

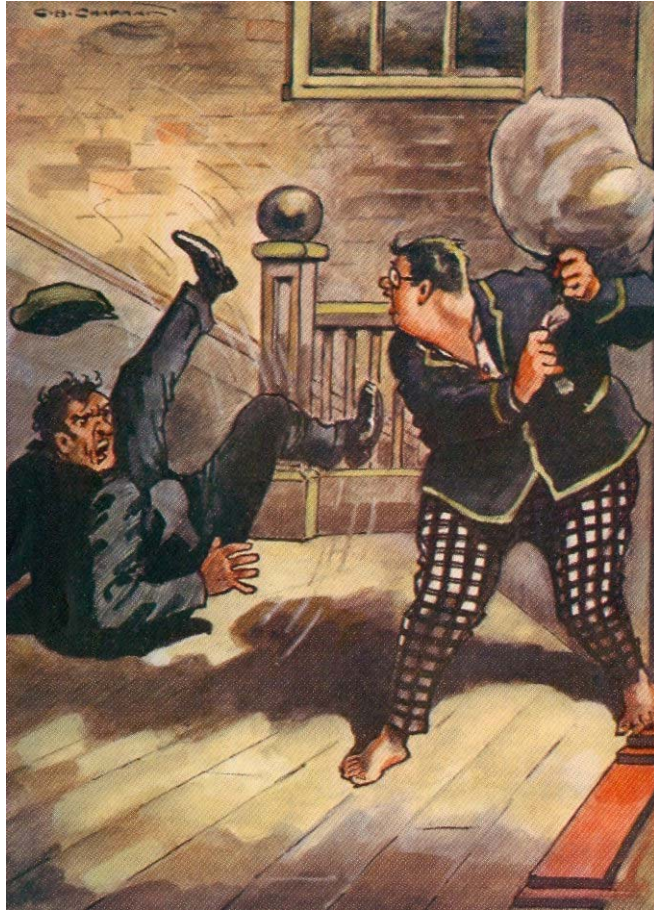


BUNTER COMES FOR CHRISTMAS

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HE SWIPED WITH THE PILLOW, WITH ALL THE FORCE HE
COULD PUT INTO THE SWIPE

CONTENTS

CHAPTER

- 1 SNOWY!
- 2 JUST LIKE BUNTER!
- 3 AND JUST LIKE BUNTER AGAIN!
- 4 NOTHING DOING!
- 5 CASH REQUIRED
- 6 MYSTERIOUS!
- 7 STARTLING!
- 8 HARRY WHARTON MAKES A DISCOVERY
- 9 BUMPS FOR BUNTER
- 10 BREAKING UP
- 11 A LIFT FOR BUNTER
- 12 A TALK ON THE TELEPHONE
- 13 HOME FOR THE HOLS
- 14 BUNTER ASKS FOR IT
- 15 ANY PORT IN A STORM!
- 16 STRANGE INTRUDER
- 17 BLANKETS FOR BUNTER
- 18 A MYSTERY
- 19 NARROW ESCAPE
- 20 CORNERED!
- 21 MYSTERY OF A CAKE
- 22 A RIFT IN THE LUTE
- 23 BRIEF ENCOUNTER
- 24 AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE
- 25 LATE HOURS
- 26 NOT BOB!
- 27 AWFUL FOR BUNTER!
- 28 ONLY BUNTER!
- 29 STARTLING DISCOVERY!
- 30 ALL RIGHT FOR BUNTER!
- 31 FALSE ALARM!
- 32 BUNTER KNOWS BEST
- 33 THANKS TO BUNTER
- 34 A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

CHAPTER 1

SNOWY!

'STOP this one, Bunter!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ooooh!'

Billy Bunter stopped it.

'It' was a snowball. Bunter stopped it with a fat chin. It spread in feathery flakes over the plumpest countenance at Greyfriars School.

As it unfortunately happened, Billy Bunter had opened his extensive mouth to call to Bob Cherry, when the snowball arrived from Bob's playful hand. That extensive mouth was immediately filled to capacity-with soft snow. Billy Bunter's startled yell came muffled by snow.

'Ooooh!' spluttered Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

It was a cold and frosty morning. An early fall of snow had sprinkled the old quadrangle with white. There was not very much of it: but there were drifts here and there among the leafless old elms, and cheery fellows were making the most of it. The December sky was cloudy: but the faces of the Famous Five of the Remove were merry and bright as they pelted one another with snowballs. Snowballing did not appeal to Billy Bunter. The open spaces did not attract him, especially on a winter's day. On a cold and frosty morning he preferred frowsting over the fire in the Rag. But Bunter had something very particular to say to Harry Wharton and Co. so his favourite armchair in the Rag remained untenanted, while he looked for them in the quad. Now he had found them-and a snowball at the same time.

He clawed snow from a fat face, spluttering.

'Ooooh!' gasped Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, I was looking for you--'

'Well, here we are!' said Harry Wharton. 'Stop this one!'

'But I say-yaroooh!' roared Bunter, as he stopped it, this time with his well-filled waistcoat. 'Beast!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Here's another!' called out Johnny Bull.

'Ow! Wow! Stoppit!'

'And here's another!' chuckled Frank Nugent.

'I say-ooooh-wooooh!'

'Herefully comes another, my esteemed fat Bunter!' grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Ow! Beast! Will you stoppit? Ooooh!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter almost danced, as he frantically dodged snowballs. But he dodged them in vain. The Famous Five were all good marksmen: and Bunter's unusual circumference made him an easy mark. Snowball after snowball burst all over the Owl of the Remove, to the accompaniment of indignant squeaks from Bunter, and merry laughter from the snowballers.

'Woooooh! Will you stoppit?' shrieked Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, I was looking for you to say-yaroooh!' A snowball bursting on a little fat nose cut short what Bunter had to say.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Apparently it was something urgent that Bunter had to say. But Harry Wharton and Co. did not seem keen to hear it. Possibly they suspected that it might be something about the Christmas holidays: a subject upon which absolutely nobody at Greyfriars was anxious to hear anything from Billy Bunter.

Anyhow they continued to pelt the fat Owl with snowballs, and Billy Bunter continued to dance and dodge.

But the worm will turn!

Billy Bunter, with his little round eyes gleaming wrath and indignation through his big round spectacles, stooped and clutched up snow. With all the force of a fat arm he hurled a snowball at Bob Cherry's laughing ruddy face.

But Billy Bunter was no marksman. There was plenty of force behind that snowball as it whizzed. Undoubtedly, it would have given Bob quite a jolt, had it landed in the middle of his features, as the wrathful Owl intended. But it missed by a yard, and whizzed on into space.

It was somewhat unlucky for Herbert Vernon-Smith, of the Remove, that he was strolling by at a little distance, not looking towards the snowballers. He strolled into the line of fire as Bunter's snowball whizzed past Bob's head.

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Bob.

'Look out, Smithy!' called out Harry Wharton. But it was too late.

Smithy was not looking out. He was giving the merry crowd no heed at all. He was taken quite by surprise.

Had Billy Bunter aimed that snowball at Smithy, possibly it might have landed on Bob Cherry. But he had aimed it at Bob: and it was Smithy who received it. He received it in his left ear, where it burst, filling his ear, his collar, and his hair, with snow. Smithy gave a startled howl and staggered.

Smithy was not the best-tempered of fellows. But even a good-tempered fellow might have become a little excited by the sudden and unexpected crash of a squashy snowball in his ear.

He glared round, clawing at an earful of snow.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Billy Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!' yelled the Famous Five. They seemed to find the unexpected incident amusing. Herbert Vernon-Smith did not look amused.

'You silly asses!' he roared. 'Which of you blithering idiots chucked that? Think it's funny?'

'Sort of!' chuckled Bob Cherry. 'But--'

But Bob was not given time to say more. Vernon-Smith came at him with a rush. Smithy had not seen that missile hurled, and it did not even occur to him that it came from Billy Bunter. Nobody would have suspected Billy Bunter of hitting a target, with a snowball or anything else. Smithy did not doubt that it was the cheery Bob, and he rushed him down, to demonstrate that it was not, as he seemed to suppose, funny to catch a fellow in the ear with a snowball.

'Here, I say!' gasped Bob. Then he went over, landing on his back with the Bouncer sprawling over him.

'Here's some for you!' howled Smithy, as he grabbed up handfuls of snow, and plastered Bob's face with them. 'Like it yourself?'

'Urrrrgh!' gurgled Bob, struggling frantically, half-suffocated with snow. 'You mad ass-gurrrrgh! It wasn't -wurrrrgh! I tell you it wasn't-gurrrrgh! Here, rescue, you fellows-oooogh! Draggimoff!'

Harry Wharton, Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, rushed to the rescue.

They grasped the excited Bouncer, and dragged, while Bob heaved under him like the stormy ocean. There was quite a mix-up of struggling juniors, scattering snow right and left.

'He, he, he!' cachinnated Billy Bunter. That mix-up in the snow was quite entertaining to the fat Owl.

But he did not linger for more than a moment or two to enjoy the entertainment. Whatever it was that he had to say to Harry Wharton, evidently it was not a propitious moment for saying it. Neither

was it judicious to remain upon the spot till Smithy learned who had projected that snowball. Like the guests in Macbeth, Billy Bunter stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once-leaving Harry Wharton and Co. and Herbert Vernon-Smith to sort themselves out. Billy Bunter rolled into the House, and left them to it: and the fattest figure at Greyfriars School filled, almost to overflowing, the roomiest armchair in the Rag: till the dinner-bell rang. Which joyful sound naturally banished all lesser matters from Bunter's fat mind.

CHAPTER 2

JUST LIKE BUNTER!

'HERE, Bunter-quick!'

Billy Bunter jumped. It was quite startling.

The Owl of the Remove was leaning on a buttress near the gates, his plump brow wrinkled in a thoughtful frown. It was a half-holiday that afternoon, and most Greyfriars fellows were enjoying it, in one way or another. Harry Wharton and Co. had gone skating on the Sark, where the ice was luckily thick enough to bear. Vernon-Smith had gone out; Lord Mauleverer had been ambling placidly in the quad, till Billy Bunter bore down on him, when his lordship, suddenly active, walked out of gates and disappeared. Bunter was rather anxious for a 'chat about the hols' with Mauly, in the hope that it might result in a happy landing at Mauleverer Towers for Christmas. But Mauly proved elusive: and the fat Owl, having cast a frowning glance after him from the gateway, leaned on the buttress, and meditated.

Bunter was thinking. Thinking was not really much in his line: but at present he had quite a lot of food for thought. His plans were unsettled for the Christmas vacation: and nobody seemed keen to help get them settled. Chats about the hols might be going on all over Greyfriars: but Billy Bunter had looked in vain for any fellow with whom to chat on that subject. Before dinner, he had had snowballs from Harry Wharton and Co. instead of the desired chat: after dinner, they had walked out regardless of Bunter. Mauly had as good as dodged out of gates at the sight of him: just as if Bunter was some troublesome bore to be eluded.

Wharton Lodge, Bunter could not help realizing, was a doubtful proposition for Christmas: Mauleverer Towers still more dubious. In other quarters, there was no doubt at all: unless-- Bunter was thinking of Smithy! A holiday with the wealthy Bounder would have suited Bunter admirably. But he shook his fat head sadly. Billy Bunter had really wonderful skill in landing himself for the 'hols', but Smithy was too hard a nut for even Bunter to crack.

As if this was not a sufficient problem to exercise a fat mind, another was added. It was near teatime: and Billy Bunter was always ready for tea before tea was ready for Billy Bunter. He had been disappointed--not for the first time--about a postal order he was expecting. It looked like commons in hall for Bunter: unless some hospitable fellow asked him to a study tea. And the unanimity with which Remove fellows didn't want Bunter to tea was really remarkable.

So Billy Bunter's fat face wore a frown as he meditated. His meditations were suddenly interrupted. There was a patter of feet in the gateway, and a junior came in at a run. It was Herbert Vernon-Smith: the fellow of whom the fat Owl had been thinking. He almost ran into Bunter in his haste. Bunter blinked at him in surprise. Smithy had not been long out of gates and why he had returned in breathless haste was not apparent. He shot in at the gateway like an arrow from a bow.

Then Bunter jumped, as the Bounder, spotting him there, stopped, and thrust a packet into a fat hand.

'I say!' squeaked the astonished Owl.

The Bounder panted.

'Quick-mind that for me!' he breathed.

'Eh? What--why--!' stuttered Bunter. 'Quick-quick--get it out of sight,' hissed Smithy.

'Quelch is after me-- Quick, you fat ass! Quick!'

Bunter, bewildered, blinked at him, and then at the packet the Bounder had crammed into his fat paw. Then he understood. It was a carton of cigarettes that Smithy had passed on to him.

'Oh, crikey!' ejaculated Bunter.

'Quick!' hissed Smithy.

Billy Bunter was not quick on the uptake. But he could understand the need for haste if Mr. Quelch, the master of the Remove, was 'after' a member of his form who was smuggling 'smokes' into the school. And though Billy Bunter's fat thoughts were, as a rule, concentrated wholly upon William George Bunter, he was willing to lend aid in keeping a Remove man out of a row with a 'beak'. He slipped the carton into his pocket.

As it disappeared from sight, the Bounder walked on into the quad, breathing rather hard, but no longer hurrying, and quite cool.

'Oh, crikey!' repeated Bunter.

He blinked round at the gateway. It was, for the moment, vacant. But the next moment, an angular figure appeared there. It was that of the Remove master.

Mr. Quelch was not running. The dignity of a schoolmaster forbade that. But his long legs were taking long and rapid strides, covering the ground at a great rate. He was less than a minute after the Bounder.

He did not even glance at the fat junior leaning on the buttress. His gimlet-eyes glinted at Vernon-Smith, at a little distance, and he strode on past the staring Owl.

Billy Bunter grinned--at his form-master's back. Evidently Quelch, while taking a walk abroad, had spotted the scapegrace of his form at an unlucky moment. He knew, or at least suspected, that Smithy had that packet of smokes in his possession. And the rule at Greyfriars on that subject was very strict. Fellows who fancied that they liked a smoke had to be very wary about it. Caught with such contraband goods, the result might be lines, or detentions, or even 'whops'. It was most likely to be 'whops' in the Bounder's case, as an old offender.

But the Bounder had all his wits about him: as a fellow needed to have, who set up to be a law unto himself at school. He had transferred that packet to Bunter in a matter of seconds, and walked on with nothing about him that his form-master was not welcome to see, if Quelch made him turn out his pockets.

'Vernon-Smith!'

Quelch's voice was deep.

The Bounder looked round at him, his manner quite cool.

'Yes, sir!' he answered, meekly.

'You will hand me that packet of cigarettes, Vernon-Smith, and follow me to my study,' said Mr. Quelch, sternly.

Smithy raised his eyebrows. If he was not surprised by that demand, he certainly succeeded in looking surprised. 'What packet, sir?' he asked, innocently.

'The packet I saw in your hand, Vernon-Smith, a few minutes ago, when I came on you round the corner of the lane,' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'You must have been mistaken, sir.'

'What!'

'I have no cigarettes about me, sir.'

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips, hard. 'Vernon-Smith! You will come with me to my study, where you will turn out your pockets.'

'Certainly, sir, if you wish.'

The gimlet-eyes fixed on Smithy's cool face, as if they would penetrate it. Quelch was sure that he had not been mistaken. Those gimlet-eyes were very keen, and very accurate. But Smithy's cool self-

possession puzzled him.

'Come with me!' he snapped.

'Very well, sir.'

Many eyes turned on Vernon-Smith, as he followed his form-master into the House. Smithy's manner was quite easy and assured. He winked at Skinner and Snoop as he passed them, and left them grinning. Then he disappeared into the House with Mr. Quelch.

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

The fat Owl was quite amused. And a happy, indeed exhilarating idea, had germinated in his fat brain. One good turn deserved another. He had played up, and saved Smithy from a row with his 'beak'. The least Smithy could do in return was to ask a fellow to tea in his study: and over that tea, a chat about the hols might prove propitious. Undoubtedly Smithy was a hard nut to crack, but there was such a thing as gratitude for services rendered. The fat Owl rolled off to the House, feeling that the problem of a study tea, at least, was solved--with a prospect of solving the even more urgent problem of a happy landing for the Christmas holidays.

Having negotiated the stairs up to the Remove studies, Billy Bunter rolled into No. 4, the Bounder's study. There he disinterred the carton of cigarettes from his pocket, and laid it on the table. Then he deposited his plump person in Smithy's very comfortable armchair, to wait for Smithy to come up, when he was through in Quelch's study.

He had not long to wait.

A few minutes later, there were footsteps in the passage, and Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles turned on the open doorway as the Bounder appeared there. He gave Smithy a nod and an affable grin.

'Here you are, Smithy! There's your smokes on the table, old chap!' chirruped Bunter. 'I say, Quelch never knew that you bunged them on me when you cut in--what? He, he, he! I say, what are you making faces at me like that for, Smithy?' added Bunter, in astonishment.

Vernon-Smith was making him almost frantic signs to be silent. Why, Billy Bunter did not know--for a moment. But the next moment he knew, as another figure appeared beside Vernon-Smith in the doorway, and his little round eyes almost popped through his big round spectacles at the sight of Mr. Quelch.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Why Quelch had come up to No. 4 with Smithy, Billy Bunter didn't know and couldn't guess. He hadn't expected Quelch. He hadn't thought of Quelch. The sight of the ghost of Banquo did not startle Macbeth more than the sight of Henry Samuel Quelch startled Billy Bunter at that awful moment. He blinked at him with bulging eyes and open mouth.

Quelch, evidently, had heard every word. Already the gimlet-eyes turned on the carton of smokes on the table.

Smithy gave Bunter a look--quite a deadly look. He was 'for it' now. He came into the study with set lips. 'Vernon-Smith.' Quelch's voice, never very musical, sounded now rather like the grinding of a saw. 'That is the packet I saw in your hand in Friardale Lane!'

'Yes, sir!' muttered the Bounder. There was no help for it, now.

'You passed it to that foolish boy, Bunter, when you came in, during the few moments that my eyes were not upon you!' Quelch's voice deepened, 'And if I had not come up to your study, to ascertain whether anything of such a nature was to be found here, you would have succeeded in deluding me.'

The Bounder stood silent. There was nothing for him to say. The gimlet-eyes turned on the fat figure

in the armchair.

'Bunter!'

'Oh, crikey! It--it wasn't me, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I never--I mean I didn't--I wasn't never--'

'You will take a hundred lines, Bunter. Vernon-Smith, you will bend over that table.' Mr. Quelch had a cane under his arm. He slipped it down into his hand.

Billy Bunter detached himself from the armchair and sidled to the door. The look on Smithy's face, as he bent over, did not indicate that he was likely to ask Bunter to a study tea: while the prospect of a chat about the hols was, if possible, still more hopeless. Something much less agreeable than tea, and a chat about the hols, was likely to happen to Bunter, if he remained in that study after Quelch was gone. Billy Bunter rolled away down the Remove passage: and as he went, a sound followed him from No. 40--the rhythmic sound of a cane contacting trousers! When Mr. Quelch tucked his cane under his arm again, picked up the cigarettes, and departed, the Bunder was left leaning on the table, wriggling like an eel, and feeling too far gone even to look for Billy Bunter and kick him. Vernon-Smith was, undoubtedly, the unlikeliest fellow in all Greyfriars to solve Bunter's problem of the Christmas holidays!

CHAPTER 3

AND JUST LIKE BUNTER AGAIN!

'BEASTS!'

Billy Bunter uttered that ejaculation in tones of indignant exasperation. He addressed it to empty space: for there was no one in No. 1 Study with Bunter as he ejaculated. But it was because no one was there that Bunter was indignant and exasperated. At teatime, a fellow naturally expected to find fellows in their study: unless, perchance, they had fallen, like the seed in the parable, in a stony place, and had to join the scramble in hall.

That such was not the case with Harry Wharton and Co., Bunter was aware. There had already been Christmas tips from the old folks at home. So they could have been, and should have been, tea-ing in No. 1 Study. Instead of which, Billy Bunter rolled into a vacant study, and blinked round it with a discontented blink, and ejaculated 'Beasts!'

No doubt they were still skating on the Sark: which was just like them! A fat lot they cared whether a fellow had had his tea or not! Still less, probably, did they care whether a fellow was fixed up for the hols or not. It was a selfish world! Indeed, it sometimes seemed to Bunter that Greyfriars was almost wholly populated by beasts: himself the only really decent and admirable fellow in the whole place. He blinked out into the passage: but there was no sign of the Famous Five. Then he blinked out into the quad from the window, in the falling December dusk. There were a good many fellows to be seen: but Harry Wharton and Co. were not among them. Bunter snorted. They hadn't come in yet: they were, in fact, the kind of fatheads actually to like strenuous exercise in keen frosty air, and likely to keep it up to the latest moment.

'Beasts!' repeated Bunter, morosely.

It was not only his tea that Bunter wanted: though undoubtedly he did want it. He wanted a chat about the hols. His brief hope of the Bounder had quite vanished: after that incident in No. 4, even Bunter realized that there was not a hope in that direction. Smithy, if he came on Bunter, was much more likely to kick him than to chat about the hols. But was there a chance that Harry Wharton might prove more amenable? There were, at any rate, no snowballs in the study, to repeat the experience of the morning!

Bunter decided to wait for the beasts to come in.

Naturally, his eyes and his spectacles turned on the study cupboard. If anything was there in readiness for tea, there was no reason--so far as Billy Bunter could see--why he should not take a snack or two to go on with.

He rolled across to the cupboard and pulled open the door. Then the pessimistic expression on his fat face was replaced by a cheery grin.

'Oh!' ejaculated Bunter. 'Good!'

His eyes danced behind his spectacles. Evidently, some of those Christmas tips had been expended at the tuck-shop. What met Bunter's eyes, as he blinked into the cupboard, was a cake--a large cake--a cake studded with plums and topped with marzipan. It had already been cut: apparently the proprietors had helped themselves to a few slices. But the bulk of it remained, to delight the eyes of a hungry Owl.

Bunter stretched out an eager fat hand.

But he paused.

Cake, to Bunter, was almost irresistible. And it was by no means certain that he would be requested to stay to tea, when the Co. came in: so unless he started on that cake now, he might not prove a

starter at all. On the other hand, even Bunter realized that scoffing a fellow's cake was not a promising preliminary to a chat about the hols!

However, a slice or two would hardly be missed from a big cake already cut. He decided on a slice or two--or perhaps three!

A slice--a quite fat one--disappeared down the plumpest neck in the Remove. Another followed it. Then another. And then yet another!

Then Bunter paused again. It was quite a big cake: but four fat slices extracted from it, gave it rather a hollow look. Obviously it was judicious to leave it at that.

Bunter hesitated. But it is written that he who hesitates is lost. Once more the fat hand was stretched out, another slice was cut, and it followed the others on the downward path.

Then, perhaps feeling that in for a penny was in for a pound, Billy Bunter hesitated no longer. Slice after slice followed on.

Almost before he knew it, Bunter was at the last slice. He was just finishing it, when there was a sound of tramping footsteps and cheery voices in the Remove passage.

The fat Owl started in alarm.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter. Swiftly, he shut the cupboard door. Gladly he would have dodged out of the study before the Co. came in, postponing that chat about the hols till a more propitious moment. But there was no time. He rolled across to the armchair, and plumped down in it, just as the door was pitched open, and Harry Wharton's voice was heard.

'Tea in my study, you fellows! We've got a cake--a real topper. Trot along anything you've got.'

'Right-ho,' came Bob Cherry's reply.

Three fellows tramped on up the passage, to collect items from their own studies for the festive board. Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent came into No. 1. Then they stared at a fat figure in the armchair.

Billy Bunter gave them a rather uneasy grin. Here was his opportunity to chat about the hols. But the missing cake from the cupboard was on his fat mind, if not on his conscience.

'I say, you fellows!' he squeaked. 'I-I-I say--' Harry Wharton laughed. He had come in fresh and cheery from the open air: and perhaps, too, the near approach of Christmas had its effect. Anyhow he was in a cheery and tolerant mood.

'All right, you fat ass--stay to tea if you like,' he said. 'Shove those books off the table, Franky. I'll get the kettle going. If you're staying, Bunter, make yourself useful--get the cake out of the cupboard.'

'Oh! Yes! But-but-I-I haven't come to tea!' stammered Bunter. 'I-I-I just dropped in for a chat. About the hols--'

'Help!'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'Give it a miss, old fat man, and get out that cake.'

'I-I can't stay, really, old fellow.' Bunter heaved himself out of the armchair. 'I've got to see a chap. I thought I'd wait for you to come in, to settle about the hols: but I-I can't stay. But look here, old fellow, it would be rather jolly to fix it up to stick together over the holidays, wouldn't it? What do you think?'

Billy Bunter blinked anxiously at the captain of the Remove. He was anxious to get out of the study before the cake was missed. He was equally anxious to get that troublesome problem of the hols settled. It was, in fact, quite an anxious moment for a worried Owl.

'You see, I've told the pater I'm having the hols with some of my pals here,' explained Bunter. 'If you like, I'll let him know that I'm going with you, Harry, old chap. What about it?'

Harry old chap paused before replying.

Perhaps the genial influence of Christmas might have evoked the affirmative that would have gladdened the fat ears.

But if so, that pause was Bunter's undoing. Frank Nugent, having cleared the study table of books and papers, stepped to the cupboard. What Wharton's reply would have been, never transpired: for at that moment Nugent opened the cupboard to lift out the cake.

There was no cake to be lifted out. Nugent stared at the spot where a cake had been, and where now only a sea of crumbs met the view. Then there was a roar in No. 1 Study. 'Where's that cake?' 'Eh?' Harry Wharton transferred his attention from Bunter to Nugent. 'It's in the cupboard, Franky.' 'It isn't!'

'But I left it there!'

'That fat villain, Bunter--'

'Oh, really, Nugent--'

'Bunter, you podgy pirate!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'If you've scoffed that cake--'

'I-I-I haven't!' gasped Bunter. 'I-I--'

'Where is it?' hooted Nugent.

'I-I say, you fellows, I-I don't know anything about it,' gasped the fat Owl. 'I-I hope you don't think I'd scoff a fellow's cake. I-I never knew you had a cake! I only came here for a hat about the chols-I-I mean, a chat about the hols--'

'Where's that cake?'

'How should I know? I never even looked into the cupboard, and I never saw any cake when I looked in, either--'

'Scrag him!'

'Boot him!'

'I-I-I say, you fellows, it wasn't me,' yelled Bunter. 'I-I expect you put it somewhere else. It wasn't there when I ate it--I mean, when I didn't ate it--If you think I scoffed that cake, I can jolly well say--whoooooop! Whoooooop! Yaroooooh!'

Only two kicks landed on Billy Bunter before he escaped from No. 1 Study: one from Frank Nugent, and one from Harry Wharton. But both of them landed hard, and Billy Bunter's frantic yell woke the echoes as he departed in his highest gear.

The Famous Five tea'd in No. 1 Study on supplies contributed by Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. The cake that was to have crowned the feast was gone with Bunter. That, perhaps, was a consolation to the fat Owl: but he could not help feeling that his hope of a happy landing for the hols was gone too.

CHAPTER 4

NOTHING DOING!

'I SAY, Mauly--'

'Don't!'

'Eh? Don't what?'

'Don't say! Just shut that door.'

'Oh, really, Mauly--'

A moment before, Lord Mauleverer had been looking quite cheery and contented. Stretched upon the settee in his study, his hands behind his head, resting on a soft cushion, Mauly looked a picture of lazy comfort and contentment: until the door opened, and a fat face and a big pair of spectacles looked in! Then, for some reason unknown to Billy Bunter, Mauly's cheery face clouded.

'Mauly, old chap--'

'Go away, Bunter!' said Lord Mauleverer, plaintively.

'I've just looked in for a chat, old fellow.'

Lord Mauleverer sighed. Harry Wharton smiled. Wharton was seated in the high-backed armchair before the fire. They had been chatting cheerily till Bunter looked in.

The high back of the armchair hid the captain of the Remove from the fat Owl at the doorway. Billy Bunter's little round eyes, even with the aid of his big round spectacles, could not penetrate a solid chair-back. So he remained unaware that Wharton was in Mauly's study.

Those eyes and spectacles were fixed on the lazy figure on the settee. But if Bunter was waiting for Mauly to ask him to come in, he waited in vain. However, Bunter did not need to be asked. He rolled in.

'I say, Mauly--'

'Oh, dear!'

'What's the matter, old chap?' asked Bunter, blinking at him with a quite puzzled blink. 'You were looking as jolly as anything when I opened the door. Now you're looking down in the mouth. What's the trouble?'

'You!'

'Oh, really, Mauly--'

'Do shut that door, Bunter.'

'Certainly, old fellow.'

Billy Bunter shut the study door. But he remained on the inner side of it after shutting it.

Bunter had come there for a chat. He was not going with his chat unchatted, so to speak. Matters were getting really serious. Greyfriars fellows would be scattering to the four corners of the kingdom. And Billy Bunter was still uncertain of the direction in which he was going to scatter. Mauly was the last hope--or almost the last. If Mauly failed, there was perhaps a lingering possibility of attaching himself to the party for Wharton Lodge. In such uncertain circumstances, Bunter naturally wanted to know.

'Seen Wharton?' went on Bunter.

'Yaas.'

'I heard him tell Cherry he was looking in to speak to you.'

'What a lot of things you hear, Bunter.'

'Thank goodness he's gone,' said Bunter. 'Can't stand that chap.'

'But he's--'

'Blessed if I know how you stand him, Mauly--stuck-up ass!' said Bunter: blissfully unconscious of the fact that the person so described was within a couple of yards of him.

Lord Mauleverer grinned. Only a high chair-back hid the 'stuck-up ass' referred to, from the fat Owl. Harry Wharton grinned, too. It was rather amusing to hear the fat Owl's opinion of him: neither was Bunter worth the trouble of getting out of a comfortable armchair to kick him.

'But never mind Wharton,' went on Bunter. 'He fancies himself too much, and throws his weight about a lot: still, I may give him a look-in these hols, if I can find the time. It all depends. I had the hols at his place last Christmas, you know. He was so pressing, a fellow could hardly say no. But his little place down in Surrey is hardly the sort of thing I'm accustomed to. I think I shall give him a miss this time.'

'Lucky man!' murmured Lord Mauleverer.

'The fact is, Mauly, that you're about the only fellow in the Remove that I should really care to do the hols with,' said Bunter. 'What about it, old chap?'

'Nothing!'

Bunter decided not to hear that.

'Mind, it isn't because you've got a tip-top place at Mauleverer Towers,' he explained. 'It's because I like you, old fellow. I've always liked you, Mauly. And admired you, too. I don't think you're just a silly yawning ass like most of the fellows do.'

'Oh! Thanks!' gasped Lord Mauleverer.

'Not at all, old boy. If I've said so, it was only my little joke. Besides, I never said so. I've often told the fellows that you're not such a fool as you look, old chap. I have really, Mauly.'

Lord Mauleverer gazed at him. Harry Wharton grinned in the armchair. Bunter, evidently, was in a flattering mood. In fact he was prepared to lay it on with a trowel! He had his own methods of laying it on!

