I—I say, sir, you know I wouldn't!' he stuttered. 'Me pilfer! I—I—I wouldn't—I—I—I never—I—I—I— Oh, crikey!'

'Some allowance, Mr. Prout, must be made for this boy's extraordinary stupidity,' said Mr. Quelch. 'His punishment will be very severe—.'

'Oh,lor!'

'But it is a matter with which I consider I may best deal personally,' went on Mr. Quelch. 'Pray leave it in my hands.'

Grunt, from Mr. Prout. But he nodded, and rose from the chair. Perhaps the terrified dismay of Bunter's fat and fatuous face had some effect on him.

'As you please, sir!' he said. 'As you please!'

'Thank you, Mr. Prout!'

Prout, with a last glare of disfavour at Bunter, elephantined out of the study. Bunter was glad to see him go. Never had he been so glad to see anybody go. The awful beast would have liked him to be sacked! Whatever Quelch might do it would not be so bad as that. It was a tremendous relief to see the door close behind Prout.

Mr. Quelch picked up a cane. Bunter eyed that proceeding very uneasily. It was better than the 'sack', no doubt: but the fat Owl did not like the look of that cane.

'Now, Bunter—!' said Mr. Quelch. He swished the cane. 'You do not appear to realize the seriousness of what you have done—.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! M—m—may I go now, sir?'

'You may not, Bunter.'

'Oh, lor!'

'While making all possible allowances for your almost incredible obtuseness, Bunter, it is my duty to impress upon your mind the difference between *meum* and *tuum*,' said Mr. Quelch. 'You must learn to respect the property of others, Bunter, whether in the shape of eatables or not. Bend over that chair, Bunter.'

'I—I—I never had Coker's parcel, sir—.'

'What?'

'And—and those two roughs took it away from me, sir—.'

'Bunter!'

'Not that I had it, sir! I never—.'

'Bunter, if you utter another word of untruthfulness, I shall change my mind and take you to your headmaster!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. 'You are the most untruthful boy in the school, Bunter.'

'Me, sir!' ejaculated Bunter. 'Not me, sir? Perhaps—perhaps you mean Smithy, sir,—or—or Wharton—or—or Cherry—.'

'Upon my word! Bend over that chair at once, Bunter!' Quelch almost roared. He seemed at the end of his patience: which, perhaps, was not surprising.

Billy Bunter bent over the chair. Evidently, there was no help for it. It was better, at any rate, than being 'bunked', as the beast Prout desired. Or was it? As Mr. Quelch laid on the cane, Bunter began to doubt it.

Whop! whop! whop!

'Yow—ow—ow!' roared Bunter.

Whop! whop!

'Yoo-hooooooooop!'

WHOP!

'Yaroooooooooooooh!'

Mr. Quelch, breathing hard, laid the cane on the table.

Billy Bunter continued to roar. Fellows in the quad glanced towards Quelch's study window. The roars from that study woke echoes in the quad.

'Yow—ow—ow—ow—ow—ow—wow!'

'Bunter—!' hooted Mr. Quelch.

'Wow—wow—ow—wow—wow!'

'Cease those ridiculous noises, Bunter—.'

'Yow—ow—ow—ow—ow!'

'And leave my study!'

'Wow! wow! wow!'

Billy Bunter left the study: but without ceasing the ridiculous noises. That was really asking too much of a sorrowing suffering Owl. The ridiculous noises accompanied him down the passage. They faded away in the distance. But the hapless fat Owl did not quite cease those ridiculous noises, till the bell rang for dinner: a function that brought at least a gleam of comfort to Billy Bunter.

CHAPTER 9

THE BIG IDEA

'I SAY, you fellows!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

Coker of the Fifth frowned.

Coker was leaning on one of the old Greyfriars elms, with his hands driven deep into his trousers' pockets, and a grim and moody look on his rugged face. It was clear, from Horace Coker's expression, that the universe, at the moment, was not being run to his satisfaction. And the sound of cheery voices near at hand seemed to give him no pleasure whatever. He frowned at Harry Wharton and Co. as they sauntered up the path: and at Billy Bunter, who rolled along from the other direction and addressed them. Neither Billy Bunter, nor the Famous Five glanced at Coker. They did not even notice that he was there. His portentous frown was wasted on the desert air.

Coker was in gloomy thought—and the subject of his reflections was that 'book' from Prout. The more Coker thought about that 'book', the more dismaying and overwhelming it seemed to Coker. He had talked to Potter and Greene about that 'book' till they were not only tired of it, but determined to hear no more about it: for which reason they had disappeared after dinner, and Coker, looking for them, found them not.

It was irritating to Coker, who had by no means exhausted the subject of his grievances, though he seemed to have exhausted his pals.

Left to himself, Coker was no longer talking about that 'book': but he was thinking about it. And the more he thought, the more angry and resentful did Coker feel. He had stated to Potter and Greene that if he did a 'book' for Prout, he would give him something else too—that he would make him sit up, indeed cringe. Potter and Greene had regarded that simply as 'hot air'. But Coker, undoubtedly, would have made Prout 'sit up', if he could have. The spot of bother was that he couldn't.

Many men in the Fifth thought Coker a lucky fellow.

That afternoon he was not going into form with the rest: he was going to catch a train at Courtfield for home. Miss Judith Coker had written to the Head, as requested by her nephew, and the Head had granted the necessary leave of absence: and most fellows thought that Coker was in luck, to get a few days out of school in the middle of the term: Tuesday to Thursday on his own.

So far as that went, no doubt it was all right. But that awful 'book' hung over Coker's head like the sword of Damocles. Certainly he was going to enjoy a rest from Prout. But all the while, that 'book' would be hanging over him: and it would have to be done when he came back to Greyfriars. And all for nothing—or next to nothing! After all, what had Coker done? He hadn't meant Prout to hear him call him an old ass. There was hardly a man in the Fifth who hadn't called Prout an old ass, at one time or another: only Prout hadn't happened to hear. Just because he had happened to hear Coker, Coker had that 'book'. Coker felt that it was unjust. Hundreds and hundreds of lines—for practically nothing! If only a man could have given his beak something back—but, of course, a man couldn't!

In that gloomy, glum, pessimistic mood, Coker did not want chattering fags bothering him with their chatter. Hence the frown he fixed on Harry Wharton and Co. and the Owl of the Remove—quite unnoticed by the recipients thereof.

'I say, you fellows, seen Prout?' asked Billy Bunter. 'I say, I heard him tell Hacker he was going to walk in the Head's garden after dinner. Know if he's gone there?' 'Haven't the foggiest,' answered Harry Wharton. 'What the dickens do you want Prout for?' asked Bob Cherry.

Billy Bunter grinned.

'I've got something for him,' he answered. 'Look!' Billy Bunter had a fat hand under his jacket. He drew it out into view, disclosing a somewhat unexpected article: nothing more or less than an egg, clutched in fat fingers.

Harry Wharton and Co. stared at it, and at him, blankly.

Bunter's fat face was wreathed with grins.

'I want you fellows to keep cave!' he said. 'Keep cave?' repeated Harry.

'That's it! I don't want to be copped, getting Prout—.'

'Getting Prout?'

'With this egg, you know—.'

'With—with—with that egg!' articulated the captain of the Remove, almost dazedly, while the Co. stared at Bunter with popping eyes.

'I got six from Quelch!' said Bunter. His little round eyes gleamed vengefully behind his big round spectacles. 'All through Prout! Making out a fellow pilfered—me, you know! Not one of you fellows,—me!' Bunter's voice thrilled with indignation. 'He wanted Quelch to take me to the Head to be bunked! I'll show him.'

'You fat, frabjous footling fathead!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'You'll be bunked fast enough, if you buzz an egg at a beak.'

'Who's to know?' grinned Bunter.

'Prout will know, if he gets the egg, you blithering bloater,' said Johnny Bull.

'He won't see me!' explained Bunter. 'You know that low wall on the quad—under the trees—a fellow could shy anything into the Head's garden there, without being seen. All I've got to do is to park myself there, and watch for Prout. I get him with this egg, and bolt—see? Prout won't know a thing.'

'You howling ass—.'

'You terrific fathead—.'

'Think I'm going to have Prout making out that a chap pilfers?' demanded Bunter. 'I'll jolly well show him! Quelch gave me six, and he jolly well jawed me too—he said I had to learn the difference between "mummum" and "tummum"—.'

'Between what and which?' gasped Bob Cherry. "'Mummum" and "tummum"! That means "mine" and "thine",' explained Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! What are you fellows cackling at, I'd like to know?' demanded Bunter. 'You don't happen to mean *meum* and *teum*?'

'No, I don't! I mean "mummum" and "tummum".'

'You can't teach me Latin, Nugent.'

'I wouldn't like to try,' agreed Nugent. 'Quelch doesn't seem to have much luck.'

'Well, I want you fellows to keep cave!' said Bunter. 'It will be all right with Prout, in the Head's garden—he won't see a thing. But I don't want somebody to come up behind and catch me, you know. You fellows keep cave, and make sure that nobody sees me from the quad, and it will be as safe as houses. I say, fancy Prout with this egg all over his chivvy! What? He, he, he!'

Billy Bunter chuckled, loud and long. Evidently, he was tremendously amused by the idea of Prout getting that egg all over his 'chivvy'. He seemed to expect the Famous Five to join in his merriment. But they did not! They gazed at him almost in horror.

'You born idiot!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'If you go anywhere near Prout with that egg—.'

'I'm not going near him!' explained Bunter. 'I shall get him over the garden wall. 'Tain't a fresh egg,' he added. 'That's all right! I wouldn't waste a fresh egg on Prout—I'd rather have it for my tea. It's a jolly old one—it was left at the back of the study cupboard, and it's too far gone. A chap couldn't eat it. But it's all right for Prout.'

'You're not going to do anything of the kind,' howled Bob.

'Ain't I just!' retorted Bunter. 'Think I'm going to have him making out I was pilfering—insulting beast! Making out that I ought to be bunked! I'll give him pilfering! I'll give him bunks! I'll—.'

'You blithering, blethering bloater—.'

'Yah, Look here, I want to know whether old Pompous has gone into the Head's garden yet,' said Bunter. 'Twouldn't be safe in the quad.'

'Chuck that egg away, fathead.'

'I'll watch it,' said Bunter.

'Shove it down the back of his neck!' suggested Johnny Bull.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, really, Bull!' Billy Bunter backed away out of reach. 'I say, you fellows, will you keep cave for me while I get Prout with this egg—?'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Bob Cherry, as a portly figure loomed into view on the path behind Bunter. 'Shut up, Bunter—.'

'Shan't!' retorted Bunter. Having no eyes in the back of his fat head, Bunter did not see Mr. Prout coming up the path: and he was not in the least inclined to shut up. 'That beast Prout—!'

'Quiet—!'

'Yah! I tell you I'm going to shy it at Prout over the garden wall—.'

'BOY!'

That sudden boom, not unlike an elephant trumpeting, behind Bunter, made the fat Owl jump almost clear of the ground.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He spun round like a plump humming-top, the egg dropping from a fat hand.

Smash!

The egg smashed at Bunter's feet: and the aroma that escaped from it, as it smashed, fully bore out Bunter's statement that it was not fresh. Indeed it seemed far from fresh. Harry Wharton and Co. backed away rather hastily. Billy Bunter, too terrified even to heed the aromatic egg, blinked at Mr. Prout with his eyes bulging through his spectacles.

'Oh, crikey!' he repeated. 'I—I—I—oh, crumbs! I—I—oh, scissors!'

'Did I hear you aright, Bunter?' boomed Prout. Prout, really, seemed to doubt his majestic ears! It was really hard to believe that he had heard this Remove boy declare that he would shy something at him over the garden wall.

'I—I—No—Yes—I—I mean—: I was only jig—jig—jig—,' stuttered Bunter.

'What?'

'Only jog—jig—joking, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I never meant—I mean, I wouldn't—didn't—I—I mean I never wasn't—. I—I never said I'd shy anything at you, sir, and I only said it for a jig—jog—joke—.'

'I trust, Bunter, that it was nothing more than a foolish, disrespectful jest!' boomed Mr. Prout: and having bestowed on Billy Bunter a frown more frightful, fearful, and frantic, than that of the Lord High Executioner, he rolled ponderously on his way.

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Bunter, when he was gone. 'I—I—I say, you fellows, I—I can't shy that egg at Prout now.'

'Hardly!' chuckled Bob Cherry.

'I—I say, if—if I got him with a tomato or something, think he would guess it was me, after what he heard me say?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the Famous Five.

'Oh, really, you fellows—!'

'You blithering, benighted bandersnatch!' gasped Bob. 'He wouldn't have to guess it was you—he would know it was! You'd better forget all about shying things at Prout, you dithering duffer. Let's dribble him round the quad, you fellows—that will keep him too busy to worry about Prout.'

'Let's!' agreed Johnny Bull.

'Yaroooh!' roared Bunter, as he fled, with five playful juniors in pursuit. For the next few minutes, Billy Bunter undoubtedly was too busy to worry about Prout: and when he escaped from the kindly ministrations of the chums of the Remove, he was too winded and breathless to think of anything but pumping in wind.

Coker of the Fifth, still leaning on his tree with his hands in his pockets, frowned after the Remove fellows as they went. He frowned again, in the direction Mr. Prout had taken. That direction was the little gate that gave on the Head's garden from the quad.

Coker's eyes were gleaming.

New thoughts were working in Horace Coker's powerful brain. It was rather like the mouse and the lion in the fable over again. So inconsiderable a person as Billy Bunter had put a new idea into Coker's masterly mind. Prout was walking in the Head's garden. Prout had given Coker a 'book'—for next to nothing! It would be absolutely easy to get Prout, with absolute security, from the spot Bunter had mentioned. If ever a beak deserved to be made to sit up—in fact to cringe—Prout did, in Coker's opinion at least! Coker had to do that 'book' when he came back after his holiday with Aunt Judy. It would be a comfort to reflect that he had paid Prout in advance.

Coker of the Fifth drew a deep breath.

The more he thought it over, the more attractive the idea seemed. It was safe as houses—he was going away that afternoon, and Prout would probably not even think of him in connection with the deed. He could start as soon as he liked—and, just before he started, he could leave Prout, say, a tomato on his portly nose, as a souvenir. Why not?

There were, really, numerous reasons why not: but not one of them occurred to Horace Coker's powerful brain. He thought it over, and it seemed good in his eyes. He moved away from the tree, at last, and strolled into the quad. Potter and Greene, sighting from a distance, hastily changed their direction, to steer clear—they did not want to hear any more about that 'book'. But they need not have taken the trouble. Horace Coker was not in quest of Potter and Greene. He was in quest of a tomato!

CHAPTER 10

OVER THE GARDEN WALL

'HE, he, he!'

Billy Bunter chuckled.

He chuckled loud and long.

Bunter was amused—tremendously amused. He could almost have wept with merriment at what he saw.

It was not merely uncommon, it was not merely unprecedented, it was utterly and absolutely unheard of, at Greyfriars, for a ripe juicy tomato to land fair and square on the majestic nose of a 'beak'. But it was that extraordinary and amazing sight that Bunter beheld. And it seemed funny, to Bunter!

The fat Owl of the Remove was leaning on the gate of the Head's garden. Beyond that gate juniors were not allowed to go. Masters, and sometimes prefects—great men like Wingate or Gwynne—walked in that garden. But it was taboo to lesser mortals.

Still a fellow could lean on a gate, if he liked: and a fellow leaning on that gate was safe from ragging, as it was under the view of any master who might be in the garden. Harry Wharton and Co. had dribbled Bunter round the quad for his own good: but the fat Owl did not like being dribbled like a soccer ball, even for his own good. So there he was, leaning on that little gate, slowly recovering his wind after his brief but exciting experiences as a soccer ball. Harry Wharton and Co. had probably forgotten his fat existence by that time, having more interesting things than Billy Bunter to think about: but Bunter having renewed his depleted supply of wind, remained leaning on the gate, partly because it was a secure spot, and partly because he was too lazy to move. And so lit happened that he had a front-row view of Prout, as it were.

As his eyes and spectacles fell on Mr. Prout, majestically pacing the garden path, the little round eyes gleamed through the big round spectacles. Bunter was still feeling the twinges of that 'six' in Quelch's study: and that unpleasant word 'pilfering' still haunted his indignant mind. He would have been very glad to 'get' Prout with that aromatic egg: and it would have been absolutely safe, shying it over the garden wall from that spot, at a little distance, where the wall was hidden by drooping branches.

But after what Prout had heard, even Bunter was not sufficiently obtuse to think of carrying on with that big idea. He was no longer thinking of egging Prout. But it was sheer joy to Bunter to see him tomatoed: and that was what he saw.

Pro ut, passing near the gate, gave the fat Owl a glance of strong disfavour. He elephantined on without taking any further notice of him.

Then it happened.

It was a surprise to both of them: to Bunter, a joyful one, to Prout one that was far from joyful.

Prout was turning in his walk. As he turned, something shot through the air, and landed fairly on his nose. It burst there.

Prout tottered.

What it was that had smitten him, he did not know, for the moment. It was something soft and juicy, he knew that. It burst on his nose, and splattered an over his portly face. Some of

the juice splattered his eyes, some ran down into his collar. Prout's plump hands flew to his face, as he tottered and spluttered.

'Ugh! Urrrggh! Oh! Goodness gracious! What—urrrrrrggh!' spluttered the amazed Fifth-form master. He clawed tomato from his face. He rubbed juice out of his dizzy eyes. He tottered. He floundered.

'He, he, he!'

Bunter was enjoying this.

Somebody, evidently, had had the same idea as Bunter! It was not an egg—it was a tomato—otherwise, it was just Bunter's idea plagiarized.

'He, he, he!'

'Urrrggh!' Prout clawed and spluttered. 'Bless my soul! This is—is—is—is tomato! Boy!'

Prout's eyes turned on Bunter, grinning over the gate, with a juicy glare. 'Boy!'

Bunter, still grinning and chuckling, backed away from the gate. 'Old Pompous' looked wildly excited and fearfully enraged, and he was making a furious stride towards the gate, really as if Bunter was the object of his wrath. The fat Owl did not wait for him. He departed in haste. And he had news for the other fellows:—all the Remove would yell over this, when Bunter told the tale. Still grinning, and still chuckling, Billy Bunter headed for the House; and the grin on his fat face, as he rolled into the Rag, was so wide, that it almost looked like meeting round the back of his fat head.

'I say, you fellows!' yelled Bunter.

There were a dozen Remove fellows in the Rag. All of them stared at the excited fat Owl, as he rolled in and yelled.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'What's up, fatty?'

'He, he, he! I say, old Prout—he, he, he!' Bunter gasped with mirth. 'I say, old Pompous—he, he, he!'

'What about Prout?' asked Harry Wharton, staring at the fat Owl. 'Have you been playing potty tricks after all, you dithering ass?'

'Eh! Oh! No! Somebody has!' gasped Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, fancy old Prout—he, he, he! Tomato squashing all over his face—he, he, he.'

'What?' yelled Bob Cherry.

'Gammon!' said Vernon-Smith. 'Tell us another one.'

'I say, I saw it!' yelled Bunter. 'He, he, he! Old Pompous, you know—I saw him, in the Head's garden, over the gate—he, he, he! Tomato squashing right on his boko—he, he, he! There was a buzz in the Rag.'

If Bunter's statement was well founded, it was undoubtedly an exciting spot of news. Fellows surrounded the fat Owl on all sides. Harry Wharton and Co. stared at him in horror. If this awful thing really had happened, they could only suppose that the fat Owl had carried on—undeterred even by a dribbling round the quad. And the consequences were certain to be still more awful than the deed itself.

'Prout—!' exclaimed Skinner.

'A tomato—on the boko!' gasped Smithy.

'Rotten trick!' said Lord Mauleverer.

'Sack for somebody!' said Peter Todd.

'He, he, he! Right on the boko!' trilled Bunter. 'Got him fair and square! Smashed all over his chivvy! He, he, he! Old Pompous, you know—he, he, he! Did he look wild? He, he, he.'

'You unspeakable chump!' gasped Harry Wharton.

'Oh, really, Wharton—.'

'You'll be bunked for it!' roared Johnny Bull.

'Eh! It wasn't me!' said Bunter. 'Think it was me?'

'Who was it, then?'

'Haven't the foggiest! Somebody buzzed it at Prout, over the garden wall. I didn't see him—but he got Prout all right! Fair and square on the boko! He, he, he! Was he wild? He didn't seem to like me laughing at him—he, he, he! A fellow had to laugh—tomato squashed all over his face! Fancy old Prout—he, he, he!'

Billy Bunter almost doubled up with mirth. 'If it was you—!' said Frank Nugent.

'It wasn't!' yelled Bunter. 'Don't you get saying it was me, Nugent. Why, the chap will be bunked if they catch him.'

'No doubt about that!' said the Bounder, with a whistle. 'A fellow who's got the nerve to buzz tomatoes at a beak will be bunked so fast that it will make his head swim. If you did it, you fat ass—.'

'Oh, really, Smithy—.'

'Who else?' grunted Johnny Bull.

'I tell you I never saw who did it,' howled Bunter, alarm mingling with his merriment. 'Some chap did it—I don't know who—how should I know? I was looking over the gate when old Pompous got it, all of a sudden. I think it came over the garden wall somewhere—I don't know! It wasn't me.'

'Nobody else on the spot?' grinned the Bounder.

'Not that I saw! But there must have been somebody, somewhere along the wall—I never saw who buzzed that tomato—!'

'Let's hope Prout didn't, either!' chuckled Skinner. 'If he did, you're up to see the Head, fatty.'

'Oh, really, Skinner—.' Alarm predominated over merriment in Billy Bunter's fat face now.

'I say, you fellows, it really wasn't me—all I did was to laugh when old Prout got it—that made him shirty, I think—but it wasn't me! I don't know who it was. Perhaps it was Smithy—.'

'What?' yelled the Bounder.

'Well, it's the sort of thing you would do,' said Bunter, blinking at him. 'You got Hacker's mortar-board with a cricket ball once, and—.'

'Smithy's been here for the last quarter of an hour,' said Harry Wharton.

'Oh! Perhaps it was Skinner—.'

'Why you fat, flabby, frabjous freak—,' gasped Skinner.

'Well, I don't know who it was, except that it wasn't me,' said Bunter. 'Don't you fellows get saying it was me, when it jolly well wasn't. I don't know who it was—but he got old Pompous all right! He, he, he! You fellows should have seen him, with tomato squashed all over his face—.'

Billy Bunter broke off suddenly. There was a well-known step in the doorway, and an angular figure appeared there. A pair of gimlet eyes scanned the Rag, where sudden silence fell.

'Is Bunter here?' asked Mr. Quelch, very quietly.

'Oh! No! I—I mean, it wasn't me—!' gasped Bunter.

'Oh! You are here, Bunter!'

'Yes, sir! I—I've been here all the time, sir—I—I haven't been out of the House since dinner, sir—.'

'I have seen you out of the House since dinner, Bunter.'

'Oh!, I—I— mean—I—I—I—.'

'You will follow me, Bunter! I have instructions to take you to your headmaster immediately.'

'I—I—I—oh, crikey; Dud—dud—did—dud—does the Head want to see me, sir?' gasped Bunter.

'Yes: and at once.'

'I—I—I haven't done anything, sir!' wailed Bunter.

'I—I—I never—.'

'Follow me, Bunter.'

'Oh,lor!'

There was not the faintest, remotest trace of merriment about William George Bunter, as he followed his form-master. Indeed, his lugubrious countenance seemed to indicate that he was understudying that ancient monarch who never smiled again. It was a deflated, dismal, and dolorous Owl that rolled after Quelch to the headmaster's study. He left the Rag in a buzz behind him.

CHAPTER 11

'BUNKED!'

DR. LOCKE fixed his eyes upon Bunter, as the fat Owl was shepherded into his study by Mr. Quelch. Seldom, if ever, had Bunter seen his headmaster looking so stern. The 'Old Man', as Dr. Locke was often called at Greyfriars, not in his hearing!—generally looked benign, kindly, indeed, benevolent. But there was no vestige of benevolence about him now. Rhadamanthus could not have looked more stern: Aeacus more grim. The first blink at that inflexible face told Bunter that he was in the worst scrape of his fat career. His plump knees knocked together as he stood facing the Head.

'Here is the boy, sir!' said Mr. Quelch.

Mr. Prout, standing by the headmaster's writing-table, glanced at Bunter: such a glance as might have proceeded from Roderick Dhu, on the occasion when dark lightnings flashed from Roderick's eye! Prout seemed at boiling point. There were still traces—many traces—of tomato about Prout's plump countenance. But they evoked no merriment in Bunter now. Never had the hapless fat Owl felt less merry.

'Bunter!' said Dr. Locke, in a deep voice.

'Oh, crikey!' moaned Bunter. 'I—I mean, yes, sir! It wasn't me, sir—.'

'You threw a—a—a vegetable at Mr. Prout.'

'Ow! No, sir! Never—.'

'Do you deny this, Bunter?'

'Oh, lor!' Yes, sir! I—I never!' wailed Bunter.

'Never thought of it, sir! I—I wouldn't! I—I like Mr. Prout. He—he—he's so nice—.'

'Upon my word!' boomed Mr. Prout. 'Only this morning, sir, I listened to this boy uttering a series of untruths in his form-master's study. In my opinion, sir, he is incapable of veracity. Mr. Quelch, I think, will bear me out, that no reliance whatever is to be placed on this boy's statements.'

'That certainly is the case, sir,' said Mr. Quelch. 'Bunter undoubtedly is the most untruthful boy in the school: indeed I have sometimes thought that he is too obtuse to understand the difference between facts and fiction. Nevertheless, this is a matter for proof.'

Mr. Quelch was doing what he could, for that unfortunate member of his form! He did not want an expulsion in the Remove.

Prout gave Quelch quite a glinting glance. There was no doubt in Prout's mind about who had hurled that tomato. How could he doubt, when he had actually heard Bunter declare his intention of 'shying' something at him over the garden wall: and something had been 'shied' at him over the garden wall, with Bunter grinning at him and nobody else in sight? Prout was shocked by Bunter's denial of what was self-evident. And if Quelch fancied that he could get that young rascal off after what he had done, Quelch was going to find out his mistake! Prout was adamant.

'Undoubtedly a matter for proof, Mr. Quelch,' said Dr. Locke. 'You are assured, Mr. Prout, that it was this boy, Bunter, who threw the—the vegetable—?'

'Absolutely, sir!' boomed Prout.

'I—I never—!' wailed Bunter.

'Silence, Bunter,' said Dr. Locke. 'Mr. Prout, did you actually see the boy with the—the vegetable, in the act of hurling it?'

'That was impossible, sir,' said Mr. Prout. 'I had passed Bunter, who was looking over the gate, in my walk, sir. As I turned to retrace my steps, the tomato struck me full in the face, blinding me for some moments.'

'Then you did not actually see it thrown?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. Probably the Remove master had little more doubt on the subject than Mr. Prout. But it was his duty, as Bunter's form-master, to see that he had strict justice. If there was anything in his favour, Quelch was not going to let the Head miss it.

