

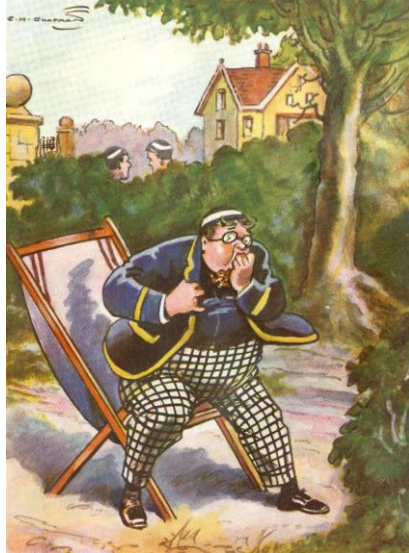


BUNTER OUT OF BOUNDS

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BILLY BUNTER ALMOST JUMPED OUT OF THE DECK-CHAIR

CHAPTER 1

AWFUL!

BILLY BUNTER slipped a grubby hand into a sticky pocket.

In that pocket, his fat fingers closed on a chunk of toffee. But he hesitated.

His eyes, and his spectacles, were fixed on Mr. Quelch.

The Greyfriars Remove were in form.

Geography was the order of the day. A large map was outspread on the blackboard. Quelch, pointer in hand, was indicating spots of interest — or otherwise — to his form. The Remove were imbibing knowledge of some of the latest fashions in European frontiers.

Some of them were giving earnest attention. Some were not. William George Bunter was numbered among the latter.

Bunter was uninterested. Whether Silesia was Polish, or whether Poland was Silesian, Bunter couldn't have cared less.

A much more urgent matter was on Bunter's fat mind. Bunter was, as usual, hungry. Not as usual, there was tuck available, in the shape of a large chunk of toffee in a sticky pocket — if a fellow could only depend on Quelch keeping his back turned while he made the venture!

Normally, a chunk of toffee in Bunter's possession would not have been in his pocket. It would have been in the most extensive mouth in the Remove, on the downward path. Unluckily, Bunter had found that toffee in Bob Cherry's study only just as the bell for class was ringing. He had had time for only one bite before he had to bolt for the form-room.

Since then it had haunted his fat thoughts. Again and again he had been tempted to make the venture, when Quelch's attention was elsewhere. But he dreaded the glint of a gimlet-eye turning upon him. Foodstuffs in the form-room were, of course, strictly prohibited. Billy Bunter wanted that toffee: but he did not want lines, he did not want a detention, still less did he want Quelch's cane.

The amount of geography Bunter learned during that lesson was absolutely nil.

At last — at long last — he ventured to slip his hand into his pocket, where sticky fingers contacted sticky toffee.

Quelch was not looking in his direction. Harry Wharton had asked a question, and Quelch was answering it, at the same time indicating with the pointer. Really, it seemed a propitious moment for a hungry fat Owl to transfer a chunk of toffee from a sticky pocket to a yearning mouth.

He hesitated.

But it was said of old that he who hesitates is lost! With the toffee actually in his fat fingers, Billy Bunter could resist no longer.

With eyes and spectacles glued on Quelch, watchful for a turn of his head, the fat junior extracted the toffee, and in a split second more, it was jammed into his mouth.

It was a rather large chunk. But Bunter had no time to disintegrate it. Capacious as Billy Bunter's mouth was, that chunk seemed to fill it to capacity. His plump cheek bulged. Several fellows near him glanced at him, and grinned. Fisher T. Fish winked at Skinner, who chuckled. Bunter chewed almost frantically: anxious to reduce that bulge before a gimlet-eye strayed in his direction. But he was fated to lose the battle of the bulge!

'Bunter!'

Only a second ago, Quelch had seemed utterly immersed in geography. But you never knew, with Quelch. Often, in class, he seemed to have as many eyes as Argus, and a few over.

'Bunter!'

Quelch's voice was not loud, but it was deep.

Billy Bunter did not answer. He couldn't. There was an impediment in his speech! That chunk of toffee was in the way.

'Bunter!'

'Urrrggh!'

'Bunter! Stand up.'

Bunter, unwillingly, stood up. All eyes turned on him.

Whatever interest the Remove might have had, hitherto, in geography, was now wholly transferred to Billy Bunter. His aspect was indeed a little remarkable: his fat face was crimson, his little round eyes bulged behind his big round spectacles, and his plump jaws worked wildly in the effort to get rid of that impediment in his speech.

Many of the juniors grinned. They seemed to find Bunter's remarkable aspect amusing.

But there was not the ghost of a smile on Quelch's grim face. Like the dear old Queen, he was not amused!

'Bunter! You are eating in class, Bunter.'

'Wurrrggh!'

That gasping gurgle was all that Bunter could manage in the way of reply. Willingly he would have answered 'No, sir!'

It was not regard for the truth that stopped him. It was the toffee. He could only gurgle.

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

'Bunter!'

You are an incorrigibly greedy boy! You are actually consuming sweetmeats in class! You have something in your mouth at this moment, Bunter.'

'Gurrrggh!'

'Eject it at once!' thundered the Remove master.

As a rule, commands in the Remove form-room were obeyed on the instant. Quelch spoke as one having authority, saying 'Do this!' and he doeth it! But Billy Bunter did not obey that

command: for two good reasons. Firstly, ejecting that chunk of toffee meant that it had to be written off as a dead loss: secondly, it would be visible and irrefragable proof that he had been eating in class! For those two good reasons, Billy Bunter, instead of ejecting the chunk, made a frantic effort and swallowed it.

'Ooooooh!'

'Bunter—!'

'Gooogh! Gug-gug-gug!' gurgled Bunter.

The unhappy Owl's last state was worse than his first.

That chunk was gone — but it was not quite gone! It was sticking somewhere, and the fat junior choked and gasped and gurgled frantically.

'Wurrrgh! Urrrgh! Gug-gug-gooogh—oooooch!'

'Bless my soul!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. 'The foolish boy is choking — Fish, pat him on the back at once.'

'Sure, sir!'

Fisher T. Fish, who sat next to Bunter, was prompt to obey. The boniest fist in the Remove crashed into the plumpest back in that form. There was a fiendish yell from Bunter. That thump in the back seemed to have shifted the toffee, which no doubt was a relief to Bunter, and he had found his voice: nevertheless, bony knuckles in a fellow's back were neither grateful nor comforting.

'Ow! wow! Yaroooh! Stoppit, you beast! Wharrer you hitting me for?' yelled Bunter. 'Oh, crikey! Ow!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Silence! Bunter—!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! Oh, sir! Oh, crikey! Ow!'

'Bunter! You are a greedy boy! You are the greediest boy I have ever known in my long experience as a school-master. You have actually been consuming comestibles in class, under my very eyes—'

'I—I didn't—I—I mean I wasn't—I—I—I wouldn't—'

'That will do, Bunter. You will remain in the form-room for two hours after the class is dismissed—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'You will write out the names of all the principal cities and rivers of Europe—'

'Oh, jiminy!'

'And that, I trust, will be a warning to you!' said Mr. Quelch, grimly.

Billy Bunter blinked at him in horror. 'But, sir—!' he gasped.

'You may be silent, Bunter.'

'B—b—b—but, sir—if—if I stay in two hours, I shall miss tea—!' gasped Bunter.

'Precisely!' said Mr. Quelch. 'Your tea will be very late, Bunter.'

'B—b—bib—bob—but—' stuttered Bunter.

'If you say another word, Bunter, I shall cane you.' Billy Bunter did not say another word. But his fat face was eloquent. Evidently, Quelch's idea was to make the punishment fit the crime! Bunter was going to miss a meal as a penalty for stuffing in class! He was going to sit in the form-room for two unending hours, with nothing but that chunk of toffee to relieve the aching void in his extensive inside! It was appalling! It was awful!

Other faces were smiling. But Billy Bunter's fat lugubrious visage resembled that of the ancient monarch who never smiled again!

CHAPTER 2

HOOK IT!

'I SAY, you fellows!'

'Eh?'

'What?'

Five fellows stared round, in surprise.

Harry Wharton and Co. were sauntering in the quad after class. It was tea-time: but tea in a junior study was a movable feast, so to speak: a fellow would 'tea' when he liked: and the Famous Five were not quite so keen in such matters as their fattest form-fellow. They were talking football, the St. Jim's match being at hand, and that topic for the moment banished tea from their minds: though there was, actually, a parcel of considerable dimensions in Bob Cherry's study, not as yet unpacked.

Football 'jaw', however, was interrupted by a fat voice that proceeded, apparently, out of space.

They were passing the form-room windows. Nobody else was on the path. So it was quite startling for what seemed like a disembodied voice to impinge suddenly upon their ears.

Like Moses of old, they looked this way and that way.

Like Moses again, they saw no man.

'I say, you fellows!' came again, impatiently. Then they looked up.

Sad to relate, they had quite forgotten Billy Bunter and his woes. Now they were reminded of him. From the high window of the Remove form-room, a fat face and a big pair of spectacles looked down.

'That ass Bunter—!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'The esteemed and idiotic Bunter!' remarked Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

'I say, you fellows—'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' called out Bob Cherry, cheerily. 'Getting on all right with those principal cities and rivers, Bunter?'

'Poor old Bunter!' grinned Frank Nugent. 'Getting hungry?'

'Only another hour, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

'Only!' gasped Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, I'm famished.'

'Come on, you chaps,' said Johnny Bull. 'It's lines for speaking to a fellow in detention. Good-bye, Bunter.'

'Beast! I—I mean, hold on a minute, dear old chap! There's nobody about— Do stop a minute.'

The Famous Five paused.

They were not unsympathetic. They could feel for a hapless fat Owl, immured in a deserted form-room, with only the principal cities and rivers of Europe to keep him company: and yearning for tea. But the rule on the subject was strict, and they did not want a detention for themselves. There was, as Bunter said, nobody about: but at any moment somebody might come round the corner of the building—and it might be Quelch!

However, the coast was clear, at the moment, and sympathy supervened. So they stopped under the form-room window.

'Well, what?' asked Harry Wharton. 'Buck up—we shall have to bolt if a pre. or a beak blows along.'

'I'm hungry—!' wailed Bunter.

'Is that all?'

'Beast! I mean, got anything to eat about you?' asked Bunter. 'Chuck it in, if you have. I say, you fellows, I've been watching you mooning about, and I thought you'd never come this way. I say, if you've got any toffee—'

'I've got some in my study,' said Bob. 'But—'

Oh! Never mind that,' interrupted Bunter, hastily.

Bunter had the best of reasons to know that Bob's toffee was no longer in Bob's study! 'Got anything else — butterscotch, or an apple or anything — even a bull's-eye—?'

'Nix!' said Bob.

'Better push on,' said Johnny Bull. 'If Quelch catches us here—'

'Oh, blow Quelch!' hooted Bunter. 'I say, Bob, old chap, cut up to your study and get something out of that parcel. Never mind the toffee — something from the parcel—'

'How do you know there's a parcel in my study?' demanded Bob Cherry. 'Oh! I—I—I—I—'

'You've been up to my study?'

'Oh! No! Haven't been up to the studies to-day!' gasped Bunter. 'And I only went up for my books, too. I never even looked into your study, old chap.'

'You saw the parcel there without looking in?' inquired Bob.

'Yes—I mean no—I—I never looked in, i mean I shouldn't have, only there was nothing in Smithy's study — I mean—'

'You fat, frabjous, footling, foozling fraud, if you've been at my parcel—!'

'I—I haven't,' gasped Bunter. 'There wasn't time — the bell was ringing — I—I mean, I wouldn't! I hope I'm not the chap to bag another chap's parcel, Bob Cherry. I never touched it, or the toffee either.'

'The toffee?' repeated Bob. 'You've bagged my toffee! Is that what you were guzzling in form?'

'No!' howled Bunter. 'There wasn't a packet of toffee on the table. If there was, I never saw it. Besides, I never touched it. I left it there just as it was.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at, when a fellow's practically perishing of hunger!' howled Bunter.

'You fat perisher—'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Lean down from the window, Bunter,' said Bob, stepping under the high sill.

The fat Owl blinked down at him.

'Eh! What for?' he asked.

'So that I can pull your nose.'

'Beast!'

Bunter did not lean down from the window!

'Oh, come on,' said Johnny Bull. 'Look here, if Quelch takes his usual trot after tea, he will be oozing along any minute—'

'Lines if he catches us talking to Bunter,' said Nugent.

'Come on!'

'I say, you fellows!' yelled Bunter. 'Hold on! I say, Bob, old chap, do cut up to your study and fetch—'

'The toffee?' asked Bob, grinning.

'Oh! No! Not the toffee. Never mind the toffee. I say, very likely there's a cake in your parcel — think there is?'

'Very likely,' agreed Bob.

'Well, cut a slice—a big slice, mind—and wrap it up in a newspaper or something, and chuck it in here—' pleaded Bunter. 'I'm simply famished! I just can't wait another hour! Be a sport, old chap! I'll keep the window open and wait for you—'

Bunter was suddenly interrupted. 'Ware beaks!' breathed Nugent.

'Oh, holy smoke!'

'Hook it!'

At a little distance a mortar-board appeared in view.

Under it was the severe countenance of Henry Samuel Quelch, master of the Remove.

But the Famous Five did not pause to ascertain whose face was under that mortar-board. A glimpse of the mortar-board itself was enough for them. As if moved by the same spring, five fellows bounded into motion. They cut along the path to the nearest corner at a speed that would have done them credit on the cinder-path. Seldom had five fellows covered the ground with such celerity. They whizzed.

Mr. Quelch, coming towards the form-room window, had a split second's view of five vanishing backs disappearing round the corner.

He also had a view of a fat junior, leaning from the window, waving a fat grubby hand, and yelling: 'I say, you fellows! Stop! I say!'

'Bless my soul!' murmured Mr. Quelch, staring as he approached. Bunter, blinking in the direction in which the Famous Five had fled, was unaware of Quelch. He yelled on:

'I say, come back! Wharrer you cutting off for? I say Quelch isn't about — the old donkey's in his study! I say, Bob — I say, Harry, old chap — I say, do bring a fellow something to eat—'

'Bunter!' came a deep, deep voice.

'Oh, crikey!'

Billy Bunter's fat head spun round, and he blinked down at his form-master through his big spectacles. Then it dawned on his fat brain why Harry Wharton and Co. had vanished so suddenly.

'Bunter! I saw some boys under this window—'

'Did — did — did you, sir?' 'I—I didn't see anybody!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I wasn't speaking to anybody, sir! I — I just came to the window for a—a—a breath of fresh air, sir—I—I've been working rather hard, sir, writing out all the city principles—I—I mean the principal cities—'

'You were speaking to several boys under this window, Bunter. You were asking them to bring you comestibles in detention!'

'Oh! No! No, sir! I wasn't speaking to Cherry, sir, and — and I only asked him a question about geology — I mean geography—I—I'd forgotten for a minute, sir, whether Poland is the capital of Italy, or—or—or France, sir—' babbled Bunter.

'I heard you, Bunter,' thundered Mr. Quelch, 'and I heard you apply an opprobrious epithet to me, your form-master, Bunter.'

'Oh! Did you, sir? Oh, lor!' 'I—I—I didn't mean you, sir—'

'What?'

'I—I—I didn't really, sir,' gasped the terrified Owl. 'I—I—I was speaking about another old donkey, sir—'

'Upon my word! Bunter, if you were not the most obtuse, as well as the greediest, boy in my form, I should cane you—'

'Oh, really, sir—'

'Shut that window immediately, Bunter, and go back to your task. If I see that window open again, Bunter, I shall come to the form-room.'



'SHUT THAT WINDOW IMMEDIATELY'

Billy Bunter gave his form-master one look. It was a look that might almost have cracked his spectacles. Then he closed the window, and limped back to his desk. The last hope was gone: for a whole hour yet there was nothing for Bunter to eat: and a forlorn fat Owl was left to derive what comfort he could from the principal cities and rivers of Europe.

CHAPTER 3

FIERCE FOR FISHY

CRASH!

Bump!

'Oh! Owl Wake snakes! Yurrooop!'

Fisher T. Fish yelled as he crashed.

It was quite unexpected.

Fishy was standing on a path near a corner of the House. He was not giving attention to his surroundings. His attention was fixed on a little book he held open in his bony fingers. It was not a school book. Fisher T. Fish was not particularly keen on school books. It was an account-book: and its pages were covered with all sorts of figures and dates. Fishy was deep, very deep, in those accounts. Cash, or anything connected therewith, had an appeal for Fishy, like that of tuck for Bunter, or football for Bob Cherry. Deep in those accounts, Fishy was taken wholly by surprise, when five fellows in a breathless bunch came suddenly whizzing round the corner.

He had no time to see them coming. Neither had they time to see Fishy in the way. They just crashed into him.

'Oh! What—?'

'Who—?'

'Oh, crumbs!'

Fisher T. Fish went over like a ninepin. The account-book flew from his hand and landed he knew not where. He sprawled on the earth. Over him sprawled Bob Cherry and Harry Wharton: over Bob and Harry, sprawled Frank Nugent and Johnny Bull and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

It was quite a mix-up.

'Oh, my hat!'

'Gerroff!'

'What the dickens—'

'Ooooooh!' came a breathless moan from Fisher T. Fish. He was buried under what looked like a heap of wildly-thrashing arms and legs. He had no breath for another yell. He just moaned. The Famous Five scrambled up, gasping. But Fisher T. Fish did not follow their example. He gasped, but he did not scramble up: there was, for the moment, no scramble left in Fishy. He lay gasping and gurgling.

'That ass Fishy—!' panted Bob Cherry, staring down at the sprawling junior from New York.

'What did you get in the way for, fathead?'

'Mooh!' mumbled Fishy.

Harry Wharton, heedless of Fishy, shot a rapid glance back towards the corner the juniors had rounded so suddenly. He rather dreaded to see a mortar-board appear round that corner. But there was no sign of Quelch.

'Not after us,' he said. 'I expect he's stopped to jaw Bunter. Better clear, all the same.'

'Come on!' said Johnny Bull. 'Cut round the gym.'

'Oooh!' moaned Fisher T. Fish. He raised himself on a bony elbow, and then slowly sat up.

'Oooh! You pesky gecks— oooh!'

He gasped and gasped.

'You pesky, pie-faced nitwits! Woohh!'

'Hurt?' asked Bob Cherry, pausing.

Four members of the Co. resumed sprinting, without delay. It really was quite urgent to vanish round the gym in case Quelch walked as far as the corner and looked round to ascertain the identity of those boys he had seen under the form-room window. But Bob was all good nature: and Fishy did look a little damaged. So Bob lingered while his comrades sped on.

'Hurt?' repeated Fishy, between gasps, with a glare at Bob. 'You pesky mugwump, you figure you can spread a guy out, and dump on him, without hurting him a few?'

'Sorry!' grinned Bob.

'Sorry don't mend anything,' snorted Fisher T. Fish. 'Give a guy a hand up, blow you, and you can pack up your sorry.'

Bob bent, grasped a bony arm, and heaved. Fisher T. Fish tottered to his feet, still spluttering for breath.

He leaned on the wall, panting and rubbing places that had sustained damage. Those places seemed almost innumerable. Fishy was a lean youth: in fact, he seemed composed chiefly of bones: and every one of those bones seemed to have a pain in it. He panted and rubbed, and rubbed and panted.

'Oooh! You pesky gink! Oooh! Say, I've dropped a book— I sure don't want to lose that book— say, you rubber around for it— can't be fur off.'

Bob gave a hurried glance back to the corner. But no mortar-board showed there. Then he looked round for Fishy's book. He did not see that account-book, which had pitched to quite a distance when it flew so suddenly from Fishy's bony hand. But he did see a tall Sixth-Form man coming towards the spot. It was Wingate of the Sixth, captain of Greyfriars, and head-prefect. Apparently Wingate had witnessed the collision from a distance, and was coming to inquire. It was not a propitious moment for being interviewed by a prefect, and Bob's cue was prompt departure. His comrades had already vanished.

'I shall have to cut, Fishy—'

'Say, you geck!' howled Fisher T. Fish. 'Ain't I telling you I dropped my account-book? Can't you look for a guy's book after spreading him out and dumping on him?'

'Wingate's coming, and— it's all right,' added Bob, as he saw the Sixth-Form man stoop and pick up an object from the ground. 'Wingate's picked it up— you can ask him for it—'

'Wha-a-at?' gasped Fisher T. Fish. He stared round, and his narrow eyes popped at the Greyfriars captain.

Wingate was staring at the object he had picked up.

It was an account-book, and it was open: and Fishy's collection of figures and dates and other details were under the eyes of prefectorial authority.

Any other fellow in the Remove, who kept a cash account, would not have cared a bean whether a prefect saw it or not! But Fisher T. Fish cared! He had good reason to care!

Forgetful even of the countless aches and pains in his bony person, Fisher T. Fish detached himself from the wall and shot towards the Greyfriars captain. Bob stared after him. For the moment, he did not understand Fishy's alarm.

'Say, that's mine, Wingate!' gasped Fisher T. Fish. 'I dropped it when a bunch of guys cannoned into me. Hand it over, please.'

Fishy stretched out an eager bony hand. He almost snatched at that precious account-book. But Wingate did not hand it over. He held it out of Fishy's eager reach. The grim look on his face quite startled Bob Cherry.

'You young rascal!' he said. 'You've been up for this kind of thing before: lending money at interest among the fags—'

'Oh!' breathed Bob. He understood now. Fishy's manners and customs were rather well known in his form. 'I shall take this account-book to your form-master's study, and you can explain it to Mr. Quelch!' said Wingate. 'I—I—I guess—!' stammered Fisher T. Fish. 'I—I say, Wingate, it— it's jest some accounts of mine—'

'Yes, and I can see the kind of accounts they are!' rapped Wingate, knitting his brows. 'When I go in, I shall take this book to Quelch's study; you needn't say any more. That will do!'

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob Cherry. It looked, to Bob, as if the result of that collision was going to be a royal row for Fisher T. Fish. But he had little sympathy to waste on Fishy, and he dismissed the matter from his mind as he departed from the spot.

Fisher T. Fish was not likely to dismiss it so easily!

His bony face was the picture of dismay. 'I—I say, Wingate—!' he gasped.

'I've said that will do!' snapped Wingate. And he slipped the account-book into his pocket, and walked away.

Fisher T. Fish gazed after him, as he went, overwhelmed.

He hardly felt the aches and pains in his bones now. Fisher T. Fish was a born business-man. He couldn't wait till he was older before he exercised his financial abilities. Lending shillings among the fags at a penny a week interest seemed, to Fishy, a quite legitimate transaction. But he was aware, only too well aware, what a very different view his form-master and head-master would take of such transactions.

And that account-book was going to Quelch's study, to be examined by Quelch's gimlet-eyes! All the particulars, in Fishy's spidery hand-writing, of names, dates, debts, interest and accumulated interest would be scanned by those gimlet-eyes! The hapless Fishy could only wonder dismally whether the result was going to be the Head's birch— or the 'sack'.

'Aw, wake snakes!' groaned Fisher T. Fish. 'This is fierce! This is sure fierce! I'll tell a man, this is fierce, and then some!'

He hardly troubled to rub his aching bones, after that!

He had much more serious things than aching bones to occupy his transatlantic mind.

CHAPTER 4

NOT A POSTAL-ORDER

'OH!' gasped Billy Bunter. 'Good!'

A lugubrious fat face brightened.

Bunter was 'out' at last! The last dreary hour of detention had crawled by: and at last, at long last, the fat Owl was done with the principal cities and rivers of Europe.

Bunter was hungry! That was his usual state: but on the present occasion, he was not merely hungry: he was awfully, fearfully hungry. Only too well had Quelch made the punishment fit the crime! The fat Owl rolled out of the Remove form-room like a lion seeking what he might devour.

He was late for tea in hall—very late. But there might be something left, if he lost no time. It was too late to join in any study tea up in the Remove. Bob Cherry's parcel had, no doubt, been disposed of long ago. But the fat Owl did not head immediately for hall. His first blink was cast at the letter-rack.

Bunter was expecting a postal-order. Every morning, when the Remove came out in break, eager eyes and spectacles scanned the letter-rack: generally drawing it blank. But hope springs eternal in the human breast! That morning, the fat Owl had drawn blank as usual. Still, there was a later post: and a possibility— if only a bare one!— that his celebrated postal-order might have arrived at last.

If, by happy chance, it had, there was still balm in Gilead, so-to speak. The tuck-shop was open, with unlimited supplies: if only a fellow's postal-order had come. If only the old folks at home had remembered their hopeful son at Greyfriars, or if Uncle Carter had weighed in with a tip— it was possible, if not probable.

Then, as he blinked up at the rack, the cloud cleared from Billy Bunter's fat face, and he ejaculated 'Good!' The unexpected had happened!

There were half-a-dozen letters in the rack, for fellows who had not yet collected them.

Among them was one addressed to W. G. Bunter, in the parental hand.

Bunter had had only the faintest of hopes. But there was the letter, under his little round eyes and his big round spectacles.

An eager fat hand clutched it down. It was Monday: and only on Saturday Bunter had written home, on the subject of cash. His plump parent seemed to have been unusually prompt in replying. Often and often Bunter had to wait quite a long time for replies to such requests. Sometimes, indeed, there was no reply at all! Mr. Bunter generally seemed to regard such requests with a very unfavourable eye. But this prompt reply certainly looked promising. It was a rather thick envelope, and Bunter, as his fat fingers closed on it, felt something hard inside. Mr. Bunter, a careful City gentleman, was not likely to have enclosed hard cash in an unregistered letter. But if it was not cash, what was it? If it was a half-crown—! Bunter would have preferred a ten-shilling note: but a half-crown was not to be despised. Eager fat fingers rent open that envelope.

Something hard was folded in the letter within. Surely it could only be a half-crown, or at least a two-shilling piece. What else could it possibly be?

In his mind's eye, Billy Bunter already saw himself in the tuck-shop, revelling in tuck to the exact extent of that remittance, whatever it was!

He saw it in his mind's eye: but he was not destined to see it with the eye of the flesh!

He unfolded the letter. Then, as a poet has already remarked, a change came o'er the spirit of his dream!

'Oh, crikey!'

It was almost a wail!

There certainly was something hard and metallic folded in that letter. But it was not a half-crown! It was not a florin! It was not even a shilling! It was hard: but certainly not hard cash!

It was a key!

Bunter blinked at it! It was a key— a Yale key— a little glimmering key! Why his pater had sent him a key, the fat Owl could not begin to guess. He could hardly believe his eyes or his spectacles. Whatever might imaginably have been in that letter from home, the last thing Billy Bunter would have expected was a latch-key.

'Oh, crikey!' repeated Bunter.

It was a crushing blow. Visions of the tuck-shop faded from his fat mind. He blinked at the letter. Then the mystery was explained.

Dear William,

I have received your letter, and regret that it is quite impracticable for me to make any addition to your pocket-money. I am surprised at your request, when you cannot fail to be aware that I have considerable difficulty in meeting the exorbitant demands of income-tax.

I was, however, about to write to you on another matter. A client of mine has engaged one of the holiday bungalows on the Pegg road, a mile or so from your school. You have probably seen them, as no doubt you go that way when you visit your sister Bessie at Cliff House.

The bungalow to which I refer is called 'The Begonias'. You will find it quite easily. It is furnished, but at present vacant, as the previous tenant has just left. My client, Mr. Pilkins, will not be occupying it till next week and, in the meantime, he desires the place to be opened and aired as often as possible. I have undertaken to see to this. As it is so near your school, it will be easy for you to walk across after class, and especially on half-holidays, and do what is necessary. This will be beneficial to you, in this fine weather, as you are very much given, I fear, to neglecting healthy exercise.

You will open all doors and windows, and, if you detect signs of damp, turn on the electric heating: taking care, of course, to turn it off before you leave, and to lock up the place carefully behind you. You may write and tell me that everything is in order.

Your affectionate Father,

W. S. Bunter.

Billy Bunter blinked at that letter, and blinked again, with a blink that could only be described as infuriated.

There was no remittance! There was not so much as a threepenny-bit to buy a bun! There were only directions for William to make himself useful!

Making himself useful had never been one of Bunter's ambitions.

And his usefulness was to take the form of walking a mile after class, opening up and airing a beastly bungalow, and then walking a mile back again!

Quite possibly, as his parent suggested, the healthy exercise might be good for him! But Billy Bunter had not the slightest desire for good to be done to him in the form of exertion. He did not want to walk a mile. He did not want to walk half a mile! He did not want to walk one rod, pole or perch!

He blinked at the letter in one hand, and the key in the other, with feelings that were really inexpressible.

Then he jammed both into a sticky pocket, and rolled sorrowfully away. He headed for hall this time. As he fully expected, hardly anything was left, at that late hour: and he did not linger in hall. His next move was up to the Remove studies: more than ever in the character of a lion seeking what he might devour.

CHAPTER 5

LUCK AT LAST

'BUNTER!'

'Bunty!'

'Bunt!'

Bob Cherry's voice was never very subdued. Often it reminded Greyfriars fellows of that of Stentor of old. Generally it would be heard at quite a distance. On the present occasion it could have been heard at quite a long distance. Bob, in fact, bawled.

Nobody in the Remove passage or studies, or in the adjacent passages or studies, could have been left in any doubt that Bob Cherry was in search of Billy Bunter.

Billy Bunter heard! But, following the well-known example of the Byronic gladiator, he heard but heeded not.

Bob Cherry, it seemed, wanted to find Bunter. Bunter, on the other hand, did not want to be found.

Bunter, at the moment Bob's powerful voice woke the echoes of the Remove passage, was standing at the cupboard in No. 1 Study. As that cupboard, and its contents, belonged to Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, the fat Owl certainly did not want to be discovered there. It was only too probable that discovery might be followed by the application of a boot to his plump trousers.

'Bunter! Bunty! Bunt!' came the bawl in the passage again.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

He turned from the cupboard, and blinked uneasily at the door through his big spectacles. If Bob came in—!

Footsteps and voices were quite close, outside.

'Seen Bunter about, Smithy?'

'Not since class. Wasn't he kept in?'

'Yes, but he's out before this. Where the dickens can the fat ass have got to?'

There was a chuckle from Smithy.

'I can guess!' he said.

'Where, then?' asked Bob.

'Somewhere where there's grub.'

'Fathead! I say, Skinner, seen Bunter?'

'I saw him in hall,' came Skinner's voice. 'He was just in time for the last doorstep!'

'He must have needed it,' chuckled Bob. 'I fancy he must have been hungry when Quelch let him out. But where is he now?'

'Couldn't care less.'

'Oh, blow! Bunter! Bunty! Bunt!' bawled Bob.

'Here, Mauly— seen Bunter?'

'Lots of times.'

'Ass! Know where he is?'

'Haven't the foggiest.'

'Blow! I want the fat chump, and I've no time to waste — it's time for the boxing. Bunter! Bunty! Bunt!'

To Billy Bunter's relief, as he listened in No. 1 Study, Bob's heavy tread moved off up the passage. It had not occurred to him that the fat Owl might be in Wharton's study.

Why Bob wanted him, Bunter fancied that he could guess— it was on account of that missing toffee! Whether that was the reason, or whether it was not, Bob was not going to find him, if he could help it. However, Bob was gone now, and he turned to the study cupboard again. Bunter was hungry: in fact ravenous! He had been, as Skinner had said, in time for the 'last doorstep' in hall. 'Doorstep' was the playful name the juniors gave to bread-and-butter. That was quite solid sustenance— perhaps a little too solid, in the general opinion of the Lower School.

No doubt Bunter had been glad of that doorstep. But to a hungry fat Owl it was merely as a drop in the ocean or a pebble on the seashore. The Owl of the Remove had rolled out of hall almost as hungry as when he had entered.

In his Own study, No. 7, he did not find either of his study-mates, Peter Todd and Tom Dutton: neither did he find anything to eat. Then he looked into No. 13, Bob Cherry's study, remembering the parcel. But tea was long over in the Remove: No. 13 was vacant, and there was no sign of even a remnant of that parcel. Then he looked into No. 4, where Herbert Vernon-Smith usually had a good supply on hand. Smithy was not there: but Tom Redwing was: and Bunter had to back out again. Now he was in No. 1 Study, where, at long last, he had found provender, in the shape of a bag of dough-nuts. In matters of tuck, Billy Bunter was absolutely unscrupulous. It was probable that that bag of dough-nuts was intended for study supper. Instead of which, it now provided a late tea for William George Bunter.

He stood at the study cupboard and gobbled.

Most fellows, after tea, were down in the Rag. It was disconcerting to hear footsteps and voices in the passage, while busily engaged in gobbling another fellow's doughnuts— still more disconcerting to learn that Bob Cherry was specially in search of him. However, the danger seemed to have passed, and the fat Owl resumed gobbling dough-nuts.

But it seemed that there was no rest for the wicked!

More footsteps and more voices impinged upon his fat ears, just outside the study.

'Here, Wharton, seen that fat ass Bunter?' It was Bob again.

'No: haven't you found him?'

'Can't find him anywhere. Seen him, Nugent?'

'Not since we saw him at the form-room window.'

'Oh, bother him!' came Johnny Bull's voice. 'Look here, if we're going to have the boxing in the Rag, come down and let's get on with it.'

'Well, I want to find Bunter. You haven't seen him, Inky?'

'No, my esteemed Bob,' answered Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bother the fat ass!' exclaimed Bob. 'Where has he got to?'