'Well, what about it, old chap?' asked Bunter, briskly. 'I haven't fixed up the hols yet, as it happens. I've decided to turn Wharton down--I see quite enough of him at school, and I couldn't stand him in the hols too--he can't expect it. And his pals are going with him, and they're a bit too much of a Bank Holiday mob for me. Then there's his uncle that stuffy old stick of a Colonel--'

'Shut up, you ass!' gasped Lord Mauleverer.

'And that fussy old aunt of his. I've stood them once, but dashed if I think I could stand them again--' Billy Bunter was interrupted.

Up to that point, Bunter's burblings had been more or less amusing to both the juniors in No. 12 Study. But at that point, Mauly had no doubt that they ceased to amuse the fellow sitting in the armchair.

He was right!

'You cheeky fat tick!' came a sudden roar from that armchair.

Billy Bunter jumped.

It was his first intimation that Mauly was not alone in his study.

He spun round, his eyes popping at a wrathful face that rose into view suddenly over the back of the armchair. He stared at Harry Wharton, as King Priam might have stared at the dread figure that drew his curtains at dead of night. He goggled at him.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He made a backward jump towards the door, as Harry Wharton came round the armchair.

'Mind if I kick that fat freak out of your study, Mauly?' asked the captain of the Remove.

'Not at all, old boy. Pleased!' said Lord Mauleverer. 'Wait a minute, Bunter.'

Billy Bunter did not wait a minute. He did not wait a second. The door of No. 12 Study banged after the fat Owl before a wrathful foot could reach him.

CHAPTER 5

CASH REQUIRED

'HE, he, he!'

That sudden and unmusical cachinnation broke the silence of No. 7 Study in the Remove.

It proceeded from the fattest member of that form. Billy Bunter seemed amused.

Prep was on. Peter Todd and Tom Dutton were sitting at the table in No. 7, deep in the section of the *Aeneid* which Mr. Quelch had assigned for preparation that evening. Billy Bunter also was seated at the table. But he was not deep in Virgil's deathless verse. Much more important matters than prep were on Billy Bunter's fat mind.

His fat face had been morose and thoughtful. Even Bunter couldn't help realising that the incident in Mauly's study had made a happy landing for the hols less probable than ever. And break-up was close at hand. Bunter had to think it out: and prep, in the circumstances, was simply an irritation. Even the celebrated shipwreck episode, into which his study-mates were delving, failed to interest Bunter. Whether the pious Aeneas was drowned in that shipwreck, or survived to make one of his long speeches. Bunter couldn't have cared less.

So it was rather surprising that Billy Bunter suddenly cachinnated, as if greatly amused by some idea that had germinated in his plump brain.

'He, he, he!'

Peter Todd looked up from Virgil. Tom Dutton went on regardless: Tom was deaf, which was not wholly an affliction for a fellow who shared a study with Billy Bunter.

'Found something funny in Virgil?' asked Peter.

'Eh? Oh! No! I was just thinking--'

'Gammon!'

'Oh, really, Toddy--'

'Well, if you've started thinking, you'd better think about your prep,' advised Peter. 'If Quelch puts you on con in the morning--'

'Oh, blow Quelch! I say, Toddy, I fancy it will be all right about the hols,' said Bunter. 'It wasn't too bad at Wharton Lodge last time. Old Colonel Wharton is rather a stuffy old stick, and Wharton's crowd are rather a Bank Holiday mob, but I've stood them before, and I can stand them again.'

Peter Todd chuckled.

'They've stood you before,' he remarked. 'But can they stand you again? It takes two to make a bargain.'

'Wharton's been rather shirty,' went on Bunter, unheeding. 'But if his uncle made a point of it, it would be all right. Suppose Colonel Wharton told him he was expecting me with the party, what?'

'Think that's likely?' grinned Peter.

'Well, he might,' said Bunter, with a fat chuckle. 'You never know. He, he, he!'

Peter Todd stared at his fat study-mate. Something, evidently, was working in that fat brain. What it was, Toddy did not know. However, he did not want to know, and he had his prep to do. So he returned to Virgil.

'I say, Toddy--'

'Prep!' said Peter, briefly.

'Oh, bless prep!' exclaimed Bunter, irritably. 'Bother prep! Blow prep! Talk about Pontius Pilate fiddling while Carthage was burning--'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'What are you cackling at now?' hooted Bunter.

'Wasn't it Nero and Rome?' inquired Peter.

'No, it wasn't!' snapped Bunter. 'Better not tell Quelch so in class, Peter. You're jolly ignorant of history.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I-I mean, it was Nero, if you like,' added Bunter, hastily. 'I-I daresay you're right, Peter, old chap. You're so jolly clever--'

'Eh?'

'Cleverest chap in the Remove, and chance it,' said Bunter. 'I've often admired you for it, Peter. I say, can you lend me five bob?'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared Peter.

'I'll settle out of my next postal order, old chap. I told you I was expecting a postal order, didn't I?'

'You did!' chuckled Peter. 'Many a time and oft. What do you want five bob for all of a sudden?'

'Well, telegrams cost money--'

'Telegrams!' repeated Peter, staring.

'Oh! No! Not telegrams!' said Bunter, hastily. 'I'm not thinking of sending anybody a telegram, Peter. Nothing of the kind. Still, they cost money--you know how they've put up prices in the Post Office. I say, be a sport and lend me five bob, old chap. I simply must have it tomorrow, if--if my postal order doesn't come.'

'Pleasure,' said Peter. 'If--'

'If what?'

'If you can take it out of a threepenny bit, and give me the change.'

'Beast!'

Peter Todd chuckled again, and resumed prep. Billy Bunter gave him a glare across the study table. Bunter, for some mysterious reason which he did not intend to disclose, but which was apparently not unconnected with telegrams, was in urgent need of the sum of five shillings. Bunter was not good at arithmetic, but if he had been ever so good, he could not have subtracted five shillings from a threepenny bit, and handed over the change. There was no help from Toddy.

Having bestowed an exasperated glare on the top of Peter's bent head, the fat Owl turned his spectacles on his other study-mate. Tom Dutton, who had not heard a word, was deep in Virgil.

'I say, Dutton, old chap--'

'*Talia jactanti stridens Aquilone procella--!*' mumbled Tom, deaf to the voice of the charmer.

'Oh, you deaf ass!' breathed Bunter, and he picked up a ruler, and tapped Dutton's knuckles to draw his attention. Dutton jumped.

'Ow! You silly fat ass, what's the game?' he exclaimed. 'I'm speaking to you--'

'Eh! Who's shrieking? I can't hear anybody shrieking.'

'Not shrieking--speaking!' howled Bunter.

'Seeking? Do you mean you're looking for something? If you do, Why can't you say so? What are you looking for?'

'Oh, crikey! I'm not looking for anything--I just want to speak--'

'Who's a freak?'

'I didn't say freak--I said speak--!' yelled Bunter.

'Oh! You didn't say freak, you said sneak, did you?' exclaimed Dutton. 'Who's a sneak. If you're calling me a sneak, Billy Bunter--'

'I'm not calling you anything,' raved Bunter. 'I just want to ask you if you can lend me five bob?'

'Eh? Did you say Bob?'

'Yes, bob.'

'My name's not Bob! It's Tom, as you know as well as I do. What are you calling me Bob for, you fat ass?'

'Oh, crikey! You deaf chump---'

'Eh?'

'Will you lend me five Shillings?' roared Bunter.

'You needn't yell at me, Bunter. I'm not deaf! I can hear you all right if you don't mumble. I heard that all right.'

'Well, will you lend me five shillings?' roared Bunter.

'No, I won't.'

'But I say, old fellow--'

'You needn't bellow! I can hear you all right! If you bellow at me I'll buzz the inkpot at you.'

'I specially want five bob tomorrow--'

'I know you want to borrow. You're always borrowing. That's nothing new. You're not borrowing anything from me. You owe me half-a-crown already.'

'Beast!'

Bunter gave it up.

Both his study-mates having been drawn blank, the fat Owl rose from his chair and rolled to the door. Fellows who 'prepared' in studies were not allowed out of those studies in prep: and there was risk of a gimlet-eye falling on a straying sheep. But Billy Bunter was too anxious to raise the little sum he so mysteriously needed, to think about that. Peter Todd looked up.

'Prep!' he said.

'Blow prep!' hissed Bunter. He opened the door. 'I'm going along to speak to old Mauly--'

'If Quelch catches you out, in prep--'

'Blow Quelch!' hooted Bunter. 'I don't suppose Quelch is about, and if he is, blow the old ass!'

And he rolled out of No. 7 Study, and rolled almost into an angular figure in cap and gown in the passage. He came to a sudden stop.

'Bunter--!'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Quelch, evidently, was about: for there he was: the gimlet-eyes under the mortar-board glinting at the unfortunate Owl.

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

'Oh, crikey!'

'What did I hear you say, Bunter?'

'Oh! Nothing, sir! I-I-I wasn't calling you an old ass, sir--' stuttered Bunter.

'I heard your words, Bunter.'

'I didn't mean you, sir! I-I didn't really, sir! I-I-I was speaking about another old ass, sir--'

'What?'

'I-I-I was really, sir--'

'Follow me to my study, Bunter.'

'Oh, crikey!'

It was a sad and sorrowful Owl that returned to No. 7 after that visit to Quelch's study. The remainder of the time devoted by the Remove to prep was devoted by Billy Bunter to wriggling and mumbling. He even forgot that urgent need for the sum of five shillings as he wriggled and

mumbled: and it was a wriggling and mumbling Owl that joined the Remove fellows when they went down after prep.

CHAPTER 6

MYSTERIOUS!

'NINEPENCE--and fourpence--that's one and two! And sixpence--one and nine! And a bob--that's two and nine. And--let's see--three threepenny bits--that makes three and sevenpence--'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

It was the following day, and five fellows had come out cheerfully into the frosty air after dinner. A somewhat unusual sight met their eyes. A fat figure, leaning on a buttress, had a collection of coins in the grubby palm of a fat hand, and, with intent eyes and spectacles, was counting them. Billy Bunter mumbled his arithmetic aloud as he counted, and five fellows chuckled as they heard it. Bunter's arithmetic was entertaining to Remove fellows, if not to the Remove master.

'Three and sevenpence--or is it three and nine? Blow! Let's see--three threepenny bits and four pennies--that's one and fivepence-!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter blinked up at five grinning faces. He frowned at them. The interruption put him out, when he was, like the King in his counting-house, counting up his money.

It was quite a varied assortment that he was counting.

Bunter had, in fact, had a busy morning. For some mysterious reason, he required the sum of five shillings: and his own resources amounted to precisely one penny which was still in his possession because it was a bad one. So he had had to start from scratch, as it were, that morning, to raise the required sum.

In break, he had scanned the letter-rack with anxious eyes and spectacles, in the hope that his celebrated postal order might have arrived at last. The near approach of Yuletide might have caused Mr. Bunter, at Bunter Villa, to accede for once to the latest request for cash from his hopeful son at Greyfriars. The number of times Billy Bunter wrote home to make such requests, was limited only by the number of stamps he could borrow in the Remove.

But once more the fat Owl had been disappointed about that postal order. He had to rely on his skill as a borrower to raise the sum he so mysteriously needed.

Bunter was a borrower of deadly skill. How many sixpences, shillings, and half-crowns he owed, up and down the Remove, he could hardly have remembered, if he had wanted to. It was said that he had once succeeded even in borrowing a shilling from Fisher T. Fish: a really remarkable feat.

All his skill had been exerted that morning. To judge by the collection of coins in his grubby hand, it had not been exerted in vain. There was quite a heap of coins of the realm: most of them, certainly, of small denomination. But every little helps.

But while it was customary for Billy Bunter to borrow anything he could, from a threepenny piece to a half-crown, it was quite uncustomary for him to be discovered counting his money. Billy Bunter had his faults--indeed, their name was Legion! --but there was nothing of the miser about Bunter. When he had any cash, it was wont to take unto itself wings and flyaway, in the inevitable direction of the tuck-shop.

For once, it seemed, Bunter was resisting the lure of the tuck-shop. Perhaps seven helpings at dinner helped him to resist that lure.

'I say, you fellows, sheer off and cackle somewhere else: said Bunter, peevishly. 'I've got to get this right. No--hold on a minute! You're not bad at figures, Wharton. Look here, how much is three threepenny bits, and two sixpences, and a shilling, and seven--no, eight--no, nine pennies?'

'Three and six, fathead.'

'Is it?' said Bunter, doubtfully. 'I made it three and ten pence. I fancy it's three and tenpence.'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'You can fancy what you like, of course,' he said. 'But it happens to be three and six.'

'Um! I say, Cherry, think it's three and six?'

'Sort of!' chuckled Bob.

'The three and sixfulness is terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter,' grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Well, then there's another bob,' said Bunter, sorting over the wealth piled in the fat paw, 'and another threepenny bit. How much does that make?'

'Four and nine, fathead,' said Nugent.

'Sure it doesn't make five bob?' asked Bunter, anxiously.

'Ha, ha! Quite!'

'Well, I made the whole lot come to five bob, when I counted it first,' said Bunter. 'But the second time I counted it, it was only four and sevenpence.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,' yapped Bunter.

'I've got to get this right. I don't know exactly how much it will cost, but I've got to have five bob to go to Courtfield--'

'Why Courtfield?' asked Johnny Bull. 'You can blow it at the tuck-shop here, without hiking off to Courtfield.'

'I'm not spending this on tuck,' said Bunter, loftily. 'I'm not always thinking of food, like some fellows I could name.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Oh! Here's another threepenny bit,' exclaimed the fat Owl. 'How much does that make altogether?'

'Five bob, ass!'

'Oh, good! Then that's all right,' said Bunter, relieved. 'It wouldn't come to more than that, I should think.'

'What wouldn't?' asked Bob.

'Oh! Nothing!' said Bunter, hastily. 'I mean--well, nothing, you know. Still, I expect five bob will cover it all right.' Billy Bunter slipped the collection of coins into his pocket. 'I say, you fellows, lend me--'

'Time we moved on!' said Bob Cherry. 'There's a lot of snow under the elms, and there's old Coker, looking as if the earth belonged to him. Let's go and give him a few.'

'Let's!' agreed Frank Nugent.

'I say, you fellows, don't walk off while a fellow's talking to you,' exclaimed Bunter. 'Look here, I've got only five bob, and there's the bus. Lend me a bob for the bus, will you?'

'What's the matter with walking?' grunted Johnny Bull.

'I can't walk through all this snow--'

'There's hardly any snow on the roads.'

'I mean, I couldn't get back in time for class. I don't want to be late for Quelch. I've got a hundred lines to do for him already, and I don't want any more. Do lend me a bob for the bus.'

Bunter held out a fat paw. Bob Cherry looked at it, apparently thinking that it was held out for inspection. 'Wants washing!' he said.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, really, Cherry--'

'Soap and water,' advised Bob. 'Lots of soap. And a scrubbing-brush.'

'Beast! I-I mean, do lend me a bob, old chap. I'll settle out of my postal order when it comes.'

Bob Cherry laughed.

'Whip-round,' he said. 'If Bunter cuts off to Courtfield, we shan't see him again till class, and that's worth a bob of anybody's money.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Five hands dived into pockets. Harry Wharton produced a sixpence, Bob a threepenny piece, while Nugent, Johnny, and the nabob contributed the moderate sum of a penny apiece. That varied collection dropped into a fat palm, and clinked into the pocket already containing a still more varied collection.

'Mind, I'll settle this out of my next postal order,' said Bunter, as the coins rattled into a sticky pocket.

'Mind you do,' said Bob. 'We shall be on our Old-Age Pensions by then, and it will come in useful.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yah!'

With that elegant rejoinder, doubtless by way of thanks, Billy Bunter revolved on his axis, and rolled away, heading for the gates. He grinned as he rolled.

Why Billy Bunter, who never moved one rod, pole, or perch, if he could help it, was going a mile to Courtfield, for the special expenditure of the sum of five shillings in that town, and why he was so mysterious and secretive about it, might have made the Famous Five wonder what he was up to, if they had been interested. But they weren't! Billy Bunter's unimportance was unlimited, and he could be as mysterious as he liked, and nobody could have cared less. The fat Owl having rolled away, Harry Wharton and Co. gave their attention to collecting snow under the elms, for the benefit of Horace Coker of the Fifth Form: which led to some quite hectic minutes: and they forgot the fat existence of William George Bunter.

CHAPTER 7

STARTLING!

'WHARTON!'

'Here, Smithy.'

'Something in that you'd like to see, I expect.'

The Famous Five were in the Rag, when Herbert Vernon-Smith came in, with a newspaper in his hand. It was almost time for class, and the chums of the Remove were chatting cheerily round the fire while they waited for the bell. They all looked round at Smithy.

'Something in the newspaper?' asked Harry, puzzled.

Remove fellows were not much interested in newspapers. Smithy was probably the only fellow who ever took the trouble to walk to the newsagents' at Friardale. His reason was one he would not have cared to confide to Mr. Quelch: for it was the racing page that interested the scapegrace of Greyfriars.

'Yes! I happened to notice it,' explained Smithy. 'About your uncle.'

'My uncle!' exclaimed Harry.

'Colonel Wharton, of Wharton Lodge, Surrey--that's your uncle, I believe.'

'Yes, but what the dickens--!'

'Here you are--look!'

Vernon-Smith tossed over the newspaper, and strolled out of the Rag. There was a paragraph in the news columns, which Smithy had marked, and on which Harry Wharton fixed his eyes. It was not on the page that usually interested the Bounder. But it was an item of news that interested Harry Wharton very much indeed.

'Oh!' he exclaimed, as he looked at it. His face was quite startled, and his friends all looked at him inquiringly.

'Anything Up, Harry?' asked Nugent.

'Well, yes, rather! There's been a burglary at Wharton Lodge, according to this.'

'Phew! Your uncle's place, where we're all going for the hols!' exclaimed Bob. 'Rotten--just before Christmas. Have they got him?'

'No. it seems not--it seems that old Wells gave the alarm, and they got after him, but he escaped by an upper window, with the picture--'

'The whatter?'

'My uncle's Tintoretto-'

'What's a Tinteretto?'

'A painting, fathead! You've seen it--it used to hang in the library at the Lodge.'

'Nothing else?' asked Bob.

'Nothing else is mentioned--'

'Bit of luck, then, if the brute only got away with a picture--'

'Fathead!' said Frank Nugent. Nugent was better posted in matters of art than Bob. 'Tintoretto was no end of a big gun in the painting line. A Tintoretto is worth a lot of money.'

'Quids?' asked Bob.

'Hundreds.'

'Oh, my hat! Hundreds of quids! Phew!'

'Let's read it,' said Johnny Bull.

Harry Wharton held out the newspaper, and his chums all read that news item together. with

serious faces. They all knew, and liked and respected, old Colonel Wharton, Harry Wharton's uncle and guardian. And if, as Nugent stated, a Tintoretto was worth 'hundreds of quids', this was a serious loss to the old gentleman at Wharton Lodge. The news item was brief:

A burglary is reported from Wimford, in Surrey, at Wharton Lodge, the home of Colonel James Wharton. It appears that the alarm was given by Mr. Wells, the butler, and the man was seen and chased, but escaped by an attic window. Later it was found that a valuable picture, a Tintoretto, had been cut out of its frame in the library, and was missing.

'It's rotten,' said Harry, his brow clouded. 'The brute must have been pretty nimble, to get away by an attic window with that picture--it's a good size, I remember. I wonder he didn't drop it, clambering down from an attic. But he seems to have got away with it all right.'

'They'll get him--and it!' said Bob. 'A picture like that won't be easy for a thief to get rid of.'

'I hope so,' said Harry. 'I'm rather anxious to get some news from home now. I'd give anything to hear that Uncle James has got his Tintoretto back--it's not only the value, though that's a lot of money, but it was the apple of his eye. And--'

There was an interruption, as a chubby face was put in at the doorway of the Rag. It was Trotter's, the House page.

'Master Wharton 'ere?' asked Trotter.

'Here,' called out Harry. 'What is it, Trotter?'

Trotter came in, with a buff envelope in his hand. 'Telegram for you, sir,' he said. 'Man just come up from Friardale with it, sir, and Mr. Quelch said bring it to you.'

'Oh, good!' exclaimed Harry, his face lighting up. Trotter handed over the telegram, and departed.

'That looks like news!' said Bob.

'Yes, rather. I shouldn't know anything about the burglary yet, if Smithy hadn't happened to see it in the paper, but I might have seen it, of course, and I expect uncle's wired to tell me it's all right. I hope this means that they've got the Tintoretto back.'

Wharton jerked open the buff envelope. He unfolded the slip within, with hurried fingers.

Then he stared at it, blankly. The astonishment in his face astonished his friends. He seemed quite at a loss for words, as he stared at that telegram.

'It's from your uncle?' asked Nugent.

'Yes, yes! But--'

'About the Tintoretto?' asked Bob.

'No! Nothing about that! Blessed if I make it out. It's from Uncle James, but-but-but--oh, my hat! Look at it!'

They looked. A telegram from Colonel Wharton, at that moment, they had naturally supposed would be in connection with the occurrence at Wharton Lodge: and they hoped that it contained good news. But there was nothing of the kind in that telegram. It astonished the Co. as much as it astonished Harry Wharton. It ran:

'Harry Wharton, Greyfriars School, Kent. Happy to see your friends at Christmas. Hope Bunter coming. Should miss him. Uncle James.'



**'NO! NOTHING ABOUT THAT! BLESSED IF I MAKE IT OUT.
IT'S FROM UNCLE JAMES...'**

'Well, my only summer bonnet and winter toque!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'Nothing about the jolly old burglary--nothing about the jolly old Tintoretto--only about Christmas!'

'Your uncle can't be much upset about what's happened, to send a telegram like that!' said Nugent.

'Not a word about it--'

'No--only about the Christmas hols!' said Harry.

'And Bunter--!' said Johnny Bull.

'Yes, Bunter,' said Bob. 'Never knew that your uncle had taken a fancy to Bunter! The old fat man must have made a good impression when he was there last hols. Never noticed it, myself.'

'Blessed if I did, either,' said Nugent. 'I jolly well thought that Colonel Wharton looked at Bunter like something the cat might have brought in.'

'Same here,' said Johnny.

'The samefulness is terrific,' concurred Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton shook a puzzled head.

'Blessed if I make it out,' he said. 'But if Uncle James wants Bunter to come along, he'll have to come. You fellows think you could stand him? I shall have to ask him, after this. But--'

Clang! clang! clang!

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, there's the bell.'

Harry Wharton put the telegram into his pocket, and the chums of the Remove left the Rag, to head for the form-room. All of them were surprised, indeed astonished, by that telegram. But if Colonel Wharton made it a point that Billy Bunter should be included in the party for Wharton Lodge, that settled the matter: Billy Bunter was coming for Christmas! At long last, the problem of the hols was solved for the Owl of the Remove. Or--was it?

CHAPTER 8

HARRY WHARTON MAKES A DISCOVERY

'WIMFORD 101.'

'Hold the line, please.'

Harry Wharton was standing at the telephone in Mr. Quelch's study. His face was a little clouded. What he had seen in Smithy's newspaper had naturally somewhat perturbed him, and he was anxious of news from home. After class, he asked leave to use the phone in his form-master's study. It was a trunk call to his home in Surrey, and he had to wait to be put through. But a deep voice came through at last.

'Colonel Wharton speaking.'

'Uncle James--'

'Oh! Is that you, Harry?'

'Yes, speaking from Greyfriars. A chap here showed me something in a newspaper this afternoon, and--'

'So you've seen it. I was going to write. Nothing for you to worry about, my boy. I expect they will get the rogue soon.'

'But the Tintoretto, Uncle--I know how you valued it,' said Harry. 'Is there any news of that?'

'None so far! The rascal seems to have got clean away with it. But they will get it back for me. A picture like that will be traced. I expect to get news of it soon.'

'I hope so, Uncle. But what exactly happened?' asked Harry. 'The paper says that Wells gave the alarm--'

'Yes, Wells heard something in the night and turned out and called me, and told me there was someone in the library. We went there together, just as the man was coming out. He had something rolled under his arm, but I did not know what it was, at that moment. We collared him, but he broke loose, and dodged up the staircase. We thought we had him, when he dodged into that old attic--you know that old disused attic--?'

'Yes, yes, and then--?'

'He banged the door shut, and shoved an old box against it, and an old bedstead. We were hardly a minute getting it open, I think--but he was gone--gone by the attic window--'

'He must have had a nerve,' said Harry. 'That old window's a good forty feet up.'

'Yes, but there's a rain-pipe from the roof, close by the window, and he clambered down it. He knew his way about--I've no doubt he had been watching the place, to get his bearings, before he gave us a call. But he must have been as active as a cat to get down that rain-pipe with his plunder. Not an easy thing to carry--five feet of rolled-up canvas!'

'He might have pitched it down first, and--'

'He would never have found it again, in the dark. We didn't give him much time. I was out of the house pretty quick, you can guess, looking for him. I nearly had him, too--but all I saw was a shadow dodging away in the dark. He was just too quick for me. If he'd thrown the picture down, and stayed to look for it he would be in Wimford Police Station now. I wish he had, by gad! But they'll get him, I've no doubt.'

'And-and nobody was hurt?'

'No! No! He wasn't a dangerous customer--a little fellow with a face like a rat--not a kick in him--but as quick and nimble as a monkey. Don't worry, my boy--there wasn't a spot of danger--excepting for that rogue himself, if I'd got a good grip on him.'

'I'm glad of that, Uncle. I-I was feeling rather anxious, so I asked Quelch to let me ring you up--'

'I understand. But it's all right, my boy--quite all right.'

'And-and Aunt Amy--?'

Wharton heard a chuckle on the telephone.

'Your aunt never woke up at all. Never heard a word about it till the morning. Now, don't let this worry you at all, my boy. They'll get the man, and they'll get the picture. I'm quite confident of that. And I'm looking forward to seeing you and your friends here when the school breaks up. Not long now. Cherry, Nugent, Bull, and Hurree Singh--I shall be glad to see them all again.'

'Yes, and Bunter--.' said Harry, thus reminded of the telegram in his pocket.

'Bunter?'

'Yes, I had your telegram---'

'My telegram?'

'Yes, it came this afternoon, and I'm going to ask Bunter to join us, if you'd like him to come, of course--'

'Good gad! What are you talking about, Harry? You have had no telegram from me.'

'Eh?'

'I never sent you any telegram. What do you mean?' Harry Wharton almost dropped the receiver in his astonishment. The telegram itself had astonished him. But this was amazing.

'Uncle! You haven't forgotten sending me that telegram today?' he stammered.

'I have sent you no telegram. What the dickens do you mean? If you have had a telegram, it was not from me.'

'Not from you?' gasped Harry.

'Certainly not. Why the deuce should I send you a telegram? What was it about?'

'Oh, crumbs! About the hols--about Christmas--'

'Some hoax, I suppose. I certainly did not send you any telegram. Some young donkey has been pulling your leg.'

'Oh!' gasped Harry.

'Some sort of a silly practical joke, I suppose. Anyhow you've had no telegram from me. You'd better find out who sent it, and warn him not to play such tricks.'

'Oh! Yes! If-if you're sure--' stammered Harry.

'Sure?' There was a testy note in the old Colonel's voice. 'Do you think I should telegraph to you and forget it?'

'Oh! No! Of course not! But--' Harry Wharton, in his astonishment, hardly knew what to say. 'I-I had the telegram--I've got it in my pocket now--'

'Well, it was a hoax. It did not come from me. Now good-bye, Harry--I'll let you know if there's any news later.'

'Good-bye, Uncle.'

Harry Wharton put up the receiver. For a long minute, he stood staring at the telephone, quite bewildered. He had rung up his home, in the hope of hearing news of the missing Tintoretto: but it was quite other news that he had received. That telegram had not, as he had believed, come from his uncle at Wharton Lodge. Who, then, had sent it?

Not Colonel Wharton! The old Colonel had not, after all, expressed that surprising wish to see Billy Bunter at the Lodge in the holidays. It was someone else, and that someone had used the name of 'Uncle James'. Harry Wharton had been surprised, but he had taken it at face value, never doubting.

Now he knew that his leg had been pulled. By whom?

He took the telegram from his pocket. He had not thought of examining it closely before. Now he examined it very closely. There was a pencilled scrawl in the space marked 'Office of Origin'. But now he gave that scrawl attention, he could see that it was not 'Wimford', as it should have been if that telegram had been despatched from Wharton Lodge. On close examination that word proved to be 'Courtfield'.

Wharton fairly blinked at it. That telegram had not come from Surrey at all. It had been despatched from a town little more than a mile from Greyfriars! It was some Greyfriars fellow who had played this trick--and what Greyfriars fellow could care two straws, or one, about landing Billy Bunter at Wharton Lodge for the hols?

There was only one answer to that query.

'Bunter!' gasped Wharton.

He knew, now.

He remembered the fat Owl's mysterious excursion to Courtfield. He remembered that Bunter wanted precisely five shillings to expend for some purpose unknown. Now he counted up the words on the telegram: and they came to twenty: exactly five shillings' worth!

'Bunter! That fat villain!'

There was no doubt about it now. It was the last desperate dodge of the fat Owl to make a happy landing for the hols. And but for the nocturnal episode at Wharton Lodge, which had caused Wharton to ring up his home, he would undoubtedly have got by with it. He was not getting by with it now! Harry Wharton crumpled that telegram into his pocket, and left Mr. Quelch's study--and went to look for Billy Bunter.

CHAPTER 9

BUMPS FOR BUNTER

'I SAY, you fellows--!'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'Where's Wharton?'

'In Quelch's study.'

'I've been looking for him!' grunted Billy Bunter. 'I suppose he'll be coming up to tea?'

'I suppose so!' agreed Bob Cherry.

'Well, I'll wait for him.'

Billy Bunter rolled into No. 1 Study. Four fellows, in that study, grinned. They had no doubt that Billy Bunter was looking for Harry Wharton to chat about the hols. As that matter had been settled by the telegram, he had happy results to expect this time--so far as they knew, at least.

Certainly it did not occur to them that the fat Owl was already anticipating those happy results: knowing more about that telegram than they dreamed. Billy Bunter had little doubt that his remarkable scheme had worked the oracle--as indeed it had! Could Wharton disregard a wish expressed so plainly by the old Colonel? Obviously, he couldn't! He simply had to ask Bunter for the hols: and that was that. All the fat Owl now wanted was to see the captain of the Remove, and make quite, quite sure that it was all right. He did not have to wait long.

There was a hurried step in the Remove passage, and Harry Wharton passed the open door. He seemed in a hurry, for he did not stop: he was seen only (or a moment, then he disappeared up the passage.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' called out Bob Cherry.

But Wharton was gone.

A moment or two later, there was a bang at a door further up the passage. Then Harry Wharton's voice was heard.

'Isn't Bunter here?'

Apparently it was the door of No. 7 that had been banged open. Peter Todd's voice was heard in reply.

'No, he's not here. I think he went along to your study.'

'Oh! All right!'

Rapid footsteps came back down the passage.

Billy Bunter grinned. Wharton, evidently, was in a hurry to see him. That looked promising. That telegram had worked the oracle!