'I have said so, sir!' boomed Prout. 'The boy was not likely to let me see him actually hurling the missile, sir, which I could have avoided if I had been aware of his disrespectful intention. I repeat that it caught me in the face as I turned in my walk.'

'Quite!' said Dr. Locke. 'Now, Bunter—.'

'I—I—I never—.'

'I understand from Mr. Prout, Bunter, that this morning he complained to your form-master, respecting the pilfering of food from a Fifth-form study, and that you were punished by Mr. Quelch. Later he heard you telling some other junior boys that you intended to throw something at him over the wall of the garden. You do not deny this, Bunter?'

'Oh! Yes! No, sir!' groaned Bunter. 'It—it—it was all a mistake, sir! I—I never had Coker's parcel, sir, and —and some roughs took it away from me, too—.'

'Bless my soul!'

'I—I never said I'd shy something at Mr. Prout over the garden wall, sir—I—I mean, it—it was only a jog—joke, sir! Just—just one of my—my little jokes, sir!' groaned Bunter.

'Besides, it was an egg, sir, not a tomato at all.'

'Boy I Do I understand you to say that it was your intention to throw an egg at a member of my Staff?' exclaimed the Head.

Bunter quaked.

'Oh! No, sir!' he howled. 'I didn't—I mean I wasn't—I never! I—I was saying something else when Mr. Prout heard me say I'd shy it at him, sir—. Besides, I dropped the egg, sir, and—and it was smashed—not—not that I had an egg at all, sir! I—I never found it at the back of the study cupboard, sir—you—you can ask Toddy, sir—he saw me taking it out—.'

'Bless my soul!' repeated the Head.

'You hear him, sir?' boomed Prout. 'You hear him? A more utterly and unscrupulously untruthful boy, sir—.'

'The matter seems clearly established,' said Dr. Locke. 'Bunter! You were heard to threaten to throw something at Mr. Prout—apparently an egg!—and a tomato was thrown—.'

'Oh, yes, sir, but—but—but an egg ain't a tomato, sir—I—I mean, a—a tomato ain't an egg, sir—,' wailed Bunter. 'It was an egg I was going to chuck, sir—I—I mean that I wasn't going to chuck, sir—. I—I don't know anything about a tomato, sir—.'

'You need say no more, Bunter.'

'One moment, sir,' Quelch came to the rescue again. 'This foolish boy, sir, no doubt declared his intention of committing such a disrespectful and disorderly act—but foolish boys, sir, very often declare an intention of doing what, in fact, they never seriously consider doing. It is an act, sir, not a very uncertain intention, for which a delinquent must be judged.'

Dr. Locke raised his eyebrows slightly.

'I am aware of that, Mr. Quelch!' he said, icily. 'I am not judging Bunter for uttering foolish and thoughtless words: but for carrying out his declared intention, which it appears beyond doubt that he did.'

'Beyond doubt, sir!' boomed Prout. 'Beyond a shadow of doubt. I am only amazed at the boy's effrontery in remaining on the spot, laughing in my face, sir, after his missile had struck me—.'

'I—I wasn't laughing, sir!' moaned Bunter. 'I—I was only coughing—I—I didn't think you looked funny, sir, with tomato all over your face, sir: —I—I wasn't laughing, sir, I was only sneezing—.'

'If Mr. Prout is certain that no one else was on the spot, sir—!' said Mr. Quelch, reluctantly. 'I am quite certain of that, Mr. Quelch! When Bunter ran away, I looked over the gate, sir, and no one else was to be seen—there was no one anywhere near the spot, sir—.'

'Bunter!' said Mr. Quelch. 'Did you see any other boy near the gate of your headmaster's garden?'

'No, sir!' groaned Bunter. 'There wasn't anybody there while I was there. At least I didn't see him, sir. Somebody might have been along the wall somewhere—.'

'Have—you any further doubts, Mr. Quelch?' asked the Head, with a touch of ice in his voice. The Head evidently had none.

'I—I fear, sir, that the case is clear,' said Mr. Quelch, reluctantly. 'I can only say that this boy of my form is so obtuse, so stupid, so inexpressibly and impenetrably dense, sir, that possibly some excuse may be found for him on those grounds—.'

'There can be no excuse, Mr. Quelch, for any Greyfriars boy guilty of such an act,' said the Head. 'No boy capable of such an act can be permitted to remain one day longer in this school. An assault had been made on a member of my Staff—a missile deliberately hurled, sir: and for such an act no excuse can be found. The offender will leave Greyfriars. '

'Oh, crikey!'

'Bunter!' The Head's voice was very deep.

'I—I say, sir, I—I never—!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I haven't had a tomato in my hand to-day, sir, or an egg either, and those fellows never booted me for saying I'd chuck it at Mr. Prout, sir—I—I never said I would, sir, and I only said it for a joke, sir—and I never said it at all—.'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir!' burbled the fat Owl.

'C—c—can I go now, sir?'

'You may go and pack your box, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'Your father will be apprised that you are returning home to-day—.'

'Ow!'

'A Sixth-form prefect will conduct you to your train at Courtfield—.'

'Wow!'

'You are expelled from Greyfriars, Bunter!'

'Oh, lor!' But I never—.'

'You may now leave my study, Bunter.' 'Yes, sir! But I—I—I—I—I—.'

'Please take that boy of your form away, Mr. Quelch.'

'Come, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch, quietly, And he dropped a hand on a fat shoulder, and led an unhappy fat Owl from the study.

CHAPTER 12

GOING—?

'BUNKED?'

'Ow! Yes!'

'Sorry, old fat man.'

Harry Wharton and Co. were sorry for the hapless fat Owl: there was no doubt about that. So were many other fellows. Faces were very serious when Billy Bunter tottered back into the Rag. His fat face was a picture of woe. It might have moved a heart of stone.

The Famous Five were glad to remember that they had done all they could to save Bunter from himself. In spite of their efforts, he had rushed on his fate. The chopper had come down-hard and heavy! Few could help compassionating the fat Owl, now that it had come down. He was 'bunked'—expelled from the school. How he could possibly have expected anything else, after pitching a tomato at a beak, was a puzzle. No one doubted that it was Billy Bunter's fat hand that had pitched the tomato. One fellow, certainly, Horace Coker of the Fifth Form, could have let in light on that subject. But Horace Coker was many a long mile from Greyfriars School, speeding home in an express train, grinning over his success in leaving 'Old Pompous' that souvenir, and never even dreaming that a fat and fatuous Owl had been 'nailed' for his deed. To everyone else, it was as clear as daylight that the culprit was Bunter. He had planned to 'buzz' an egg at Prout, and he had been stopped. He had buzzed a tomato instead. How was anyone to doubt?

Whatever Bunter had to say on the subject naturally carried no weight whatever: his reputation of untruthfulness was too well known. His habitual 'fibbing' had come home to roost, as it were.

Nevertheless, all were compassionate. Bunter had done it: Bunter had got what anyone might have expected for doing it: but it was hard lines all the same.

Bunter's manners and customs did not, perhaps, make him beloved. But the 'bunking' of Billy Bunter washed out all offences. Bunter was going, and Greyfriars School was to know him no more. It was the K.O. for Bunter. It was a sad occasion.

'Sorry, old fat man,' said Bob Cherry.

'The sorrowfulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Rough luck, old chap!' said the Bounder—the first time, probably, that Smithy had ever addressed Bunter as an old chap!

Billy Bunter blinked dismally from face to face, through his big spectacles. There was sympathy in abundance, but it did not seem to comfort the Owl of the Remove very much. Sympathy was all very well: but it could not rescue him from the train home!

'I say you fellows,' moaned Bunter. 'I say what's a fellow going to do? The Head said I'm expelled—me, you know! I—I—I suppose he meant it?' Bunter accompanied that question with an enquiring blink.

'Sort of, I imagine!' said Bob.

'But—but I can't go, you know,' said Bunter. 'It's all very well for the Old Man to say I'm bunked, but I can't go home.'

'Eh?'

'It wouldn't do at all,' explained Bunter. 'The pater would kick up a fearful fuss. I—I suppose the Old Man never thought about that. But—but it simply wouldn't do! I can't go home in the middle of the term.'

The Remove fellows gazed at Bunter.

The Head's sentence of expulsion was like unto the decree of Fate. A fellow who was sacked had to go. But it seemed that Billy Bunter had original ideas on the subject. He was sacked: there was no doubt about that. But it appeared that he was not prepared to go!

'The Head said pack my box,' went on Bunter. 'Quelch thinks I've gone up to the dorm to pack it. I say, what's a fellow to do?'

'Better pack your box, old scout,' said Nugent. 'Oh, really, Nugent—.'

'You'll have to catch your train, you know,' said Peter Todd.

'Oh, really, Toddy—.'

'You awful ass!' said Johnny Bull. 'Why couldn't you leave old Pompous alone? They were bound to spot who did it.'

'Oh! Think so?' asked Bunter, brightening a little.

'Think they'll find out who chucked that tomato at Prout?'

'You did, you fat chump,' said Skinner.

'Oh, really, Skinner—.'

'Is he going to make out that he didn't do it?' asked Vernon-Smith, staring at the fat Owl.

'It's no use now, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton, quite gently. 'We did all we could to stop you, and I'm sorry we didn't have better luck. But now you've done it—.'

'I never!' yelled Bunter. 'I suppose old Pompous thinks I did, as I was there and nobody else was, and he was shirty because I laughed when he got the tomato, but I tell you I never—.'

'He was there, and nobody else was, and he didn't do it!' said Skinner. 'Did you tell the Head that, Bunter?'

'Of course I did! He didn't believe me!' said Bunter, sorrowfully. 'I might just as well have said nothing at all. Making a fellow out to be liar, you know.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Quelch ought to have stood by a fellow in his form,' said Bunter, bitterly. 'But did he? He actually said I was untruthful.'

'Did—did—did he?' gasped the Bounder. 'Now I wonder what could have put that idea into his head?'

'Oh, Quelch is down on me,' said Bunter. 'Only this morning he whopped me for snooping Coker's parcel, though I told him I never touched it, and those roughs took it away from me, too. Pretty thick for a form-master to doubt a fellow's word, I think. That's the sort of justice we get here.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here comes Wingate!'

Wingate of the Sixth looked into the Rag. Billy Bunter looked at him, and moved round the long table, to place that article of furniture between him and the captain of Greyfriars.

Wingate's eyes followed him.

'Oh! You're here, Bunter,' he said. 'I've been looking for you, you young ass. Have you packed your box?'

'Nunno!' stammered Bunter.

'Then it will have to be sent after you,' said Wingate. 'Headmaster's instructions are for you to catch the two o'clock train at Courtfield. I'm to see you off in the train.'

'I—I ain't going—!' gasped Bunter.

'Wha-a-t?'

'You-you see, I—I—can't go! The pater would kick up no end of a fuss! I—I'm not g—g—going—.'

'Come here at once, Bunter,' rapped the prefect.

'I—I—I never chucked Prout at that tomato, Wingate—I—I mean, I never chucked that tomato at Prout—.'

'That will do,' said Wingate. 'That's for the Head to settle, not for me. My orders are to take you to the station. Come at once.'

'Shan't!' yelled Bunter, desperately. 'I ain't going.' Wingate strode into the Rag. In silence, the Remove fellows watched. Billy Bunter was 'bunked': but apparently he was not going if he could help it. The Greyfriars captain strode round one end of the table. Billy Bunter promptly dodged round the other end.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Bunter, old pippin—.'

'Bunter, you ass—.'

'Bunter, you fathead—.'

'Stop!' exclaimed Wingate, as he circumnavigated the long table in pursuit of the elusive Owl. 'Do you hear, Bunter?'

'Beast!' gasped Bunter.

'By gum!' breathed Wingate. He put on speed, fairly whisking round the long table after Bunter. Billy Bunter's little fat legs flashed as he flew. But it booted not. A hand dropped on a fat shoulder from behind, and the Owl of the Remove was jerked to a halt.

'Now come along—!' gasped Wingate.

'Shan't!' howled Bunter. 'Leggo! I say, you fellows, make him leggo!'

'You young rascal, I've a good mind to give you six before you go!' rapped Wingate. 'Now come on!'

With a grip of iron on a fat shoulder, he led Billy Bunter from the Rag. The bell for class began to ring. The Removites headed for their form-room. In that form-room, that afternoon, there was a vacant place. The fattest member of the form was gone. Billy Bunter, 'bunked' from the school, had started on his journey home: and no fellow in the Remove expected to see him at Greyfriars again. But it was the unexpected that was destined to happen.



WITH A GRIP OF IRON ON A FAT SHOULDER, HE LED BILLY BUNTER
FROM THE RAG

CHAPTER 13

BUT NOT GONE!

'I SAY, you fellows!'

Five Remove juniors jumped almost clear of the floor, as if moved all at once by the same spring.

Harry Wharton and Co. were not merely surprised.

They were quite astounded. The voice of the midnight messenger announcing that Troy was afire, did not startle King Priam more than the voice of William George Bunter, at that moment, startled the chums of the Remove.

Nobody had expected to hear Billy Bunter's voice in the Remove passage again. Now, quite amazingly, it was heard.

It was after class.

'The 'bunking' of Billy Bunter was the one topic in the Remove. Bunter was gone. Wingate, it was known, had taken his ticket at Courtfield, shepherded him into his train, and seen the train start. Billy Bunter was, or should have been, at home, by the time the Remove came out of their form-room. Everyone was sorry for Bunter. Harry Wharton and Co., when they came up to tea in No. 1 Study, were looking, and feeling, quite serious. If they did not exactly miss Bunter very much, at least they sympathized with the fat and fatuous Owl, upon whom the 'chopper' had descended so heavily.

And then—!

Really, it was not easy to believe their ears, or their eyes. The fat voice that greeted them as they came into No. 1 Study made them jump. The fat figure that met their eyes, sprawling in the study armchair, made them stare, with popping eyes. So utterly unexpected was that sight, that they could almost have believed that it was the ghost of Billy Bunter revisiting the glimpses of the moon. They gazed at him, astounded.

'Bunter!' gasped Harry Wharton. 'Bunter—here!' stuttered Frank Nugent.

'The esteemed and ridiculous Bunter—,' ejaculated Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bunter!' said Bob Cherry, like a fellow in a dream. 'Bunter!' articulated Johnny Bull.

It was Bunter! It was not Bunter's ghost—it was Bunter! There sat the fat Owl, blinking at them through his big spectacles, just as if he had never been sacked, just as if he had never left Greyfriars at all, just as if Wingate of the Sixth hadn't seen him off in his train for home. Amazingly, unbelievably, it was Billy Bunter!

'I say, you fellows!' squeaked Bunter.

'My only hat and summer sunshade!' gasped Bob Cherry. 'Bunter! It's Bunter! He's bunked—but he's here! Do I sleep, do I dream, do I wonder and doubt—are things what they seem, or is visions about?'

'Oh, really, Cherry—.'

'How did you get here?' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'Eh? Walked,' answered Bunter. 'Think I flew?'

'But you're sacked!' yelled Johnny Bull.

'You—you—you've come back!' stuttered Nugent.

'Of course, I have,' answered Bunter, peevishly. 'I told you I couldn't go home in the middle of the term. The pater would be in a fearful bait.'

'Oh, suffering cats!'

'But you're bunked!' shrieked Bob.

'I know that! That's not my fault, I suppose?' said Bunter, warmly. 'Everybody makes out that everything's my fault: but I suppose it ain't my fault that the Head bunked me, is it? I never asked him to.'

'Oh, holy smoke!'

Bunter, apparently, was not taking the sentence of the 'sack' with the same seriousness as his headmaster! 'But—but—but Wingate saw you off in the train!' said Johnny Bull. 'Everybody supposes you're at home now.' Catch me going home in the middle of the term! I couldn't help Wingate seeing me off in the train, of course: but I wasn't going home. I got out at Lantham.'

'Oh, scissors!'

'And took the next train back,' said Bunter. 'That was the only thing a fellow could do.'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'I had to walk from Courtfield,' went on Bunter. 'It wouldn't run to a taxi. If you fellows had cashed my postal order, as I asked you—'

'Did Gosling see you come in?'

'Not likely! I got in over the Cloister wall, while everybody was in form. Gosling might have shut me out if he'd seen me. I say, you fellows, what have you got for tea? I suppose you've come up to tea.' Bunter, it seemed, was thinking less of the 'sack' than of his next meal. First things always came first with Bunter.

'You can't stay here, you fat ass!' exclaimed Harry. 'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'Well, this is the jolly old limit, and some over!' said Bob Cherry. 'Never heard of a chap who's been bunked coming back as if nothing's happened.'

'Bunter's making history!' grinned Nugent.

'There'll be a row when he's found here,' said Harry. 'Your father will be expecting you home, Bunter. The Head must have told him—'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Bunter, 'I can send him a telegram. One of you fellows can send it off for me. Just tell him it's all a mistake, and I'm not coming home, see? That's easy.'

'Is it?' gasped the captain of the Remove.

'Oh, yes: that's all right,' said Bunter, breezily. 'But never mind that now—what about tea? I've had nothing since dinner, and I can tell you I'm jolly hungry. I can't go down to hall to tea—in the circumstances, you know—'

'Oh! I fancy not! But—'

'Well, I suppose you fellows are going to stand by a chap, in a jam like this,' said Bunter, warmly. 'What have you got for tea?'

Harry Wharton and Co. looked at one another. Billy Bunter's idea that he was going to stay on at Greyfriars, after being expelled from the school, was really enough to take any fellow's breath away. Obviously, Billy Bunter was booked for the 'boot' as soon as his presence in the school was discovered. But evidently he had succeeded in penetrating into his old haunts unseen, and unsuspected so far. No one could possibly have anticipated or even dreamed of so unheard-of a proceeding. So far, only the Famous Five knew. Certainly, they were not disposed to hasten the fat Owl's inevitable fate. Nor were they disposed to refuse hospitality to a hungry Owl for the last time!

'O.K.!' said Harry. 'You can have your tea here, you fat ass, and then you'd better trot off to Courtfield for the next train.'

'I'll watch it!' said Bunter.

'Do you fancy you can stay on after being bunked?' hooted Johnny Bull.

'Well, I've got to,' explained Bunter. 'I'm not going home. Besides, I never did anything to be bunked for, did I? You fellows know that I never got Prout with that egg—.'

'You got him with a tomato!'

'I didn't!' yelled Bunter. 'I tell you—.'

Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in at the study doorway. 'That sounds like Bunter's voice,' he said. 'Who—what—why, what—is—is—is that Bunter? The Bounder stared blankly at the fat figure in the armchair.

'It's Bunter,' said Bob. 'He's come back! The Head's sacked him, but Bunter doesn't take any notice of a little thing like that!'

'Oh, gad!' gasped Smithy. 'Bunter—and he's come back! Here, Reddy, come and have a squint at the one and only! Bunter's come back.'

Tom Redwing looked in.

'Bunter!' he exclaimed, blankly. 'What on earth are you doing here, Bunter?'

The fat Owl blinked at him.

'Eh? I'm sitting in this armchair,' he answered. 'Can't you see?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the Bounder.

'What's the joke?' asked Squiff, coming up the passage. 'What—why—what—that can't be Bunter!'

'Bunter—turned up like a bad penny!' chuckled Smithy. 'Oh, my hat! This is too rich! Fancy Quelch's face when he spots him! And the Head's!'

'Better push on with tea, if Bunter's going to have any,' chuckled Bob Cherry. 'It won't be long before they root him out. Mum's the word, Smithy.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The Bounder went up the passage, laughing. Other fellows came to stare into No. 1 Study, as the news spread that Bunter was there. Harry Wharton and Co. lost no time in preparing the festive board. By happy chance, the Famous Five were in funds, and it was quite a handsome spread in No. 1 Study. Neither did Billy Bunter lose time. He was, as he had stated, hungry. The rate at which he travelled through ham and eggs and sardines was a record, even for Bunter. The hospitable Co. feared that interruption might come before Bunter had finished his tea. But it looked as if it would have to come very soon, if it was to come before Bunter cleared the board. Neither did Bunter heed the astonished faces that stared in at the door from one moment to another. He concentrated on the foodstuffs. The sword of Damocles that was suspended over his fat head, evidently had not affected his appetite in the very least.

Billy Bunter ate, and was happy: while Harry Wharton and Co. could only wonder what was to be the outcome of the fat Owl's unexpected and amazing return to the school from which he had been banished. And when tea was over, and the fat Owl announced that he was going to see Quelch, in the hope of convincing his form-master, at least, that he hadn't 'done it', they all wished him luck—but doubted very much whether he would have any!

CHAPTER 14

A SURPRISE FOR MR. QUELCH

TAP!

'Come in!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

Quelch really could not help snapping. He was in an irritated, snappish, and altogether disgruntled mood. In the form-room, that afternoon, the Remove had found him far from genial. The happenings of that day had been very disturbing to Mr. Quelch. No form-master could possibly like an expulsion in his form. Even admitting that it was just and inevitable, still it was a most disagreeable and disconcerting occurrence.

As a pupil, Quelch did not exactly miss Bunter. Bunter was, in fact, the kind of pupil to make a schoolmaster wonder whether, after all, a schoolmaster's career was a mistake.

Indeed, Bunter's absence from his form was as good as a nerve-rest to a form-master.

Nevertheless, the whole affair was disconcerting, disturbing, and unsatisfactory. A member of Quelch's form had been 'bunked': and it was a blow to Quelch.

Having snapped 'Come in', in response to that tap at his study door, Quelch turned a rather glinting eye on that door. He did not want to see other members of the Staff just then: especially Prout. If this was Prout—!

It was not Prout! As the door opened, Mr. Quelch half-rose in his chair, and then sank back again, staring, as if he had seen a startling vision. Much as he regretted that the Head had been under the necessity of expelling Bunter of the Remove from Greyfriars, he had neither hoped nor expected to see Bunter of the Remove at Greyfriars again. Now he saw him!

It was Billy Bunter who rolled into his study.

He did not roll in very far. He left the door open, and remained rather near it, as if he anticipated that there might be occasion for dodging out again without loss of time.

Quelch gazed at him, at a loss for speech.

Bunter, he had supposed, was at home. Wherever he was, he was not and could not be at the school from which he had been expelled. Yet here he was! Quelch, dumbfounded could only gaze.

Billy Bunter blinked at him, through his big spectacles, anxiously and uneasily. A smear of jam round a large mouth, and an accumulation of cake crumbs, indicated that the fat Owl, since his return, had been somewhere where there was food.

'If you please, sir—!' squeaked Bunter. Mr. Quelch found his voice.

'Is—is—is that Bunter?' Really, it was a superfluous question. Quelch could see that it was Bunter. But he could almost have fancied that his gimlet-eyes were deceiving him.

'Yes, sir!' said Bunter.

'You—you—you are here—?'

'I've come back, sir.'

'You—have—come—back!' repeated Mr. Quelch, at dictation speed, as it were. He seemed almost too overcome to speak.

'Yes, sir! I—I—I hope you're glad to see me back, sir!' ventured Bunter: a remark which showed that the fat Owl had a hopeful nature.

'Upon my word!' said Mr. Quelch. He sat upright, staring at Bunter, gradually assimilating the amazing fact that this was indeed Bunter, and that he had come back. 'Upon my word! What does this mean, Bunter?'

'I—I've come back, sir—.'

'Bunter! You have been expelled! A Sixth-form prefect saw you into your train for your home. Yet you are here! You—you have returned to the school! '

'Yes, sir! You see—.'

'You incredibly stupid boy!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. 'Why have you returned here, Bunter?'

'I—I can't go home in the middle of the term, sir—.'

'What?'

'The pater would be waxy!' explained Bunter.

'Bless my soul! '

'I—I thought you might speak to the Head, sir, and—and explain that—that I never prouted Tomato—.'

'Wha—a—at?'

'Oh—I mean that I never tomatoed Prout, sir! If you would explain to Dr. Locke that it was all a mistake, sir—' said Bunter, anxiously. 'You see, sir I can't be bunked—I mean sacked—that is, expelled—it wouldn't do at all, sir. The pater would kick up no end of a shindy. Perhaps you'd explain to the Head, sir, that it won't do at all—.'

'Bunter! You are expelled! You should not have returned here! You must leave the school immediately!' articulated Mr. Quelch. 'Do you suppose for one moment, you stupid boy, that you will be permitted to remain here!'

'Yes, sir!'

'Upon my word!'

'If you'd explain to the Head, sir—.'

'There is nothing for me to explain to your headmaster, Bunter. You have been judged by your headmaster, and expelled for what you did—.'

'But I never did what I did, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I—I mean, I never did what I didn't! It was all a mistake, sir! I never did anything except laugh when Mr. Prout got the tomato, sir, and I—I couldn't help it, he looked jolly funny, sir, with tomato squashed all over his chivvy, I mean his face, sir! You'd have laughed if you'd seen him, sir—.'

'Bunter!'

'It was somebody else tucked the chommy, sir—I mean chucked the tommy. If you'd explain that to the Head, sir, he wouldn't want to bunk a fellow, sir, as I never did it. I—I hope you believe me, sir.'

'I cannot believe a single word you say, Bunter.'

'Oh, really, sir—.'

'If by some remote chance, you are telling the truth on this occasion, Bunter, you have only yourself to blame. Your habitual untruthfulness makes it impossible to give credence to any statement you may make. Neither is there any doubt in the matter.'

'But I never—!'

Mr. Quelch rose from his chair. Billy Bunter backed a little nearer the door, his eyes and spectacles watchfully on the Remove master.

'I can scarcely understand your stupidity, your obtuseness, your effrontery, in returning to the school from which you have been expelled, Bunter. You will be sent home immediately—.'

'But I can't be bunked, sir!' wailed Bunter. 'I keep on telling you that pater would be awfully waxy, sir—.'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'I—I thought you would put in a word for me, sir, when I explained that I never did it—and—and that you don't want to lose me, sir! If you'd go to the Head and tell him I never did it, sir—.'

'Upon my word!' breathed Mr. Quelch.

His eyes strayed to the cane on his table. Billy Bunter, as he noted it, backed yet a little nearer to the door. But Quelch did not touch the cane. Bunter evidently, had come to him, in the hope that his intervention might induce a less Rhadamanthine attitude in the Head. Apparently the fat Owl did not, or could not, or would not, realize that the affair was over and done with and settled, and that nothing remained for him but to disappear into the outer spaces. Mr. Quelch made an effort to be patient.

'Bunter! You must go at once,' he said.

'Yes, sir!' said Bunter, hopefully. 'Do you mean to my study, sir?'

'Bless my soul! I mean nothing of the kind, Bunter! You must leave the school immediately.'

'But I can't, sir. You see—.'

'I shall myself take you to the station!' said Mr. Quelch. 'And—. Stop! Where are you going, Bunter?'

Billy Bunter had backed as far as the doorway. By that time it seemed to have dawned upon Bunter's fat brain, that there was nothing to be hoped for from Quelch. He backed out into the passage.

'Stop!' hooted Mr. Quelch. 'Bunter—Bless my soul! Bunter! Stop! Stop at once! I command you to stop, Bunter!'

Quelch made a stride through the doorway, with outstretched hand. But that outstretched hand did not reach Billy Bunter. Quelch had a back view of a fat figure racing down the passage. He stared at that plump back. He glared at it.