'The wherefulness seems to be terrific.'

Billy Bunter, inside the study, listened with all his fat ears. He had almost finished the doughnuts. He was surrounded by a sea of crumbs. If they looked into the study—

'Beasts!' breathed Bunter.

He was glad, at any rate, to hear that the Famous Five were due for boxing in the Rag. If only they went down, and left a fat Owl undiscovered—!

'Oh, come on, and bother Bunter!' grunted Johnny Bull. 'Well, there's this cake—!' said Bob.

'Leave it in my study,' said Harry Wharton.

'Oh, all right.'

Billy Bunter's fat heart gave a jump. They were coming into the study!

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Not often was Billy Bunter quick on the uptake. His fat brain generally moved to slow motion. But imminent peril sharpened his fat wits. As the door-handle turned, the fat Owl ducked a fat head, and disappeared under the study table, like a fat rabbit into a burrow.

Under the table he palpitated, as the door flew open and Bob Cherry tramped in. There was a sound of something heavy dumping on the table over a fat head.

Billy Bunter scarcely breathed. If they found him—!

But the other fellows did not enter, and Bob, having dumped that 'something heavy' on the table, turned at once to the door again.

'Come on,' said Johnny Bull, from the passage. 'Coming!'

The door closed after Bob. Footsteps in the passage receded towards the stairs.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Really he could hardly believe in his good luck. His escape had been narrow: but he had escaped. They were gone, and he was undiscovered: and at liberty to finish the last doughnut. And what was it that Bob had dumped on the table? He had mentioned a 'cake'. Why Bob had been carrying a cake about, was quite a mystery: but it certainly looked as if he had, and had dumped it on the table over Billy Bunter's head. The fat Owl's little round eyes glistened behind his big round spectacles. If it was a cake—!

The footsteps died away. A fat Owl emerged from under the table, breathless but grinning. His eyes and spectacles shot to the object on the table. It was a cake! 'Oh, crumbs!' breathed Billy Bunter.

His eyes danced behind his spectacles. "Doorsteps" in hall, and dough-nuts in No. 1 Study had by no means filled the aching void inside Bunter. He was ready for more— much more! And what now met his gloating eyes was not merely a cake— it was a very large cake, bristling with plums, and thick with marzipan on top! It was a really magnificent cake: such a cake was not often seen in a junior study. There was enough of it— more than enough— to satisfy even Billy Bunter, at his hungriest! No doubt it had arrived in Bob Cherry's parcel, among other good things: and no doubt the other good things had sufficed for tea and the cake was reserved for supper. It looked like it, to Bunter. Anyhow, there was the cake-at his mercy! And in such matters as this, Billy Bunter was as merciless as any pirate that ever sailed the Spanish Main.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. He grabbed up the cake.

His first proceeding was to break off a chunk—a large chunk— and cram it into the widest mouth in the Remove. But that was merely provisional— a bite to go on with. Gladly, Bunter would have sat down at the table, and finished that big cake to the last plum and the last crumb. But he dared not! They were looking for him, and might come back to the studies: and he was not likely to have so lucky an escape a second time. Bunter had to find a safer quarter before he devoured his prey.

With his mouth full, crunching, he picked up the cake, and packed it under a fat arm. Then he opened the door a few inches, and blinked into the Remove passage through his big spectacles.

The coast was clear! Most if not all the Remove fellows had gone down after tea. Billy Bunter emerged from No. 1 Study, with the cake under his arm. His fat face was wreathed in grins. After so many trials and tribulations he could not have made a happier landing! He needed only a minute to reach his own study and settle down to revel in a feast of the gods. Happily, he rolled up the passage.

And then—! 'Bunter!'

It was a voice behind him. It was the voice of his form-master.

CHAPTER 6

THE WAY OF THE TRANSGRESSOR

'BUNTER!'

'Oh!' gasped Billy Bunter.

He spun round. The cake nearly dropped from under his fat arm, as he blinked at Mr. Quelch. Quelch had come across the landing into the Remove passage. He had, for a moment, a back view of Bunter and the cake. Now, as the alarmed fat Owl spun round, he had a front view. His brows contracted in a deep frown.

Quelch was not pleased with that particular member of his form. The incident of the afternoon in the form-room had ruffled him. 'Stuffing' toffee in class had been followed by the fat Owl's performance at the form-room window.

'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was very deep.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'What are you doing with that enormous cake, Bunter?'

'I—I—I'm taking it to my— my study, sir—'

Bunter hoped fervently that Quelch had not seen him emerge from No. 1 with the cake. If Quelch guessed that it was somebody else's property—!

Luckily, Quelch did not. Seeing the cake under Bunter's fat arm, he naturally assumed that it was Bunter's. But that did not diminish his ire.

'And what were you going to do with it, Bunter?' Bunter blinked at him. The question seemed to him quite idiotic. Bunter did not expect much sense from a school-master: but even a school-master, Bunter thought, ought not to need telling what a fellow was going to do with a cake when he had one!

'I—I—I'm going to eat it, sir!' stammered Bunter.

'Precisely!' said Mr. Quelch. 'I have no doubt that such was your intention, Bunter. You will be allowed to do nothing of the kind.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'Your greediness, Bunter, is shocking to me,' went on Mr. Quelch. 'This afternoon you were consuming— I might say devouring— sweetmeats in class. Later, I heard you requesting other boys to bring you foodstuffs in detention. Now I find you with a large— an enormous— cake— a quantity sufficient to make you quite ill, if you were permitted to consume it—'

'Oh, no, sir! I—I—'

'Do not interrupt me, Bunter!'

'Oh! No, sir! Yes, sir! I mean no, sir! But, sir—'

'You must learn, Bunter, to subdue this insatiable desire for sweet and sticky comestibles.'

'Oh! Yes, sir! No, sir! But— but—'

'You must learn moderation, Bunter!'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir! But, sir—'

'As a lesson to you, Bunter, I shall confiscate that cake!'

'Oh, crikey!'

'You will take it down immediately to my study, Bunter.'

'Oh, really, sir—'

'Immediately!' thundered Mr. Quelch.

Billy Bunter gave him a horrified blink. He had bagged that cake from No. 1 Study at the risk of a booting from the proprietor. Now he had to hand it over to authority— undevoured! One mouthful— an extensive one, it was true— was all that Bunter was to enjoy of that luscious big cake— the remainder was to disappear from his gaze like a beautiful dream!

It was too much! Quelch did not look in a favourable mood for argument: but the hapless Owl made one essay: 'If— if you please, sir—'

'That will do, Bunter.'

'But— but if you please, sir, I—I—I'm hungry!' wailed Bunter. 'There was hardly anything left when I got into hall to tea, sir, and— and—'

'Indeed!' said Mr. Quelch. 'If that is the case, Bunter—!' He paused a moment.

'Yes, sir?' said Bunter, hopefully.

'If that is the case, Bunter, you may go to the House-dame, and explain the matter to her,' said Mr. Quelch.

Billy Bunter very nearly ejaculated 'Beast!' The prospect of 'doorsteps' from the House-dame was no comfort to him.

'Now go down to my study— with the cake!' added Mr. Quelch.

'Yes, sir!' groaned Bunter.

He rolled dismally towards the stairs. One faint, lingering hope remained— if Quelch trusted him out of sight with that cake, several more extensive mouthfuls would follow the one that had already gone on the downward path.

But alas for Bunter! Quelch did not trust him out of sight! He followed the fat Owl across the landing to the stairs. He followed him down. He was still in Bunter's wake, when the fat junior arrived at his destination. He followed him into the study.

Dusk was falling, and Quelch's study was dim. The Remove master switched on the light.

'You may place it on my table, Bunter!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

Bunter made one more dolorous essay: 'If—if you please, sir—'

'Place that cake on my table, and leave my study.'

With deep feelings, Billy Bunter turned to the table.

Quelch's table was littered with books and papers, and there was not much unused space for dumping that big cake. In the clearest spot, a little account-book lay. Bunter dumped down the cake on that account-book.

'Now go!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

Billy Bunter moved slowly to the door. It seemed to him almost impossible to drag himself away from that cake. Half-way to the door, he turned a fat head to blink at it. Quelch made a sharp gesture, and he restarted. But at the door he turned again, his eyes and spectacles on the cake! They seemed glued to it, like the sad eyes of Dido to the departing sail of Aeneas. Quelch made another gesture— unheeded! Then he picked up his cane! That was enough for Bunter. He jumped out of the study.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter, inaudibly, as he rolled dismally down the corridor.

It was a sad and sorrowful Owl that rolled into the Rag.

Quite a cheery company was assembled in that apartment. Harry Wharton, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh had the gloves on, opposed to Peter Todd, Herbert Vernon-Smith, and Mark Linley. A crowd of fellows stood round watching the boxing. Billy Bunter was not interested. Bunter was thinking of the cake. Like Rachel of old, he mourned for that which was lost, and could not be comforted.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' It was a cheery roar from Bob Cherry. 'Here, Bunter—'

Bunter gave him an alarmed blink, forgetting even the cake for a moment.

'I—I say, Cherry, old chap, I— I never had that toffee—!' he gasped.

Bob Cherry laughed.

'Never mind the toffee, you fat fraud,' he said. 'I've been looking for you everywhere. Hungry?'

'Eh? Oh! Yes!' gasped Bunter.

'Like a cake?'

'Eh?'

'There was one in my parcel— a jolly big one,', explained Bob. 'I kept it for you.'

'Wha-a-at?' stuttered Bunter.

'Sorry you've had such an awful time, old fat man,' chuckled Bob. 'You must have felt like eating those principal cities and rivers by the time you were through. Well, I thought I'd let you have the cake, and the other fellows agreed, so there you are.'

Bunter glared at him!

'I've been looking for you all over the shop with that cake under my arm,' went on Bob. 'I couldn't find you anywhere, so I left the cake in Wharton's study—'

'Oh!'

'It's a topping one, and lots of plums, and marzipan!' said Bob. 'Cut up to the study, old fat man, and scoff it. Scoff the lot, if you've got room for it! That's all!'

Bob Cherry turned back to the boxing.

Billy Bunter did not speak. He couldn't! He stood as if stunned. He had wondered why Bob was going about with a cake under his arm, and why Bob was looking for him! Now he knew! Bob had not been looking for him to boot him for snooping the toffee. He had been looking for him to give him that cake— a sort of consolation prize, as it were, for his hard time in the form-room! It was just like Bob, who was all good-nature: but the hapless fat Owl had never dreamed of guessing anything of the kind.

He had snooped the cake lawlessly and piratically— and it was his own! If only he hadn't snooped it, he could have cut up to No. 1 Study now, and sat down to the full and unalloyed enjoyment of it.

But he had snooped it— and now it was in Quelch's study: confiscated. More than once, in a tuck-hunting career, Billy Bunter had made the discovery that the way of the transgressor was hard! But never had the fat transgressor so deeply and sincerely repented of a transgression! He could almost have wept.

'Oh, lor!'

He tottered to an armchair and collapsed into it, and groaned. Words could not have expressed his feelings. He just groaned.

CHAPTER 7

IN SUSPENSE

'WINGATE—'

'Cut!'

'But I guess—'

'I said cut!'

Wingate spoke impatiently, over his shoulder. He had no time for Fisher T. Fish and no use for that lean transatlantic junior.

The Greyfriars captain was in his study, in conversation with two other Sixth-Form men: Gwynne and Sykes. The three great men were talking football: and were not pleased by the interruption when a Remove junior tapped at the door and looked in. First-eleven football was important. Fishy and his dingy affairs were not. So Fishy was briefly bidden to 'cut', and the door should have closed at once on his lean, anxious face.

But it did not. Instead of 'cutting', as bidden, Fisher T. Fish stood where he was, at the open door, and went on: 'It's about that leetle book, Wingate! Mebbe you'd go easy with a guy, and keep Quelch out of it.'

Fishy's voice was pleading. That he was due for 'toco', if his Shylock transactions came to official knowledge, he knew only too well: he had been there before, so to speak. But 'six' from a prefect's ash plant, though painful, would have been a relief, in comparison with a report to Quelch. Quelch was certain to take an awfully serious view of such a matter. As likely as not, or more likely than not, he would take Fishy to the Head. Anything was better than that. But if Fishy had a faint hope, Wingate's reply dashed it.

'I've taken it to Quelch's study! Now shut that door.'

'Aw, search me!' mumbled Fisher T. Fish, in dismay. 'I—I—I say, Wingate, what did Quelch say?'

'Nothing, as he wasn't there. I've left it for him, and you'll hear from him before long, I expect. Now cut.'

Fisher T. Fish shut the door at last. Three great men were left to discuss First-eleven matches, dismissing Fisher T. Fish wholly from mind. Outside, Fisher T. Fish shook a bony fist at the door, and drifted away dismally.

That account-book, with its tell-tale record of Fishy's money-lending transactions among the fags, was already in Quelch's study.

'I guess the jig sure is up!' mumbled Fisher T. Fish. 'The minute Quelch sees that leetle book, the jig sure is up. And mebbe he's giving it the once-over now— might be sending for a guy to his study any minute! Oh, great John James Brown, this sure is fierce!'

But hope springs eternal in the human breast! If Quelch had not yet seen that 'leetle book'—! From what Wingate had said, it appeared that Quelch had not been in his study when the 'leetle book' was taken there, and the prefect had left it for him. If Quelch was still not in his study, might there not be a chance of retrieving that 'leetle book' before the gimlet-eyes fell on it?

Fishy almost trembled at the thought. A surreptitious visit to a master's study, to abstract an article therefrom, was awfully risky. There were fellows in the Remove, like the Bounder, who cared nothing for risks. But Fishy was not one of them. He was not of the stuff of which heroes are made. If Quelch came in and caught him—!

On the other hand, he was booked for stormy weather anyway, if Quelch saw the account-book. It was worth the risk.

Slowly, his mind not quite made up, Fishy moved off in the direction of Masters' studies. He stopped at a window near the corner of the passage, looking out into the falling dusk to make up his mind, and screw up his courage to the sticking-point.

If Quelch was in his study, he could make some excuse for his call— some question about grammar or geography. If Quelch wasn't, he could snatch up that wretched book from the table and bolt.

He had almost made up his mind, when footsteps came along from the direction of the staircase.

Fishy could almost have yelped aloud with chagrin. He had been too long making up his mind: and had left it too late. Quelch, evidently, was not in his study, for there he was, under Fishy's eyes.

First came a fat junior with a lugubrious fat face, carrying a large cake under his arm. Following him came Quelch.

Neither of them glanced at the American junior standing at the window. Billy Bunter rolled on with the cake, and Quelch followed him: and both disappeared into the Remove master's study.

'Aw! Wake snakes!' mumbled the hapless Fishy. A few minutes ago, he could have made the venture. He could not make it now. Quelch was in his study: and that 'leettle book' was under the gimlet-eyes.

A minute later, Bunter emerged from Quelch's study— minus the cake! He did not waste a blink on Fishy as he rolled away, to the Rag.

Fishy remained standing by the window, in the lowest possible spirits.

Any moment now the summons might come!

Quelch could hardly fail to see that 'leettle book' on his table. He could hardly fail to examine it. On a previous occasion, when Fishy's financial operations had come to Quelch's knowledge, he had been given 'six' of the very best, and a stern warning of dire consequences if anything of the kind should recur. Now Quelch would know that it had recurred: and Fishy could picture the thunder gathering in his brow as he examined that 'leettle book'. It would not be 'six' this time: quite likely it would be the 'long jump': and what was Fishy's 'poppa' in New York going to say about that? From the bottom of his transatlantic heart, Fishy wished that he had left financial operations till a little later in life!

He glanced round again at a footstep. It was Herbert Vernon-Smith. The boxing was over in the Rag. Smithy gave Fishy a nod.

'Know whether Quelch's in his study?' he asked. 'Yup!' mumbled Fishy.

'Oh, blow!' said the Bounder, crossly. 'He's generally chinning in Common-Room at this time. Sure?'

'Yup!' grunted Fishy.

'Blow!' said the Bounder, again, and he walked away.

Fishy could guess that the scapegrace of the Remove had some design on his form-master's study— which could not be carried out if Quelch was there.

But Fishy was not interested in the Bounder and his designs. Smithy might be thinking of 'japes': but Fishy had that account-book, and the possible 'long jump' to think of. Every moment he dreaded to see Quelch's door open, and the Remove master emerge with thunder in his brow.

But the door did not open.

Surely Quelch must have seen that wretched account-book by this time. Wingate must have left it on his table where he could see it when he came into his study. Yet nothing was happening. Fishy was good at guessing, reckoning, and calculating: but he could not guess, reckon, or calculate that Billy Bunter had deposited a cake on that account-book, hiding it from sight, and so leaving Quelch in complete ignorance of its existence.

But, though Fisher T. Fish certainly couldn't guess that Billy Bunter's cake was the cause of the respite, he could guess that for some reason or other Quelch had not yet seen that 'leetle book'. The thunder would have rolled by this time. Perhaps he had sat down to a pile of Form papers: or perhaps to peruse Horace or Lucretius, his favourite authors, or to write a letter— noticing nothing! If he left his study without having noticed that account-book on his table, there was hope yet. He was, as Smithy had said, due for 'chinning' in Common-Room with the other beaks. Fishy watched the study door, from a distance, with quite painful anxiety. If Quelch came out and walked up the corridor to Common-Room, oblivious of Fishy, all was clear— Fishy was going to make a nose-dive into that study and clutch up the evidence of guilt. If only—!

Again there were footsteps. This time they were reminiscent of the 'huge earth-shaking beast' mentioned in Macaulay. It was the ponderous tread of Mr. Prout, master of the Fifth.

Mr. Prout paused, and glanced at Fisher T. Fish, unfavourably.

'Fish!' rapped Mr. Prout.

'Yup!' muttered Fishy.

'Junior boys should not loiter here!' said the Fifth-form master, severely. 'You are aware of that, Fish!'

'Oh! Yup! But—I—I—!' stammered Fisher T. Fish.

Prout raised a plump hand. 'Go away at once!' he rapped.

Fisher T. Fish breathed hard, and he breathed deep, through his sharp transatlantic nose. But there was no help for it. Prout had told him to go, and he had to go. It was no longer possible to watch Quelch's door, to whip into the study if Quelch came out. Fishy had to go—and he went!

Prout frowned after him, and then rolled ponderously up the passage to his study. Fisher T. Fish, in despair, limped away to the Rag— there to await the now inevitable summons to answer for his misdeeds. There was a cheery crowd in the Rag, most of the fellows discussing the recent boxing. But there was no trace of cheeriness in the long, lean face of the unhappy business-man of the Remove. Fishy, thinking of his lost account-book, looked as dismal and lugubrious as a fat Owl sprawling in an armchair thinking of his lost cake!

CHAPTER 8

TWO OF THEM

'WELL?'

Mr. Quelch rapped out that monosyllable like a bullet.

He did not seem pleased to see Bunter.

Quelch was in Common-Room. Several other beaks were in that apartment. There was a buzz of voices. Quelch, Hacker, Capper, and Twigg were discussing some point, no doubt important, which was to be raised at the next Masters' meeting presided over by the Head. Little Monsieur Charpentier hovered on the edge of the conversational circle, getting in a timid word or two when opportunity offered. In the midst of which there was a tap at the door, and it opened, to reveal the fat face and spectacles of the Owl of the Remove.

'If you please, sir—!' mumbled Bunter.

'Well?'

'If—if—if you please, sir, m—mum—may I have leave to go over to Cliff House to-morrow, sir, to see my sister Bessie?'

'You should not have come here to make that request, Bunter!' rapped Mr. Quelch. 'You should have come to my study while I was there. However, you may have leave to go to Cliff House after class to-morrow. Close that door.'

'Thank you, sir.' mumbled Bunter.

He closed the door. The tide of talk rolled on again in Common-Room. Outside the door, Billy Bunter grinned.

Mr. Quelch was a very keen gentleman. Little escaped his gimlet-eyes. But even Quelch did not surmise that Bunter's visit to Common-Room had any other motive than that stated by the fat Owl.

As a matter of fact it had! Billy Bunter's object was to ascertain that Quelch was in Common-Room— and not in his study. Sister Bessie at Cliff House School was nothing more or less than a pretext for making sure of Quelch's whereabouts.

Grinning, Billy Bunter rolled away up the corridor. Bunter was not thinking of visits to Sister Bessie at Cliff House. He was thinking of the cake. He had not ceased to think of it, for a moment, since he had landed it on Quelch's table in Quelch's study. The longer he thought of it, the deeper grew his yearning for it. The interval between tea and supper always seemed, to Bunter, unduly long. Now it seemed endless. It was now close on time for prep: and the prospect of sitting at prep in No. 7 with that aching void in his extensive inside, was appalling— to Bunter. Desperate diseases, as the poet has remarked, require desperate remedies! Billy Bunter was going to recapture that cake if he could.

Having now ascertained, beyond doubt, that Quelch was elsewhere, the fat Owl rolled along to his form-master's study.

At the door, he paused, to blink anxiously up and down the passage. He was very anxious not to be seen there! Later, when Quelch found that the confiscated cake was gone, there would be inquiry. Billy Bunter was prepared, if questioned, to state anything but the truth. But obviously his uncommon gifts as an Ananias would not serve if he was seen going to Quelch's study.

But the coast was clear. Most of the 'beaks' were in Common-Room: and if any were in their studies, the doors were shut. Billy Bunter rolled into Quelch's study, his fat heart palpitating.

It was very dark in the study. If there was a gleam of starlight in the quad, it did not penetrate, as the curtains were drawn. A glimmer from the lighted corridor followed Bunter in, but it was only a glimmer, and did not reach so far as Quelch's table. The fat Owl dared not switch on the light. He groped to the table in the dark, and groped over it for the cake.

Thud!

The groping fat hands contacted a volume, and tipped it off the table. There was a thud as Quintus Horatius Flaccus landed on the carpet.

Bunter caught his breath.

If that thud had been heard—!

It was some moments before he groped again. This time the groping fat fingers dislodged a larger volume.

Thud! T. Lucretius Carus joined Horace on the carpet. 'Blow!' hissed Bunter.

Lucretius was a somewhat bulkier author than Horace: the thud was louder as he landed. Billy Bunter listened anxiously, his plump ears pricked up like a frightened fat rabbit's.

But there was no alarm: and he groped again. Crash!

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Something went over, and there was quite a crash as it joined company with Horace and Lucretius on the floor. A wet splash on fat fingers apprised Bunter that it must have been an inkpot.

He blinked round anxiously at the half-open door.

They couldn't have heard, in Common-Room, but if any beak happened to pass in the passage—! The fat Owl trembled

A moment later, the half-open door was pushed further open. Behind it, Billy Bunter could not see who entered the study. But he heard someone enter. He naturally expected the light to flash on.

But the light did not flash on.

Whoever had entered the study, had entered in the dark, and remained in the dark.

Billy Bunter hardly breathed.

Who it was, he had no idea. If it was Quelch, why should he come into his study without switching on the light at the door? But if it was not Quelch, who else?

Whoever it was, Billy Bunter's cue was, like Brer Fox, to 'lie low and say nuffin': Whoever it was, was not going to discover him in Quelch's study, if Bunter could help it.

He remained still and silent, behind the door, listening with intent fat ears and palpitating heart— in dread that it was Quelch, and that discovery was imminent.

He heard a sound as of a chair moved. That was followed by a groping sound that seemed to come from above: as if some reaching hand, in the dark, was groping for the electric lamp that hung suspended from the ceiling over Quelch's writing-table.

Then, unmistakably, he heard someone step down from a chair. A cracking sound followed, as if something breakable had been tossed into the fireplace. The fat Owl wondered dizzily whether the unseen visitor to the study had removed the lamp from its socket and thrown it into the fender. That was certainly what it sounded like.

Hardly a moment more, and a swift though stealthy footstep passed the door behind which the fat junior huddled against the wall. Then a sound of swift receding footsteps came back from the corridor. Then silence.

The intruder, whoever he was, was gone.

But his luck was in. There was no sound of a footstep in the passage. Nobody had heard the successive downfalls of Horace, Lucretius, and the inkpot! If those two great classic authors

were swimming in a sea of ink it did not worry Bunter. Classic authors were of little importance compared with a cake!

But where was that cake? Quelch's intention, no doubt, was to despatch it to the kitchen department. If he had already done so—!

It was an awful thought!

Bunter groped again almost frantically. Then he gave a gasp of relief, for this time the fat fingers contacted what they sought. The cake was there: still where the fat Owl had placed it on the table under Quelch's gimlet-eye.

Billy Bunter's clutch closed on it.

The cake was recaptured! All that remained was to escape from Quelch's study with his booty. He did not even pause to take one bite! He jammed the cake under a fat arm, and turned to the door. Cake under arm, he rolled doorward: and like Iser in the poem, he rolled rapidly! But half-way to the door he stopped suddenly, his fat heart jumping almost into his plump neck! There was a footstep outside.

Up to that moment, luck had befriended Bunter. But at that moment, it let him down.

Someone was coming— and if it was Quelch—!

In that awful moment Billy Bunter, in his mind's eye, saw himself cakeless, and bending over under Quelch's cane.

He stood paralysed for a second. Then, with a sudden inspiration, he backed behind the door. If it was Quelch, the game was up. But it mightn't be Quelch, and perhaps there was a chance yet.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He emerged from behind the door. The perspiration was thick on his plump brow. The whole incident had lasted less than a minute: but it had given the Owl of the Remove the fright of his fat life.

But all was clear now. That mysterious intruder, whoever he was and whatever his game was, was gone: and he had not seen Bunter, or had any suspicion that the fat Owl was in the room. The way was open now for escape. Cautiously Billy Bunter peered into the corridor through his big spectacles. His luck was in again— not a door opened: and there was no eye to fall upon him as he tiptoed out of Quelch's study.

He rolled away down the corridor: once more under-studying Iser and rolling rapidly— with the recaptured cake under a fat arm. He gasped with relief when he turned a corner. He did not head for the Rag: he had no use for company in disposing of that cake! He headed for the stairs, and a couple of minutes later he was up in the Remove studies— captured cake and all! Lord Mauleverer, coming down the passage from No. 12, glanced at Bunter, and the cake, and smiled.

'Whose is that?' he asked.

'Yah!' was Bunter's brief and elegant reply to that query.

He rolled into No. 7 Study and slammed the door. He landed the cake on the study table. For a moment, he feasted his eyes on it: but only for a moment. Mauled, as he walked on, heard a sound of happy munching and crunching from No. 7 Study. Billy Bunter was getting busy without delay. Not only did he love cake— not only was there an aching void in his extensive circumference that clamoured to be filled— but he was in haste to dispose of the evidence before Quelch inquired after that cake! In matters of tuck, Billy Bunter was always a fast worker: but seldom had even Billy Bunter travelled through so large a quantity in so short a time. At last— at long, long last— Billy Bunter was enjoying that cake: he munched and crunched, and crunched and munched, and life seemed just one grand sweet song!

CHAPTER 9

NARROW ESCAPE

FISHER T. FISH sat up and took notice.

For quite a long time, Fishy had sat, or rather slumped, in a state of dismal apprehension. At every footstep, he dreaded that the summons was coming, calling him to his form-master's study to suffer for his sins. The thought of facing those gimlet-eyes, glinting over that account-book, was unnerving. He gave no heed to the cheery buzz of talk round him in the Rag.

Harry Wharton and Co. were talking football: but Fishy did not care a continental red cent about the St. Jim's match, or any other match. Skinner and Snoop and Stott, near his armchair, were discussing the two-thirty at Wapshot: but Fishy had never been more uninterested in the sport of kings. The buzz of voices passed him by unheeded, while he reflected dismally on what was coming to him. A footstep at the door made him jump.

But it was only the Bounder who came in.

He came in grinning. Smithy seemed amused about something. Fishy did not heed him as he joined Skinner and Co.: but suddenly he sat up and took notice, as a remark reached him from Smithy and his friends.

'Quelch is still chinning in Common-Room,' chuckled the Bounder. 'I'd like to see his face when he gets back to his study, and the light won't come on. I wonder how long it will take him to guess that the lamp isn't there.'

Ha, ha, ha!

'Quelch will be shirty!' said Skinner.

'So was I—when he gave me lines this morning!' drawled the Bounder. 'One good turn deserves another, what?'

'Jolly risky, larking in Quelch's study!' said Snoop, shaking his head.

'Who cares?'

'Sure nobody spotted you in the passage?' asked Skinner.

'Nobody at all about. Quelch can try to guess who left him in the dark, when he goes back to his study— and keep on guessing!'

Fisher T. Fish caught his breath. He was deeply interested now.

From what he heard, Quelch had left his study and was safe off the spot. Added to that, there was no longer a light available in the study if he came back. The circumstances could not have been more favourable for an attempt to retrieve that wretched account-book.

Obviously, Quelch couldn't have seen it before he went, or Fishy would have been sent for at once. How and why he had overlooked it Fishy didn't know: but plainly he had! If it was gone before he returned to his study, all was well. This looked like a chance— if the coast was still clear.

'There'll be a row about it,' said Snoop.

'Who cares?' repeated the Bounder.

'I guess you'll care a few, Smithy, if some guy spotted you around the study,' said Fisher T.

Fish. 'You plumb sure there was nobody around?'

'Nobody! Not a soul about,' answered the Bounder. 'I wasn't there more than a minute, either. Safe as houses.' Fisher T. Fish left his armchair, and jerked away to the door. He left the group chuckling over Smithy's jape on Quelch.

Fishy was very far from possessing the Bounder's nerve. But he had made up his mind now, on Smithy's assurance that there was 'nobody about. It looked as if opportunity knocked. He left

the Rag: and at the corner of Masters' studies his keen, sharp eyes scanned the passage. There was still nobody about, as Smithy had said.

The door of Common-Room, at the further end of the passage, was still closed: the beaks still 'chinning' there. One door in the passage was open— that of Quelch's study; Billy Bunter had not taken the trouble to close it after his departure with the cake. No light came from the open doorway: the study was untenanted.

Fisher T. Fish drew a deep breath: then his lean legs whisked up the passage.

It was now or never: and he was going to take the chance.

Almost in a moment, he reached the open doorway, and shot in, panting.

Softly, he closed the door. He had to have a light to find that account-book: and he could not risk letting a light be seen. He groped in his pocket for a match-box.

With beating heart, in dread every moment that Quelch might come along from Common-Room, he struck a match. In its wavering glimmer, he scanned the table with hurried searching eyes.

He noticed, without heeding, that two books and an inkpot lay on the floor, with a pool of ink. The glimmer of a broken electric bulb in the fender caught his eye. But these details had no interest for him. His eager eyes searched for that account-book.

Wingate must have left it on the table. It must be there— it had to be there among all those books and papers.

The match went out. Fisher T. Fish struck another bending eagerly over the littered table in search of that 'leettle book'. Moments were precious: at any moment the door might open. And if Quelch caught him there, in a flagrant attempt to abstract the evidence of guilt, that added offence would put the lid on: the 'jig' would undoubtedly be 'up'.

Almost frantically, all his nerves in a jump, Fisher T. Fish searched for that 'leettle book'.

Suddenly he saw it— on the spot from which, a short while ago, Billy Bunter had lifted the cake.

'Gee-whiz!' breathed Fishy. He clutched it up.

Fisher T. Fish was gladder to recover that tell-tale account-book than he could have been to receive, with interest, all the various borrowings recorded in its pages.

Once he was safe out of the study with that book, all was well. Wingate had left it there for Quelch, and was done with it. Quelch had not seen it— and now he was not going to see it! This was, as Fishy would have expressed it in his native language, okay— it was tops— it was indeed the cats whiskers! He panted with relief as his lean fingers closed on that 'leettle book'. Almost at the same moment, the door opened, just as his match went out.

Fisher T. Fish jumped.

'Chinning' in Common-Room, evidently, was over.

Quelch had returned to his study—at the unluckiest possible moment for the business-man of his form!

Framed in the doorway against the faint glimmer of light from the passage was an awe-inspiring figure in cap and gown: dim but unmistakable!

Fisher T. Fish gazed at it, rooted to the floor after his startled jump. It was Quelch— staring into the study. Fishy could have groaned. At the very moment of success, with that doggoned 'leettle book' clutched in his bony fingers, he was caught!

But was he?

Quelch's hand was on the lighting-switch just inside the doorway. But Fishy remembered what he had heard in the Rag. He was in the dark— the glimmer from the passage did not reach

him. He was, as yet, invisible— Quelch did not know that he was there. Was there a chance yet?

Click!

Quelch had pressed the switch. But no light came on.

There was a surprised and annoyed exclamation from the Remove master.

'Bless my soul! What is the matter with the light?' Fishy heard another click, and then another. But no light came on. Fishy, still wrapped in darkness, still stood rooted. If Quelch went, there was a chance yet of dodging out and escaping, unseen and undiscovered.

But Quelch did not go. Fishy heard his voice again.

'Bless my soul! How very annoying! The lamp must be defective!' Then, in a deeper tone, 'Or is this some trick— some prank? Upon my word! If some mischievous boy has tampered with my lamp—' The tone in Quelch's voice sent a cold shiver down Fishy's apprehensive back.

He heard a sound of rustling. Then Quelch's voice again.

'Where did I leave my match-box?'

Fishy's heart almost died within him. If Quelch had a box of matches about him, the 'jig' was up! His hopes sank to zero.