'Bunter here?' exclaimed Harry, as he came in.

'Yes, old chap!' purred Bunter. 'Here I am, old fellow. Waiting to see you, Harry, old chap--'

'You fat villain!'

'Eh?'

'You podgy, piffling, pernicious porpoise--'

'What?'

'You fat, frabjous, footling freak--'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'I'm going to burst you all over the study!' roared the captain of the Remove.

'I-I-I say--!' gasped Billy Bunter, in dismay and alarm. This did not look as if the oracle had been worked!

Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, all stared blankly. They were as surprised as Bunter.

'What the dickens--!' exclaimed Bob.

'What on earth's the row?' asked Johnny.

'That fat, spoofing octopus--' gasped Harry Wharton. 'Pulling my leg with that telegram--'

'What?'

'I've just been on the phone home. About what I saw in Smithy's paper. But I mentioned that telegram. And it came out that my uncle never sent it.'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Billy Bunter.

'Your uncle never sent it!' exclaimed Nugent, blankly.

'But he did, old chap--he must have--it had his name on it.'

'Well, he didn't! Now look at it!' Wharton jerked the telegram from his pocket, and threw it on the study table. 'Look at it! That scrawl on it isn't Wimford--it's Courtfield! It was sent from Courtfield, only a mile away, today. Who do you think sent it?'

'Oh, crumbs!'

Four pairs of eyes fixed on the telegram.

'That fat villain!' gasped Harry. 'Using my uncle's name--that's why he had to go to Courtfield--that's why he had to have five bob--and I should never have spotted it, if I hadn't phoned home because of what I had seen in Smithy's paper. Bunter, you spoofing porpoise--'

'Oh, lor!'

The fattest face in the Greyfriars Remove registered utter dismay. Billy Bunter's artful scheme had fallen down like a house of cards. Evidently he was not, after all, safely landed for the hols!

'Bunter!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'Oh, my hat!

Bunter--!'

'I-I-I say, you fellows, it wasn't me!' gasped Bunter. 'I-I say, I-I never sent that telegram. I-I never went to Courtfield after dinner--'

'We know you did!' roared Johnny Bull.

'I-I mean, I-I never went to the post office, and I never sent a telegram when I went there. I-I only went to get some-some stamps. Besides, I never went there at all--'

'A chap could be run in for putting somebody else's name on a telegram,' said Johnny Bull. 'This ought to go to Quelch.'

Yell, from Bunter.

'I say, you fellows, don't you get going to Quelch! He -he might think I-I sent that telegram--why, they might remember me at the post office, if he asked them. Besides, I didn't put somebody else's name on it--only "Uncle James". And it was only a lark, too.'

'So you own up to it, you fat villain?'

'No, I don't--I don't know anything about it,' gasped Bunter. 'Not a thing. I never went to Courtfield, and I never went to the post office while I was there, either. I think it's pretty thick to put this on me. I never did it, and I wouldn't have done it either, if I'd known that Wharton was going to phone home. How was I to know? The-the fact is that that telegram came from Colonel Wharton all right--' 'He's just told me it didn't!'

'Well, I daresay he's forgot--he's rather old and doddering, you know--doddering old fogies do forget things, you know--'

'I'll burst him!' gasped Harry Wharton. 'I'll burst him all over the Remove passage--'

'Here, you keep off!' yelled Bunter. 'I tell you I don't know anything about that telegram, and it cost me five bob, too. I tell you I never did it, and I only did it for a lark, and if you can't take a fellow's word, I can jolly well say-- Yaroooooh! Leggo!'

'Bump him!'

'I say, you fellows--Wow!'

Five pairs of hands grasped Billy Bunter. Weighty as he was, five pairs of hands were enough. The fat Owl was swept off his feet, and he descended on the study floor with a resounding bump.

'Ow! Wow! Oh! I say--'

'Give him another!'

CHAPTER 10

BREAKING UP

'BOB, old chap--'

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'When are you going?'

'When we start.'

'Well, when are you starting?'

'When we go.'

Billy Bunter breathed hard through his fat little nose.

Bob Cherry's replies were veracious and accurate, but they did not convey much in the way of information. And Bunter was in need of information.

It was breaking-up day at Greyfriars. Everybody, or almost everybody, was in high spirits. Studies had a dismantled look: passages echoed with cheery voices and tramping feet and the bumping of boxes. The school bus had already rolled away to Courtfield Station with a crowd of fellows: but there were still crowds about.

Among the fellows not yet gone was Billy Bunter. Many were eager for the first bus and the first train. But Billy Bunter did not join in the rush. He was not in the least eager for a train that would land him at home, sweet home.

At the eleventh hour, so to speak, Bunter was still unfixed for the hols. That telegram, which he backed as a winner, had proved a lamentable loser. But hope springs eternal in the human breast. He had seen Lord Mauleverer roll away in a car--taking with him the last hope of Mauleverer Towers. But the Famous Five were not yet gone.

They would be going by the bus to the station: packed in with a crowd: and Billy Bunter was going to pack into the same bus. He was going to pack into the same carriage on the same train, if he could. He was going to exert all his blandishments, in the lingering hope of landing at Wharton Lodge. Not until the last, the very last, moment, was the fat Owl going to head for Bunter Villa.

'I suppose you'll be going on the next bus, Bob, old chap!' he tried again.

'Suppose away!' said Bob, cheerily.

'Look here, are you going in the next bus or not?' hooted Bunter.

'Ask me another.'

'Beast!'

With that, Billy Bunter rolled away, leaving Bob Cherry grinning. Bunter was not grinning. He was frowning. It was a cold and frosty December day: much too cold for Bunter to want to hang about, keeping an eye on fellows who, as he easily surmised, would jolly well get off without him if they could. It was all very annoying: and Bunter frowned.

But that frown was banished from his plump brow, as he came on Johnny Bull. It was replaced at once by a friendly grin.

'Hold on a minute, Johnny, old chap!' squeaked Bunter.

Johnny Bull gave him a stare.

'Want a boot on your bags?' he inquired.

'Eh? No!'

'You'll get one, if you call me Johnny old chap.'

Johnny stalked on, evidently having no use for Bunter's blandishments. The fat Owl cast quite an expressive glance after him as he stalked.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

The frown returned to his fat visage. It corrugated his plump brow. It was like unto the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner. Bunter was more and more annoyed.

But once more he underwent a sudden change of aspect, as he spotted Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The frown was wiped away as if by a duster, and replaced as before by an amicable grin.

'I say, Inky, jolly cold, ain't it?' said Bunter, affably: by way of an opening gambit.

'The coldfulness is terrific,' agreed the nabob of Bhanipur.

'Tough on you, old fellow, when your own country's like an oven,' said Bunter, sympathetically. 'You jolly well get cooked there, don't you?'

'Not quitefully, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter.'

'I suppose niggers get used to it,' agreed Bunter. 'Jolly cold here for a nigger--I say, Inky! Inky, old chap! I say, don't walk away while a fellow's talking to you!' hooted Bunter.

But Hurree Jamset Ram Singh did walk away. Somehow he seemed to have had all he wanted of Billy Bunter's genial conversation.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter, once more.

And once more he frowned. It was no use wasting amicable grins on a departing back! He frowned: and this time the frown of the Lord High Executioner had simply nothing on Bunter's. Bunter was getting exasperated: and his fat face registered wrath.

Yet once more, however, that wrathful and indignant frown was wiped away, as his eyes and spectacles fell on Frank Nugent. Really, the changes in Billy Bunter's fat countenance were quite kaleidoscopic. Unwrinkling his corrugated brow and replacing the frown with as beaming a smile as he could muster, he rolled up to Nugent.

'Here you are, Franky, old fellow!' said Bunter, breezily.

'Here I am,' agreed Nugent.

'Taking the bus to the station, what?'

'Not at all.'

'Oh! How are you getting there, then?'

'The bus will be taking me.'

'You silly ass!' yapped Bunter. 'I-I-I mean, you will have your little joke, old chap. He, he, he! Awfully funny! He, he, he! I-I say, what are you grabbing up that snow for?'

'Just to let you have a last one to remember me by.'

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter just dodged a snowball as he hurriedly retreated. Once more his fat visage approximated, in its aspect, to that of the Lord High Executioner. Yet once more, he cleared that fat visage, as Harry Wharton came out of the House. It required an effort: but Bunter made the effort, and his fat face beamed at the captain of the Remove.

'I say, Wharton--'

Harry Wharton walked on.

'I say, Harry, old chap--'

Harry old chap, like Felix, kept on walking.

But Bunter was not to be denied. He clutched at a sleeve, and Harry old chap had to come to a halt.

'I say, old fellow--'

'Roll away, barrel.'

'But I say--'

'Hook it.'

'I only want to know when you're starting, old fellow,' urged Bunter. 'We go the same way on the railway, you know,' and it would be rather jolly to travel together, wouldn't it?'

'Not at all.'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'You don't want to travel with a stuck-up ass, and a Bank Holiday mob, Bunter. Not your style at all. Buzz off.'

'But I do, old chap,' said Bunter. 'I-I don't mind at all. I know you can't help being a stuck-up ass, old fellow--and I don't mind--I don't mind in the least, old boy. Not the least little bit. In fact, I-I'd like to be seeing you in the hols--'

'I don't think you'd really like it,' said Harry, shaking his head. 'You see, if I see you in the hols, I'm going to boot you all round Surrey and back again. If you really want the booting of your life, just let me catch sight of you in the hols. You'll get it.'

With that, the captain of the Remove shook his arm free, and walked on.

'Beast!' hooted Bunter.

Possibly, after that, the Famous Five supposed that they were done with Billy Bunter. But they were not quite done with him: Bunter, at all events, was not quite done with them.

When, a little later, Harry Wharton and Co. packed into a bus for the station, a fat Owl was in the offing, with eyes and spectacles on the alert. They were not going to get away unaccompanied by William George Bunter, if William George could help it. Once they were inside the vehicle, the fat Owl was sure of them: so, having seen them safely inside, Bunter followed on. Five fellows grinned as he did so: and one of them--Bob Cherry--made a prompt move.

Bunter, as he stepped on the bus, did not expect to receive a gentle, but firm, shove on his podgy chest. But it was the unexpected that happened. He did receive a shove on his podgy chest! And, instead of stepping on the bus, he sat down, suddenly, on the cold, unsympathetic earth, and roared:

'Yaroooooh!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' came from a crowd of fellows on the bus.

'Ow! Beast! Wow!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Good-bye, Bunter!'

'Cheerio, old fat man.'

The bus rolled away, laughing faces looking back at a fat Owl sitting on the earth and spluttering for breath. The glare that Billy Bunter cast after it might almost have cracked his spectacles.

The Famous Five were gone! Bunter remained! It was home, sweet home, for Billy Bunter. And the frown that settled once more on the fattest face at Greyfriars might have been envied, but never equalled, by the Lord High Executioner!

CHAPTER 11

A LIFT FOR BUNTER

'SMITHY!'

'Don't bother!'

'But I say, Smithy--' persisted Billy Bunter.

Herbert Vernon-Smith gave the fat Owl an impatient stare. He was about to step into the Rolls that his millionaire pater had sent for him: and he seemed to have no time, and no use, for the Owl of the Remove.

Almost everybody was gone by this time. Smithy was one of the last, having gone some distance with his pal, Tom Redwing, on his way to his home at Hawkscliff. He had returned to the school to find the paternal car waiting, and--not at all to his pleasure--Billy Bunter waiting also.

Billy Bunter had spotted the waiting car. That was why he had waited. He had a faint, faint hope of a lift in that car! True, it was a faint hope--very faint indeed! But it was worth trying on, before he finally resigned himself to the train for home.

'Why the dickens aren't you gone, Bunter?' snapped Smithy. 'Anyhow, don't bother--I've got to get off.'

'Hold on a minute, old chap,' urged Bunter. 'It's rather important, Smithy.'

'Well, what?'

'You see, my pals started without me,' explained Bunter. 'I was going on the same train, but I missed the bus. I thought you might give me a lift, old chap, as-as-as far as Wharton Lodge.'

'What?'

'It-it-it would take you a bit out of your way, I know,' admitted Bunter. 'But-but with a splendid car like that--'

'About fifty miles, that's all: a mere trifle!' said the Bounder, sarcastically. 'Anything else you'd like, you fat chump?'

'Well, you see, Wharton's expecting me--'

'Is he?' said Smithy: quite as if he doubted it.

'Yes, old chap--there was a bit of a misunderstanding, but-but it will be all right, if-if I get to Wharton Lodge. Wharton was only joking when he said he'd boot me if I turned up-I-I-I mean--'

'You fat, footling, fathead--'

'Oh, really, Smithy-I-I mean, Harry knows that I wouldn't let him down for the hols. It's-it's all arranged, really, only there was that little bit of a misunderstanding. If you'd give me a lift, old fellow--'

The Bounder stared at him. Bunter blinked at him anxiously.

Evidently, the fat Owl still nourished a lingering hope of a happy landing at Wharton Lodge. Precisely what sort of a greeting he would receive there, if he arrived in Smithy's car, Bunter did not know. But he was going to arrive there if he could. It was a rather long run, and they would arrive rather late: and they would have to let him stay the night, Bunter considered: and if Bunter stayed the night the rest might follow. The fat Owl hoped so, at any rate. A lift in Smithy's car might work the oracle--if Smithy obliged! Smithy was not a very obliging fellow, it was true: and it was probable, too, that he had not forgotten the incident of the cigarettes in No. 4 Study. The fat Owl's blink at the Bounder was very anxious.

Smithy seemed to be reflecting for some moments.

Then he suddenly burst into a laugh: to Bunter's relief, though he did not see where the laugh came

in. As he laughed, he nodded.

'You can hop in, if you like,' he said.

'Oh! Good!' gasped Bunter.

He hadn't expected it! It had been but the faintest of hopes! But it seemed that it had materialized.

Billy Bunter lost no time in hopping in, before the Bounder could change his mind.

Smithy did not immediately follow him in. He seemed to have some special directions to give the chauffeur. For two or three minutes he was speaking to him, in a low voice which did not reach Billy Bunter's fat ears.

Then he stepped in, and the car started.

Billy Bunter leaned back on soft cushions, and almost purred with satisfaction. This was ever so much better than cramming into a crowded bus, and then into a train. He was rather glad now that he had missed that bus. The car was going to land him at the very door of Wharton Lodge, which the train couldn't have done. Future prospects were doubtful--very doubtful--but so far, at least, things seemed to be going Bunter's way.

The Rolls rolled on swiftly.

Smithy did not seem in a mood for conversation. Every now and then he glanced at Bunter, and the fat Owl detected an ironical grin on his face. What he was grinning at, Bunter did not know: neither did he care. He was making use of Smithy, and that was all Bunter cared about. Bunter's own essays at conversation met with little encouragement.

'Not a bad car, Smithy,' he remarked. 'Not quite up to our Rolls at home, but not bad, what?'

'Fathead!'

There was silence for some time. Bunter broke it:

'Got any chocs, Smithy?'

'No.'

'Any toffee?'

'No!'

'I say, we've started pretty late, Smithy, and we shall get in a bit late. What about stopping for a snack on the road?'

'Nothing about it.'

Bunter just managed to refrain from ejaculating 'Beast!'

The car ran on through falling December dusk. Lights of towns and villages twinkled by. The car ate up mile after mile, while the winter dusk deepened.

It stopped at last.

Billy Bunter blinked from the window into deep shadow.

Then he blinked at the Bounder.

'I say, are we there?' he exclaimed.

'We're here, fathead! Get up and get out.'

'Oh, all right.'

Vernon-Smith stepped out. Billy Bunter rolled out after him. He blinked round in surprise. He expected to see the lighted windows of Wharton Lodge. But there were no lighted windows to be seen.

So far as Bunter could see, they had stopped on a country road. Why, was quite a mystery to Bunter.

'I say, Smithy, we ain't at the house,' yapped Bunter. 'What are we stopping here for, Smithy?'

'You're walking the rest.'

'Look here, I jolly well ain't walking,' snapped the fat Owl. 'Why can't you drive right up to the

house?'

'This way!'

Smithy grasped a fat arm, and led Billy Bunter on. Still more surprised, and considerably irritated, the fat Owl blinked round him in the deep gloomy dusk. He could make out nothing but a country road, a few trees, and dim buildings spotted about. There was not sign of Wharton Lodge.

'Look here, Smithy--!'

'Here you are!' said Smithy. 'You're at the gate now.'

'What gate?' yapped Bunter.

'You'll see.'

Vernon-Smith jammed Bunter against a low gate. Then he let go the fat arm, and disappeared.

Bunter was left alone. More puzzled and irritated than ever, he blinked round for the Bounder.

'Smithy! Where are you, Smithy? I say, Smithy! Beast! Can't you answer a chap? Smithy!' Bunter fairly yelled. 'Smithy!'

But answer there came none!

The only sound that reached Billy Bunter's fat ears was the throb of the engine, as the car re-started.

'Smithy!' roared Bunter.

The car's lights flashed away into the dusk. The amazed Owl found himself staring blankly at a vanishing rear-light! It vanished!

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

The car was gone! Herbert Vernon-Smith was gone!

Quite bewildered, Billy Bunter was left on his own. But as he blinked round, a gleam came to his eyes from a lighted window across a garden.

Where was he? Dark as it was, it was dawning on Bunter that there was something familiar in his surroundings. There was a name, glimmering in metal letters, on the gate: and he groped in his pocket for a match-box, and struck a match, hoping to get a clue to his whereabouts.

Then Billy Bunter almost fell down, in his astonishment. For a moment or two, he was really unable to trust the evidence either of his little round eyes or his big round spectacles. For the name on the gate was:

BUNTER VILLA

Bunter Villa! He was not at Wharton Lodge! He was nowhere near Wharton Lodge. He was at home! Slowly it dawned on Bunter's fat brain. Smithy had given him a lift--home! Certainly, Smithy hadn't undertaken to give him a lift to Wharton Lodge. He had simply told Bunter that he could hop in, if he liked! Bunter had taken the rest for granted. Sadly and sorrowfully now he realized that he had taken too much for granted! That indescribable beast had been pulling his leg all the time: and now was rolling away in his car, leaving Billy Bunter landed at home, sweet home!

'Beast!' hissed Bunter.

It was an infuriated Owl that kicked open the garden-gate, and tramped up the garden-path to Bunter Villa!

CHAPTER 12

A TALK ON THE TELEPHONE

'JOLLY!' said Bob Cherry.

There were few times and places that Bob would not have described as more or less 'jolly'. But it really was jolly. The group of Greyfriars juniors, standing at the door of Wharton Lodge in the winter morning, looking out at a scene like an old-fashioned Christmas card, agreed that it was jolly. Harry Wharton's face was very bright. He was home for the holidays, his friends were with him: Uncle James and Aunt Amy genial and kind: old Wells respectfully benign: the red berries of the holly glistened on the walls: Christmas was coming: and whirling snow-flakes added to the seasonable effect. There was just one little spot of bother: the recent nocturnal episode at the Lodge, and the loss of the old Colonel's priceless Tintoretto. But Colonel Wharton did not allow that incident to cast a shadow on the festive season.

'The lake's frozen hard,' said Harry. 'We can get some skating this morning, if you fellows feel like it.' 'If!' said Bob. 'No "if" about that!' He chuckled. 'Remember last time, when Bunter was here, and he skated sitting down? We had to carry him off--and did he weigh one ton--or two?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter's exploits on the ice were something to be remembered! The juniors chuckled as they remembered them.

And Bob's remark reminded them of the fat Owl, whom they had last seen sitting on the earth, the day before, behind a departing bus. Bunter, they had no doubt, was at home at Bunter Villa now: though they were not aware how the playful Bunder had landed him there. They were not expecting to see or hear anything more of the fat Owl until the next term at Greyfriars. Which did not diminish their cheery spirits.

'I wonder if Bunter's up yet,' said Nugent.

'Not likely,' said Bob. 'It's only ten o'clock.'

'No rising-bell at Bunter Villa,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'Bunter won't have turned out yet.'

Buzzzzzz!

It was the ring of a bell, in the telephone cabinet in the hall. The juniors glanced round.

Wells, the portly, ruddy butler, came to take the call.

Having taken it, he emerged from the telephone cabinet, and came across to the group of schoolboys at the doorway.

'Master Harry--!'

'For me?' asked Harry.

'Yes, sir! Master Bunter is holding the line.'

'Bunter!' exclaimed five voices in unison. Evidently, Billy Bunter was up, though it was only ten o'clock! It was the fat Owl of the Remove on the line.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Talk of angels, and you hear the rustle of their wings!' he remarked. 'Fancy Bunter out of bed at ten in the morning, where there's no rising-bell! I suppose he's rung up to wish us a merry Christmas.'

'Um!' said Harry Wharton, doubtfully. He had a suspicion that he was going to hear something more than that from the fat Owl.

He went to the telephone and took up the receiver. As he placed it to his ear, a fat irritable squeak came through:

'Are you there? Why doesn't the beast come to the phone? Keeping a fellow hanging on! Beast!'

Stuck-up ass! I say, are you there? Blow him! Are you there? Beast!

'Here,' said Harry, laughing.

'Oh! Is that you, old chap?' The exasperated squeak changed quite suddenly into a honeyed tone. 'I say, Harry, old fellow--'

'Cut it short! I'm going out.'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'Is that all?'

'No, it isn't, you beast-I-I mean, no, old chap--'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I say, old fellow, I've got up early to phone you. Just to wish you a merry Christmas you know--'

'Thanks! Same to you! Good-bye.'

'Hold on,' came almost a yell over the wires. 'I haven't finished yet. Do listen to a chap! I say, old fellow, I was thinking of giving you a look in--'

'Think again!'

'I'm a bit pushed for time, these hols, with so many invitations coming in right and left, you know--'

'I don't!'

'Well, you know now I've told you!' yapped the fat voice from Bunter Villa. 'But I could find time to run across and see you, old fellow. I hope you ain't shirty about that telegram, old boy. It was all a misunderstanding really--I never sent it, and it was only a joke too--just one of my little jokes--he, he, he! Look here, I could get a train to bring me over in time for lunch, if you like.'

'I don't like.'

'Oh, really, Harry, old fellow--'

'Merry Christmas, Bunter, from all of us--the whole Bank Holiday mob! Now good-bye.'

Harry Wharton put up the receiver. Billy Bunter, at Bunter Villa, had not finished yet, but Harry, at the Wharton Lodge end, had! He rejoined his friends in the hall. For a few minutes they chatted, in a cheery group. Then--!

Buzzzzzz!

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Is that Bunter again!' exclaimed Bob Cherry.

This time Harry Wharton took the call. Bob had guessed correctly: it was the fat voice of the Owl of the Remove that came through.

'Is that you, Harry, old fellow?'

'You fat ass--!'

'We seem to have been cut off. I was going to say--'

'Rats!'

'I was going to say--'

'Ring off!'

'I was going to say that there's a train here for Wimford in half an hour. So you'll be seeing me soon. You needn't trouble to send the car to the station. I'll take a taxi. I expect you could lend me a cab fare---'

'I'll lend you a boot!'

'I say, old chap, don't be stuffy. It was all a misunderstanding what I said in Mauly's study. I don't mind your crowd being a Bank Holiday mob, old fellow--I don't really--'

'You fat chump!'

'And I can stand your uncle all right, if that's what you're worrying about. I don't care if he's a stuffy old stick.'

'What?'

'A stuffy old stick! I've stood him before, and I can stand him again. Don't you worry about that, old fellow. I've got tact, you know--I can get on all right with a grumpy old fogey--'

'I wish you were a bit nearer, Bunter!' said Harry Wharton, in a concentrated tone.

'Oh! Do you really, old chap?'

'Yes: I'm just yearning to boot you all over the shop.'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'Now ring off, for goodness' sake, and don't let me hear any more of your burbling till next term at Greyfriars. It will be bad enough then.'

'He, he, he!'

'What are you he-he-he-ing about, you bloated blitherer?'

'He, he, he! I don't mind your little jokes, old fellow. I shall have to cut off now, to catch that train--'

'If you catch that train, that train isn't all you will catch.'

'He, he, he! I won't say good-bye, old fellow--just aw revaw! Look out for me, old boy!'

'I will!' said Harry Wharton. 'We'll all look out for you, and if we see you anywhere around, we'll boot you all the way back to Wimford station, and boot you into the train. Got that?'

'Beast!'

'We'll all look out--the whole Bank Holiday mob! If it's a boot you want, you've only got to barge in and ask for it! You'll get it--hard! Now go and eat coke!'

Slam! Harry Wharton replaced the receiver quite vigorously. This time, the bell did not ring again. Even Billy Bunter seemed to have been discouraged, and that was the end of the talk on the telephone. A cheery party set out with their skates for the frozen lake in the park: and as they whizzed merrily over the glistening ice, they quite forgot Billy Bunter. But they were destined to be reminded of him later.

CHAPTER 13

HOME FOR THE HOLS

'WILLIAM!'

Billy Bunter suppressed a grunt.

It is said that there is no rest for the wicked. It seemed also that there was no rest for the lazy. Billy Bunter, sprawling in an armchair before a fire, with his feet on the fender, did not want to be disturbed. It was only eleven o'clock in the morning: much too early for Bunter to think of exerting himself--if he thought of it at all, which was improbable.

'William!'

It was the voice of Mr. Bunter. And there was quite a sharp note in the parental voice.

Bunter did not reply.

From the direction of the voice, he gathered that his honoured parent was looking in at the door. From the door he could not see his hopeful son in the armchair before the fire. Remembering the incident in Mauly's study at Greyfriars, Bunter hoped that history would repeat itself. What Mr. Bunter wanted, he did not know: but he could guess that, whatever it was, it would mean getting out of that armchair. And he did not want to get out of that armchair.

'William!'

It was not a cheerful or contented Owl that cold and frosty morning. He had turned out early--early for Bunter in holiday time--to telephone to Wharton Lodge. The result of that talk on the telephone had been neither grateful nor comforting. He had hoped for better things. With the tact that was one of his charming characteristics, he had explained that he didn't mind if the party at the Lodge were a Bank Holiday mob, and that he could stand that stuffy old stick Colonel Wharton. Somehow that had seemed to put Wharton's back up, making things worse instead of better. To arrive at Wharton Lodge, only to be booted back to Wimford Station, was not an attractive prospect. Billy Bunter had had to resign himself to home, sweet home, for the hols.

That would not have been too bad, if the Bunter establishment had resembled, even in a remote degree, the Bunter Court that he had often described at school. But it didn't! On close inspection, Bunter Court diminished to Bunter Villa: the horde of menservants and maidservants to a cook and a daily maid: the magnificent Rolls to a well-worn old Ford.

Worst of all, Bunter was expected to make himself useful at times. Mr. Bunter was not so unreasonable as to expect his hopeful son to be ornamental: but he did expect him to make himself useful now and then. Billy Bunter was absolutely without any urge to make himself useful.

Neither did he find much comfort in the company of Sister Bessie and Brother Sammy. Sammy had a most exasperating way of annexing tit-bits at meal times before Billy could get at them. Bessie seemed to have only one topic of conversation: a half-crown Billy had borrowed off her at Cliff House in the term. The way Bessie harped on that subject was more than tiresome. Billy was fed up with it. It really seemed that he would never hear the end of that half-crown: unless, perhaps, he repaid the loan: a resource that had not yet occurred to him.

Altogether, it was a pessimistic Owl that morning.

There was a spot of comfort in sprawling in an armchair and toasting his toes on the fender. But even that spot was to be denied him, it seemed. The parental voice at the door indicated as much.

'William!'

For the fourth time, Mr. Bunter pronounced that name.

The sharp note in his plump voice was growing sharper.

Billy Bunter sat tight. If Mr. Bunter concluded that he was not there, and proceeded elsewhere, that would be all right. Bunter's cue was to follow the example of that sagacious animal, Brer Fox, and 'lie low and say nuffin'.

But alas for Bunter! Ponderous footsteps sounded behind the armchair. Mr. Bunter was coming into the room.

A moment more, and he was staring down at a fat Owl and the fat Owl was blinking up at him.

'William!' Mr. Bunter almost hooted.

'Oh! Did you call?' gasped Bunter.

'You are well aware that I called you, William. Why did you not answer?' demanded Mr. Bunter.

'I-I didn't hear you,' gasped Bunter. 'And-and I was just going to answer, too--'

'I have had a complaint from the cook, William. She has missed a cake from the kitchen. Do you know anything about it?'

'Oh! No! Not a thing,' answered Bunter, promptly. 'I haven't been in the kitchen, and I never touched the cake while I was there, either. I-I hope cook doesn't think that I'd scoff her cake. It wasn't much of a cake, either--hardly any plums in it--'

'I, have a good mind to box your ears, William.'

'Oh! I-I say--'

Billy Bunter blinked apprehensively at his plump parent.

He could only hope that, while Mr. Bunter had a good mind to box his fat ears, he would have a better mind not to! Luckily, that proved to be case.

'You are an idle, as well as a greedy boy, William!' said Mr. Bunter, severely. 'Why are you sitting in that armchair? Did I not mention at breakfast that the snow required sweeping from the garden-path?'

'Oh, lor!'' moaned Bunter.

'Had you forgotten?' snapped Mr. Bunter.

'Oh! No! Yes! Oh, crikey!'

Bunter had not forgotten: but he had hoped that Mr. Bunter had! Apparently, Mr. Bunter hadn't!

'Now go and see to it at once!' said Mr. Bunter. 'I shall expect to see the path quite clear of snow, William, from the gate to the house, before dinner.'

'I-I-I say,' gasped Bunter. 'Kik-kik-kik-couldn't the gardener do it?'

'The gardener is not here today, William. Neither should I feel disposed to pay him three shillings an hour to sweep up the snow, while an idle schoolboy sprawls in an armchair!' said Mr. Bunter, sternly.

'But I-I-I say,' it looks as if it's going to snow again!' groaned Bunter. 'Tain't much use sweeping up the snow if it's coming down again, is it?'

'You will go at once and sweep the path clear of snow, William!'

'But I-I say--'

'You will find a broom in the garden-shed.'

'Oh! Yes! But--'

'Now go immediately--unless,' added Mr. Bunter, grimly, 'unless you are waiting for me to box your ears, William.'

William, it appeared, was not waiting for that! William bounced out of the armchair as if moved by a spring. 'I'm going!' he gasped.

And he went.



SPOTS OF PERSPIRATION CAME OUT ON HIS FAT BROW AS
HE LABOURED WITH THE BROOM AND THE SNOW

With deep feelings, Billy Bunter sorted a broom out of the shed, and set to work.

On a frosty morning, it was really quite a healthy and wholesome spot of exercise for a fat Owl. Probably it did Bunter good. But if it was for Bunter's benefit, Bunter had not the smallest, slightest, remotest desire for such benefits.

Cold as was the December day, spots of perspiration came out on his fat brow as he laboured with the broom and the snow. Every other minute, he rested on the handle of the broom, and moaned. By the time he had swept the garden-path clear. Billy Bunter was feeling that life was weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable, and that even the hols were a delusion and a snare. And all the while, the sky looked as if more would be coming down soon: which indicated more snow-sweeping for a hapless Owl later on. Perhaps it was no wonder that Billy Bunter, in such harrowing circumstances, debated in his fat mind whether, after all, it might be a practical proposition to take a chance at Wharton Lodge. Desperate diseases, as the poet has told us, require desperate remedies!