'Bunter!' thundered Mr. Quelch.

The fat Owl tore on.

'BUNTER!'

Billy Bunter turned a corner and vanished. Quelch, with an empty hand still outstretched, was left staring.

CHAPTER 15

CORNERED!

'QUIET,—without Coker!' remarked Potter.

'Bit more peaceful!' agreed Greene.

'But—!' added Potter.

'But—!' Greene agreed again.

There was no doubt whatever that it was a good deal more quiet and peaceful in that Fifth-form study, now that Coker was away at his Aunt Judy's. Horace Coker's long legs were no longer sprawling all over the study. His loud voice was no longer on the air. He was no longer telling Potter and Greene how to play cricket, or explaining to them what an ass Wingate was not to shove him into the First Eleven. Best of all, they had heard the last of that 'book' for Prout, which had, of late, made them almost weep with boredom. Certainly, on Thursday, Coker would be back again: but in the meantime there was peace, perfect peace.

But—there was, undoubtedly, a 'but'. Potter and Greene had to admit that there was a 'but'. Coker had his qualities: or at least his uses. If he talked nineteen to the dozen, if he felt, and expressed, a profound contempt for every opinion but his own, at least the study was like unto a land flowing with milk and honey when Coker was there. During his absence it was likely to resemble Egypt in one of the lean years. Neither Potter nor Greene had an Aunt Judy to keep them supplied with almost countless parcels and almost unlimited currency notes. They had come up to tea: and if they missed Coker at no other time, it was undeniable that they missed him at tea-time.

'That dashed parcel would have lasted us!' remarked Potter. 'Just like Coker to lose it, just before he went off.'

'Oh, just!' assented Greene.

'That fat tick, Bunter, had it. I believe. It would have seen us through,' grunted Potter. 'Well, that fat tick won't snoop tuck in the studies again, now he's bunked for tomatoing Prout.'

Potter crossed to the study cupboard, and opened the door. Fortunately, that cupboard was always well-supplied, though Coker's latest parcel had been 'snooped' by Billy Bunter, for the ultimate benefit of Messrs. Pug and Mouldy. Sufficient for at least one respectable spread remained—or should have remained. Potter looked into the cupboard, expecting to see a cake, a bag of doughnuts, a packet of ham, a jar of honey, a bag of jam-tarts, and several other things,—relics of the absent Coker.

Then he stared, and jumped, and looked round at Greene.

'You taken the things out, Greeney?' he asked.

'Eh! No ! They're there—.'

'They're not.'

'What?'

William Greene made a bound, to join George Potter at the study cupboard. He stared into it, blankly. He did not behold a bag of doughnuts, a cake, a packet of ham, a jar of honey, or a bag of jam-tarts, or anything else edible. All he beheld was a sea of crumbs and some empty paper bags. Someone, it seemed, had been there, before Potter and Greene came up to tea.

'Who—?' gasped Greene.

'Gone—every scrap!' hissed Potter. 'Who the dickens—.'

'Couldn't be Bunter this time—he's bunked, and gone.'

'But who—?'

It was quite a mystery. Every edible article that that study cupboard had contained was gone. Potter and Greene had come up rather late to tea, after cricket nets. Someone else, it was clear, had been earlier: and the early bird had left only crumbs for the late-comers. It looked—undoubtedly it looked—as if Bunter of the Remove had been there. But Bunter of the Remove couldn't have been there, when he was banished from Greyfriars School. Voices from the passage reached Potter and Greene, as they stood gazing into an empty cupboard with inexpressible feelings. Cedric Hilton's drawl floated in at the doorway, apparently in answer to a question.

'No, I haven't seen him, Wingate! I heard that he was bunked for shying a tomato at Prout.' 'So he was!' came Wingate's voice. 'But the young ass seems to have butted in again. He's in the House somewhere now.'

'Oh, gad!' ejaculated Hilton.

'We've drawn the Remove studies. The young ass must be somewhere,' growled Wingate.

'He's got to be taken to Quelch, and hiked off to the station.'

The next moment Wingate was looking into the study.

Potter and Greene stared round at him from the denuded cupboard.

'You men seen anything of Bunter?' asked Wingate.

'Bunter!' yelled Potter. He understood, now. 'Bunter!' howled Greene. He understood also!

'You've seen him?' asked the Greyfriars captain.

'No—but he's been here!' roared Potter. 'If Bunter's back, that accounts! He's been here—.'

'How do you know he's been here, if you haven't seen him?' asked Wingate, testily.

'Because somebody's cleared out the study cupboard!' howled Potter. 'Look! We had lots for tea,—and now look!'

'Oh, my hat!' said Wingate. 'The young sweep! Well, if he's been here, he can't be far away now, I suppose. He must be hiding somewhere. Have you looked round for him?'

'Eh? No—.'

'Well, if he was here, he may be here now.' Wingate glanced round the room. 'Look behind that arm-chair—.'

'Oh, crikey!' came an unexpected squeak.

Potter and Greene gave a simultaneous jump, as that fat squeak came suddenly from behind the arm-chair in the corner of the study.

It had not occurred to them that the cupboard-raider might have been still in the study when they came up. But it occurred to them now. Evidently, Billy Bunter had been busy in that study when Potter and Greene arrived, and had dodged out of sight before they entered.

'Bunter!' gasped Potter.

'He's here!' hissed Greene.

'Oh, crikey! I— say, you fellows, I ain't here—!' came a terrified squeak from a terrified fat Owl behind the arm-chair in the corner.

Potter and Greene rushed at that arm-chair. They grasped it, and spun it away to the middle of the room.

Billy Bunter was revealed: sitting in the corner, with half a cake on his fat knees. Evidently, the fat Owl had not quite finished his feast when Potter and Greene had come up, and

scared him into cover. He had dodged out of sight, in that corner, taking with him what remained of the foodstuffs.

Potter and Greene eyed him almost wolfishly. Billy Bunter, clutching the remnant of the cake, blinked up at them.

'I—I say, you fellows—!' he stammered. 'I—I—I say—yaroooooh! Leave off kicking me, you beasts! Wow! ow! wow!'

The fat Owl squirmed out of the corner under the propulsion of lunging feet. The remnant of cake rolled on the floor. Even Billy Bunter did not heed it. He scrambled up, and bolted for the door,—where Wingate's grasp closed on his collar like a vice.

'Come along, you young ass!' said Wingate. 'Quelch wants you.'

'Ow! Leggo! I'm not going! I say—Leggo!' howled Bunter. 'I tell you I ain't going to be bunked—.'

'This way!' said Wingate, and he led the hapless fat Owl down the passage.

Ten minutes later, a crowd of fellows saw Billy Bunter depart from Greyfriars once more: this time in charge of Mr. Quelch. And this time, they had no doubt that they had seen the last of Billy Bunter. And if other fellows sympathized, Potter and Greene, at least, wished that they had given him a few more before he went. Potter and Greene tea'd in hall: and if Coker had been a long-lost brother they could not have missed him more.

CHAPTER 16

THE ARTFUL DODGER

'I SAY, sir—.'

'You need not speak, Bunter.'

'But I say—.'

'Be silent!'

'Oh, really, sir—.'

'I have told you to be silent, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch, in a voice not unlike the grinding of a very rusty file.

'Yes, sir! But—!'

A gimlet-eye gleamed at Bunter. Had they been still within the precincts of Greyfriars School, it is probable that Mr. Quelch's cane would have had a little exercise next.

But they were not at Greyfriars now. They were sitting in a railway carriage, en route for Lantham Junction, which was ten miles from the school.

They had a carriage to themselves. Quelch sat in a corner seat, upright as a ramrod, with frowning brows under the brim of his hat. Billy Bunter sat in the opposite corner, blinking at him through his big spectacles like a worried and troubled owl.

Bunter was, in fact, worried and troubled. Having returned to Greyfriars after the 'bunking' process, the fat Owl had, apparently, nourished a hope of remaining there. Now he was on his way home again. But home, sweet home, still had no appeal for Bunter. He was not going home if he could help it. Somehow or other, by hook or by crook, Bunter was going to remain a Greyfriars man—whether his headmaster 'bunked' him or not!

Earlier that eventful day, Wingate had put him into the train at Courtfield, and Bunter had to change at Lantham Junction into the train for home. Instead of so doing, he had changed into a train back to Courtfield and Greyfriars. That was not to happen again. Quelch was going to see to that. Quelch was taking him under his personal escort as far as the junction, to put him unmistakably into his train for home. Once on the express from Lantham homeward, Bunter would be done with. And Mr. Quelch was very keen to have done with him. His valuable time was being wasted on a fat and fatuous Owl who seemed unable to understand that when a fellow was bunked, he was bunked, and that was that! Bunter's view seemed to be that 'that' wasn't 'that' at all!

Quelch had no use for conversation in the carriage.

Bunter, on the other hand, had! He was worried. He was troubled. He had expected Quelch to see him off at Courtfield as Wingate had done. Then the return trip would have been as easy as before. It was dismaying to find that Quelch was making assurance doubly sure in this manner.

'I—I—I say, sir, are—are you coming as far as Lantham?' bleated Bunter.

'I am!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'It—it's wasting your time, sir—!' said Bunter. 'I—I can change at Lantham all right, sir. I—I only want the money for my ticket. I—I—I'm not thinking of taking a ticket back to Courtfield, sir.'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir! But—!'

'Say no more.'

'I—I hoped you'd put in a word for me, sir, as I never prouted old Tomato—I mean I never tomatoed old Prout—.'

'Silence!'

'I jolly well ain't going to be bunked, and chance it!' exclaimed Bunter. 'C—c—c—couldn't you try to find out who did it, sir?'

The Remove master breathed hard.

'The fact is established, Bunter, and there is nothing more to be said!' he rapped. 'Now be silent.'

'But I never—.'

The gimlet-eye glittered at him.

'Bunter, as you are no longer in my form, and no longer belong to Greyfriars, I should be sorry to chastise you,' said Mr. Quelch. 'But if you say another word, Bunter, I shall box your ears.'

Billy Bunter blinked at him indignantly. But he did not say another word. He did not want his fat ears boxed: and Quelch looked only too ready to suit the action to the word.

The fat Owl relapsed into indignant silence, as the train churned on to Lantham Junction.

But if his fat chin remained at rest, his thoughts were busy. Bunter was not going home in the middle of the term, to face Mr. Bunter in a 'wax'. He was quite determined on that. The problem before Bunter now was how to dodge Quelch before he could be safely landed in the express, with a ticket for home, but no money for a ticket back.

His fat thoughts were still revolving round that problem, when the train rattled into Lantham Junction, under the summer sunset deepening to dusk.

Mr. Quelch stepped out, and signed to Bunter to follow.

The fat junior rolled out after his form-master, obediently.

But there was a gleam in his little round eyes behind the big round spectacles. Lantham Junction was a big station, with crowds of people about. Billy Bunter was going to dodge Quelch in those crowds,—if he could! And as Quelch moved on, with his long strides, the fat Owl lagged behind him. But a gimlet-eye glittered round.

'Bunter!' snapped Mr. Quelch. 'Keep close to me.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! I—I wasn't going to clear off, sir—!' stuttered Bunter.

'If you attempt anything of the kind, Bunter, I shall take you by the collar!'

'Oh, really, sir—.'

'Walk at my side.'

'Oh, lor!' I—I mean, yes, sir!' groaned Bunter.

Mr. Quelch pushed on through the crowd of passengers coming and going, with a fat figure rolling at his side. He was ready to grasp a plump neck if Bunter showed a sign of bolting.

The Owl of the Remove rolled on dismally, his hopes sinking almost to zero, his little fat legs whisking to keep pace with Quelch's long ones. Gladly he would have lagged behind again. But there was no lagging for Bunter. A clutching hand was too near.

Then, suddenly, his chance came.

A trolley, piled high with baggage, came wheeling along the platform, the porter who was wheeling it almost invisible behind the mountain of boxes and bags on the trolley.

Mr. Quelch stepped hastily aside, out of the way of the traffic. Billy Bunter stepped aside also: but, with a sudden inspiration, he stepped on the other side. The heavy-laden trolley rolled between them.

For the moment, Bunter was out of reach of that clutching hand!

He did not lose that moment.

Seldom was Billy Bunter quick on the uptake. Seldom indeed did his fat wits work rapidly. But the fat Owl was desperate now: and desperation spurred on his fat faculties.

He shot away!

Over-topped by the stacked trolley, he was, for the moment, invisible to Quelch. He flew.

As the trolley rolled clear, and visibility became good again, the gimlet-eyes gleamed round for him—and had a rear view of Bunter, bolting at top speed for the exit.

'Bunter!' Quelch fairly roared. 'Stop!'

That roar reached Bunter's fat ears. But it did not cause him to stop. Rather it spurred him on. He raced.

'Bunter!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

Bunter whizzed.

The Remove master rushed in pursuit. But again fortune befriended the fat Owl as a passenger running for the train collided with Mr. Quelch as he rushed. Both of them staggered from the collision: and Bunter gained a few more moments.

In those moments, he reached the exit from the platform, where several passengers were going out. A ticket-collector stretched out a hand. As Bunter's ticket was in Quelch's keeping, he was not in a position to hand it over. Still less was he in a position to stop and explain, with Quelch almost at his heels. In sheer desperation, he lowered his fat head and butted.

'Ooooooh!' gasped the ticket-collector.

He tottered. A moment more, and he was grabbing at Bunter. But he grabbed a second too late: and the fat Owl careered on.

'Ooogh! 'Ere! Stop! Bilk!' gasped the collector.

'Ere, look out, can't you?' he added, as Mr. Quelch came up with a rush. 'Want to knock me over?'

'Stop that boy!' gasped Quelch. But it was too late to stop that boy! 'Let me pass—quick—the boy is running away—.'



'Ticket, please!' The man blocked the way. 'Where's your ticket? Too many bilks on this 'ere line—you 'and over your ticket—.'

Quelch was in haste. He was in pressing haste. But really, he could not butt the ticket-collector out of the way as Bunter had done! He had to pause in his pursuit of the fleeing Owl.

With deep feelings, he paused, and handed over his ticket and Bunter's. Then he hurried out, to resume the pursuit.

But Billy Bunter had lost no time. No fat figure was in sight now. Bunter had bolted out of the station. Mr. Quelch came out breathlessly into Lantham High Street. Lights were twinkling along the street in the summer dusk. There were plenty of people about. But among them Quelch's eyes failed to discern the fat figure he sought.

'Upon my word!' breathed Mr. Quelch.

That remark did not come near expressing his feelings!

His feelings, indeed, were inexpressible.

Bunter had vanished! Quelch, instructed by his Chief to place Bunter in the express for home, had failed to place him in the express. The express rolled out of Lantham Junction without that plump passenger. Quelch, standing outside the station, scanning the street, up and down and round about, was left at a loss. Never had the glance of the gimlet-eyes been so sharp and searching. But the most penetrating eye could not discern an object that was not there. Bunter, evidently, had turned a corner. Bunter was gone.

'Upon my word!' repeated Mr. Quelch.

Not often was Henry Samuel Quelch at a loss. But he was in a state now that Remove fellows might have described as 'flummoxed'.

Bunter was gone! Bunter had eluded his watchful eye and his clutching hand, and vanished. Bunter was somewhere in Lantham—but where? Quelch did not even know which way he had gone—only that he had, indubitably, gone!

'Upon my word!' said Mr. Quelch, for the third time: still without coming anywhere near expressing his feelings.

He could not return to Greyfriars School and report to Dr. Locke that he had lost Bunter, - that that fat and fatuous youth, instead of being safe on his way home, was at large in the county of Kent. On the other hand, he certainly could not put Bunter in his train as no Bunter was available.

Up to that time, Quelch had had a spot of compassion for the hapless fat junior who had been 'bunked' from Greyfriars. But that quite evaporated now. Now he would have been extremely glad to have had Bunter in his study, with his stoutest cane in his hand: to administer a 'six' which would have made the 'six' administered that morning seem a trifle light as air. The swiping of the cane on the plumpest trousers at Greyfriars would have been music to Quelch's ears, at that exasperated moment.

Quelch's lips were hard set, and his eyes glinted, as he left the station, and walked up the High Street, looking for Bunter.

Looking for Bunter, in a town like Lantham, was rather like looking for a needle in a bundle of hay—especially as Quelch walked up the High Street, and Bunter had bolted down that thoroughfare!

But there was nothing else that Quelch could do. He had to find Bunter, if Bunter was to be found.

Once he found him, a vice-like grip would fasten on Bunter's collar, and the young rascal would have no chance of bolting a second time. But it was finding him that was the problem.

It was a pleasant summer evening—dark, but warm and fine. Many inhabitants of Lantham were out, enjoying that balmy evening. But the Remove master of Greyfriars was not enjoying it. Never had Mr. Quelch enjoyed any evening less. His face, matching his mood, grew grimmer and grimmer. He breathed harder and harder. He was at boiling-point: and really seemed in danger of boiling over.

Where was Bunter? He inquired of at least a dozen people, one after another, but nobody seemed to have seen or taken notice of a fat schoolboy in spectacles. Long and arduous was Mr. Quelch's search for the elusive fat Owl: but it was not crowned with success.

Which was not, perhaps, surprising, as Billy Bunter had lost no time in getting outside Lantham, and shaking the dust of that town from his feet. Billy Bunter had covered a mile, almost without stopping to take breath. Under the stars on a country road, he was flagging a car for a lift.

Quelch's feelings, as he hunted Bunter, were deep.

Probably they would have been deeper, had he guessed that William George Bunter, in those very moments, was packed in a car, rolling away under the stars for Courtfield and Greyfriars School!

CHAPTER 17

ONLY BUNTER

'Wow!'

Herbert Vernon-Smith jumped.

If it had been possible for a startled fellow to jump out of his skin, as the saying goes, the Bounder of Greyfriars School certainly might have done so at that moment.

Never was a fellow so utterly astonished.

The summer night was dark. The hour was late. Lights still glimmered from the windows of some of the masters' studies. But all Greyfriars fellows were—or were supposed to be—fast asleep in bed.

The Bounder was an exception. In the Remove dormitory, every other fellow in the form was sleeping. No one had awakened when Smithy crept quietly from his bed, and dressed himself in the dark. His chum, Tom Redwing, if he was dreaming, did not dream that Smithy was getting out of bounds after lights out.

It was no new experience for the Bounder. There was a kind of blackguardism in Smithy which sometimes took the upper hand. Even the risk of such exploits had its attraction for the reckless scapegrace. Any fellow discovered 'breaking out' after lights out, was booked to go the way Billy Bunter had gone: even more inexorably if possible: for it was an offence even more dire than tomatoing a form-master. But the Bounder's luck had always been good: and he had enjoyed long impunity. He was quite cool, though very wary, as he tiptoed by dark staircases and passages, to the Remove box-room, and clambered from the window there to the leads outside.

But he was not cool now! He was startled almost out of his seven senses. From the leads, a rain-pipe gave easy access to the ground, for an active fellow like Vernon-Smith. The Bounder swung himself down that rain-pipe, hand below hand. Had he looked below, he could have seen nothing, in the dark: but he did not look below—for what obstacle could there possibly be in the way of his descent!

Nevertheless, it seemed that there was an obstacle, for his swinging foot suddenly contacted something solid. That contact was followed by a sudden howl:

'Wow!'

Utterly startled, the Bounder jumped, and lost his hold on the rain-pipe. He slithered helplessly down, and landed on the earth, with a heavy bump. He gave a breathless gasp as he landed.

Someone was there! That was clear—only too clear!

It was somebody's head against which his foot had knocked, and it was that somebody who had uttered a pained howl. The Bounder, breathless from his bump on the earth, stared almost wildly at a dim figure in the gloom.

He was caught! That was the unnerving thought that flashed into his mind. He had done this often—quite often—and now he had done it once too often. More than once he had been under suspicion—Quelch was very far from satisfied with that particular member of his form, and some of the prefects had had a very doubtful eye on him. He had left his dormitory at that late hour, nothing doubting—and he had been caught! For the moment, the certainty of it overwhelmed him, and he sat panting on the ground, with a vision before his mind's eye of the Head's stern face, and the morning train for home.

'Ow! wow! Who's that? Ow! My napper! Ow! wow!' came a howl.

The dulcet tones of William George Bunter were seldom heard with pleasure. But at that terrifying moment, they came to Vernon-Smith's ears as a tremendous relief. The music of the spheres had simply nothing on the fat voice of Billy Bunter—at that alarming moment! The Bounder gasped.

'Bunter!'

It was not Quelch. It was not Wingate or Gwynne or Loder. It was, amazingly, Bunter! He was not caught! The head his foot had contacted was the fat head of Billy Bunter—supposed to be many a long mile from Greyfriars, but evidently quite near at hand.

'Bunter!' repeated Smithy, blankly.

Twice Billy Bunter, 'bunked' by his headmaster, had departed from Greyfriars School. But departing from Greyfriars School, apparently, did not mean a thing to Bunter! Here he was again!

Vernon-Smith staggered to his feet. His face was almost pale with fury. He had had the scare of his life: and it was nothing after all—it was only that fat, fatuous, ineffable Owl back again at the school from which he had been expelled. Smithy's overpowering desire, at that moment, was to punch Billy Bunter, and to punch him hard.

'Ow! Who's there? I say—wow! Who kicked me on the head? Beast!' howled the fat Owl, rubbing a fat head, 'Ow!'

Herbert Vernon-Smith groped for him, guided by the fat voice, and a glimmer of spectacles. He grasped him.

'You fat idiot!' he hissed.

'Ow! Leggo, Wingate, you beast! I tell you I ain't going to be bunked! Leggo!' roared Bunter. Another moment, and the Bounder would have been punching him right and left. But he realized the need for silence. Yells from Bunter might reach wakeful ears, with disastrous results. Bunter had to be kept quiet. Punching him certainly was not the way to keep him quiet! It would have had quite the reverse effect. The Bounder controlled his temper.

'Quiet, you fat fool!' he breathed.

'Eh? Who's that? Is that Smithy?' The fat Owl peered at him through his big spectacles. 'Oh, crikey! I thought it might be Quelch or Wingate. Oh, lor!' Billy Bunter spluttered with relief.

'I say, leggo, Smithy—wharrer you grabbing a fellow for?'

Vernon-Smith released the fat junior, exercising all his self-control to refrain from banging his fat head against the wall.

'You dithering dummy—!' he breathed.

'Oh, really, Smithy—.'

'What are you doing here, you howling ass?'

'I've come back—.'

'I can see that, you ditherer. You potty porpoise, I thought a prefect had got me, when my foot banged on your silly head!' hissed Smithy.

'He, he, he! I'll bet it gave you a scare,' chuckled Bunter. 'He, he, he!'

Again Bunter's head had a narrow escape from a bang on the wall. Only the necessity of keeping him quiet saved it.

'I say, I was just going to climb up that pipe, when you kicked me on the head,' squeaked Bunter. 'You jolly well startled me—.'

'Do you think you didn't startle me, you blithering bloater?'

'He, he, he!'

'Quiet, you blitherer. Do you want Quelch to hear you?' hissed Smithy.

'Oh, crikey! No! I say, I've had an awful time getting back, Smithy! Quelch took me as far as Lantham to put me on my train, but I dodged him and got back. I should have had to walk, only I got a lift in a car most of the way. Wasn't that lucky, Smithy? I say, where are you going, Smithy?' squeaked Bunter, as the Bounder made a move.

'Mind your own business, and keep quiet!' snapped Vernon-Smith, over his shoulder.

'I say, I want you to give me a bunk up that pipe! I've got to get in, you know! I've been trying to get up, but I couldn't manage it. Give me a bunk up, will you, Smithy?'

Smithy disappeared in the gloom.

'I say, Smithy!' howled Bunter. 'Deaf? I say I want you to give me a bunk up that pipe! Will you give me a bunk up that pipe, Smithy? It won't keep you a minute, if you're going to the Cross Keys, Smithy! I say—!'

Vernon-Smith reappeared. He would gladly have gone on his way, leaving Billy Bunter to his own devices. But he couldn't go on his way leaving Bunter yelling after him. He realized the need for silence, if Bunter did not. Almost choking with suppressed fury, the Bounder came back.

'Will you be quiet, you mad porpoise?' he breathed. 'You'll wake the House, at this rate.'

'Well, give a chap a bunk up,' retorted Bunter. 'I've got to get in, haven't I? Think I can camp out in the quad, or what? You jolly well give me a bunk up, Smithy, and you can get off to your pub as soon as you like.'

'Quiet!' hissed Smithy.

'Gimme a bunk up, then!'

The Bounder had to oblige. Never had he felt less obliging. But there was no help for it. He had to keep Bunter quiet, if he did not want attention drawn to the fact that he was out of bounds after lights out. He gritted his teeth, but he gave the fat junior the required helping hand.

It was not an easy matter 'bunking' Bunter up the rain-pipe. As a climber, Billy Bunter had the ease and grace of a hippopotamus. He gasped and spluttered and gurgled as he clambered, the Bounder shoving behind, panting with his efforts. For long minutes, Bunter clambered, and the Bounder shoved, but at last success crowned that combined operation, and the fat Owl succeeded in negotiating the rain-pipe, and sprawling on the leads above.

'Oooogh! Ooooooh! Urrrrrrgh! Oh, crikey! Urrrrrgh!' floated down from a breathless fat Owl, as he sprawled.

Herbert Vernon-Smith stood panting below. But he did not linger. He cut away in the darkness. He was done with Billy Bunter now, and free to go on his way and join his sporting friends at the Cross Keys. He lost no time in dropping from the Cloister wall, and tramping away down the dark lane,—little dreaming of what was to happen before his return.

CHAPTER 18

BUNTER BORROWS A BED

HARRY WHARTON awoke.

He did not know, for a moment, what had awakened him. He had been dreaming,—of cricket at Felgate, certainly not of the fat Removite who had been sacked from Greyfriars. But he wondered whether he was not still dreaming, as a fat familiar voice came whispering through the shadows:

'I say, you fellows.'

The captain of the Remove sat up in bed. He stared about him in the gloom, and a glint of spectacles met his view, in the glimmer of summer starlight from the high windows of the dormitory.

He was not dreaming! That whispering was the voice of Billy Bunter: that gleam of glasses came from the spectacles that adorned the plump visage of the Owl of the Remove. Harry Wharton stared blankly. It was Bunter,—the banished but irrepressible Owl!

'I say, you fellows! Any of you awake?' came the whisper: quite a loud whisper. Bunter did not want to be heard outside the Remove dormitory: but he wanted the inhabitants of that dormitory to hear.

'Bunter!' breathed Harry Wharton.

'That you, Harry, old chap?'

'You fat lunatic, how did you get here?' breathed Wharton. 'What on earth do you fancy you're up to now?'

'Oh, really, Wharton—.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' came sleepily from another bed. 'What's the row? Who's up?'

'It's me, Bob, old fellow—.'

Bob Cherry was heard to jump in bed. 'Bunter!' he ejaculated.

'Great pip!' came from Johnny Bull. Fellows were awakening all along the row of beds.

'Bunter—!'

'That fat chump!' said Frank Nugent.