But again there was a respite. Quelch's fumbling in a pocket produced nothing.

'How excessively annoying!' Quelch's voice rumbled again. 'Where is that match-box? Oh! I remember— I left it on the mantelpiece.'

Would he go now? Fishy clung to that last hope, like a drowning man clinging to a straw. There was a momentary pause. Was he going?

He was not!

He came into the dark study, heading for the mantelpiece, where he had left that match-box!

He had to pass round the table to reach it. Fisher T. Fish jumped out of the way.

But he could not jump without a sound. Quelch heard, and he was aware also of something shadowy in the dark. Then Quelch knew that someone was in the room in the darkness. His voice came loud and sharp:

'Who is there? Who is that? Who—?'

A moment more, and a grasping hand was on a shoulder. Fishy's head fairly swam. He was caught— caught in Quelch's study, by Quelch, with that tell-tale account-book clutched in his bony hand! Caught— to be taken to the Head and sacked!

In his panic, he shoved both hands violently at Quelch's chest, and twisted out of the grasp on his shoulder.

Bump!

Quelch, under that unexpected and forceful shove, toppled over backwards. There was a heavy bump as he landed, on his back, on the carpet, at full length.

He sprawled and gasped.

It was unexpected— it was amazing— it was unbelievable— it was unthinkable— but Henry Samuel Quelch, master of the Greyfriars Remove, had been up-ended on his own study carpet!

'Oh!' came gasping in the darkness. 'Whooh!'

Fisher T. Fish did not stay to hear.

Utterly terrified by what he had done, he darted to the door. Fortunately for him, the corridor was still clear: and greased lightning had nothing on Fishy as he ran.

Fisher T. Fish vanished into space: while Mr. Quelch, in a state of dazed and dizzy amazement, was still sprawling on his back gasping for breath.

CHAPTER 10

BUNTER IS WANTED

MR. QUELCH gained his feet.

He leaned his hand on the table to steady himself, while he gasped and gasped for breath. It was difficult for Quelch to realize that this thing really could have happened. But it had! He had been pushed over— up-ended— some boy had been in his study, in the dark, and had pushed him over to escape. Who that boy was, Quelch had not the remotest idea. He had seen nothing— only a dim shadow in the gloom.

And the young rascal had escaped— he was gone.

Having recovered his breath a little, Quelch stepped to the doorway and looked out. There was a light some distance down the corridor. But it revealed nothing but the fact that the corridor was empty.

Mr. Quelch set his lips very hard.

He did not know who the delinquent was. But he was going to know. And the severest flogging that had ever been administered at Greyfriars School was going to be his portion, when he was discovered.

Mr. Quelch turned back into his study, groped to the mantelpiece, and found that match-box. He struck a match and looked round him in its glimmer. The gleam of broken glass in the fender caught his eye, and he knew why his light had not come on.

His lips set harder.

Who had been there? Some boy of his own form: he could have no doubt about that. Some young rascal had been playing tricks in his study—and he had caught him— if only that unexpected shove had not toppled him over and given the young rascal a chance to escape in the dark.

The light of the match revealed two volumes and an ink-pot on the floor. With deep feelings, Mr. Quelch picked up Quintus Horatius Flaccus and T. Lucretius Carus. As he replaced them on the table, he gave a sudden start. It was not something that caught his eye— it was something that did not catch his eye, that caused him to give that start. Something that had been on his study table was no longer there. It was a cake that was missing.

'Bunter!' breathed Mr. Quelch.

As the match burned down, he stood staring at the vacant spot where the confiscated cake had lain. That spot was bare! That an account-book had lain there, hidden by the cake, Quelch naturally did not know.

The cake was gone! It was Bunter's cake, and that naturally brought Bunter to his mind. Was it Bunter?

'Wow!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch, suddenly.

The match had burned down to his fingers. He dropped it hastily, and was in darkness again. He struck another. Holding it up, he scanned the table.

The cake, certainly, was not there. Grimmer and grimmer grew Quelch's speaking countenance. He had little doubt now about the identity of the young rascal who had been in his study in the dark! That greedy boy had ventured to come there, in his absence, to recover his cake. Quelch had caught him in the act— and he had pushed his form-master over, to escape. Quelch saw it all— now. He could have no doubt.

But Quelch was a just man, even if, at the moment, an extremely angry and exasperated one. He was going to make sure, before the vials of wrath were poured out on the offender's head.

With set lips and glinting eyes he left his study. A minute later, he was looking into the Rag— where a buzz of voices died away suddenly, as the angular form appeared in the doorway, and the gimlet-eyes glinted in.

All eyes turned upon Mr. Quelch, startled.

Quelch was calm: he was always calm. But his calmness had, at that moment, something quite deadly in it. His lips were set, his eyes glinted: his look told, all too plainly, that someone was 'for it': and 'for it' very seriously.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Something's up.'

'The upfulness seems to be terrific,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'The esteemed Quelch is infuriated.'

'What the dickens—!' muttered Harry Wharton.

'You ass, Smithy!' whispered Skinner. And Snoop and Stott exchanged a glance. Vernon-Smith breathed rather hard.

Smithy was sure, absolutely sure, that he had not been seen anywhere near Quelch's study. He had nothing to fear. But he needed all his nerve to keep up an aspect of casual unconcern under the glint of those gimlet-eyes.

Having scanned the crowd of juniors, Quelch spoke.

His voice came rather like the grinding of a file. 'Wharton!'

'Oh ! Yes, sir!' stammered Harry. He wondered, for one unpleasant moment, whether he was the object of official wrath. But Quelch's next words came as a relief. 'Is Bunter here?'

'Bunter, sir? He was here a little while ago.' The captain of the Remove glanced round. 'Is Bunter here, you fellows?'

The Bounder breathed more freely. Quelch's glance had not lingered on him. If it was that disrespectful prank with the light in his study that had brought Quelch to the Rag, he was not thinking of Smithy.

'Bunter's not here, sir!' said Harry.

'Do you know where he is, Wharton?'

'I haven't seen him for some time, sir. He was here some time ago, but I haven't seen him since.'

'Very well!' said Mr. Quelch, quietly.

Quelch said 'very well!' but voice and look indicated that matters were not very well: not indeed well at all: in fact very far from well. He gave a last glinting glance round the Rag, and turned and walked away— evidently to look for Bunter elsewhere.

A buzz of voices broke out immediately he had departed.

Something, it was clear, had happened: something in which Billy Bunter was concerned. And Quelch's aspect left no doubt that it was something serious.

'What on earth's up?' asked Frank Nugent.

'Quelch looked frightfully shirty,' said Johnny Bull.

'That fat ass Bunter has been up to something.'

'But what the dickens—!' said Bob Cherry.

'Goodness knows.'

'Not after you, after all, Smithy,' murmured Skinner. 'But what does he want Bunter for? Think he fancies it was Bunter doused the glim in his study?'

'Why should he?' snapped the Bounder.

It was a discomfiting suggestion to Smithy. If, by some unlooked-for chance, the wrong man was 'nailed' for that prank in Quelch's study, it would be up to the right man to own up: and

the Bounder, with all his faults, was not the fellow to let another fellow take the rap for him. He was not feeling so much at ease now.

'Well, it looks—!' said Skinner.

'Oh, rats!' Smithy turned his back on Skinner.

There was a hum of surmise and speculation among the crowd of juniors in the Rag. Bunter, evidently, was booked for trouble. Bunter's sins were many: but this was clearly something more serious than usual— something indeed awfully serious. But what the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove could have done this time was quite a mystery.

Leaving the Rag in a buzz, Mr. Quelch headed for the stairs. With the grimmest of brows, he rustled up to the junior studies. It was not yet prep, and the Remove passage was deserted. Mr. Quelch walked up that passage, and stopped at No. 7.

He tapped— Quelch always tapped— and there was a startled squeak in the study as he threw open the door. He had found Bunter.

CHAPTER 11

BUNTER!

BILLY BUNTER was sitting in Peter Todd's armchair in No. 7 Study.

He was leaning back in that armchair, breathing rather hard.

He was, in fact, taking a rest after his exertions: which he really needed, for those exertions had been considerable.

It had been a delightful cake— a luscious cake— a scrumptious cake. And it had been a large one. It was now wholly in the pluperfect tense: it had been! Bunter had disposed of that cake to the last plum, if not to the last crumb.

Even Billy Bunter was not accustomed to taking on so large a cargo at one go. But the delightfulness, the lusciousness, and the scrumptiousness of that cake had led him on. Moreover, he did not want any of it to survive as evidence against him if Quelch started inquiring. So he had finished the cake. After which he rolled to Toddy's armchair for the rest he undoubtedly needed.

But there is no rest for the wicked!

Hardly had the fat Owl settled down to luxurious repose, when a tap came at his study door, and it opened to reveal Quelch.

'Oh!' squeaked Bunter.

He blinked at his form-master, through his big spectacles, like a startled owl. Then he heaved himself to his feet—with some difficulty. Billy Bunter always moved to slow motion: and now he was loaded far over the Plimsoll line. It really was not easy for Bunter to get out of that armchair. However, he got out of it, and stood blinking apprehensively at Quelch.

Quelch eyed him grimly.

'Bunter!' His voice was deep.

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'It—it wasn't me, sir—'

'Were you in my study ten minutes ago, Bunter?'

'Oh! No, sir!' gasped Bunter. He felt that he was on safe ground there. Certainly it was a good deal more than ten minutes, since he had recaptured that cake in Quelch's study.

'Not at all, sir! Oh! No.'

'Where were you, Bunter?'

'Here, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I've been here the last hour, sir— more than an hour— nearer two, I think, sir—'

'Take care what you say, Bunter.'

'Oh, yes, sir! I—I've been up here a long time, sir—I—I came up to look out a verb in my geography book—'

'What?'

'I—I—I mean to look out a geography, in my Latin grammar, sir—I—I—I mean—I—I've not been outside the study for an hour, sir—'

'It was barely half-an-hour ago, Bunter, that you came to Common-Room, to ask leave to go to Cliff House to-morrow to see your sister.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. He had forgotten that! Billy Bunter belonged to the class of persons who, proverbially, ought to have good memories! Unluckily, he had a very bad one. 'I—I mean—I—I mean half-an-hour, sir—'

'Did you remove a cake from my study, Bunter— the cake which was confiscated, and which has now been taken away?'

'Oh, no, sir! I—I haven't tasted cake to-day!' gasped Bunter. Bunter and truth had long been strangers, and they were not likely to strike up an acquaintance now. 'I—I never went anywhere near your study, sir, and— and I don't know anything about the— the cake, sir!' Again Bunter felt on safe ground. The cake was undoubtedly in Bunter's study: but it was inside Bunter, and not to be detected without an X-ray outfit. Quelch's gimlet-eyes often seemed to look right through a fellow: still, even those gimlet-eyes could never spot that cake, now.

But alas for Bunter!

'Are not those cake-crumbs on your waistcoat, Bunter?'

'Oh, crikey!'

Bunter glanced down at the most extensive waistcoat in the Lower School at Greyfriars. It was almost smothered with crumbs from that delectable cake. Bunter had not noticed it before. He noticed it now!

'Bunter!' Quelch's voice was deeper and deeper. 'You have abstracted the cake from my study, and you have eaten it. There are actually cake-crumbs on your face.' Bunter drew a hasty sleeve across a wide mouth. 'Bunter, there is no doubt now. It was you in my study.'

'I—I—oh, lor',' mumbled Bunter.

'For your action in taking away a cake which had been confiscated, Bunter, I should cane you. But the matter is much more serious than that. It is a matter with which only the head-master can deal. To-morrow, Bunter, you will be taken before Dr. Locke. Your head-master will deal with you.'

Billy Bunter blinked at him in horror.

He had expected a spot of bother, if Quelch found him out. But he had not expected that. Only for a very, very serious offence was a fellow ever sent up to the Head. Snooping a cake was not, from Bunter's peculiar point of view, really an offence at all. But even if Quelch thought so, it was not so serious as all that!

'Oh!' stuttered Bunter. 'Did—did you say the—the Head, sir?'

'I did, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'For your action, Bunter, you merit the severest possible punishment—'

'Oh, really, sir—'

'I have no doubt that your head-master will administer a flogging—'

'Wow!'

'A very severe flogging—'

'But—but—but what for, sir?' stuttered the terrified and bewildered Owl. 'I—I haven't done anything, sir— except— except the cake, sir—' Even Bunter realized that, with so many cake-crumbs adhering to him, it was time to confess to the cake! 'I—I was so-so jolly hungry, sir—' 'I am not alluding to your abstraction of the cake from my study, Bunter, as you know very well.'

'But—but I—I haven't done anything else, sir!' moaned Bunter. He realized that Quelch fancied that he had! 'Oh! If—if you mean those books, sir, they— they just fell off the table, in the dark, sir— and—and the inkpot, too— I hope they didn't get inky, sir.'

'Upon my word!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch. 'Have you the temerity to deny, Bunter, that when I caught you in my study, not more than ten minutes ago, you made your escape by an action that calls for the most condign punishment?'

Billy Bunter blinked at him dizzily. 'But you never, sir!' he gasped.

'What? I found you there, in the dark—'

Billy Bunter felt as if his fat head was turning round.

Quelch, apparently, fancied that he had caught Bunter in his study! Bunter, at any rate, knew that Quelch hadn't.

'And you had the temerity, the disrespect, the effrontery, to push me over, in order to make your escape—'

'Pip—pip—pip—push you over, sir!' articulated Bunter. 'Oh, crikey! I didn't, sir—I—I never—I—I—I wouldn't dare— oh, crumbs!'

Mr. Quelch gave the fat Owl a very sharp look. There seemed to be something like a ring of sincerity in Bunter's terrified wail. And indeed Billy Bunter was about the last fellow in the Remove to commit so wild and reckless an act. Yet the evidence seemed conclusive.

'You deny this, Bunter?' demanded Quelch.

'Oh, yes, sir— of course, sir—I—I—I never—I didn't— I wasn't— oh, lor'! I— I didn't wasn't never—!' burred Bunter. 'It—it wasn't me, sir! If—if—if somebody pushed you over, sir, did—did—didn't you see who it was, sir?'

'I could see nothing, Bunter, as you had removed my lamp from its socket, and the light did not come on.'

'I never!' yelled Bunter. 'It—it was somebody else, sir! He came in while I was there, sir, and shifted the lamp—'

'Nonsense!'

'He—he did, sir. I—I never saw him—I couldn't saw him in the dark—I mean I couldn't see him, sir, but I heard him—he just nipped into the study and shifted the lamp and cut, sir—I thought it was you at first, and got behind the door, sir—I—I never touched it—'

'Nonsense!' repeated Mr. Quelch. 'I cannot doubt, Bunter, that you removed the lamp, for additional security, in case I returned to the study. In this, Bunter, you were successful, for I could not recognize the boy I found in my study when I came in. But—'

'It wasn't me, sir!' wailed Bunter.

'You were there, Bunter. The fact that you abstracted the cake is proof of it. Say no more.'

'But, sir, I—I—I never—'

'Enough!' snapped Mr. Quelch. 'You will go before your head-master to-morrow, Bunter, and I warn you that your punishment will be very severe.'

With that, the Remove master turned to the door. Billy Bunter's little round eyes almost bulged through his big round spectacles at him. Once more Billy Bunter was finding the way of the transgressor hard. Now he was called upon to answer not only for his own sins, but for those of some unknown person who had, apparently, pushed Quelch over in the dark! And he was going up to the Head for it—with a flogging to come!

'I—I—I say, sir, it— it wasn't me!' wailed Bunter. 'That will do, Bunter!' came over Mr. Quelch's shoulder. 'But—but—but it wasn't, sir—I never—I never wasn't didn't— I—I—I wasn't in your study at all, sir—I—I never went there— nowhere near it. I—I was up here, sir, all the time I was there—I—I mean all the time I wasn't there, sir! I—I— hope you can take my word, sir.'

If Billy Bunter really hoped that, it indicated that Bunter had an extremely hopeful nature!

Quelch, without replying, left the study. He was done with Bunter: until the morrow, when the hapless fat Owl was to be taken to the Head.

'Beast!' groaned Bunter.

He tottered to the armchair, and sat—or rather fell—into it.

Even the cake, which had so happily filled that aching void, was no comfort now. For the first time in his fat career, Billy Bunter wished that he had kept at a safe distance from a cake!

CHAPTER 12

PAINFUL PROSPECT

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!' 'Bunter, you ass—'

'What's the row?'

'What's up, fathead?'

'Is the upfulness terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter?'

'Give it a name.'

Quite a little crowd surged in at the doorway of No. 7 Study in the Remove. They had waited till Quelch was off the scene. Quelch had not looked as if he would like the company of a mob of juniors at his heels! However, the Remove master had now gone back to his study: and a dozen fellows had come up to inquire what the trouble was.

Billy Bunter did not reply to the questions that rained on him from the doorway. He blinked at his form-fellows with a dismal, dolorous blink and groaned. Never had the fat Owl of the Remove been seen looking so utterly woebegone.

Harry Wharton and Co. felt quite concerned. Quelch's grim looks had apprised them that the matter was serious. Bunter's looks seemed to indicate that it was not merely serious, but that it was awfully, fearfully, overwhelmingly serious.

'Brace up, old chap,' said Bob Cherry. 'Tell us what's up?'

'What on earth have you been doing?' asked Harry.

'Nothing!' mumbled Bunter.

'Quelch is after you for nothing?' asked Skinner, with a grin.

'Oh, lor!'

'Tell us another!' suggested Snoop.

'Beast!' moaned Bunter.

The Bounder pushed forward, with a scowling face.

Smithy was feeling uneasy in his mind.

'Cough it up, you fat ass!' he said, roughly. 'Does Quelch think you've been larking in his study?'

'Oh, dear! Yes!' mumbled Bunter. 'He thinks it was me pushed him over in his study—'

'WHAT!' exclaimed a dozen startled voices.

'Pushed Quelch over—!' gasped Bob. 'Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles. You mad porpoise, what made you do it?'

'I didn't!' yelled Bunter. 'Somebody must have, I suppose, as Quelch says so, but I didn't!'

Harry Wharton whistled.

'If that's it, no wonder Quelch looked wild,' he said. 'Where on earth did you get the nerve to push Quelch over?'

'I tell you I didn't!' shrieked Bunter.

'Oh, don't be an ass,' said Johnny Bull. 'Quelch isn't blind, and he knows who pushed him over, if anybody did.'

'It was in the dark,' howled Bunter. 'Quelch can't have seen who it was, or he wouldn't think it was me.'

'In the dark!' repeated Bob Cherry.

'Some silly ass had taken Quelch's lamp out, and it was all in the dark,' moaned Bunter. 'Somebody must have been there, and Quelch caught him, and he thinks it was me, because I had the cake. Oh, lor!'

'The cake!' said Bob. 'That cake? What the dickens—?'

'You see, Quelch had confiscated the cake, and I—I went after it, when he was in Common-Room!' moaned Bunter. 'Of course I never turned on the light: and while I was there, somebody nipped in, in the dark, and took Quelch's lamp out—'

'Oh!' breathed the Bounder.

He realized that Bunter must have been in Quelch's study at the time he was playing that prank on his form-master.

'I don't know who it was, but he did!' mumbled Bunter. 'So when Quelch came back to his study, there couldn't have been a light, see?'

'And he caught you?' asked Bob.

'No!' howled Bunter. 'He must have caught somebody, but he never caught me, as I wasn't there. I was up here with the cake.'

'You fat, frabjous, blithering bloater,' said the Bounder. 'So Quelch caught you after the cake, and you pushed him over—'

'I didn't!' yelled Bunter.

'Who did, then?'

'How should I know? It's all the fault of that silly idiot who took Quelch's lamp away!' groaned Bunter. 'If there'd been a light, he would have seen who it was.'

'He would have seen you, you fat ass.'

'Beast!'

'What a nerve!' said Skinner. 'Lots of fellows would like to up-end Quelch— but nobody's ever done it before. Fancy Bunter!'

'And what's the verdict?' asked Bob. 'What's going to happen now?'

'Quelch says I'm to go up to the Head to-morrow!' groaned Bunter. 'That means a flogging! Oh, crikey!'

'What did you expect for up-ending a beak?' asked Skinner.

'I tell you I didn't!' howled Bunter. 'I—I told Quelch so, but he didn't believe me. He's doubted my word before,' added Bunter, dismally. 'Pretty thick, I call it, doubting a fellow's word.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'You must have been potty to push Quelch over to get away, even if it was in the dark,' said Peter Todd.

'I keep on telling you I didn't!' howled Bunter. 'I can't help Quelch making mistakes in the dark. He thinks I shifted his lamp, so that it would be safer if he came back— but I never did— it was somebody who nipped into the study while I was hiding behind the door—'

'You don't expect Quelch to believe that, do you?' asked Johnny Bull, staring at the fat Owl.

'It's true!' wailed Bunter.

'Truth is stranger than fiction, when it comes from Bunter!' remarked Nugent.

The Bounder drew a deep breath. He knew, at all events, that that much of Bunter's statements was true. He did not believe a word of the rest. But certainly it was not Bunter who had 'shifted' Quelch's lamp: Quelch was in error on that point. And he knew that it was up to the fellow who had played that trick to clear the hapless fat Owl on that point, at least. 'You fat idiot!' he said. 'You've asked for a flogging, and the more the Head lays it on, the better.'

'Oh, chuck it, Smithy,' said Bob Cherry, warmly. The Bounder gave an angry snort.

'This means six for me,' he growled.

'Eh! Why?' asked Bob, staring.

'Because it was I that shifted Quelch's lamp, and I'm going down now to tell him so!' snarled the Bounder. And he walked out of the study scowling. He was going to do the right thing: but in the very worst of tempers.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter. 'So it was Smithy— I couldn't see who it was— I thought it was Quelch, at first— and got behind the door—I—I say, you fellows, when Quelch knows that it wasn't me put him in the dark, think he will believe that it wasn't me that floored him?'

Billy Bunter blinked round eagerly at dubious faces.

But he could read little hope there. In fact, not a fellow doubted that the fat Owl, caught in the dark by Quelch, had done the very thing that Quelch believed that he had done.

'Better not tell any more crammers, old fat man,' said Bob. 'They're not much use with Quelch.'

'But I didn't—!' wailed Bunter.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! That's prep!' said Bob, as a bell began to ring.

And the Remove fellows dispersed to their studies for preparation, leaving William George Bunter the picture of woe in Toddy's armchair.

Billy Bunter did not give much attention to prep that evening. With the painful prospect of an interview with his head-master on the morrow hanging over his fat head like the sword of Damocles, Bunter had no mind for prep. Neither, in No. 4 Study, did the Bounder find it easy to settle down to his books. Six of the very best from Quelch's cane had not left him in a studious mood!

THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

'POOR old Bunter!'

'That fat ass—!'

'Where did he get the nerve?'

'Goodness knows.'

'Up-ending old Quelch—'

'Poor old Bunter! He's for it!'

It was the one topic in the Greyfriars Remove that morning.

When the Remove fellows gathered at their form-room door, they were thinking, and talking, of nothing else. Billy Bunter, as a rule the most inconsiderable member of the form, had the house, as it were. It was Bunter first and nobody else anywhere.

Such an occurrence as that in Quelch's study was, of course, quite unprecedented. It was not recorded in the history of Greyfriars School that a form-master had ever before been up-ended on his own study carpet.

Bunter denied having done anything of the kind. He admitted to the cake: but of the flooring of Quelch he asseverated, almost with tears in his eyes, that he knew absolutely nothing.

That cut no ice whatever. Billy Bunter's prevarications were too well known. Fibbing, in times of stress, was always his first resource. Indeed, Bunter really seemed, sometimes, hardly to know that a difference existed between truth and untruth. Skinner had remarked that if Bunter said it was raining, a fellow had to look out of the window before believing him! Many sympathized with the unfortunate Owl; but nobody thought of crediting his almost frantic asseverations of innocence.

Bunter, obviously, had done it! If Bunter hadn't who had? '

Somebody had! That was indubitable! Quelch had caught a Remove fellow in his study, in the dark, and that fellow had pushed him over and escaped. Bunter had been there— after the cake. So Bunter had done it. Few, if any, could doubt.

There was one fellow in the form who could have let in light on the subject. But Fisher T. Fish did not guess, reckon, or calculate that he was going to do so.

Fishy had been quite surprised to hear the news about Bunter. It had not occurred to him for a moment that some other fellow might be 'nailed' for what he had done. He had expected wrathful inquiry: only anxious that suspicion should not fall upon his transatlantic self. Of Bunter's exploit he had known nothing. And when he did know, Fishy was as silent as the clam of his native country. If that fat gink chose to horn in and get himself suspected, that was his own funeral, and the fat gink could take what was coming to him. That was how Fisher Tarleton Fish looked at it. It did not even occur to him to follow the Bounder's example. Fishy had no use whatever for the vials of wrath.

Fisher T. Fish was silent in the little crowd at the form-room door in the morning, while everyone else talked about Bunter. Nobody heeded Fishy. Bunter was the one topic. The fat Owl had not yet arrived for class, though the bell had ceased to ring. All the rest of the Remove were there awaiting the arrival of their form-master. No doubt Bunter's fat little legs were reluctant to carry him to the form-room.

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob Cherry, for the umpteenth time. 'Blessed if I can guess where he found the nerve to do it.'

'Chanced it, to dodge away in the dark,' said Nugent. 'He wouldn't have if that ass Smithy hadn't messed about with Quelch's lamp.'

'Hardly,' said Harry Wharton. 'But he might have guessed that Quelch would trail him down after that cake.'

'Oh, Bunter, , wouldn't think of that,' said Johnny Bull. 'Does he ever think of anything— except grub?'

'The thoughtfulness of the idiotic Bunter is not terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

'That ass Smithy—!' said Bob.

'That goat Smithy—!' agreed Johnny. There was an angry grunt from the Bounder.

'How was I to know that that fat chump was oozing about Quelch's study after a cake?' he demanded. 'Quelch gave me lines, and I gave him one back for them, and that would have been all, if that howling ass hadn't butted in. Now I've had six from Quelch.' The Bounder gave a reminiscent wriggle.

'You did the right thing, old chap, ' said Tom Redwing, 'and it may make a difference for Bunter.'

'Oh, blow Bunter!' growled Smithy. 'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he comes!'

All eyes turned upon a fat figure that came almost crawling up the passage. Billy Bunter had arrived, at last: at a snail's pace, and evidently with reluctance. But he had to come.

His aspect was woebegone. He blinked dismally and dolorously through his big spectacles at the Remove fellows. Seldom had the fat Owl looked so utterly down on his luck. 'I say, you fellows,' he mumbled.

'Brace up, old fat man,' said Bob, kindly. 'The Head won't eat you.'

'But I—I say, I—I never did it!' wailed Bunter. 'I had the cake, but I never tipped over old Quelch— I—I wouldn't—'

'Hem!' said Bob. Bunter looked so dismal, that Bob would gladly have believed him, had it been possible. But how was it possible to believe Bunter?

'Better chuck that, Bunter,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'You'll only make Quelch madder by telling him more crammers.'

'But it wasn't me!' moaned Bunter. 'If anybody tipped up Quelch, it was some other fellow— I—I say, was it you, Smithy?'

'What?' yelled the Bounder.

'Well, it was you put out the light,' argued Bunter. 'You've jolly well owned up to that. If it was you—'

Vernon-Smith made a step towards Bunter. Tom Redwing hastily pushed him back.

'Keep your temper, old chap,' he murmured. 'Bunter's got enough coming to him.'

'If it was Smithy—' went on Bunter.

'You can wash that out, you fat chump,' said Harry Wharton, sharply. 'Smithy was in the Rag with us, when Quelch came there, after it happened.'

'Oh, was he?' said Bunter. 'Well, it wasn't me, so it must have been somebody else. Was it you, Bob?'

'I!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'Or you, Bull?' asked Bunter, blinking at Johnny.

'You fat villain!' roared Johnny Bull. 'Are you trying to put what you did on to some other fellow?'

'Well, it must have been some other fellow, as it wasn't me,' said Bunter. 'If it was you, Smithy, you ought to own up—'

'Let go my arm, Reddy,' breathed the Bounder. 'I'm going to boot him.'

'If it was you, Bob—'

'I won't slaughter you, old fat man, as the Head's going to,' said Bob Cherry. 'But you'd better shut up.'

'Well, it was somebody, and it must have been one of you fellows,' said Bunter. 'Quelch ought to find out who it was, before he jumps on a chap.'

'Better tell him so— here he comes!' said Peter Todd.

'Oh, lor!'

gasped Bunter. He blinked at the angular figure approaching the form-room door. Sad to relate, Billy Bunter never did enjoy the company of his form-master. Now it was less enjoyable than ever. Bunter would have given the biggest cake that ever was baked to have given Quelch a miss that morning.

Quelch gave him one glance. It was a grim glance.

Then he unlocked the form-room door, and the juniors filed in and took their places. Billy Bunter's plump knees knocked together as he crawled to his place. Undoubtedly Bunter was feeling, in those moments, like the Raven's unhappy master whom unmerciful disaster followed fast and followed faster!

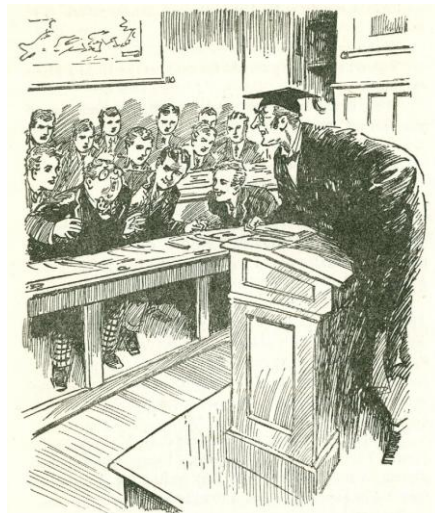
The Remove master stood by his desk, his eyes on the form. There was a deep silence. Everyone knew that something was coming: and they waited for it rather as they might have waited for a thunderbolt.

'Bunter!'

Quelch's voice was very deep.

Gasp, from Bunter.

Quelch's eyes were fixed on him. All other eyes were fixed on Quelch. The Remove waited breathlessly. 'Bunter! I have told you that you are to go before your head-master this morning—'



'BUNTER, I HAVE TOLD YOU THAT YOU ARE TO GO BEFORE
YOUR HEAD-MASTER'

'Ooooooh!' mumbled Bunter. 'Yes, sir! No, sir! It—it—it wasn't me, sir—it—it really wasn't—
oh, crikey!'

'You are too untruthful a boy, Bunter, for me to place reliance upon a single word you utter!' said Mr. Quelch, sternly.

'Oh, really, sir—!' mumbled Bunter.

'But—!' said Mr. Quelch, slowly. He paused.

It was quite a thrilling pause.

Apparently there was, after all, a 'but'. A gleam of hope came into Billy Bunter's dismal, dolorous fat face. Was Quelch going to relent?

If not, where did the 'but' come in? The Remove fairly hung on Quelch's next words. A pin might have been heard to drop in the form-room. Billy Bunter gazed at his form-master, breathless.

With a single exception, there was not a fellow in the Remove who did not believe that Bunter had up-ended Quelch in the dark study the evening before. But the fat Owl was so awfully down on his luck that they had to sympathize: and they all hoped that he would wriggle through somehow. Fisher T. Fish, certainly, shared that hope. Fishy's conscience was tough: but even Fishy felt a twinge. He guessed, reckoned, and calculated, that whatever guy came out at the little end of the horn, he was not going to be that guy. Nevertheless, it gave him a twinge to think of the hapless fat Owl going up to the Head for what his own bony hands had done. He would have given anything except cash to see Bunter in the clear.

The pause was not too long: but it seemed long to the Remove. It seemed interminable to Bunter, blinking at his form-master like an anguished owl. But Quelch spoke again at last.

'But—!' he repeated. 'But a fact has come to my knowledge, Bunter, which introduces an element of possible— of barely possible— doubt into the matter.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Tom Redwing pressed the Bounder's arm. Smithy shrugged his shoulders. Both of them could guess what that 'fact' was. Quelch went on:

'I am now aware, Bunter, that it was not you, as I had supposed, who extinguished the light in my study yesterday evening.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter, again. He realized that the Bounder's owning up to that reckless prank had made a difference.

'That,' went on Mr. Quelch, his gimlet-eyes glinting for a moment in Herbert Vernon-Smith's direction, 'was a foolish trick played by another boy, who has admitted it, and who has been punished for his folly and impertinence.'

Another brief pause.

Billy Bunter, palpitating between hope and dread, glued his eyes and spectacles on Mr. Quelch. Was Quelch going to let him off or not? He wished that he would hurry up with it, at any rate.

'In view of this,' resumed Mr. Quelch, 'I shall consider the matter further before dealing with you, Bunter, and I shall not send you to your head-master this morning.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter, for the third time.

His fat face brightened, rather like the sun coming out from behind a cloud.

'That is all—for the present!' added Mr. Quelch. 'We shall now commence.'

And they commenced, in an atmosphere of considerable relief to all— and especially to the Owl of the Remove. The matter was dismissed— for the present, as Quelch had significantly added. Billy Bunter was not to go, in fear and trembling, into the awful Presence that morning! Quelch had changed his mind, and most of the form could guess why. He had made one error, and the Bounder had set that right. Having made one error, he was extremely anxious to avoid any possible risk of making another. Quelch was a just man: Aristides of old had simply

nothing on Quelch in that line. If there was the faintest element of doubt, the culprit was entitled to the benefit of it: and Billy Bunter was given the benefit of the doubt, such as it was. The matter was not at an end: Quelch was not likely to be satisfied to leave it where it was. But that did not worry Bunter, so long as the peril was past. It was quite a cheery Owl who perpetrated howlers in the Latin lesson that morning.