That afternoon, Billy Bunter found himself in the train for Wimford, heading for Wharton Lodge—dreading the worst, but hoping for the best!

CHAPTER 14

BUNTER ASKS FOR IT

'IT'S coming down!' remarked Bob Cherry.

It was!

Snow clouds drifted over the December sky. Flakes were falling fast. The surroundings of Wharton Lodge looked more than ever like an old-time Christmas card.

Ten miles away, a garden-path laboriously swept clear in the morning by a morose Owl, was getting covered as thickly as ever in the afternoon. At Wharton Lodge, paths and lawns and shrubberies disappeared under a white mantle. Trees looked like spectres: and every now and then a mass of snow rolled thudding down from the old red roofs.

But if it was wild and wintry without, all was ruddy and cheery within, in Harry Wharton's 'den', where the Greyfriars fellows had gathered.

They had been skating in the morning, and had come in merry and bright for lunch--and as hungry, as Bob expressed it, as hunters or Bunters. After lunch, Inspector Slade from Wimford had called, in connection with the affair of the lost Tintoretto, and he was now with Colonel Wharton in the library. In Harry's 'den', as he called it, the five schoolboys had gathered, and they were debating whether to venture forth and defy the elements.

The 'den' was a very comfortable and commodious apartment. It was a large room, with french windows and a little balcony, where there were old stone steps leading down into the garden. There was a communicating door to Wharton's bedroom adjoining, and another on the corridor, in which were the rooms occupied by his chums. That corridor ended in an old stair that led up to a disused attic, long abandoned to dust and cobwebs, its existence almost forgotten, till recalled by the episode of the midnight visitor who had escaped by its window.

In the 'den' a log fire burned and crackled in a wide old grate, the firelight dancing on frosty windows. Outside, the balcony and the steps down were banked with snow, and more was coming down every moment. Bob, looking out at the weather, remarked that it was 'coming down', but he added:

'Jolly, isn't it?'

'The jolliffulness is terrific, my esteemed Bob,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, 'but the indoorfulness is preferable to the outdoorfulness.'

'Oh, rot!' said Bob. 'What about a spot of snowballing? Plenty of snow about, what?'

'Lots!' agreed Harry Wharton. 'Who says snowballing?'

'Snowballing!' said Frank Nugent and Johnny Bull, together.

'That's four for getting out!' chuckled Bob. 'This Co. goes by the majority, so brace up and face it, Inky.' The nabob of Bhanipur nodded a dusky head.

'The coldfulness is terrific,' he said, 'but a stitch in time that cannot be cured must be endured by a bird in the bush, as the English proverb remarkably observes.'

'Good old English proverb!' chuckled Bob. 'Let's get going, then! A long lane that has no turning saves too many cooks from going longest to the well, what?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Bob looked from the window again.

'In about five minutes we shall look like a crowd of Abominable Snowmen,' he said. 'But what's the odds so long as you're "'appy"? Come on, you men, and shove on your coats. You'd better shove on

a couple of blankets too, Inky.'

Bob hurled open the door on the corridor, and four fellows went along to their rooms for coats and caps and scarves, while Harry Wharton stepped into the adjoining room for a similar outfit. In a few minutes they gathered again in the 'den', and Harry opened the french window on the balcony. A gust of wind came in, laden with whirling flakes.

'Jolly!' said Bob, rubbing a snow-flake out of his eye. 'Come on-race you fellows down the steps.'

He plunged out into six or seven inches of snow on the balcony. Johnny Bull and Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh followed him, Harry Wharton coming last and closing the door after him.

'Mind the steps, Bob!' called out Johnny Bun, as Bob plunged ahead. 'They're slippery.'

'Oh, that's all right!' said Bob, cheerily. 'Race you down! Follow your leader!'

Bob, as usual, was full of beans. The fact that the old stone steps were caked with snow did not deter him. He went down those steps with a rush.

'Look out!' shouted Nugent.

'Oh, my hat!'

'Bob, you ass--!'

'My esteemed idiotic Bob--'

Bob found those steps slippery! Half-way down, he slipped, and did the remainder of the steps in one! From above, his comrades watched him roll down in clouds of snow, and there was a roar from below as he landed.

'Ooooh!'

'More haste less speed!' said Johnny Bull, sententiously.

'Do that again, Bob!' called out Nugent.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Bob Cherry sat up dizzily, half buried in snow. He rubbed snow out of his eyes and ears and neck, and gasped for breath. Four laughing faces looked down on him from the balcony.

'Oooogh!' came up from Bob.

'Going to do that again, Bob?'

'Oooogh! Fathead! Oooogh!'

'What is the oddfulness, so long as the happiffulness is terrific, my esteemed Bob?' chuckled the nabob of Bhanipur.

'Groooogh!'

'I think we'd better follow the example of jolly old Agag, and walk delicately,' remarked Nugent.

'Much better,' said Harry, laughing.

And the four juniors, walking delicately as Nugent advised, descended the snowy steps with care.

'Oooogh!' Bob Cherry was spluttering, as his friends joined him. 'Groooogh! I'm nearly suffocated! I'm smothered! I think I slipped.'

'Looked like it!' chuckled Nugent.

'I told you so!' remarked Johnny Bull.

'Fathead!'

'Well, I did tell you so--'

'Ass!'

Bob Cherry scrambled up shaking off snow. He looked rather like a snowman, and the fact that Johnny had told him so did not seem much of a consolation. He clawed off snow and gasped for breath.

'Oooogh! Where's my cap? Seen my cap?' he exclaimed. 'Is some silly ass standing on my cap?'

'There's a silly ass standing on it,' chuckled Nugent. 'It's under the biggest feet in the Remove.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Brrrr!' said Bob. He stooped and recovered his cap on which he was standing. 'Oooogh! Some of that dashed snow has gone down my neck! Never mind--all in the day's work! Come on!'

A tumble down the steps, and a smothering in the snow did not suffice to dash Bob's cheery spirits. He jammed a snowy cap on a snowy mop of hair, and plunged away through falling flakes, and his comrades followed.

On the wide drive, that curved between rows of leafless trees from the house to the gate on the Wimford road, there was plenty of room for a snow-battle--and plenty of snow. Gathering snowballs, and pelting one another with the same, seemed to have quite an exhilarating effect on the schoolboys, to judge by the shouts of laughter that echoed among the frosty branches. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh forgot that it was cold: finding it quite warm work.

They had the place to themselves: nobody else seemed to be defying the weather. But all at once a figure appeared in the open gateway at the end of the drive, rolling in from the Wimford road. Bob Cherry, about to hurl a snowball, checked it, as he caught sight of the new arrival, and shouted:

'Look out! Somebody's coming in.'

There was a pause in the snowballing, and the juniors all looked towards the figure in the gateway. It was a plump figure, looking plumper than even in an ample overcoat, and smothered with snow from head to foot. It came rolling in with a well-remembered roll, and a pair of big spectacles glinted back the pale rays of a wintry sun.

'Bunter!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'Bunter!' echoed Bob.

'Billy Bunter--!'

'That fat ass--!'

'I say, you fellows--!' gasped Billy Bunter. He got no further.

'Go it, you men,' called out Harry Wharton. 'Bunter's looked in to ask for it: let him have it!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Snowballs rained again. Right and left, up and down and round about, they crashed and squashed and burst on the fat figure in the gateway. It was like Billy Bunter's earlier experience in the old quad at Greyfriars: only more so: much more so. Snowballs squashed and smashed all over William George Bunter, and he tottered, with a succession of breathless squeaks.

'Ooogh! I say, you fellows--ooogh! I-I just looked in to say--gurrngh! Beasts! I say--oh, crikey! Woooogh! Oh, jiminy!'

Billy Bunter had doubted--deeply doubted--what his reception might be like from the 'Bank Holiday mob' if he rolled in at Wharton Lodge. But he was left no room for doubt now. A hail of snowballs made it quite clear, even to the Owl of the Remove. That hail fairly drove him out of the gateway, and whizzed after him as he bolted along the Wimford road as fast as his fat little legs could carry him.

'Cheerio, Bunter!' yelled Bob Cherry.

'Come back if you want some more of the same!' called out Harry Wharton.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter was too breathless even to yell back 'Beast!' He careered on, and disappeared among falling flakes. After which, the chums of the Remove resumed the snow-battle, and once more forgot the fat existence of William George Bunter.

CHAPTER 15

ANY PORT IN A STORM!

'OH, lor'!

Billy Bunter groaned.

Nothing but a groan could give expression to his feelings at the moment. So he groaned. Groaning did not seem to get him anywhere: but no doubt he found it a solace.

He was standing under a snowy tree, close to a snow-ridged wall. He was standing there because it was the only shelter available: though it was not much of a shelter. Harry Wharton and Co., if they had thought of him at all, would have thought that he was already back at the station, taking his train. But Billy Bunter was nowhere near the station. A walk from Wimford to Wharton Lodge had tired his little fat legs, and a walk back, trudging through thick snow on the road, with thick flakes falling overhead, had no attraction whatever for him.

There were other difficulties, too. The fat Owl had expended all his available cash on a single ticket to Wimford. Billy Bunter often took chances--quite long chances: but this time he had taken rather too long a chance. He was stranded without so much as a return fare in his possession. How he was to get back to Bunter Villa was a problem compared with which those set by the maths master at Greyfriars were quite easy going.

Moreover, Bunter did not want to go back to Bunter Villa. And in fact he was not thinking of going back to Bunter Villa.

As he stood by the wall, at the corner of the park, expressing his feelings in a series of mumbling groans, quite other thoughts were revolving in his fat mind.

After his reception at the gate, even Bunter realized that he couldn't walk in at Wharton Lodge. Harry Wharton had promised to boot him back to Wimford if he did: and only too clearly now, he was prepared to be as good as his word.

Nevertheless, Bunter was still thinking of Wharton Lodge as a refuge. It was, in fact, the only port in a storm! The fat and fatuous Owl had, so to speak, burned his boats behind him.

'Beasts!' groaned Bunter. 'After all I've done for them--Beasts!'

He blinked up at the snow-ridged wall.

Billy Bunter knew his way about at Wharton Lodge.

He had been there before. A fellow who couldn't venture to walk up to the door and knock, could find another way in! He remembered Harry Wharton's 'den' with its balcony and steps up from the garden. Those beasts were out of doors now: there wouldn't be anybody in Wharton's quarters. Certainly, if he was found there, he knew what to expect. And he did not want--very much indeed he did not want--to be booted back to Wimford Station. But suppose a fellow kept out of sight for a while--in a rambling old place like Wharton Lodge, that was a practical proposition! A fellow might show up, later, at a propitious moment--trusting to luck and the genial influence of Christmastide! Anyhow he would get out of that beastly snow.

Having already taken long chances, Billy Bunter was debating in his fat mind whether to take a still longer one!

For long, long minutes, he hesitated. But he made up his fat mind at last.

At the worst he would be found, and escorted--no doubt emphatically--back to the railway station. Even so, one of the beasts would surely stand him a railway fare home, if only to see the last of him. But at the best, it might turn out quite a happy landing--with luck! Certainly, he would need a lot of luck, to see him through. But he was going to chance it.

Fortunately, the park wall was low. Having made up his fat mind, Billy Bunter made a jump, and caught the coping in fat hands. He dislodged a mass of snow, which smothered him, and elicited from him a series of gasping gurgles. But he plunged and clambered on, and surmounted the wall. He rolled over it, lost his hold, and landed on the inner side with a bump and a howl.

But he fell in thick snow, which cushioned the fall. He scrambled to his feet, rubbed snow out of his eyes and off his spectacles, and blinked round him. From a distance, came an echoing sound of shouts and laughter. Those beasts were still busy on the drive, carrying on their snow-battle. Billy Bunter was going to give the drive a wide berth.

No one was in sight. In such weather, few persons were likely to be out of doors, if they could help it. Satisfied that he was not observed, Billy Bunter trod away through the snow. He left a trail of footprints behind him: but in a few minutes they were obliterated by falling flakes, and no sign remained to tell that a fat Owl had passed that way.

He was careful to keep clear of the front of the house, where there might be eyes at windows. Wharton's rooms were on the west side, and it was from that side that the fat Owl cautiously made his approach. He gasped with relief when he found himself at the foot of the stone steps down which Bob Cherry had tumbled half an hour ago.

There he paused, to blink round him with a wary blink.

There was not likely to be anybody about, till the juniors came back: and, in fact, there was nobody. Really, it could not have been easier.

Billy Bunter tramped up the steps to the little balcony.

It was thick with new-fallen snow in which his feet sank deep. The french windows were shut, and for a moment Billy Bunter felt an alarming misgiving. If that door was locked--!

But it was not likely to be locked, with the schoolboys out of doors. Billy Bunter remembered that Harry Wharton and Co. were accustomed to use that way in and out of the house, when they were at Wharton Lodge in holiday time. And, to his satisfaction, the door opened to his hand.

He rolled in, followed by a flurry of snow on the winter wind. Snow fell from him in lumps and chunks, and scattered on the floor. That was a new cause for alarm. Outside falling flakes hid Bunter's trail. Inside, there was nothing to hide it. The most casual glance would reveal that somebody had come in at that door.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

But the fat Owl was equal to the occasion.

He set the french window wide open. Gusts of wind blew in, laden with thick flakes. Billy Bunter's traces were lost on the snow that scattered rapidly over the floor. Probably the juniors, when they came in, would suppose that the door had been carelessly latched, and had blown open. Anyhow Bunter had to take that chance, among the many other chances he was taking.

He blinked round Harry Wharton's 'den'.

It was very warm and comfortable, especially in contrast to the weather outside. Bunter almost purred with satisfaction as he warmed himself at the crackling fire.

But he dared not linger there.

Any minute, he might hear tramping feet on the balcony.

Unwillingly he tore himself away from the fire. He had to find a refuge before he was discovered, if he was to remain under the roof of Wharton Lodge. But as he was about to cross to the door, his eyes fell on a dish on the table, laden with apples, oranges, and bananas.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'Good!'

He had no time to lose. Moments might be precious. But the lure of foodstuffs was irresistible.

Bunter was hungry! That was, indeed, his usual state. And if he was going to find a hide-out in Wharton Lodge, and keep 'doggo' till it seemed safe to reveal his presence, obviously provender was a serious consideration. That dish of good things was a windfall!

Two fat hands fairly flew to that dish.

Pausing only to cram a banana into a capacious mouth, he crammed the rest into his pockets. Then, with his mouth full, and all his pockets bulging, he rolled across to the door.

He opened that door cautiously, and blinked out into the corridor. For several anxious seconds, he blinked and listened. But the coast was clear--there was no one about.

He stepped out on tiptoe.

To his left, the corridor ended on a landing, where there was a gallery over the hall below. On his right it led away past a number of doors which he could guess belonged to the rooms occupied by the visitors. It was to the right that he turned, tiptoeing up the corridor.

His fat brain was working actively now. He remembered the old stair at the end of that corridor, which led up to a remote and disused attic.

A disused attic was not the refuge he would have chosen, had not his choice been so limited. But it was a case of any port in a storm. He clambered up the narrow winding stair, glad to get out of sight of anyone who might come upstairs and across the landing.

It was deeply dusky at the top of the stair. He groped over a door, and his fat hand found a door-handle. It creaked as he turned it. He pushed open the door and blinked into the attic.

'Oh, crikey!' was his comment on what he beheld. That attic was not inviting to the eye.

Probably it had not been used for a generation or two.

There was a small window, obscured by dust, through which came a pale glimmer of a setting wintry sun. On the floor was a thick but very old and dusty square of carpet. There was a fireplace with a wide old grate under an ancient chimney, dating from the days when small sweeps climbed the interior of chimneys to sweep them. On either side of the fireplace was a deep alcove, in one of which was a sink with a tap: in the other, a rickety old bedstead. Three or four old boxes, a dilapidated washstand, and other such fragments of lumber, were revealed by the glimmer from the little window.

'Oh, crikey!' repeated Bunter.

It was a far from inviting refuge.

But it was a refuge: and the only one available that was safe and secure.

Nobody was likely to come up the old winding stair to an attic long disused: so far as Bunter knew, nobody had come up for years. He was quite unaware that it was by that attic window that the purloiner of Colonel Wharton's Tintoretto had escaped. Bunter knew nothing of the recent nocturnal happenings at Wharton Lodge.

He rolled in, and shut the door after him. He was feeling safe now.

He groped for a key: but there was no key. But who was likely to open that door? Nobody, Bunter hoped at least.

How was anyone at Wharton Lodge to guess, or dream, that a surreptitious fat Owl had penetrated the building and ensconced himself in that remote and forgotten attic?

Nobody could guess it, or dream it!

Not to any mind could it possibly occur that, in that extraordinary and very remarkable way, Billy Bunter had come for Christmas!

The future was uncertain: extremely uncertain. But Billy Bunter was not the fellow to meet troubles half-way. The present tense was good enough for Bunter. He sat down on the edge of the old

bedstead which creaked under his weight. From his coat pockets he disinterred apples, oranges, and bananas, and proceeded at once to deal with them. For the time, at least, all was well: he was under the shelter of a roof, and he was eating! He ate and was comforted!

CHAPTER 16

STRANGE INTRUDER

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'What--?'

'Lookout!'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Who-what--?'

It was quite a chorus of startled exclamations.

The early December dusk had fallen thickly. Lights were gleaming from the many windows of Wharton Lodge. But on the west side of the old house all was dark and shadowy, as the Greyfriars juniors came back to the steps up to the little balcony outside Harry Wharton's den. They were considerably snowy, and somewhat breathless, but in the cheeriest of spirits. Snow was still falling, covering their footprints as fast as they were made, and the old stone steps up to the balcony were thick with it. Bob Cherry tramped up--a little more carefully than he had descended earlier--and the four others followed him up one after another: and then--

Bob as he reached the balcony, noted that the french window' was open. A glimmer of firelight came from within.

But that was not all that he noticed. In the open doorway was a figure, its back to him, peering into the room.

It was a small figure--slim even in a thick overcoat--with a hat pulled low over its head. Even as Bob's eyes fell on it, it turned and faced him. The man, whoever he was, had not heard the juniors coming: he was not aware of them till Bob stepped up on the balcony. As he turned, Bob had a momentary glimpse of sharp glinting eyes under the low hat. But it was only a glimpse, for the next second the man was leaping at him, and his startled exclamation had hardly left his lips when he was hurled backwards.

As he reeled over, the little man shot down the steps. There were four juniors in his way: but that sudden unexpected rush took them utterly by surprise, and they were knocked right and left like skittles.

Bob was sprawling on the balcony, Harry Wharton fell on the steps, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh rolled down to the bottom in clouds of snow.

The little man staggered and stumbled over Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. But he was on his feet again in a twinkling and running. He vanished into the December dark while the juniors still sprawled and panted from the sudden shock.

'What the dickens--?'

'Who the thump-?'

'Who was that?'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Oh, my esteemed hat!'

'Did you see--?'

'Oh, crikey!'

Everyone was exclaiming, as he scrambled up. They stared round them in blank amazement. But the man who had been on the balcony had vanished. Not a sound came back of his footfalls in the thick carpet of snow.

Bob Cherry stared down from the balcony.

'Who the thump was that?' he exclaimed. 'He knocked me over!'

'And me!' gasped Harry Wharton.

'And all of us! Who the dickens was he? Couldn't have been anybody belonging to the house--'

'He's got away,' said Johnny Bull. 'Some tramp--'

'Must have been,' said Nugent.

'Not another jolly old burglar, what?' said Bob.

'Not likely,' said Harry. 'Some tramp nosing about, I suppose, and he found that door wasn't locked. He might have gone through the rooms though, while everybody was downstairs, if we hadn't come back when we did.'

'Perhaps he's gone through them already,' said Johnny Bull.

'Oh, my hat! Let's look!'

All the five were considerably shaken by that sudden and unexpected shock. But they lost no time in hurrying in by the french window, and Harry Wharton switched on the light.

They stared round the room. Snow was everywhere, blown in by the winter wind. It lay about almost in heaps. 'I don't think he's been inside,' said Bob. 'He seemed to be just looking in when I spotted him--we must have been close behind him--'

'He hadn't just opened that door,' said Johnny Bull, shaking his head.

'How do you know, then?'

'Because all this snow couldn't have blown in if the door had only just been opened,' said Johnny.

'Must have been open for some time for snow to blow all over the shop.'

'True, O King!' admitted Bob. 'And if he had the door open for some time, that means that he's been inside, I suppose.'

'Anything missing, Harry?' asked Nugent.

'Nothing that I can see,' answered Harry, scanning the room. 'But if he's been inside, we can guess what he was after--anything that he could pick up. You fellows had better look through your rooms. We'll lock that door when we go in and out this way, after this,' he added.

'The lockfulness of the stable door after the cracked pitcher has gone to the well is a stitch in time that saves ninepence, as the English proverb remarks,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Old Inky's always got a proverb to fit the case, even if it's mixed like pickles,' he said. 'Hallo, hallo, hallo--something is missing--'

'I don't see-!'

'Look!' Bob pointed to a dish on the table. 'That dish was piled when we went out--look at it now!'

'Oh, my hat!'

The juniors looked at the dish: or rather stared at it. Whoever and whatever that little man was, whether a wandering tramp, or any other snatcher-up of unconsidered trifles, they would hardly have expected him to bother about such booty as apples, oranges, and bananas. But that dish, which had certainly been well supplied, was bare! Not an apple, not an orange, not a banana remained. Certainly, it was not likely to occur to them by whose fat hands it had been cleared. Naturally, they attributed it to the lurking intruder they had seen on the balcony. 'Well, that beats the band!' said Frank Nugent. 'Blessed if I ever heard of a burglar burgling apples and oranges before.'

'Not so much as a pip left!' said Johnny Bull.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Not much damage done, if that's all he's taken.' he said. 'But we'd better look through the rooms and make sure.'

They looked through the bedrooms. But no trace of a visitor was discovered in any of them. Nothing was missing, and there was no sign of any intruder.

'We interrupted him, coming back when we did!' was Harry Wharton's conclusion. 'I imagine that he must have been after something more valuable than a dish of fruits. Must have filled his pockets with them, and then we came along and he had to bolt.'

'Looks like it,' said Bob.

It certainly did look like it,' and the juniors left it at that. They could only conclude that some lurking vagrant had found the door unlocked, and that that was all there was to it.

'We'd better go down and let my uncle know about it,' added Harry. 'And I'll send up young John to clear up all this snow.'

And, having carefully locked the french window, Harry Wharton went down with his friends, and Colonel Wharton, acquainted with the occurrence, came to the same conclusion as the juniors. Certainly neither the old Colonel, nor any member of the Famous Five, dreamed that in those very moments a fat Owl, sitting on an old bedstead in a remote attic, was finishing the last of the apples, oranges, and bananas, which they supposed had gone in the pockets of the mysterious intruder.

CHAPTER 17

BLANKETS FOR BUNTER

'WURRRRRGH!'

Billy Bunter mumbled. And he shivered. It was cold in the attic.

Billy Bunter, if ever he had foreseen anything, might have foreseen that it would be extremely cold in a remote attic, in December, with snow piled on the roof, and a north wind blowing round the old chimney-stacks. But a fellow could not think of everything! Bunter, at all events, couldn't: and he hadn't thought about that.

He was thinking of it now!

He sat on the edge of the old bedstead, hugged his coat round his fat person, shivered, and mumbled. Like the heathen of old, he sat in darkness. The December night had set in, and nothing but a glimmer of snow, and a fainter glimmer of wintry starlight, came in at the little window.

So far, the fat Owl's remarkable scheme had been crowned with success. He was inside Wharton Lodge. There was a roof over his head. His presence, obviously, was unsuspected: for no one had come anywhere near the attic stair.

So far, so good. But--!

The prospect of the night in that chilly attic was not attractive. A fellow had at least to have some blankets on a winter's night. That creaking old bedstead was useful, but not without covering of some sort.

There were plenty of blankets within easy reach, if it came to that: in the rooms occupied by the Greyfriars fellows. Access to them was facile, while Harry Wharton and Co. were downstairs in the evening. But what would happen if they came up to bed and found their blankets missing?

The open door of Wharton's 'den', and the disappearance of apples, oranges, and bananas from the dish on the table, had apparently not excited suspicion. Bunter, unaware that there had been a second intruder in that quarter, did not know that suspicion had fixed on that intruder. But he knew at any rate that no trail had led to a fat Owl in an attic.

But disappearing blankets was quite another matter.

Bagging blankets from the beds was as good as announcing that a surreptitious hand was at work. Billy Bunter had to think that one out!

One thing was certain: if he was going to remain that night in his present quarters, he had to have blankets. He simply couldn't go on shivering all night. The alternative was to show up, and take his chance: but that was a very, very last resource.

William George Bunter was, perhaps, the most obtuse fellow in the Greyfriars Remove. But, like many obtuse persons, he had a vein of artfulness in him.

Thinking it over, as he mumbled and shivered, quite a bright idea came at last into his fat brain.

He had to have blankets. But suppose, when he raided them, he made it look like a 'rag'--the sort of 'rag' to which schoolboys were accustomed. Suppose Harry Wharton's bed was 'shipped', wouldn't he take it for granted that it was a 'rag', due to the exuberant spirits of schoolboys on holiday?

Blankets missing would be deemed simply a part of the 'rag'!

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

He was quite taken with that bright idea.

Incidentally, it would serve Wharton right! A fellow who greeted Billy Bunter with snowballs when he came for Christmas deserved that, and more--much more!

The fat Owl made up his fat mind.

He was going to 'rag' Wharton's room, and walk off with his blankets. Harry Wharton could put it down to anyone he liked among the four members of the Co. Probably he would put it down to Bob, whose exuberant spirits were, in fact, rather liable to run away with him. Anyhow he could hardly put it down to William George Bunter who, if he thought of him at all, he supposed to be ten miles away.

Having decided, at last, on his plan of campaign, Billy Bunter rose from the creaking old bedstead. It was well on in the evening now, and most likely the party at Wharton Lodge would be safely downstairs. But Billy Bunter was going to be very wary--very wary and very cautious. As silently as he could, he opened the attic door, peered out, and listened with intent fat ears. All was silent.

The old attic stair had several curves, and he could not see far down. A glimmer showed that there was a light in the corridor below.

The fat junior emerged from the attic on tiptoe, and crept down the stair. Step by step he descended silently.

He stopped at a bend in the middle of the narrow staircase. Keeping back behind the corner, he projected a fat head forward, rather like that of a tortoise from its shell. Now he was able to scan the corridor.

A light burned at a distance. It showed a number of closed doors, and one open.

Nobody was to be seen. But Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles fixed anxiously on the doorway that was open. If somebody was in that room--!

He was glad, a few moments later, that he had not ventured further. A trim maidservant came out of the open doorway. Had Bunter been on the lower stair, she could hardly have failed to see him. But the fat head popped back like a jack-in-the-box.

Bunter listened.

From sounds that came faintly up, of opening and closing doors, he could guess why the maid was there. She was going from room to room, preparing them for the night. Once she was through, she would be gone, and the coast would be clear.

For long minutes, the fat Owl listened. But there was complete silence at last: and he ventured to peer round the corner again. The corridor was vacant, and all the doors closed.

Now was the time!

Billy Bunter tiptoed down the lower stair. He blinked watchfully as he went, like a very wary owl, and crept along the corridor.

Harry Wharton's 'den', with his bedroom adjoining, was at the other end, nearest the landing. At the door of that room, Bunter bent a cautious head to listen. There was no sound from within. Plainly, the whole party was downstairs.

Then he peered warily out on the landing.

The hall was below, brightly lighted. Sounds of voices came up to his fat ears. There was a piano in the hall, and he heard a tinkling as a hand was run along the keys. Then came a cheery boom:

'Go it, Franky! Let's have *Good King Wenceslaus*, what?'

'Hear, hear!' came several voices.

'All together!'

It was Frank Nugent at the piano. There came a burst of cheery boyish voices in chorus:

*"Good King Wenceslaus looked out,
On the feast of Stephen,*

*When the snow lay round about,
Deep and crisp and even."*

Billy Bunter was not interested in King Wenceslaus, good as that ancient monarch was. He was only interested to be assured that the Greyfriars party were all at a safe distance.

On tiptoe, he crept out on the old oak gallery round the hall. He tiptoed across, and peered down through interstices in a balustrade of black old oak. Now he could see as well as hear, and make assurance doubly sure.

He had a view of the old hall, decorated with glimmering holly. In a high-backed chair by the fireside, sat Miss Amy Wharton. Her kind old face smiling under a lace cap. Colonel Wharton, erect as a ramrod, his usually somewhat stern countenance relaxed and pleasant, stood with his back to the fire. Round the piano were gathered the Famous Five, all merry and bright, Frank Nugent on the *music-stool*, his slim hands running over the keys. *The old rafters echoed to Good King Wenceslaus.* A glimpse was enough for Bunter. All was safe in that quarter. After that sing-song in the hall, the next item on the programme would probably be supper. He had ample time for what he had to do. He tiptoed back into the corridor, opened the door of Wharton's 'den', and rolled in. He was after blankets: but there was another consideration not likely to be absent from his mind--provender. He had been lucky once in that apartment, and he hoped to be lucky again. In the glimmer from the fireplace, he blinked eagerly over the table.

'Oh!' breathed Bunter. 'Good!'

His fat face brightened as he saw that the denuded dish had been replenished. The next moment he was cramming apples, oranges, and bananas into his pockets, which bulged with his plunder.

Then the fat Owl opened the communicating-door, and rolled into Harry Wharton's bedroom. It was dark: but a glimmer of firelight from the 'den' was enough for Bunter.

He lost no time.

The neatly-made bed was very soon a wreck. Two blankets and a pillow Bunter rolled up in a quilt, for transport. That was all he needed, and all he could conveniently carry. The remainder of the bedclothes he scattered over the floor. He tipped the mattress over the end of the bedstead. In its place he lodged a couple of chairs, draping over them an overcoat and a raincoat from the wardrobe. In the glimmer of firelight from the 'den' he blinked at his handiwork through his big spectacles and chuckled.

'He, he, he!'

Certainly it had the effect of a schoolboy 'rag'. Not infrequently beds had been similarly 'shipped' at Greyfriars. Billy Bunter remembered an occasion when Harry Wharton and Co. had 'shipped' the bed of Loder of the Sixth, as a reprisal for a too liberal use of the ashplant. It was going to be a surprise for Wharton when he came up to bed: and he could think what he liked about it--putting it down to one of his friends, or to some member of the household--of whomsoever or whatsoever he thought, he was not likely to think of a surreptitious fat Owl of whose proximity he never dreamed.

'He, he, he!'

Billy Bunter suppressed his fat chuckle, as he opened the door on the corridor. He blinked cautiously out, and listened. Cheery voices echoed up from the hall:

*"O the mistletoe bough!
O the mistletoe bough!"*

As uninterested in *The Mistletoe Bough* as in *Good King Wenceslaus*, Billy Bunter packed his bundle over a fat shoulder, and emerged. *The Mistletoe Bough* followed him up the corridor, as he rolled to the attic stair, and up into the attic. The closing door shut off that cheery chorus. Then all was silent, save for an unmusical cachinnation from a fat Owl:

'He, he, he!'