'The ridiculous Bunter!' exclaimed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bunter!' chortled Skinner. 'Turned up like a bad penny again! Didn't Quelch shove you in the train at Lantham, fatty?'

'I dodged him at Lantham,' answered Bunter. 'Of course, I wasn't going home. I'm not going to be bunked—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You—you—you've come back again!' stuttered Peter Todd. 'You've turned up here in the middle of the night! How on earth did you get in?'

'Through the box-room window,' answered Bunter. 'I thought I should have to crack a pane to get it open: but it was all right, as Smithy left it unfastened—.'

'Smithy!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'Yes, and he gave me a bunk up,' said Bunter. 'I slipped back a good many times, getting up that rotten pipe, but Smithy gave me a bunk up, and—.'

'What do you mean, you fat duffer?' It was a voice from Tom Redwing's bed, in sharp tones. 'Smithy's in bed here, like the rest of us.'

'He, he, he! That's all you know!' chuckled Bunter. 'But never mind Smithy! I say, you fellows, I've got back. Anybody got a match? I'd better not turn on the light—it might be seen from the windows. Somebody got a candle? I can tell you, I'm jolly tired. I got a lift most of the way back, but I've had to walk miles—miles and miles! I want to turn in, and I don't want any beastly beak coming up. Who's got a match?'

There was a scratch, and a glimmer of flickering flame.

Bob Cherry had stepped out of bed and struck the match. He lighted a candle-end, and set it on a wash-stand. In the flickering light of the candle, William George Bunter was revealed to the staring eyes of all the Remove.

The fat Owl looked tired. He looked dusty. He did not look as if he had been enjoying life. No doubt he hadn't!

'It's Bunter!' said Bob, staring at him in the candle-light. 'Bunter, as large as life and twice as natural. You blithering bloater—.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—.'

'They've booted you out twice!' said Bob. 'Have you come back to be booted out a third time, you fat ass?'

'I'm jolly well not going to be bunked—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Quiet, you fellows!' exclaimed Tom Redwing. 'We don't want Quelch up here.' He was not thinking of Bunter. He was staring at Herbert Vernon-Smith's empty bed.

Other fellows stared at it, too. Before Bunter's arrival, no one in the Remove dormitory had known or suspected anything of the Bounder's absence. But they all knew now. Only too evidently, the scapegrace of the Remove was out of bounds after lights out.

Harry Wharton's lips curled. Johnny Bull gave an expressive grunt. Skinner laughed. But Tom Redwing's face was darkly clouded.

Smithy's ways were not his ways: but though that reckless kink in his chum irked him, it made no difference to their friendship. Redwing's chief feeling now was alarm for his chum. If Bunter's antics brought Quelch up, Smithy's absence could not fail to be discovered, with dire results.

'So Smithy's out!' said Frank Nugent. 'Well, if they come up after Bunter, Smithy's number is up, as well as Bunter's.'

'Serve him right!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'I say, you fellows—.'

'You've seen Smithy, Bunter?' asked Bob.

'Yes: he was coming down the rain-pipe from the box-room, when I was trying to get up, and he banged his foot on my head—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! I say, you fellows, what have they been doing to my bed?' exclaimed Bunter.

Billy Bunter blinked at a denuded bed. Apparently he had thought that his bed would be made as usual, and ready for him: if he had thought at all, which was perhaps improbable. Bunter was ready for bed—more than ready. But no bed was ready for Bunter.

The bedstead, certainly, was still there. But there was nothing on it. It had been stripped, even to the mattress. As Billy Bunter was no longer a member of the Remove, and as the bed was not required, the bedclothes had naturally been taken away under the instruction of the House dame. A bare iron bedstead was all that greeted Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles.

The fat Owl blinked at that bedstead in dismay. 'I say, you fellows—!'

'You'll have to rough it, old fat man, if you're staying,' chuckled Squiff.

'Of course I'm staying!' yapped Bunter. 'But I can't sleep on a bed without any bedclothes. Oh, lor!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

"Quiet, for goodness sake!" breathed Redwing. 'If Quelch hears a sound—!'

His anxiety for his scapegrace chum was keen.

'I say, you fellows, what am I going to do?'

'Better call up Mrs. Keeble, and ask her for your bed-clothes!' suggested Skinner.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I'm jolly nearly dropping!' wailed Bunter. 'I've jolly nearly walked my legs off! I say, shall I turn in with you, Bob, old chap?'

'Not till they give me a bed double-width,' answered Bob Cherry. 'Even then it would be a squeeze.'

'Beast! I say, if you fellows give me your blankets, perhaps I could manage. Half-a-dozen blankets—.'

'Don't all you fellows speak at once!' said Bob.

'Well, I'm jolly well going to turn into Smithy's bed, then!' exclaimed Bunter, desperately.

'Smithy can turn in with you when he comes back, Redwing. Tell him not to wake me up, will you?'

'Ha, ha, ha! '

'I can see Smithy not waking him up, if he finds Bunter in his bed!' chortled Skinner. 'Better look out for squalls, Bunter, if you bag Smithy's bed.'

'Beast!'

'Better let Smithy's bed alone, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'Shan't!' hooted Bunter. 'I'm going to turn in: and if Smithy kicks up a row when he gets back, he will be copped,, and sacked, and serve him jolly well right, so yah!'

And, having made up his fat mind on that point, Billy Bunter lost no time in changing into the pyjamas Smithy had left carelessly lying across his pillow and plunging into Smithy's bed. There were chuckles up and down the dormitory, as Bob Cherry blew out the candle. Most of the fellows were of opinion that something in the nature of an earthquake would happen to Billy Bunter, when Smithy came back and found the fat Owl in his bed. Bunter, however, was thinking of the bed, not of the Bounder. He laid his fat head on Smithy's pillow. In a few minutes more, the fat Owl would have been fast asleep. But there came a sudden ejaculation from Bob Cherry's bed.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' Bunter's eyes opened again.

'I say, you fellows, don't jaw! A fellow wants to go to sleep—.'

'Somebody's coming!'

'Eh?'

'Oh, my hat!' breathed Harry Wharton. There was a quiet but firm, tread in the corridor. The Remove fellows knew that tread. 'That sounds like Quelch!'

'Oh, crikey! '

Billy Bunter grabbed at the bedclothes, and drew them up over a fat head. Under the bedclothes, he palpitated: while every ear listened-in to that firm tread approaching the door of the Remove dormitory.

CHAPTER 19

QUELCH COMES HOME LATE

'GOOD night, sir!' said Trumble, the old porter at Friardale railway station. Mr. Quelch just managed to reply 'Good night, Trumble!' without snapping. But it was not easy.

Never had the Remove master of Greyfriars felt more like snapping, alike at the just and the unjust.

Quelch was, sad to relate, in a very bad temper.

He had had much to try him. The events of that day might have frayed the edges of the sweetest temper. It was bad enough for a member of his form to be expelled from the school. But for that member to turn up again like a bad penny, after being seen off by train, was really too much. And that was not the worst—not nearly the worst. Bunter, escorted for a second time to the railway, and this time by no less a person than Mr. Quelch, had still failed to take the homeward trail. Quelch had been assigned to make sure that the egregious Owl departed this time. He had failed in his assignment.

Where Bunter was now, he had no idea.

He had looked for him in Lantham, for quite a long time. Finally, as there seemed nothing else to be done, he had taken a train back to Courtfield. There he would have taken a taxi to the school, had one been available. But, as it never rains but it pours, no taxi happened to be available: and Mr. Quelch had taken the local train to Friardale, which was only half a mile from Greyfriars. Now he had to walk the half a mile: and, at the end of that walk, report to Dr. Locke that he had lost Bunter—a most disagreeable prospect. It was no wonder, perhaps, that Mr. Quelch was in the worst temper ever.

However, he managed to respond to Trumble's 'Good night' without snapping—just! Then he started to walk by Friardale Lane to the school. It was a rather late hour: Quelch's evening had been wholly wasted on Bunter. Quelch's time was of value: many little things had had to be neglected, owing to that waste of time. And he was concerned for Bunter—at large in Lantham—so far as Quelch knew! Where was that obtuse boy now? Had he some fatuous intention of reappearing at Greyfriars on the following day? For what reason could he have eluded Quelch at Lantham? Quelch could not help feeling that he was not done with Bunter yet, and that the next day a familiar fat face might be seen about the school! It was all very disturbing and perturbing. Quelch, as he strode under the dark branches along Friardale Lane, rather resembled in aspect the Alpine climber in the poem: his brow was set, his eye beneath flashed like a falchion from its sheath! He was concerned for Bunter: and at the same time, fairly yearning to lay a cane about that fat and fatuous youth. He was envisaging quite an uncomfortable interview with Dr. Locke: already, in his mind's eye, he could see the Head raising his eyebrows, at the report that Bunter was still at large. He was so deep in discomfiting reflections, that he did not observe a shadowy figure lurking under the trees, in the dip in Friardale Lane where it was darkest, the thick branches above shutting out most of the summer starlight.

He became aware of that shadowy figure suddenly, as it moved out into his path, at the same time uttering a shrill whistle.

Mr. Quelch came to an abrupt halt.

"Old on, guvnor!" came a husky voice: accompanied by a far from agreeable whiff of beer and tobacco.

Mr. Quelch stared at the man. In the glimmer of starlight that came through the branches, he discerned a burly, muscular figure, and a spotted muffler that concealed a face. The whistle, evidently, had been a signal: for it was followed by another burly figure emerging from the shadows on the other side of the lane, also with a spotted muffler tied over the face.

For the moment, Quelch was startled. The next, his face set like iron. He had a stout walking-stick under his arm. He slid it down into his hand. He did not need telling that these two shadowy figures, lurking in the dark lane, were footpads: probably a couple of the racing roughs from Wapshot. But he was not in the least alarmed. He was, in fact, just in the mood to deal with them.

'What do you want?' he rapped. There was not the faintest tremor in his voice. Quelch was hard as nails. 'That's an easy one, guvnor! Only your wallet, and your watch, and anything else you've got in your togs, and—OH!

Crack!

Quelch's hand, with the walking-stick in it, moved like lightning. The crack of the stick on the footpad's head was followed by a frantic yell, as the ruffian staggered away. 'Oh! Ow! Oh! My 'ead! Ow! Get him, Mouldy!' spluttered the recipient of the walking-stick. Pug, for the moment, had had enough.

But as Mouldy jumped at Mr. Quelch, the walking-stick whirled round, and came with a terrific crash across the spotted muffler. Mouldy, in his turn, tottered back, yelling.

'Oh! Ow! My smeller! Wow!' Apparently the nose under the spotted muffler was damaged. 'You rascals!' Quelch stood firm as a rock, brandishing the walking-stick. 'You lawless rascals!

'Ow! My 'ead!

'Wow! My blinking boko!

Pug and Mouldy backed away. Probably they had thought it quite an easy thing to 'hold up' an elderly gentleman in a dark lane—as easy as 'holding up' a fat schoolboy in a wood! They were rather in the position of the hunters who, expecting to start a hare, came on the fierce old bear! They backed away quite hurriedly from the grim face and the brandished walking-stick.

'Oh! Ow! My nose—!' moaned Mouldy. 'Ow! wow! My 'ead!' groaned Pug.

Quelch, with glinting eye, strode at them, with the stout stick in the air.

'Now, you rascals—!' he rasped. "Ere, you keep orf!" howled Pug.

'You 'op it, and let a bloke alone!' yelled Mouldy. Crack! crack! Twice the stick landed, once on Pug, and once on Mouldy. Quelch would willingly have administered a few more: he was warming to the work. But Pug and Mouldy did not wait for more. They bolted, yelling, into the dark trees beside the lane: no longer thinking of Quelch's wallet, or his watch, or anything else in his 'togs': and only anxious to escape from Quelch. The Remove master was left victorious on the scene of action.

Mr. Quelch gave a contemptuous snort, and resumed his way. He saw nothing more of Messrs. Pug and Mouldy. They had had quite enough of the Tartar they had caught. Quelch strode on, and dismissed them from mind.

Greyfriars came in sight: the ancient buildings and ivied walls glimmering in the summer stars. Quelch headed for masters' gate, in the shadow of elm branches over the wall. Old

Gosling was probably fast asleep in his lodge at that late hour: but Quelch had a key to masters' gate, and could let himself in.

That gate was on the little lane that ran by the old Cloister wall. Quelch was fumbling in his pocket for his key, when a sound near at hand caused him to start, and glance round sharply. It was a rustling in the thick old ivy of the Cloister wall.

The starlight, under the overhanging branches, was dim and uncertain. But Quelch's sharp eyes had a momentary glimpse of a figure that detached itself from the ivied wall and darted away into the darkness.

He stood quite still, staring.

For a moment, he thought of Bunter. Was it possible—could it be possible—that that foolish, fatuous fellow had returned to the school already? But it was only for a moment that he thought of Bunter. The figure he had glimpsed was going, not coming. And it was nothing like Bunter's. In the dimmest light Billy Bunter would have been known by his circumference. Quelch had had the merest momentary glimpse of that vanishing figure,—but it was nothing at all like Bunter's. But there had been something familiar about it. Was it some Greyfriars junior, breaking school bounds at that late hour?

Quelch's face grew grimmer. He ceased to think of Bunter, and thought of another member of his form—Herbert Vernon-Smith. He had long had a doubtful eye on that particular member of his form. He suspected—he almost knew,—the ways of the scapegrace of Greyfriars. Was it—?

He could not be sure. He could not be quite sure that that briefly-glimpsed figure belonged to Greyfriars at all. It might have been some vagrant—some unknown person with whom he had no concern. But—!

Quietly, he unlocked the gate, and went in. It was a simple matter to make sure upon one point at least: whether all the boys of his form were in bed in the Remove dormitory, as certainly they should have been. He had to see the Head about Bunter,—but, for the moment, he dismissed both the Head and Bunter from his mind. He was going to make sure first that all the Remove—and more especially one particular member—were safe in bed, or whether, as he strongly suspected, that particular member was absent! His face was grim as he let himself into the House: and it grew grimmer as he made his way up to the Remove dormitory: to investigate.

CHAPTER 20

LUCK FOR TWO

'I SAY, you fellows—!'

'Quiet, you fat ass!'

'I say, think it's Quelch?' breathed Billy Bunter, in a terrified whisper from under Smithy's blankets.

'Sounds like him!' said Bob Cherry. 'You'd better keep mum, fathead, if you don't want to be hooked out'

'But I—I say, Quelch can't know. I've got in! I—I left him at Lantham,—he can't know I've got back—!' mumbled Bunter.

'He will know fast enough, if you don't give your chin a rest. He won't be in a good temper. Do you want six in Smithy's pyjamas?'

There was a chuckle from some of the beds. But there was no chuckle from Billy Bunter. Bunter was palpitating. He did not need telling that Quelch would not be in a good temper, if he found him there: and assuredly he did not want 'six' on Smithy's pyjamas!

'I—I say, you fellows, don't you say anything!' mumbled the fat Owl. 'Quelch will think it's Smithy in this bed, if you don't tell him. Don't you fellows say a word—'

'Keep quiet, Bunter!' came an anxious whisper from Tom Redwing. 'Keep your face out of sight, if Quelch looks in—.'

'And keep mum.' said Nugent.

'Mumfulness is the word, my esteemed idiotic Bunter.' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'Speech is silvery, but silence is the bird in the bush that makes Jack a dull boy!'

'But I say, you fellows, mind you don't say anything—.'

'Quiet!' breathed Tom Redwing. 'If Quelch doesn't spot you in that bed, it will be all right for Smithy!'

'Eh? Blow Smithy! But I say—!'

'Quiet!' hissed Bob Cherry. 'We'd better all be fast asleep, you fellows—not a sound—!'

'But I say, you fellows—!'

'Quiet!'

Even Billy Bunter was quiet, as the door-handle was heard to turn. The footsteps had stopped at the dormitory door.

Every head was on a pillow now: all eyes were closed.

Quelch,—if it was Quelch—was going to find his form all deep in slumber when he looked in!

The door opened.

Billy Bunter, his fat face concealed by the edge of a sheet, suppressed a gasp. Quelch couldn't know that he was there—he simply couldn't! It must be for some other reason that he was paying that unexpected late visit to the Remove dormitory. Quelch couldn't know a thing: and surely he would take it for granted that Smithy's bed had its usual occupant. That, at all events, was Billy Bunter's only chance. It was Smithy's only chance, too: if Bunter had thought of Smithy. But the fat Owl's concern was wholly for William George Bunter, and he did not waste a thought on Smithy.

Closed eyes were aware of a sudden light. The switch at the doorway had been turned on. Many eyes half-opened, to take a surreptitious peep. Then there was no doubt that the visitor was Mr. Quelch.

He stood in the doorway, looking in.

His glance swept along the row of beds. He took no note of the stripped bed that had been Bunter's. But had one of the other beds been unoccupied, the fact would have leaped to Quelch's eyes at once.

His grim face relaxed a little, as he saw that all the beds were occupied. The Remove fellows, still as mice with the cat at hand, waited breathlessly for his next move. If that keen glance along the beds satisfied Quelch, and he went, all was well: the palpitating fat Owl would be safe for the night, and Smithy's outbreak would remain undiscovered. And little as most of the fellows liked the Bounder's ways, nobody wanted him to be found out and 'sacked': least of all Tom Redwing.

A few moments, which seemed very long to the juniors, elapsed. Quelch did not go. He stood where he was, looking in. And when, at length, he made a move, it was not to depart: it was to walk quietly into the dormitory.

He walked very quietly. Quelch did not want to awaken his form, at that late hour, if it could be helped, and evidently he had no suspicion that they were all wide-awake already! But Quelch, as his form knew only too well, was no fool. He knew all about the device of a 'dummy' in a bed. His gimlet-eyes were fixed on Vernon-Smith's bed, which certainly looked as it contained a sleeper. But Quelch was aware that appearances might be deceptive. A fellow out of bounds after lights out might very likely leave a dummy in his bed, to deceive a casual or careless glance. The reckless Bounder had not taken that precaution: neither would it have deceived Quelch, who was not likely to be either casual or careless in making such an investigation.

Quietly, Mr. Quelch walked directly to the Bounder's bed. He was going to make absolutely sure that a Greyfriars junior was in that bed, and not a bundle of sweaters or overcoats. As he stopped at the bedside, all the Remove knew he was there. It was not Bunter he was after—it was the Bounder. For some reason, unknown to them. Quelch suspected that Vernon-Smith might be out of the dormitory—and he had come there specially to ascertain. Tom Redwing hardly breathed. He was not concerned about Bunter and his amazing antics. But if Quelch found the fat Owl in that bed, Smithy's number was up. He would get what he deserved, no doubt: but that was no comfort to his chum. Other fellows were feeling anxious, as well as Redwing. But their anxiety, compared with Billy Bunter's, was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine! Billy Bunter fairly squirmed with dread, as he heard those quiet footsteps stop at the bedside, and knew that the gimlet-eyes were scanning the bed.

That squirm saved the fat Owl.

Quelch's face, already suspicious, grew more suspicious, as he noted that the edge of the sheet covered the head on the pillow. He expected that, if it was a 'dummy' in the bed. But the next moment, all his suspicions vanished, as the terrified fat Owl squirmed and wriggled, and the bedclothes stirred. Obviously, that bed had a live occupant! A 'dummy' could not have moved! Quelch's frowning brow cleared. He was prepared to mete out stern justice if required. But it was a relief to him to find that his suspicions were unfounded. There was a sleeper in that bed, who had stirred in his sleep: or so, at least, it seemed to Quelch. He stepped quietly away.

He gave one more glance up and down the dormitory.

No one, it appeared, had awakened. Quietly, he moved back to the door, switched off the light, and went, closing the door softly behind him: glad that his nocturnal visit had not awakened his form! Footsteps died away down the corridor.

'Oh, crikey!' came a gasp from Vernon-Smith's bed. I—I—I say, you fellows— oh, crikey!

'All serene, old fat man,' said Bob Cherry.

'You're in luck, you blithering Owl!' said Harry Wharton 'Safe till the morning—then look out for the boot!'

'Oh, really, Wharton—.'

'Smithy's in luck, too!' chuckled Skinner. 'If Quelch had found that bed empty, it would have been the long jump for Smithy.'

'Serve him right!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'True, O Ming!' said Bob. 'But we don't want Smithy bunked like Bunter, all the same.

You've saved Smithy's bacon, Bunter!

'Blow, Smithy!' grunted Bunter.

And the fat Owl, relieved of his terrors, laid a fat head on Smithy's pillow and closed his eyes. About a minute later there was a deep rumbling sound which the Remove had never expected to hear in their dormitory again: the resonant snore of Billy Bunter. The fat Owl of the Remove, 'bunked' but still at Greyfriars School in spite of 'bunking', slept, and snored: and forgot his woes and tribulations in balmy slumber.

The other fellows were not long in following his example: with one exception. Tom Redwing was still wide awake when, much later, the door opened almost without a sound, and a stealthy footstep was barely audible in the silence. Redwing sat up in bed and whispered, in the darkness:

'Smithy!'

There was a sound of a suddenly-caught breath.

'Reddy! You're awake! You—.'

'Bunter's here—!' whispered Redwing.

'That fat ass! So he's got in! Nothing to do with me is it?'

'He's turned in, in your bed—.'

'By gum! The cheeky fat chump. I'll hook him out fast enough—!'

'Hold on, Smithy! Quelch has been up here, and if your bed had been empty, you'd have been nailed—.'

'Oh!' gasped the Bounder.

'Bunter's pulled you through! Leave him alone,—you can turn in with me.'

And Billy Bunter's balmy slumbers continued undisturbed: and his snore echoed in the Remove dormitory till the rising-bell rang in the sunny morning.

CHAPTER 21

BUNTER AGAIN!

'ON my word!' ejaculated Mr. Prout.

Prout was quite taken by surprise.

He was so surprised that he expressed it in monosyllables. Generally Prout was polysyllabic. Greyfriars fellows were out in 'break' in the sunny morning, and Mr. Prout had come into his study. He wanted some papers for the Fifth in form and he glanced over his study table for them. But the next moment, he forgot form and the Fifth, as he stared, with eyes almost bulging, at a sheet of paper on his blotter. Prout read that paper like a man in a dream. Never had he been so astonished.

'On my word!' he repeated. Then, recovering himself a little, 'Amazing! Unprecedented! Unparalleled!'

Prout had forgotten Billy Bunter. True he had heard, the previous day that the young rascal who had tomatoed him had reappeared in the school after being sent home. But he had been dispatched a second time: and Prout had dismissed him from mind. He had not expected to be reminded of him. Now he was most unexpectedly and surprisingly reminded. With bulging eyes he gazed at that paper on the blotter. It ran:

Deer Mr. Prowt,

It wasn't me chukked the tommatoe that squashed on your noze. It was sumbody else but I don't kno whoo. I hoap you will believe me and speek to the Head about it so that he will lett me off. I can't go home in the middel of the turm the pater would be in a pheerful wacks. I ashore you that it wasn't me as I never did it and it was only a joak about the egg and I nevvver tutchted a tommatoe at all and woodent have buzzed it at your noze if I had.

W. G. Bunter.

Prout did not know the handwriting. As it looked as if a fly had bathed in the inkpot, and then crawled over the paper, any Remove fellow could have told him that it was Bunter's. The spelling was not so unfamiliar: it reminded him of Coker's! But the signature was Bunter's: that note had been left for him by the Owl of the Remove, whom, so far as he remembered him at all, he had supposed to be at home long ago. That note had been written by Bunter of the Remove, and evidently recently. Bunter, so far from being at home in Surrey, was still at school in Kent! Bunter, expelled by the Head, escorted to the railway station by Mr. Quelch, was still at Greyfriars School! Really, it was no wonder that Prout pronounced it unprecedented and unparalleled!

'Bunter!' said Mr. Prout, quite dazedly. 'The boy Bunter! Then he is here again—he must have returned—amazing! Unprecedented!! The boy is actually here—in the House—he is expelled, but he is here—unparalleled!'

Mr. Prout snatched that remarkable epistle from the blotter, and, with it clutched in a plump hand, rolled out of his study. If Billy Bunter hoped that that appeal would touch the Fifth-form master's heart, and cause him to relent, Billy Bunter was booked for disappointment. A tomato squashing on his majestic visage was not easily forgotten or forgiven. Only the direct

punishment was adequate in such a case. There was no sign of relenting about Prout, as he elephantined out of the study with Bunter's note in his hand. His plump face expressed only wrath, towering wrath, compared with which Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring of woes unnumbered, was a mere passing breeze. Purple, Prout rolled along to Mr. Quelch's study.

He found the Remove master there—and was met by a glance that seemed to come straight from the Arctic regions.

Quelch was not in the best of tempers that morning. The Head had been just a little acid on the subject of Bunter. There had had to be a late telephone-call to Bunter's home. There had been another in the morning, which had only elicited the news that Bunter had not arrived under the parental roof. What had become of Bunter, since he had escaped at Lantham, Quelch did not know, and could not guess. But he more than half-expected to hear, during the day, that the egregious Owl had reappeared once more in the school from which he had been 'bunked'. Any other fellow, sacked from school, would have disappeared, and not been heard of again. But the Owl of the Remove seemed to resemble the man in the story who was dead but wouldn't lie down! 'Bunking' seemed to make no difference to Bunter!

With that worry on his mind, Quelch was in no mood for Prout.

'Mr. Quelch—!' boomed Prout. He was interrupted. 'I am busy this morning, Mr. Prout.'

Quelch's voice was as Arctic as his look, 'I have no time—.'

'There is a matter, Quelch, that I must bring to your notice without a moment's delay—.'

The gimlet-eyes glittered.

'Mr. Prout! If you have more complaints to make about boys in my form—!' Quelch almost barked.

'Look at that, sir!' boomed Prout. He threw, or rather hurled, Bunter's note on Quelch's table. 'Look at that, Mr. Quelch! Look at it!'

Quelch, in surprise, looked at it. Then he jumped. 'That—that—that is from Bunter!' he ejaculated.

'Yes, sir,—from the boy who was expelled from the school, sir, yesterday, sir, for an unprecedented and unparalleled assault upon a member of Dr. Locke's staff, sir—for hurling a tomato, sir—.'

'When did you get this note, Mr. Prout?'

'I have just found it, sir, on my study table. It was left there, sir, for me to find! It was left there, sir, by Bunter—by that boy of your form, sir, who was justly expelled for an unprecedented outrage, sir—and who, sir, must be in the House at this moment, sir—and who, sir, must be found immediately and sent away from the school, sir!' boomed Prout. Quelch compressed his lips hard.

He had wondered where Bunter was, and whether he would turn up at Greyfriars again. He knew now.

'The boy must be in the House—actually in the House!' Prout went on booming, 'He must have found some opportunity of entering unperceived, since the doors were opened this morning, sir! As the boy is—or rather, was—as the boy was in your form, sir, I conclude that you will deal with the matter, and without delay, sir!'

'I shall certainly deal with the matter, and without delay, Mr. Prout,' answered Mr. Quelch, in tones that might have come from the deepest depths of a refrigerator. 'You may leave it in my hands!'