CHAPTER 14

JUST LIKE BUNTER!

'CHEEKY young sweep!' said Temple of the Fourth.

'But what a nerve!' said Fry.

'Oh, rather!' said Dabney.

Billy Bunter grinned.

It was a grin of fatuous self-satisfaction.

After class that day, Bunter rolled in the quad. He passed Temple, Dabney and Co. of the Fourth Form, and their remarks reached his fat ears. As they made those remarks, they looked at him in something like wonder.

He knew to what they were alluding, of course. The news had spread beyond the Remove. In fact, by that time, all the Lower School at Greyfriars knew what a devil of a fellow Bunter was! Never before, in all his fat career, had Billy Bunter been regarded as a devil of a fellow! He liked it.

Fags in the Third and Second stared at him, and whispered to one another that that was the chap who had up-ended his beak! To such a reputation even the reckless Bounder had never aspired.

Quelch was the very first beak at Greyfriars School who had ever been up-ended on his own study carpet. And that chap Bunter had done it— that fat chap Bunter of the Remove! And he had got away with it, too!

The fat and fatuous Owl was no longer disposed to deny it.

Who actually had up-ended Quelch, Bunter had not the faintest idea. Whoever it was, he was keeping it very 82 dark, and evidently intended to go on keeping it very dark. Everyone else believed that Bunter was the man!

While the peril lasted, Bunter's asseverations of innocence had been almost frantic. Nobody had believed him— nobody ever did believe Bunter.

But the peril was over now. In the absence of danger Billy Bunter was as bold as a lion. And he was deriving satisfaction from being looked at, and pointed out, as the fellow who had had the amazing and unexampled nerve to up-end his beak!

With no danger to come from Quelch, it was very agreeable to Bunter. If fellows chose to believe him a chap of tremendous nerve, more wildly reckless than the Bounder himself, Bunter was more than willing to let them get on with it.

Hitherto, Bunter had been the most inconsiderable member of his form. He was no longer inconsiderable. He was a devil of a fellow who had up-ended his beak! Hitherto, he had never been able to make fellows stare, unless at his circumference. Now everybody stared.

The voice of Coker, of the Fifth Form, came to his ears, as he rolled on.

'That's him!' said Coker, with his accustomed superiority to grammar. 'That's him! Floored his beak, I've heard.'

'Cheeky young tick, if he did,' said Potter.

'Some nerve, though,' said Greene.

Billy Bunter almost purred as he blinked at the Fifth-form men through his big spectacles. His fame was spreading! Even senior men knew 'what a devil of a fellow he was!'

'Here Bunter!' said Coker, staring at the fat Owl. 'Did you up-end Quelch, as everybody seems to be saying?'

Bunter paused for one moment. He was enjoying his new-found reputation. He had no hesitation whatever about strutting in borrowed plumes. But so far, he had not actually laid claim to that glory and distinction. Yet why not, when it was as safe as houses? Only too easily did fibs come to William George Bunter. He winked at Coker.

'What do you think?' he grinned.

'And you got away with it?' said Potter.

'You see, it was in the dark,' explained Bunter. 'Quelch couldn't see a thing when he came back to his study and collared him—'

'Him!'

'I mean me,' amended Bunter, hastily. 'I mean when he came back to his study and collared me. That's how it was! So I just pushed him over and walked away. Nothing, really.'

And Bunter rolled on, leaving Coker and Co. staring.

Never had he felt so happy and glorious.

'Here, Bunter.' It was Hobson of the Shell this time. 'Here, I've heard that you floored your beak in his study last evening. Did you?'

Bunter chuckled.

'Didn't I just!' he answered.

'You've got a nerve!' said Hobson: and Bunter rolled on beaming. He came on the Famous Five, who all regarded him curiously. There was quite a change in Bunter, since he had crawled into the form-room that morning looking the most woebegone object in the universe.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Enjoying life, old fat bean?'

roared Bob Cherry. 'Up-ended any more beaks?'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I say, you fellows.' Bunter blinked at the chums of the Remove, a little anxiously. 'I say, it's all right now, ain't it? Quelch let me off going up to the Head— you heard what he said in the form-room. He can't rake it up again, can he?'

'I don't see how he can,' answered Harry Wharton, after a moment's thought. 'Not unless he finds out for certain.'

'You mean, if he finds out who did it?' asked Bunter.

'Oh, don't be an ass!' said Frank Nugent. 'He knows who did it just as well as we do.'

'I—I—I mean—' stammered the fat Owl.

'The knowfulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

'Of course he knows,' grunted Johnny Bull. 'We all know. As it happened in the dark, there might be a spot of doubt, and you've got the benefit of it, you fat fraud. But Quelch knows all right.'

'Well, it doesn't matter what Quelch knows, so long as he doesn't do anything,' said Bunter.

'That's the point.' 'He can't do a thing,' said Bob. 'Not unless you go to him and tell him you did it, old porpoise.'

'I'll watch it!'

'Then you're all right—the only fellow at Greyfriars who ever floored a beak and got away with it!' said Bob, with a chuckle.

'Fancy Bunter!' said Nugent. 'Smithy's got a limit— but it seems that Bunter hasn't!'

'Bold, bad Bunter!' chuckled Bob. 'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter smirked.

'What beats me is, where he got the nerve?' said Johnny Bull. 'A fat footling funk like Bunter—up-ending Quelch—'

'More nerve than you've got, and chance it!' retorted Bunter. 'I'd like to see you up-end a beak, Bull.'

'Oh!' said Johnny. 'So you're owning up that you did it, are you, after all your crammers?' Bunter winked.

'I'm not telling Quelch!' he grinned. 'I don't mind letting my pals know, now it's all right. Quelch can't do a thing, now he's let it drop. Think he could?'

'No!' said Harry. 'But—'

'Well, that's all right,' said Bunter. 'Not that I care,' he added, loftily. 'I'm not so funky of Quelch as some fellows I could name. Fat lot I care for Quelch!'

'You fat, fozzling, frabjous fathead—!' began Johnny Bull.

'Yah!' retorted Bunter. And he rolled on, leaving the Famous Five staring. They had had little doubt before: but now that the fat Owl had admitted it, there was no doubt whatever! Billy Bunter, quite happy to leave such prominent members of his form staring, rolled on, and rolled into Fisher T. Fish, who was coming out of the tuck-shop with his usual quick, jerky steps. Fishy was always in a hurry.

'Here, look where you're going, you locoed fat gink!' yapped Fisher T. Fish, as he staggered.

'Beast!' gasped Bunter.

'You fat clam—!'

'Yah! Who's a Shylock!' jeered Bunter.

Fisher T. Fish gave him a glare. He did not like that name applied to his business transactions among the fags. It had been a relief, even to Fishy's tough conscience, that Bunter had not, after all, been sent up to the Head, to answer for what he, Fishy, had done with his own bony hands. But that disagreeable epithet got his goat, as he would have expressed it in his native language, and made him feel like landing a bony fist on a fat little nose.

'You pesky, pie-faced, slab-sided mugwump!' said Fishy. 'You want me to make potato-scrappings of you?'

'Yah!' retorted Bunter. 'I'd up-end you as soon as look at you, like I did Quelch—'

Fisher T. Fish jumped almost clear of the ground. His narrow eyes fairly popped at Bunter.

'Like you did whatter?' he gasped.

'Like I did Quelch!'

'Oh, great John James Brown!' articulated Fisher T. Fish.

He gazed at Bunter.

No other fellow in the Remove was surprised to hear Bunter admitting, or rather boasting of that unprecedented exploit in Quelch's study. But Fisher T. Fish was very much surprised. He was, in fact, astounded. Everyone else might believe that Bunter had up-ended Quelch: but Fisher Tarleton Fish had the best of reasons to know that Bunter hadn't!

'You—you—you up-ended Quelch!' he stuttered.

'Didn't I just!'

'Aw! Carry me home to die!' breathed Fisher T. Fish.

'So yah!' added Bunter, elegantly: and he rolled into the tuck-shop, leaving Fisher T. Fish gazing after him like a fellow in a dream.

CHAPTER 15

WHO?

'BLOW!'

Billy Bunter uttered that ejaculation, in exasperated tones.

Herbert Vernon-Smith grinned.

It was the following day. Smithy was sitting on one of the benches under the old elms, with a box of chocolates on the bench beside him. But he seemed more interested in Bunter than in the chocs. In fact Bunter was, at the moment, rather entertaining to watch.

Not for the first time in his fat life, Billy Bunter had been disappointed about a postal-order. He was in the sad state known as 'stony'. Bunter was going through his pockets, one after another, in the faint, faint hope of discovering some coin of the realm that might possibly have been overlooked. Fat hands groped in sticky pocket after sticky pocket—but in vain!

During that day, Billy Bunter had been rather enjoying life. He had revelled in his new-found reputation as a devil-may-care fellow who did not give a bean for beaks! As a matter of actual fact, he hadn't up-ended Quelch. But everyone believed that he had, which, from Bunter's point of view, was just as good!

The glory of being celebrated, in his form, as a bold, bad up-ender of beaks, was very gratifying. But at the moment, Billy Bunter was thinking of something even more agreeable—food. He would have been glad to unearth, in some recess of a sticky pocket, a half-crown, or a shilling, or even a sixpence— or even a humble threepenny-bit.

No coin of the realm came to light. But something else did. It was a Yale latch-key. Whereupon Billy Bunter ejaculated 'Blow!' blinking at it in exasperation.

Sad to relate, Bunter had quite forgotten his pater's letter, and the injunctions therein.

Neither was he pleased to be reminded of them.

He was not interested in his pater's client, Mr. Pilkins.

He was not interested in the Begonias bungalow on the Pegg road. Least of all was he interested in walking a mile to that bungalow, and walking a mile back, on a half-holiday.

'Blow!' repeated Bunter, crossly.

No doubt, sooner or later, he would have to carry out his pater's instructions. But later seemed ever so much better than sooner, to a lazy fat Owl.

He jammed that key back into a sticky pocket.

Then he resumed his search. But every pocket was drawn blank. There was not a single coin of any description in a single sticky pocket: and the fat hands came out empty: only a little stickier and grubbier than before the search.

'Blow!' mumbled Bunter again, disconsolately.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter blinked round through his big spectacles, and gave the Bounder a frown. He had not noticed Smithy before: now he realized that Smithy had been watching the performance, so to speak.

Then, as he observed the box of chocolates on the bench his frown faded out. He rolled under the tree. '

'I say, Smithy, old chap—' he began, with one eye on Smithy, old chap, and the other on the chocolate-box. 'Squat down and have some,' said Smithy, unexpectedly

'What-ho!' gasped Bunter.

He was prompt to 'squat' down and have some! Herbert Vernon-Smith generally seemed to regard William George Bunter as something that the cat might have brought in. But for once he seemed quite amicable. His eyes were curiously on the fat face, as Bunter gobbled chocolates.

'Tell me all about it, Bunter,' he said, suddenly.

'Eh! About what?' asked Bunter, his fat voice coming a little muffled through a barrage of chocolates.

'Just what happened in Quelch's study, evening before last.'

'Oh! That! I just floored Quelch, you know! Tipped him up, and over he went! He, he, he!'

'Better not let Quelch hear you saying so.'

'I'll watch it!' grinned Bunter. 'I don't mind telling a pal like you, Smithy, now it's all over, and Quelch has let it drop. Keep it dark, you know. Not that I care a bean for Quelch!' added Bunter, loftily. 'Who's Quelch?'

He munched chocolates, the Bounder's eyes still curiously on his fat face. The Bounder had been doing some thinking that day.

Like the rest of the Remove, he had believed that Bunter was the man who had 'floored' Quelch. And, like the rest of the Remove again, he had wondered where on earth the fat Owl had found the nerve to do it. A reckless fellow himself, he would never have dreamed, in his wildest moments, of any such exploit. Yet Bunter had done it— or, had he?

Since Quelch had let the matter drop, Bunter had made no secret of it. Rather he had bound it unto himself as a crown of glory, as it were. Perhaps that had caused a doubt to come into Smithy's mind.

Really, there seemed no room for doubt. Nevertheless, Smithy wondered, and he was curious to know.

'But how exactly did it happen?' he asked.

'Oh! I just shoved him over, you know,' answered Bunter, airily.

'Did he collar you in the dark?'

'No— I mean, yes, of— of course. Exactly! That's why I tipped him over,' said Bunter, breezily.

'You wouldn't have had the nerve to tip him over, Smithy. He, he, he!'

'Hardly!' agreed the Bounder.

'Nothing to me!' said Bunter. 'I just did it! You should have heard him bump!' added Bunter, impressively. 'Fairly banged on the floor! Shook the study.'

'And he never saw a thing, in the dark?'

'No fear, or he wouldn't have thought—' Bunter checked himself suddenly.

'He wouldn't have thought what?'

'Oh! Nothing! I wasn't going to say he wouldn't have thought it was me! It was me, you know. Me all the time! Nobody else.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'You see, I've got the nerve for it,' said Bunter. 'Just tipped him over, as cool as you please. Down he went— wallop! Did he yell? He, he, he!'

'If he'd seen who it was— But it must have been as black as a hat in his study— He couldn't see who it was,' said Smithy.

'Not a thing,' said Bunter. 'He just grabbed him in the dark—I—I mean, he just grabbed me in the dark—and he— I mean I—I toppled him over. Down he went— bang!'

'He grabbed him—you mean you—in the dark, and he— you mean you— toppled him over!' repeated the Bounder, staring at the fat Owl.

'Eh ? Yes! That's how it was! Some fellows would have been scared,' said Bunter. 'Not me! I just up-ended the old bean, and walked away. Cool as you please. Fat lot I care for beaks!' Bunter blinked into an empty chocolate-box. 'Got any more chocs, Smithy?'
'No.'

Billy Bunter detached himself from the bench, and rolled away, to look for Lord Mauleverer, and a possible little loan to tide him over till his postal-order came. Vernon-Smith was left with a very thoughtful expression on his face. He had doubted whether Billy Bunter really was the hero of that remarkable exploit. Now he had no doubts on the subject.

'Oh, here you are, Smithy.' Tom Redwing joined his chum on the bench. The Bounder gave him a whimsical grin.

'Like to guess a riddle, Reddy?' he asked. 'What is it?'

'Who was it up-ended Quelch in his study on Monday evening?'

Redwing stared.

'Bunter,' he answered. 'We all know now that it was Bunter. He's been bragging of it ever since. It was Bunter.'

Vernon-Smith shook his head.

'Anybody but!' he said. 'That fat ass knows that it won't come out now: and he's cashing in on it. Brag's his long suit. But who the dickens was it, Reddy?'

'Must have been Bunter—'

'Anybody but, I tell you! Somebody did it, and Bunter doesn't know who it was, any more than we do,' said the Bounder, positively. 'I thought it was Bunter, like everybody else: but— I jolly well know now that it wasn't! But who else, Reddy?'

Redwing, in turn, shook his head.

'If it wasn't Bunter, I give that one up!' he said.

And the Bounder, too, had to give it up. But his opinion remained fixed that, whoever it was that had up-ended Quelch, it was not the fat and fatuous Owl, who laid claim to the exploit.

ONCE TOO OFTEN

'MAULY, old chap—'

Mr. Quelch frowned.

That fat voice was not music to his ears, as it floated round the massive trunk of the ancient elm under which he was sitting.

It was a fine, sunny afternoon. Quelch, as he often did in fine weather, had taken a pile of Form papers out into the quad, to peruse and correct the same in the open air, under the shade of a tree. He had chosen a somewhat secluded spot: and had been proceeding sedately with his work for some time when sauntering footsteps on the other side of the tree came to his ears. Those footsteps stopped, the saunterer apparently leaning on the trunk, doubtless unaware that only that massive trunk separated him from a form-master busy with papers. So far, Quelch gave no heed. But he gave heed when, a few minutes later, more footsteps accrued: and a fat voice became audible round the elm. Then, as already recorded, he frowned.

Of late, Quelch had had a very grim eye on the fattest member of his form.

Billy Bunter had never ranked high in his esteem.

Bunter was, in fact, the kind of pupil to make a school-master wonder whether a teacher's career was, after all, a mistake. But of late Billy Bunter had, so to speak, out-Buntered himself. Only a few days ago he had had a detention for stuffing toffee in class. That had been followed by the episode of the cake, which had been confiscated for his own good, and which he had had the temerity to recapture and devour. But that was not all. That was far from all. Was it Bunter who had tipped Quelch over on the floor of his own study in the dark?

Quelch could have little or no doubt that it was. A remote possibility of doubt, and a strict sense of justice, had compelled him to leave the affair in abeyance. Nothing had since come to light. Whoever the culprit was, he was getting away with it—no doubt laughing in his sleeve! Quelch had to be just. Having given Bunter the benefit of the doubt, he had to leave it at that, unless new evidence transpired. But he was not likely to forget: and often, very often, there was a glint in the gimlet-eyes when they fell on Bunter.

Now, as the fat voice floated round the elm, he was inclined to rise from his seat, step round the tree, and order Bunter off. He had work to do, and did not want chattering in his ears. But he checked that impulse. Remove fellows had a right to walk and talk in the quad: and if Lord Mauleverer chose to lean on one of the ancient elms, Billy Bunter was within his rights in rolling up and addressing him. So Quelch, though he frowned, made no move. Controlling his impatience, he carried on with the Form papers.

'I say, Mauly, I've been looking for you,' the fat voice ran on. 'What are you sticking here for?'

'Because you were looking for me, old fat man.'

'Oh, really, Mauly—'

'Now go and look for somebody else, like a good porpoise,' said Lord Mauleverer.

'He, he, he!' Bunter, apparently, decided to take that suggestion as a joke.

'He, he, he! I say, Mauly, I've been disappointed about a postal-order. I believe I told you I was expecting a postal-order—'

'I believe you did.'

'Well, it hasn't come. Look here, you lend me five bob till my postal-order comes, and I'll lend you a hand with your lines for Quelch. Is it a go?'

On the other side of the elm Mr. Quelch's frown intensified. Probably he was not wholly unaware that Remove fellows sometimes helped one another out with impots. But it was not a practice of which any school-master could approve. Again he was tempted to rise and step round the elm.

But he could not take official note of words spoken unconsciously in his hearing. Quelch was very particular on such points. He frowned portentously: but he went on with Form papers. 'Thanks, old fat bean,' came Lord Mauleverer's drawl. 'I don't fancy Quelch would take your fist for mine. I don't want Quelch on my track.'

'Pooh! Who cares for Quelch?'

The gimlet-eyes glittered, as the Remove master heard that!

'I do, Bunter— and so do you!' came Lord Mauleverer's answer. 'Don't be a bigger ass than you can help, old fat man.'

'Pooh! Fat lot I care for Quelch!' said Bunter, disdainfully. 'I'd up-end him again, as soon as look at him!' Quelch jumped.

'Look here, Bunter,' came Mauleverer's voice again. 'Have a little sense. If you go on bragging about that, it will come out, sooner or later, and then you'll be for it.'

'Rot!' said Bunter. 'Quelch can't do a thing now he's let it drop. Not that I care! I'm not funky of beaks, like some fellows. I don't give a bean for Quelch.'

'Chuck it, you fat chump.'

'Not a bean!' said Bunter. 'Smithy swanks about his nerve, but I'll bet he wouldn't have floored Quelch like I did. You should have heard him bump, Mauly! Bang he went! He, he, he!'

Mr. Quelch rose to his feet. Of careless words spoken in his hearing he would have taken no official heed. But this was far too serious a matter to be passed unheeded. There was no doubt on the subject now— if ever there had been any doubt. Bunter had not only 'floored' him in his study that evening in the dark: but evidently he was boasting about it among his form-fellows! The expression on Quelch's face, as he rose, was like unto that of the fabled Gorgon. It was petrifying.

Billy Bunter, happily unaware of an impending earthquake, burred on:

'Did he yell? He, he, he! You should have heard him, Mauly! Down he went— wallop! He, he, he! But I say, old chap, if you'd lend me—'

Bunter broke off suddenly.

He was interrupted.

'BUNTER!'

It was an awful voice!

A mortar-board appeared round the massive trunk of the old elm. Beneath it was a face that might have been that of Rhadamanthus, at his most Rhadamanthine.

Billy Bunter blinked at it.

He stood transfixed with horror.

It was Quelch! Really, Billy Bunter would have preferred Rhadamanthus in person! But it was Quelch—and Quelch had heard him!

'Oh, gad!' murmured Lord Mauleverer, in dismay. No more than Billy Bunter, had he any idea that his form-master was in the offing.

'BUNTER!'

'Oh! Oh, crikey!' moaned Bunter.

He goggled at Quelch. His fat knees knocked together.

His startled eyes almost bulged through his spectacles.

'I heard what you have said to Mauleverer, Bunter.' Quelch's voice came like the grinding of a saw. 'It appears, Bunter, that not only were you guilty of the outrageous, the unprecedented act in my study, but that you have made it a matter of boasting in your form!'

'I—I—I—!' stuttered Bunter.

'Now that the facts are known, beyond doubt, you will be dealt with, Bunter—'

'I—I—I didn't—I—I—I wasn't—I—I—I never—' babbled Bunter. 'I—I—I—I mean to say— oh crikey!'

'I shall take you to your head-master—'

'I—I—I—I—!'

'Follow me, Bunter.'

'Oh, jiminy!'

Mr. Quelch, with Form papers crumpled in his hand, walked— or rather stalked— away towards the House. Billy Bunter did not immediately follow. He seemed rooted to the ground, blinking after Mr. Quelch, overwhelmed with dismay. Mauly gave him a compassionate look.

'Better go, old chap!' he murmured.

'Oh, lor!'

Bunter still stood rooted. His fat head fairly swam.

He had boasted of that exploit up and down the Remove. He had enjoyed, with fatuous self-satisfaction, the distinction of being a bold, bad up-ender of beaks! He had strutted in borrowed plumes: he had been looked at, pointed out, wondered at: in fact he had felt, like Quintus Horatius Flaccus of old, like to strike the stars with his exalted head. But now—! Innumerable times had the fat Owl boasted of that deed of derring-do! Now he had boasted once too often— and Quelch had heard him!

Rooted to the earth, he stood blinking after Quelch, as if his fat little legs refused to move.

The Remove master turned his head. The gimlet-eyes gleamed at the petrified Owl.

'Bunter! Follow me at once.'

Billy Bunter got into motion. Quelch swept on: and the fat Owl rolled dismally after him. Many eyes in the quad turned on them, as they went to the House: Quelch stalking ahead with thunder in his brow, Billy Bunter rolling in his wake, looking as if all the woes of the universe had landed in one overwhelming heap on his fat shoulders.

CHAPTER 17

SENTENCED

DR. LOCKE sat at his writing-table in his study, his eyes fixed upon a dismal, dolorous fat face. He was, as a rule, the most kindly of head-masters. But he did not look kindly now. His brows were knitted. His look was grim. It was almost as grim as that of the Remove master who stood by the table: calm, but with a deadly calmness.

Billy Bunter blinked from one to the other, and from the other to the one, with a hopeless blink.

He was for it!

He had to realize that. He had been given the benefit of the doubt: but there was no longer a doubt of which he could hope to receive the benefit. Out of his own mouth he was condemned. Never had a boaster so deeply and sincerely repented of his boasting—now that it had, so to speak, come home to roost! He almost crumpled under the Head's stern gaze. His fat little legs sagged under him.

Dr. Locke had listened quietly to what Mr. Quelch had to tell him. His brows had knitted more and more as he listened. Once or twice Bunter had essayed a squeak: but a stern gesture from the Head had silenced him. Mr. Quelch, with a calmness that was quite intense, had placed the facts before the head-master. It was now for Dr. Locke to deliver judgment.

Obviously, such an act could not be dismissed with a mere caning. Six of the very best would not have met the case. A flogging at least was indicated. It might even be the 'sack'. Of the two, Billy Bunter would probably have preferred the latter. The mere thought of the Head's birch made every ounce of his fat cringe.

And he hadn't, after all, done it! He had said that he had—he had boasted that he had: but—he hadn't! But there was no hope now that anyone would believe that he hadn't. He was, as it were, bound hand and foot in the meshes of his own fibbings. He might have reflected, like Lord Marmion, 'O what a tangled web we weave, when first we practise to deceive!' But it was too late for such reflections to help. He was for it now!

Floggings were rare—very rare indeed—at Greyfriars.

Once upon a time, in the 'good' old days, they had been 'frequent and painful and free'. The grandfathers of the present Greyfriars generation had had to take them in their stride. But times had changed. Manners and customs had ameliorated. The birch was there: but seldom if ever was it called upon for exercise. Only in a very, very extreme case, as an alternative to expulsion, was the Head likely to wield that dreaded implement.

But this was a very extreme case. Up-ending a beak was as extreme as anything could be.

There was no hope for the hapless Owl.

'Bunter!' The Head spoke at last, and his voice was very deep. 'Bunter! You have heard what your form-master has said.'

'Oh, lor!'

'It appears that you not only had the temerity, the audacity, the unheard-of effrontery, to lay hands upon a member of my Staff—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'—but that you have actually made this unprecedented act a matter of boasting among your form-fellows—'

'I—I—I—'

'I need hardly tell you, Bunter, that such an act merits the most severe punishment—'

'Ooooooh!'

'A senior boy would be immediately expelled for such an act. In the case of a junior boy, a flogging may perhaps be adequate—'

'Wow!'

'If Mr. Quelch desired it, Bunter, I should certainly expel you. But your form-master takes a more lenient view.'

Billy Bunter blinked at his form-master. Quelch did not look very lenient! Still, he certainly was sparing the fat Owl the last and most extreme penalty. A flogging was painful, no doubt: but it was nothing like so bad as the 'long jump'. A fellow could get over a flogging. He couldn't get over the 'sack'. Bunter ought really to have felt relieved. But he didn't! The prospect of the Head's birch was too horrifying.

'For this,' continued the Head, 'I trust, Bunter, that you will feel duly grateful to your form-master.'

If Bunter felt grateful, he did not look it.

'Your punishment will be administered, Bunter, in hall, after third school to-morrow!' added Dr. Locke. 'You may now leave my study.'

'I—I—I say, sir—!' gasped Bunter.

'I have said that you may leave my study, Bunter.'

'Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! But—but—but—' babbled the fat Owl, 'I—I—I never did it, sir—'

'What?'

'I—I didn't never— I mean, I never didn't—I—I—it wasn't me, sir—it was somebody else—I—I never did it!' wailed the unhappy Owl. 'I—I—I don't know anything about it, sir. Oh, lor!'

'Upon my word!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch. He was accustomed to reckless untruths from Bunter. But this seemed to him quite the limit.



'YOUR PUNISHMENT WILL BE ADMINISTERED'

Dr. Locke gazed at the stammering fat Owl. Then he glanced at the Remove master.

'There is no doubt in the matter, Mr. Quelch?' Quelch compressed his lips.

'Dr. Locke! Because there might possibly have been a shadow of doubt, I allowed the matter to remain in abeyance. Then I learned that Bunter not only admitted the act, but boasted of it— boasted of it, sir, as an exploit of which he was proud. I heard him uttering these boasts,

sir, with my own ears! With my own ears, sir!' repeated Mr. Quelch: as if to make it absolutely clear that he hadn't heard it with some other person's ears.

'Then nothing more remains to be said! Bunter—'

'But I never—'

'Leave my study—'

'Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir! But— but I never didn't wasn't—'

'Go!'

'I—I—I wasn't in the study at all, sir—I—I never went there that evening, sir— and— and I only went for the cake—'

'I have told you to go, Bunter.'

'Oh, yes, sir, but as I never did it, sir—'

'Mr. Quelch, will you kindly take this boy of your form away from my study!' said Dr. Locke.

An iron hand dropped on a fat shoulder.

'Come!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

Bunter wriggled in that iron grip. It hooked him towards the door. He squeaked frantically as he was hooked.

'I never—I didn't—I wasn't! I ain't going to be flogged! Oh, crikey! Leggo! Yaroooh!'

Mr. Quelch opened the door with one hand, and propelled Bunter outside with the other. In the corridor, he released the fat Owl.

'Now go!' he rapped.

'But I—I—I— never--—'

'You are to be flogged to-morrow, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice, 'and I am therefore reluctant to cane you to-day. But if you utter another untruth, I shall cane you severely. Now go.'

Billy Bunter gave him one last hopeless blink— and went. He rolled out into the quad a picture of woe. Never had he looked, or felt, so limp. Only half-an-hour ago, full of beans, he had been boasting of that exploit in Quelch's study: but there were no beans left in him now. Gladly he would have shaken off his borrowed plumes. It was a dismal, dolorous, disconsolate, despondent, deflated Owl. Bold, bad Bunter, the reckless up-ender of beaks, had fallen from his high estate, and great was the fall thereof.

WOEFUL BUNTER

'I SAY, you fellows!'

It was a pathetic squeak.

Harry Wharton, about to say 'Cut!' checked that word on his lips. Frank Nugent, about to say 'Hook it!' also refrained. Bob Cherry and Hurree Singh, on the verge of saying 'Buzz off, Bunter!' simultaneously, remained silent. Johnny Bull gave a faint grunt, and left it at that. The Famous Five had gathered for tea in No. 1 Study.

Over tea they were talking football. The arrival of a fat figure in the study doorway afforded them no satisfaction whatever.

Billy Bunter was, as usual, superfluous. But Bunter was down on his luck—awfully down on his luck. That made a difference. So instead of telling Bunter variously to cut, hook it, or buzz off, they checked their natural impulse so to do.

They had heard the news. Most of the Remove had heard that what had been known to all the form for a couple of days was now known to authority, and that Bunter had had to go up to the Head. Even a hard-hearted fellow might have sympathized with anyone who had to go up to the Head: and the Famous Five certainly were not hard-hearted. They were really sorry for a fat and fatuous Owl who had landed himself in so awful a scrape.

Bunter rolled in, not a voice saying him nay.

There was a cake on the table, which Nugent had just divided into five equal portions. Bunter did not even blink at it. Evidently, Bunter was not his accustomed self.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo. old fat man!' said Bob, instead of 'Buzz off!'

'I—I say, you fellows—'

'Seen the Head?' asked Harry.

'Yes!' moaned Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, he says that I'm going to be flogged. Think—think—think he means it?' Apparently Bunter nourished a hopeful doubt on that subject. He blinked anxiously at the chums of the Remove. But really, they could give him no encouragement.

'Of course he does, fathead!' said Johnny Bull, 'and you're jolly well getting off cheap. If you were a senior man, they'd sack you for what you did.'

'But I didn't—I never—'

'That's no good now, Bunter,' said Bob. 'Better chuck that.'

'I tell you I never—'

'Have a little sense, Bunter,' said Nugent. 'You've been bragging about it up and down the form for a couple of days. Now it's got to Quelch. No good spinning fibs now.'

'But I never touched Quelch!' wailed Bunter. 'I never tipped him over. I wasn't there when he was tipped. I was up in my study.'

The Famous Five gazed at him.

Evidently Bunter was no longer desirous of 'cashing in', as Smithy had expressed it, on that exploit. He was now only anxious for that glory and distinction to be transferred elsewhere. But it was much too late for that.

'I say, you fellows, don't you believe me?' mumbled Bunter.

'Believe you!' said Bob. 'Oh, my hat! Why, you fat Ananias, I've heard you bragging a dozen times about up-ending Quelch.'

'The bragfulness has been terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'If you hadn't, it might never have come out,' said Johnny Bull. 'But it was bound to get to the beaks sooner or later. Now it's come out, you've got to face it.'

'But I never did—I never—'

'You've said you did, dozens of times,' said Harry Wharton. 'There isn't a man in the Remove you haven't told you did.'

'Oh! Yes! But—'

'But what, then?'

'That was only a—a—a—a joke!' moaned Bunter. 'I—I—I may have said I—I did, but I—I—I didn't, see?'

'Better tell the Head that!' said the captain of the Remove, drily.

'He won't listen to a chap!' wailed Bunter. 'Quelch won't listen, either. They've made up their minds that I did it. They won't believe a word I say. That's the sort of justice we get here.'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Quelch thinks I did, just because he heard me say I did. Now he won't believe me when I say I didn't! But I didn't! I don't know who up-ended Quelch, and if it was one of you fellows—!'

'What?' yelled five fellows together.

'Well, if it was one of you fellows, it's up to you!' said Bunter. 'Smithy owned up about dousing the glim in the study, and if it was one of you fellows that up-ended Quelch, it's up to you now—'

'It was you!' roared Johnny Bull.

'Beast!'

'For goodness sake, Bunter, chuck up fibbing,' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'Can't you see it isn't any use, now?'

'Well, it was somebody—!' said Bunter.

'Yes, and we all know who that somebody was,' said Bob.

'It wasn't me—'

'Bow-wow!'

'I ain't going to be flogged!' howled Bunter. 'I'd rather be sacked, if it comes to that. I'd rather go home. I ain't going to be flogged.'

'Brace up, old fat man! It will wear off!' said Bob. 'What the dickens did you expect, when it came out that you had up-ended a beak?'