CHAPTER 18

A MYSTERY

'OH!' gasped Harry Wharton.

He stared blankly.

The Greyfriars party had come up to bed: at a rather later hour than that to which they were accustomed at school. Good nights had been said below to the old Colonel and Aunt Amy, and the Famous Five came up to the landing, where they chatted for a few final minutes before dispersing to their rooms.

Then Harry Wharton entered his room by the door on the corridor, and switched on the light--and stared at what it revealed.

In fact, his eyes popped at what he saw. It was so very unexpected.

He stared at a denuded bed, at sheets strewn on the floor, at a dangling mattress, and chairs and coats piled on the bed. Someone, evidently, had been there, dealing with his bed with a reckless hand.

Evidently--to Wharton--it was a 'rag': reminiscent of Greyfriars. He had not forgotten how he had himself lent a hand in shipping the bed of an unpopular prefect. But assuredly he had never dreamed of finding his own bed shipped at Wharton Lodge.

He stood for a long minute, staring at the wreck, and compressing his lips a little.

A lark was a lark: and an apple-pie bed might perhaps have been excused. But this was rather over the limit.

But his brow cleared. If Bob Cherry's exuberant spirits had proved a little too exuberant, after all it was only a 'rag'. Bob did not always stop to think twice before he acted once. If this was Bob's idea of a joke, he had to take it in good part.

It was natural for him to think of Bob, who undoubtedly was a rather unreflecting fellow at times. Nugent was too thoughtful: Johnny had too much solid common-sense: and he could not suppose that it was the nabob of Bhanipur. If one of his friends had larked in this remarkable manner, it was Bob Cherry.

'Ass!' murmured Wharton.

And having quite decided to take the matter as an unthinking lark, he began to set his bed to rights, to re-make it as well as he could. Then he noticed what he had not noticed at first. Some of the bedclothes were missing. Bob--if it was Bob--had apparently carried the joke so far as to hide some of the bedclothes.

'Ass!' murmured Wharton again.

He proceeded to search for the missing articles. It did not occur to him, for the moment, that they were no longer in the room.

But in a few minutes he had made that discovery also.

Having looked into the wardrobe, and under the bed, and into every other possible hiding-place, he had to realize that the bedclothes were gone.

'Ass!' he murmured for the third time.

Bedclothes were a necessity on a cold December night. The 'rag' could be taken as a joke: but he wanted his blankets. Bob, no doubt, had taken them along to his own room, and would greet him with a cheery grin when he came in quest of them! Anyhow he wanted them: and he left his room and went along to Bob's door, and tapped.

'Not in bed yet, Bob?' he called out.

'No: trot in.'

Wharton opened the door, and 'trotted' in. Bob was standing before the looking-glass, collar and tie in hand, which he had just removed. He looked round inquiringly.

Wharton also looked round. He expected to see his blankets. But if they were in Bob's room, they were not visible.

Bob gave him a rather keen look. Probably he detected faint signs of impatience in Wharton's face.

'Anything up?' he asked.

'Oh! No! But I'd like my blankets, if you're done with them,' said Harry, lightly, but just a trifle sarcastically.

'Eh?' ejaculated Bob.

'My blankets--'

'Your blankets!' repeated Bob, staring.

'Yes! And the pillow and quilt too, if you don't mind. It's rather parky at night in December, you know.'

Bob, with collar in one hand, and a tie in the other, stood staring at him, quite blankly. 'Is that a joke?' he asked, at last.

'Not at all.'

'Then what the dickens are you driving at?'

'Only I'd like to have my blankets.'

'What blankets?' howled Bob.

'The blankets off my bed.'

'Aren't they on your bed?'

'No! If they were, I shouldn't be looking for them. Where are they?'

'How the dickens should I know?' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'If they've forgotten to put blankets on your bed, it's nothing to do with me, is it? I didn't come here to make your bed for you, did I?'

Harry Wharton gave him a very searching look. Bob's face expressed only blank astonishment.

'Look here, Bob, have you got my blankets here?' he exclaimed. 'A joke's a joke, and I'm not in the least shirty about it: but I want my blankets. If you've got them here--'

'Crackers?' asked Bob.

'Look here--'

'Do you mean that somebody's pinched the blankets off your bed?' asked Bob. 'Some silly ass japing? Is that it?'

'Yes, that's it--if you didn't know! My bed's been shipped, and most of the bedclothes taken away. Wasn't it you?'

Bob knitted his brows.

'Somebody's shipped your bed, and you're asking me if it was I!' he said, gruffly. 'I don't claim to be as polished as old Mauly, but I hope I've got rather better manners than to ship a fellow's bed when I'm a guest in his house. Wasn't it rather a mistake to ask fellows here if you can't trust them to behave?'

Harry Wharton crimsoned.

'Sorry, old chap, if it wasn't you!' he stammered. 'I--I thought--well, the bed's been shipped, just like we shipped Loder's once at school, and--I thought--'

'I might ship a fellow's bed at school, but not here.' said Bob. 'And if you think I would--'

'No! No!' said Harry, hastily. 'It was somebody--'

'I'm not that somebody.'

'Of course I know you're not, if you say so. Anyhow it's only a lark, and you're so packed with larks, old fellow, I thought--'

'Well, you've rung the wrong bell, and you'll have to look further for your dashed blankets,' said Bob. Then his frowning face relaxed. 'If your bed's been shipped, it must have been one of the bunch, I suppose, playing a silly lark--I suppose old Wells hasn't taken to larking with his master's guests, or young John, or one of the maids--'

'Hardly,' said Harry.

'Well, I don't know anything about it,' said Bob.

'Right-ho, old fellow. Good night.'

'Good night.'

Harry Wharton stepped out of Bob's room, and shut the door. He stood for some moments in rather troubled thought. It was possible, of course, that some member of the household had played that trick in his room: but it was extremely improbable. Yet if it was one of the Co., Bob was the likeliest, and it was not Bob. Bob Cherry might, in a particularly unthinking moment, have perpetrated such a 'rag': but not in any circumstances would he or could he have prevaricated about it or anything else. But if it was not Bob, who was it--and where were the blankets?

He tapped at Frank Nugent's door and opened it.

'Franky, old man--'

'Hallo! What's up?' Nugent came to the door, and at a glance he could see that something was amiss.

Harry Wharton forced a smile.

'Some silly ass has bagged blankets off my bed, for a silly lark,' he said. 'It wasn't you, of course.'

Nugent laughed.

'Not guilty,' he said. 'Must be a blithering ass, whoever it was. Sounds a bit like old Bob--'

'I've asked him, and he says no.'

'Then it wasn't Bob.'

'No: and that leaves only Johnny and Inky, and it doesn't seem the least little bit like either of them.'

'It doesn't!' agreed Nugent.

'But I want those dashed blankets,' said Harry. 'I can't bother them downstairs at this time of night, and--and the less said about a silly thing like this the better. I'll speak to Johnny. Good night, old boy.'

He closed Nugent's door, and tapped at Johnny Bull's.

Johnny opened the door, and gave him an inquiring stare.

'What's up?' he asked.

'Some ass has shipped my bed, and walked off with my blankets. I'm looking for them.'

'That ass Bob--'

'No, it wasn't Bob. I've asked him.' Johnny's face became a little grim.

'Well, it wasn't I, if that's what you've looked in to ask,' he said, tartly. 'If you think I'm such a silly ass as that--'

'No! No! It's all right,' said Harry, hastily, and he drew the door shut. He heard a grunt from within as he closed it.

He found Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's door open, and a dusky face looking out. The nabob had heard voices in the passage. His dark eyes scanned Harry Wharton's face inquiringly.

'What is the upfulness?' he asked.

'Only a lark,' said Harry. 'Somebody's shipped my bed and hidden my blankets. Know anything about

it, Inky?'

The nabob shook a dusky head.

'The knowfulness is not terrific,' he answered. 'Perhapsfully the esteemed and idiotic Bob!'

Harry Wharton laughed. The Co., like himself, evidently regarded Bob as the likeliest 'suspect'.

'Not Bob,' he answered. 'He's said so. It's all right, Inky--I expect I shall find those blankets somewhere. Cheerio.'

Harry Wharton returned to his own room. He was utterly puzzled and perplexed. Who had shipped that bed, and hidden the blankets, if not one of the Co.? Yet one after another they had disclaimed all knowledge of the 'rag'.

It was a mystery, and he had to give it up. Once more he searched his room for the missing bedclothes, and then looked into the 'den' adjoining. But nothing was to be seen of them: the mysterious ragger, whoever he was, had evidently removed them to a safe distance.

In a puzzled frame of mind, and not in the best of tempers, Harry Wharton set about preparing his bed, the best he could, for the night. A rug and a couple of coats, supplied the place of the missing blankets and quilt, and a cushion served as a pillow. It was not very comfortable, but he did not want news of the 'rag' to spread further, and he made the best of it. And the distance was too great for any ear to hear a rumbling snore from a remote attic, where a fat Owl was rolled warmly and comfortably in purloined blankets.

CHAPTER 19

NARROW ESCAPE

BILLY BUNTER woke.

The first glimmer of a grey December dawn was peeping in at the cobwebby attic window.

There was a creak from the old bedstead, as the fat Owl sat up and rubbed his eyes, and blinked in the dimness, from his dusky corner.

Seldom, or never, had Billy Bunter awakened so early.

At Greyfriars he was wont to snore till the rising-bell clanged--and later: often till a whizzing pillow, or a jerk at his bedclothes, brought him out of the land of dreams. In holiday time he was accustomed to much later rising.

But even in slumber, Bunter realized he was hungry. He awakened ravenous. There was an aching void inside his fat circumference which banished slumber.

He had made himself fairly comfortable for the night.

His overcoat was spread over the old bedstead for a mattress. Quilt and blankets rolled round his fat person kept him warm. But for the fact that he had gone supperless to bed, Bunter might have slept on till almost any hour in the morning. But that aching void did it! Epimenides himself couldn't have slept so soundly, had he been as hungry as Bunter.

There had been quite a pile of apples, oranges, and bananas. Not a single one remained. Bunter was not the fellow to leave anything eatable uneaten. But now he rather wished that he had left something over.

But there was nothing--nothing at all, unless he made a breakfast of apple-peel, orange-peel, or banana skins. And he was feeling that he could easily dispose of a complete turkey, followed by an out-size in Christmas puddings.

'Oh, crikey!' mumbled Bunter.

The old bedstead creaked, as he rolled off it.

He had slept in his clothes, and had a rumpled and dishevelled look. That was not bothering him.

Breakfast was the pressing consideration. It was, in fact, a matter of which the importance could not possibly be exaggerated. A fellow had to eat--especially a fellow named William George Bunter.

It was Bunter's happy way to take chances, and trust to luck. Luck had befriended him so far. He still hoped for the best. Something might turn up in his favour. In the meantime, he realized that he had to keep 'doggo'. But, even at the risk of discovery, followed by the painful process of booting, he had to eat! On that point there was no doubt: not possible, probable shadow of doubt, no possible doubt whatever!

With a cautious fat hand, he opened the attic door, and peered out on a dim shadowy stair.

Exactly what hour it was, he did not know, as his watch was not a going concern. But he knew it was very early--awfully early.

If the household was not yet astir, there was a chance of annexing foodstuffs from somewhere. He had to take that chance, or face a hungry day: which was hardly to be thought of!

On tiptoe, he crept down the attic stair.

The corridor was shadowy and silent: all doors closed.

None of the Greyfriars party was up, as yet. He tiptoed along to Harry Wharton's 'den' at the other end of the corridor. But a blink into that apartment was disappointing. The dish on the table was as bare as he had left it.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter inaudibly, addressing the captain of the Greyfriars Remove, fast asleep in

the adjoining room.

He tiptoed into the gallery over the hall. A blink over the balustrade assured him that nobody was about.

His fat heart beat faster, as he crept cautiously down the big staircase. He was now in full view if anyone came into the hall so early. He could only hope that nobody was up yet.

He stopped at the service door, and listened.

If there was nobody about below stairs, his course was clear--he knew his way to the larder. He had been there before, on previous happier occasions! But, as he listened, a sound from the other side of the door came to his fat ears.

Somebody was up: and moving about in the kitchen quarters. He was not, after all, the earliest riser at Wharton Lodge.

'Beast!' moaned Bunter.

He did not open that door. He did not want to encounter the surprised stare of a cook or an early house-maid. There was nothing to be done in that direction.

But he was not at the end of his resources. He remembered, from his last visit, that there had always been biscuits in the side-board in the dining-room.

Much more solid fare was what he wanted. But a couple of pounds of biscuits would at least take the keen edge off his appetite.

He tiptoed to the dining-room which opened off the hall. A blink within revealed that it was dark and deserted: the blinds still closed over the high windows.

Nobody was there yet, at all events: and if there were biscuits in the side-board, there were biscuits for Bunter.

His fat face brightened at the first blink into the side-board. There was quite a large box of biscuits there.

A moment more, and Billy Bunter was munching and crunching.

While he munched and crunched, he stacked biscuits into his pockets, dropping a few on the floor, from crammed fat hands.

The vacant state of that biscuit-box when it came to light later might cause more comment than the disappearance of apples, oranges, and bananas from Harry Wharton's sitting-room. But that could not be helped. Billy Bunter did not leave a single biscuit in the box.

He turned from the side-board, with his mouth full and his pockets crammed. Then he noticed the biscuits that had fallen, and stooped to retrieve them.

At the same moment the dining-room door opened, and a portly figure entered, with solid tread. Bunter suppressed a gasp.

It was sheer luck that he had been stooping for the biscuits when Wells came in. Had he been standing, the butler could hardly have failed to see him, shadowy as it was in the long lofty room with the windows curtained. The table, luckily, was between them, and Wells noticed nothing. Without a glance in Bunter's direction, he went along to the windows, and there was a whirr of rings as he drew back the long blinds.

The wintry sun glimmered in.

'Oh, crumbs!' breathed Bunter.

The room was lighter now--much lighter. When Wells came back to the door, there was no doubt that his eyes would fall on a fat Owl. Already, in his mind's eye, Billy Bunter saw himself spotted, detected, and discovered. But the game was not up yet.

He blinked at Wells's portly back. Then, without lingering to collect the biscuits on the floor, he

tiptoed to the door.

If Wells looked round--!

But Wells, busy with the blinds, did not look round: his portly back remained turned to Bunter: and in a matter of seconds, the fat Owl was outside the dining-room door.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He cast a hurried, anxious blink round the hall. Wells was up, evidently: and if anyone else was about---

No one was to be seen. But in the dining-room sounded a solid tread: Wells was coming back to the door. There was no time to reach the staircase before he came out into the hall.

But again luck befriended the fat Owl. That solid tread stopped, and he heard a sound from the dining-room, a sound between a grunt and a snort.

'Huh! Who has been here? Huh! Young John again! This is not the first time. I shall have to speak to young John--I shall have to speak to him severe! Biscuits on the floor--and the box empty! Huh!'

Billy Bunter suppressed a gasp of relief.

Wells, evidently, had spotted the biscuits on the floor, and stopped to look at the biscuit-box. That that box had been cleared out by a fat Owl, only a few minutes ago, Wells naturally did not know and could not suspect.

'Young John' was the only manservant under Wells's command: something between a page and a footman. From Wells's remarks, Bunter could guess that Young John, on some occasion, had helped himself from that biscuit-box. So Wells's suspicions turned in the direction of Young John. That was quite a relief to Bunter. Wells could turn his suspicions in any direction he liked, so long as he did not turn them towards a fat Owl.

Bunter did not wait to hear any more of Wells's self-communings. He cut across to the staircase. He lost no time.

Few fellows at Greyfriars would have credited Billy Bunter with the speed with which he flew from the dining-room door to the stairs. He fairly whizzed. He was half-way up the stairs when Wells come out of the dining-room.

'Who's that?' called out Wells. 'Was that you, John?' He had heard something. He stared round the hall.

He did not, for the moment, look up the staircase.

That moment saved Bunter.

An arrow in its flight had nothing on the alarmed fat Owl as he flew up the remainder of the stairs. But the patter of his feet, in the oak gallery above the hall, reached Wells's ears: and he stared up: a moment too late.

Split seconds were precious now: and Bunter threw caution to the winds, and ran as if for his fat life.

Wells stared up. The old oaken balustrade hid the fugitive Owl in the gallery above from his sight.

But the running footsteps came plainly to his ears.

'John!' hooted Wells.

His plump face was stem and severe. Someone had been pilfering biscuits in the dining-room: and that someone had bolted up the stairs to escape detection. That much was quite clear to Wells.

His frown was quite portentous. If it was young John, thus seeking to escape discovery, Wells was not the butler to let him get away with it. Wells, in his turn, mounted the stairs: and, considering age and weight, he mounted them with remarkable rapidity. Fast as the terrified Owl fled, pursuit was hot on his track.

Had Bunter lost a moment Wells would have sighted him as he reached the top stair. But just in

time, the fat Owl had hurtled into the corridor and was out of view beyond a corner.

Behind him sounded Wells's heavy tread.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Ahead of him lay the long corridor. Bunter had to cover its length to reach the attic stair. Wells was only seconds behind him. Long before he could reach the attic, Wells would have a back view of him. But dire peril sharpened Bunter's fat wits.

He checked his wild race, at the first door in the corridor: that of Harry Wharton's 'den'. Wharton was asleep in the adjoining room: but that could not be helped: he had to hunt the nearest cover. He opened the door of the 'den', plunged in, and closed the door after him: and stood panting within, listening as the solid tread in the gallery approached.

That solid tread came on: and stopped. Wells was staring up the empty corridor. A few seconds earlier he would have seen Billy Bunter. Now he saw nothing but uninhabited space.

'John! Was that you, John? Where are you, John?' Evidently, Wells's suspicions were still on John! Billy Bunter heard the fruity voice through the door. If Wells looked in--!

The fat Owl blinked wildly round the sitting-room. He had to get out of sight, in case Wells should look in.

In one corner was a rather roomy settee, set across the corner, with a triangular space behind it where the walls met. With the activity of a hunted fat rabbit, Billy Bunter pitched himself over the back of the settee, and collapsed breathless into the corner behind it.

He heard the door open.

Bunter could not see him, as he huddled down behind the settee, but he knew that Wells was glancing round the room.

But a glance round seemed to satisfy the butler, for he withdrew, closing the door after him. A solid tread faded away.

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Bunter. He panted and panted for breath.

He could not venture to leave that hide-out. He had to be sure that the coast was clear before he ventured forth, and Wells was still prowling about. Having recovered his breath, Billy Bunter dived fat hands into his pockets, and disinterred biscuits therefrom.

He had had a narrow escape--a very narrow escape: and he was not out of the wood yet! But there was comfort in foodstuffs: and Billy Bunter, huddled in the corner, munched biscuits and felt better.

CHAPTER 20

CORNERED!

'BEAST!' breathed Billy Bunter, inaudibly.

There had been no sound for several minutes, except that of munching behind the settee in the corner. Probably Wells had gone down: and if so, it was Billy Bunter's chance. He had to get back to his lair in the attic, if he could, before the household was astir.

But even as he debated in his fat mind whether it was safe yet to make a venture, the door opened, and someone unseen came into the room. The cornered Owl ceased to munch.

It was not Wells who came in. It was a much lighter tread. It was, in fact, Young John, with a basket of logs to set the fire going. Whoever he was, he was in Billy Bunter's estimation a beast! Bunter could only huddle in his corner and wait for him to go.

He heard the log-basket dumped down, followed by a sound of raking, and the scratch of a match: which enlightened him as to what was going on. Young John did not seem in a hurry. It was long, long minutes before he finished his labours at the fireplace. But at length Bunter heard his footsteps going back to the door.

He was going! Another minute or two, and Bunter's chance would come!

But alas for Bunter! Other footsteps were audible in the corridor. Then a voice--a feminine one:

'What have you been doing, John?'

'I've just lighted Master Harry's fire, Alice.'

'I don't mean that! I mean, what have you been doing to make Mr. Wells so cross?'

'I ain't done nothing.'

'Wasn't it you in the dining-room?'

'I ain't been in the dining-room.'

'Well, Mr. Wells thinks you have, and he's asking for you downstairs.'

Grunt from Young John.

'Finding fault with me agin!' he said, in an aggrieved tone. 'What is it this time, Alice?'

'It's the biscuits! Mr. Wells says that the box in the side-board has been cleared right out.'

'Well I don't know nothing about it, said Young John. 'I might 'ave 'elped myself once, and did I ever 'ear the end of it from Mr. Wells? I ain't never touched one since. And if I did, I wouldn't clear out the 'ole box! P'raps some of Master Harry's friends had a fancy for them.

'They're not up yet.'

'Well, I don't know nothing about it,' said Young John, sulkily: and with another grunt, he departed. But his departure brought no relief to a cornered fat Owl, for Alice came in. She also had duties to perform in Master Harry's sitting-room before Master Harry was up. Bunter heard sounds of broom and dusters, and his plump heart quaked at the thought that Alice might move the settee to sweep behind it.

But that settee was large and heavy, and Alice, perhaps, not quite so thorough in her methods as she might have been. At all events, she did not touch the settee: though her broom shoving under it almost contacted a fat shin, and very nearly elicited a startled squeak from a fat Owl.

Fortunately for Bunter, Alice remained in happy ignorance of the fact that the corner behind the settee was inhabited. And at last, after what seemed something like a century to Billy Bunter, she went to the door.

It closed after her and Bunter gasped with relief. Now was the time! He rose to his feet, and blinked across the back of the settee towards the door, listening with his fat ears on the stretch for a sound

from the corridor.

From the corridor he heard no sound. But from another direction he did: from the adjoining bedroom. Possibly Alice's activities in the 'den' had awakened Master Harry. At any rate, there were sounds of a fellow getting out of bed.

'Beast!' hissed Billy Bunter.

Harry Wharton was getting up. Bunter's eyes and spectacles shot to the communicating door. It was shut: but if Wharton opened it--! The fat Owl realized that he dared not make the venture. That corner behind the settee was neither comfortable nor commodious: but it was secure. Bunter had to wait! With deep feelings, he huddled down again: with the dismal prospect before him of remaining huddled there till the Greyfriars juniors went down to breakfast.

A few minutes later, he was glad that he had not ventured forth, for there were now sounds from the corridor indicating that other fellows were astir. He heard taps on doors, and a faint murmur of voices. It seemed that one of the party--no doubt Harry Wharton--had gone along to call the others. Why the unspeakable beasts were turning out so early, Bunter could not guess: but evidently, they were!

He wondered whether any of them might come into the 'den' before going down. He soon learned. The door was hurled open, and vigorous footsteps tramped in. Billy Bunter knew the tread of the largest feet in the Greyfriars Remove. It was Bob Cherry.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob.

The door from Harry Wharton's bedroom opened, and Harry came in. Billy Bunter could have groaned, if he had dared make a sound. There were two of them now--and if either looked over the back of the settee--! Bunter could almost feel the impact of a boot on his plump trousers! He could only huddle down and hope for the best.

'Oh, here you are, Bob,' said Harry. 'I've called the other fellows--take a "pew" old man.'

'Right-ho!'

To Bunter's horror, a heavy tramp came across directly towards the settee in the corner. But Bob was only taking a 'pew'. He sat down on the settee, and Billy Bunter scarcely breathed behind him. More footsteps and voices--and Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh came in, one after another. The whole Co. had gathered in the 'den'.

'Too bad to call you fellows up so early--' Bunter heard Wharton's voice. 'But--'

'Okay,' said Bob. 'Early to bed, early to rise--' 'The early bedfulness and the early risefulness are the way to the healthy and wealthy wisefulness,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Inky, old man, that jolly old moonshee who taught you English at Bhanipur must have been a whale on proverbs,' he said.

'My esteemed and idiotic Bob--'

'But what's up?' asked Johnny Bull. 'You've got something to say to us---cough it up.' Johnny, a practical youth, was wont to come to the point, with Yorkshire directness.

'Yes,' said Harry, slowly. 'About that "rag" in my room last night--'

'Oh! That!' grunted Johnny.

Billy Bunter pricked up fat ears behind the settee. He knew now Why the Famous Five had gathered so early in the 'den'. The shipping of Harry Wharton's bed was going to be discussed. As the shipper thereof, Billy Bunter was interested. He was going to learn what they thought about it! It was not likely that they would think of him!

'Yes, that,' said Harry. 'Somebody shipped my bed, and walked off with the blankets--'

'You never found them, then?' asked Nugent.

'No: I looked everywhere. But they've been taken clean away. It's a silly practical joke, I suppose--it can't be anything else.'

Billy Bunter was glad to hear that!

'Silly trick!' grunted Johnny Bull. He gave Bob Cherry a stare. 'Look here, there's only one fellow here silly ass enough to jape like that--'

Bob's blue eyes glinted a little.

'There's a silly ass, here,' he agreed. 'Yorkshire chap--'

'Look here--!' roared Johnny.

'Well, you look here--'

'Hold on, you two,' exclaimed Harry, hastily. 'Bob's told me that he knows nothing about it. You've all told me the same. That settles that.'

'Who else, then?' grunted Johnny.

'I haven't the foggiest.'

'The who-fulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head.

'Dashed if I make it out, then,' said Johnny. 'There's only the five of us here, and if it wasn't one of us, who was it?'

'That's a puzzle,' said Harry. 'It must have been somebody in the house, but who, has simply got me guessing. But-but I'd rather that nothing was said about it downstairs. That's why I wanted to speak to you before anybody else was up. My uncle might think--!' He paused.

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

'No "might" about that: he said. 'Colonel Wharton would think that some of us had been ragging, and he would think it rotten bad manners, under his roof.'

'Bound to, I suppose,' said Bob. 'Least said soonest mended.'

'Quitefully so,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'Speech is silvery, but silence is the bird in the bush that makes a stitch in time save ninepence.'

'But the blankets will be missed when the bed's made,' said Nugent.

'Yes, but I'll speak to Alice--I can fix that all right,' said Harry. 'The dashed things will turn up sooner or later--they're hidden somewhere, and somebody may come across them. That doesn't matter much. Only-only I wouldn't like my uncle to think--!'

'What he's bound to think if he heard of this!' said Johnny Bull. 'He couldn't think anything else, as he would know jolly well that it was one of us.'

'I don't mean that--'

'I do!' said Johnny, stolidly. 'There may be some practical joker in the house somewhere, but it doesn't seem likely to me. Does it seem likely to you?'

'Well, no: but--'

'Well, then, it was one of us, as it couldn't be anybody else. That's just common sense,' said Johnny. Bob's eyes glinted again. Obviously, Johnny Bull had little or no doubt on the subject, whatever the others had.

'Which one?' asked Bob, sharply.

'You ought to know,' answered Johnny.

'If you can't take a fellow's word, Johnny Bull!' said Bob, breathing hard.

'Don't be an ass!' said Johnny. 'I can take your word all right, if you mean it. But if you're pulling our leg--'

'I'm not pulling your leg, but I've a jolly good mind to pull your nose!' hooted Bob.

'For goodness' sake, don't let's "rag"!' exclaimed Frank Nugent. 'It's settled that it wasn't one of us--'
'Who else, then?' asked Johnny Bull.

'How should I know, fathead?'

'Well, if it wasn't one of us, I'd like to know who it was,' grunted Johnny.

Bob Cherry jumped up from the settee.

'You're asking to have your head punched, Bull!' he roared.

'Punching heads wouldn't get us anywhere,' said Johnny, calmly. 'And I think this has been kept up long enough, if you ask me. Look here, if you've shoved Wharton's blankets somewhere for a silly joke, why not own up, and have done with it?'

Harry Wharton caught Bob's arm, just in time, and dragged him back. In another moment there would have been war.

'Bob, old chap--!' he exclaimed.

'Oh, all right.' Bob calmed himself. 'Musn't row here! If we were back in the Remove passage, I'd punch your cheeky head, Bull. Well, that silly ass can think what he likes, and be blown to him: but if you think the same, Harry Wharton, I'll go down now and look out a train.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind, fathead! I don't think so, and Johnny doesn't really. It's a dashed mystery, and we can't make head or tail of it. For goodness' sake let it drop and let's say no more about it.'

'Now let's get a run out before brekker,' said Nugent. 'The snow's stopped, and it's a jolly morning.'

'Yes, let's!' said Harry. 'And not another word about that silly rag. Come on, all of you.'

Harry Wharton unlocked the door on the balcony. The welcome sound of receding footsteps came to Billy Bunter's fat ears.

He heard the french window close after the Famous Five, and heard the click of the key as Harry locked it again on the outside. Then a grinning fat face rose in the corner. Billy Bunter was considerably amused by what he had heard.

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

Evidently, there was no suspicion of the real author of that 'rag'. All had gone according to the astute Owl's plan. No one dreamed that the roof of Wharton Lodge sheltered a surreptitious fat Owl! And if the episode had caused a spot of bother among the Co., that, so far as Billy Bunter could see, mattered nothing. For such a trifle, Bunter couldn't have cared less.

All Billy Bunter cared about was to get back safely to his lair in the attic. But though Harry Wharton and Co. were gone, the coast was not clear. The household was astir now: and there were footsteps, and the buzz of a Hoover came to his ears, on the carpet in the corridor. Uncomfortable and incommodious as was that corner behind the settee in Harry Wharton's 'den', Billy Bunter had to continue to inhabit it till it was safe to emerge: Bunter was still cornered!

But at last--at long last--there was silence! Intent fat ears failed to pick up a sound. And, at last, Billy Bunter ventured to clamber over the settee and tiptoe across to the door. At the door, he bent a fat head to listen, to make assurance doubly sure that the coast was clear: and, even as he did so, there was a step outside, and the door-handle turned.

CHAPTER 21

MYSTERY OF A CAKE

BILLY BUNTER barely repressed a startled gasp.

The door opened.

There was no time to dodge back to his corner. There was no time for anything, even to think.

Without thinking, Billy Bunter instinctively backed behind the door as it was thrown open. It tapped on his fat little nose as he backed against the wall behind it. But he dared not utter a squeak.

Someone entered, unseen by Bunter.

If that someone had closed the door after him, Billy Bunter's number would have been up. He would have been immediately revealed. The breathless Owl could only hope that he wouldn't.

And he didn't! Whoever it was that had entered, walked directly across to the table. Bunter heard something dumped down on that table. Then footsteps came back to the doorway. The unseen somebody walked out, pulling the door shut behind him.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He wiped a spot of perspiration from a fat brow. It had been his narrowest escape!

Someone, apparently, had brought something up to Master Harry's sitting-room, and left it there. He had had no occasion to close the door, as he was in the room only a matter of seconds. He--whoever he was--had come and gone, without the slightest suspicion that there was anyone in the room.

Billy Bunter's eyes, and spectacles, turned on the object that had been dumped on the table. Then the little round eyes glistened behind the big round spectacles.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

It was a cake!