Prout, with a final snort, revolved on his axis, and elephantined out of the Remove master's study. Quelch was left staring at Bunter's note in his hand. Evidently,—only too evidently,—Billy Bunter had returned once more to Greyfriars, and was now about the House somewhere, otherwise he could not have left that note for Prout in his study. Bunter had to be found, and dispatched home once more: and this time Quelch resolved, he should be accompanied all the way home by a Sixth-form prefect, who should have instruction not to leave him till he was actually under the roof of Bunter Villa.

Mr. Quelch looked from his study window. Many fellows were in sight in the sunny quad: but the familiar fat figure of Billy Bunter was not to be discerned. If the Owl of the Remove was in the school, he was not showing up in public.

The Remove master stood frowning: and as Wingate of the Sixth came along the path, he called to him. The Greyfriars captain glanced round, and came to the window. 'Wingate, I have just learned that Bunter has returned here, for the second time—it appears that he is now in the House—.'

Wingate stared.

'Bunter!' he exclaimed, blankly.

'You have seen nothing of him, Wingate?'

'Nothing, sir! It seems hardly possible—.'

'The absurd boy is certainly beret Wingate. He left a note for Mr. Prout in his study, so he must be in the House.'

'The young ass!' breathed Wingate.

'Will you, with the assistance of the other prefects, please make a search for him. Probably he may be found in the Remove studies.'

'Oh, certainly, sir.'

The astonished Greyfriars captain hurried away. A few minutes later Wingate, Gwynne, Loder, Walker, and other prefects of the Sixth, were looking for the elusive fat Owl. Mr. Quelch was left with Bunter's note in his hand, reading it over again with a very thoughtful brow. He was puzzled: and something like a doubt was creeping into his mind.

Was it possible—could it be possible—that a mistake had been made in this matter? Prout was certain on the subject: but Quelch, in his own private opinion had no great respect for Prout's intelligence. Bunter had strenuously denied the charge: but that counted for little, for Bunter's word was worth nothing, or less than nothing. No doubt justice had been done. And yet—!

Yet was there a doubt, after all?

Bunter was obtuse—indeed the extreme limit in obtuseness,—but could even Bunter be obtuse enough to haunt the school from which he had been expelled, if actually he had committed the unpardonable act of tomatoing a form-master? What was the use of this appeal to Prout, if actually he was the culprit?

It seemed to Quelch that he detected a genuine ring in that epistle from the unfortunate Owl. Or was it just one more sample of Billy Bunter's ineradicable untruthfulness?

Quelch read that note again, and yet again. He pondered. But finally, he shook his head. With that shake of the head he dismissed doubt. Billy Bunter's system of fibbing on all occasions had come home to roost! Habitual unveracity was his undoing. The hapless fat Owl was telling the truth,—but nobody could believe him.

CHAPTER 22

BUNTER IN THE BOX-ROOM

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'That fat ass—!'

'He's been here, then—!'

'Looks like it!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Harry Wharton and Co. were not unsympathetic.

Really and truly, they compassioned the unlucky fat Owl of the Remove. But they could not help laughing. The affair undoubtedly had its comic side. Billy Bunter's antics might also have made a stone image laugh.

Bunter,—not an early riser when he could help it, had turned out that morning at the first clang of the rising-bell. He did not want to be caught in bed. He had vanished from the Remove dormitory, and had not been seen since. But the Remove fellows had no doubt that he was still about the premises somewhere, and wondered how long it would be before he was on his travels again. Bunter himself seemed to fancy that, somehow or other, he was going to stick to Greyfriars, expulsion or no expulsion. But no one else shared that fancy. Whether the authorities had yet discovered that the fat Owl was back in the school, the juniors did not know. Nothing seemed to have been seen or heard of him, so far. The Famous Five had wondered where he might be, till they came up to No. 1 Study in break that morning. Harry Wharton had a parcel under his arm, which had arrived from Wharton Lodge, and had been collected from Gosling. They had come up to the study to unpack that parcel, and dispose of the contents in break. But they forgot the parcel, for the moment, at the sight of a sheet of impot paper on the study table, which, like the note Mr. Prout had found, looked as if a fly had bathed in the inkpot and crawled over it. They knew the 'fist' of William George Bunter. Bunter, evidently, had been there, during class that morning, and had left a note for them, as well as one for Prout.

They read it together, with grinning faces.

Dear Wharton.

I haven't had any brekker this morning ekscept a caik I fownd in Smithy's studdy, and I am pheerfully hungry. When you find this noat do be a pall and bring me sumthing to eet in the bocks room. I will settle for it out of my nekst postal-order. I have ritten a noat to Prowt and I hope he will kno that it wasn't me, but I am not gowing to be bunked annyway.

W. G. Bunter.

P.S. Cum as kwickly as you can with sum grubb.

'Oh, my hat!' said Bob Cherry. 'So he's in the box-room! How long does the fat ass think that he can keep up this game!'

'Does he think at all?' asked Nugent, doubtfully.

'The thankfulness of the esteemed fat Bunter is not terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'If the fat chump has left a note for Prout, as he says, they'll know he's back, and they won't be long rooting him out,' said Johnny Bull.

Harry Wharton nodded.

'No doubt about that!' he said. 'Look here, you fellows, we came up to whack this parcel, but—.'

'But—!' grinned Bob Cherry.

'Well, if Bunter's missed his brekker, it's pretty awful—for Bunter—.'

'The awfulness is preposterous!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Harry Wharton untied the parcel on the study table.

There was a note inside from his Aunt Amy. The other contents were of a more substantial nature: a cake of considerable dimensions, a carton packed with delicious jam-tarts, a box of tangerines, and several other enticing things.

The Co. looked at them. They all had healthy boyish appetites, and liked a spot of refreshment in 'break'. But they could not disregard the pathetic appeal of a hungry Owl in a box-room. Quite heroically they resolved and agreed to pass on that consignment of tuck to the disconsolate Owl.

'Come on!' said Bob.

And they gathered up the various packages, and left the study. There could be no doubt that Bunter would be looked for, as soon as his presence was known. But so far, the search did not seem to have begun: the coast was clear in the Remove passage, at all events. They hurried up that passage to the box-room stair at the end, and mounted the stair to the little landing above, on which the box-room door opened. That door was shut: and it did not open as Bob Cherry turned the handle.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! It's locked!' said Bob. 'The fat chump has locked himself in!'

He banged on the box-room door, 'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Are you there, Bunter, you ass!

Bunter! Bunty! Bunt!'

'I say, you fellows.'

Evidently Bunter was there, for his fat squeak came through the keyhole.

'Open the door, fathead,' said Harry Wharton.

'Have you got some grub?'

'Lots!'

'Oh, good!' gasped Bunter, from within. 'I'm fearfully hungry. But I—I say, is there anybody about?'

'Only us!' answered Harry.

'Sure?' gasped Bunter.

'The surefulness is terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter.'

'Sure Quelch ain't about—or a pre?'

'Nobody but us, at present, fathead,' answered the captain of the Remove. 'Do you want the grub or not?'

'Oh! Yes! Rather!' gasped Bunter. 'If—if you're sure there ain't a pre hanging about, or—or Quelch—or old Pompous—or—or anybody! I ain't going to be bunked, you know.'

'Oh, crumbs!' ejaculated Frank Nugent. 'Does that blithering owl fancy that he can stay on here, locked in a box-room?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

That, apparently, was Bunter's present idea. There was no doubt that he was anxious for provender: nevertheless, he was in no hurry to open the door. He wanted to make quite, quite sure that the enemy was not in the offing, before that door was opened.

'It's all right, fathead!' bawled Bob. 'Nobody about but us! We've got a cake, and jam-tarts—.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. Those magic words seemed to banish his misgivings. There was a sound of a bolt being withdrawn in the box-room. The door was pulled open, and a fat face and a big pair of spectacles looked out.

'I say, you fellows—I' gasped Bunter. He blinked past the group of juniors for a moment, to make sure that no one else was on the landing. Then his eyes and his spectacles concentrated on the provender. 'Oh! Good! I say, don't you fellows come in—I've got to shut the door quick if they come up—just hand in the grub—.'

'Here you are, fathead!'

Billy Bunter grabbed at packages with both fat hands.

Almost in a moment, that supply of provender was inside the box-room, and a jam-tart was in Billy Bunter's capacious mouth, to begin with. He crunched happily.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' murmured Bob Cherry. There were footsteps below, in the Remove passage. 'Somebody's coming—.'

There was a squeak of alarm from Bunter.

The box-room door slammed shut, almost on Bob's nose. There was a creaking of a rather rusty bolt, as it was pushed home. Harry Wharton and Co. stood looking at one another in silence. From the Remove passage a voice floated the box-room stair: the voice of Wingate of the Sixth Form.

'You look in the studies! The young ass must be about here somewhere! I'll draw the box-room.'

'The pre's are after him!' murmured Nugent.

There was no doubt about that. A moment more, and Wingate's face rose into view on the box-room stair. He stepped on the landing, and stared at the chums of the Remove, and they stared at him. Then he crossed to the box-room door, and turned the handle.

CHAPTER 23

BUNTER WON'T GO

'BUNTER!' No reply.

'Are you there, Bunter?' Silence.

Wingate shook the door-handle. As the door did not open, it was evident that it was fastened inside. The Greyfriars captain had no doubt that Billy Bunter had been trailed to his lair.

He thumped on the door.

'Let me in, Bunter! Do you hear?'

If Bunter heard, he heeded not. No reply came from within the box-room. George Wingate breathed rather hard. Really, he had no time to waste on Bunter. But it appeared that he had to waste some.

Although no voice proceeded from the box-room, another sound was heard from within. It was the sound of munching. Billy Bunter, regardless of authority at the door, was disposing of the provender. Perhaps his plump jaws were too busy for speech with jam-tarts going down like oysters.

Wingate gave the door another resounding thump. He was getting angry.

'Bunter, you young ass! I know you're there! Open this door at once,' he exclaimed.

Then Billy Bunter paused, for a moment, in the mastication of jam-tarts, to reply. His reply was brief, but emphatic.

'Shan't!'

Wingate glared at the door. His look was most expressive. Glares, however, produced no effect on a bolted door.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Bunter's asking for it.'

'The askfulness is terrific!' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bunter!' Wingate fairly roared. 'Will you open this door immediately?'

'No, I won't.'

'I'm going to take you to your form-master.'

'I'll watch it.'

Thump! thump! thump! Thrice Wingate thumped on the door. But if he expected that that would induce Bunter to withdraw the bolt, he was disappointed. The door remained fast: and as the thumping died away, the sound of munching was once more heard. Bunter was still busy on the foodstuffs.

Gwynne of the Sixth appeared on the box-room stair, and looked across the landing.

'Found him?' he asked.

'Yes, he's in the box-room! He's locked himself in, the young ass, and won't open the door,' growled Wingate. 'Oh, holy smoke! Better report to Quelch!' grinned Gwynne. 'It's up to Quelch.'

'I suppose so!' assented Wingate, and he went down the stair with Gwynne. Billy Bunter had been trailed down: but a bolted door of solid oak undoubtedly presented a problem. The prefects were willing to leave that problem to Mr. Quelch for solution.

'Well, this beats it!' remarked Bob Cherry. 'Does that benighted owl think he can stick in that box-room, with the beaks and the pre's after him?' He tapped on the box-room door.

'Bunter, old fat man! You'd better come out.'

'Oh, really, Cherry—.'

'Quelch will be up here in a minute or two.'

'I don't care.'

'Oh, scissors!'

'You see, I'm not going to be bunked!' came the fat voice from the box-room, a little muffled by jam-tarts. 'Quelch ain't going to take me to the train again. I mightn't be able to dodge him next time. I'm not going.'

'But you can't stick there, you fat chump!' exclaimed Frank Nugent.

'Can't I?' retorted Bunter. It seemed that the fat Owl considered that he could.

'Have a little sense, Bunter,' urged Harry Wharton. 'If you don't open the door, one of the pre's will get in at the window and open it—.'

'He jolly well won't, if I can stop him!' retorted Bunter. 'I've got a cricket-stump here.'

'Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!' said Bob.

The chums of the Remove gazed at one another. Evidently, Bunter was prepared to stand a siege in the box-room, if it came to that.

'You see, I never did it,' went on the fat voice. 'If I did it—I mean if I'd done it—it would be different. But I never done it—I mean I never I did it—and I ain't going to be bunked for nothing.'

Bob Cherry rubbed his nose.

'I wonder,' he said, 'whether that fat chump's telling the truth after all. He might—just once!'

'The mightfulness is terrific.'

'He might!' said Johnny Bull, dubiously. 'But—.'

'But—!' grinned Frank Nugent.

'Truth is stranger than fiction, at least when it comes from Bunter,' said Harry Wharton. 'But if he didn't tomato Prout who did?'

'Goodness knows! I—I suppose it was Bunter. But—but—well, I give it up,' said Bob, shaking his head.

The Famous Five, like their form-master, were feeling a doubt creep into their minds.

Bunter, evidently, nourished a hope of remaining at Greyfriars. Upon what could that hope be founded, unless upon his own knowledge that he was not the guilty party?

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' whispered Bob. 'Here comes Henry!'

Bob did not allow that whisper to reach the ears of the angular gentleman who was ascending the box-room stair! The next moment Mr. Quelch appeared in the landing. His face was grim. Wingate's report that the expelled Owl had locked himself in the Remove box-room, and refused to come out, had evidently aroused his ire. The gimlet-eyes glinted at the Famous Five.

'What are you juniors doing here?' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Nothing, sir! We—we—.'

'Go away at once.'

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

The juniors descended the stair. But they remained at the foot of the little staircase, extremely interested to know what was to transpire next. They heard Mr. Quelch rap sharply on the box-room door above. Then they heard his voice, rapping still more sharply.

'Bunter! Are you in that room, Bunter?' 'Oh! No! Yes!'

'Come out at once.'

'I—I—I—.'

'I order you to unlock that door immediately, Bunter!'

'Tain't locked, sir—.'

'What? what? The door does not open! What do you mean by saying that it is not locked, Bunter?'

'Tain't really, sir: The key's gone! It—it—it's bolted!'

'You utterly stupid boy—.'

'Oh, really, sir—.'

'Unbolt the door at once, if it is bolted.'

'Am—am—am I going to be bunked, sir?' came a gasp from the box-room.

'What? You have been expelled, Bunter, and you will be taken home by a prefect, and handed over to your father's care. Now open this door.'

'I ain't going—.'

'Bunter! I warn you to obey me instantly. Otherwise I may chastise you severely before you are taken to your train.'

'I—I—I—I never did it, sir—.'

'That will do, Bunter! Unbolt this door!' Quelch's knuckles rapped sharply on the oak again.

'Do you hear me, Bunter?'

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

'Then open the door immediately.'

'I—I—I ain't going to be bunked, sir—.'

'You are going to leave this school without a moment's delay, Bunter. I command you to open this door!'

Below, in the Remove passage, Harry Wharton and Co. looked at one another. They expected to hear the sound of the box-room door opening. But they heard no such sound. Even the commanding voice of Henry Samuel Quelch seemed to have less terror for Bunter, than the prospect of being escorted home by a prefect, and landed at Bunter Villa. The door did not open.

Rap! rap! rap!

Quelch's knuckles were busy again.

'Bunter!'

'Oh, lor!' Yes, sir!'

'Will you open this door?'

'I—I never did it, sir—.'

'Open this door!'

'I ain't going to be bunked—.'

'Open this door!'

'Shan't!' howled Bunter, desperately.

'What? Upon my word! Bunter, you impertinent young rascal—.'

'Beast!'

'Oh, scissors!' breathed Bob Cherry, in the passage below. 'Better clear, you men—Henry won't be in a good temper when he comes down, after that.'

It was a judicious suggestion. The Famous Five 'cleared'. A few minutes later, Mr. Quelch came down, without Bunter. He passed the juniors on the Remove landing like a thundercloud.

The bell rang for third school. Harry Wharton and Co. headed for their form-room, with the rest of the Remove. One member of that form,--or rather, a former member -remained in the box-room. Billy Bunter, expelled but not expedited, was still at Greyfriars School-behind a bolted door!

CHAPTER 24

HOLDING THE FORT

'WHAT a lark!' chuckled the Bounder.

'The larkfulness is terrific.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

There was a crowd, or rather a swarm, of Greyfriars fellows on the spot, in the sunny summer's afternoon, staring up at the box-room window. At that window a fat face, adorned by a big pair of spectacles, was to be discerned.

To most of the crowd, the extraordinary affair of Billy Bunter undoubtedly appealed as a 'lark': a lark of the first dimensions. To the 'beaks', it was certainly no lark: it was awfully serious, as no doubt it was to the fat Owl himself. A fellow who was 'bunked' but wouldn't go was something new in the history of Greyfriars. Not only the Remove, but fellows of all other forms were deeply interested and hilariously excited about it. Everyone—in the Lower School at least—was glad that it was a half-holiday that afternoon. They did not want to miss the Bunter affair.

Harry Wharton and Co. had even dismissed cricket from mind. Herbert Vernon-Smith and Skinner and Snoop had forgotten all about the three-thirty at Wapshot. Even Lord Mauleverer had turned his back on an arm-chair in the Rag, and Fisher T. Fish was neglecting his business accounts. Almost to a man, the Remove were interested in Bunter: and most of them wished him luck, of which, assuredly, the hapless Owl was in need. After dinner, the vicinity of the Remove box-room window was as crowded as Big Side on the occasion of a First-eleven match. Fellows stood about in groups, or sat on walls or window-sills, even on the branches of trees. Billy Bunter, generally the most inconsiderate of persons, was the centre of interest now: and when his fat face was seen at the window, it was the cynosure of all eyes. Remove stared up at it: Temple. Dabney and Co. of the Fourth stared up at it: so did Hobson and Hoskins and a swarm of the Shell: and Tubb of the Third with a myriad of fags: even Fifth-form men came round to have a look at Bunter: Billy Bunter had the distinction of being stared at by Potter and Greene, and Blundell and Fitzgerald, and Hilton and Price: senior men who would hardly have deigned to take note of his fat existence at normal times. Even Sixth-form men strolled round to glance up at that window.

"Bunked, you know, and he won' go!" said Cecil Reginald Temple, of the Fourth. "Bunked for biffing a beak with a tomato or somethin'—and he won't go! That fat ass Bunter!"

'Some nerve!' said Fry. 'The Old Man will be waxy!'

'Oh, rather!' said Dabney.

'That fat chump Bunter!' said Hobson of the Shell. 'Bolted himself in the box-room, by gum! I've heard that they took him to the station yesterday, and he came back again! That fat owl Bunter!'

The name of Bunter was on every tongue. Everyone, from the Sixth to the Second, was discussing Bunter. A stranger looking in that afternoon might have supposed that Bunter was the most, instead of the least, important member of the Greyfriars community. Bunter undoubtedly had the house!

Exactly what the 'beaks' were going to do, in this unprecedented state of affairs, nobody knew. But something, obviously, had to be done: the matter could not remain where it was.

A fellow who had been 'bunked' had to depart. Bunter, indeed, had departed twice: but he had twice returned. Now, it seemed, he was not going to depart for a third time, if he could help it.

So far he had been able to help it, for he was still in the Remove box-room, behind a bolted door. Nothing had yet been done.

Perhaps it had been expected, or hoped, that urge of the inner Bunter would cause the fat Owl to capitulate. It was not easy for any fellow to carry on for a whole day without provender: least of all when that fellow was William George Bunter.

But if that had been Mr. Quelch's idea, nothing had come of it, for Bunter had not emerged from his lair. Quelch was happily unaware of Harry Wharton's parcel from home, which had been passed in to the inhabitant of the box-room. Kindly as that act had been, Quelch would probably have taken a dim view of it, had he known. Luckily he did not know.

'They've got to get him out,' Bob Cherry remarked. 'They just can't let him carry on. But how—?'

'The howfulness is terrific,' grinned Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

'It would be no end of a smash, if they tried breaking in the door,' said Nugent. 'But they can't leave him there.'

'More likely to try the window,' said Johnny Bull. 'Easy enough to get at the window from the leads.'

'Not so easy to push in, if Bunter handles that cricket-stump!' said Harry Wharton.

'Oh, my hat! Think he would?'

'Well, he seems determined not to go,' said Harry. 'I—I—I wonder whether he did tomato Prout after all! Blessed if it doesn't begin to look as if he didn't. He's got it fixed in his fat head that he won't go, at any rate.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here comes Gossy with his ladder!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'They're going to try the window.'

There was a buzz of excitement, as Gosling, the ancient porter of Greyfriars, was seen approaching, with a ladder on his shoulder. On one side of him walked Mr. Quelch, with a grim brow. On the other walked Wingate of the Sixth. Measures, evidently, were being taken, at last, to deal with the Owl of the Remove.

Many fellows had surmised that, as the bolted door presented tremendous difficulties, the window might be tried. All that was needed was for one of the prefects to get in at the window, and unbolt the door from the inside. That, it appeared, was what had been decided upon. True, it was a small window, and fastened inside with a catch: far from easy to enter if there was resistance from within. The Famous Five were aware that Bunter had provided himself with a cricket-stump for that very purpose. It remained to be seen whether the fat Owl would have the temerity to handle it. Really, after his recent exploits, no one quite knew what was to be expected from Bunter.

Mr. Quelch glanced round at the swarming crowd, with a glinting gimlet-eye. All the fellows there were glad that it was a half-holiday: but Quelch, probably, would have preferred them to be in the form-rooms. So numerous an audience could not possibly have pleased him.

However, after that glinting glance, he gave them no further heed. No doubt he expected the matter to end in a few more minutes, now that measures were being taken to deal with the mutinous Owl.

'Place the ladder here, Gosling,' he rapped.

'Yessir!' grunted Gosling.

Below the box-room window was the flat leaded roof of an out-building on the ground floor. It was, therefore, impossible to place the ladder to the window itself. Gosling's ladder was to give access to the leads. Wingate, apparently, was to undertake the task of rooting Bunter out: but the captain of Greyfriars was too dignified a person to scramble up a rain-pipe.

Gosling planted the ladder, and then mopped his brow. 'It's 'eavy!' he remarked. 'Wot I says is this 'ere, that there ladder's 'eavy!'

Mr. Quelch ignored that remark. Evidently he was much more indifferent to the weight of that ladder, than Gosling was.

'Now, Wingate—!' he said.

'Yes, sir!' said Wingate.

He stepped to the ladder.

'Please go up and enter at the window, Wingate! If the catch is fastened inside, and Bunter refuses to open it, you must break a pane to reach it.'

'Very well, sir.'

All eyes were on Wingate, as he mounted the ladder.

He stepped on the flat leads, and stepped to the box-room window, all eyes following him.

There was almost breathless excitement now. A determined fellow, at that little window, could keep out an intruder, if he liked,—and if he had the nerve. Harry Wharton and Co. wondered what Bunter was going to do with that stump! Quelch, apparently, expected the affair to go through swiftly and easily. But if the fat Owl had screwed up his courage to the sticking point—

Tap! Wingate was seen to tap on the glass. Within, a fat face could be seen, and a big pair of spectacles gleamed.

'Bunter!' called out Wingate. 'Open this window!'

'Shan't!'

That brief but emphatic reply was audible at quite a distance. There was a buzz among the swarm of onlookers.

'By gad! Bunter means business!' murmured the Bounder. 'More power to his jolly old elbow!'

'Open this window at once. Bunter!' rapped Wingate.

He rapped out the order in his most authoritative tones. But he had no better luck at the box-room window than he had at the box-room door in the morning. Bunter did not open the window.

Wingate could see that the catch within was fastened.

It could be got only by breaking an adjacent pane. Without further ado, the Greyfriars captain jammed his elbow at that pane, and the glass flew in fragments.

Through the opening thus made, Wingate inserted his hand to push back the catch.

Crack!

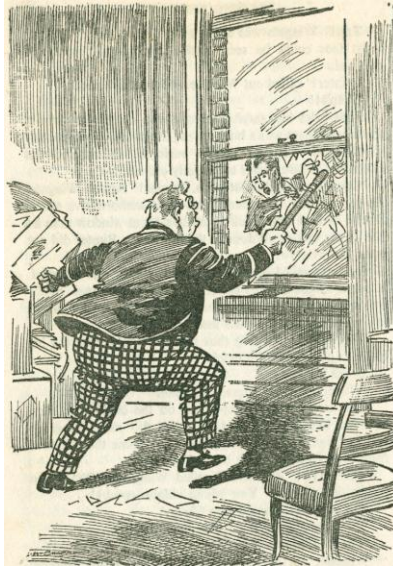
'Whooooooop!' roared Wingate.

The crack of a cricket-stump on the back of a hand sounded like a pistol shot. Louder still rang Wingate's yell of anguish, as he staggered back from the window, frantically sucking at the back of his hand.

'Oh! Ow! Oh, gad!' yelled Wingate. 'Oh! You young rascal—ow! You young villain—wow!'

'Oh, my hat!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'Bunter's sticking it out!' grinned Smithy. 'The stickfulness is terrific.' Wingate, on the leads outside the box-room window, was almost dancing. Mr. Quelch was glaring up at the fat face at that window, with a glare compared with which that of the fabled Gorgon might have been called a kindly smile. Billy Bunter, blinking defiance, brandished the stump.



THE CRACK OF A CRICKET-STUMP ON THE BACK OF A HAND
SOUNDED LIKE A PISTOL SHOT

Evidently, the Owl of the Remove had screwed up his courage to the sticking-point, and was going to hold the fort.

'Oh! ow! oh!' Wingate caressed his right hand with his left. Only too clearly, there was a pain where the cricket-stump had landed. Probably it was quite a severe pain: Wingate looked as if it was!

'Wingate!' called out Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Ow! Oh, crumbs! Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Wingate.

'Please lose no more time.'

'Wha—a—at?'

'I am waiting for you to open that window, Wingate!' Wingate stared down at him. The expression on his face made a crowd of fellows grin. They could guess, if Mr. Quelch could not, that he had had enough of Bunter's stump on his knuckles. Quelch, in his anxiety to get through with Bunter, and have done with that fat and fatuous youth, doubtless did not realize that Wingate was not disposed to put those knuckles within easy reach of the stump again.

'I am waiting, Wingate!' repeated Mr. Quelch, as the Greyfriars captain did not answer. Wingate very nearly retorted, 'You can wait!', but fortunately he restrained such an undignified reply. But he made no motion towards the box-room window. He came back towards the ladder. He stepped on the ladder, holding with his left hand. His right seemed out of action for the present, after Bunter's bang. The fat Owl had put quite a lot of beef into that bang.

'Wingate—what—?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, as he descended.

The Greyfriars captain stepped off the ladder to the ground.

'That window cannot be opened, sir! The catch is fastened inside, and cannot be got at! Not with a cricket-stump banging on a fellow's knuckles!'

'Where are you going. Wingate—?'

'I'm going to get some Elliman's for my knuckles, sir!' almost hooted Wingate. And he walked away.

'But—!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

Wingate did not stay for 'buts'. He departed, and disappeared. Mr. Quelch stared after him, quite at a loss.

Then he turned to Gosling, standing beside the ladder. 'Gosling!'

'Yessir.'

'Perhaps you could ascend to the leads. Gosling, and open the box-room window.'