'But I never—'

'Pack it up!'

'I tell you I never—'

'Can it!'

'Beasts!' howled Bunter. And he rolled out of No. 1, having found no comfort in that study. Harry Wharton rubbed his nose thoughtfully, after the fat Owl was gone.

'I suppose there couldn't be any doubt that Bunter did it!' he said.

'After he's bragged all over the shop that he did?' asked Nugent.

'Well, no, I suppose not!'

And Bunter and his woes were dismissed, and football resumed, as a topic, in No. 1 Study.

Billy Bunter could not dismiss his woes, however. The fact that he was to undergo a flogging on the morrow loomed larger in Bunter's fat mind than anything else that might be going on in the universe. On the morrow there was to be a very unaccustomed scene in Hall: the whole school gathered to witness a flogging: every form in its ranks, masters and prefects present: the Head with his birch: and Billy Bunter playing the principal role: Bunter the centre of attention, the cynosure of all eyes. If Bunter liked the limelight, he was going to get it, in

ample measure. Bunter did like the limelight: but not in the form indicated. Gladly he would have resigned the principal role in that performance to some other fellow. And really and truly, it was some other fellow's due: for in point of fact Bunter hadn't up-ended Quelch! But who was going to believe that, after he had as good as proclaimed from the house-tops that he had?

'Oh, lor!'

mumbled Bunter, in the passage. 'Oh, crikey! I jolly well ain't going to be flogged — I know that! But—but—but— Oh, lor!'

'Say, bo, what's the verdict?'

It was Fisher T. Fish. Fishy, like everyone else, had heard, and perhaps he was not feeling wholly at his ease. Billy Bunter gave him a dolorous blink.

'The Head says I'm going to be flogged,' he mumbled. 'They—they won't believe I never did it, just because Quelch heard me say I did.'

'You sure did open your big mouth too wide,' said Fisher T. Fish.

'But it wasn't me at all,' wailed Bunter. 'It's pretty mean of the fellow who did it not to own up, now I'm nailed for it.'

'Why should he?' said Fisher T. Fish, perhaps as much to his conscience as to Bunter. 'You wouldn't be nailed, if you'd kept your big mouth shut. If you'd cut off the gas, you'd be okay. I guess that guy ain't asking for trouble, jest because you had to blow off your mouth.'

'Beast!'

Fisher T. Fish shrugged his lean shoulders and jerked away. Fisher T. Fish guessed and reckoned that Bunter had asked for this, in fact sat up and begged for it, and that it was his own funeral. Certainly Fishy was not disposed to take his place as principal boy in the next day's entertainment just because that fat clam couldn't keep his big mouth shut!

Herbert Vernon-Smith came up the passage. He was on his way to join Redwing at tea in No. 4. But he paused, giving the dismal and dolorous fat Owl a very curious look. Smithy had settled it, in his own mind, that Bunter was not the wanted man: but whether he was or not, he was booked now to pay scot and lot for the unknown up-ender.

'Sacked?' he asked.

'Worse than that!' groaned Bunter.

'Worse?' asked Smithy, staring.

'The Head says it's a flogging—'

'You fat chump!'

'Beast!'

'Better than the long jump, fathead.'

'I ain't going to be flogged, when I never did it!' wailed Bunter.

The Bounder laughed.

'An hour ago, in the quad, you were bragging to me that you did,' he said. 'But I didn't believe you then, so I believe you now.'

'Oh!' Bunter blinked at him in surprise. Smithy was the first, and only, fellow to express doubt on the subject. 'You don't believe I did it, Smithy?'

'Not at all! Keep your pecker up,' added the Bounder, with unwonted kindness, a little moved by the fat Owl's woe. 'It may come out yet who did it, before the Old Boy gets busy with the birch. I don't believe you're the man, if that's any comfort to you.'

'Oh!' said Bunter, again. He gave the Bounder a suspicious blink. 'Look here, Smithy, if it was you—'

'Eh?'

'Well, how do you know it wasn't me, if you come to that?' argued Bunter. 'You jolly well couldn't know it wasn't me, unless it was you.'

'Why, you fat villain—!' howled Smithy, his kindly sympathy vanishing on the spot. 'You— you—'

'You can call a fellow names,' said Bunter. 'But I can tell you, it's pretty mean to land it on me, when it was you all the time: and you jolly well ought to go to Quelch and say— Yaroooh! Beast! Leave off banging my head! Wharrer you banging a fellow's head for? Yaroooh!' Twice a fat head banged on the passage wall, before the fat Owl escaped. Smithy, absolutely unsympathetic now, went into No. 4 and slammed the door. Billy Bunter was left rubbing a fat head, for some minutes forgetful even of the awful fate that impended over him on the morrow.

NOTHING DOING!

'GOSLING!'

'Yessir.'

'The Head wants you in his study.'

Grunt.

'If he's not there, you're to wait.'

Grunt.

William Gosling, the ancient porter of Greyfriars School, detached his ancient limbs from the armchair in his lodge, reluctantly. Why the Head wanted him in his study, at a time when the Head was usually at dinner in his house, Gosling couldn't guess. Taking a little repose in that armchair, smoking his evening pipe, with a glass of something warm to keep it company, Gosling did not want to stir. But a message from the Head was a matter that could not be disregarded or delayed. Neither could it occur to Gosling that the Remove junior who brought the message was pulling his ancient leg. He grunted, twice, and thrice, but he got into motion: and it was a relief to Billy Bunter to see him disappear on his way.

Bunter rolled into Gosling's lodge.

There was a telephone in the lodge. Bunter was in need of a telephone. A fellow who had an urgent need to phone home could, in normal circumstances, obtain leave from a master to use the instrument. But the present circumstances were far from normal. Obviously Bunter couldn't risk letting a beak learn that he was phoning home as a last desperate resource to dodge a flogging on the morrow.

SO, at the cost of a fib— a trifling cost to Billy Bunter— he had extracted Gosling from his lodge. As the Head was at dinner, Gosling would have to wait in his study: and he could wait till he was tired of waiting so far as Bunter was concerned. So long as he remained absent long enough for Bunter's phone call, it was all right.

The fat Owl lost no time in ringing up Bunter Villa, Surrey. Probably an additional trunk call on the telephone bill might, at a later date, puzzle and perhaps irritate somebody. But that somebody would not be Bunter: so that again was all right.

That did not matter. What mattered was that his respected pater, Mr. William Samuel Bunter, would now be home from the City: and that Gosling's telephone was, for ten minutes at least, at Bunter's disposal.

'Hallo!' A plump voice came through. 'Is that you, father?' squeaked Bunter.

'Eh! what? what? Is that William?'

'Yes: Billy speaking from school. I say—'

'Upon my word! Why have you incurred the expense of a trunk call, William? I have spoken to you, many times, on the subject of your unthinking extravagance. The cost of a trunk call—'

'It's awfully important, father. You see—'

'I see no reason whatever why you should have incurred such an expense, William. Especially as you wrote to me, only the other day, that you were in need of money—'

'Yes, yes, but—!'

'However, as it happens, I was about to write to you, William. I should certainly not have incurred the expense of a trunk call to your school: but as you have incurred that expense—'

'I—I was going to say—'

'Please do not interrupt me, William. I will now give you my instructions instead of writing to you.'

'But—I—I—I say---!' gasped Bunter.

'Please listen, William. You have, of course, carried out the instructions in my letter regarding the Begonias bungalow on the Pegg road?'

'Oh! Ah! Yes! No! I—I mean—'

'My client, Mr. Pilkins, is very particular about the airing of the bungalow, as he has decided to come down next week—'

'Oh! Yes! No! Never mind Mr. Pilkins now—'

'What? what? Did you say never mind Mr. Pilkins, William? Mr. Pilkins is one of my valued clients. What do you mean, William?'

'I—I—I mean—'

'Do not waste time, William, unless you desire to incur the additional expense of a second call, for which I shall certainly not pay.'

'But— but I—I say—'

'I have told you, William, that Mr. Pilkins plans to visit his seaside bungalow next week. Certain preparations have to be made—'

Billy Bunter breathed hard, and he breathed deep, through his fat little nose. He had forgotten again all about Mr. Pilkins and his bungalow. With such a sword of Damocles suspended over his fat head, he was not likely to remember Pilkineses or bungalows. Neither did he want to hear about them now. He couldn't have cared less about Pilkins and his bungalow. He hadn't rung up Bunter Villa to talk about Pilkineses and bungalows. He was anxious to get to what really mattered. But the plump voice from Bunter Villa plumped on:

'Mr. Pilkins has sent an order to Chunkley's Stores, at Courtfield, for goods, chiefly edible I believe, to be delivered at the Begonias to-morrow—'

'Oh! Yes! But—'

'As the place is unoccupied, it will be necessary for someone to be there to take delivery of the goods—'

'Yes, yes, yes! But—'

'If you will refrain from interrupting me, William, it will save time, and further expense. Arrangements have been made for the delivery to take place to-morrow afternoon, and it will be necessary for you to go over to the bungalow immediately after class, and wait there for Chunkley's van—'

'Oh! All right! But—'

'You will take delivery of the goods, and pack everything away neatly and tidily. Any perishable goods are to be placed in the refrigerator. You will find the current is on. Do not leave anything in an untidy or slovenly state, William. It would displease Mr. Pilkins.'

'Blow Mr. Pilkins!' hissed Bunter.

'What? what? what did you say, William?'

'I—I—I mean—I—I—'

'Do you, or do you not, understand my instructions clearly, William?'

'Oh! Yes! But I rung you up to say—'

Pip-pip-pip! came over the wires.

'That is all, William—'

'But I say—!' yelled Bunter.

'If you hold on, William, a second call will be charged—'

'I don't care! I say, do listen to a chap!' wailed Bunter. 'I say, can I come home to-morrow?'

'WHAT?'

At that unexpected request, Mr. Bunter seemed to forget even his valued client, Mr. Pilkins, and the bungalow. His plump voice came in a gasp.

'I say, I'm in an awful row!' groaned Bunter into the transmitter. 'The—the Head says I'm to be flogged to-morrow—'

'Upon my word! What have you done, William?'

'Nothing!'

'Do not be absurd, William. If you have transgressed to such an extent that your head-master deems a flogging essential—'

'But I—I—I haven't!' wailed Bunter. 'Somebody floored Quelch in his study in the dark, the other day, and he thinks I did it because he heard me saying I did—'

'Wha-a-a-t?'

'It wasn't me at all. I—I never went to his study that evening, and I was gone, too, before Quelch came back— but—but they think it was me, and—and—and it's a flogging in hall to-morrow, and—and I'd rather come home, and—and—and—'

'William!' The plump voice was deep. 'I have every confidence in the judgment and the justice of your form-master and your head-master. Do you think, for one moment, that I could countenance you in disregarding their authority? Are you in your senses, William?'

'I—I—I ain't going to be flogged!' wailed Bunter. 'I—I—I say, I—I—I'd rather come home. I—I—I'm coming home to-morrow—'

'If you should take such a step, William, you will be immediately sent back to your school, to take your just punishment, and any additional punishment that your headmaster may consider necessary.'

'Oh, crikey!'

Bunter blinked hopelessly at the telephone. Evidently home, sweet home was not going to be a resource in that dire extremity. There was nothing doing!

'Do not talk nonsense, William. If you have incurred punishment, take it with manliness. Bear it with fortitude. Let it be a lesson to you, and it will be for your ultimate advantage. Now, if you have clearly understood my instructions with regard to Mr. Pilkins' bungalow—'

Slam! The receiver went back on the hooks with quite a jolt. Billy Bunter did not want to hear any more about Mr. Pilkins and his bungalow. If Mr. Bunter gave any more instructions from Bunter Villa, Surrey, they were wasted on the desert air.

'Oh, lor'!' moaned Bunter.

He rolled dismally out of Gosling's lodge: just in time to meet Gosling as he came back. The Greyfriars porter gave him a deadly glare.

'You young limb!' said Gosling. The 'Ead never sent for me and me kicking me 'eels waiting for him, you young limb. Wot I says it this 'ere—'

But Billy Bunter was not interested in what Gosling had to say. He rolled away: his fat brain concentrated on the one problem that was of real importance: how was he going to dodge that flogging?

HOPELESS DAWN

CLANG! clang!

The rising-bell was ringing in the fresh morning.

Bob Cherry, as usual, was the first out of bed in the Remove dormitory, with a bound, and a scattering of blankets. Other fellows followed: and by the time the bell had ceased to clang, all were up: with one exception. Billy Bunter's snore had not been interrupted by the clang of the rising-bell.

Bob stepped to the bed from which that resonant snore echoed, to awaken the fat Owl by jerking off the bedclothes. But he paused, as he remembered what was due to Billy Bunter that day after third school. Instead of depriving Bunter of his blankets at one fell swoop, he shook him gently by a fat shoulder.

'Wake up, old fat man!' said Bob. Snore!

Shake! shake! shake!

Billy Bunter's eyes opened. They blinked in the gleam of early sunlight at the high windows.

'Mmmmmmm!' mumbled Bunter. 'Beast! Leggo! Tain't rising-bell.'

'It's stopped,' said Bob. 'Turn out, old boy: 'Shan't!'

Billy Bunter never, if he could help it, turned out till the latest possible moment. Even a few extra minutes in bed were so much to the good, from the point of view of a lazy fat Owl.

But he, too, suddenly remembered! It was the dawn of a day disastrous in the history of Greyfriars School: the day on which Bunter was to play the principal part in the ceremony in hall. That remembrance effectually awakened him. Like Macbeth, it murdered sleep!

'Oh, crikey!' said Bunter. 'I—I—I say, you fellows— oh, lor!'

He rolled dismally out of bed.

'Brace up, old chap!' said Bob, kindly.

Bunter gave him a lack-lustre blink. He did not look like bracing up.

'Poor old Bunter!' murmured Nugent.

'Sorry, old fellow,' said Harry Wharton.

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

'Well, what the dickens did he expect?' said Johnny Bull. 'Sorry all the same, old fat man,' he added.

'I—I—I say, you fellows, it wasn't me!' wailed Bunter. 'I say, I think Smithy ought to own up—'

'You potty porpoise,' yelled the Bounder. 'I don't know anything about it.'

'You jolly well said you knew it wasn't me--'

'Did you, Smithy?' asked Bob Cherry, staring at the Bounder. 'We all know that it was Bunter''

'And very likely it was, too!' growled Smithy. 'Still, I don't believe that it was Bunter. They've got the wrong pig by the ear.'

'But he said it was!' exclaimed Harry Wharton. 'He's told everybody, and everybody else, that it was—'

'Gas!' said Smithy. 'Bet you it was some other fellow' Fisher T. Fish's narrow eyes turned on the Bounder, with a startled look. But he did not speak. Fishy's cue, in the circumstances, was to follow the example of that sage animal, Brer Fox: to lie low and say nuffin'.

'Rot!' said Bob. 'We all know—'

'The knowfulness is terrific.'

'I say, you fellows, if it wasn't Smithy, I don't know who it was, but it wasn't me!' wailed Bunter.

'But you said it was, and Quelch heard you!' roared Johnny Bull.

'Oh! Yes! No! That—that was only—only a—a—a figure of speech!' gasped Bunter. 'What I—I really meant was, that—that it wasn't me—'

'Oh, my hat!'

'I say, you fellows, I ain't going to be flogged! I say, what's a fellow to do?'

'There's only one thing you can do,' said Skinner.

'What's that?' asked Bunter, eagerly.

'Bend over.'

'Beast!'

It was a dismal Owl that drifted down from the dormitory. At breakfast the unhappy Owl ate hardly more than enough for two or three other fellows: his woes had affected his appetite. When the Remove gathered at their form-room door, Bunter's fat face, generally as broad as it was long, looked longer than it was broad. When Quelch arrived, Bunter gave him a blink that might have moved a heart of stone. He did not seem to move Quelch's, however: his glance at Bunter was as grim as that of the fabled Gorgon.

Billy Bunter fell, rather than sat, into his place. It was a bright and sunny morning, but no trace of its brightness was reflected in the fattest face in the form-room. To Bunter, it was a hopeless dawn!

He had the sympathy of most of the form, for what that was worth. Even the Bounder, not usually given to wasting a thought on lame ducks, compassionated him: though his compassion was largely mingled with contempt. Smithy had had some severe punishment, in his time, and had deserved it: but he could 'take' it, and nothing would have induced him to pull a long face about it. But the unfortunate Owl was not made of such stern stuff. Bunter was the fellow to ask for it: but not the fellow to 'take' it when it came.

'Bunter!' rapped Mr. Quelch. 'Oh, lor!'

'After third school to-day, you will go to my study.'

'Oh, crikey!'

'You will wait there till I come for you, Bunter.'

'I—I—I say, sir—'

'That is all, Bunter.'

'But I say, sir—'

'Silence!'

Billy Bunter had an easy time in form that morning.

Quelch, grim as he was, could be considerate. He passed Bunter over very lightly. No doubt he realized that the fat Owl had enough on his mind, and was in no state to deal with pluperfect tenses and imperfect subjunctives.

In fact, Quelch's voice that morning was a mere distant drone in Bunter's fat ears. His chief attention was given to the form-room clock. Often and often had the little round eyes and the big round spectacles travelled to that clock during class, and always had it seemed to Bunter that the hands crawled. Now, however, they seemed to race. Every minute that ticked away brought him nearer and nearer to the dreaded hour.

In break that morning, Lord Mauleverer sought out Bunter and led him to the tuck-shop. Almost everybody was sympathetic: but Mauly's sympathy took a practical turn: a turn that Bunter, even in his present state of woe, could appreciate. The Head's birch loomed nearer

and nearer: nevertheless, there was comfort in stuffing jam-tarts and doughnuts, and washing them down with ginger-pop.

But in third school, Bunter's fat face was more lugubrious than ever. That school was the final interval between him and what was coming to him. After that school, Greyfriars was to gather in hall: and Bunter was to wait in his form-master's study till Quelch came to lead him to execution. The hands of the form-room clock did not seem merely to race now— they seemed supersonic! They tore round the clock-or at least so it seemed to Billy Bunter. Never before had Bunter dreamed that he would ever wish a lesson with Quelch to last longer! Now he would have been glad of even maths, to keep him in the form-room. But the ruthless minutes ticked and ticked away: dismissal, for once unwelcome to Bunter, came.

A woebegone fat Owl rolled out of the form-room with the Remove. In the quad, Bob Cherry gave him a gentle tap on the shoulder.

'Better go in, old chap!' said Bob. 'Quelch told you to go to his study, you know.'

'I ain't going to be flogged.'

A bell began to ring. It was the signal for hall. While other fellows headed for hall, Bunter was due to head for Quelch's study. But he did not. It was as if fat little legs refused to carry him in that dreaded direction. The awful hour was at hand! There was nothing that Bunter could do, except, as Skinner had said, bend over— under the birch!

But was there not?

Billy Bunter stirred suddenly. He moved. But he did not move in the direction of Quelch's study. He moved in the direction of the gates, which stood open after class. Gosling, at his lodge, stared at him. He did not heed Gosling. One idea was fixed in Billy Bunter's fat mind— he wasn't going to be flogged! Whatever happened, whatever resulted, though the stars in their courses fought against him as against Sisera of old, he wasn't going to take that flogging! And with that fixed idea firmly rooted in his fat head, William George Bunter rolled out of gates— out of bounds —and disappeared into space.

CHAPTER 21

A WASH-OUT

HALL was crowded.

All was prepared.

Every form was there, every man in every form ranked in his place. Sixth-Form prefects, with canes under their arms, had sharp eyes on juniors: and rapped out 'Silence!' or 'Less noise there!' when murmuring voices were audible. The whole Staff was present, excepting so far Mr. Quelch and the head-master— Prout, ponderous and solemn: Hacker, sour and sarcastic: Wiggins and Twigg and Lascelles, grave: little Monsieur Charpentier, twittering: and others mildly interested. It was a rare occasion: fags in the Third and Second, who had never seen a flogging, were excited about it: it was an event in their young lives. In the Remove ranks almost every face was very serious, for almost every fellow sympathized with poor old Bunter — though, of course, it had to be admitted that he couldn't expect anything else after up-ending a beak. Fisher T. Fish's lean face was perhaps the most serious of all: for even Fishy could not help feeling a pang about this: though he argued with his rather leathery conscience that that fat guy had asked for it by opening his big mouth too wide.

'Poor old Bunter!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'I hope the Old Man won't lay it on too hard.'

'The hopefulness is terrific,' sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'But where is Bunter?' asked Nugent. 'It's time Quelch brought him in— the Head will be here in a few minutes, now.'

'Here he comes,' said Bob. 'Here's Quelch, and— No! He hasn't brought Bunter! Where's Bunter. I wonder.'

All eyes turned on Mr. Quelch. It was easy to see, in his speaking countenance, that he was perturbed. And he came alone. For some reason, as yet unknown, he had not marched Bunter in.

'Something's up!' whispered Johnny Bull, as Quelch was seen to confer in low tones with Wingate of the Sixth.

'Looks like it!' muttered Harry Wharton. 'But what— they can't be letting Bunter off.'

'Let's hope it's that!' said Bob.

'Yes, rather,' agreed Nugent. 'But—'

'Not likely,' said the Bounder. 'Quelch is in a bait about something. I wonder—'

'Silence there!' called out Loder.

And the whispering was subdued. All present gazed at Mr. Quelch, wondering what was 'up'. Obviously, something was. The impressive ceremony in Hall was not, apparently, going according to plan.

'Here comes Henry!' breathed Bob, taking great care that that faint whisper did not reach the ears of Henry Samuel Quelch.

The gimlet-eyes glanced, or rather glinted, over the Remove.

'Wharton!' Quelch addressed his Head Boy.

'Yes, sir.'

'Do you know where Bunter is?'

'Oh!' breathed nearly all the Remove. They could guess now that Bunter had not been in Quelch's study, when his form-master went there for him. Quelch had, of course, expected to find him there. Had he not commanded him to wait there? Nevertheless, his question indicated that he hadn't found Bunter there.

'Bunter, sir?' said Harry, rather blankly.

'I—I thought he was waiting in your study, sir.'

'He is not in my study, Wharton. Do you know where he is?'

'No, sir.'

'Does any boy here know where Bunter is?'

The gimlet-eyes included the whole form in one inquiring, glinting glance.

'No, sir!' came a chorus, with a general shaking of heads. Nobody knew where Bunter was. If he wasn't waiting in Quelch's study, as bidden, nobody could even guess where he was.

'Has anyone seen him since third school?'

'We saw him in the quad, sir,' answered Bob Cherry.

'When was that, Cherry?'

'Just before the bell rang for hall, sir. I thought he was going to your study.'

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips very hard and turned away. No news of Bunter was to be had from his form-fellows. The Remove master went out of hall, obviously very much disturbed.

The juniors exchanged glances. There was a buzz of suppressed excitement.

'Where on earth's Bunter?' muttered Bob.

'Dodging it!' said Skinner, with a grin. 'The fat ass— he will get something extra for this.'

'Oh, gad, what a lark!' said the Bounder. 'The whole jolly old school collected for the execution— and nobody to be executed!' Smithy chuckled. 'The Old Man's face will be worth seeing!'

'Even Bunter can't be such an ass,' said Harry. 'It can only make matters worse for him. He's got to take it.'

'Bunter can't take it,' said Johnny Bull. 'He's the man to ask for it, but not to take it. Sticking in some corner now, I suppose— and Quelch getting madder and madder looking for him.'

'The awful ass!' said Nugent.

'Looks as if the pres. are going to look for him,' whispered Peter Todd. Wingate, Loder, Gwynne, and Sykes, of the Sixth, were seen to follow Mr. Quelch out of Hall.

Some of the fellows grinned. Others looked very serious indeed. It was clear, by this time, that the fat and fatuous Owl was seeking to 'dodge' the birch. Instead of waiting in Quelch's study, he had vanished into parts unknown. A flogging, at Greyfriars, was very unusual: but this was more unusual still: it was unprecedented: unheard-of: the hapless Owl of the Remove seemed bent on making Greyfriars history! No doubt he would be found, and marched into Hall to take what was coming to him. But— if he wasn't found, what then? The whole impressive ceremony, for which the whole school was gathered, would be a fiasco— a fizzle— a wash-out! Nothing could be done without Bunter!

Excitement grew. Where was Bunter? Would he be found in time? If not, what was going to happen?

There was a general thrill, and a sudden cessation of whispering, as Dr. Locke entered by the upper door. Every eye fixed on the Head. The hour had come! Dr. Locke, evidently in complete ignorance of the fact that the most indispensable cog in the machine was missing, had arrived. The birch lay ready to his hand. Only the culprit was required for contact to be established. But where was that culprit?

'What a lark!' whispered the Bounder, again.

'Silence!'

Eager eyes watched the Head. He was seen to speak to Mr. Prout. What he said could not be heard: but Prout's boom in reply reached all ears.

'It seems that the boy cannot be found, sir.' Dr. Locke raised his eyebrows.

'Bit of a facer for the Old Man!' breathed Smithy.

'Cannot be found?' This time the Head's voice, in slightly raised tones, was audible. 'Did you say cannot be found, Mr. Prout?'

'So I understand, sir.'

'His form-master is looking for him at this moment,' said Mr. Hacker.

Dr. Locke was seen to compress his lips. The whole school watched him breathlessly. For a moment or two, there was a quite extraordinary expression on his face. Then the accustomed calm of that majestic countenance supervened, and Dr. Locke waited— for Bunter! —the headmaster of Greyfriars School waited, for the most inconsiderable member of the Lower Fourth! Undoubtedly, Billy Bunter was making history, that morning!

'Here comes Quelch—!' breathed Bob.

'Without Bunter!' grinned Smithy.

'Oh, my hat! What larks!'

Quelch came— and he came alone! There were spots of red in his cheeks. For once his look was flustered. Those spots of red deepened as he met the head-master's icy inquiring eyes. Never, probably, in all his scholastic career, had Henry Samuel Quelch felt so utterly and hopelessly at a loss. Actually, he stammered.

'Dr. Locke— I regret— I very much regret—'

'Where is the boy, Mr. Quelch?' The Head's voice cut in like a cold chill.

'I—I am sorry— I—I regret—I—'

'He should be here.'

'Oh! Quite! Yes— undoubtedly! But— but at the moment, he cannot be found— he has had the temerity, the audacity, to absent himself, instead of waiting in my study as ordered to do, and — and — and at the moment, he cannot be found—' Mr. Quelch was almost incoherent. Dr. Locke interrupted the unhappy Remove master. He was conscious that the situation was becoming ridiculous. It could not end too soon!

'The school will dismiss!'

With that, the Head majestically departed by the upper door. Quite probably he was glad to get away from a myriad gazing eyes. The school, dismissed, streamed out: quite a majority of them grinning as they went. That impressive ceremony had been a complete wash-out.

BILLY BUNTER AT CLIFF HOUSE

'BESSIE!'

Bessie Bunter, of the Fourth Form at Cliff House School, gave quite a jump. She had not expected to hear her name uttered, at that moment, by anyone; least of all by her brother Billy. Indeed, for a moment she could hardly believe her plump ears, as she heard that breathless squeak.

The spot where Miss Elizabeth Bunter stood was quite secluded. That was why she had chosen it. She was leaning on the school wall— like Brother Billy, Bessie always preferred leaning, if there was anything at hand upon which to lean. A large bank of laurels screened the spot from general view. Between those laurels and the wall, Miss Bunter was invisible to the rest of Cliff House School. Her reason for thus seeking the solitude in which sages have seen charms, was simple: the Fourth Form girls were due in the gym, under the eagle eye of Miss Bullivant, the games-mistress: and Bessie hoped to escape that eagle eye— and gym!

She would not have been very much surprised, perhaps, to hear the deep voice of Miss Bullivant: for the 'Bull' might look for her. But she was amazed to hear that fat squeak in Billy Bunter's familiar tones.

She jumped, and almost swallowed a chunk of toffee.

Then she stared round through the big spectacles that were so like Brother Billy's.

'Bessie, old girl!'

Then she stared up. The squeak came from above. Over the wall, a fat face looked down.

Bessie regarded it blankly. 130

It was Brother Billy's. It was red from exertion. Obviously, Billy had clambered up the outside of the wall to look over, and the clamber had told on him. He was crimson and breathless.

'Billy!' exclaimed Miss Bunter.

'So jolly glad I've spotted you, old girl!' gasped Billy. 'I—I thought I—I might see you about, and get a word with you—'

'Why couldn't you come in at the gate, if you've come over to see me?' demanded Bessie.

'Climbing the wall like a monkey, and making a girl jump—'

'You see, I—I—'

'I jolly well nearly swallowed my toffee!' said Bessie, indignantly. 'Go round to the gate, if you're coming in.'

'I can't! I mustn't be seen.'

'Eh! Why not?'

'They might let them know at Greyfriars—' gasped Bunter. 'I say, Bessie, I'm in an awful scrape—'

'You always are,' said Bessie. 'What have you been doing now?'

'Nothing! You see—'

'You've come over without leave?' asked Bessie. 'You're out of bounds.'

'Yes! You see—I—I had to cut!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I can't go home: the pater would send me back to school—'

'Of course he would!' said Bessie, staring. 'Think you can go home if you like in the middle of the term?'

'Then I thought of you, Bessie, dear.' Billy Bunter did not always address his sister as 'Bessie, dear!', but circumstances alter cases. 'I—I say, Bessie, I haven't had any dinner—and it's nearly tea-time.' Bunter's fat voice fairly quivered with pathos.

'You've cut I' repeated Bessie. 'You don't mean that you've run away from school?'

'I—I—I had to—'

'You'll get into an awful row, then.'

'I couldn't get into a worse one than I'm in already!' groaned Bunter. 'I'm up for a flogging, Bessie.'

'What have you done, then?'

'Nothing at all! It was somebody else did it. Quelch thinks it was me because he heard me say it was. That's the sort of justice I get from Quelch!' said Bunter, bitterly. 'But I'm not going to be flogged. I—I just cut—and—and—and I'm fearfully hungry, Bessie. That's why I thought of you—I—I mean, I—I thought of you at once, dear— I knew you'd help me—'

'Did you?' said Bessie. She seemed to doubt it, herself. 'Look here, Billy, don't be silly— I mean not sillier than you can help. You'll have to go back to school—'

'I'm not going back to be flogged.'

'You can't stay out of bounds. Have a little sense.' urged Bessie. 'And look here, Billy, you get down off that wall. There'd be a row if you're seen here, if you've really run away from school.'

'I wanted to speak to you, Bessie—'

'Well, you've spoken to me. Now go away.'

'I—I've been hanging about a long time, looking for a chance to speak to you on the quiet,' mumbled Bunter. 'I—I was jolly glad when I spotted you in this corner, Bessie. I—I say, Bessie, think you could get me something to eat? I'll drop in, and keep behind those laurels, and you can bring me something—'

Bessie Bunter blinked up at the harassed fat face looking down over the wall. Perhaps her plump heart was touched by the fact that Billy had had to miss his dinner. Bessie could fully appreciate how awful that was.

'I'll try I' she said. 'But—'

Billy Bunter did not wait for 'buts'. He rolled over the wall, and dropped within. Bessie blinked at him. 'You can't stay out of school, Billy—!' she said.

'I can't go back.'

'But look here—'

'I say, you get me something to eat. I'm famished! I haven't had anything since Mauly stood me doughnuts in break this morning!' moaned Bunter. 'It's like shipwrecked chaps in an open boat at sea, Bessie. I say, you cut off and get me something— anything— and I'll wait here behind these laurels—'

'Yes: but—'

'Hurry!' urged Bunter.

'I can get something at the school shop,' said Bessie.

'But old Janet never gives tick. Have you any money?'

'No! Haven't you?'

'No, I haven't either.'

'Oh, lor'!' groaned Bunter.

'I might find something in Barbara's study,' said Bessie, after a little thought 'But—OH! Somebody's coming.' There was a sound of a heavy tread.

'Oh, crikey!'

A massive figure appeared round the laurels. It was that of Miss Bullivant, the games-mistress of Cliff House.

'Bessie, you are late for gym—' Miss Bullivant broke off, as she saw that Bessie Bunter was not alone. She stared in grim surprise at the Owl of Greyfriars. 'What— who is this? What is this boy doing here? Is this your brother, Bessie?'

'Yes, Miss Bullivant—!' gasped Bessie.

'And why has he entered Cliff House in this surreptitious manner?' demanded the Bull, sternly.

'Boy!'

'Oh, crikey!'

'Boy! What are you doing here?'

'Oh! Nothing! I—I—I haven't run away from school—' stuttered Bunter.

'WHAT?'

'I—I—I mean—!'

'You have run away from school!' exclaimed Miss Bullivant.

'Oh! No! I—I wasn't going to be flogged, and I didn't cut, and—and—and—'

'Upon my word! You have run away from school, and you have ventured, in such circumstances, into the precincts of Cliff House!' thundered the Bull. 'Upon my word I You will be taken back to your school at once.'

'I—I—I—'

'Come!'

A heavy hand dropped on a fat shoulder.

'Bessie! Go to the gymnasium at once! I will see that your brother returns to his school without delay.'

Billy Bunter gave Bessie a despairing blink. She gave him a sympathetic blink in return. Then he was led away by Miss Bullivant's heavy hand.