It was a large, luscious, aromatic Christmas cake! Billy Bunter feasted his eyes on it. His pockets were full of biscuits: but biscuits, compared with that cake, were as moonlight unto sunlight, as water unto wine. He could guess why it had been brought there: probably by Young John. Some time that morning Harry Wharton and Co. would be coming in, by the french window: and that luscious cake was to be their 'elevenses' in the 'den'. Billy Bunter grinned as he thought of it. If the Co.'s 'elevenses' depended on that cake, they were going to be minus 'elevenses'. Billy Bunter knew what was going to happen to that cake! Aunt Amy was very thoughtful for her dear nephew and his schoolboy guests: and her thoughtfulness was a windfall for a voracious fat Owl!

'He, he, he!' chuckled Bunter.

He rolled across to the table, feasting his eyes on that cake. He was glad now that he had not escaped earlier. Now he was going to escape with that Christmas cake under a fat arm. If the cake was missed, it would be another mystery added to the mystery of the missing blankets! Billy Bunter, certainly, was not going without that cake!

He lifted it from the table, and tucked it under his arm.

Then he tiptoed back to the door. Having listened for a long, long minute, he ventured to open it an inch and peer out.

To his dismay, a fruity voice came to his fat ears. 'John!'

'Yes, Mr. Wells!'

'Have you taken the cake to Master Harry's room?'

'Yes, Mr. Wells.'

'Very good.'

'Beast!' breathed Billy Bunter. Wells, evidently, was in the offing, and it was not yet safe to venture

out with his booty.

He listened.

A solid tread came from the direction of the landing into the corridor. Wells was approaching. Could he, for any reason, be coming to that room? Billy Bunter quaked. But he did not waste a moment.

Wells's solid tread gave warning of his approach, and the fat Owl had time to hunt cover. He made one jump to the communicating door into Harry Wharton's bedroom, jumped into that apartment, and shut the door after him. On the safe side of that door he listened anxiously.

The solid tread was heard in the 'den' adjoining. Wells was there--he had entered Master Harry's sitting-room. Then a sound familiar to Bunter's ears was audible--that sound between a grunt and a snort.

'Huh!'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He could guess what it meant. Wells had missed the cake--the cake that was now clutched under Billy Bunter's fat arm. Wells, evidently, had very strong doubts about Young John, after the episode of the biscuits!

Billy Bunter lowered a fat head, and blinked through the keyhole into the 'den'. Wells was standing by the table, his plump brow corrugated in a portentous frown. The butler of Wharton Lodge was plainly disturbed and angry. Evidently, after the affair of the biscuits, he was keeping an eye on Young John! Young John had stated that he had taken that cake to Master Harry's sitting-room. If he had, where was it? Grimmer and grimmer grew Wells's plump frown.

'Huh! Where is that cake!' Bunter heard Wells communing with himself. 'It is not here! It certainly is not here! This is the finish! This is the "sack" for Young John! I will ask the master to step here.'

'Oh!' breathed Bunter.

'Huh! The biscuits--and now that cake! Pilfering! I must report this to the master! Huh! I've spoken to that young man, and I've spoken severe! Now the master will deal with him.'

'Oh!' breathed Bunter again.

The portly butler turned, and walked out of the 'den'. 'Oh! crikey!' mumbled Bunter.

He stood dismayed.

Wells had gone to report the matter to Colonel Wharton.

He was going to request Colonel Wharton to step there! It was the sack for Young John! Billy Bunter was in no danger: they were not likely to look into the bedroom. But for once, amazing to relate, William George Bunter was not thinking wholly of William George Bunter!

Bunter had a conscience! It was a very elastic one, capable of stretching to almost any extent. Still, there it was--such as it was! In matters of tuck the fat junior was absolutely without scruple. In bagging that cake, it had not even occurred to him to remember that there was any difference between 'meum' and 'tuum'. 'Mine and thine' simply had no meaning for Billy Bunter, where tuck was concerned. But--!

But he was worried now.

Young John was going to be sacked for pilfering the cake stacked under Billy Bunter's arm!

Unaccustomed as he was to thinking of others, accustomed as he was to concentrating wholly on his fat self, it worried him. Cake or no cake, he just couldn't let that happen. He just couldn't! Seldom, very seldom, did Billy Bunter's fat conscience sit up and take notice. But now it did! He just couldn't let that hapless young man be sacked.

There was a struggle in Bunter's fat breast.

It was a lovely cake--a luscious cake--a large cake--a cake with which Billy Bunter, once his fat hands

were upon it, could hardly bear the idea of parting, But unless Young John was to be adjudged guilty of pilfering that cake and sacked accordingly, it had to be!

'Oh, crikey!' mumbled Bunter.

He made up his fat mind. He made it up with a self-denial that--in Billy Bunter--was really heroic. He opened the door, tiptoed into the 'den' and replaced the cake on the table.

Then he hurriedly retreated into the bedroom again. He felt safer there than behind the settee in the corner of the 'den'. But he could not venture out into the corridor. He had to wait till the coast was clear. He listened with both fat ears for footsteps and voices. What Wells would think, when he found the cake on the table in the sitting-room after all, he did not know, and could not guess. But at any rate the cake would be there, and it was not the sack for Young John. He watched through the keyhole of the communicating door, prepared to dodge under Harry Wharton's bed if anyone approached that door. Footsteps sounded in the corridor.

'Are you sure, Wells?' He heard a deep voice.



HE OPENED THE DOOR, TIPTOED INTO THE 'DEN' AND REPLACED THE CAKE ON THE TABLE.

'The cake is gone, sir.'

'I put it there!' came an almost tearful voice: that of Young John. 'I left it there, sir! I jest left it on the table, sir.'

'Very well, John: if you left it there, it must be there now!' came the deep voice. 'You may have overlooked it, Wells. I trust so! Let us see, at all events.'

Colonel Wharton strode into the sitting-room from the corridor. Wells followed him in. Young John lingered in the doorway. Billy Bunter, at his keyhole, watched breathlessly.

'Good gad!' he heard a sharp exclamation. 'Wells!'

'Yes, sir.'

'You said the cake was gone!'

'Yes, sir!'

'Then what is this? Is not that the cake?'

'Oh!' gasped Wells.

Billy Bunter could not help grinning. From his keyhole, he had a full view of Wells's portly face. The expression on that portly face was quite extraordinary, as Wells stared at the cake. He stared at it as if he could hardly believe his eyes: as, indeed, he hardly could. He did not speak. For a moment, he couldn't! He could only stare at that cake like a man in a trance.

'Well?' The old Colonel's sharp voice broke the silence. 'Well? Is that the cake John placed here, Wells?'

'Oh!' gasped Wells. 'Yes--Oh! Yes, certainly! But-but I-I looked for it, and it was not there--I-I-I cannot understand how I could have overlooked it--'

There was something like a snort, from Colonel Wharton.

'Obviously, you did!' he snapped. 'Well, there it is, and that ends the matter.'

'I-I was sure--' stammered Wells.

'Nonsense!' said Colonel Wharton. And he strode out of the sitting-room.

Wells continued to stare at the cake. Then he glanced round at Young John in the doorway. Young John was grinning: probably enjoying Mr. Wells's discomfiture. Wells frowned at him.

'I told you, Mr. Wells--!' said Young John.

'That will do, John! Go about your business.'

'Yes, Mr. Wells!' grinned John.

And he went! Wells, once more, stared at the cake!

He stood for a long minute staring at it. Then he shook his head, as if giving up a hopeless puzzle.

Then he, too, left the sitting-room, closing the door after him.

'He, he, he!' gurgled Billy Bunter.

Footsteps died away. All was silent: and at last, all was safe. Bunter tiptoed into the sitting-room.

Actually, Billy Bunter had been prepared to sacrifice that cake, on the altar of conscience. But, as it turned out, no such sacrifice had to be made: there was the cake, at the mercy of a fat Owl! Bunter clutched it up.

He peered out into the corridor. The coast was clear.

With the cake under his arm, he emerged. And the speed with which he scuttled up the corridor to the attic stair, would have done him credit on the cinder-path. He bolted up the stair, rolled into the attic, and shut the door. And then--!

Nobody ever came near that old disused attic. That was fortunate for a surreptitious Owl: for anyone at hand would certainly have heard a sound of munching and crunching, which went on for quite a long time. It did not cease, in fact, till that cake, extensive as it was, had wholly disappeared down a fat neck. After which, even Billy Bunter felt that he had had enough--if not a little too much. And he rolled himself in Harry Wharton's blankets and went to sleep.

CHAPTER 22

A RIFT IN THE LUTE

'COME on, Bob.'

No reply.

'Bob, old chap-!'

'Oh! All right!'

And Bob came on.

But he came slowly. There was a cloud on Bob Cherry's usually sunny face. Five juniors in overcoats were in the porch outside the door of Wharton Lodge. Wells, at the door, waited to close it till they were gone. But Bob seemed to linger, as if doubtful whether to go with his friends or not.

However, at Harry Wharton's urgent voice, he made up his mind, and followed the others, and Wells shut the door.

But he did not speak. Obviously he was not in his usual cheery mood. Frank Nugent gave Harry Wharton a slightly comical look: and Harry smiled, and then frowned a little. Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh shook his dusky head. Johnny Bull glanced at Bob, and emitted a faint grunt. They walked down the drive in silence.

That afternoon the Famous Five were walking into Wimford, where there was a pantomime matinee. Colonel Wharton had provided the tickets for the show at the Wimford Theatre Royal, and the party had been looking forward to their first panto of the season. But Aladdin and the Widow Twankey had apparently lost their attraction for Bob, to judge by his clouded face. It was uncommon--very uncommon indeed--for Bob to feel either disgruntled or resentful. Now, unluckily, he was feeling both.

It was agreed on all hands that nothing more should be said about that mysterious 'rag' of the night before. And nothing more had been said. But it had left an atmosphere of trouble behind: it had, in fact, a sting in its tail, as it were.

Four members of the party had rather taken it for granted that it was Bob who had shipped that bed, and hidden the blankets. Bob's disclaimer was good enough for Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh: improbable as it seemed that there was some impertinent practical joker in the household staff at the Lodge. But Johnny Bull, who was quite a whale on solid common sense, had no use for improbabilities. So far as Johnny could see, it was sheer rot to suppose anything of the kind. It followed, therefore, in Johnny's opinion, that the shipper was one of the fellows in the party at Wharton Lodge: as there could be little doubt that Uncle James and Aunt Amy would have thought, had they been told of the affair. And if the shipper was one of the party, that one, in Johnny's opinion, was Bob: and Johnny's idea was that Bob was a silly obstinate ass, not to own up to what was as clear as daylight. It was a silly 'rag': but after all only a 'rag', and what was the use of making a silly mystery about it? Johnny had no more use for mysteries than he had for improbabilities.

Which was naturally very irksome to Bob, who had not the remotest idea who had perpetrated that 'rag'. Johnny's belief irritated him, and he could not help thinking that there were lingering doubts in the minds of the others. So, for once in a way, Bob was disgruntled, and his cheery voice was not heard once as the party walked down the drive, and turned into the Wimford road. And they walked up that road in silence, save for a desultory remark or two from Wharton or Nugent. It was very uncomfortable all round.

Several times Johnny Bull glanced at Bob, and seemed to speak. But Bob's look did not encourage

remarks from Johnny. However, as the lights of Wimford glimmered through the early December dusk, Johnny gave tongue at last.

'Look here, Bob--' he began.

Bob walked on a little faster.

'I'm speaking to you, Bob Cherry!' said Johnny.

'Well, don't.'

'I believe it's going to be a rather jolly panto,' said Frank Nugent. 'A company down from London--' But that interruption was futile. Johnny Bull went on regardless. 'Look here, Bob, don't be an ass! What's the good of sulking?'

Bob Cherry's face flamed.

'Who's sulking?' he inquired, in a voice that could have been heard at quite a considerable distance.

'You are!' said Johnny, calmly. 'You've hardly spoken a word all day. I fancy Wharton's uncle noticed something, at lunch. I saw Wells look at you, too. We haven't come here to scowl at one another, I suppose. We're friends--'

'Are we?' said Bob.

'Yes, we are, even if you've got your silly back up about nothing,' said Johnny. 'Nobody cares a bean about your playing the goat last night--'

'I did nothing last night.'

'Oh, don't keep that up,' said Johnny, impatiently.

'What's the use of talking rot? If you didn't, who did?'

'You, perhaps!' said Bob, savagely.

Johnny Bull jumped, almost clear of the Wimford road. 'What?' he gasped.

'You seem jolly keen to put it on me,' said Bob, sarcastically. 'Perhaps you know more about it than anybody else.'

'Why, you-you-you--!' stuttered Johnny, almost speechless with wrath.

Harry Wharton interposed hurriedly.

'For goodness' sake, shut up, both of you!' he exclaimed. 'We agreed to say nothing more about it. Let it drop.'

'The dropfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed and idiotic chums,' murmured the nabob of Bhanipur.

'Oh, come on,' said Nugent. 'We shall be late for the panto at this rate.' Bob Cherry had come to a halt.

Johnny Bull breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He gave Bob a look--a very expressive look. Fortunately, he left it at that. In silence, but with a very expressive face, he stalked on ahead of the party.

'Come on, Bob,' muttered Harry, uneasily. Bob did not come on.

'I'm not coming!' he said. 'Cut on without me. I've had all I want from Bull, and a little over. I don't want to punch his head while we're both staying at your place--'

'My dear chap---'

'My esteemed Bob--'

'It's all right,' said Bob. 'I'll go for a bit of a walk. I'm not going to the panto with Bull: I should be punching his cheeky head before the show was through. You fellows cut on--'

'But--!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'I tell you I'm not standing any more from Bull, and none of us wants a row, I suppose,' snapped Bob.

'The silly ass has got it fixed in his silly head that I played that silly trick last night--'

'It doesn't matter who played it--'

'I know that.'

'And it's of no consequence anyway--'

'I know that too!'

'Well, then, let's forget all about it. Do come on, old chap.'

Bob shook his head.

'Hope you'll have a good show,' he said. 'I'll take a trot! Cheerio.'

And Bob Cherry settled the matter by turning; and walking back the way the party had come. Three fellows stood looking after him as he went: and then they looked at one another. Their faces were glum.

'This is rather rotten,' said Harry, at last.

'The rottenfulness is terrific,' sighed the nabob of Bhanipur.

'Bob's got his back up!' said Nugent, dismally. 'Johnny's rather an ass! Once he gets an idea into his head, it won't come out again without a hammer and chisel.'

'Better get on, I suppose,' said Harry.

'Yes: no good being late for the show.'

They followed Johnny Bull. He looked round, as they joined him, and noted that Bob was absent.

'Where's Cherry?' he asked.

'Gone for a walk,' answered Harry, a little curtly.

Grunt, from Johnny. But he left it at that, and they walked on into Wimford in silence.

It was quite a good show at the Wimford Theatre, and the schoolboys, as a rule, liked a panto. But none of the four enjoyed it very much. There was a rift in the lute, and it weighed on the minds of all the members of the usually happily united Co.

CHAPTER 23

BRIEF ENCOUNTER

'OH, crikey!' breathed Billy Bunter.

He was alarmed.

A footfall, faint but unmistakable, came to his fat ears. In that remote recess of Wharton Lodge, a footfall on the attic stair was as startling to Billy Bunter, as the footprint in the sand was to Robinson Crusoe on his island.

It was very dark in the attic.

Billy Bunter was sitting on the old bedstead, in the alcove in the duskiest corner: his spectacles glimmering in the faint glimmer from the little window.

Few fellows would have cared for a day in that dusty old attic. But Billy Bunter had his resources. As a sleeper, he had few equals. In that line Rip van Winkle had little or nothing on William George Bunter. And he had been up unusually early that morning. So the fat Owl had slept and snored contentedly, hour after hour.

But even Billy Bunter could not sleep and snore for ever. He was up again now, demolishing what remained of his supply of biscuits. It was not an attractive attic: but he was safe from discovery there: he was assured of that. And then--then came that footfall!

It came faintly through the silence. Billy Bunter jumped, as he heard it, and almost swallowed a biscuit whole.

Someone was coming quietly up the attic stair.

That narrow winding stair led nowhere but to Bunter's attic. Whoever was coming up, was coming to that attic: there could be no doubt about that! Why he, whoever he was, was treading so softly, Bunter had no idea. Billy Bunter had his own reasons for tiptoeing when he moved about: but he could imagine no reason why anyone else at Wharton Lodge should move on tiptoe.

But that footfall was so soft, and so stealthy, that it certainly seemed to proceed from someone who did not desire his movements to be heard by others. Only the fat alarmed ears in the attic could have heard them. But the heaviest tread could not have startled and alarmed Bunter more.

Whoever it was that was coming up, was coming direct to his hide-out: and that could only spell discovery of a surreptitious fat Owl!

He rose from the old bedstead, and bent a fat head at the door to listen.

There was no mistake about it: someone was coming up the attic stair, though why he was treading so softly was a mystery.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

They did not know he was there! They couldn't! It could only be by chance that someone was coming up to that old attic. All the same, it meant discovery as soon as that someone entered.

The fat Owl blinked round him wildly in the dimness.

His first thought was to hide, and keep out of sight, as he had done that morning in Harry Wharton's 'den'. But there was nowhere in the attic to hide. And even if he could have crammed his plump person under the old bedstead, the signs of occupation remained.

There was no light in the attic. But obviously whoever was coming would bring a light with him. Its first glimmer would reveal the pile of bedclothes on the bedstead, the sea of crumbs on the floor, the heap of orange-peel, apple-peel, and banana skins. The very first glance would reveal that the room was inhabited.

The game was up!

'Oh, lor'!' moaned Bunter.

Given time, he could have hidden the signs of occupation. But there was no time. It was a matter of moments. The stealthy step on the stair was almost at the attic door.

Billy Bunter's little round eyes gleamed behind his big round spectacles. The game was up, if he was found there--and he was about to be found there. But he was not going to be rooted out and booted out. If he had to go, at least he was going without a boot behind him. He was not going to be grabbed in that attic.

He clutched up Harry Wharton's pillow from the bedstead. With that pillow clutched in both fat hands, he stepped to the door, and lifted it ready to swipe. Whoever was coming into that attic, was going to meet with a sudden surprise. One swipe of the pillow would tumble him over, and the way would be clear for a fat Owl to escape. Billy Bunter had not the faintest idea who the newcomer might be. But whoever he was, he was going to get the hardest swipe that an exasperated Owl could give him.

The soft step was just outside now. The door-handle turned.

Dim as it was, Billy Bunter's eyes made out a small, slight figure, with a glint of sharp, rat-like eyes under a low hat. Bob Cherry might have recognized him as the little man he had caught on Wharton's balcony the day before. To Billy Bunter's eyes he was a complete stranger. Who he was, what he was, and why he was there, Billy Bunter did not know or care. He swiped with the pillow, with all the force he could put into the swipe.

Crash!

'Oh! Strike me pink!' came a gasping ejaculation, as the man went over backwards, on the little landing outside the attic door.

What happened next seemed like a dream to Billy Bunter.

He had intended to dodge away while the newcomer sprawled under that effective swipe. But he had no time. To his utter amazement, the little man himself dodged away.

He must have been taken utterly by surprise by that sudden, unlooked-for swipe. He must have been at least a little damaged by his sudden crash on hard boards. Nevertheless, it was only for a split second that he sprawled: the next, he was slithering away down the attic stair.

While the fat Owl blinked in amazement in the dimness, he vanished down the stair, and a sound of running feet came back from the corridor below. It died out in a moment or two.

The man was gone!

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He stood with the pillow in his hands, blinking, almost wondering whether it had really happened, in his amazement.

What did it mean? What could it mean? Slowly it dawned on Billy Bunter's fat brain what it could only mean. That little man, whoever he was, did not belong to Wharton Lodge. Now that his fat wits had time to work, Bunter realized how unlikely it was that any inhabitant of the Lodge would come up to that attic in hat and overcoat.

It was still more unlikely that any inhabitant of the Lodge, suddenly swiped with a pillow in the dark, would take to his heels, and run as if for his life. That little man had been more alarmed than Bunter! Obviously--now Bunter had time to think--he was some extraneous person, who had penetrated secretly into the house: very likely by the french window on Wharton's balcony: some sneak-thief taking advantage of the fact that, at that hour, everyone would be downstairs.

'Oh, jiminy!' breathed Bunter, as it was borne in upon his fat mind that it was some law-breaker that he had swiped with Wharton's pillow.

It was an alarming thought.

But the man was gone! Plainly, he had believed that old attic to be vacant, and had been utterly startled and scared by finding someone there. He had scuttled off like a frightened rabbit, doubtless in fear of a shout alarming the household and cutting off his escape. Probably he was already out of the house, and still running!

Billy Bunter closed the attic door.

Had he realized earlier that the man was some lawless intruder, Bunter certainly would have been scared, and would very probably have uttered an alarming yell. But as it was, it was the intruder who had been scared: and he had vanished like a ghost at cock-crow. Nobody was likely to hear from him that the attic was inhabited: the fat Owl was still secure in his hide-out. Nobody belonging to Wharton Lodge knew that he was there: or was going to know! Satisfied in his fat mind on that point, Billy Bunter sat down again on the old bedstead, and resumed his interrupted operations on the biscuits.

CHAPTER 24

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

'BLOW!' muttered Bob Cherry, crossly.

It was irritating.

A fellow, already considerably disgruntled, about to open a door, couldn't help feeling irritated, when he suddenly remembered that it was locked!

'Blow!' repeated Bob.

Bob Cherry had taken a 'trot', as he had told his friends, while they went on to the pantomime at Wimford. But he had soon tired of a trot on his own, in the thickening December gloom, and he had walked back to Wharton Lodge. His face was clouded, and his heart was not light. That spot of trouble in the Co. bade fair to cast a shadow over the Christmas party at Harry Wharton's home, which was the last thing that Bob would have desired. Also, he was uneasy lest the old Colonel, or Aunt Amy, should discern that something was amiss.

He did not want inquiries as to why he had come back before his friends. But it was easy to avoid that, by going in by way of the french window on Harry Wharton's balcony. He could switch on the light in the 'den', settle down before the fire there with a book, and so pass the time till the Co. came back from Wimford.

He tramped up the steps to the little balcony, and groped in the dark for the door-handle. Then he suddenly remembered. Since the incident of the tramp--if the man had been a tramp--the previous afternoon, that french window had been kept locked. He had forgotten it, in the stress of other matters that occupied his mind. Now he remembered it, and ejaculated 'Blow!' twice with increasing emphasis.

He couldn't get in that way, if the door was locked. He stood and stared at the glimmering glass of the french window, with a glum brow. He did not want to go round to the front of the house and ring for admittance. Wells, or Young John, letting him in, would know at once that something was up, as he had cut the pantomime and come back alone. The old Colonel would probably see him come in, and wonder, even if he did not question him. Blow that wretched tramp--but for him, that french window would have been left unlocked, as usual, for ingress and egress.

Then, with a faint hope that Harry might have forgotten to lock that door after all, he turned the handle, and pushed.

It was rather a faint hope, for Harry Wharton was far too careful a fellow to forget such things. So he was quite surprised when the door swung open at his push.

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bob.

Wharton, usually careful, had been careless for once. It looked like it, at all events, as the door certainly was not locked. Bob was not likely to surmise that somebody had been there before him: a surreptitious somebody skilled in unlocking locked doors from the outside! No such thought occurred to his mind. He took it for granted that Harry had forgotten to lock that door, and it was a relief to him.

He stepped in from the balcony.

The embers of a log fire glowed faintly in the fireplace, lights and shadows dancing as little tongues of flame leaped and fell. But it was very dim, and Bob reached for the electric light switch at the side of the french window, and switched it on.

He threw off his overcoat and cap. The fire was low, and he stirred it, and threw on two or three logs from the basket, and there was a bright and cheerful blaze.

It was very cosy and comfortable in the 'den', and Bob felt a little more cheerful. He stepped across to Harry's bookcase, to look for a book, remembering that there was a Tom Merry annual there: and lifted it from the shelf.

He was standing at the bookcase, when a sound from the corridor came to his ears, and he stared round in surprise. It was an unexpected sound--the patter of running feet! Somebody was coming down the passage at racing speed.

'What the thump--!' ejaculated Bob in astonishment. The next moment, the door from the corridor was thrown open, and a figure in overcoat and hat ran in.

Bob's eyes fairly bulged at him.

He had had only a glimpse of the man on the balcony the previous day. But he knew him again instantly: the diminutive figure in the overcoat, the rat-like eyes glinting under the low hat.

The man checked himself for a second, blinking, as if surprised by the light in the room. But it was only for a second. Then he was racing across the room towards the french window: in his desperate haste not even seeing Bob standing at the bookcase.

Whiz!

Bob had no time to intercept him. But he acted promptly. The book in his hand was large and heavy. He hurled it with all the force of his arm, and it crashed on the side of the man's head, knocking him side-ways.

He staggered over, falling on one knee.

Bob Cherry followed up the whizzing book with a rush.

That tramp, or sneak-thief, or whatever he was, had paid Wharton Lodge a second visit: and he was not getting away this time, if Bob could help it.

His grasp was on him, before the man could get on his feet again. At the same moment, he shouted at the top of his voice:

'Help!'

The rat-eyed man turned on him like a cat, wrenching to free himself. Small as he was, not so tall as the sturdy Greyfriars junior, he was strong and wiry, active as a cat, slippery as an eel. He struggled savagely, desperately, to break loose, while Bob held on to him, and shouted again and again.

'Help! Colonel Wharton! Wells! John! Help! Thieves! Help!'

There were footsteps on the stairs, and startled voices.

A heavy tread came from the direction of the stairs, and Colonel Wharton's deep voice: 'Good gad! What's all this? What's going on here?'

'Help!' roared Bob. 'Thieves!'

'Good gad!'

Colonel Wharton appeared in the doorway. Behind him were Wells and John. They stared into the room. At the same moment the rat-eyed man, with a frantic effort, tore loose from Bob, and flung the Greyfriars junior off. There was a gasp from Colonel Wharton, staring at him with popping eyes.

'Him again!' gasped the Colonel. Evidently, he had seen the rat-eyed man before. There was another gasp from Wells: 'The burglar!'

Colonel Wharton came in with a rush. The rat-eyed man was springing for the french window. The Colonel's grasp was almost upon him, when he tore the door open, and leaped out on the balcony.

'That rascal again!' panted the old Colonel. He rushed out on the balcony in pursuit.

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Bob Cherry, breathless from that brief but hectic struggle. He panted for breath. 'Who's that man, Wells? Have you seen him before?'

'It's the burglar!' gasped Wells. 'The man who stole the Tintoretto--'

'Oh!' Bob gave a breathless whistle. 'Sure it's the same man? I thought he was some pilfering tramp--sure he's the same man?'

'Quite sure, sir,' said Wells. 'Both the master and I saw him quite plainly that night. It is the man who got away with the picture.'

Bob ran to the balcony. He stared down into the December gloom. But there was nothing to be seen but glimmering snow. There was a sound of heavy breathing, as Colonel Wharton came tramping up the steps again.

'Got away, sir?' asked Bob.

'Yes!' Colonel Wharton's grizzled brows were knitted. 'The rascal! He must have picked the lock on this door--it shall be kept bolted after this! But who could have dreamed that he would pay us another visit, after getting away with a picture worth a thousand pounds? What was he after this time, I wonder? I must get the police at once.'

Colonel Wharton hurried downstairs, losing no time in getting on the telephone to Inspector Slade at Wimford. Wells and John and Bob Cherry proceeded to look through the rooms, to ascertain whether the intruder had taken anything with him in his flight.

But there was no sign anywhere that anything had been tampered with. Whatever the man's object had been in coming, he had gone empty-handed.

His sudden hurried flight looked as if he had had a sudden alarm, and dashed to escape. But what could have alarmed him was a mystery: for no one had seen him or heard him, till he came so suddenly on Bob Cherry. A fat Owl in an attic could have let in some light on that mystery: but no one knew or dreamed anything about a fat Owl in an attic.

Why the rascal, who had succeeded only a few nights before in escaping with valuable plunder, had revisited the Lodge at all, was a puzzle. It puzzled Colonel Wharton, and it puzzled Inspector Slade: and it puzzled Harry Wharton and Co. when they came back from the panto at Wimford, and heard what had happened. It had to remain a puzzle.

CHAPTER 25

LATE HOURS

'OH, lor'!' mumbled Billy Bunter.

He lifted a fat head from Harry Wharton's pillow, and sat up on the old bedstead, hugging the blankets round him.

It was a sleepless Owl.

A cake in the morning, and biscuits in the afternoon, had filled the aching void inside William George Bunter. But he was sadly and sorrowfully conscious of that aching void again: indeed, he was feeling rather like a shipwrecked mariner who had been in an open boat at sea for days.

Billy Bunter had hoped--and still hoped--for a favourable propitious moment to reveal his unsuspected presence at Wharton Lodge. No such favourable moment had transpired as yet.

In the meantime, he had to keep 'doggo'. But a fellow had to eat! Even at the risk of departing on his fat neck, Bunter had to have provender. That was as certain as anything in Euclid. Better the boot, and Bunter Villa again, than that aching void in his fat circumference: growing more and more aching with every passing minute.

But Bunter had laid his plans. Bunter was going to tiptoe down from his attic in the middle of the night, when everyone was fast asleep, and raid the larder. He was sure of finding a good supply there: which, transported to his attic, would see him through.

What Wells, and the cook, and everyone else, would think, when the raid was discovered in the morning, he did not know or care. They might put it down to a schoolboy lark, like the shipping of Wharton's bed. They were not likely, at any rate, to put it down to a fat Owl whose presence in the house was unknown to any other inhabitant thereof.

Bunter had rolled himself in Harry Wharton's blankets, to sleep till it was late enough and safe enough to make the venture. But he couldn't sleep. When he did nod off, he awoke again. He had had a good deal of slumber that day: but he could have slept and snored through the night, but for that aching void. Now he just couldn't!

'Oh, lor'!' he mumbled. 'Oh, crikey!'

He blinked dismally in the dimness. What time it was, he did not know, but he knew that it was late. But was it late enough for a hungry Owl to tiptoe downstairs like a lion seeking what he might devour? He had to be quite, quite sure that everyone had gone to bed, before he carried out his nefarious designs on the larder.

But it was futile to try to sleep. He was too hungry for that. He rolled off the old bedstead at last, opened the attic door, and peered out. A faint glimmer in the dark showed that the light was still on in the corridor below.

'Beasts!' mumbled Bunter, disconsolately. It was not yet time.

Lights would be out, when the household had retired to slumber. He had to wait for the house to be in darkness, before he made his venture.

But another idea germinated in his fat brain, as he stood blinking at the shadowy attic stair.

The elders, no doubt, were still up: but the schoolboys turned in at an earlier hour than the elders. Likely enough, they were gone to bed. Very likely they were fast asleep, while a hungry fat Owl was so woefully wakeful. If so, it would be safe enough for a hungry Owl to venture forth as far as Harry Wharton's sitting-room, at the further end of the corridor. There might be something of an edible nature in that room. It was possible that that fruit dish had been replenished: and even a single banana would have been a windfall to a ravenous Owl.

He hesitated.

But the inward urge was too strong. Billy Bunter had to eat, if eatables were to be had: and it was a chance, at least.