The ancient porter of Greyfriars blinked at him. 'Me. sir!' he ejaculated.

'Yes, you. Gosling,' said Mr. Quelch, testily.

'Wot I says is this 'ere, sir, it ain't my dooty to go up no ladders, and open no winders, with a young rip banging at a bloke's knuckles, sir, with a blinking cricket-stump, sir!' grunted Gosling. 'I'll 'old the ladder, sir, if you'd like to go up!' added Gosling, not without an inflection of sarcasm in his crusty voice.

'Do not be impertinent, Gosling.'

'Wot I says is this 'ere—.'

'That will do!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

Grunt, from Gosling. Evidently, he was not going up that ladder. Mr. Quelch stood looking at it: and the crowd watched in breathless excitement. Was Quelch going up to get a rap on the knuckles at the window?

But if Quelch was thinking of it, he dismissed it as altogether too undignified for a form-master. For a long, long moment he stood: then he turned and rustled, away. Gosling, grunting, followed with the ladder.

'First round to Bunter!' chuckled the Bounder.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

A crowd of laughing faces stared up at the box-room window where Billy Bunter stood blinking down at them—stump in hand! Undoubtedly, the first round had gone to Bunter—the Owl of the Remove, sticking to the school from which he had been 'bunked' like a limpet to a rock, was still at Greyfriars, and still holding the fort!

ONE GOOD TURN . . .

'ONE good turn deserves another.'

Herbert Vernon-Smith made that remark, in No. 4 Study. Tom Redwing looked at him inquiringly.

Prep was on, and almost over, in the Remove studies. The fact that an expelled junior who wouldn't go, was bolted in the box-room, made no difference to the customary routine. Or, more accurately, it was supposed to make no difference. Probably most of the Remove fellows were thinking more about the amazing affair of Billy Bunter than about prep, that evening. Smithy, at all events, had 'chucked' prep rather early, and was sitting on the corner of the table in No. 4, with his hands in his pockets, and a grin on his face, while his more studious chum completed his task.

'What—?' asked Redwing.

'About Bunter——!'

Redwing smiled.

'The fat ass!' he said.

'Oh, quite! The blithering owl seems to think he can stick on here, after getting bunked for tomatoing old Pompous. What a brain!' grinned Smithy. 'But one good turn deserves another, as I said. Bunter did me a good turn last night—might have been me for the long jump, as well as that fat ass, if he hadn't butted in.'

'Very likely,' said Redwing, rather drily.

'They're leaving him to it,' went on Vernon-Smith. 'They've done nothing since Wingate got his knuckles cracked this afternoon at the window. But you can guess what they're banking on.'

'He will have to come out,' said Redwing. 'He can't stick there without grub, much longer. I fancy Quelch must have expected him out before this.'

'That's it: said Smithy, with a nod. "They don't want to wreck the place, smashing in the door—and they can't push in at the window,—but that fat chump can't hold the fort without provender. Quelch is simply leaving him to it, till he gets too jolly hungry, and walks out of his own accord.'

'What about it?'

'Didn't you hear me say that one good turn deserves another? Why shouldn't a fellow lend him a hand?' The Bounder chuckled. 'A fellow could slip up to the box-room with a bag of grub, what?'

'Oh!' said Redwing. 'There'd be a fearful row, if a fellow was caught at it, Smithy.'

'I know! Worth it in a good cause, what?' grinned Smithy. 'Why shouldn't Bunter carry on—it's no end of a lark. Bunter did me a good turn—I'm going to do him one! See?'

'Um!' said Redwing. He could not help suspecting that Smithy was thinking less of a 'good turn', than of aiding and abetting a fellow who was up against authority. The Bounder was a rebel by nature: and, as the poet has remarked, a fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind! Anything that was 'up against the beaks' was sure to find favour in Smithy's eyes.

Still, it was true that Bunter, though quite inadvertently, had done the Bounder a good turn, saving him from the dire consequences of his nocturnal escapade. And Redwing, like most

of the Remove fellows, had a spot of sympathy for the hapless fat Owl under sentence of expulsion, and beleaguered in the box-room. He nodded.

Smithy slipped from the corner of the table. No doubt it was risky to attempt to carry aid to the fat mutineer: but risk mattered little to the reckless Bounder.

'I've got a rucksack here,' he said. Bunter's going to have it—packed to the brim.

Contributions up and down the form—what? Every fellow will shell out something, to keep the game going.'

The Bounder opened the study cupboard. That cupboard was always well supplied, and Smithy shifted the whole of the supplies into the rucksack. The receptacle was almost half full, when he walked out of the study with it, leaving Redwing to finish his prep.

His first visit was paid to No. 1 Study. Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, about to put their books away after prep, looked round at him, as he came in, Smithy held up the rucksack.

'Contributions, please!' he said.

'Eh?'

'What?'

'Grub for Bunter!' explained 'the Bounder. 'I want this full before I take it up to him. Shove in anything you've got.'

'Grub for Bunter!' repeated Harry Wharton. 'Oh, my hat! If Quelch catches you—'

'He won't, if I can help it. But get a move on—sooner the quicker, you know.'

'O.K.,' said Harry. In a few moments, a bag of biscuits, a tin of sardines, and half a cake, were added to the contents of the rucksack. No. 1 Study was not so well supplied as No. 4. But Wharton and Nugent were willing to contribute all they had: and no fellow could do more.

Smithy hurried out of the study again, leaving the chums of the Remove chuckling.

He lost no time, going up the passage from study to study. Some were drawn blank, supplies being at a low ebb. But there were many contributions, and the rucksack was a good deal heavier, when the Bounder arrived at No. 12, where Lord Mauleverer was yawning over his unfinished prep.

His lordship stared, when he was apprised of Smithy's mission. Then he grinned, and waved his hand towards his study cupboard.

'Help yourself!' he said.

Smithy proceeded to help himself, liberally. No. 12 was even better provided than No. 4.

Smithy cleared out the cupboard with an unsparing hand, and the rucksack was crammed when he had finished.

If that stack of foodstuffs was safely conveyed to the box-room, one thing at least was certain: the fat garrison would not be starved out!

Quite heavily laden now, the Bounder stepped out of Mauly's study. He cast a wary glance down the passage, towards the landing and the staircase. Several Remove fellows had come out of their studies, but there was no sign of a beak or prefect on the scene,—so far, at all events.

Tom Redwing hurried up to his chum, with an anxious face. For once, he was not opposed to one of Smithy's reckless stunts: but he was anxious for him to get through while the coast was clear. There was no doubt that the vials of wrath would be poured out, in full measure, upon any fellow lending that fat mutineer aid in his extraordinary campaign, if it came out.

'Hurry up, Smithy,' breathed Redwing. 'If Quelch came up—'

'No sign of him,' answered the Bounder.

'No, but now we're through with prep, he may come up, to see that we keep clear of the box-room—!'

'I shouldn't wonder! Keep cave, old man, and whistle if a beak or a pre shows up,' said the Bounder. Redwing nodded, and remained in the passage, with a wary eye open in the direction of the staircase. Vernon-Smith, with the heavy rucksack slung on his shoulder, cut up the box-room stair at the upper end of the Remove passage.

He fairly shot up that stair, to the little landing above.

There he was safe out of sight, if any authoritative person came to the Remove quarters.

He hurried across the shadowy little landing, to the door of the box-room, and tapped.

'Beast!' came from within. Apparently the fat garrison concluded that it was the enemy in the offing.

The Bounder bent to the keyhole, and whispered through:

'Bunter—!'

'Yah!' from within.

'You fat chump—!' hissed Smithy.

'Eh! That ain't Quelch—!'

'It's me, fathead—Smithy!' whispered the Bounder.

'I've brought up some grub for you, you fat ass.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'Aren't you hungry?' chuckled Smithy.

'Oh! Yes! Rather! Famished! I've finished Wharton's parcel. It didn't really last long, you know. They might have brought something more, while they were about it, but fellows are so jolly selfish—.'

'You burbling, bloated bandersnatch—.'

'Oh, really, Smithy—.'

'I've got a rucksack packed with grub. If you want it, open the door, you burbling blitherer. Quick! Quelch may come up now we're through prep. Get the door open, fathead, sharp.' There was a creak of a rusty bolt.

The box-room door opened a few inches, and a fat face, much in need of a wash, looked out, and a pair of big spectacles glimmered in the gloom.

'Sure there's nobody about, Smithy—?'

'Yes—Reddy's keeping cave. Here you are, ass!' The door opened wider. Two fat hands were stretched out to seize the loaded rucksack. Billy Bunter almost tottered under its weight.

'Oh good,' gasped Bunter. 'I say, Smithy, you ain't such a beast as I've always thought you—.'

'You dithering dummy—.'

'Beast! I—I mean, thanks, old chap! I—.' Bunter was interrupted.

From the passage below, came a sudden low whistle.

The Bounder gave a start, at that signal from Redwing. 'Oh. gad! Somebody's coming!' he breathed.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter. He dropped the rucksack, and grabbed at the door to slam it. The Bounder put his foot in the way just in time. Below, in the Remove passage, he could hear a firm tread,—a tread he knew! Quelch, evidently, had come up to the Remove studies: and it sounded as if he was coming up the passage to the box-room stair. If he came up, the Bounder was fairly cornered.

But Smithy had all his wits about him. Swiftly he jammed his foot in the way of the closing door: and there was an alarmed squeak from Bunter.

'Oh, crumbs! It won't shut—what's the matter with this beastly door—what—.'

'Quiet!' hissed Smithy.

He pushed in at the doorway, shoving the fat Owl unceremoniously aside. He grasped the door and closed it: and swiftly shot the bolt.

'I—I say—.' Bunter blinked at him, in the dim glimmer of starlight from the little window. 'I say, what—.'

'Quiet, you fat chump! Do you want Quelch to know I'm here?' breathed Smithy. 'I can dodge out after he's gone! Quiet!'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'Not another word—not a syllable! Keep quiet!'

Billy Bunter did not utter another word. But he did not exactly keep quiet. Fat hands were groping in the crammed rucksack. And there was a sound of crunching and munching, as a firm tread came across the landing to the box-room door, and there was a sharp knock.

CHAPTER 26

SMITHY ON THE SPOT

KNOCK! knock! knock!

'Bunter!'

'Beast!' breathed Billy Bunter, through a barrage of cake. He ceased to munch.

'Do you hear me, Bunter?'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' mumbled Bunter.

'For the last time, Bunter, I command you to open this door, and emerge from that box-room!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'Am I still going to be bunked, sir?'

'What? You are certainly going to leave the school without delay, Bunter.'

'Then I ain't coming out.'

'Listen to me, Bunter.' Mr. Quelch spoke quietly.

Apparently he had made up his mind to be as patient as possible with this extraordinary member of his form. 'You have been here a whole day, Bunter, without food—I am concerned for your health, Bunter. For your own sake, I advise you to open this door at once.'

'I ain't going to be bunked.'

'You utterly stupid boy—!'

'Oh, really, sir—.'

'Open this door immediately!'

'Shan't!'

Mr. Quelch breathed very hard. He did not speak again. Bunter, only too clearly, was heedless of his master's voice. It was useless to talk to Bunter.

The Bunder, silent as a mouse with the cat in the offing, waited for him to go. Quelch, evidently, had no suspicion that any other Remove fellow was in the box-room with Bunter. Smithy was very anxious that he should not make that discovery!

But Quelch did not go. Smithy, listening intently for a sound of receding footsteps, heard nothing of the kind. Quelch was not going. So long as he remained there was no escape for Smithy.

He wondered, savagely, what Quelch was sticking there for. He knew that Bunter was not going to open the door. Yet there he still was, on the landing outside, apparently a fixture. Billy Bunter gave him no further heed. Bunter had found a carton of delicious meringues in the rucksack—a contribution from Lord Mauleverer. Those meringues were now vanishing, one after another, down the most capacious gullet in the county of Kent. Bunter, thus happily occupied, was too busy to give heed to an angry form-master on the other side of a bolted door. And he was not worried about Smithy. Bunter had an immense capacity for not worrying about other fellows' troubles.

'Oh!' breathed the Bunder, suddenly.

His eyes glinted at the little window overlooking the leads. It was a dim square in the glimmer of starlight. Outside that dim square, a shadow stirred.

The Owl of the Remove would never have noticed it.

But it did not escape the eyes of the wary Bunder.

He grinned.

He knew now why Quelch was waiting on the landing.

Quelch was expecting that door to be opened shortly, though not by Bunter! He had tried his eloquence once more upon the obstinate Owl: but he had taken other measures also. That dim shadow at the box-room window meant that someone had clambered up on the leads outside, and was at the window under cover of darkness, while Quelch was at the door!

Unconscious of danger, Bunter munched meringues.

Smithy, with a swift but silent step, crossed to the window, and peered through the glass.

Within, he was invisible, without, the individual on the leads was visible, though dimly. A glimmer of starlight on the face revealed the features of Loder of the Sixth.

Loder had not made a sound in getting on the leads under that window. He made no sound as he approached the window, and reached up to the orifice of the broken pane. Neither was there a sound, as his hand came through that orifice, and groped for the catch within.

The Bounder chuckled softly.

Bunter, undoubtedly, would have been taken off his guard, by that silent approach under cover of the night. Once a hefty Sixth-form prefect was inside, the fat Owl's game was up.

And it indubitably would have been, had not Smithy been on the spot!

But Smithy was on the spot!

The cricket-stump Bunter had wielded was not visible.

But Smithy was at no loss. He drew a pin from the lapel of his jacket.

The groping hand from without found the catch within.

At the same moment, the pin between the Bounder's finger and thumb found the groping hand. He gave a sharp jab at that hand!

'Yaroooooooooooh!'

Loder's frantic yell, as the pin established contact, woke echoes far and near. A flash of lightning had nothing on the rapidity with which Gerald Loder snatched his hand away.

Billy Bun

'I say—groogh—what—urrrggh—what—woogh—ooogh—!' spluttered the startled fat Owl.

'Quiet, ass,' whispered Smithy.

'But I say—urrrggh—urggh—urrrggh—!'

'Oh! ow! ow! wow!' Loder was yelling, out on the leads under the window. 'Oh, gad! Oh, crikey! Wow! My hand—ow! Wow! Yow—ow—ow—ow—ow!'

The pin was ready, if Loder groped in again. But Loder was thinking of anything but groping in again. He had hoped to catch Bunter off his guard: but he had found him,—apparently!—very much on his guard! One jab from that pin was more than enough for Loder.

The Bounder, grinning from the window, saw him scrambling down from the leads. Loder had had all he wanted: and a little over. Loder was gone! The fat garrison of the box-room had had a narrow escape: it was fortunate for him that Smithy had been on the spot!

Bang! came at the door! It was not a rap. It was not a knock! It was a terrific bang! Quelch had heard Loder's frantic yells, and knew that the night-attack had failed. Bunter, it seemed, was much more wary than he had expected!

'Bunter!' Quelch almost bawled.

'Oh, crikey! Urrrggh!'

'Bunter! If you persist in remaining in that room, no Greyfriars boy will be allowed to communicate with you. No food will be permitted to reach you. You will be compelled to emerge Bunter, by want of sustenance.'

'He, he, he!'

Quelch, outside, quite jumped. Whatever reply he had expected to that dire menace, he certainly had not expected it to take the form of a fat cachinnation. Cutting off food supplies was not a laughing matter for any fellow—especially a fellow named W. G. Bunter. Yet Bunter was chuckling. The Remove master could hardly believe his ears! But there was no mistake about it,—that dire menace of famine evoked only a fat chuckle from Billy Bunter!

'Bunter!' hooted Mr. Quelch.

'He, he, he!'

'This is not a laughing matter, Bunter.'

'Isn't it, sir? He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter. Really, it was not surprising that the peril of famine had no terrors for Bunter, with his fat hands groping in a rucksack crammed with ample and varied provender. But Quelch, quite unaware of that rucksack, was puzzled and perplexed.

'I am surprised, Bunter, that you are not very hungry already. You will certainly become very hungry if you remain here. For your own sake, Bunter, I advise you to cease this folly, and emerge from that room. No food of any kind will be allowed to reach you here.'

'He, he, he!'

'For the last time, Bunter, will you open this door?'

'Not if I'm going to be bunked, sir.'

'Then you will remain here, without food, until you emerge!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

With that, Quelch gave it up. There was a tramp of footsteps across the landing to the box-room stair. Quelch was going, at last. There was nothing further that he could do. Loder, evidently, had failed, at the window: and his master's voice at the door produced no effect on Bunter. With deep feelings, Mr. Quelch departed: and to Herbert Vernon-Smith's relief, his footsteps died away. The coast was clear now for the Bounder.

'I say, Smithy.' Bunter paused in the demolition of meringues, as Vernon-Smith put his hand to the bolt. 'I say—'

'You're all right now, fathead! You've got enough grub there for days—it would last any other fellow weeks.'

'Beast. I—I mean, look here, old chap, suppose they try the window again, later, after I've gone to sleep?' said Bunter, anxiously.

'You'd better keep watch, old fat man, or they'll get you. Loder would have got you if I hadn't pinned his paw,' chuckled the Bounder.

'But—but a fellow can't stay awake all night you know,' exclaimed Bunter. 'I—I say, Smithy, suppose—suppose you stick in here with me—'

'What?'

'Then you could keep watch while I go to sleep—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! Look here, Smithy—'

'I can see myself doing it!' chuckled the Bounder. 'You'd better sit it out to-night, old fat chump, and keep your specs glued on the window.'

'Oh, lor!'

'Hold on, though.' Smithy chuckled again. 'The window could be fixed. Something jammed between the sashes would fix it all right—a wedge of some sort. They'd never get it open from outside, if it was wedged. O.K., old fat ditherer—I'll fix it and you can go to sleep, when we go to dorm, and snore your fat head off.'

Smithy was busy for the next few minutes. Material was found by breaking the lid of a box! With his pocket-knife, he shaped a fragment of wood into a wedge. That wedge was pushed down between the sashes of the window, and driven well home. When Smithy had finished, the window was an immovable fixture,—catch or no catch!

'O.K., fathead!' said the Bounder. He drew back the bolt of the door. 'Cheerio! Better bolt this door after me, if you can tear yourself away from the grub for half-a-minute.'

Billy Bunter contrived to tear himself away from the foodstuffs long enough to bolt the door after the Bounder. Smithy departed, grinning: and the fat Owl returned to the feast. And when, later that night, an echoing snore announced that the garrison of the box-room was fast asleep, and a groping hand from without fumbled at the window, that window did not open: and Billy Bunter remained happily unconscious of it. While the rest of the Remove slumbered in their dormitory, Bunter, with a fat head pillowed on a fat arm, slept and snored in the box-room: and was still blissfully snoring long after the rising-bell had awakened Greyfriars School to a new day.

PROUT TAKES A HAND

'MR. QUELCH!'

'Mr. Prout!'

Bob Cherry winked at four other Remove fellows, who grinned.

Other fellows were smiling.

The portentous frown on Mr. Prout's face, and the extremely acidulated expression on Quelch's, seemed to afford a cheery spot of entertainment to the observers, of whom there were a good many. In fact quite an ocean of eyes turned on the two masters when they met in the quad, and Mr. Prout addressed Quelch in a deep boom, and Quelch replied in tones of concentrated acid.

Prout, obviously, was in a state of wrathful indignation. Quelch, equally obviously, was not at his bonniest.

Quelch had had much to try his temper, of late, and undoubtedly it had an edge on it. A member of his form, expelled by the Head, was still at the school two days after expulsion, bolted in a box-room. That was more than enough for Quelch: and he did not want anything from Prout in addition.

It was after class on Thursday. Amazingly, almost incredibly, Billy Bunter, 'bunked' on Tuesday, was still at Greyfriars on Thursday afternoon, as if he had become a fat fixture there. To the Head and his staff, and indeed to Bunter himself, it was a very serious matter: but to most of the rest of Greyfriars it appealed as a tremendous lark. Never had there been such a happening in the history of the old school—one of the most inconsiderable members of the Greyfriars community was making history, and history of a most exciting and entertaining kind. It could not go on,—it could not, of course, go on! But—it was going on! Billy Bunter was almost the only topic of Greyfriars now. He had the limelight in abundance. Fellows in every form discussed Bunter and his amazing campaign. Even in the Prefects' Room they talked of Bunter. In the Fifth-form games-study they talked of him. Even Potter and Greene, who were expecting Coker back that afternoon, from his Aunt Judy's, and a consequent renewal of the sadly-depleted supplies in their study, almost forgot Coker. It was a case of Bunter first, and the rest of the field nowhere.

After class, Prout had walked round to look up at the box-room window. At that window he had had a glimpse of a fat face and a glimmer of spectacles. Bunter was still there,—Bunter, who had been expelled for tomatoing Prout!

The Head, it appeared, was leaving the matter in the hands of Bunter's form-master: and Bunter's form-master, clearly, had been able to do nothing. It was altogether too much, in Prout's opinion. Something had to be done, by somebody else if not by Quelch. Coming on Quelch in the quad, as he walked back to the House, Prout paused to address him, in his deepest boom; and every fellow within hearing distance lent an ear! Prout did not seem to care if all Greyfriars had ears and eyes concentrated on him. This unparalleled state of affairs had to end: and he was going to make that clear.

'I have just looked up at the box-room, Mr. Quelch!' boomed Prout.

'Indeed?' Quelch seemed to bite off the word, rather than utter it.

'Bunter is still there, Mr. Quelch.'

'I am aware of it.'

'It is two days, Mr. Quelch, since that boy of your form was expelled for an unheard-of, unparalleled assault upon a member of Dr. Locke's staff. Yet he is here! This must end, sir.' 'Measures have been taken. Mr. Prout—.'

'They have failed, sir! Authority is flouted, sir! It is quite clear, sir, that the boy has been receiving aid—aid and abetting, sir—doubtless from other boys in your form. He must have food, sir, and it must have been conveyed to him surreptitiously. Is such a state of affairs to continue indefinitely, sir?'

'Certainly not! But—.'

'The boy's continued presence here, sir, is an insult to authority, and an insult to me personally,' boomed Prout. 'He must go, sir! He must go at once, sir! I, sir, can tolerate this no longer.'

'The headmaster, Mr. Prout, has left this matter in my hands—.'

'The headmaster, Mr. Quelch, must certainly have expected you to bring it to an end before this. It appears, sir, that you cannot do so. If you cannot, sir, others must take the matter in hand.'

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips, very hard.

'I shall take the matter in hand, myself, Mr. Quelch,' boomed Prout.

'I shall be very glad, sir, if you can suggest a means of inducing that foolish boy to emerge from the box-room!' said Mr. Quelch, acidly.

'The door must be forced, Mr. Quelch.'

'It' is no easy matter, Mr. Prout, to force a solid oak door bolted on the inside. Neither am I prepared to direct such damage to be done, except as a very last resource,' snapped Mr. Quelch.

Snort, from Prout.

'I am not suggesting, sir, that Gosling should be ordered to batter in the door with an axe!' he hooted. 'Nothing of the kind, sir. But I have no doubt that a skilled workman, with his tools, would be quite able to force the door, without reckless destruction of the school's property, sir.'

'Possibly, sir! But—.'

'Have you any objection, sir, to my calling in such a person?' demanded Prout. 'I am going to Courtfield after tea, sir, I am prepared to call as Chunkley's and engage the services of such a person, sir.'

Mr. Quelch breathed very hard. Interference from Prout was extremely annoying and exasperating. Yet he did not see what objection he could raise. Battering in the box-room door was a last desperate resource if everything else failed. But it was quite probable that Prout was right, and that a skilled workman with appropriate tools would be able to work the oracle: after which, Billy Bunter could be extracted from the Remove box-room like a fat winkle from a shell. It was, in fact, a way out of the impasse: but doubly and trebly unwelcome, coming from Prout.

'Well, sir?' boomed Prout, as the Remove master did not speak. 'I have suggested a means, sir, of ending, this extraordinary, this unheard-of, this unparalleled state of affairs. I will take the trouble, sir, to call at Chunkley's and engage the person required. Well, sir?'

'I should prefer you, sir, to attend to your own affairs!' snapped Mr. Quelch. Only too obviously, his temper was failing him!

'What? What?'

'In plain English, sir, to mind your own business!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, in quite a goaded state by this time. 'That, sir, is what I should prefer.'

'Sir!' gasped Prout.

'But if you find that impossible, sir, you may do as you please!' added Mr. Quelch: and with that he turned on his heel, and billowed away.

Mr. Prout stood staring after him, purple with indignation. It was not easy for him to believe his portly ears. He, Prout, master of the Fifth-form, had been told to mind his own business, by the master of a junior form! Prout did not know how often other members of the Staff had been tempted to tell him that very thing! Quelch, at long last, had fallen to the temptation, that was all! But to Prout it really seemed that it was time for the skies to fall.

'Upon my word!' gasped Mr. Prout. 'Upon my word!' He cast a glance round at a swarm of interested faces: every one of which was wreathed in a grin. Then, with a purple visage, he elephantined away to the House.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Was Quelch shirty?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'The shirtfulness was terrific!' grinned Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. 'And the esteemed Prout is also terrifically infuriated.'

'Prout means business,' said Harry Wharton. 'Bunter's number is up now. They'll root him out when Prout gets back from Courtfield.'

'Like his cheek to butt in,' said the Bounder. 'It's fun while it lasts! Old Pompous is a spoilsport.'

'It will be good-bye to Bunter!' said Johnny Bull. 'Looks like it!' said Bob. 'The poor old porpoise has got it coming. He will have to get it into his head that when a fellow is bunked he has to mizzle. Bother old Pompous!'

It was about half an hour later that Mr. Prout was seen to issue from the House, and roll down to the gates. His plump face was set and grim. Prout, evidently, meant business. He was going to walk across the common to Courtfield, and call in at Chunkley's to engage that skilled workman with his tools: and that would be the final chapter. At last—at long last—the sentence of expulsion would be put into effect, and it would be good-bye to Billy Bunter. That was all that was to be expected now. But often it is the unexpected that happens.

CHAPTER 28

AN AMBUSH!

"ORRIBLE luck, Mouldy!" sighed Pug.

"Orrible!" agreed Mouldy.

'If that 'orse had got 'ome!' said Pug. 'We'd 'ave been rolling in it! But—.'

'But he didn't!' said Mouldy, sadly.

'And what 'ave we got, 'anging about the lanes arter dark?' went on Pug. He gave a tousled head a reminiscent rub. 'All I've got was a clout over the nut from that bony old party's walking-stick.'

'And me a swipe on the smeller!' said Mouldy, rubbing his nose, still sore from contact with Mr. Quelch's walking-stick.

'It's a 'ard life!' said Pug.

'It is that!' assented Mouldy.

'If something don't 'appen this 'ere arternoon, Mouldy, there's only one thing for it!' said Pug, darkly. 'We'll 'ave to look for work.'

Mouldy shuddered. The word seemed to give him a pain.

There was no doubt that Messrs. Pug and Mouldy were in hard luck. They were not enjoying life that summer's afternoon.

They sat in the grass, with their frowsy backs to tree-trunks, in the little clump of woodland on Courtfield Common. The footpath across the common to Courtfield wound through that little patch of woodland.