KEPT TO BE CALLED FOR

MR. QUELCH stood at his study window, looking out into the quad. His lips were compressed in a tight line. His brow was knitted. His eyes glinted. Never, since he had been a master at Greyfriars School, had Mr. Quelch been so deeply, so intensely annoyed and exasperated. Billy Bunter was the cause of it. Where was Bunter?

That flogging, now overdue, had not taken place. Everything had been ready for it— except Bunter! Never before had it happened that any Greyfriars fellow, due for punishment, had 'walked out' on the school. Bunter had. Nothing had been seen or heard of him during the afternoon. Obviously, he was out of bounds— but where?

The Head had, naturally, been very much annoyed. He had been quite chilly to Quelch. But really Quelch was not to blame. He had ordered Bunter to wait in his study till wanted: and that order should have been automatically obeyed. How could Quelch possibly have foreseen that the fat Owl would walk out on him? Such a thought could never have entered his mind. Yet that troublesome and exasperating boy had done exactly that. And now nobody knew where he was, except that he was out of bounds.

At his window, Mr. Quelch could see a good many fellows in the quad— and he could see that many of them were talking and grinning. He could easily guess what the topic was. The solemn proceedings in Hall had been turned into ridicule by Bunter's failure to turn up for execution. The whole school had been assembled, complete with head-master and staff— for nothing! It was rather like the exploit of the famous Duke of York, who marched up a hill and then marched down again!

Harry Wharton and Co. passed in Mr. Quelch's view from his window, and he could not fail to note that they seemed amused about something. Billy Bunter's antics had, no doubt, a comic side, to his form-fellows. Any comicality was quite lost on Mr. Quelch. He frowned after the Famous Five: and then his frown deepened, as his eyes fell on Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder of the Sixth: and he read smiles on their faces. Even prefects of the Sixth Form, it seemed, fancied that there was a funny side to these unprecedented and exasperating happenings. And where, all this while, was Bunter?

Buzzzzzz!

The unmelodious note of the telephone bell caused Mr. Quelch to turn his head. With a tighter compression of his lips, he stepped to the instrument. If this was a call from some affectionate parent, inquiring after the well-being of Tom or Dick or Harry, Quelch was prepared to be very curt. He had enough trouble on hand, without parents added thereunto. He whipped off the receiver. 'Well?' It was quite a bark.

'Is that Mr. Quelch?' came a deep voice.

'Speaking.'

Another bark!

'Miss Bullivant speaking from Cliff House School.'

Mr. Quelch stared at the telephone. He was acquainted with Miss Bullivant, of Cliff House School: but he certainly did not expect telephone calls from that massive lady. Neither was he gratified to receive one. So he barked again:

'Well?'

'A boy named Bunter—'

Mr. Quelch jumped, at that!

'Bunter?' he repeated.

'A boy named Bunter is here. I gather, from his foolish stammerings, that he has left school without leave. If that is the case—'

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Quelch. 'Yes! Quite! Is—is—is the boy now at Cliff House, Miss Bullivant? I think I remember now that he has a sister at Cliff House—'

'Precisely! If he is absent without leave—'

'He certainly is absent without leave, Miss Bullivant. He has, in fact, run away from school, to avoid a just punishment. I am extremely anxious for him to be brought back here. If you would have the kindness to detain him until he can be fetched—'

'I have done so, Mr. Quelch. I have placed him in charge of the porter here, with instructions to keep him in safe custody, while I communicated with you on the subject—'

'I am extremely obliged, Miss Bullivant. I am very much obliged indeed!' Mr. Quelch was not barking now! That communication from Cliff House was a tremendous relief to him. He had wondered, and pondered, how the truant was to be traced and brought back to Greyfriars: and here was Miss Bullivant, practically handing him over on a plate! 'This is very, very kind of you, Miss Bullivant. I really cannot express how much I am obliged to you.'

'Not at all, sir!' came the deep voice from Cliff House. 'The boy will be detained here until you send for him. No doubt you will do so at the earliest possible moment.'

'Assuredly! I will send a prefect across to bring him back at once. I regret that you have been troubled by this foolish boy— but he shall be fetched away immediately— immediately!'

'Very good! Good-bye.'

'Good-bye, Miss Bullivant.'

Mr. Quelch put up the receiver. He was immensely relieved. He almost ceased to frown. The missing Owl had not, after all, vanished into space: he had simply rolled over to Cliff House: and now he was there, waiting to be called for and collected, as it were. In another hour or so he would be back at Greyfriars and this very perturbing and disturbing episode would be at an end!

The Remove master stepped back to the window. The Famous Five were still in the offing, and he called to his Head Boy.

'Wharton!'

Harry Wharton came up to the window.

'Yes, sir.'

'Kindly ask Wingate to step here.'

'Yes, sir.'

Mr. Quelch watched him cut across to the Sixth-Form green, where Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder were discussing some topic that caused them to smile. A minute later, the captain of Greyfriars was under the window.

'You wished to speak to me, sir?'

'Yes, Wingate! I have now been informed where that foolish boy, Bunter, is to be found. He is at Cliff House School, and I desire him to be fetched away at once. Will you see to this, Wingate?'

'Certainly, sir.'

Mr. Quelch either did not notice, or did not heed, that half-a-dozen fellows were within hearing. By the time Wingate of the Sixth walked out of the gates, on his mission to Cliff House, the news had spread that the missing Owl had been traced, and that a pre. had been despatched to march him home.

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob Cherry, for the umpteenth time that day. 'They've got him again! Much better to have got it over this morning.'

'The betterfulness would have been terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

'It would be wearing off, by this time!' said Nugent 'Now he's got it coming! Poor old Bunter.'

'Silly ass to cut!' said Johnny Bull. 'Did he think he could stay out of bounds for ever?'

'Does he ever think at all?' sighed Bob.

There was much sympathy for "poor old Bunter" in the Remove. Later, many fellows gathered at the gates, to see him marched in, when Wingate brought him back. Now that his whereabouts had been ascertained, and a Sixth-Form prefect sent to fetch him, everyone expected to see him marched in, as a matter of course. But it is sometimes the unexpected that happens.

CHAPTER 24

NECK OR NOTHING!

'COME along, Bunter,' said Wingate, not unkindly.

'Oh, lor'!'

'Step out.'

Billy Bunter stepped out, as bidden. But only for a few steps. Then he lagged again. Wingate was a good-tempered fellow: and he needed all his good-temper in dealing with the fat Owl. It really seemed as if Billy Bunter's little fat legs couldn't and wouldn't drag him in the direction of Greyfriars.

He had been called for and collected, so to speak, at Cliff House. Wingate was walking him back to school. His brief career as a runaway was, apparently, already at an end. The birch, successfully dodged in the morning, now loomed inevitably ahead. But—!

The nearer that prospect came, the less Bunter liked it.

He was still thinking of dodging it, if Wingate gave him a chance: or half a chance. He was not going to bend over under the birch if he could help it. Nothing else mattered in comparison with that. He had, indeed, almost forgotten that he was hungry. His fat mind was concentrated on escape.

What was to follow, if he did escape, he did not know.

He couldn't go home, and Sister Bessie at Cliff House had failed as a resource. But he was not thinking of the future: it was the present tense that worried him. It was fixed in his fat mind that he wasn't going to be flogged: that was the immediate problem to be solved, and for the moment his thoughts went no further. Thinking was not much in Billy Bunter's line, anyway. They were taking the short cut back to Greyfriars, by the footpath through Friardale Wood. Bunter, as he lagged, blinked at trees and thickets, and debated whether he could, by a sudden bolt, hope to dodge Wingate in the wood. But Wingate would be after him like a shot: and even if he gained a start, he would be recaptured in a minute or less. Wingate was kind and good-tempered, no doubt compassionating the unfortunate Owl: but he was a prefect, with his duty to do, and he had to deliver up Bunter to Mr. Quelch at Greyfriars.

There would be still less chance when they came out into Friardale Lane. In the open, there was no hope of dodging. Billy Bunter almost made up his fat mind to chance it, and he lagged behind. But as he lagged, the Sixth-Form man turned back.

'Come along, Bunter!'

'I—I'm coming.'

'You young ass!' said Wingate, no doubt reading the fat Owl's thoughts easily enough. 'Do you want to give me the trouble of marching you in by the collar?'

'Oh! No!' gasped Bunter. Certainly he did not want a grasp on his collar. That would have banished the last hope of escape.

'Come on, then.'

'Oh, lor'!'

Bunter rolled on, at a snail's pace. Wingate accommodated his pace to the fat junior's. He was not enjoying that walk: and he was getting impatient. But he could understand the hapless Owl's feelings about what awaited him at journey's end. Bunter really couldn't be expected to be in a hurry, in the painful circumstances.

They reached the stile on Friardale Lane. Billy Bunter's hopes rose, for a moment. If Wingate got over first—!

But the Greyfriars captain did not get over first. He did not want to have to chase a fleeing fat Owl through the wood. He stopped. Bunter stopped too.

'Get over, Bunter,' rapped Wingate.

'I—I—I'm tired—I!' moaned Bunter.

'You can sit on the stile for a few minutes if you like.'

With deep feelings, Billy Bunter clambered on the stile. He was glad of a rest, if it came to that.

Bunter was always glad of a rest. But there was no chance now of dodging in the wood.

Wingate stepped over, and sat beside him on the top bar— within easy reach!

Bunter blinked up and down the lane. In one direction was the village of Friardale, with the Pegg road beyond— the way to freedom, if only he had a chance of bolting. In the other direction was Greyfriars School: quite an attractive spot in normal circumstances: but at the moment more dreaded by Billy Bunter than any other spot on the inhabited globe.

From the stile it was quite a short walk to the school.

This was probably the first time in his fat life that a walk had seemed too short for Bunter!

Actually, he would have been glad if there had been miles and miles and miles yet to cover!

Wingate gave the fat Owl a few minutes. It was really considerate of him, for the Sixth-Form man, quite unlike Bunter, was impatient to get this over. Billy Bunter would gladly have sat it out on the stile for a quite indefinite period. Wingate sat with growing impatience, and after a few minutes, stirred.

'Get on,' he said.

'Wait till that car's passed,' mumbled Bunter. A motor-van was coming up the lane from the direction of Greyfriars. It was one of Chunkley's delivery-vans from Courtfield. It stirred up a cloud of dust as it came whizzing on in the middle of the road.

Wingate gave a grunt, and sat back on the stile again.

Bunter had gained another minute! They waited for Chunkley's van to pass.

It rolled past them, and disappeared round a bend of the lane towards Friardale. Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles followed it longingly. He would have been tremendously glad to disappear round that bend after it. He gave Wingate a stealthy blink.

But it seemed hopeless: he was within reach of a grasping hand. Then, suddenly, Bunter had an inspiration.

The situation was desperate! Unless he could get away from Wingate, he was going to bend over under a birch. Bold measures, assuredly, were not Billy Bunter's line of country. But desperate diseases require desperate remedies! It was neck or nothing, now! He did not stop to think, before he acted on that sudden inspiration.

With tremendous artfulness, he dropped his handkerchief, at Wingate's feet. He slid from the stile, and stooped to pick it up. Wingate, sitting on the top bar, could not step off, without stepping on him. So he sat where he was till Bunter had retrieved that hanky— little dreaming of the wildly reckless scheme that had germinated in the fattest head at Greyfriars.

Bunter picked up that hanky, and then, still stooping, snatched at Wingate's ankles as he sat, and heaved with all his might.

That action was so sudden, and so utterly unexpected, that it took the Greyfriars captain wholly by surprise.

His feet flew into the air under that frantic upward heave, and he went backwards over the stile, before he knew what was happening.



HE WENT BACKWARDS OVER THE STILE

There was a roar, as he landed on his back, sprawling, on the inner side of the stile. Bunter did not stay to hear it. He flew.

Billy Bunter's motions, as a rule, resembled rather those of the tortoise than the hare. But fear lent him wings! He had gained a start— but very soon, Wingate would be up and over that stile, and racing in pursuit. Bunter had to make the most of that start: and he made the most of it. Red and breathless, gasping and grunting, he flew up the lane and disappeared round the bend, the way Chunkley's van had gone. Remove fellows would have been astonished had they seen him. They would have had to admit that there were occasions when Bunter could be a sprinter. He whizzed.

For a couple of minutes he pounded wildly on. Friardale was in sight now, ahead of him. On his right was the Cross Keys, an inn outside the village at a little distance from other buildings. There he sighted Chunkley's van again. It had halted at the inn, doubtless to deliver goods; for the driver was not to be seen, and the double-doors at the back of the van were open.

Billy Bunter swerved in his course, to pass the halted van. But he did not pass it. Another inspiration flashed into his fat brain: it seemed to be his day for inspirations. He had put on a remarkable burst of speed: but only too well he knew that he had not a chance in a foot-race with a Sixth-Form athlete: his only hope was to dodge out of sight somewhere before Wingate caught sight of him again. It flashed into his mind that the open door at the back of Chunkley's van was the 'somewhere' he so sorely needed.

He gave one hurried blink round. The driver had not yet come out of the inn: there was no one about, for the moment. 'He scrambled wildly in at the back of the van. It was the work of a moment.

Panting for breath, he rolled into the van.

Goods of all kinds were packed there: the van was on a long round. But there was plenty of room for Bunter. He crammed himself down between a packing-case and a large sack of vegetables. There, he hoped at least, he would be invisible to the driver when he came back to the van: and to the Greyfriars captain, if Wingate looked in. Crammed among the various goods scheduled for delivery by Chunkley's Stores Ltd, he gasped and gasped for breath.

He was only just in time.

There were footsteps, from the inn. The fat Owl strove to suppress his gasping. It was the driver.

But the man did not even glance into the van. Bang! bang! went the double-doors, as he closed them: and then he walked round to the driver's seat, happily quite unaware that he was now booked to carry a passenger.

Then came a sound of rapid pounding footsteps in the lane. Billy Bunter knew what that portended. Wingate had not been losing time. The driver was starting up the engine. Through its buzz, a familiar voice came to Bunter's anxiously listening fat ears.

'Here! Hold on a moment! Have you seen a schoolboy pass here— a fat kid in spectacles?'

'No, sir— ain't seen anybody.'

'He must have passed here— unless he dodged through the hedge. Bother him! You've seen nobody?'

'Nobody at all, sir.'

The van slid into motion. Billy Bunter, hardly able to believe in his good luck, settled down more comfortably amid Messrs. Chunkley's varied assortment of goods. Chunkley's van rolled on through Friardale and out on the Pegg road: and Wingate, no more than the driver, dreaming that it now carried a passenger, dismissed it from mind. For the next quarter of an hour George Wingate was active and busy, hunting and searching up and down and round about for an elusive fat Owl. But he had to give it up at last. Billy Bunter had dodged him: and where Bunter was Wingate didn't know and couldn't guess. There was nothing further that he could do, except to walk back to Greyfriars and report that Bunter was still out of bounds.

FAIR PLAY FOR BUNTER

'HERE he comes.'

'But where's Bunter?'

'Hasn't he got him?'

'Looks as if he hasn't.'

Quite a crowd of fellows watched Wingate of the Sixth come in at the gates. Everyone expected to see a fat figure rolling by the side of the Greyfriars captain as he came.

But no such fat figure was visible. Wingate came back alone: and it was evident that he hadn't 'got' him!

He frowned at the crowd of juniors as he came in.

His accustomed good temper seemed to have failed him a little. That was really not surprising. An unexpected tumble from a stile, and a bump on the cold unsympathetic earth, followed by a vain hunt for a vanished Owl, might have ruffled the best of tempers. Wingate's look did not invite inquiry: but two or three fellows, eager for news, ventured to inquire, all the same.

'Didn't you find Bunter, Wingate?' asked Bob Cherry. 'Wasn't he at Cliff House after all?' asked Vernon-Smith.

'Where's Bunter, Wingate?'

The Greyfriars captain did not deign to answer those questions. He walked on, frowning, leaving the juniors in an excited buzz.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, there's Quelch!' murmured Bob.

And the whole crowd followed Wingate, as Mr. Quelch stopped him in the quad.

Quelch, no doubt, was as surprised as the juniors, to see Wingate come in alone. And certainly he was not pleased. Like everyone else, he had taken it for granted that Bunter, known to be at Cliff House, had only to be called for and collected.

He had been called for: but obviously not collected!

'Wingate! Where is Bunter?' rapped the Remove master.

'Sorry, sir— I don't know.' Wingate had disdained to answer inquiries from juniors, but he had to answer Quelch. 'I found him at Cliff House, sir, but he got away from me in Friardale Lane—'

'Do you mean to say that he ran away?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

'Yes, sir.'

'Upon my word! And you allowed him to do so?'

Wingate bit his lip hard.

'I couldn't help—!' he began.

'Nonsense!' interrupted Mr. Quelch. 'Where is the boy now?'

'I haven't the least idea, sir!' answered Wingate, rather gruffly. And he went on to the House, leaving the Remove master with a thunderous brow.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard and deep. This was, as Smithy whispered to Tom Redwing, a 'facer' for Quelch. The elusive Owl, who should have been handed over to him there and then, was still absent— still missing— it was not the end of Billy Bunter's remarkable Odyssey! Mr. Quelch was not often at a loss: but for once he was what fellows in his form would have described as 'flummoxed'. He simply did not know what was to be done. His look indicated that Bunter, had he been within reach, might have suffered severely for his sins. But Bunter was not within reach. Bunter was out of bounds.

The Remove master gave one grim glance round at staring faces. The crowd of juniors melted away at once. Nobody was anxious to catch a gimlet-eye just then. Quelch really looked almost dangerous!

Harry Wharton and Co. gathered in No. 1 Study to a rather late tea. Over tea, Bunter was the topic. Even the St. Jim's match took second place to Bunter now. Where was Bunter— and what did he fancy he was up to?

'The howling ass!' said Johnny Bull. 'He will have to come in sooner or later— he can't stay the night out.'

'What on earth does the fat ass think he is up to?' said Bob. 'Chap at school can't walk out on the beaks.'

'Bunter seems to think that he can,' said Nugent, with a grin.

'The thankfulness of the esteemed and idiotic Bunter is not terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'I suppose he really hasn't thought at all— except about dodging the Old Man's birch,' he said.

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob. 'I expect he's sorry by this time that he went after that cake in Quelch's study. But if he hadn't up-ended Quelch—'

'Did he?' said a voice at the door.

The Famous Five looked round, as Herbert Vernon-Smith came into the study. The Bounder lounged in, with his hands in his pockets. He stood looking at the chums of the Remove with a whimsical grin on his face.

'They're after him,' he said.

'After Bunter?'

'Half-a-dozen of the pres. have just gone out on their jiggers,' grinned the Bounder. 'I fancy they've got orders to scour the country for that fat ass. Bound to run him down, I suppose.'

'Bound to,' agreed Bob.

'It's tough on him, if the beaks have got the wrong pig by the ear,' said Vernon-Smith. 'If it wasn't Bunter that up-ended Quelch—'

'We know it was!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'The knowfulness is terrific, my esteemed Smithy.'

'You're the only man in the form who doesn't think so Smithy,' said Harry.

'There's one other, I think,' answered Smithy.

'Who's that?'

'The fellow who did it.'

'Oh, rot!' said Bob. 'Think any fellow in the form would be mean enough to leave it on Bunter? Rot!'

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

'Whoever did it, has left it on Bunter, and that fat chump played right in his hands, by bragging about it,' he said. 'That was all gas— Bunter's gas. He's asked for what he's got, but he never did it— it was somebody else—'

'Who, then?' asked Nugent.

'That's got me fogged,' admitted the Bounder. 'But look here, you chaps— Bunter's a silly ass, and he's asked for all this, by bragging about what he never did,' but fair play's a jewel. If it was another fellow, and he's keeping it dark, he ought to be made to own up before the Old Man gets busy on Bunter.'

'No doubt about that,' agreed Harry Wharton. 'But—'

He shook his head. 'You think that some other fellow went to Quelch's study that evening, after Bunter had cleared, and that Quelch caught him in the dark— well, who was he, and what did he want in Quelch's study at all?'

'You went there to douse the glim, Smithy,' said Bob, with a grin. 'But what did the other fellow want— if there was another fellow?'

'How would I know?' snapped the Bounder. 'But there was some other fellow mixed up in it— I'm sure of that. And I'm going to spot who it was, if I can— Why shouldn't Bunter have fair play?'

'Hear, hear!' said Bob. 'But—'

'Most of the fellows were in the Rag, at the time,' said Smithy. 'But some fellow wasn't—' 'Bunter wasn't!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'I know that, fathead! He was up in his study guzzling cake. Look here, you fellows think it over,' urged the Bounder. 'If we spot some fellow who was out of sight at the time, we can ask him where he was, and what he was doing—see?'

'Um!' said Bob, doubtfully.

'Well, that's the line I'm going to follow,' said Smithy, 'and I think it will lead to something— and somebody!'

'Best of luck,' said Harry. 'But—'

'But—!' said Nugent.

'The butfulness is terrific!' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Oh, rats!' said the Bounder, crossly. 'I tell you I don't believe it was Bunter, and that silly fat chump is going to have fair play. And if all you fellows can do is to butt like a bunch of billy-goats, you can go and eat coke.'

With that, Smithy walked out of the study. The Famous Five exchanged smiling glances.

Smithy, no doubt, wanted to see fair play: but still more, probably, he was keen to demonstrate that he was right, and everybody else wrong. But if he was right, the chums of the Remove certainly wished him luck.

Harry Wharton rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

'Can't be anything in it,' he said. 'If it wasn't Bunter, he's done everything he could to make everybody believe that it was. Still, if Smithy's got it right, let's hope he'll spot the man.'

'Not much time left for him,' said Bob. 'Bunter will have to come in at dark— he can't stay the night out.'

'We shall see him roll in at lock-ups!' said Nugent.

But Frank Nugent did not prove a true prophet! Billy Bunter did not roll in at lock-ups! He did not roll in at all.

BUNTER AT THE BUNGALOW

"ERE! Wot's this 'ere?"

Chunkley's driver stared into Chunkley's van. Billy Bunter blinked at him.

The van had halted. Whither it was bound, Bunter had neither thought nor cared when he had dodged into it. All Bunter cared about was getting away from Wingate— and what awaited him at Greyfriars. The more miles that van covered, and the greater the speed, the better Bunter was pleased. But it had stopped, at last: no doubt for the delivery of goods, for the driver had stepped down and opened the doors at the back.

Then Bunter dawned on him.

He stared blankly at the fat Owl. It was his first intimation that he had been carrying an unsuspected passenger. 'I—I—I—I say—!' stammered Bunter.

'Wot you doing in my van?' demanded the driver. 'Stealing a ride when a bloke wasn't looking— what?'

'I—I—I— You see—I—'

'Git out.'

Billy Bunter eyed the driver warily, as he got out. He half-expected a smack on a fat head as a reward for stealing a ride. The driver eyed him in turn, doubtless remembering that inquiry, back in Friardale, about a 'fat kid in spectacles'.

'Bloke after you?' he asked.

'Oh! Yes!' gasped Bunter. 'A— great big fellow— he was after me— and—and I had to get away, and— and—'

'All right! You can 'ook it.'

Bunter was glad to 'hook' it.

He rolled out of the van, and blinked round him, to ascertain where he was. At a little distance was the line of the cliffs, with the sea rolling beyond. The van had stopped on the Pegg road. The inland side of the road was dotted with a row of bungalows, facing the sea. The van had stopped at the garden gate of one of them. On that gate was an inscription that rang a bell in Billy Bunter's fat memory.

THE BEGONIAS.

'Oh!' ejaculated Bunter.

The stress of recent events had utterly driven from his fat mind all recollection of what Mr. Bunter had told him on Gosling's telephone the previous day. He had not given a single thought to the Begonias, or to Mr. Pilkins, or to the delivery of goods at the Begonias that afternoon, or to his pater's instructions to be on the spot to take delivery of those goods. His fat mind had been absolutely blank on the whole subject.

But it was recalled now, as he blinked at 'The Begonias' on the bungalow gate. He understood now why Chunkley's van had stopped there. It had stopped to deliver the goods of which Mr. Bunter had instructed his hopeful son to take delivery.

'Oh!' repeated Bunter.

He had been about to roll away. Now he did not roll away. He blinked up and down the road. There was no sign of pursuit. Obviously, Wingate had been left behind at Friardale. All was safe now.

And Bunter had the key of that untenanted bungalow in his pocket. Unexpectedly, he was on the spot to carry out his pater's instructions.

But that was not his chief thought. His chief thought, as he blinked at the Begonias, was that here was a refuge where he could rest his weary fat limbs secure from pursuit.

And another thought— a still happier one— flashed into his fat brain, as he remembered what Mr. Bunter had said on Gosling's telephone. 'Chiefly edible, I believe.' There were edibles among the goods that Chunkley's driver had to deliver at the Begonias. Eatables!

In his frantic flight, Bunter had almost forgotten that he was hungry. But he remembered it now. A dinner-less and tea-less Owl could hardly fail to remember that!

Bunter was hungry. He was ravenous. He knew now, as he had told Bessie, what it was like to be in an open boat at sea! If Chunkley's driver delivered edibles at that bungalow, Bunter knew what was going to happen to those edibles.

The driver was sorting out packages from the back of the van, taking no further heed of him. Apparently he had quite a quantity to deliver at the Begonias. Billy Bunter blinked at him, and then opened the gate, and rolled up the garden path to the door of the bungalow.

There he groped in his pocket for the key. The driver, following him up, laden with packages, stared at him as he fumbled. Then he stared at the latch-key as Bunter produced it.

'It's all right, driver,' said Bunter, breezily. 'My father sent me the key, to come over and let you in. I— I was coming over, when I got that lift in your van. Here you are.'

The fat Owl inserted the key in the lock. He turned it and pushed open the door.

'Okay!' said the driver.

He tramped in with his packages, and dumped them down in the little hall. Then he went back to his van, and drove off.

Billy Bunter grinned after the van as it disappeared up the road in the direction of Pegg. Then he blinked in the other direction. There was nobody to be seen on the road. Obviously, pursuit had been thrown off the track. Billy Bunter rolled into the bungalow and shut the door.

Then he lost no time.

Mr. Bunter had instructed him to take delivery of the goods from Chunkley's, pack everything away, neatly and tidily, and place perishable goods in the refrigerator. All was to be ready for Mr. Pilkins when he came. But Billy Bunter was not bothering about Mr. Pilkins. When Billy Bunter was hungry, and there were edibles about, the result was inevitable. With hasty fat hands Bunter unpacked those packages, and as the edibles came to light, their appearance was followed by a happy sound of munching and crunching. Mr. Pilkins was not due for a few days, anyway: and in the meantime, his bungalow and his provender were at Billy Bunter's mercy. Probably there might be a spot of bother when he did arrive and found his stores extensively depleted. But Bunter was not the fellow to meet troubles half-way. He did not waste a thought on Mr. Pilkins.

He ate and was happy. He did not need to pack the perishable articles in the refrigerator: he packed them in his own circumference. They perished on the spot! By the time Bunter had finished, the little hall of the Begonias looked anything but neat and tidy: and almost everything in the packages that did not require cooking had disappeared. After which Bunter, though a little fatigued by his exertions, felt ever so much better.

Having loaded up to the Plimsoll line, and a little beyond it, the fat Owl rolled to the window and looked out into the sunset. He gave a little jump at the sight of a cyclist passing on the road. It was Loder, of the Sixth Form at Greyfriars.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

He noted that Loder was staring about him as he rode, as if looking for somebody. He could guess for whom Loder was looking! Likely enough other prefects were out, looking for an elusive fat Owl. But Loder did not give the Begonias any special attention: certainly he never dreamed that the missing Owl was watching him from a window there! He cycled on, and disappeared towards Pegg.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter. Evidently he was safe at the Begonias!

There was a large, comfortable-looking armchair in the hall. Billy Bunter rolled to it, and sprawled in it. He sprawled luxuriously: and as the sun sank lower, and the shades of night overspread sea and shore, his eyes closed and his mouth opened, and a deep and resonant snore, which was wont to wake the echoes of the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars, woke the echoes of Mr. Pilkins' bungalow. Few, at Greyfriars, doubted that Billy Bunter would roll in when night fell: for what else could he do? But there was a vacant bed in the Remove dormitory that night: and when morning came, and there was still no Bunter, who was to guess that the fat Owl was cooking his breakfast in a seaside bungalow?

CHAPTER 27

LETTER FROM BUNTER

'No Bunter!'

'No!'

'What on earth's become of the fat ass?'

'Goodness knows.'

'He's had a night out—'

'Can't have had a night out—he's pushed in somewhere.'

'Well, where?'

'Ask me another!'

'Does Quelch look shirty this morning?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

There was no doubt at all that Mr. Quelch looked 'shirty' that morning! One glance at his speaking countenance warned his form that their best guess was to be on their very best behaviour that day. Certainly Quelch, a just man, would never have visited his wrath upon an unoffending head. But it was certain that though he couldn't be unjust, he was going to be awfully, fearfully just! It behoved his form, that day, to follow the example of Agag of old and walk delicately.

Billy Bunter was still out of bounds. Where he was, nobody could begin to guess. It was known that he hadn't gone home: and Sister Bessie at Cliff House had seen nothing more of him. It could hardly be supposed that he had camped for the night under a hedge or a haystack: he must have obtained shelter somewhere. But where?

It was quite a mystery. To many fellows it also seemed rather a lark. But that, assuredly, was not the view taken by those in authority. Mr. Quelch, obviously, failed to see anything of a larkish nature in these unprecedented occurrences. Quelch had never been grimmer.

There was no Bunter at the Remove form-room door that morning. One place in the form-room was going to be vacant. In the Latin lesson Bunter's accustomed howlers would be missing.

'O where and O where can he be?' chanted Skinner, and there was a laugh.

'Beats me!' said Bob Cherry. 'If he had any money, perhaps he could put up somewhere! But had he?'

'I don't think his postal-order had come!' said Nugent.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'He cut tiffin yesterday,' said Bob. 'He can't go on missing meals— not Bunter! But where is he getting them?'

Puzzled heads were shaken. It was unimaginable that Billy Bunter could be missing meals all this while. But he was well known to be in his usual impecunious state: and meals cost money. Even the dread of a flogging could hardly have kept him away from the food-stuffs so long. Yet he was still staying out of bounds. It looked as if he must have found resources somewhere, somehow. But what, and where, nobody could guess.

'He's butted in somewhere where there's food!' said Skinner. 'That's a cert. But where the dickens—?'

'The wherefulness is terrific.'

'How long does the fat chump think he can keep up this game?' grunted Johnny Bull. 'He will have to come back.'

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob. 'He will have to take it, sooner or later. Might as well get it over.'
'I'm not so sure of that,' said Vernon-Smith. 'If he stays out long enough, it may come out who really floored Quelch that night—'

'Bunter did, fathead.'

'I don't believe he did.'

'Oh, you're an ass.'

Smithy shrugged his shoulders. He was still alone in his opinion, but— perhaps for that reason— clung to it obstinately. But he had certainly had no luck, so far, in 'spotting' the genuine up-ender.

'Here comes Henry!' added Bob. 'Better tell him you think he's barking up the wrong tree, Smithy— he sort of looks as if he'd like to hear it.'

There was a chuckle: but it died away as 'Henry' came up the corridor. Mr. Quelch certainly did not look in a receptive mood for any suggestions from a member of his form!

There was silence as the gimlet-eye glinted over the juniors. Possibly Quelch fancied, or hoped, that Bunter might have turned up, not venturing to add absence from class to his other manifold offences. But there was no Bunter to meet the gimlet-eye: and Quelch's grim face became a little grimmer.

It was not an exhilarating morning in that form-room at Greyfriars.

Quelch was, of course, just. Aristides himself could not have been more so. But little errors, that might have escaped notice on happier occasions, did not escape now. Lines fell that morning in the Remove in a manner reminiscent of the leaves in Vallambrosa of old.

'Bother that fat chump!' said Bob Cherry, ruefully, when the Remove came out in break.

'Is Quelch's back up, you chaps?'

'Sort of!' said Nugent.

'The upfulness is terrific!' sighed Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

'Bother, bless, and blow Bunter!' said Bob. 'If Quelch is going to be a Tartar till he blows in, the sooner he blows in the better.'

But Bunter did not blow in!

At 'tiffin' there was a vacant place at the Remove table.

No fat voice asked for extra helpings. That vacant place attracted glances from every direction. Fellows in other forms, who had hardly heard of Bunter, were interested in him now. Even Sixth-Form prefects, who sat at the high table, glanced along at the Remove to see whether Bunter was there. Bunter, in school, seldom or never had the spot-light. But in his absence he was getting it in generous measure. It was so utterly unprecedented for any Greyfriars man to 'walk out' on the beaks. Bunter had done it: and Bunter, in his absence, had the house, as it were.

The Remove were rather glad that they were 'up' to Lascelles, and then to Monsieur Charpentier, for the remaining classes that day. They had had enough of Henry Samuel Quelch in the morning. In the present afflicting circumstances, the less they saw of their respected form-master, the better they liked it.

But when they came out after last lesson, Trotter, the House page, was waiting in the corridor with a message for Harry Wharton.

'Mr. Quelch wants you in his study, sir,' said Trotter. 'You're to go immediate, sir.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, what's the row now?' asked Bob Cherry, as Trotter departed after delivering that summons. 'What does Quelch want you for?'

Wharton shook his head.

'Can't guess that one,' he answered. 'I suppose I'd better go and see.' And he went.