He crept out of the attic at last, and tiptoed down the winding narrow stair. He blinked along the corridor. All the doors were closed.

He hesitated again. Ten to one they were all asleep in bed. But if they had not yet come up---! And if they came up, and spotted him--! It was a tense moment!

But again his hesitation was brief. Taking his courage in both hands, as it were, the fat Owl tiptoed along the corridor.

A sound from one of the rooms made him jump. But it was only the sound of someone turning over in bed. Silence followed.

Evidently, they had gone to bed!

Reassured, Billy Bunter crept on his way, and arrived at the door of the 'den'. There he paused to listen, before opening the door. It was fortunate for the fat Owl that he was so cautious, for from within came the sound of a voice! Some members of the Co., evidently, were not yet in bed. It was Bob Cherry's voice he heard.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

'It's no good, Harry--!' came the voice.

'Look here, Bob--' That was Wharton's voice, and it sounded worried.

'I tell you it's no good. I'd better get off to bed--Franky and Inky and that fathead Bull will be fast asleep by this time--!'

So there were only two of them up! For some reason Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry were still up, and talking in the 'den', after the others had gone to their rooms. Billy Bunter shook a fat fist at the door. It really seemed, to Bunter, that those two were sitting up late just to annoy him.

'Don't go yet, Bob--'

'I tell you it's no good talking. We can't go on like this--two fellows at loggerheads in the same party. I came jolly near punching Bull's head today. You don't want that to happen here, I suppose.'

'There's nothing to row about--'

'Isn't there?' snapped Bob. 'Has that silly ass got it fixed in his silly head that I shipped your bed last night, or hasn't he?'

'Yes: but--'

'He can't take my word about it--'

'It's not that, Bob. He thinks you're keeping up a mystery about it--'

'Perhaps you think the same?' snapped Bob. It was plain that Bob Cherry was not in his usual sunny temper!

'Nothing of the kind, Bob. But be reasonable, old chap--it does look as if it was one of the party played that silly trick. If there's some idiotic practical joker in the house, it beats me to guess who it could be.'

Outside the door, Billy Bunter grinned. He was interested in that conversation in Harry Wharton's den. His fat ear was not unaccustomed to keyhole work! He listened in, grinning.

'It beats me too,' said Bob. 'But it doesn't beat Johnny--Johnny's the man who knows! Look here, Harry, I tell you we can't go on like this--and I'd better clear off in the morning--'

'You're not going to do anything of the sort, Bob. You can't break up the party like that.'

'I tell you--'

'Have a spot of patience, old chap. We may spot that practical joker, whoever he is. There's

somebody, I know that, playing tricks. I heard a queer story from Wells today, about a cake that disappeared from this room, and then must have been put back again, as he found it here--and then disappeared again. Some silly ass is playing pranks. Well, if we spot him--'

'If!' grunted Bob.

'We're bound to, sooner or later, if he carries on the silly game. Then it will be all right, and Johnny will know--'

'I don't care what he knows or doesn't know! I know that I'm fed up with him, and I know that we can't carry on here, with two fellows in the party not speaking to one another. Your uncle and aunt will soon tumble to it that something's up--if they haven't already! I'd better go before there's any more trouble, and--'

'I won't let you go.'

'It's no good talking, Harry--I've decided, and I shan't change my mind if you keep me talking here till midnight. We'd better both get off to bed.'

'We're not going to bed till we've settled this--'

'It's settled.'

'It isn't! Look here, Bob--'

'I'm sorry, old chap! But we can't keep on like this--either Johnny or I will have to clear. That means me. Now chuck it.'

'But look here--'

'I'm going to bed!'

There was a tramp of footsteps in the 'den'. A fat ear was suddenly detached from the keyhole, and Billy Bunter jumped away in alarm. Bob Cherry was coming out--!

A fat Owl fled up the corridor. There was a sound of an opening door behind him.

Billy Bunter had no chance of reaching the attic stair unseen. In another moment, Bob would have stepped out of the 'den', and his astonished eyes would have fallen on a fleeing fat Owl. Billy Bunter turned the door-handle of the nearest door, and darted into a room. What or whose room it was, he had no time to think--he had to get out of sight. And he was just out sight, when Bob emerged from Harry Wharton's sitting-room, and tramped on to his own room.

Bunter palpitated behind a half-open door, listening.

'Do listen, Bob--' Harry Wharton, it seemed, had followed Bob.

'Good night,' said Bob.

'No good saying good night, old fellow--if you won't listen in my room, you'll have to listen in yours.'

Harry Wharton followed Bob into his room. And at the same moment a startled voice, in the darkness of the room behind Bunter, exclaimed:

'Who's that?'

It was Johnny Bull's voice.

CHAPTER 26

NOT BOB!

JOHNNY BULL sat up in bed.

He was startled.

Johnny had not yet fallen asleep. He was, in fact, a little perturbed in mind, thinking over the very matter that Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry were discussing in the 'den'. Like Bob, Johnny felt that the present state of affairs couldn't go on: two fellows avoiding one another, and never exchanging a word, in the same party. It was altogether too irksome, and would become more so, if the elders noticed that there was a rift in the lute, which they were sure to do sooner or later.

Irksome as it was, Johnny did not see what could be done about it, unless Bob gave up keeping up that silly mystification. The affair itself was trifling: it really didn't matter much who had shipped that bed. There was no reason that Johnny could see why Bob Cherry should not own up to what was, after all, only a lark: and still less reason why he should be sulky about it simply because Johnny knew what he knew!

That he didn't know, did not occur to Johnny. Johnny had a practical mind, and no use whatever for improbable surmises. Some member of the Co. had played that prank, simply because there was no one else who could have. That was just logic. As it certainly was not Wharton himself, and equally certainly was not Johnny, it rested on the other three--and of the other three, neither Nugent nor the nabob was such an unthinking ass! Obviously, therefore, it was Bob. So why couldn't he say so? Johnny had no patience with such nonsense--making a mystery out of next to nothing, and getting sulky and disgruntled about it, too! Johnny's face, on the pillow, wore a frown, as he thought it over. But his thoughts were suddenly switched from the subject, as he heard his door open, and a glimmer came in from the passage. He heard a hurried panting breath. Startled, he exclaimed 'Who's that?' and sat up in bed, peering in the darkness.

The door was partly open, but only the slightest glimmer came in at the aperture. All was dark: he could see nothing but that glimmer. But he knew that someone was in the room.

'Who's that?' repeated Johnny.

'Oh! Is that you, Bob Cherry, larking again, you silly ass?'

There was no reply.

'Who is it?' hooted Johnny. 'I'm not asleep, if you've come larking here, you blithering fathead! Can't you speak?'

Billy Bunter could have--but he didn't! He palpitated in silence.

He knew that Harry Wharton had followed Bob into his room, to carry on the argument that Bob had cut short in the 'den'. If they had closed the door, the coast was clear. But had they?

'You silly, blithering, blethering ass!' came from Johnny Bull's bed. 'Think I don't know it's you, you dithering dummy! Making out that you never shipped Wharton's room, and now come along here, when you think I'm asleep, for another silly lark! I'll show you whether I'm asleep or not! Take that!' Something whizzed from the bed to the door, in the dark.

It was a pillow.

Dark as it was, Johnny's aim seemed to be good. Billy Bunter gasped, as the pillow landed on a fat chest. He caught it with fat hands.

It was followed by the sound of Johnny scrambling out of bed. At the same moment, there was the sound of a closing door down the passage. The music of the spheres could not have been so welcome to Billy Bunter's fat ears.

The coast was clear! But Johnny was scrambling from his bed! Quick action had never been Billy Bunter's long suit. But he acted quickly now! A stocky figure loomed dim in the gloom. With all the force of two fat arms, Bunter hurled the pillow back.

Bump!

He heard Johnny Bull land on the floor. The whizzing pillow had caught him, fair and square, in the middle of his features, up-ending him. He rolled on the floor, spluttering.

But Billy Bunter did not linger to hear him splutter.

In a split second he was outside the door, banging it shut after him. And his feet hardly touched the floor as he raced for the attic stair.

'Oh! Urrrrgh!' gasped Johnny Bull, sitting up dizzily. 'Oh, crumbs! By gum. I-I-I'll--'

He sat, gasping for breath. That sudden bump on the floor had been rather a shock to Johnny. It was some moments before he scrambled to his feet.

He knew that his mysterious assailant was gone: he had heard the door bang, as he rolled over. He had not seen him, but he knew where to look for him--or at all events he was sure that he did!

Still gasping, he groped for the electric light switch beside the door, and flashed on the light. Then, staying only to throw on a coat over his pyjamas, he dragged open the door, and tramped out into the corridor. With a grim face, he tramped down the passage to Bob Cherry's room. There was nobody to be seen in the corridor: but he did not expect to see anyone: his unseen visitor had had time to get clear. That it was Bob Cherry, and that Bob had scudded back to his own room, Johnny had not the slightest doubt. And he was going to see Bob about it, without delay. That day, Bob had had to restrain himself from punching Johnny's head. Johnny did not look as if he was going to restrain himself from punching Bob's!

He did not tap when he reached Bob's door. He turned the handle, and hurled the door wide open. He marched in. 'You silly ass, what sort of a blithering idiot do you call yourself, larking in a fellow's room in the middle of the night?' he roared.

Bob Cherry was sitting on the edge of his bed, fully dressed, which did not surprise Johnny. He did not notice, for the moment, that there was another fellow in the room:

Harry Wharton, standing by the fireplace. His inimical glare fixed on Bob.

Bob stared at him blankly. He was too surprised by this sudden irruption to speak, for the moment. He only stared. Harry Wharton, from the fireplace, stared too, as astonished as Bob. What was the matter with Johnny Bull was a mystery to both of them.

'What were you going to do, in my room, I'd like to know?' roared Johnny. 'Think you could ship my bed, like you did Wharton's, with me in it? You silly, blithering, dithering dunderhead--'

'Mad?' asked Bob.

'By gum!' gasped Johnny. 'Are you going to say that it wasn't you in my room, Bob Cherry? You didn't knock me over with my own pillow? What?'

'Did anybody?' stuttered Bob.

'Yes, you did, and I'm jolly well going to punch your head for it, too,' roared Johnny, and he rushed.

Harry Wharton made a jump forward, just in time.

He grabbed Johnny by his coat collar, and dragged him back. Johnny Bull spun round, thus made aware that someone else was in the room as well as Bob. His eyes popped at Harry.

'You mad ass!' exclaimed Harry Wharton. 'What the dickens--!'

'Let go my collar.'

Harry Wharton let go the collar, but he stepped between the exasperated Johnny, and Bob, who was still sitting staring on the bed.

'Now what's the row?' snapped Wharton. 'I thought you were gone to bed--'

'So I was, when that larking lunatic came into my room larking,' hooted Johnny. 'I'm going to punch his silly head! You can let him ship your room if you like, but I'm not going to let him bang me over with my own pillow--'

'Potty!' said Bob.

'Bob did nothing of the kind!' said Harry. 'Did anybody?'

'Think I don't know whether I've been knocked over or not?' hooted Johnny. 'That larking lunatic--'

'Somebody's been in your room--?'

'Yes: that japing ass--'

'When?' demanded Wharton.

'Only two or three minutes ago--'

'It wasn't Bob--'

'Who was it, then?'

'Whoever it was, it wasn't Bob. Bob has been with me ever since we came up, and my eyes haven't been off him for a minute. Two or three minutes ago we were sitting in my 'den', and then I came here after Bob--he hasn't been out of my sight for a second.'

Johnny Bull stared at him. Then he stared at Bob.

Then he stared at Wharton again. He was completely taken aback.

'You're sure?' he gasped, at last.

'Yes, ass!'

'I-I thought it was Bob larking again--if it wasn't, who was it? Somebody came into my room in the dark, and I thought it was Bob--of course I did--'

'Of course you did!' said Bob Cherry, sarcastically. 'And now that you know it wasn't, who are you going to think it was, next? Franky or Inky?'

'I-I thought--!' stammered Johnny.

'Gammon! Catch you thinking!'

'I-I chucked my pillow at him, and he got hold of it, and floored me--I was banged over on the floor--'

'Hard, I hope!' said Bob.

'If-if-if it wasn't you--I-I suppose it wasn't, if you've been with Wharton all the time. But who--?'

'Go along and kick up a shindy with Nugent or Inky!' suggested Bob. 'Get out of my room, anyway.'

'It wasn't Nugent or Inky,' said Harry.

'What wasn't Nugent or Inky?' asked a voice at the doorway. Two figures appeared there: one with a coat, the other with a gorgeous dressing-gown, over his pyjamas. Loud voices had brought Frank Nugent and the nabob of Bhanipur to the scene.

'What is the upfulness?' asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Look out, you two!' said Bob. 'Johnny's on the warpath. Somebody's been larking in his room, and he's going to punch somebody's head--he doesn't mind whose.'

'I-I-I thought--' mumbled Johnny. He was quite abashed. He had been quite convinced that Bob was the mysterious practical joker. Now he hardly knew what to think. 'I-I know it wasn't you, Nugent, or you, Inky, I-I thought it was Bob, but-but it seems that it wasn't--'

'What a brain!' said Bob. 'He's got that into his head--perhaps he'll get it into his head next that it wasn't I who shipped Wharton's room last night! Now his brain's started working, watch for results!'

'Looks as if there's some practical joker about,' said Nugent. 'Wharton's room last night--Johnny's tonight! Same chap playing the goat.'

'The samefulness is terrific,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head.

'That's plain enough,' said Harry Wharton. 'Somebody's playing tricks, and it wasn't one of us five. Have you got that into your head yet, Johnny, or do you want it hammered in?' Johnny's face was crimson. Johnny was slow to part with an idea once fixed in his mind. But he had to part with that one. Surprising as it was, improbable as it was, it was evident that the 'nigger in the woodpile' was not one of the Famous Five. It was clear now, even to Johnny, that under the roof of Wharton Lodge there was some person, not one of the Co., who was responsible for those mysterious pranks. And as Johnny realised that more and more clearly, his face became redder and redder.

'Got it at last?' asked Bob, still sarcastic. Johnny gave a sort of gulp.

'Sorry!' he gasped.

'So you ought to be,' said Bob.

'I-I couldn't help thinking--'

'You mean you couldn't think at all!'

'Well, you know how it looked--'

'How it looked to a silly, obstinate ass, do you mean?' Johnny gulped again.

'I've said I'm sorry--'

'I heard you!' said Bob. 'And now you've said your piece, get out, and let's get to bed. It's about time, I think.'

'Bob, old chap--!' murmured Harry.

Johnny Bull, breathing rather hard, turned to the door.

Bob's face was uncompromising, and Wharton, Nugent, and the nabob exchanged troubled glances. It did not look as if the rift in the lute was mended.

But at the door, Johnny Bull turned back. Perhaps it cost him an effort. But if so, he made it.

'Look here, Bob,' he said. 'I was wrong, and I've owned up that I was wrong. I'm sorry, and I've said so. Don't keep it up, old chap! It isn't like you to keep up a grudge. Can't you wash it out and forget it?'

Bob Cherry's grim look relaxed.

To the relief of his comrades, it was replaced by a cheery grin.

'Okay, old boy,' he said. 'Wash it out and forget it--we've been pals too long to break it up now.

Wash it out--and tomorrow we'll all have a go at hunting out that practical joking tick, whoever he is, and skin him alive!'

'Hear, hear!' said Nugent.

'The hear-hearfulness is terrific.'

'It's all right then?' said Johnny.

'Right as rain!' said Bob. 'Good night, old boy.'

'Good night, old chap.'

And the Famous Five went to bed, all of them considerably relieved in their minds: though more puzzled than ever to guess who the mysterious practical joker could possibly be--and quite unaware that the happenings of that night were not yet over!

AWFUL FOR BUNTER!

CREAK!

Billy Bunter started.

Creak!

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

His eyes, and his spectacles, swivelled round to the door of the attic. That creak, in the silence of the night, was alarming. If it meant that pursuit was on his trail--!

The hapless fat Owl was sitting on the bedstead, with Harry Wharton's blankets hugged round his fat form. He was sleepy. But he couldn't even think of sleep. He was too hungry for that. Something had to be done about that aching void in his extensive inside before he could think of closing his eyes in slumber. He sat dismally on the bedstead in the dark, waiting for midnight.

For quite a long time, after his narrow escape from Johnny Bull, the fat Owl had listened at the door of the attic, in a state of palpitating trepidation. He dreaded to hear pursuing footsteps on the attic stair.

But there were no footsteps: there was no pursuit.

Whatever Johnny thought about the unseen visitor to his room, whatever the others thought, clearly they did not think of a fat Owl in an attic.

Reassured at length, Billy Bunter sat on the bedstead, wrapped the blankets round him, and waited while the slow minutes crawled by. His escape had been too narrow for him to think of repeating his venture, till he was quite, quite sure that the whole household was safe in the arms of Morpheus.

Not till he was absolutely certain that every inhabitant of Wharton Lodge was in bed and fast asleep was Billy Bunter going to venture forth again from his lair. He had to wait.

Never had the time passed so slowly. Even in form with Quelch at Greyfriars, when it had often seemed to him that the form-room clock must have stopped, never had the minutes seemed so long, and an hour so endless. Really that night was like an Arctic night--so cold and so interminable. There was only one spot of consolation: the prospect of getting at the larder later. But not till a very late hour dared he make the venture.

Sitting on the old bedstead, in the corner of the old attic, he waited. How long he had sat there, he didn't know and couldn't guess--it seemed like a century or two! He had no doubt that it was past midnight now. But he couldn't be sure. Perhaps that stuffy old stick, Colonel Wharton, might still be up. He had to wait till all was sure and safe--feeling more and more every moment like a shipwrecked mariner in an open boat at sea.

Creak!

'Beasts!' breathed Bunter.

He blinked in alarm at the door. That creaking sound indicated that somebody was astir. But it couldn't possibly be those fellows after him. He did not know how long it was: but he knew that it must be more than an hour, probably more than two, since he had fled up the attic stair. They would have been after him long ago, if they were after him at all.

Creak!

Billy Bunter's fat heart gave a sudden jump. He remembered that strange visitor of the afternoon--that sneak-thief, or whatever he was: the little man with the glinting rat's eyes under the low hat, who had fled in such wild haste after the swipe from the pillow.

The man had obviously been frightened, and had run like a rabbit. It had not occurred to Bunter's fat

mind for a moment that he might repeat that visit. But it occurred to him now, as he listened to that creaking sound.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Creak!

His fat ears were on the stretch. He heard the creaking again, but it did not seem to come from the direction of the door. It was not a footstep on the attic stair. Nobody was coming up. Was it, after all, only the creaking of old woodwork, audible in the silence of the night?

Creak!

'Blow!' mumbled Bunter, crossly. He detected the direction of the sound now. It came from the little attic window.

Only that old window creaking in the December Wind, after all! It couldn't be anything else. Nobody could climb up to that window. It was a good forty feet from the ground. There was an old rain-pipe clamped to the wall close beside it, but only some person as active as a cat, and nimble as a monkey, could possibly have clambered up it. It was only the wind! The fat Owl, reassured, hugged Harry Wharton's blankets, heedless of creaks.

Then suddenly he became aware of a cold draught of air. With a jump, he realized that the window was open!

He blinked round--and sat petrified.

In the corner where he sat on the bedstead, it was pitchy dark. At the window was a faint glimmer.

That glimmer was blotted out by something solid. There was a light footfall.

Billy Bunter's eyes, almost popping through his spectacles, caught a glimpse of glinting eyes under a low hat. It was that man again! It was the same man that he had swiped with the pillow, and who had run like a rabbit after that swipe!

Bunter did not stir. He couldn't!

He could only sit as if frozen to the bedstead, his eyes bulging at that utterly unexpected nocturnal intruder.

He had chosen that attic as a safe hide-out. Nobody ever came up to that attic. Least of all could he have dreamed that a little rat-eyed man had any interest in it. But there he was--not ten feet from the staring Owl.

There was a sudden gleam in the dark. It came from a flash-lamp.

If it had turned towards Bunter's corner, it would have revealed the fat Owl sitting petrified on the edge of the old bedstead.

But it did not turn towards Bunter's corner. It turned on the door: and the rat-eyed man tiptoed across to that door, and stood there listening. For a long minute he stood there, his head bent to listen: obviously totally unaware that anyone else was in the attic.

The petrified Owl could only watch him, in frozen silence.

The man turned from the door. He did not turn towards Bunter's dark corner. He placed the flash-lamp on an old box, and its light streamed on the floor, not in Bunter's direction.

His next action amazed the fat Owl, even in his terror.

In the light of the flash-lamp, he knelt on the floor, and turned back the edge of the old dusty square of carpet.

Bunter heard a low husky chuckle.

'Safe and sound! They never guessed! Fools, to fancy that I could carry it down from the window! I'd have dropped it and never found it again in the dark! Left till called for! Ha, ha!'

That was so much Greek to Billy Bunter.

But it penetrated his fat mind that there was something hidden under that dusty old carpet: something that was of eager interest to the midnight intruder.

That was why he had crept up the attic stair that afternoon, meeting with so unexpected a reception!

No doubt he had concluded, then, that some member of the household had been in the attic by chance, never dreaming that it was inhabited, and would be occupied at night. Obviously he had not the remotest suspicion that it was occupied now.

Bunter, clamped to the bedstead, hardly breathing, could only hope that he would remain in that state of ignorance!

He heard a husky chuckle again. The man kneeling at the carpet seemed to be in high feather. He muttered to himself aloud:

'Left till called for! I've called twice-third time lucky! I couldn't get it down from that window--but who's to stop me walking downstairs with it now?' Another husky chuckle. 'They've taken care of doors and windows--but if that stops a covey getting in, it won't stop him getting out! Tintoretto and all! Ha, ha!'

As he chuckled, the man folded back more of the old carpet. The light of the flash-lamp streamed on the floor it had covered.

But it was not only on the floor that it streamed. There was a glow of rich colours in the light. Billy Bunter almost wondered whether he was dreaming. Never for a moment could he have guessed or imagined that anything was hidden under that dusty old carpet, which had lain there forgotten for years. Least of all could he have imagined that an oil painting was hidden there. But it was a large oil painting that he was now blinking at with dizzy eyes through his spectacles. It was a picture rich in glowing colour.

What Billy Bunter did not know about matters of art, would have filled volumes. He could not have told whether that painting was by the hand of an Old Master, or whether it was a coloured oleograph. But he could see, at all events, that it was a picture--a large painted canvas, flattened out on the floor under the old carpet, now partly revealed as the man turned the edge of the carpet back. It glimmered and glowed in the gleam of the flash-lamp.

That painting, evidently, was what the rat-eyed man wanted. He knew that it was there, and he had called for it--surreptitiously, clambering like a monkey up the old rain-pipe!

After the alarm that afternoon, no doubt he had found all doors and windows carefully secured. But his monkey-like agility had served his turn. Probably he had had experience as a 'cat' burglar! There he was--feasting his eyes on his prize.

But suddenly, to Bunter's horror, he turned his head, and his sharp rat-like eyes swept round the dark attic, like those of a startled and scared animal.

Perhaps, in the silence, he had caught some faint sound of the fat Owl's breathing, hard as Bunter tried to suppress it.

He had taken the alarm!

In an instant, the corner of the old carpet dropped back into place, hiding the painting as before. The man leaped to his feet.

He clutched up the flash-lamp, and swept the light round the room in a circle.

It flashed on Billy Bunter, sitting petrified on the edge of the bedstead in the corner. His spectacles flashed back the light.

The man stared at him, as amazed as alarmed. He seemed dumbfounded.

The sight of a fat schoolboy, sitting on an old bedstead in a deserted attic, wrapped in blankets, at

midnight, was really enough to dumbfound any enterprising burglar! He stared as if he could hardly believe his own rat-like eyes, sharp as they were: and Bunter stared back, rather like a fat rabbit fascinated by the glare of a serpent.

Then, as the man made a movement, Bunter woke to life. With a howl of terror, the fat Owl bounded up from the bedstead. Hardly knowing what he was doing, he hurled the blankets at the rat-eyed man, and bolted for the door.

Enveloped in whirling blankets, the man tottered. The flash-lamp went to the floor with a crash and was instantly extinguished. But Bunter's fat hand was on the door-handle, and he tore the door open, yelling at the top of his voice:

'Help! Help! Burglars! I say, you fellows! Help! Help!'

That frantic yell rang far and wide. It reached most ears in Wharton Lodge: certainly those of Harry Wharton and Co., who were nearest at hand. Startled voices were heard below.

Bunter charged at the doorway. But in the sudden blackness, he charged into the door-post instead, and uttered an ear-splitting yell as his fat little nose was almost flattened by the contact.

'Yaroooooh!'

Stumbling blindly, the fat Owl rolled over on the carpet.

Yell after yell pealed from him, as he rolled.

Billy Bunter was not thinking now of keeping 'doggo'.

He was not thinking of anything but his terror of the man in the attic. He yelled and yelled and yelled. Voices were calling:

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'What's up?'

'What the thump--!'

'Who's that?'

'What--!'

Bunter did not even hear: his own musical effects filled his fat ears. He yelled and yelled.

He was unaware that the rat-eyed man, probably as terrified as Bunter himself by the sudden alarm, was scrambling in frantic haste out of the attic window, to slither down the rain-pipe: going while the going was good! He had no time to lose, for there were lights and voices and hurried footsteps on the attic stair. Billy Bunter did not know that he was gone: all Bunter knew was that he was scared out of his fat wits, and he sprawled on the dusty old carpet, and yelled and yelled and yelled and yelled.

CHAPTER 28

ONLY BUNTER!

'BUNTER!'

'Not Bunter!'

'Yes, Bunter!'

'The esteemed and idiotic Bunter!'

'We're dreaming this!'

'Bunter-here! That fat ass, Bunter--!'

'Bunter-my hat!'

'Bunter-great Scott!'

It was a chorus of amazement. If it had been possible to doubt their eyes, Harry Wharton and Co. would have doubted them.

But there was no doubt about it. The object sprawling on the dusty old carpet in the attic was Bunter--Billy Bunter-William George Bunter of the Greyfriars Remove!

Life is full of surprises. No doubt the Famous Five had had a few, in their young lives. But never, assuredly, had they had such a surprise as this!

It was not merely surprising! It was amazing! It was dumbfounding! It was incredible. But it was Bunter!

That frantic yelling from the attic had awakened them all at once. They had turned out, wondering what was up. Somebody, up in the attic, was yelling wildly for help. Harry Wharton, aware that there was no light in the attic, had snatched up an electric torch. They ran up the attic stair. The door was wide open, and Harry flashed the light into the room. And what it revealed made them wonder if they were dreaming.

The attic had one occupant. That it had had another, only a few moments before, the juniors were not aware. The man with the rat-eyes was gone--already at the bottom of the rain-pipe. But there was Billy Bunter--sprawling and yelling: gasping for breath, but still emitting wild yells.

'Help! Help! Burglars! I say, you fellows! Keep off! Oh, crikey! Help!'

They gazed at him.

Evidently, Bunter was in a state of panic. After the recent happenings at Wharton Lodge, it was possible that there might be a burglar about. But there was nothing to be seen of any burglar. It was more probable that the fat Owl had been scared by something in the dark. But what he was doing in that attic, and how he had come there at all, was a quite bewildering mystery.

Bunter, so far as they knew, was ten miles away at Bunter Villa. They had seen and heard nothing of him since the previous day when they had greeted him with snowballs, and he had beaten a prompt retreat. If they had thought of him at all, they would have thought of him as being at home under the parental roof. Probably they had not thought of him at all.

But, evidently, Billy Bunter wasn't ten miles away, under the parental roof! He was here--here in Wharton Lodge--sprawling on the old carpet in the attic, and rousing the midnight echoes with his yells.

'It's Bunter!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'It isn't his ghost-it's Bunter!' stuttered Frank Nugent.

'The Bunterfulness is terrific.'

'Bunter!' articulated Johnny Bull.

'Bunter! How did Bunter get here, in the middle of the night?'

'Bunter!' said Harry Wharton, like a fellow in a dream.



'HELP! HELP! BURGLARS! I SAY, YOU FELLOWS! KEEP OFF ! OH, CRIKEY! HELP!' THEY GAZED AT HIM.

'Bunter, you fat ass--'

'Help!' yelled Bunter.

'Bunter, you dithering dummy--'

'Help! Burglars! Keep him off! Help!'

'Shut up!' roared Bob Cherry. 'Do you want to wake the whole house, you howling ass?'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. He seemed to realize, at last, that the danger--if any--was past. He sat up on the old carpet and blinked at the crowd of astonished juniors. Then he gave an uneasy blink round the room.

'I say, you fellows, where is he?' he gasped.

'Where is who, you fat ditherer?'

'The-the-the burglar!' gasped Bunter.

'What burglar, fathead?'

'I-I say, is he gone? I-I-I say, he nearly had me! I-I say, it-it was a burglar--' spluttered Bunter. 'I-I say, call Colonel Wharton--call Wells--call everybody--'

'Likely!' said Harry. 'You fat chump-'

'I tell you it was a burglar--'

'And what was he burgling--that old bedstead, or those old boxes, you fat lunatic? Never mind your burglars! What are you doing here?'

'And how did you get here?' demanded Bob. 'What's this game, you fat, footling, frumpious freak?'

'I-I-I say, you fellows, look round--he-he-he might be hiding under the bed, you know,' gasped Bunter.

'Fathead! '

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' roared Bob Cherry, suddenly. 'Look!' He pointed to the blankets scattered on the carpet: and then to a quilt and pillow on the old bedstead. 'Look! That's where your blankets went! 'My blankets!' exclaimed Harry, staring.

'That fat villain--'

'Oh, my hat!' exclaimed Nugent. 'It was Bunter who shipped your bed, Harry--he's got the blankets here.'

'Bunter!' gasped Johnny Bull. 'Oh, crumbs! Bunter all the time! And I-I thought--I-I say, Bob, old chap--'

'Okay,' said Bob. 'We fancied that there was a practical joker about, and we know now who the joker was. That fat, footling, fozzling frump--'

'They're the missing blankets,' said Harry, blankly. 'Has that fat lunatic been camping here, or what?' 'Looks like it!'

'Camping up here, in this attic, and we never knew that he was within miles,' said Harry Wharton. 'By gum, if I don't boot him all over Surrey--'

'I-I say, you fellows--'

'You've been camping here!' roared Harry Wharton.

'It was you shipped my bed and walked off the blankets.'

'I-I-I didn't--'

'How did they get here, then?'

'Well, it was so jolly cold, you know--a fellow had to have some bedclothes. You didn't want me to freeze, did you?'

'You-you-you--!'

'Not that I touched your bed,' added Bunter, hastily. 'It wasn't me at all. Besides, it was only a joke.'

'You benighted fat ass, what are you doing here at all?'

'I-I-I--'

Billy Bunter, sitting on the carpet, blinked uneasily at the Famous Five. Now that his dread of the rat-eyed man was gone, he was assailed by another dread. His presence in Wharton Lodge was revealed now! He had hoped for a propitious moment to reveal it. But hardly any moment could have been more unpropitious than this!

'Bunter all the time,' said Bob. 'It must have been Bunter in your room, Johnny--Bunter who floored you--'

'Plain enough now,' said Johnny. 'And I'll jolly well floor him.'