Pug and Mouldy were watching the footpath.

It was a very favourable spot for 'holding up' some unwary pedestrian. The surrounding trees screened it from general view. At the same time they had a wide view of the green sunny common, enabling them to spot anyone who came along. The loneliness of the footpath made it as safe a proposition as any footpad could reasonably expect. That was all to the good, in its way: but it had its drawbacks: for nobody had come along: it was altogether too lonely for two hard-up racing roughs who were down to the last cigarette. For more than an hour Pug and Mouldy sat there, chewing stumps of cigarettes, watching the footpath, and hoping for luck to come their way.

It was quite a pleasant spot if Pug and Mouldy had noticed it. The sunshine glistened on the waving green grass of the common. But Pug and Mouldy had not eyes for that. Birds twittered in the branches round them. But they had no ears for the song of the birds. The beauties of Nature had no appeal for them. And they certainly did not add to the beauty of the scene, as they sat slouching and slumping against the trunks, with frowsy hats tilted on frowsy heads, and spotted mufflers encasing unwashed necks. Pug and Mouldy were, in fact, two blots on the landscape.

Their looks expressed deep discontent. Stubs of cigarettes picked up by the wayside were all the smokes they had. They had not tasted beer for hours and hours and hours. They had been in hard luck ever since an unreliable 'gee' had run away with all their financial resources at Wapshot. Their only spot of luck had been a parcel of 'prog' annexed from a fat schoolboy. Their encounter with Mr. Quelch had been a dead loss,—unless they were to count as profit a bump on Pug's head, and a swelling on Mouldy's nose. And it looked as if no luck was coming their way on that solitary footpath. Not a single person had come along

since they had been there: and like two Sister Annes they watched in vain for a sign of anyone coming.

'Blokes must use this 'ere path, or what's it 'ere for?' said Mouldy. 'Might be somebody any minute, Pug.'

'There ain't been nobody so far!' grunted Pug. 'Might as well be on a desert island as in these 'ere blinking rural parts. Am I thirsty, Mouldy?'

'Am I?' said Mouldy, with deep feeling.

'It's jest the spot for 'olding up a covey!' sighed Pug. 'But if there ain't no blinking covey to 'old up, what's the use?'

'We got to raise the wind some'ow!' said Mouldy.

'It's that or a job!' groaned Pug.

'Don't!' said Mouldy. The word 'job' seemed to afflict him as much as the word 'work'.

They sat and stared moodily out on the common. And then, suddenly, they ceased to slouch and both of them sat up and took notice. At a distance across the common, but coming in their direction, was a bowler hat.

'Cor!' breathed Pug.

'Struth!' murmured Mouldy.

Beery eyes gleamed at that bowler hat, For a few moments, that was all they could see of the approaching pedestrian, among the clumps of bush along the footpath. But it was coming towards them: its wearer, whoever he was, was following the footpath across the common, and that footpath led directly through the patch of woodland where the two ruffians lurked.

Before long, however, the wearer of that bowler hat emerged into view, though still at a considerable distance. He was not a very tall, but very plump, gentleman, with a ruddy plump face, and he walked slowly. Pug and Mouldy watched him, with appraising eyes: and then they exchanged a blissful glance.

'Pie!' murmured Pug.

'Jest our cup of tea!' agreed Mouldy.

'Easy as easy!' said Pug. 'Mouldy, ol' man, we're in luck arter all.'

'We are that!' grinned Mouldy.

'Fat old party!' said Pug. 'Not even a walkin'-stick in his 'and, like that bony covey the other night. Not that he looks as if he could 'andle it like that bony covey. This is pie. Mouldy—this is jest pie!'

'You're telling me, Pug.'

They chuckled with glee. A plump, prosperous-looking, middle-aged gentleman was indeed 'pie' to Messrs. Pug and Mouldy. Mr. Prout, as he elephantined onward by the footpath across the common, little dreamed what satisfaction his plump and prosperous aspect afforded to a pair of frowsy footpads.

Pro ut, as he rolled, was certainly not thinking of footpads, or anything of the kind. He was thinking of his offended dignity: and of his determination to root that impertinent young rascal, Bunter, out of his lair, whether Mr. Quelch liked it or not. Prout had walked that footpath dozens of times, and never dreamed of danger thereon. He did not believe a word of Bunter's story of footpads in Friardale Wood a couple of days ago, and he had heard nothing of Quelch's nocturnal adventure in Friardale Lane. He knew, but had probably forgotten, that there were bad characters in the neighbourhood, when the races were on at Wapshot. Certainly he never guessed, or dreamed, that two pairs of beery greedy eyes

watched him from the trees, as he rolled slowly on towards the clump of woodland in the middle of the wide common.

Pug and Mouldy rose to their feet. At his present rate of progress, it was likely to be a good many minutes before the 'fat old party' arrived on the spot: but they prepared for action.

They cast suspicious and watchful glances up the footpath behind them. It was always possible that someone might come along from Courtfield: and visibility did not extend very far on a footpath winding among trees.

But there was no one to be seen or heard, and they were satisfied that the path which had been so solitary hitherto, was as solitary as ever. And in the other direction only the 'fat old party' was to be seen, on the open common.

'O.K., Mouldy,' said Pug.

'We got 'im all right!' agreed Mouldy.

They unwound unwashed mufflers from unwashed necks, and arranged the same over unwashed faces. Pug and Mouldy were not in the least particular about the way they 'raised the wind': all was grist that came to their mill. But they were very particular indeed about avoiding unpleasant contacts with the police. They did not want to be identified later as the persons who had robbed a 'fat old party' on Courtfield Common. But with the spotted mufflers tied across their faces, up to the eyes, there was no danger of that.

Having thus concealed their unprepossessing features, ready for action, they backed into the trees on either side of the footpath. There was nothing visible to alarm the fat old party when he arrived at the clump.

Happily unconscious of what awaited him, Mr. Prout rolled on. It was a warm afternoon, and Prout was glad to pass out of the summer sunshine into the shade of the branches.

Having arrived, still happily unconscious of the fact, precisely at the spot where Pug and Mouldy lurked in ambush, Mr. Prout stopped, to take out a handkerchief, and wipe a bead or two of perspiration from his plump face.

Then there was a sudden rush of footsteps.

Mr. Prout jumped, almost clear of the grass, in his surprise and alarm. He would probably have jumped quite clear of it, but for the considerable weight he would have had to lift.

'What—what—!' stuttered the Fifth-form master of Greyfriars. 'What—.' He stared blankly at two frowsy figures, with spotted mufflers tied over their faces. His eyes bulged at them.

"Old on, old covey!" grinned Pug.

'Don't you give no trouble, and you won't get 'urt!' said Mouldy. 'Old 'im while I go through his 'pockets, Pug.'

'Bless my soul!' gasped Mr. Prout. He realized that he was in the hands of footpads: in a lonely spot, far from help.

But as those footpads grasped at him, Mr. Prout made a backward jump. He was not going to be robbed if he could help it.

Prout was not an active man like Quelch. He was plump: he was ponderous: he was short of wind. So far from being able to handle Messrs. Pug and Mouldy as Quelch had done, Mr. Prout could not have handled one of them for half-a-minute. He was absolutely at the mercy of the two ruffians. But Prout, if he was no athlete, had courage. He was not going to be robbed, at least without resistance.

He jumped back, and clenched portly fists. His bulging eyes gleamed from his portly face.

'Stand back!' he gasped. 'You rogues—you rascals—how dare you stop me? Stand back, you scoundrels.'

Pug and Mouldy did not take the trouble to answer.

They rushed at Mr. Prout and clutched at him.

But they did not find that 'fat old party the easy victim they had anticipated. Prout hit out. A plump set of knuckles landed in Pug's eye, rather unexpectedly. If Prout lacked muscle, he had plenty of weight: and his weight behind that punch gave it great driving force. Pug, uttering a startled yell, went backwards, and sat down in the grass with a sudden bump.

'Oh!' yelled Pug. 'Strike me pink!' He clapped his hand to his eye. 'Oh! Ow! Strike me pink and blue! Get him, Mouldy'

Mouldy was already grasping Mr. Prout. Prout had no chance of landing another weighty punch. He was almost as helpless as a sack of flour in the ruffian's burly grasp. But he struggled gamely. He panted, he puffed, and he blew: but he struggled: and when Mouldy dragged him over, he dragged Mouldy down with him, and they sprawled together in the grass.

'Help!' roared Prout. 'Help! Help! '

Pug scrambled up. His eye was winking painfully. It was feeling bad—but not so bad as his temper. His other eye glittered with fury. He fairly hurled himself on the sprawling Fifth-form master, hitting out right and left. Blows rained on the unfortunate Prout from the ruffian's heavy fists.

'Help!' shrieked Prout. 'Help!'

It was fortunate for Mr. Prout that, unexpectedly, on that solitary footpath there were ears to hear!

CHAPTER 29

HOMERIC

HORACE COKER started, and stared round.

Coker had been tramping along moodily, his eyes on the ground, his hands shoved deep in his pockets, a frown on his brow.

He had had a couple of days at Aunt Judy's: a much-needed rest from Prout. Aunt Judy's birthday could not have been more timely, really, since it had obtained for him a couple of days' leave from school, and that much-needed rest from his form-master. That was all to the good: but all things come to an end: and Greyfriars, and Prout, had to be faced again. Worst of all, that 'book' had to be faced. That book—a whole book of Virgil—had hung over Coker's head like the sword of Damocles, during his leave from school. Now he was coming back—to that 'book', and Prout!

His face, in the railway carriage, had been clouded. It was still clouded when he got out at Courtfield, and started to walk to the school. It clouded more and more as he tramped along the grassy footpath over the common in the summer sunshine. Not a gleam of that sunshine was reflected in Coker's rugged face. Every stride of his long legs brought him nearer and nearer to Greyfriars—nearer and nearer to that awful 'book': nearer and nearer to Old Pompous and his exasperating ways.

Coker was not feeling at all sure that he was going to write out that 'book'. Of course, he had to. But he was in a mood to hurl defiance in Prout's very teeth. Who was Prout, anyway? There was just one gleam of consolation in the midst of Coker's pessimistic reflections. He almost smiled, as he remembered that tomato squashing on the portly visage.

Quite unaware of the exciting happenings at Greyfriars since his departure, never even dreaming that Prout had followed a false scent and 'nailed' the wrong man. Coker remembered that incident with satisfaction.

He could not help feeling pleased, not only by the incident itself, but by the masterly way in which he had planned it and done it. Over the garden wall, he had landed that tomato fair and square in the middle of Prout's portly features, and escaped unscathed. Prout hadn't seen him: nobody had seen him: and he had gone off at once to catch his train, unsuspected, and safe as houses. After all, if he did have to write that detestable 'book', he had paid Prout in advance for it. There was consolation in that thought.

Still, there was that 'book': that dismal, deadly, almost endless 'book' ahead of him. From *Arma virumque* right on to *fluctibus aestas* he had to grind out that beastly book: a total of no fewer than seven hundred and fifty-six lines. And all because Old Pompous had, quite by accident, heard himself alluded to as an 'old ass'. And, after all, wasn't he an old ass? He was: if Coker's opinion was worth anything. Naturally it did not occur to Coker that his opinion wasn't.

Coker, as he tramped across Courtfield Common, grew moodier and moodier, his brow darker and darker. He had a jolly good mind not to write that 'book' at all, and chance it. It was as he entered upon the footpath where it ran under the branches of the patch of woodland, that Coker was suddenly jerked out of his gloomy and moody reflections. He was rather glad, as Prout had been on the other side of the wood to get out of the blaze of

sunshine into the shade of green foliage. He tramped on by the winding path under overhanging branches: and then, all of a sudden, as already related, he started, and stared round.

'Help!'

The yell—quite a breathless frantic yell—came from further along the footpath among the trees. Coker could not see who yelled. But he heard very clearly. Somebody, evidently, was in need of help—and badly in need of it.

'What the dickens—!' ejaculated Coker, staring: and for a moment quite forgetting Old Pompous and that awful 'book'.

'Help! help!'

It was rather a shriek than a yell this time. 'Oh, gum!' said Coker.

He had been striding along the footpath. Now he broke into a run. If anyone was in need of help. Coker was the man to give it. What was the matter, he could not begin to guess: but it was plain that something was. The longest legs in the Fifth-form at Greyfriars fairly whisked, as Coker dashed on.

Coker's feet were a good size, and, as a rule. Coker could be heard coming. But the thick grass on the footpath deadened even Coker's footfalls. He raced on unheard by the busy trio, charging along the winding path, and came suddenly and unexpectedly on the scene of action.

His eyes popped at what he saw.

Prout—Old Pompous—actually Old Pompous himself—was sprawling in the grass. Coker had not expected to see his form-master before he arrived at the school. Now he saw him. But Old Pompous was not all he saw. Two frowsy-looking roughs, with spotted mufflers tied across their faces, were man-handling Old Pompous: one of them raining savage blows on him.

For a second, Coker just stared. Then he went into action.

He did not stop to think. It was, in fact, very seldom that Coker stopped to think, and he did not begin now.

Old Pompous had whopped him, given him a book, and generally failed to treat him with the respect and consideration due to so important a person as Horace James Coker. But he did not remember that now. Neither did he heed the fact that Pug and Mouldy were a pair of burly roughs: extremely dangerous animals to tackle. He just rushed on.

'Help!' Prout's yell had degenerated into a feeble squeal. 'Help!'

'Coming, sir!' panted Coker.

The next moment he had come! Pug, in the very act of delivering another punch at Prout, caught Coker's fist on his stubbly chin, yelled, and rolled in the grass beside the Fifth-form master. Mouldy, whose thievish hands had been already groping at Prout's pockets while Pug punched bounded up, startled.

'You rotters!' roared Coker, belligerently. 'Come on!'

Mouldy gave one quick glance in the direction from which Coker had come. That glance was enough to ascertain that he was alone. Then Mouldy leaped almost like a tiger at Coker.

Coker met him with left and right.

What Horace Coker did not know about boxing, would have filled volumes on the subject of the 'noble art'. But Coker was big, he was brawny: and if Nature had been a little niggardly in the matter of brains, it had compensated him in muscle. And he had unlimited

pluck. He met Mouldy with a punch that was like the kick of a mule, and that made Mouldy feel, for the moment, that his already damaged nose had been driven like a nail through his head.

'Oooooogh!' gasped Mouldy. He backed.

But Pug was on his feet the next moment, hurling himself at Coker. A schoolboy—even an out-size schoolboy like Horace Coker—had no terrors for Pug. He was not going to abandon his victim, and his plunder, because Coker had arrived on the scene. He was going to knock Coker out, and then get on with his job as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles.

'Knock 'im out. Mouldy!' he panted, as he engaged Coker. 'Quick—afore some other bloke blows along.'

'Ow! My nose! Ow! Won't I jest break 'im up!' panted Mouldy.

Coker's hands were full with Pug, as Mouldy rushed at him again. Left and right from Mouldy banged on Coker, and he staggered. Pug jumped in to finish him. He met a swinging upper-cut from Coker, which rattled every tooth in his head, and sent him tottering across the footpath. His back came up against a tree, and he leaned there, with both hands to his jaw, gurgling. For the moment, Pug was hors de combat.

Coker turned on Mouldy, whose fists were hammering at him. Few Greyfriars fellows could have handled that burly rough. But the big, beefy Horace was one of the few. The fact that one of his eyes was half-closed, and his nose streaming crimson, did not seem to affect Coker unless to spur him on. Heedless of hammering fists, he attacked Mouldy, hard and fast, hitting hard and hitting often. Foot to foot, they slogged at one another: and when one of them gave ground, it was not Coker. It was Mouldy who backed, followed up by Coker's slogging fists.

Mr. Prout sat up, dizzy and dazed, and blinked bewildered at the scene.

Prout was too dizzy and winded to help. He made an effort to rise, and rolled back again, spluttering. He realized that someone had come to his help, and stopped that rain of blows, but it was a full minute before he collected his scattered wits sufficiently to recognize Horace Coker. His eyes bulged at Coker, almost popping from his face.

'Coker!' gasped Prout.

Again he strove to get on his feet. Coker was engaged in desperate combat, with one burly ruffian: the other about to rejoin the fray. Gladly, eagerly, Prout would have lent aid. He struggled up, and got as far as his plump knees. But he got no further. Pug, coming back into the fight, gave him a back-hander in passing, and Prout went sprawling again.

Pug reached Coker, just as Mouldy stumbled and fell under a terrific drive from the hefty Horace. Coker went spinning under knuckly fists. He fell—and luckily, he fell on Mouldy, flattening him in the grass, and knocking most of the wind out of him.

Coker was down—but he was not out! He was far from out! He was up again almost like a jack-in-the-box. A blackening eye, a swollen streaming nose, and a cut lip, did not seem to worry him. He pitched into Pug with undiminished zest. Pug was hitting hard: but Coker did not seem to care how much he got, so long as he gave—and he gave with tremendous vim. Prout, feebly struggling once more to get on his feet, could scarcely believe his eyes, as he saw Pug go reeling backwards, and land with a crash on his back, almost lifted off his feet by one of Coker's hefty drives.

Coker stood panting.

Both Pug and Mouldy were down, and Coker still on his feet—victorious in that Homeric combat. He was perspiring, he was winded and panting, his head was reeling, he could hardly keep his feet—but he was still on them, and Pug and Mouldy were on their backs. Both Coker's eyes were darkening, now: his nose looked very like the ripe tomato that had squashed on Prout a couple of days ago: he was covered with bruises as with a garment. But there he was, on his feet, the light of battle gleaming in his discoloured eyes, ready to go on if Pug and Mouldy re-started after the interval.

'Bless my soul!' said Prout, faintly.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Coker, dabbing his flowing nose with the back of his hand: but with a wary eye on Pug and Mouldy.

Pug crawled to his feet. Coker clenched his big fists ready. But Pug did not come on again. He eyed Coker almost wolfishly: but he backed away. Mouldy was still moaning in the grass.

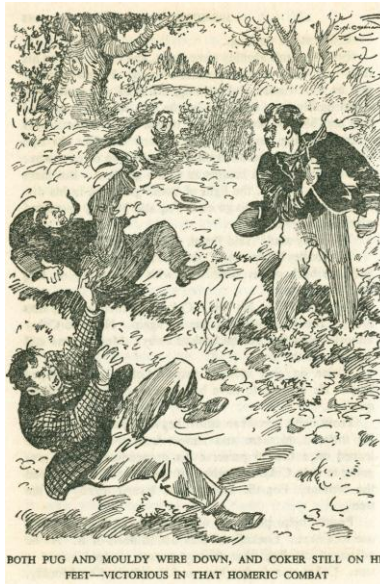
'Come on, you rotter!' gasped Coker. Pug jumped back. He seemed to have had enough of Coker at close quarters.

Prout, with herculean effort, heaved himself to his feet.

He tottered on them and almost went over again. He leaned on a tree to preserve his perpendicular. He was going to help Coker, somehow, if the two ruffians renewed the combat. For the moment, he leaned dizzily on the tree.

Prout's help, probably, would not have been of much use to Coker. Luckily, he was not in need of it. As he advanced on Pug, that frowsy person dodged round a tree. Coker stared after him, and then turned on Mouldy, who was heaving himself painfully upward. Mouldy gave a howl as Coker came at him.

"Ere you, keep orf! I give in! Don't you 'it me agin! You keep orf.' And as Coker still advanced, Mouldy fairly bolted into the trees.



'Coker!' gasped Prout.

He detached himself from the tree-trunk. He could scarcely believe that Coker, that obstreperous, unruly boy of his form, had been victorious in a desperate affray with two

burly footpads. But he had! Pug and Mouldy were in full retreat. They had left Horace Coker in a deplorably damaged and dilapidated state. But he had beaten them to it. Coker was still game, ready to go on if Pug and Mouldy wanted to go on. But Pug and Mouldy were not thinking of going on. They were only thinking of going off!

'Coker! My dear boy—my dear brave boy!' gasped Mr. Prout.

He forgot that Coker was obstreperous. He forgot that he was unruly. He forgot that he had ever contemplated requesting the Head to expedite the departure of that member of his form from Greyfriars School. Coker had gone through a terrific combat to save him from violence and robbery. Coker, reckless of odds, had rushed to his rescue. Coker, on his behalf, had collected such damages, that his rugged countenance was likely to be a striking picture for weeks to come. Two to one had not daunted Coker. Alone, like Coriolanus, he had done it! Prout shuddered to think what his own state would have been, had not Coker intervened to save him from Pug's hammering fists. Prout overflowed with grateful feeling. He could almost have hugged Coker.

'Coker! You are hurt—I fear that you are hurt—!'

Coker rubbed an eye with one hand, and a nose with the other. There was no doubt that Prout's fear was well-founded: Coker was hurt. He was in fact very sorely damaged. But Coker was not the man to make much of it.

'Oh! That's nothing, sir!' he gasped. 'Just a knock or two—nothing really. A bit winded, that's all.' 'Coker! I am proud of you,—I am proud to have such a boy in my form!' gasped Prout.

'Eh?' Coker blinked at him.

'I am under the deepest obligation to you, Coker. I only wish, Coker, that I could somehow repay you for this great service—for your unexampled courage, Coker.'

'Oh!' gasped Coker. He stood blinking at Prout. Coker was not perhaps very bright. But he had a practical turn of mind. If that was how Prout was feeling about it, what about that 'book'? 'It's really nothing, sir—.'

'Nonsense, Coker! Such courage—such bravery—.'

'Well, sir, if you think I've done anything—.'

'Assuredly, Coker—most assuredly.'

'Well, sir, if you'd let me off that book—!'

'That book?' repeated Prout, blankly, Prout, for the moment at least, had forgotten all about that 'book'. 'Oh! That—that book! That book, Coker—my dear, boy, you are certainly excused that book—do not give it another thought, Coker.'

Coker's face brightened,—so far as so extremely damaged a face could brighten. That awful 'book', which had hung over his head for two whole days at Aunt Judy's, that wretched 'book' which would have used up all his hours of leisure for days and days to come, was washed out! Prout, undoubtedly, was glad that Coker had come along at so opportune a moment. Coker was even gladder. A scrap with Pug and Mouldy was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine, compared with grinding through that awful book from *Arma virumque to fluctibus aestas*. 'Oh! Thank you, sir!' gasped Coker. It was a tremendous relief: he actually regretted, at that moment, that he had tomatoed Prout!

'Not at all, Coker!' said Mr. Prout, benevolently. Now, my dear boy, you are hurt—I must assist you to the school. I was going to Courtfield, but after what has occurred, I must postpone my call at Chunkley's. Lean upon my arm, my dear boy, and I will assist you to the school: you must attend to your injuries without delay.'

Fortunately. Coker was feeling too battered and bruised to feel like grinning, or he might have grinned. Coker was half a head taller than Prout, and leaning on Prout's arm for support would have required some considerable doubling-up. Neither was Horace Coker in the very least disposed to play the part of a battered wreck in need of assistance.

'Oh. I'm all right, sir!' said Coker, cheerily. 'If you don't mind, sir. I'll cut off as fast as I can—I'd like to bathe my eyes—they feel as if they're going to be jolly black—.'

'If you can proceed without assistance, Coker—.'

'Oh, quite, sir: I'm all right, really.'

'Very well, Coker: lose no time in reaching the school, and I will follow,' said Mr. Prout. Coker lost no time. Mr. Prout followed more slowly.

After that wild adventure, Prout was not feeling like walking on to Courtfield, to call at Chunkley's and engage that skilled person to deal with the door of the Remove box-room. Indeed he had almost forgotten Billy Bunter and his antics. Slowly, ponderously, Prout elephantined his way home across the sunny common: arriving at Greyfriars School after his heroic rescuer.

CHAPTER 30

AT LAST!

'DOES Henry look shirty?' murmured Bob Cherry.

There was a subdued chuckle from the Co.

It had to be subdued: —for Henry, otherwise Mr. Henry Samuel Quelch, master of the Greyfriars Remove, did not look in a mood to relish chuckles from members of his form. Not a fellow in the Remove was anxious to catch Quelch's eye, just then.

That Quelch looked 'shirty' there was no doubt. That indeed, was a very mild description of his aspect.

His face was grim. His gimlet-eyes glistened. His lips were set in a tight line. A crowd of fellows stared at him: but they kept at a respectful distance to stare. Quelch really looked as if he might bite!

He was certainly aware of innumerable stares. But he gave them no heed. He looked neither to the right nor to the left, as he walked between Wingate of the Sixth on one side, and Gosling with his ladder on the other.

Behind the three, as they marched round the building, evidently heading for the box-room window, Harry Wharton and Co. fell in, to march in the same direction, with a crowd of Remove fellows, and a good many fellows of other forms. Apparently another attempt was to be made to extract the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove from his lair, while Prout was on his way to Courtfield to engage the services of that skilled person at Chunkley's. No doubt for that very reason, Mr. Quelch had decided, at last, on drastic measures. No doubt Old Pompous's interference had put the lid on. Quelch certainly looked as if he meant business this time: and every fellow wondered what was going to happen.

They watched Gosling plant his ladder. Was Wingate going up again to get another rap on the knuckles? Interest and excitement were intense.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the jolly old porpoise!' murmured Bob Cherry, as a fat face appeared at the box-room window over the leads, and a pair of big spectacles flashed back the rays of the sun.

'Bunter's ready for them!' chuckled Frank Nugent.

'They can't get that window open,' said the Bounder. 'Even if they got at the catch, it wouldn't open now it's wedged. Bunter's all right.'

'Quelch is up to something,' said Johnny Bull. 'He's not going to wait for Old Pompous to take it out of his hands.'

'Looks like it,' agreed Harry Wharton. 'But what—?'

'And how?' said Bob.

'The howfulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'The esteemed and idiotic Bunter is ready with the stump.'

'Good old porpoise!' chuckled the Bounder. 'More power to his elbow! This is the lark of the term.'

Billy Bunter, evidently, was prepared to hold the fort, as he had held it before. He was brandishing the cricket-stump at the window, defiance gleaming through his spectacles. If Wingate's knuckles came within reach of that stump again, those knuckles were booked for another tremendous crack.

'Wingate!'

There was sudden silence, as Mr. Quelch addressed the captain of Greyfriars. Everyone was anxious to hear.

'Yes, sir!' said Wingate.

'You will go up to the box-room window, Wingate, and order that foolish boy to unbolt the door of the box-room.'

'Certainly, sir.'

'If he refuses again, you will break in the window,' continued Mr. Quelch. 'You have the hammer, Wingate.'

'Yes, sir! I have it here.' Some keen eyes, among the crowd, detected that there was a bulge under Wingate's coat.

'Very well. Wingate: pray proceed,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I will go to the box-room door, to take charge of that insensate boy when you open it.'

Wingate mounted the ladder.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Did you fellows hear? That's the game—Henry's determined to put it through before Old Pompous gets back.'

All eyes watched Wingate, as he stepped on the leads.

Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles, were fixed on him, as he approached the window. The fat Owl was ready to swipe at intrusive knuckles. But this time Wingate did not reach in for the catch. He reached under his coat, and drew out into view a large and very heavy coke-hammer.