He found Quelch at his grimmest

'Wharton!' The Remove master really seemed to bite off the name, rather than utter it.

'Wharton! Have you any knowledge of Bunter's movement since he left school yesterday morning?'

'No, sir,' answered Harry, in wonder. 'I know no more than anyone else, sir.'

'You do not know where he is now?'

'Not in the least, sir.'

'Very well,' said Mr. Quelch, a little less grimly. 'It appears, however, that it is to you that that foolish boy has chosen to write—'

'Oh!' exclaimed Harry. He understood now why he had been called to Quelch's study.

'Here is his letter.' Mr. Quelch's forefinger tapped an envelope on the table. Wharton glanced at it. It was addressed to him, in a scrawling, sprawling hand that was quite familiar. Evidently Quelch had recognized that 'fist' at a glance. 'It came by the afternoon post, Wharton. You may open it in my presence.'

'Certainly, sir.'

Harry Wharton took the letter, and slit the envelope.

'The post-mark was Friardale: and the word 'Lokal' was scrawled in the corner. It was evidence that the missing Owl was not very far away. Obviously, Quelch intended to see that letter, in the hope of discovering in it a clue to Bunter's present whereabouts. His eyes remained fixed grimly on the captain of the Remove, as he unfolded the missive, and watched him while he read:

Deer Wharton.

I'm all rite, and I'm not coming back to be phlogged. I shall be all rite here for a phew days at least. There's plenty of grubb and a verry kumfortable bedd. I'm not telling you where it is bekwase I expekt Quelch will see this. But I can't stay hear for evver, of corse, so will you and my uther pals try to find out who it was floored Quelch and make him own up. I may have said that it was me but that was only a joak. If it wasn't Smithy I don't kno who it was. I'm not gowing to be phlogged for nuthing, and if I have to get out of hear I shall runn away to see! So no more at pressent from yore old pal

W. G. Bunter.

'Well?' Mr. Quelch's voice came in a snap. 'Have you any objection to showing me that letter from Bunter, Wharton?'

He did not add that any such objection would be brushed aside: but Harry Wharton could guess that one!

'None at all, sir!' answered Harry.

He handed the letter to his form-master.

The gimlet-eyes glinted over it. There was no address on it; nothing to reveal the present whereabouts of a missing Owl. The post-mark on the envelope indicated that Bunter was still somewhere within the range of Friardale Post Office. But there was nothing more. The astute Owl was not running the risk of a prefect calling to collect him again!

Mr. Quelch read that remarkable epistle, twice. It revealed that his efforts to instruct Bunter in English orthography had not been very successful. But that was all it revealed.

Something like puzzlement mingled with the grimness in Quelch's countenance. That letter certainly sounded as if Bunter hoped that something might come to light in his favour. Could it be possible, after all, that there was a mistake in the matter? Yet how could that be, when it was out of his own mouth that he was condemned? Quelch shook his head. But he was puzzled.

In a way, that letter was a relief to him. Intensely exasperated as he was with the troublesome Owl, he was relieved to know that Bunter, though still missing, had come to no harm: and that it would not now be necessary to call in the aid of the authorities to search for him.

Inexplicably, Bunter had succeeded in locating himself somewhere where there was plenty of food and a comfortable bed! He was still in the neighbourhood: though precisely where was a mystery.

'You may leave this letter with me, Wharton,' said Mr. Quelch, at last.

'Very well, sir.'

Harry Wharton left the study. Within a few minutes all the Remove heard the news. Perhaps some other fellows, as well as the Bounder, began to doubt whether Bunter was, after all, the genuine up-ender. One thing at least seemed certain: Bunter was not coming back to be flogged. That day, there was no further news of Bunter. Wherever he was, in whatever inexplicable lair he had found refuge, he was still out of bounds, and he was staying out of bounds.

DETECTIVE SMITHY

'SMITHY—'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'Soccer, old chap!'

It was Saturday afternoon. On a fine, clear afternoon, a half-holiday, Harry Wharton and Co. were, naturally, thinking of football: especially with the match at St. Jim's in the offing. The captain of the Remove was picking up sides for a practice game. Smithy was wanted, and the Famous Five were looking for him. They came on him in the quad, leaning on a buttress, his hands in his pockets, and a wrinkle of thought in his brow.

He seemed so deep in reflection, that he did not notice them till he was addressed. Then he looked up.

'Eh, what?' he said.

Smithy, as a rule, was as keen on the winter game as any man in the Remove. But he was evidently not thinking of Soccer now.

'Gone to sleep, standing up, like a horse?' inquired Bob Cherry.

'Oh, don't be an ass! I was thinking—'

'About Soccer?'

'Eh! No! Fish!'

'Fish!' repeated Bob, blankly.

The chums of the Remove stared at Smithy. That reply was quite unexpected and indeed mystifying.

'Fish!' said Harry Wharton. 'Did you say fish?'

'Yes, I did.'

'Well, you can chuck thinking about fish, and think about football,' said Harry. 'You're not going fishing, Smithy: you're wanted for Soccer.'

'You silly ass—'

'Thanks! Now come and get changed.'

'I mean Fish with a capital F!' hooted Smithy.

'Oh! Fish!' said Harry. He realized that Smithy was alluding, not to fish in the Sark, but to Fisher T. Fish of the Remove. 'Never mind Fishy—'

'What the dickens are you thinking about Fishy for?' demanded Bob. 'Fishy doesn't matter—he doesn't play Soccer.'

'I think he may matter a lot.'

'Oh, rot,' said Bob. 'Fishy wouldn't be any use, even in a practice game. We can pick up sides without counting in Fishy.'

'Think you could get Soccer out of your head for just a minute or two?' asked Vernon-Smith, sarcastically. 'I know it's the beginning and end of all things, and then some, and then some over: but just try to chuck it for a tick. I've been puzzling this out, and I think I've got on to something. Perhaps you've forgotten what I said about Bunter getting fair play.'

'Oh, blow Bunter.'

'He's still sticking out of bounds, hiding somewhere—'

'He's all right,' said Bob. 'He told Wharton in that letter that there's plenty of grub where he is. Bunter wouldn't worry about anything else.'

'He said that he won't come back to be flogged.'

'Well, he will have to, sooner or later. But never mind Bunter now, or Fishy either— we're picking up sides— Soccer, old chap—'

'Never mind Soccer—'

'Never mind it?' said Bob, staring. 'Never mind it, when we're going over to St Jim's to play Soccer next week? Gone batty?'

'Bunter's going to have fair play,' said the Bounder, unheeding. 'He never floored Quelch, and some other fellow did. That fellow's keeping it dark, and leaving it on Bunter. I told you I was going to spot him, if I could—'

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Detective Smithy on the Track!' he said. 'Well, how far have you got in the detective line, Smithy?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The Bounder did not join in the laugh. He scowled.

'If you fellows don't want to help, cut off and kick a footer about, and be blowed,' he snapped.

'Perhaps you don't care whether a fellow gets fair play or not.'

'O, draw it mild, Smithy,' said Harry Wharton. 'If you think you've got on to anything, let's hear it. If it wasn't Bunter, I can't begin to guess who it was— perhaps you can!'

'Perhaps!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'The perhapsfulness is terrific,' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Cough it up, anyway,' said Frank Nugent.

'I told you the line I was going to follow,' said Vernon-Smith. 'Most of the fellows had turned up in the Rag for the boxing, and were still around: but some fellow must have been out of sight, when the balloon went up in Quelch's study—'

'Yes. Bunter—!' began Johnny Bull.

'Will you forget Bunter for a minute?' hooted the Bounder. 'If it was some other fellow who floored Quelch, he must have been out of sight, as well as Bunter. Well, Fishy was.'

'Fishy!' repeated Harry Wharton, staring.

'Fishy!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'Oh, my hat! You've thought of Fishy as the man who up-ended Quelch— why, you ass. Fishy wouldn't have the nerve to up-end a bunny-rabbit, let alone a beak.'

'Hardly,' said Nugent, laughing.

'What on earth's put Fishy into your head?' asked Harry. 'He's about the last fellow I should have thought of. I can't see Fishy japing in a beak's study.'

'Rot!' said Johnny Bull.

'The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed Smithy.'

'Terrific and preposterous, and then some!' agreed Bob Cherry.

Evidently, the Famous Five had never dreamed of connecting Fisher T. Fish with the episode in Quelch's study. In fact, they had never thought of him at all. Fishy's ways were not their ways: and they hardly remembered his existence except when they saw him about. And whether he had been out of sight, or not, at the material time he certainly did not seem to them a probable up-ender of beaks!

'Chap might do anything in a panic,' said Vernon-Smith. The more he was scared, the more likely he would be to panic and lose his head.'

'Something in that,' assented Bob. 'But—'

'Was he out of sight, though?' asked Johnny Bull. 'I remember seeing him in the Rag, after the boxing— squatting in an armchair, looking down in the mouth. I remember—'

'Yes, and he was there, when I came in and told Skinner what I'd done in Quelch's study,' said Vernon-Smith. And he butted in and asked me if I was quite sure that nobody was about in Masters' studies. Then he went out and it was only a matter of minutes afterwards when Quelch came in on the war-path.'

'Oh!' said Harry, slowly. 'But—'

'Is that all?' asked Bob. 'If that's all, what about Soccer?'

'That's not all!' snapped Smithy.

"Let's have the rest, then!" said Bob, resignedly. 'And then let's get changed—'

'There was something else, earlier,' said Vernon-Smith. 'I was scouting round Masters' studies, and Fishy was hanging about there. I asked him whether Quelch was in his study, and he said that he was, so I left my jape on Quelch till later. I never thought anything about it at the time, of course: but it seems to fit in now.'

'Oh!' said Harry, again, dubiously.

'Now you know why I've thought of Fishy,' went on Vernon-Smith. 'Not long before the row, he was hanging about Masters' studies, where no fellow has any business: and he must have had an eye on Quelch, as he told me that the old bean was in his study. Later, he found out from me that Quelch was in Common-Room, and that there was nobody about the place, and he cut out of the Rag, and was out of sight when the balloon went up. But—' The Bounder paused.

'Oh! There's a 'but'?' asked Nugent, with a grin.

'Yes, there is!' snapped Smithy. 'It looks, to me, as if Fishy was the man— if he had any reason for going to Quelch's study at all. But that's where it falls down.'

'Bump!' said Bob.

'That's what I was trying to worry out,' went on Smithy. 'If Fishy had any reason for butting into Quelch's study while he was out, he's the man. But what reason could he have had? He wouldn't be after the cake, like Bunter — or dousing the glim, as I did — or pouring gum into the inkpot, as some silly ass did once — not in his line at all. If he'd been in a row with Quelch, he might have gone there to pay him out somehow — but he hasn't been in any row that I know of—'

Bob Cherry gave a little jump. For a moment, he forgot Soccer!

'By gum, though, hasn't he?' he exclaimed. 'I'll bet you he was in a row with Quelch that very day— must have been— and a jolly big row, too—'

'I've heard nothing about it—'

'Well, I haven't, either,' said Bob, 'and that's queer, too. Fishy must have been in an awful row with Quelch. You fellows remember that afternoon— we bolted from Quelch, and knocked Fishy over, coming round the corner at a rush—'

'What on earth's that got to do with it?' asked Harry, blankly.

'Lots!' said Bob. 'Fishy dropped that account-book of his— and Wingate came along and picked it up, and saw what it was— accounts of his money-lending among the fags— and did old Wingate look grim? I heard him tell Fish that he was going to take it to Quelch's study when he went in. I forgot all about it afterwards: but Fishy must have got into a row with Quelch. He jolly well did, the last time he was spotted at that game.'

'Oh!' exclaimed the Bounder. His eyes gleamed. 'But Fishy hasn't been in a row about it— we should all have heard—'

'Can't make that out,' admitted Bob. 'I'm jolly sure that Quelch would go right off at the deep end when he saw that account-book of Fishy's—'

'He can't have seen it.'

'Must have, if Wingate took it to him—'

'He can't have, or there would have been a royal row.

By gum! Did Fishy manage to get it back, somehow, before Quelch looked at it? Is that why he was hanging about Masters' studies, and why he cut out of the Rag when I told him that the old bean was in Common-Room, and nobody about?' exclaimed the Bounder. 'Perhaps Quelch wasn't in his study when Wingate took it there— then he'd leave it for him. By gum!'

Smithy's eyes danced.

As an amateur detective, he had been successful up to a point: he had spotted Fisher T. Fish as the 'wanted' man: if Fishy could be found to have had any motive for butting into Quelch's study while Quelch was out. But there he had seemed to come up against a blank wall.

Unexpectedly, Bob Cherry had supplied the missing motive!

It had not occurred to Bob: But Smithy's keen, wary mind grasped it at once. The fact that Fishy had not been in a 'row' was proof that Quelch had not seen that record of his Shylock transactions. And if it had been left in his study, for his inspection, Fisher T. Fish undoubtedly had the strongest of motives for a surreptitious visit to that study, to recapture it before it could be inspected. 'Detective Smithy' had no doubt now that his 'case' was complete!

It was Fisher T. Fish, after that account-book, whom Quelch had caught in the dark, and who in desperation had up-ended Quelch to escape— the Bounder had not the slightest doubt of it.

'I think that settles it!' he said.

'Blessed if it doesn't look like it,' said Harry Wharton, slowly.

'The lookfulness is terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. And Johnny Bull gave a nod.

Harry Wharton knitted his brows.

'We've got to have this out,' he said. 'I think we'd better go and see Fish about it at once.'

'Come on,' said Smithy.

'But I say—!' began Bob.

'Anything else?' asked Smithy.

'Yes! What about Soccer?'

'Soccer! You silly ass!' howled the Bounder.

'Eh? We're picking up sides for Soccer—and—'

Bob was interrupted.

'Shut up!' hooted all his friends, together.

And Bob shut up, and followed them into the House: to call on Fisher T. Fish. It was a visit that Fisher Tarleton Fish was not likely to enjoy.

A TALK ON THE TELEPHONE

Buzzzzzz!

Mr. Quelch breathed rather hard through his nose. He was not in a happy mood that sunny afternoon: and the unmelodious buzz of the telephone bell did not have a soothing effect. Quelch had retired to his study, for a quiet hour or two with Lucretius. Generally, in leisure hours, Quelch could find relaxation and enjoyment in the majestic hexameters of T. Lucretius Carus. But for once that great classic author had lost his charm. Quelch was worried and perturbed. He could not help thinking of Bunter.

Really, it could never have occurred to Quelch, that so inconsiderable a person as Bunter, could take precedence, in his mind, over so considerable a person as T. Lucretius Carus. But it was so! He was worried and troubled about Bunter, and Lucretius took second place to the fat and fatuous Owl— the sublime beaten to it by the ridiculous, as it were!

Where was Bunter? A Greyfriars boy had 'walked out' on the school— an amazing and unprecedented state of affairs. A member of Quelch's form was out of bounds— had been out of bounds for days— and was staying out of bounds— and it was a situation with which Quelch did not know how to deal.

The truant had, apparently, found some refuge— and had come to no harm. That, no doubt, was satisfactory, so far as it went. Quelch had been anxious as well as angry. Now he was only angry! But his anger, like wine, seemed to improve with keeping! Seldom or never had Quelch been so exasperated.

He did not hear, but he could guess, the comments in Common-Room on the strange state of affairs, among the other 'beaks'. And the Head was distinctly chilly. It was a situation that could not last: yet Quelch did not know how to end it. For, where was Bunter?

It was in vain that he fixed his eyes on Lucretian hexameters. A fat face came between him and those melodious verses. Neither was he soothed by numerous ink-stains on the pages. They reminded him of Bunter— if he could have forgotten the troublesome Owl for a moment.

Buzz! Quelch was in no mood for a talk on the telephone, from whomsoever it might come. He compressed his lips as he picked up the receiver. He compressed them harder, as a fat familiar voice came through.

'Hallo! I say, is that Mr. Quelch?'

'Bunter!' breathed the Remove master. 'Is that you, Bunter?'

'Oh! Yes! I say, have you found him out yet, sir?'

'What? What do you mean?'

'I mean the chap who tipped you over, sir—'

'Bunter! I command you to return to the school at once.'

'Is the flogging off, sir?'

'What? what? How dare you, Bunter? Your punishment will be administered with the utmost severity.'

'Then I ain't coming back, sir! I ain't going to be flogged! If you'd try to find out who tipped you over sir—'

'There is no doubt about that, Bunter, as you are well aware. I refuse to hear a word on that subject. Return to the school immediately.'

'No fear!'

Mr. Quelch breathed very hard. It was very fortunate for William George Bunter, that there was the length of a telephone-line between him and his form-master. Otherwise, a fat head might have been smacked, at that moment.

'From where are you speaking, Bunter?' asked Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice. He did not ask Bunter where he was speaking from! Even in a moment of intense exasperation, Quelch could not have ended a sentence with a preposition.

'That's telling, sir!' came the fat voice.

'Wha-a-t?'

'I ain't having a pre. coming after me again. I ain't coming back if there's going to be a flogging. I never did it, sir! It wasn't me! I've rung you up, sir, because I thought you might have found out who did it—'

'Will you return to the school, Bunter?'

'Yes, sir, if the flogging's off. I can't stay here much longer, as Pilkins will be here next week—'

'Pilkins! Who is Pilkins?'

'Eh! Oh! I—I mean— oh— nobody, sir! Nobody at all! This bungalow doesn't belong to anybody named Pilkins,' came a hurried gasp. 'Nothing of the kind, sir! I—I've never even heard the name!'

'Upon my word! Are you staying in a bungalow, Bunter?'

'Oh! No! Tain't a bungalow, and it doesn't belong to Mr. Pilkins,' gasped the alarmed fat Owl.

'I—I ain't going to tell you where I am, sir! I ain't having Wingate coming after me again. I ain't going to be flogged.'

Mr. Quelch stood gazing at the telephone. Bunter, undoubtedly, was very anxious to keep his whereabouts a secret. But the fat Owl had his own inimitable way of keeping secrets! Quelch had learned that he was in a bungalow, and that that bungalow belonged to some unknown person of the name of Pilkins. He could surmise, too, that that person of the name of Pilkins was absent: that Bunter expected him to materialize in the near future: and to turn him out of his present quarters.

'Are you there, sir?' came the fat squeak, as Mr. Quelch stood silent.

'I am here, Bunter. And you—'

'I—I'll come back if the flogging's off, sir! I—I—I say sir, if—if you'd find out who it was who floored you, it will be all right. I ain't going to be flogged, especially for nothing. It wasn't me tipped you over, sir—'

'That will do, Bunter. It appears that you have taken refuge in a bungalow, in the absence of the owner. Give me the address at once.'

'I'll watch it!' came a gasp. 'Think I'm going to have that beast Wingate coming here for me, like he did at Cliff House? No fear.'

'I command you, Bunter—!' Quelch almost shouted into the transmitter.

'If the flogging's off, sir—'

'Silence!'

'I ain't coming back to be flogged!' wailed the fat Owl. 'I—I thought you might find who did it, sir. Don't you think you ought to find out, sir, instead of picking on me?'

'Upon my word! I—I!' Words seemed to fail Mr. Quelch.

'Don't you think it's up to you, sir? You being my beak— I mean my form-master. Tain't fair to pick on me, when it was somebody else all the time. Couldn't you try to find out who it was, sir?'

'It was you, Bunter!' Quelch fairly roared.

'Twasn't! I don't know who it was, except that it wasn't me! I never didn't wasn't—'

'For the last time, Bunter, tell me from where you are speaking?'

'Shan't!'

'Wha-a-a-at?' stuttered Mr. Quelch.

'Shan't!'

With that emphatic negative, there was quite a whirr, as a receiver was jammed back, in a bungalow a mile from Greyfriars School. Bunter had cut off. Mr. Quelch stood staring at his telephone, for a full minute, before he replaced his receiver, and returned to his chair.

The thunder in his brow was portentous. Yet he was as much perplexed as angry. Bunter must have hoped for something, when he put in that telephone call from his unknown refuge. For what had he hoped? Was it— could it be— possible that he was not, after all, that unseen up-ender in the dark, and that he hoped that a discovery might be made, while he stayed out of reach of the impending birch? His letter to Harry Wharton had caused that doubt to enter Quelch's mind for a moment. Now it entered again. But, as before, he shook his head. Bunter was the culprit—how could he doubt it?

And where was Bunter now?

Lucretius lay unheeded on the table, while Quelch grimly thought that out. He was still in the neighbourhood— he was in a bungalow, of which the proprietor, a Mr. Pilkins, was absent: and surely a rigid inquiry would and must locate that bungalow. Billy Bunter had, quite unintentionally and inadvertently, given his form-master a clue: and Mr. Quelch was going to follow up that clue till it led him to William George Bunter.

CHAPTER 30

CATCHING FISH

FISHER T. FISH sat in his study, No. 14 in the Remove, with an account-book on a bony knee, and a wrinkle of thought in a bony brow. He was not thinking of Soccer that afternoon: if Harry Wharton and Co. had looked into No. 14 for a recruit, Fishy would have told them to guess again. The business-man of the Remove was thinking of business. Dollars and cents occupied Fishy's cute mind.

Since the exciting episode in Quelch's study on Monday, Fishy had walked very warily. That episode had scared him stiff, as he would have expressed it. It had warned him off his financial operations— for a time.

But the lapse of a week had a reassuring effect. Fishy was considering, now, whether it was all clear, and whether he could venture to restart after the interval, as it were. He had had a secret and very unpleasant dread that something might transpire about that account-book. There was a chance that Wingate might mention the matter to Quelch. It was not likely: the prefect had left that account-book on Quelch's table, for Quelch: and could have no doubt that Quelch had found it there and dealt with the matter. With that, no doubt, he had dismissed it wholly from mind. For several days Fishy had felt uneasy about it. But nothing had transpired: and it was clear by this time that Wingate had forgotten it, while Quelch had never known anything about it. Fishy had had a narrow escape: but he guessed, reckoned, and calculated that now it was okay. And if that fat guy, Bunter, had chosen to open his big mouth too wide, that, in Fishy's opinion, was Bunter's own funeral, and he could take that for which he had asked. So, that sunny afternoon, Fisher T. Fish was feeling at his ease, and going through the figures in that account-book with considerable satisfaction.

A tramp of feet in the Remove passage interrupted his financial meditations. The door of No. 14 was hurled open, and a little crowd of Remove fellows appeared in the doorway. Fisher T. Fish stared at them.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here he is!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'Sure, here I am, if you want me,' said Fisher T. Fish. 'If it's football, you can look for somebody else, I guess I'm busy.'

'Oh, my hat!' yelled Bob. 'There it is!' He pointed to the account-book on the bony knee. 'That's it! He got it back.'

Fisher T. Fish jumped. He clutched up the account-book, and whipped it into his pocket. But it was too late. Six pairs of eyes had seen it.

Why his unexpected visitors were interested in it. Fishy did not, for the moment, guess. But he could see that they were!

'That's it, is it?' said the Bounder, grimly.

'That's it!' said Bob. 'I saw Wingate pick it up, and heard him tell Fishy he was going to take it to Quelch. And Fishy's got it.'

'Aw, wake snakes!' breathed Fisher T. Fish. His lean face registered dismay. A few minutes ago, he had been satisfied that the whole affair, so far as he was concerned, was at an end. Now it dawned upon him that it was not at an end—it was at the beginning!

'So it was you, Fishy!' said Harry Wharton. He did not doubt now.

'Eh! What was me, you gink?'

'It was you in Quelch's study that evening,' said the captain of the Remove. 'It was you he caught in the dark there.'

'Aw, go to sleep and dream again,' said Fisher T. Fish. 'Ain't that fat guy Bunter told the world that it was him?'

'Never mind that! How did you get hold of that account-book, after Wingate took it to Quelch's study? Quelch hasn't seen it, or you'd have been up for a row. You got it back in time. Quelch caught you there, and you floored him to get away with it. It's plain enough now.'

'The plainfulness is terrific.'

Fisher T. Fish breathed hard through his long, thin nose. Generally, Fishy was at no loss for words. His sharp voice was music to his own ears, if to no others. But now he seemed quite at a loss. In fact, it was not of much use for Fishy to say anything. The case was clear enough.

'Detective Smithy' had worked it out: Bob Cherry had supplied the motive: and the discovery of that tell-tale account-book in Fishy's possession put the lid on, so to speak. If the Famous Five had doubted before, they could not doubt now. Fisher T. Fish was the 'wanted' man!

The Bounder grinned. 'Fair play for Bunter' had been his object: but undoubtedly Smithy was also very keen to demonstrate that he had been right when everybody else had been wrong. That was now demonstrated.

'That's that!' he said. 'We know now who up-ended Quelch.'

'Fishy all the time!' said Nugent.

'The esteemed and execrable Fishy—'

'And he left it on Bunter!' growled Johnny Bull. 'Bunter would have been flogged for it, if he hadn't cut out of bounds! Look here, you worm—'

'Aw, forget it!' snapped Fisher T. Fish. 'Did I ask that fat gink to open his big mouth and tell the world that it was him? He would be okay if he'd kept it shut.'

'You can't leave it on him, now,' said Harry.

'No fear!' said Bob. 'That fat ass asked for it, I know: but fair play's a jewel. You'll have to own up now, Fishy.'

'Aw, talk sense.'

'You'll have to go to Quelch, and—'

'Forget it!'

'Bunter will be marched in before long. Do you think we're going to let him take the rap for what you did?' exclaimed Nugent.

'Ain't he asked for it?' snorted Fisher T. Fish. 'Ain't he sat up and begged for it? Ain't it his own funeral? I guess I ain't asking for trouble because that fat clam had to open his mouth too wide! Forget it.'

'That won't do!' said Vernon-Smith.

'I guess it will have to do,' said Fisher T. Fish, 'and I guess you guys ain't going sneaking to Quelch about what you've found out.'

'No!' said Harry Wharton. 'Nobody's going to tell Quelch anything—excepting you! It's up to you!'

'Leave it at that!' said Fisher T. Fish.

'Look here—'

'Shut the door after you!' said Fisher T. Fish.

The juniors stood looking at him, a little nonplussed.

Fisher T. Fish had been found out: they all knew now who had up-ended Quelch. Fishy had left it on Bunter: and there was, perhaps, the excuse for him, that the fat Owl had brought it upon himself by his own fatuous fatheadedness. Bunter had chosen to strut in borrowed plumes: and Fishy had left him to take the consequences. That was enough to satisfy Fishy's rather leathery conscience. But it certainly did not satisfy Harry Wharton and Co.

'You can't keep it dark now, Fishy,' said Bob Cherry, at last.

'I guess I ain't talking a lot: answered Fisher T. Fish. 'Quelch believes that Bunter was the man—'

'Did I ask him to make out that he was?' demanded Fisher T. Fish.

'Well, no: but—'

'It was you that did it!' growled Johnny Bull.

'Mebbe it was, and mebbe it wasn't!' said Fisher T. Fish. 'I guess I ain't spilling anything. Shut the door after you.'

The Bounder eyed him grimly.

'Is that all you've got to say?' he asked.

'That's the whole lot.'

'You're not going to own up, now that half-a-dozen fellows know that it was you, and not Bunter?'

'Not so's you'd notice it.'

'Look here—!' bawled Johnny Bull.

'Mebbe you'll vamoose, and shut that door, when you're through with chewing the rag,' suggested Fisher T. Fish. 'I guess I mentioned I was busy.'

'You're going to own up, Fishy, now that you're spotted!' said Vernon-Smith. 'Nobody here is going to give you away—that's barred. You're going to own up, and make it all right for Bunter.'

'Sez you!'

'Quelch is in his study. Like to call on him now?'

'Aw, don't make a guy laugh.'

'If you don't own up—'

'Wash out the "if".'

'Then you'll be made to. You needn't keep on telling us that that fat booby Bunter asked for it— we know that. But he's going to have fair play all the same. You've got to see him through.'

'Better think it over, Fishy: said Harry Wharton.

'Gurrrggh!'

'That's to go on with,' said Bob. 'Now what about Soccer, you chaps?'

This time Bob's friends did not tell him to shut up!

They crowded out of the study, leaving Fisher T. Fish still sitting on the floor gasping for breath. They were done with Fishy, for the present: and Soccer was the order of the day. But while other fellows were enjoying life on the football field, the business-man of the Remove, thinking of the bleak prospect before him, looked absolutely joyless. That prospect was undoubtedly 'fierce' for Fishy!

'The gotfulness is terrific, esteemed and execrable Fish,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Be a sport, Fishy,' urged Bob Cherry. 'Look how Smithy owned up about dousing Quelch's glim when he fancied it was Bunter. A chap simply can't leave a thing on another chap.'

'Play the game, Fishy,' said Nugent.

'Make up your mind to it,' said Harry Wharton.

Fisher T. Fish shrugged his lean shoulders. His mind was already made up.

'Not much use talking to him,' said Vernon-Smith. 'But get this, Fishy— if you don't see Bunter clear, you're going to have the time of your life. Now we know it was you, you're not getting away with it any longer. You're going to be scragged till you own up.'

'Hear, hear!' said Johnny Bull. 'Good egg!' agreed Bob Cherry.

'Bump him, to begin with!' added Smithy.

Fisher T. Fish jumped up, in alarm. He had cause for alarm. Six juniors closed in on him. He was grasped on all sides.

'Say, you guys, I guess—here, hands off! Wake snakes! Leggo! Oh, great John James Brown!

Whooo—oop!' Bump!

In the grasp of many hands, Fisher T. Fish was swept off his feet. He landed on the study floor with a tremendous bump. His frantic yell, as he landed, echoed the length of the Remove passage.

He sat and spluttered for breath.

'That's a tip!' said the Bounder. 'Lots more to come if you don't do the right thing!'

'Urrrggh!' gurgled Fisher T. Fish. 'I guess—wurrnggh!'

'Lots and lots!' grinned Bob Cherry.

'Wurrnggh!'

CHAPTER 31

DRASTIC MEASURES

MR. QUELCH frowned.

Frowns had come rather frequently to Quelch's brow of late. Not once, since Billy Bunter had disappeared out of bounds, had Quelch been at his bonniest. Now he frowned again— portentously.

It was Monday morning.

As the bell had not yet rung for class, there were plenty of fellows to be seen in the quad, as Mr. Quelch looked from his study window. Quelch's eyes were on three Sixth-Form men— Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder— who were going down to the gates. A good many fellows in the quad glanced at the three, wondering why they were going out of gates when it was just on class. Apparently three members of the Sixth Form were going to miss their headmaster's valuable instructions, in their form-room, that morning. Quelch knew why.

Since that telephone-call from the egregious Owl on Saturday, Quelch had done some pondering.

Inexplicably, but assuredly, Bunter had found refuge in a bungalow, of which the tenant was absent. That, Quelch decided after pondering, could only be one of the holiday bungalows which speculative builders had put up along the Pegg road since the War. Most of them were vacant, and locked up, at the end of the summer. If Bunter was in one of them, he could be found. That was why three Greyfriars prefects were heading for the gates instead of the Sixth-Form room that morning. They were going to ascertain whether one of those sea-side bungalows was the lair of the missing Owl. Quelch hoped that they would return with Bunter, or at least with news of him.

Wingate, Gwynne, and Loder disappeared out of the gates. Then Mr. Quelch's eyes fell upon some members of his own form: and it was what he now saw that brought the portentous frown to his brow.

Herbert Vernon-Smith was sauntering in the quad, with his hands in his pockets. Suddenly his saunter changed into a rapid run, as another Removite— Fisher T. Fish— appeared in the offing. To Mr. Quelch's surprise, Vernon-Smith kicked Fish.

Why he kicked him was not apparent. Fish had done nothing to provoke that kick: he did not seem even to have noticed Vernon-Smith as he came along. Nevertheless, Smithy kicked him: and Quelch could see, though he could not hear, that Fish yelled as he received it. It seemed, to Quelch, an absolutely unprovoked act: and naturally it brought a frown to his brow.

But there was more to come.

Harry Wharton and Co. were in a bunch, discussing something— probably the match with St. Jim's due on Wednesday. But as Fish yelled, they all looked round: and then they all started towards Fish.

Quelch could hardly believe his eyes at what followed.

They all kicked Fish. That unfortunate member of Quelch's form, yelling, fled, Bob Cherry landing a final quite good one as he went.

'Bless my soul!' murmured Mr. Quelch. But even that was not all.

Fishy, in his flight, passed near Squiff and Peter Todd.

Both of them ran at him and kicked him as he fled.

The hapless Fish headed for the House. Lord Mauleverer was near the door: looking, as usual, too lazy to live.

But as Fishy passed him, his lazy lordship woke to activity, and kicked Fishy as he passed.

'Bless my soul!' repeated Mr. Quelch.

Really, it looked as if kicking Fishy was a sort of game that had become popular in his form.

Mr. Quelch had no high opinion of that particular member of the Remove. He had not forgotten that, the previous term, Fish had been 'up' for serious trouble. His financial operations among the fags, which to Fishy seemed a quite legitimate activity, had evoked Quelch's direst wrath. Six of the very best had been a warning to Fishy to mend his ways: with the 'sack' in prospect if he failed so to do.

But, though Fisher T. Fish did not rank high in his form-master's esteem, Quelch certainly had to disapprove of these proceedings.

A few minutes later the bell rang, and the quadrangle cleared, as the various forms headed for the various form-rooms. Mr. Quelch left his study to take his form.

The Remove were gathered, as usual, at their form-room door. Voices fell upon Mr. Quelch's ears as he approached.

'Fishy's not here.'

'He's not in a hurry to turn up.'

'Bet he won't show up till Quelch comes.'

'Boot him if he does.'

'Yes, rather.'

'The ratherfulness is terrific.'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Ware beaks!'

There was sudden silence, as Mr. Quelch turned the corner. The gimlet-eyes swept over the assembled juniors. Then, in grim silence, Quelch unlocked the form-room door.

Then there was a patter of feet in the passage, and Fisher T. Fish arrived, breathless, just in time to go in with the form. Obviously, he had been keeping away till Quelch was present.

Mr. Quelch's frown intensified. For some reason, his form were 'down' on Fisher T. Fish, with a very heavy down. It really looked as if Fishy could not come near any Remove man, without danger of contacting boot-leather. That his manners and customs might have made him unpopular, seemed probable enough to Quelch. Still, there was a limit.

'Wharton!' Mr. Quelch rapped out the name of his Head Boy.

'Yes, sir.'

'It appears that what, I think, would be called a rag, is going on in my form!' said Mr. Quelch, sternly. 'From my study window I saw you taking part in it, Wharton.'

'Oh! Did you, sir?' stammered Harry.

'I did, Wharton! It appears that Fish is the object of it. I will allow nothing of the kind in this form. I shall deal very severely with any repetition of what I have seen this morning.'

Harry Wharton made no reply to that. However, Mr. Quelch had no use for replies. He dropped the subject, with that stern warning.

The lesson commenced: to the relief of Fisher T. Fish.

Fishy, certainly, did not like being booted. But still less would he have liked Quelch to become acquainted with the cause of the booting.

From the bottom of his transatlantic heart, he hoped that that warning would prove effective. But he could not help having strong doubts.

Nobody was going to tell Quelch how matters stood: unless Fishy himself did. It was probable that the drastic measures adopted by his form-fellows might induce him to do so, in the long

run. All the Remove knew now of the Bounder's discovery: and all agreed that it was up to Fishy, the only dissentient being Fishy himself.

Fishy was going to say nothing— if he could help it.

But he was beginning to wonder whether he would be able to help it. How many kicks he had collected already, he hardly knew: but he knew that there were more to come, unless he did what all the Remove regarded as the right thing.

It was not a happy morning for Fishy.

Everyone else was looking forward to getting out in break. Fisher T. Fish was not. He dreaded, with reason, what might await him, out of sight of the gimlet-eyes.

He was rather glad, when the Remove were dismissed, that Mr. Quelch beckoned to him to remain. He was far from keen to go out with the rest. He was conscious of significant glances from some of them as they went.

'Fish!'

'Yup, sir!' muttered Fishy.

'It appears that you are in some trouble with your form-fellows at the moment, Fish.'

'Oh! Nope, sir!' stammered Fish. 'It— it— it's nix, sir.'

'What?'

'I—I mean, it's nothing, sir! Only jest their fun.'

'Only their fun!' repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly.

'Yup! I—I—I guess I ain't complaining, sir! Jest a leetle fun!' almost groaned Fisher T. Fish. 'I—I don't mind it, sir.'

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Quelch.

He sat looking at the lean face for a few moments, at a loss.

'Very well, Fish: you may go,' he said, at last. And Fisher T. Fish went, leaving his form-master very puzzled.

He peered out of the form-room door before he left it, and was relieved to see that the corridor was clear. But alas for Fishy! Four or five fellows were waiting for him at the corner, and he almost walked into them.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here's Fishy!'

'Owned up yet, Fishy?'

'Boot till you do.'

'Look here, you pesky ginks,' gasped Fisher T. Fish. 'You heard what Quelch said, and you sure don't want him after you. I guess— Yaroooh! Stoppit! Oh, great John James Brown!

Whooooooop!'

Fisher T. Fish fled from lunging feet.

He had doubted whether Quelch's warning would prove effective. His doubt had been well-founded. And the hapless Fishy began to wonder whether, after all, his best guess might not be to chance it with Quelch. He looked like leading the life of a Soccer ball unless, and until, he did!

TRACKED TO HIS LAIR!

BILLY BUNTER caught his breath.

He trembled.

'Oh, crikey!' he breathed, inaudibly.

He sat up in the deck-chair, in the garden of the Begonias, his little round eyes popping through his big round spectacles. His fat face registered alarm and dismay.

Up to that moment, the truant Owl had been quite at his ease. It was very pleasant in the bungalow garden, lolling in a deck-chair, in the shade of the laurel hedge that screened it from the road. It was a fine sunny morning, and a deck-chair in a garden was infinitely preferable to a form-room at Greyfriars, under a gimlet-eye.

After a breakfast that had made a deep inroad into the supplies that Chunkley's had delivered for Mr. Pilkins, Bunter had rolled out with that deck-chair, in which he was now lazily lolling.

He had been very particular to select a spot that was screened from the road. He did not want to be spotted by any wayfarer who might come along from Friardale to Pegg, or from Pegg to Friardale— especially if such a wayfarer happened to belong to Greyfriars School.

But, secure from observation as he was, the voices that floated over the laurel hedge brought alarm to his fat ears. He had not heeded footsteps on the road. But when those footsteps stopped at the garden gate, and familiar voices became audible, he sat up and took notice.

For he knew those voices. One was Wingate's: another was Gwynne's: and the third was Loder's. Three Sixth-Form prefects of Greyfriars had stopped at the gate, only a few yards from the fat Owl on the other side of the laurel hedge.

Why they stopped there, Billy Bunter didn't know and couldn't guess: being happily unaware that he had furnished his form-master with a clue, in that talk on the telephone on Saturday.

But their proximity spelled peril for a fat truant out of bounds.

They couldn't have come for him— they just couldn't know that he was there. But only the laurel hedge separated him from the grasp of official hands! He hardly breathed, as he pricked up his fat ears to listen like a startled plump rabbit. Anxiously he waited for the footsteps to pass on. But they did not pass on.

Bunter had been feeling quite secure at the Begonias.

Neither had he had a bad time, out of bounds. True, it was somewhat solitary: and Billy Bunter was a gregarious animal. But he was getting out of lessons, which was distinctly to the good, from the point of view of a lazy fat Owl. And there was, so far at least, plenty of 'grub': a detail of which the importance could hardly be exaggerated. That consignment from Chunkley's had been, as Mr. Bunter had stated, 'chiefly edible'. Certainly, it was diminishing at a rather rapid rate.

On one point, Billy Bunter's mind was made up, fixed and immutable: he wasn't going back to take that flogging. Even if they sacked a fellow for staying out of bounds, that, in Billy Bunter's opinion, was better than bending over under the birch. And was there not a chance that, if he succeeded in keeping at a safe distance, it might come out who really had up-ended Quelch? The fat Owl felt that he had done all he could. He had written to Harry Wharton, and telephoned to Quelch, urging both of them to find out who had done the up-ending act. What more could a fellow do— except stay out of bounds and dodge that flogging? Anyhow, until that flogging was off, William George Bunter was going to continue to be missing.

Or was he? Three prefectorial voices floating over the laurel hedge sounded as if his choice in the matter might be limited!

'It's rot! That was Loder's voice. It sounded irritable.

'Beak's orders!' came Wingate's reply.

'Quelch—'

'Oh, bother Quelch.'

'Well, it's rather like looking for a needle in a haystack!' came Gwynne's voice. 'But we've got to play up. That young ass has got to be found.'

'I don't feel like trotting about all the morning, looking for him,' came a grunt from Loder. 'Let Quelch look for him, if he wants him.'

'Oh, buck up, Loder,' said Wingate. 'From what Quelch told us, the silly young ass has barged into one of these bungalows. As likely as not we may spot him at a window.'

Billy Bunter almost jumped out of the deck-chair as he heard that. He wondered dizzily how on earth Quelch knew. But he had to realize that, somehow, Quelch did know: and that he had despatched the prefects to root him out. Somehow, they were aware that he had taken refuge in one of those sea-side bungalows, but did not know which. No doubt they had stopped at the Begonias because it was the first of the dozen or so scattered along the road from Friardale to Pegg. The fat Owl sat palpitating.

'If he's got any sense, he won't be sitting at a window!' came from Loder.

'Well, he can't have much sense, or he wouldn't be playing this potty game,' said Wingate. 'If we don't spot him at a window, we may find him sitting in a garden— I suppose he won't be sticking indoors all the time.'

Bunter jumped again, at that!

'Most of these holiday bungs are empty now, and locked up!' grunted Loder. 'I don't see how he can have got into one of them.'

'Well, I don't, either: but Quelch seems sure of it, and we've got to find him if we can.'

'I know I'll smack his head, if I find him, for giving us all this trouble,' growled Loder.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter, inaudibly.

'Never mind that,' said Wingate, sharply. 'The young ass will get enough from the Head, when we march him in. Begin here, and we'll draw all the bungs along the road. Knock at the doors first, to see whether there's anybody in: if not, scout round for traces of anybody about. May find a door or window open.'

Billy Bunter caught his breath again. He had left the front door of the Begonias ajar. That could not be discerned from the road: but certainly it would be discerned immediately anyone went up to the door to knock. Which meant that the search would not extend beyond the Begonias.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed the hapless Owl.

So far from being, as he had fancied, absolutely secure in Mr. Pilkins' bungalow, he was in dire peril of recapture. The enemy were— literally— at the gate!

'All right,' came Loder's growl. 'I'll start here, and you fellows go further along.' Loder, evidently, did not intend to exert himself more than he could help. Those sea-side bungalows, at various distances apart, spotted the road for a mile or more: and giving them all the once-over implied a considerable amount of walking. Loder preferred to leave it to Wingate and Gwynne.

'Well, follow on, when you've looked round this show,' said Wingate. 'We've got more than a dozen to do.'

'Let's get on with it, and get it over,' said Gwynne.

'Come on, then.'

Footsteps receded up the road. Wingate and Gwynne were going further afield, leaving the Begonias to Loder. They were welcome, so far as Bunter was concerned, to explore every holiday bungalow on the coast of Kent, so long as they kept clear of the one of which Mr. Pilkins was the tenant. But Loder remained—and the fat Owl listened in the deepest trepidation for Loder's next move.

Loder did not seem in a hurry. He was leaning on the gate, not at all keen to exert himself in the search for the missing member of Quelch's form.

However, he bestirred himself at last. Bunter heard the click of the opening gate.

Loder tramped in, up the gravel path.

Once inside the garden, he had only to glance round, to see the fat figure in the deck-chair by the laurels. But he did not, for the moment, glance round: he was looking towards the bungalow. Billy Bunter barely breathed, as his eyes and spectacles fixed on Loder. If he turned his head—and the next moment, Loder turned it!

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Loder gave quite a jump, at the sight of him. He did not need to go up to the door. There was the fat Owl, in the deck-chair, under his eyes, only a few yards away, blinking at him with a terrified blink.

'Bunter!' ejaculated Loder. 'You young rascal! I've caught you, have I?'

He strode straight at the fat Owl, his right hand lifting as he strode: apparently to deliver the smack to which he had referred.

'Ow! Keep off, you beast!' yelled Bunter. He bounded out of the deck-chair and dodged round it. But Loder was almost upon him: and in desperation, he clutched the deck-chair, and pitched it at Loder's legs.

'Oh, gad!' spluttered Loder, as he stumbled, and came down sprawling over the wallowing deck-chair.

Billy Bunter shot away up the path, heading for the bungalow doorway like a rabbit for its burrow. His fat little legs fairly flashed as he flew.

Loder scrambled up, red with fury, and charged after him. He had collected quite a number of aches and pains, sprawling over the deck-chair. He raced after the fleeing Owl.

Fortunately for Bunter, the distance was short. A few yards more, and Loder certainly would have had him. Barely ahead of a clutching hand, the breathless Owl reached the doorway, and plunged in. He grabbed at the door, and slammed it shut, as Loder arrived.

Bang!

The slam of the door was followed by a frantic yell which woke the echoes along the Pegg road, and down to the beach. The door had slammed on Loder's nose.

Loder staggered back, yelling, clasping his suffering nose with both hands: while Billy Bunter, gurgling for breath, palpitated on the safe side of the door.

TOO FIERCE FOR FISHY

'THIS way, Fishy!'

'Come on!'

Fisher T. Fish breathed hard through his long thin nose.

He did not want to 'come on'. He wanted to give the Remove fellows a wide miss in break that morning. But he had no choice. Harry Wharton linked arms with him on one side, Herbert Vernon-Smith on the other. They walked him away— and Fishy, willy-nilly, walked between. 'Break' was a welcome interval to every fellow at Greyfriars: with the exception of Fisher T. Fish. Class, with Quelch, not usually attractive, was preferable to the company of his form-fellows, in the peculiar circumstances.

Fishy had fled from lunging feet, at the corner of the form-room passage. But, like the ancient mariners who eluded Scylla only to fall victims to Charybdis, he found his last state no better than his first. A grasp on either arm walked him away to the Rag.

'Say, you ginks,' expostulated Fishy, as he walked. 'You sure heard what Quelch spilled in the form-room— he's got his eye on you—'

'Never mind Quelch now,' said Smithy.

'I guess you'll mind him, if I yell, and he humps along,' hooted Fisher T. Fish. 'And if you don't leggo, I'll sure let out a yaup that would wake Rip Van Winkle.'

'Go it!' said Smithy.

But Fisher T. Fish did not 'go' it. He did not want Quelch on the scene. Very much indeed he did not. Quelch, certainly, would have come down on raggars, with a very heavy down. But he might have learned more than Fisher T. Fish wanted him to know. Already his attention had been drawn to the fact that Fish had suddenly become extremely unpopular. Fishy did not desire a stern inquiry into the cause.

In the lowest of spirits, Fishy walked into the Rag between the Bounder and the captain of the Remove, and a crowd of other fellows followed them in. Johnny Bull shut the door: a proceeding that Fishy eyed with great uneasiness. Almost all the Remove were crowding in the room, and in all the crowd, there was not a friendly face. Fisher T. Fish stood among them like an Ishmael, against whom was every man's hand. Fishy had never been exactly popular: his manners and customs were against it. But his popularity, now, was evidently at the very lowest ebb.

'Now,' said Harry Wharton. 'We're all here: and we've got to get this settled, Fish. Are you going to Quelch?'

'Nup!' yapped Fisher T. Fish.

'We've found out— at least Smithy found out— that it was you who up-ended Quelch, and that fat ass Bunter had nothing to do with it—'

'Sez you!' snapped Fisher T. Fish.

'You've left it on Bunter, because that fat chump was ass enough to brag about what he hadn't done. Bunter can't help being a howling ass: but he's not going to get it in the neck because you funk doing the right thing.'

'No fear!' said Bob Cherry, emphatically.

'The no-fearfulness is terrific, my esteemed funky Fishy!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bunter's out of bounds now,' went on Harry Wharton. 'But they will get him sooner or later—'

'Sooner rather than later,' said Vernon-Smith. 'Some of the pres. went out before class, and we can guess what they were after.'

'Might be marched in any minute,' said Bob Cherry. 'Look here, Fishy, you've got to do the decent thing. Make up your mind to go to Quelch—'

'You needn't tell him what you went to his study for that evening,' added Wharton, with a curl of the lip. 'But you've got to own up that you floored him— before Bunter gets the chopper.'

'Didn't that fat gink ask for it?' hooted Fisher T. Fish. 'Didn't he open his big mouth and yowl for it?'

'He did,' agreed the Bounder. 'But fair play's a jewel, all the same. Bunter isn't going to take the rap for what you did.'

'I guess—'

'Nuff said! Are you going to Quelch, or not?'

'Nup!' snapped Fisher T. Fish.

'Then you'll have to be persuaded!' grinned Bob Cherry. 'Perhaps you'll change your mind after you've run the gauntlet.'

'Oh!' gasped Fisher T. Fish.

He understood now why he had been walked into the Rag. He cast a longing glance at the door. But there was no escape. He was there to 'run the gauntlet': and he felt an anticipatory ache in every bone in his bony person at the prospect.

'Line up, you men.' said Harry Wharton.

'Say, you pesky gecks—!' gasped Fisher T. Fish. 'That's enough from you, Fishy.'

'I guess—'

'Save your breath for running!' advised Bob. 'You'll need it.'

'Aw, search me!' mumbled Fisher T. Fish. He watched the crowd of juniors, as they formed up in a double line, the length of the Rag, from the big window to the door. Fishy had already collected a good many kickings. But what he had already collected, was as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine, compared with what he was now booked to collect.

He had to run between the two lines of Removites, and every fellow was ready to kick him as he passed. Every fellow was sure to get in at least one. Active fellows might land two or three. By the time he reached the door, Fishy was likely to feel like a football after an uncommonly hard game.

'Ready, Fishy?' called out Nugent.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Fisher T. Fish did not seem to be ready. He was extremely unwilling to start. He had no desire whatever to play the part of a football.

'Don't keep us waiting, Fishy!'

'Get a move on.'

'Start him, somebody.'

A foot landing on his transatlantic trousers started Fisher T. Fish. There was no help for it. He was in the hands of the Amalekites. He started to run between the lines of grinning juniors.

'Boot him!'

'Go it!'

'Here, give a fellow room—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Fisher T. Fish was not much of an athlete. But as foot after foot landed on him, he put up a run that would have done him credit on the cinder-path. Amid yells of laughter from the

Removites, and yells not of laughter from Fishy, he careered on wildly, active feet thudding on him at every step. He hardly knew how he reached the door.

But he did reach it, and tore it open. A final crash from the Bounder's foot landed him in the passage outside.

He did not linger there. He flew, and vanished round the nearest corner, followed by a roar of laughter from the Rag. Most of the fellows there were of the opinion that 'running the gauntlet' would be sufficient instruction for Fishy, and that he would not want 'more of the same'.

That opinion was well-founded. At a safe distance, Fisher T. Fish leaned on a wall, gasping for breath, almost wondering whether he was still in one piece. And when he moved, at last, his mind was made up— the persuasive methods of his form-fellows had been effective. This was too 'fierce' for Fishy! Six from Quelch, or even the Head's birch, seemed almost attractive in comparison. The life of a Soccer ball was altogether too exciting! Slowly, but surely, Fisher T. Fish made up his mind to it: and when he limped away, it was to Mr. Quelch's study that he limped.

CHAPTER 34

LIGHT AT LAST!

'WELL, Loder?'

Mr. Quelch almost barked that interrogation, as Loder of the Sixth came into his study. Quite unaware of an exciting scene that was going on, in those very moments, in the Rag, Quelch was anxiously awaiting the return of the prefects, with— he hoped— a recaptured Owl. But Loder seemed to have returned alone. There was no sign of Billy Bunter.

Quelch's eye, as he barked, lingered for a moment on Loder's nose, which, like Marian's in the ballad, was red and raw. Apparently it had recently sustained a knock.

However, Quelch was not interested in Loder's nose.

He was interested in the missing member of his form. He frowned.

'Have you not found that troublesome boy Bunter?' he barked.

'Yes, sir.'

'Oh!' Quelch's frowning brow cleared a little. 'Did you find him, as I anticipated, in one of those bungalows—?'

'That's where he was, sir! It's called the Begonias, and he seems to have made himself at home there,' grunted Loder.

'Then why have you not brought him back to the school?'

'Because he ran into the bungalow, and slammed the door in my face,' growled Loder. He gave his nose a rub. It had a lingering pain in it, from contact with the door of the Begonias.

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Quelch. He could guess that Loder's nose had been very near that door when it slammed! 'Bless my soul! Is Bunter still in the Begonias bungalow, then?'

'He was when I left,' grunted Loder. 'He won't come out, and he won't open the door. Wingate and Gwynne are stopping there, to see that he doesn't dodge away again, while I came back to tell you that he's found. He can't get away.'

'Very good,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I will deal with the matter myself, now that I know where the boy is to be found.'

Loder left the Remove master's study, doubtless to seek some soothing balm for his painful nose. Quelch dismissed Loder, and his nose, from mind, and concentrated on Bunter.

That fatuous, troublesome, irresponsible boy was found at last. That was a great relief to Quelch. The egregious Owl might slam a door on a prefect's nose, and refuse to open it again: but he would scarcely venture to pass unheeded his master's voice! Quelch had only to call and collect him! After which the sword of Damocles, so long suspended over the fattest head at Greyfriars, would descend. Once more the school would be assembled in hall and this time Quelch would take the greatest care that the principal boy was not missing at the performance! Justice, though with lagging foot, was overtaking, at last, the young rascal who had up-ended his beak!

Mr. Quelch rose from his chair. He was going into action at once. The French master could be pressed into service to take the Remove in third school. Quelch was going to visit the Begonias: and he was going to return with William George Bunter: and then—

Tap!

Mr. Quelch glanced round irritably at that tap on his door. He did not want interruptions now. The door opened: and a member of his form came in. It was Fisher T. Fish.

Fishy came in slowly. He came in reluctantly. He came in apprehensively. But he came in. Fishy had 'run the gauntlet' once. He did not want to run it twice! Reluctantly, apprehensively, but inevitably, Fisher T. Fish presented himself in his form-master's study.

'If—if—if you please, sir—!' stammered Fisher T. Fish.

Quelch made an impatient gesture of dismissal.

'I have no time now. Fish! You may come back later—'

'But, sir—'

'You may go!' rapped Mr. Quelch.

Fisher T. Fish would have been glad to go, with his tale untold. But he had collected all the kickings he wanted. 'I—I—I guess I got to put you wise, sir!' he gasped.

'I—I—I've sure come here to own up, sir—'

'What?'

'It—it—it was me, sir!' articulated Fisher T. Fish.

Mr. Quelch stared at him blankly. He had not the remotest idea to what Fish was alluding.

'You!' he repeated. 'What was you, Fish? What do you mean?'

'I—I—I guess it was me that—that—that—' It really seemed as if the words would not emerge.

Fishy's voice trailed away.

'That what?' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'Last—last Monday, sir—!' gasped Fishy.

'Last Monday!' repeated Mr. Quelch. He started, as he recollected what had happened, a week ago, in that study. But Fish— so far as Quelch knew— had no connection with that incident. 'What do you mean? If you are alluding to Bunter's action—'

'It—it—it—it—'

'What?'

'It—it—it—it wasn't Bunter, sir!' Fisher T. Fish got it out at last, in a gulp. 'It—it—it—it was— was—was me, sir!'

Mr. Quelch jumped.

Why that member of his form had come to his study, obviously in fear and trembling, he had no idea. But if he had made a hundred guesses, he would never have guessed that one! He stared at Fisher T. Fish, too astonished to speak.

It was some moments before he found his voice. Then he gasped: 'You!'

'Yup!' groaned Fisher T. Fish. He could almost hear his bony knees knocking together, as he waited for the thunder to roll.

'You!' repeated Mr. Quelch. He really found it hard to assimilate. 'You! You have come here, Fish, to tell me that it was you, and not Bunter, who committed that disrespectful, that outrageous, that unheard-of act—'

'Yup!' moaned Fisher T. Fish.

'Upon my word! Bunter, as you are well aware, has been sentenced to a flogging by his head-master! And you confess that it was you—!' Quelch's voice deepened. The thunder rolled. 'But for Bunter's extraordinary conduct in absenting himself from school, that punishment would have been administered. And it was you-!'

'I—I—I guess—I—I—I—'

'And why have you come to me now, after such a lapse of time, to confess to your action?' thundered Mr. Quelch.

'I—I—I sorta figured I'd own up, sir—' mumbled Fisher T. Fish. "I—I—I—' His voice trailed away again.

The gimlet-eyes glinted at him. Back into Quelch's mind came what he had witnessed from the study window before class that morning. He could guess that what he now heard for the first time, was already known in his form, and that pressure had been brought to bear on the hapless delinquent.

He drew a deep, deep breath.

But for this interruption, he would have been on his way, in a few minutes more, to collect Bunter at the Begonias. The facts could not have come to light at a more opportune moment. That flogging was due, not to William George Bunter, but to Fisher Tarleton Fish! It was not Bunter, it was Fish, who had up-ended his form-master on his own study carpet! Nearly— very nearly— awfully nearly, had Quelch, whose model was Aristides the Just, committed an act of injustice! True, that error was due to the fat Owl's own fatuous foolishness. Nevertheless, that flogging had very nearly arrived at the wrong address! And now—!

'I will deal with you later, Fish!' said Mr. Quelch, at last. 'For the present, leave my study.'

Fisher T. Fish limped out of the study.

Mr. Quelch was left in a very troubled mood. Bunter was out of bounds— he had set authority at naught— he had walked out on his form-master—his offences were manifold. And yet—! Quelch could not help feeling relieved, deeply relieved, that that flogging had not been delivered at the wrong address, as it certainly would have been had Bunter been in instead of out of bounds. For several long minutes, Mr. Quelch remained in deep and uncomfortable reflection.

Then he stepped to his telephone, and rang up the exchange, to inquire the telephone-number of the Begonias.

THE CLOUDS ROLL BY

Buzzzzzz!

Billy Bunter did not heed the buzz of the telephone bell, in the little lounge hall of the Begonias bungalow.

Who was ringing, and why, he did not know: and did not want to know. He was interested in other things.

He blinked from a window, into the sunny garden. In that garden, Wingate was sitting in the deck-chair lately occupied by the fat Owl. He seemed a fixture there.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

He rolled away to a back window. In the back garden, he sighted Gwynne, strolling with his hands in his pockets.

'Beast!' hissed Bunter, again.

Buzzzzzz!

Still the fat Owl did not heed the telephone. It could ring as long as it liked, without interesting a truant who was out of bounds: and was determined to stay out of bounds, by hook or by crook— if he could!

But could he? He had been tracked to his lair: they knew where he was, now. Loder was gone: and Bunter could guess that he had gone to report to Quelch. Wingate and Gwynne remained: the bungalow was watched fore and aft, so to speak. There was no escape for a cornered fat Owl. Billy Bunter could not help feeling that it was journey's end: the last lap in his extraordinary Odyssey.

Buzzzzzz!

He blinked from the front window again. Wingate, catching sight of the fat face at the window, grinned. He rose from the deck-chair and came to the window.

'Bunter—!'

'Beast!'

'Better come out.'

'Shan't!'

'Loder's gone for Quelch—'

'Blow Loder!'

'Quelch will be here soon for you—'

'Blow Quelch!'

'You young ass!'

'Yah!'

Wingate shrugged his shoulders, and returned to the deck-chair, followed by a devastating blink from the Owl of the Remove.

'Oh, lor'!' mumbled Bunter.

Buzzzzzz!

Billy Bunter gave the telephone an exasperated glare.

That incessant buzzing was irritating. He had enough to worry about without a telephone bell buzzing in his fat ears. He snatched the receiver off the hooks.

'Wrong number!' he snapped into the transmitter: and jammed the receiver back again. There was silence at last.

Dismally, he blinked from the windows again. Evidently, the prefects were going to remain till Quelch came. And when Quelch came, could he keep the door locked? Could he pass unheeded that commanding voice? He resolved that he would—but with a sad misgiving that he wouldn't! The Head's birch, which for days he had successfully dodged, loomed terribly near.

Buzzzzzz!

It was the telephone again, more irritating than ever.

Billy Bunter gave it a glare of concentrated exasperation. It couldn't be a call for Mr. Pilkins, who was not due at his bungalow yet. It was some fathead with a wrong number—

Buzz!

Bunter grabbed up the receiver, and fairly yelled into the mouthpiece: 'Shut up!'

He banged the receiver back. That settled that! The worried fat Owl blinked from the windows again, in the faint hope that one or both of the Sixth-Form men might be gone. But both of them were still there. And any minute now Quelch might appear—!

Buzzzzzz!

Billy Bunter gave the telephone quite a deadly look.

But this time he decided to take the call, if only to get rid of the obstinate caller. He put the receiver to a fat ear.

'Bunter!' came a voice. It was a voice he knew.

The fat Owl jumped. It had not occurred to his plump brain that the call might be for him personally. But it occurred to him now, as he recognized the voice of his form-master.

It was Quelch at the other end!

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'Bunter? Are you there, Bunter?'

'I ain't coming back—'

'Listen to me, Bunter—'

'I ain't going to be flogged—'

'Will you listen to me?' It was almost a roar, over the wires. 'Listen, you stupid boy—!'

'It wasn't me—'

'Will you listen?' shrieked Mr. Quelch. 'I am now aware, Bunter, that you were not guilty of the act for which you were sentenced to a flogging, as your own almost incredible and unimaginable foolishness led me to believe—'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'The boy concerned has now confessed to the act— and will be duly dealt with by his headmaster. You are exonerated, Bunter.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter, again.

'Now that the facts are known, the flogging will not, of course, take place—'

'Oh!' Another gasp from Bunter.

'In the circumstances,' went on Mr. Quelch, 'your irresponsible conduct in absenting yourself from school without leave will be pardoned, if you return immediately— immediately, Bunter.'

'Oh!' Bunter could only gasp.

'Immediately!' added Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice.

'Oh! Yes, sir! Certainly, sir! Oh, crikey! I say, sir—'

'Immediately, Bunter!'

With that, Mr. Quelch cut off.

Billy Bunter stood blinking at Mr. Pilkins' telephone.

He rather wished that he had been a little more prompt in taking that call!

'Oh, crikey!' said Bunter. He grinned.

It was all clear now! The clouds had rolled by! The unknown up-ender, whoever he was, had been found out. That flogging no longer impended over the fugitive Owl: the sword of Damocles had vanished into space. Bunter was free to walk out of the Begonias as soon as he liked— with nothing to come to him! A few minutes ago, Billy Bunter's fat face had registered dismay and despondency. Now it beamed.

'Oh, crikey!' repeated Bunter.

He rolled to the door. He was done with the Begonias now. He had made a deep— a very deep— inroad into the edibles supplied by Chunkley's, and it was possible that Mr. Pilkins, when he arrived, might be annoyed about it— and probable that Bunter might hear from his pater at home in severe terms. But Bunter was not the fellow to meet troubles half-way. The clouds had rolled by— and it was a cheerful Owl who rolled out of the Begonias.

Wingate jumped up from the deck-chair.

'You young scamp! So you've come out—'

Bunter chuckled.

'I'm going back, Wingate—'

'You are!' said the Greyfriars captain: and a firm hand dropped on a fat shoulder. 'Here, Gwynne—I've got him! Come on.'

Billy Bunter chuckled again. They had 'got' him: but, in the happy change of circumstances, the fat Owl had no objection to being 'got'. It was a bright and beaming Owl that rolled back to Greyfriars.

BUNTER ASKS FOR IT!

'I SAY, you fellows!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'Here's Bunter!'

The Remove were coming out of third school. They found an unexpected fat figure in the quad. Billy Bunter was strolling, or rather rolling, there, with his fat hands in his sticky pockets, and a cheery grin on his fat face. Hunter looked as if his troubles were over. He was quite merry and bright.

'So you've come back, you fat ass!' said Bob Cherry. 'Where have you been all this while?'

'Oh, I've been staying in a friend's bungalow,' said Bunter, airily. 'I've had rather a good time, really. Still, I'm glad to be back— the grub wouldn't have lasted much longer—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Well, it's all right now,' said Bunter. 'Quelch told me on the phone that he knows now that it wasn't me, and it's all washed out. He said the fellow had owned up. I jolly well knew it was Smithy, all the time—'

'What?' yelled the Bounder.

'And you jolly well ought to have owned up before, Smithy,' said Bunter, giving him a very severe blink. 'Leaving it on me all this while—'

Smithy half-raised his foot. But he let it fall again, and laughed.

'You footling fat chump,' said Harry Wharton. 'It was Smithy found out who it was, and we made him own up to Quelch. But for Smithy you'd be getting toco from the Head.'

'It was Fishy,' said Bob. 'And Fishy's up for the show in hall that you missed, you fat fozler.'

'Oh!' ejaculated Bunter. 'I thought—'

'Gammon!' said Bob. 'You didn't, and couldn't, and never did, and never will.'

'Yah!' was Bunter's elegant rejoinder to that. 'I say, you fellows, I suppose you've missed me a lot—'

'Not at all,' answered Harry. 'And we haven't missed any tuck from the studies, either.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Does Quelch know you're back?' asked Nugent.

'I haven't seen the old boy yet,' answered Bunter, carelessly. 'I'm not in a hurry to see Quelch. He can wait.'

'You fat ass, you'd better go in and report—'

'Oh, Quelch can wait!' said Bunter. 'Who cares for Quelch? It wasn't me that up-ended him, but I can jolly well tell you that I'd up-end him as soon as look at him—'

'BUNTBUR!'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

An angular figure had appeared in the doorway of the House. A pair of gimlet-eyes fixed on the fat Owl surrounded by a crowd of juniors. Mr. Quelch came out with rapid strides: just in time to hear Bunter's happy remark.

'BUNTER!'

'Oh! Oh, lor!'

Billy Bunter's eyes almost popped through his spectacles at a thunderous face.

'Oh, crikey—!'

'What did you say, Bunter?'

'Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I mean, I—I—I didn't mean I'd up-end you as soon as look at you, sir—I—I—I—'

'Follow me, Bunter.'

'Oh, lor!'

Billy Bunter did not look like up-ending Quelch, as he rolled away sadly and sorrowfully into the House after his form-master. From Mr. Quelch's study window floated a rhythmic sound of cane contacting trousers, accompanied by a series of anguished squeaks. And Billy Bunter, bending over, rather wished that he was still Out of Bounds.