'Bunter!' he rapped.

'Yah!' retorted Bunter.

'Open the door of the box-room at once.'

'Yah!' repeated Bunter.

'I have orders to break in the window, Bunter.'

'Beast!'

Wingate wasted no more time in words. He lifted the coke-hammer, and crashed it on the window-sashes. It was a heavy hammer, and there was plenty of beef in the Greyfriars captain's right arm. The crash was terrific.

Crash!

'Oh, crikey!' came a gasp from Bunter.

Crash! Crash!

There was a buzz of excitement in the watching crowd.

Quelch's frown deepened, and his lips set harder. Quelch just hated this. He had hoped to get through somehow, without so terrific a disturbance. But Prout had really left him no choice in the matter. If he did not succeed in dealing with the expelled Owl, Prout was going to deal with him: and that was quite intolerable. Much against the grain, Quelch was taking these drastic measures. It was annoying and irritating and exasperating: but at all events, Bunter would be secured before Prout could weigh in with that skilled person from Courtfield: it would at least put 'paid' to the interference of Prout.

Crash! crash! crash!

Glass flew in fragments. The wooden sashes were old and strong: but no window-sashes could long resist the crashing of a coke-hammer in a sinewy hand. The sashes were going.

'Oh, crikey!' came another dismayed squeak from Bunter.

The fat Owl retreated from flying fragments of glass and whizzing splinters. He disappeared from the view of the crowd below.

Crash! crash!

It could be heard all over Greyfriars. Fellows in the quad, fellows at the cricket-nets, fellows in the studies all heard it, and jumped. From all sides they came crowding to the spot, to see what was going on. Fellows in flannels came running from the cricket-ground—Sixth-form men came out of the Prefects' Room,—the tuck-shop poured out its population—Potter and Greene, waiting at the gates in expectation of Coker, forgot Coker, and came running. All, or almost all, Greyfriars swarmed on the spot-staring, ejaculating: while crash on crash rang from the box-room window as Wingate plied the coke-hammer.

Mr. Quelch rustled away.

He disappeared into the House: evidently to go up to the Remove box-room and wait at the door for Wingate to open it, and deliver the fat garrison into his hands. It was only a matter of minutes now. Once such drastic measures were decided upon, the thing was as good as done.

Crash! crash! crash!

Broken glass and splinters of wood scattered far and wide. The window-sashes disappeared from existence. Nothing, at last, remained to bar Wingate's entrance—unless Bunter could handle the captain of Greyfriars: which was highly improbable. Once the whole window was out of the way, Wingate had only to step in.

He dropped the coke-hammer on the leads at last.

A myriad of eyes watched him step in at the window. Nothing further was seen of him, or of Bunter, from without: but something was heard.

'Yaroooh! Leggo, you beast! I ain't going to be bunked! Leggo my neck, will you? Owl wow! Leggo! Beast!'

Evidently, Bunter was in the hands of the enemy!

In those strong hands, the hapless fat Owl was wriggling like an eel. But he wriggled in vain. Wingate had a powerful grip on the back of a fat neck. With his other hand, he drew back the bolt on the door of the box-room.

'Leggo!' yelled Bunter. The door opened.

'Here he is, sir!' said Wingate.

Quelch was on the landing outside, ready to receive the prize. Wingate's grip on Bunter's collar was replaced by Quelch's.

'Now, Bunter—.'

'Leggo!' yelled Bunter.

'Come with me at once—.'

'I ain't going to be bunked—!'

'Come!'

The unfortunate fat Owl had no choice about coming.

With an iron grip on his collar, his form-master walked him away. The siege of the box-room was at an end: its plump garrison a prisoner: at long, long last to take the homeward trail, expelled from Greyfriars. At long, long last, Billy Bunter's number was up!

Or was it?

COKER GETS THE NEWS

'COKER—.'

'What—!'

'Great pip!'

'What the dickens—!'

Potter and Greene fairly stuttered with amazement.

They gazed at Horace Coker with popping eyes. Often had Coker surprised his friends. But never so much as now!

Potter and Greene had left the buzzing crowd in the quad, and come up to their study to ascertain whether Coker had blown in yet. They found that he had. That was not surprising, as they had been expecting him. But the state in which they found him was surprising. They hadn't expected that.

Coker was leaning over a bowl of water on the study table, with a sponge in his hand, bathing his eyes and nose. Both eyes were blackened,—black as the ace of spades. The nose, like Marian's in the ballad, was red and raw. Coker's rugged countenance revealed other damages—indeed it would have been difficult to lay a finger on a single spot that had not suffered under Pug and Mouldy, and retained traces of that Homeric combat. Never had so decorative a visage been seen before within the ancient walls of Greyfriars School. If Horace Coker had stopped a runaway lorry with his face, it could hardly have looked more damaged.

Coker raised a dripping face from the bowl, and blinked at his friends. To their further surprise, he seemed in cheerful spirits, in spite of the casualty-list concentrated in his countenance.

'Oh! You fellows!' said Coker. 'I didn't see anything of you when I came in—. I told you I was coming back this afternoon—.'

'There's been a row on,' said Potter. 'We were watching the show. But—but how on earth did you get like that, Coker?'

'Railway accident?' asked Greene.

'A scrap with some tramps,' said Coker. He gave his wet face a rub, and blinked. 'Does it look very bad?'

'Does it?' gasped Potter.

'Oh, holy smoke!' said Greene.

'Well, it was pretty tough going, with two of them on to a fellow,' said Coker. 'I don't mind admitting that I feel a bit rocky.'

'You look it, at any rate!' agreed Potter. 'I—I say, old man, you shouldn't get into scraps with tramps, you know. Old Pompous will go right off at the deep end when he sees you.' Coker stared at him.

'Prout's seen me already, fathead,' he answered.

'Like that?' gasped Greene.

'Yes, of course.'

'Oh, suffering cats and kittens!' said Potter. 'What on earth did he say?'

'Well, he was pretty decent about it. I must admit that!' said Coker. 'He's let me off that book.'

Potter and Greene gazed at him. They were prepared to hear that the thunder had rolled, if Prout had seen a member of his form in such a shocking state. They were not prepared to hear that he had been decent about it, and let Coker off that 'book'. They goggled at him. 'Mean to say Prout saw you like that—and—and never even jawed you?' stuttered Potter. 'Well, dash it all, a man could hardly jaw a fellow for getting knocked about like this, in the circs,' said Coker. 'What do you mean? Think he was going to jaw me for getting it instead of him?'

'Eh?'

'What?'

'He would jolly well have had it,' said Coker, with a nod. 'He had had a few, when I came up. They had him down, and one of them was punching him like a punch-ball. I'll bet that Prout would have been a jolly old picture, if I hadn't barged in.'

'Oh!' gasped Potter. He began to understand. 'Old Pompous is out—he was going over to Courtfield—has anything happened to him?'

'Sort of,' said Coker. 'A couple of footpads, in that patch of wood on the common. I came on them as I was walking here from the station, see? Jolly lucky I did, too —Prout's let me off that book. That's worth a knock or two.'

'A couple of tramps, pitching into Prout—!'

'That's it! They were going to rob him. I expect,—anyhow they were pitching into him like billy-O. I wasn't having that, of course,' said Coker. 'After all, Prout's my beak. He's got his funny ways, but he's my beak.'

'Oh, scissors!' said Potter. 'You tackled a couple of tramps to see Old Pompous through—.'

'Of course I did,' said Coker, testily. 'Think I was going to stroll by and leave them to hammer him? Don't be an ass!'

'Well, if that's how it was, you're all right with Prout,' said Greene. 'And he's let you off that book?'

'Well he seemed so jolly grateful, and all that, that I thought I'd mention it,' explained Coker. 'Fact is, I was thinking of not doing it, and leaving Old Pompous to whistle for it. In fact I'd as good as made up my mind about it. But of course I'd rather Prout washed it out. So as he seemed so jolly pleased with me, for once. I put it to him, and it's washed out.' Coker gave his damaged features another rub with the sponge, and grinned. 'Spot of luck. what? I'm not feeling any too good, just at the moment: but I've got out of that book! Couldn't have happened better, really.'

Coker in spite of his accumulation of damages, was evidently feeling satisfied, on the whole. His friends gazed at him. Both of them would rather have written out the whole twelve books of the Aeneid, from end to end, and followed it up with the Eclogues and the Georgics, than have gone through what old Horace had gone through. Tastes, evidently, differed!

'And look here, you men,' went on Coker. 'As I've said, Prout's let me off that book: and I did call him an old ass, as you know, and he heard me. I call it pretty decent of him. Old Pompous ain't such a bad sort. If you fellows can't see it, you can take my word for it. I don't want to hear him run down, in this study.'

'Who runs him down in this study?' demanded Potter.

'Only you. Coker,' said Greene.

'I don't want any jaw about it,' said Coker. 'Just bear in mind what I say—and if you've got anything to say against Prout, don't say it to me, that's all.'

'But we haven't—!'

, 'We never—!'

'Well, don't!' said Coker. 'Prout's all right, whether you fellows can see it or not. I'm sorry now that I buzzed that tomato at him just before I left on Tuesday. I wish I hadn't, so there!' Potter jumped. Greene bounded.

'You—you—you buzzed that tomato at Prout just before you left on Tuesday?' articulated Potter.

'You—you—you—you buzzed that tommy at Prout!' breathed Greene.

Coker nodded.

'Wasn't there a row about it?' he asked. 'Haven't you fellows heard? Why, I thought Old Pompous would kick up a terrific shindy, about getting a tomato squashing on his boko. I got him over the garden wall, you know—right on the boko—Squash! Then I went for my train—.'

'You—you got him right on the b—b—boko—!' stuttered Potter .

'With a tut—tut—tomato—!' stuttered Greene.

'Mind, keep it dark,' said Coker. 'I don't want it shouted over the school. Didn't Prout make a row about it?'

'Didn't he?' gasped Greene. 'Why, you ass—you fathead—nobody ever thought of you—hey got a Remove kid for it—.'

'Eh?'

'That fat young tick. Bunter—.'

'What?'

'And he's bunked for it—.'

'Bunked?'

'Yes, bunked! The young ass bolted himself in a box-room, but they've just hooked him out. He's bunked—sacked—expelled—and you tell us that it was you who buzzed that tomato at Prout!' gasped Potter.

Coker blinked at them.

'But what have they got young Bunter for?' he howled. 'Bunter had nothing to do with it. What made them think it was Bunter?'

'Prout thought so—he was on the spot, anyway. He was taken to the Head and bunked for tomatoing Prout.'

'Oh, crumbs!' said Coker.

He gazed at Potter and Greene in consternation. For a long minute he gazed at them without speaking. That was rather an unusually lengthy period for Horace Coker to remain silent. But he seemed quite dumbfounded.

He found his voice at last.

'Bunter—bunked—and it was me! Oh, crikey! Where's that towel?' Coker stared round for the towel, and towelled his streaming face, with hurried hands. 'I shall have to see the Head at once, then—can't let that go on. Bunter bunked,—when it was me all the time! Oh, my hat!'

He pitched aside the towel, and strode to the door. 'But I—I say—!' gasped Potter.

'Coker, old man—!' exclaimed Greene.

Coker did not heed them. He strode out of the study, leaving Potter and Greene staring blankly at one another.

CHAPTER 32

NOT BUNTER!

'BUNTER!' said the Head, sternly.

'Oh, lor!' mumbled Bunter.

He stood before Dr. Locke's table, in Dr. Locke's study, his fat knees sagging, his fat face the picture of woe.

Mr. Quelch stood quite near at hand—ready to grasp a fat neck at any moment, if the fat Owl showed signs of recalcitrance. At the same time, there was a faintly compassionate expression on Quelch's crusty face. He had had a great deal of trouble with Bunter: more trouble with Bunter than with all the rest of the Remove put together. But the doleful woe in Bunter's fat countenance might have touched the toughest heart.

The Head's brow was stern. Bunter's unheard-of proceedings, since he had been expelled, had naturally stirred his deep ire. Nevertheless there was, in his, stern face, a faint reflection of the compassion visible in Quelch's.

But he had his stern duty to do: and like Pharaoh of old, he hardened his heart. This boy was expelled,—for just cause! He should have been gone a couple of days ago. Now he was going!

'Bunter! I scarcely know what to say to you!' said Dr. Locke. 'Two days ago you were expelled from this school, for a lawless, outrageous action—.'

'I—I—I didn't—.'

'Twice,' said the Head, in a deep voice, 'you were taken to the railway station—twice you have returned, disregarding your sentence of expulsion—.'

'I never didn't—.'

'You have the audacity, the effrontery, to bolt yourself in a room and refuse to emerge! Considerable damage has been done to the school property, in order to deal with you, Bunter.'

'But I never wasn't—I mean I didn't never—.'

'I am glad, Mr. Quelch, that you have now been able to deal with this matter.' said Dr. Locke, with a stress on the word 'now'. 'Care must be taken that this foolish boy gives no more trouble.'

'If you will give instructions, sir, for a prefect to accompany him to his home and deliver him personally into the hands of his parents—,' suggested Mr. Quelch.

Dr. Locke frowned.

'A very unusual proceeding, Mr. Quelch—but apparently it is not sufficient to place him in his train. I will request Wingate to travel home with him, and not to leave him until he has delivered him there.'

'Very good, sir.'

'If—if—if you please, sir—!' gasped Bunter. 'You need say nothing, Bunter.'

'But I—I—I never—I didn't—I wasn't—!'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'Tain't fair, sir!' howled Bunter. 'I never tomatoed Old Pompous, sir—.'

'What? what?'

'I—I—I mean Mr. Prout, sir—I never tomatoed him.'

I—I couldn't help laughing, sir, when he got the tomato squash on his boko—I—I mean his nose, sir—but I never did it—I—I—I—.'

Dr. Locke raised his hand.

'I have said that that will do, Bunter! Mr. Quelch, kindly keep this boy under your personal supervision until Wingate is ready to take him home. He must not be allowed to give further trouble. I—.'

Knock!

The Head was interrupted.

It was a hurried knock at his study door: not the respectful tap it should have been. Dr. Locke cast a frowning glance towards the door. He had no time to say, 'Come in!' if that was his intention. The door opened, and Horace Coker came in—or rather rushed in.

Three pairs of eyes, and one pair of spectacles, fastened on the face of Coker of the Fifth, as if it fascinated them. It was the very first time that a senior man of Greyfriars had presented himself in his headmaster's study, with two black eyes, a red raw nose, and a general aspect of having been under a lorry. Dr. Locke gazed at him—Mr. Quelch gazed at him—Billy Bunter blinked at him. Coker's unusual aspect seemed to have taken their breath away.

'If you please, sir—!' gasped Coker, breathlessly.

Dr. Locke rose to his feet, thunder in his brow.

'Coker! What does this mean? How dare you rush into my study in that manner? How dare you present yourself before me in such a state—such a revolting state—such a disgraceful and disgusting state? How—.'

'I—I—I came in rather a hurry, sir, as—as I've only just heard that Bunter was bunked, sir—.'

'Leave my study this instant.'

'But, sir—.'

'The condition you are in, Coker, is a disgrace to the school. I can scarcely believe my eyes, Coker! Never have I seen a Greyfriars boy in such a state. You have been fighting—.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Some tramps—.'

'Go!'

'But I—I—I came, sir—.'

'I shall request your form-master to deal with you, Coker, with the utmost severity, for appearing in so disfigured and disgraceful a state. Now leave my study instantly.'

'But I've just heard that Bunter was sacked, sir—!' gasped Coker.

'That does not concern you. Go!'

'But—but—but it does, sir! If Bunter's been bunked for chucking that tomato at Prout, sir, it wasn't Bunter—.'

'What?'

'It was me, sir!' gasped Coker. It was no time to think of grammar!

The Head stared at him. Mr. Quelch gave a start.

Billy Bunter jumped. They almost forgot Coker's remarkable aspect, in their astonishment at his still more remarkable statement.

'What—what—what did you say, Coker?' articulated the Head.

'It was me, sir! That young ass—I—I mean Bunter—Bunter never had anything to do with it, sir! It wasn't Bunter! It was me.'

'Bless my soul!' said the Head.

'You!' breathed Mr. Quelch. 'You, Coker! A boy of my form has been expelled for that act—. Now you confess that it was your act!'

'Yes, sir! You see, I—I—.'

'You, Coker!' Dr. Locke's voice rose. 'You,—a senior boy—a Fifth-form boy—a boy in Mr. Prout's form—you—.'

'I'm sorry I did it, sir, but I—I did!' stammered Coker. 'I—I was wild with Old Pompous—I mean Mr. Prout—giving me a book, sir, and—and—and—I did it, sir, —I—I had to tell you, sir—I couldn't leave it on that fag—.'

'And why, Coker, have you not told me before? Why have you permitted your headmaster to punish an innocent person, for your act? Why—.'

'I—I never knew, sir! I've been away from the school the last two days, sir—you gave me leave to go home for my aunt's birthday, sir—.'

'Oh! Yes.' Dr. Locke remembered. 'And now—.'

'I've only just got back, sir, and—and Potter and Greene told me—you could have knocked me down with a doughnut, sir, when I heard—I—I mean, I—I never dreamed of anything of the kind,—I—I came to you at once, —sir, when I heard that another fellow was bunked for what I did—.'

Coker gasped for breath.

There was a brief silence in the Head's study. Dr. Locke's brow was thunderous. Quelch was looking relieved. There was not going to be an expulsion in his form, after all—that was obvious. Bunter had been 'bunked' for tomatoing Prout—and it was Coker who had tomatoed Prout. Bunter's amazing antics since his expulsion were surely excusable, now it had transpired that Bunter was not the culprit!

Billy Bunter grinned. At the very end of his tether, at the eleventh hour, fortune had befriended him. They couldn't bunk him now—they just couldn't! They could bunk Coker instead, if they liked—Bunter was not worrying about that. It was Bunter who broke the silence.

'I—I—I say, sir. I—I told you I never—!' squeaked Bunter.

'Silence, Bunter,' rapped Mr. Quelch.

'But I never, sir—.'

'Be silent! Dr. Locke, Coker's confession clears this boy of my form!' said Mr. Quelch.

'Indeed, one might almost say that there was some justification for his mutinous proceedings since his expulsion, sir, as it now appears that he was expelled for another boy's act—.'

Dr. Locke knitted his brows.

'Bunter's sentence is, of course, rescinded, now that the facts are known, Mr. Quelch. But for his untruthfulness, which made it impossible to rely upon a single word he uttered, it would never have been passed. Bunter!'

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

'Let this be a warning to you, Bunter! You may leave my study.'

Billy Bunter gave his headmaster one indignant blink.

He was let off: but it seemed that Dr. Locke still considered that he was to blame in the matter, somehow! However, he was very glad to leave the study. He rolled to the door: and he rolled rapidly. Mr. Quelch followed him out. Coker of the Fifth, no doubt, would have been glad to follow on. But the Head was not through with Coker yet.

'Coker!' Dr. Locke's voice rumbled. 'Coker, it was you, on your own confession, who committed the outrageous, the lawless act, for which the only possible punishment is expulsion from the school. I will say nothing now of the disgraceful state in which you have presented yourself here. That concerns me no longer, as you are no longer a Greyfriars boy, Coker! You are expelled from Greyfriars, Coker!'

'I—I—!'

'There is nothing more to be said, Coker. Leave my study.'

'But I—I—.'

'Go!' thundered the Head.

Coker almost tottered from the study.

CHAPTER 33

HAPPY LANDING!

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!' exclaimed Bob Cherry.

'Bunter—!'

'Still here?' grinned Skinner.

'What—?'

'Why—how—?'

That Billy Bunter was 'still there', was evident. For there he was, rolling out of the House into the sunny quad, with a cheery grin on a fat grubby face. Harry Wharton and Co. and everyone else, had expected, if they saw Bunter again, to see him in the custody of Quelch or a prefect, heading for the railway station and home. But it was not thus that they saw him. They beheld him roll out of the House on his own, obviously not in custody, and grinning as if he had not a care in the wide world.

'I say you fellows, it's all right!' squeaked Bunter. It was a happy squeak. Bunter, after all his wild adventures, was feeling good.

There was quite a rush to stare at Bunter. Everybody had been thinking, or talking of Bunter: and now all eyes were fixed on him. Remove fellows surrounded him—Fourth-form and Shell fellows stared at him—Fifth-form seniors stared, and even great men of the Sixth-form. Gosling, from his lodge, stared: and Mr. Prout, coming in at the gates, stared harder than anyone else. Bunter was 'bunked'—Bunter had been hooked out of his refuge by drastic measures that had echoed and re-echoed all over the school: yet there was Bunter, free as air, looking merry and bright though very much in want of a wash.

'All right, is it?' repeated Bob Cherry, blankly. 'Isn't Quelch taking you to the station again?' Bunter chuckled.

'He, he, he! No fear.'

'But you're bunked!' exclaimed the Bounder.

'I jolly well ain't!' trilled Bunter. 'Didn't I tell you fellows I jolly well wasn't going to be bunked? Well, I jolly well ain't, see?'

'The Old Man can't have let him off!' said Johnny Bull.

'That's all you know!' grinned Bunter.

'Look out, Bunter—there's Quelch looking from his study window!' said Smithy. 'He's got his eye on you.'

'Who cares?' grinned Bunter.

They could only gaze at him in astonishment Bunter, evidently, did not care if a gimlet-eye was on him from Quelch's study window. It was quite mystifying.

'Mean to say that you're staying, Bunter?' asked Frank Nugent.

'Yes, rather!'

'After tomatoing Prout—!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'Oh, really, Wharton! Didn't I tell you I never tomatoed Prout—?'

'Oh! Yes! But—.'

'The Head jolly well knows I didn't, now,' said Bunter. 'The Head can take a fellow's word! Perhaps you fellows will take my word, after this!'

'Perhaps!' chuckled Bob Cherry.

'The perhapsfulness is terrific, my esteemed fibbing Bunter,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'I say, you fellows, it's all come out. I—.'

"Ware beaks, Bunter!" called Squiff. 'Here comes Prout!'

Sniff, from Bunter.

'Who cares for Prout?' he answered, disdainfully. Evidently, Billy Bunter cared no more for Mr. Prout, bearing down upon him with a frowning brow and a gleaming eye, than he cared for Quelch at his study window! It was an independent Owl.

He blinked through his big spectacles, quite calmly, at Mr. Prout as he came. Other fellows made way for the Fifth-form master. They expected him to take Bunter by the collar and secure him. Bunter did not seem to expect it. The portly Prout did not daunt him,—now.

His manner was quite breezy.

'Bunter!' boomed Prout.

'Oh! Yes, sir,' answered Bunter, casually.

'What are you doing here, Bunter? I perceive that you have left the apartment in which you had the audacity, the effrontery, the unabashed impudence, Bunter, to take refuge. You should now be in the custody of your form-master, or a prefect. I shall take you to your form-master at once, Bunter.'

Prout reached out with a plump hand. Billy Bunter backed.

'You see, sir it wasn't me—!' he squeaked.

'What? what?'

'The Head knows now that it wasn't me—.'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'I ain't bunked!' yelled Bunter. 'I tell you the Head knows now that it wasn't me, and I ain't going.'

'Nonsense! You are expelled from this school, Bunter, and you are going immediately! You will be allowed no further opportunity of defying authority. Bunter! I shall take care of that! Come!'

The plump hand descended on a fat neck.

'Come!' boomed Prout.

Bunter wriggled.

'Leggo!' he roared. 'I tell you I ain't bunked and I ain't going. Leggo my collar!'

Mr. Prout did not let go Bunter's collar. He compressed his grip on it. Bunter wriggled and yelled.

'Leggo!'

'Silence, Bunter! Come with me at once. I shall—.'

Mr. Quelch's study window shot up. An angular form leaned out. A gimlet-eye glittered at Prout.

'Mr. Prout!' It was almost a hoot, from Quelch.

The Fifth-form master glanced round at the window. 'Mr. Quelch! I find this boy—.'

'Will you kindly release that boy of my form, Mr. Prout, immediately?' inquired Mr. Quelch, in icy tones that might have come directly from the North Pole.

'Sir!' gasped Mr. Prout. 'This boy is under sentence of expulsion, as you well know—this boy—.'

'That boy is no longer under sentence of expulsion. Mr. Prout, as it has now transpired that he did not commit the act for which the sentence was passed on him.'

'Nonsense, sir!' boomed Mr. Prout. 'This boy, sir, was expelled for hurling a—a—a vegetable, sir, at me—at me, Sir—.'

'It is now known, Mr. Prout, that it was not Bunter'

'Absurd, sir!' boomed Prout.

'The culprit, sir, has confessed to the headmaster and Bunter is completely exonerated!' hooted Mr Quelch

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Prout. He released Bunter's collar. If such is the case, Mr. Quelch—I can scarcely credit it, but if such is the case,—if the offender was some other boy of your form, sir—.'

'The offender was not some other boy of my form. sir!' said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice.

'The offender was a boy of your own form, sir!'

'Eh?'

'It was Coker, sir—.'

'Kik—kik—kik—Coker!' Mr. Prout seemed afflicted with a stutter. 'D—d—did you say Kik—kik—Coker?'

'I said Coker, sir! He has confessed to the headmaster, sir, and has been expelled from the school in Bunter's place, as the guilty party. I trust, Mr. Prout, that you are now satisfied.' Mr. Prout did not look as if he was satisfied. He looked quite dazed, overwhelmed, and dumbfounded. He gazed at Mr. Quelch with bulging eyes. A full-rigged ship, suddenly caught in a stormy head-wind, could not have been taken aback so thoroughly as Mr. Prout, at that moment. He goggled at Mr. Quelch. He almost gibbered. Finally, without another glance at Bunter, he elephantined into the House, and was gone.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter. Quelch's window closed with a snap.

'He, he, he!' Billy Bunter chortled. 'I say, you fellows, I jolly well ain't bunked, and I jolly well ain't going to be bunked. Ain't you jolly glad?'

'Are we?' said Smithy: as if he doubted it.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, really, Smithy—.'

'Jolly glad, old fat man,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'The gladfulness is terrific.'

'Terrific and preposterous, and then some!' said Bob Cherry. 'Gratters, old porpoise.'

Billy Bunter was not, perhaps, a highly-prized member of the Greyfriars community. Still, everyone was glad that he had come through his manifold trials and tribulations, and reached a happy landing.

GREYFRIARS SCHOOL had not, after all, lost its Bunter. The Remove, had not, after all, lost its fat ornament. The next day Billy Bunter was in form again, as of old, and once more, as of old, perpetrating 'howlers' in con: once more displaying a keen interest in other fellows' study cupboards, once more seeking to 'touch' Remove fellows for a little loan on a postal order he was expecting.

Neither was Horace Coker missing, after all, from the ranks of the Fifth. That Homeric combat with Messrs. Pug and Mouldy was Coker's salvation. After that Homeric combat, could Mr. Prout fail to forgive and forget the episode of the tomato? He couldn't. And the Head had only to learn how and why it was that Coker had appeared in his majestic presence in so dilapidated a state, to concur at once in Prout's views. So there was a happy ending all round to the strange eventful history of the Banishing of Billy Bunter.