Yell, from Bunter.

'You keep off, Bull, you beast! It wasn't me in your room! I never chucked that pillow at you! Besides, you chucked it at me, first--you jolly well know you did! '

'Scrag him!'

'Boot him!'

'I-I say, you fellows, keep off!' howled Bunter. 'I-I had to get in out of the snow yesterday, hadn't I? I wasn't hiding here--only-just keeping dark, you know, to-to-to give you a-a-a surprise! I-I knew you'd like me to come for Christmas, Harry, old chap--'

Harry Wharton lodged the electric torch on a shelf, to light the room. He seemed to want his hands free.

'We can't boot him out at this time of night--!' he said.

'I should jolly well think not!' gasped Bunter.

'But we'll all boot him out together, first thing in the morning--'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'We'll boot him all the way to Wimford, and boot him into a train--'

'Beast!'

'And now we'll bump him, to go on with.'

'Hear, hear!'

'I say, you fellows--leggo!' yelled Bunter, as the Famous Five, with one accord, grasped him, and swept him off the floor.

'I say--I wasn't--I didn't--I never---Wow! Ow! Wow!'

Bump!

A cloud of dust rose from the old carpet, as Billy Bunter bumped on it. The fat Owl's roar as he landed might have done credit to the Bull of Bashan, famed of old time for his roaring.

'Yaroooooh!'

'Give him another!'

'Go it!'

'Bump him!'

But that other was never administered, for at that moment, there was a heavy tread outside the attic. Colonel Wharton strode in at the doorway.

'What--what is all this?' he rapped.

Grasping hands released the fat Owl. The juniors all turned towards the old Colonel: while Billy Bunter sat on the carpet and roared.

CHAPTER 29

STARTLING DISCOVERY!

COLONEL WHARTON stared at his nephew, at his nephew's friends, and at the fat Owl sitting on the carpet. He looked amazed. It was, in fact, a rather amazing sight, at midnight: five fellows, with a garment or two thrown on over their pyjamas, a fat Owl sitting on the floor and roaring, the scene illumined by an electric torch shining from a shelf. It was chiefly upon Billy Bunter that the old Colonel's astonished gaze fixed. He did not know why Harry Wharton and Co. were there--still less did he know how or why another fellow, not known to be in the house at all, was there.

'Harry' What--' he almost stuttered. 'Who is this? Where did he come from? What is he doing here? What? What?'

'It's Bunter, Uncle--'

'Bunter--?'

'You remember Bunter--he was here last Christmas---Billy Bunter--'

'Oh, Yes' I remember him now! But he did not come with you, Harry--he was not with your party--he was not in the house--yet he is here now--what does all this mean? All this uproar at such an hour--'

'The fat ass fancied there was a burglar, and woke us all up--'

'I was awakened also--Wells was awakened, too--he is coming up, I think. But what is Bunter doing here at all?'

'You'd better tell my uncle, Bunter,' said Harry.

Bunter had ceased to roar. He scrambled to his feet. He set his spectacles straight on his fat little nose and blinked uneasily at Colonel Wharton. He gave another uneasy blink at Wells, who was looking in at the door, staring at the unexpected Owl as if he had been the ghost of a fat schoolboy.

'Well, Bunter?' rapped Colonel Wharton. 'What does this mean?'

'Oh! Nothing" gasped Bunter.

'How did you get here?'

'I-I walked in--'

'You walked in!' repeated the Colonel. 'And when did you walk in? And how did you walk in, when every door is secured for the night--?'

'He seems to have barged in yesterday, Uncle--' said Harry.

'Yesterday! Then where has he been since?'

'Here, I think--'

'In this attic?' almost stuttered the old Colonel. 'Good gad! Bunter, have you been here in this attic since yesterday?'

'I-I-I-No! I-I-I mean yes!' gasped Bunter. 'You see, I-I-I wasn't quite sure that--that Harry expected me--'

'You fat villain--'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'There--there was a misunderstanding, when we broke up at Greyfriars,' stuttered Bunter. 'Of course, I knew that Harry would like me to come for Christmas--an old pal like me--but-but he forgot to ask me--'

'Good gad!'

'So I-I-I came--'

'You came?' repeated Colonel Wharton, staring at him blankly.

'Yes! I-I came. The beasts--'

'What?'

'I-I-I mean, the old chaps snowballed me, and-and-and I-I-I thought I'd come in quietly,' gasped Bunter. 'I-I haven't been hiding in this attic--'

'You have been hiding here?'

'No--not hiding--nothing of the kind--I-I just thought I'd keep "doggo" for a bit, till-till I was sure that-that Harry really wanted me to come for Christmas! He-he said he'd boot me all the way back to Wimford if-if I came. Of course, I knew that that was only his joke, but-but-but I-I thought I'd keep "doggo"-just for a day or two--'

'Harry--'

'Yes, Uncle.'

'Is that boy Bunter in his right mind?'

'More or less,' said Harry, laughing. 'He can't help being a howling ass and a blithering idiot.'

'The blitherfulness of the esteemed idiot is terrific,' grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'He is here!' said Colonel Wharton. 'He apparently entered the house secretly, and hid himself in this attic. You will see him to the station tomorrow, Harry--'

'Oh, crikey!'

'And see him into his train--'

'I-I-I say--'

'Certainly,' said Harry. 'We'll all see him off tomorrow.'

We'll make jolly sure that he doesn't lose that train.'

'What-ho!' said Bob Cherry.

'But I-I say, you fellows--!' squeaked the dismayed Owl.

'And now, you utterly stupid and absurd boy,' said the Colonel, sternly, 'explain why, after remaining hidden here, you have disturbed and awakened the whole house by this uproar in the middle of the night! What do you mean by it?'

'That burglar--!' gasped Bunter.

'He fancied there was a burglar, Uncle,' explained Harry. 'He's the kind of silly Owl to be frightened in the dark.'

'I tell you there was a burglar,' howled Bunter. 'He nearly had me! He came this afternoon, but ran off when he found that there was somebody here--'

'What?' exclaimed the Colonel. 'There was certainly a man in the house this afternoon--the rascal who burgled the house a few nights ago. Have you seen him?'

'Haven't I jolly well?' gasped Bunter. 'He ran off this afternoon--but he came back tonight--I never thought he'd come back--but he did--he got in at that window--'

'Nonsense! Nobody could climb to that window! Probably you dreamt the whole occurrence, you stupid boy.'

'I tell you he got in at that window!' yelled Bunter. 'He must have got out the same way--can't you see the window's open--?'

'Nonsense! A burglar escaped by that window the other night, but climbing up is a very different matter from sliding down a rain-pipe. Nonsense!'

'But I tell you--'

'Nonsense! You have been frightened in the dark, and have alarmed the whole house with your folly. I have a very great mind, Bunter, to box your ears very severely,' rapped the Colonel.

'I tell you there was a burglar--'

'Rubbish!'

'I tell you I saw him--he didn't see me at first, but I was watching him when he pulled up the carpet--'
'When he pulled up the carpet?' repeated Colonel Wharton, almost dazedly. 'Did you say when he pulled up the carpet?'

'Yes, and then--'

'Perhaps this boy should be seen by a doctor,' said Colonel Wharton. 'He not only fancies that there was a burglar, but fancies that he was purloining a dusty old carpet of no value whatever. He had better see a doctor--'

'I tell you he was pulling up the carpet--'

'Do not be so absurd, Bunter. You have been dreaming. Say no more.'

'But I tell you--'

'Nonsense!'

'I tell you--!' yelled Bunter.

'Shut up, old fat man,' said Bob Cherry. 'You've been dreaming. What the dickens could a burglar want that old carpet for?'

'It wasn't the carpet he wanted,' yapped Bunter. 'It must have been the picture.'

'Eh?'

'What?'

'What picture?'

'The boy is rambling,' said Colonel Wharton. 'He must certainly see a doctor before he is sent home. There are no pictures in this attic, Bunter. Cannot you see that for yourself?'

'It's under the carpet--'

'Good gad! A picture under the carpet! Harry, this boy requires medical attention. Late as it is, I think perhaps I had better telephone--'

'I tell you there's a picture under the carpet, and that's what the burglar was after!' shrieked Bunter.

'Shut up, you fat ass,' said Bob.

'Pack it up, fathead!' said Johnny Bull.

'For goodness' sake, don't talk such rot, Bunter,' said Harry Wharton. 'You're making my uncle think you're wandering in your mind.'

'The wanderfulness is terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter.'

'I tell you--!' howled Bunter.

'Dry up, ass,' said Nugent.

'I tell you--'

'That will do,' said Colonel Wharton. 'Be quiet, Bunter. I will listen to no more of your nonsense.'

'Well, look!' yelled Bunter: and he stooped, grasped the edge of the old carpet, and hurled it back, disclosing what was beneath.

Everyone but Bunter expected to see a bare dusty floor.

But that was not what they saw. Amazed eyes fastened on a large painted canvas--a picture that glowed with colour in the beam of the electric torch. The Famous Five stared at it, in blank amazement: Wells, from the doorway, stared at it, gasping: and Colonel Wharton, staring at it with popping eyes, ejaculated:

'The Tintoretto!'

CHAPTER 30

ALL RIGHT FOR BUNTER!

'THE Tintoretto!'

Every voice echoed the old Colonel's ejaculation. Billy Bunter blinked round at amazed faces. 'Ain't that a picture?' he demanded.

'The Tintoretto!' repeated Colonel Wharton, dazedly. 'Then that rascal did not take it with him that night! The Tintoretto!'

He stooped and lifted the canvas. He lifted it with careful hands, tenderly. That Old Master was the apple of Colonel Wharton's eye. It was an artistic treasure, worth a large sum in cash: but absolutely priceless in the estimation of its proprietor. Its loss had been a heavy blow, quietly as the old Colonel had taken it. He had had little hope of ever seeing it again. And now it was in his hands--amazingly, almost miraculously, restored.

Obviously, now, it had never left Wharton Lodge at all.

It had lain concealed under that dusty old carpet in the attic ever since the night of the burglary and the escape of the midnight marauder by the attic window. No one had dreamed of it. No one could have dreamed of it. But there it was!

'That's what he was jolly well after!' said Bunter. 'Perhaps you believe that there was a burglar, now! He jolly well knew there was a picture under that carpet. I don't know how, but he jolly well knew. I shouldn't wonder if it's worth pounds, or he wouldn't have been after it like that.'

'You fat ass,' said Frank Nugent. 'It's worth a thousand pounds at least.'

Billy Bunter jumped.

'A thousand pounds!' he gasped. 'Oh, crikey! No wonder he was after it, then. I wonder how he knew it was there?'

'The wonderfulness is not terrific, my esteemed idiotic Bunter,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'It was there because the estimable and execrable burglar put it there.'

'Must have,' said Bob. 'Well, this beats Banagher!'

'Hid it there, when he climbed out of the window that night!' said Harry. 'If he'd pitched it down, he would have lost it in the dark, and he couldn't carry it with him, I suppose--he wanted both hands for clambering down that rain-pipe! But we all thought--'

'We all thought that he had taken it with him in his flight,' said Colonel Wharton. 'Good gad! We all believed that it was gone--gone with the burglar--what else could we think? And all the while--!'

'Under that old carpet, all the while,' said Harry. 'And that's why he came back--that's what he was after--!' It was all clear, now.

That enterprising burglar, escaping with the stolen painting, had found it impossible to carry his booty with him in his desperate scramble down from the attic window. He had had to abandon it--but, with resourceful cunning, he had spread it flat on the floor under the old carpet, hoping that it would never be found there: as indeed it never had--till now! That was why he had revisited Wharton Lodge: so inexplicably, as it had seemed. It was because he had had to go empty-handed, that he had come back. And, but for Billy Bunter's unexpected presence in the old attic, he would certainly have succeeded in his object. Only that unexpected presence had prevented him from coolly walking off with Colonel Wharton's Tintoretto!

'So Bunter wasn't dreaming, after all!' said Bob Cherry. 'He did see the rogue after that picture.'

'Didn't I tell you so?' hooted Bunter. 'Didn't I tell you he got in at that window--?'

'Must be a monkey at climbing, if he could!' said Harry. 'But-but I suppose he must have--'

'And I jolly well saw him, and--'

'And yelled your head off,' said Bob. 'Lucky you did, as it turns out. He would have got away with it this time.'

'By gum!' said Nugent. 'If Bunter hadn't been here--'

'All he had to do was to roll up that canvas, and walk downstairs with it,' said Harry, 'and nobody would have known a thing. Phew!'

'Fancy Bunter coming in useful for once!' said Johnny Bull.

'Oh, really, Bull--'

'Good gad!' exclaimed Colonel Wharton. 'That is very true. If that utterly stupid and absurd boy had not been here, there would have been no alarm. We should never even have known that the Tintoretto had been hidden in this attic at all. It was fortunate that he was here.'

'Jolly lucky, as it turns out,' said Harry.

'The luckfulness was terrific.'

Billy Bunter grinned. He saw hope ahead! Unexpectedly, unintentionally, Billy Bunter had been the right man in the right place. But for Billy Bunter, the rat-eyed man and the Tintoretto would have vanished together: neither of them, probably, ever to be seen again. It was Bunter, William George Bunter, who had frustrated his knavish tricks!

'I say, you fellows, wasn't it jolly lucky I was here?' chirruped Bunter. 'I-I-I suppose you're glad I came now, Harry, old chap.'

'You fat frump--'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'You pernicious porpoise--'

'Beast! I-I mean, look here, old chap--'

'But I'm glad you were on the spot, all the same,' said Harry, laughing. 'You ought to be booted all the way back to Bunter Villa, but--'

'Harry, my boy--' said Colonel Wharton.

'Yes, Uncle.'

'That absurd boy has rendered us a great service--unintentionally, no doubt, still a very great service. He has saved my Tintoretto. But for the alarm he gave, it would have been gone--and gone for good! It seems that he desired to come here for Christmas--and came in a most extraordinary and irresponsible and incredibly stupid way--'

'Oh, really, sir--'

'Nevertheless, in the circumstances, if he desires to spend the Christmas holidays here, I think you should make him welcome, Harry.'

'Certainly,' said Harry. 'Like to stay for the hols, Bunter?'

Billy Bunter beamed.

'Well, if you make a point of it--!' he began.

'I don't!'

'He, he, he! You will have your little joke, Harry, old chap! He, he, he! I'll stay, old fellow. That's all right, old boy!'

And that was that!

'Wells, you will see that a bed is provided for Master Bunter,' said Colonel Wharton. 'He will be staying for the holidays. Now you boys had better get back to bed--I must go down and 'phone Inspector Slade, and let him know that the Tintoretto has been recovered--and--'

'I-I-I say--!' squeaked Billy Bunter.

'What is it?'

'C-e-can I have some supper?'

'Eh?'

'I'm awfully hungry,' said Bunter, pathetically. 'I-I haven't had anything today, excepting a cake--'

Wells looked at him!

'A cake!' he murmured.

'And some biscuits--' added Bunter.

'Biscuits!' murmured Wells.

'And-and-and I'm simply famished,' said Bunter. 'I-I never had a chance of getting at the larder--'

'What?'

'I-I-I mean, I-I wasn't going down to the larder,' amended Bunter, hastily. 'That isn't why I was sitting up when that burglar got in. But-but-but-I-I say, can I have some supper?'

'Wells, will you see that this-this absurd boy has supper,' said Colonel Wharton.

'Yes, sir!'

'You will go with Wells, Bunter.'

'What-ho!' gasped Bunter.

And he rolled away after Wells. Colonel Wharton strode out of the attic after them, with his precious Tintoretto: so happily recovered. The Famous Five looked at one another.

'Well,' said Bob Cherry, 'does this beat Banagher, or doesn't it?'

'It does!' agreed Johnny Bull.

'It do!' agreed Nugent.

'The beatfulness of esteemed Banagher is terrific!' concurred Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Bunter's got away with it,' he said. 'Bunter's come for Christmas, after all. Now who says bed?'

'Bed!' said four voices in unison.

And they went back to bed. Billy Bunter was considerably later in seeking repose. Billy Bunter was busy, and keeping Wells busy, at the supper-table, for quite a long time. And when, at last, Billy Bunter rolled into a comfortable bed in a comfortable room, shut his eyes, opened his mouth, and snored, a couple of dozen burglars could hardly have awakened him.

CHAPTER 31

FALSE ALARM!

SNORE!

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

Snore!

'Wake up, Bunter.'

Snore!

'Can that chap snooze?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'The snoozefulness is terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Bunter!' roared Bob.

Snore!

It was ten o'clock on a fine winter morning. Bright sunshine streamed down on thawing snow. It glimmered in at the window of Billy Bunter's room at Wharton Lodge. It glimmered on a fat face on a pillow, in which the little round eyes were clamped shut. Five fellows looked at the sleeping beauty, and grinned.

The Famous Five had had their breakfast long ago.

Now the open spaces called them. They were going down to the lake to skate. But first they were calling Bunter.

It was not because they were particularly keen on the fascinating company of the Owl of the Remove. Billy Bunter, in his own extraordinary way, had come for Christmas, and was going to stay for Christmas, and that was that. He was not going to be booted back to the railway station: he was not going to be booted at all: his problem of the 'hols' was solved: and there he was, and there he was going to stay. But while Harry Wharton and Co. were prepared to make the best of it, they did not yearn for the light of Billy Bunter's fat face, and the sound of his fat squeak. So far as they were concerned, Billy Bunter could have slept the clock round, and slept it round again, and in fact slept and snored till the end of the holidays, and they wouldn't have disturbed his slumbers. But, as it happened, Bunter was wanted--so they had come up to rouse him out.

Bunter had not come down for breakfast. Over night, he had loaded up to the Plimsoll-line, and somewhat over. There was no aching void inside Bunter now. His extensive circumference was remarkably well filled. As there was no inward urge to eat, and no rising-bell, Billy Bunter slept on, and the loud and resonant snore that was wont to wake the echoes in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars, now echoed for quite a considerable distance at Wharton Lodge.

'Bunter!' roared Bob. 'Bunty! Bunt! Wake up!'

Snore!

'You're wanted, Bunter!'

Snore!

'Better give him a shake,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'I'll try pulling his nose,' said Bob Cherry, thoughtfully.

'That may wake him up!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Bob leaned over the bed, and closed a finger and thumb of a fat little nose. He gave that fat little nose a jerk.

'Urrrrgh! Groooogh!' came from Bunter. 'Urrrrgh! Urrrrgh!'

Billy Bunter awoke quite suddenly.

'Gurrrgh! Led do by dose!' came in muffled accents from Bunter. 'Whad's zat? Who's zat? Led do by dose, you beast!'

'I fancied that would do it,' said Bob, as he released the little fat nose. 'He's awake.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Beast!' Billy Bunter glared from the pillow at five grinning faces. 'Lemme alone! Tain't rising-bell.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh!' Bunter remembered where he was. 'Oh! I say, you fellows, what are you barging in here for? I'm not getting up yet.'

'It's ten o'clock,' said Frank Nugent.

'I don't care if it's twelve! Lemme alone.'

'Turn out, old fat man,' said Harry Wharton.

'Shan't!'

'But look here--'

'I'm not getting up yet. You can tell Wells I'll have my brekker in bed, about eleven. Now get out, and let a fellow sleep.'

'My esteemed idiotic Bunter--'

'Shut up!'

'You're wanted, you fat ass!' hooted Johnny Bull. 'Don't yell at me, Bull. Get out, the lot of you. I was just dreaming about a Christmas pudding, and you woke me up!' exclaimed Bunter, indignantly.

'Can't you let a fellow have his sleep out? We don't treat guests like this at Bunter Court, Wharton, I can tell you. Now shut up and let a fellow go to sleep.'

And Billy Bunter closed his eyes on the pillow again.

'You're wanted, Bunter--!' said Harry.

'Do shut up.'

'Inspector Slade has called from Wimford--'

'Blow him!'

'He wants to see you about what happened in the attic last night--'

'Tell him to wait.'

'He can't waste his time waiting for you to get up, Bunter.'

'Tell him to call again, then.'

'Look here, Bunter--!'

'Beast!'

Billy Bunter's eyes remained shut. He was going to sleep again--if he could. A police inspector calling from Wimford did not seem, to Billy Bunter, a sufficient reason for turning out of bed as early as ten o'clock! He could wait, or he could call again: in fact, he could do anything he liked, except disturb a lazy fat Owl! Bunter was going to sleep.

'Roll him out!' suggested Johnny Bull. Harry Wharton shook his head.

At Greyfriars, in the Remove dormitory, Billy Bunter would have been out of bed in a twinkling, bumping on the floor in a tangle of bedclothes. But the Removites were not at Greyfriars now. Billy Bunter was a guest under a hospitable roof: and the short and simple methods at Greyfriars were barred.

'Look here, Bunter--!' recommenced Harry.

'I've asked you to shut up, Wharton.'

'I can't tell Mr. Slade that you won't come down.'

'Tell him to go and eat coke, then.'

'Do turn out, old fat man.'

'Shan't!'

'My uncle will come up, if you don't go down.'

'Don't let that stuffy old stick come barging in here.'

'Why, you fat, footling freak--'

'Oh, all right! Call a fellow names when you've asked him to come for Christmas! It's the sort of manners I expect from you. I tell you I'm not getting up yet, and I jolly well don't want a Bank Holiday mob kicking up a row and keeping me awake! Get out, the lot of you.'

And Bunter, his eyes clamped shut, settled a fat head comfortably on the pillow. The juniors exchanged glances. Exactly how to deal with so peculiar a guest as William George Bunter was rather a problem.

It was Bob Cherry who solved that problem. He uttered a sudden shout of alarm.

'Oh! Look out! Who's that under Bunter's bed?' Billy Bunter's eyes opened suddenly.

'Is that the burglar?' gasped Bob.

His comrades, for a moment, stared at him blankly.

Then they caught on! A burglar under a bed, at ten o'clock in the morning, was improbable: but not too improbable for a scared fat Owl.

'I-I-I say, you fellows!' gasped Bunter. 'I-I-I say--'

'Burglars!' gasped Nugent.

'Run for your lives!' shouted Bob. 'Run for it!'

'Run terrifically!'

The Famous Five rushed for the door. They bumped into one another in the doorway, in wild haste to escape. There was a frantic yell from Billy Bunter, as he scrambled wildly out of bed.

'Help! I say, you fellows, don't go--I say, keep him off! I say--Help! Burglars! Yaroooooh!'

The fat Owl hurled himself out of bed. His foot caught in a trailing blanket, and he rolled over, yelling. Five juniors bolted out of the doorway. Bunter was left alone. He rolled and roared.

'Yaroooooh! Help! I say, you fellows, he's got me--he's got hold of me--I say—help--come back--yaroooooh--!'

The fat Owl scrambled frantically to his feet. He did not stay to cast a single blink round. He bolted for the door, and charged headlong into the passage. Five fellows, in the corridor, chuckled as a fat figure in pyjamas hurtled out of the doorway.

'He's got up!' remarked Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Billy Bunter neither heard nor heeded. He charged down the corridor for the stairs. On the landing he charged into Colonel Wharton, who was coming up to inquire why Bunter had not come down.

The old Colonel staggered from the shock, and the fat Owl tottered.

'Oh!' gasped Colonel Wharton.

'Oooogh!' gurgled Billy Bunter.

'You utterly absurd boy! Why are you rushing about in that manner?' exclaimed the Colonel.

'Urrrrgh! There's a bub-bub--'

'What?'

'A bub-bub-bub-bib-bib-bib-burglar,' stuttered Bunter. 'There's a bib-bob-burglar under the bob-bib - bub-bed in my room--'

'Good gad! Harry, what does this mean? Is this some absurd joke on this foolish boy? Bunter, go

back to your room at once and dress yourself--the inspector is waiting to see you!

'There's a bib-bub-bob--'

'Nonsense!'

'I tell you there's a bob-bib-bub--Ow! Leggo!'

Colonel Wharton did not let go. He grasped a fat shoulder and marched Billy Bunter back to his room. The fat Owl blinked at five laughing faces as he went, and it dawned on him. It was, after all, a false alarm!

'Beasts!' he hooted.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Pulling a fellow's leg--'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'There wasn't anybody--'

'He's guessed it!' said Bob. 'What a brain!'

'The brainfulness is terrific.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yah!'

It was a disgruntled Owl. However, being up, Bunter stayed up: and the Famous Five, having so effectually roused him out, trooped laughing down the stairs, and out into the frosty air. And a disgruntled fat face cleared when Billy Bunter sat down to a late, but ample, breakfast. There was comfort and consolation in breakfast.

CHAPTER 32

BUNTER KNOWS BEST

'I SAY, you fellows.'

'Good night, Bunter.'

'But I say--'

'Roll off to bed, barrel.'

'Will you let a chap speak?' howled Billy Bunter.

It was rather late. Six juniors had come up to bed.

Harry Wharton and Co., who had had an active day, were ready for bed--and Billy Bunter, who had been active at least at meal-times, was quite sleepy. But he did not seem, at the moment, to be thinking of slumber. From the landing, he blinked up the corridor that led to the attic stair, and his blink was uneasy. Midnight intruders haunted Billy Bunter's fat memory.

'Well, what's the trouble?' asked Harry Wharton.

'That man--'

'What man?'

'Oh, really, Wharton! Suppose he came back?' hooted Bunter. 'Of course, I'm not afraid of him--'

'You sounded as if you weren't, last night!' agreed Bob Cherry.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'You can cackle!' yapped Bunter. 'But if he came back again--'

'He won't come back,' said Harry, soothingly. 'His game's up here, and I expect he's in the next county before this.'

'He might--!'

'Well, if he did, he couldn't barge in. Every door and window locked and bolted. Safe as houses.'

'If he climbed up to that attic window again--'

'My uncle's had it screwed up on the inside. A fly couldn't get in. Roll off to bed--'

'He might get down the chimney.'

'He might!' grinned Bob Cherry.

'The mightfulness is terrific!' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Or he might crawl in through a keyhole?' snorted Johnny Bull. 'For goodness' sake, get off to bed, Bunter, and don't be such a fat funk.'

'Beast! I say, you fellows--'

'Bed!' said Frank Nugent.

'I'm not going to bed to be burgled!' yapped Bunter. 'I'm jolly well going up to that attic to make sure before I go to bed. You jolly well know that that man can climb like a cat--he's a cat burglar! And he's after that picture--'

'That picture's safe back in its frame in the library, old fat man, and Inspector Slade is hunting for the man: and it's all right-right as rain.'

'The rightfulness of the rain is terrific, my esteemed funky Bunter.'

'I'm going to bed.' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Oh, go off to bed--and perhaps you'll wake up in the morning to find that that picture's gone again!' sneered Bunter.

'Fathead!' said Johnny.

'Ass!' said Bob.

'I say, you fellows, you come up to the attic with me. I'm not afraid of the man, of course--I'd knock

him spinning as soon as look at him. But-but I'd rather not go alone.'

'Rubbish!' said Johnny Bull.

'Rot!' said Frank Nugent.

'The rotfulness is terrific.'

'Oh, let's go!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. 'We shall have Bunter yelling all night, at this rate. Get that torch. Harry, and let's give that jolly old attic the once-over, if nothing else will shut Bunter up.'

'Oh, all right.'

Harry Wharton stepped into the 'den', and came back with the electric torch. Johnny Bull snorted, and the other fellows grinned, as they marched up the corridor with the uneasy fat Owl. Nobody but Bunter had the remotest, faintest doubt that the rat-eyed man was gone for good. Until Inspector Slade and his merry men succeeded in laying the rascal by the heels, every precaution was being taken at Wharton Lodge: the old Colonel was running no risk of losing his precious Tintoretto again. Every door, every window, was carefully secured for the night: and Young John, under the Colonel's eye, had driven screws into the attic window, after which the most enterprising of burglars would have found it too tough a proposition. So, if the rat-eyed man still haunted the vicinity of Wharton Lodge, in the December darkness, he could do nothing, so far as anyone' could see, but prowl round the building like a cat. Everyone was satisfied on that point, excepting Billy Bunter.

However, it was easy to satisfy even Bunter, by giving the attic the once-over: and making assurance doubly sure that no nefarious intruder could possibly squeeze in. Four of them grinning, and one of them snorting, the Famous Five proceeded to the attic stair: Billy Bunter bringing up the rear.

On that stair, Bob Cherry paused, winking at his comrades.

'Hold on, you chaps,' he said. 'This is Bunter's show! Bunter's going to lead the way. Come on, Bunter.'

'I-I-I've got to tie my shoe-lace. You fellows get on--'

'That's all right--we'll wait till you've tied your shoelace.'

'It--it's in a knot! Don't wait.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, come on,' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'It will take Bunter a jolly long time to tie that shoe-lace.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Whether it was trouble with a shoe-lace or not, Billy Bunter remained in the rear. Harry Wharton led the way, and the Co. followed him: and the fat Owl followed them. The attic door was wide open, and the party marched in, and Wharton flashed the light round the room. Billy Bunter blinked in from the doorway.

Certainly there was no sign of any unlawful intruder in the attic. Billy Bunter blinked across at the little window. 'Sure that's safe?' he asked.

Harry turned the light on it.

'Safe as houses,' he answered. 'About a dozen screws in it. Anything else?' Billy Bunter blinked uneasily round the room. 'What about the chimney?' he asked.

'Fathead!'

'Well, suppose he climbed on the roof--'

'Suppose he flew up?' suggested Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

'Well, if he climbed on the roof--'

'I can't see even a cat burglar climbing on the roof, in all this snow!' said Bob Cherry. 'Don't be such an ass, Bunter--if you can help it.'

'For goodness' sake, chuck it, and let's get to bed!' grunted Johnny Bull.

'Let's!' said Nugent.

'I say, you fellows, you just look up the chimney, and-and see whether anybody could get down it--'

'Ass!'

'Fathead!'

'Forget it.'

'Stop talking rot and go to bed.'

'Oh, let's look up the chimney,' said Harry Wharton, resignedly. 'Let's look up, if nothing else will keep Bunter quiet.'

He stooped at the dusty old fireplace, put his head under the wide old chimney, flashed the light up, and stared into murky recesses. It was a fact that that ancient chimney was built on ample lines, easily spacious enough to admit an intruder, if any intruder thought up such an extraordinary mode of entry. But Harry Wharton, as he looked up, did not expect to see anything but old brickwork caked with ancient soot.

What he did see made him jump!

It was a foot!

His eyes bulged at it.

He stared petrified.

There was somebody in that old chimney! That foot, obviously, was the extremity of a person further up. Not for a moment had the chums of the Remove taken such a possibility seriously. But for Billy Bunter, they would have gone to bed, the whole household would have gone to bed, never dreaming of anything of the kind. Five fellows had simply laughed at Billy Bunter's uneasy fears. Amazingly, unexpectedly, Billy Bunter knew best! That dangling foot in the old chimney proved as much. Petrified by the unexpected sight, Harry Wharton stared at it.

Someone--it was easy to guess who--was descending the interior of the old chimney! Perhaps he had heard voices below, and checked his descent. But there he was--! From behind Wharton, as he stared astounded, came Bob Cherry's chuckle:

'Anybody there, old bean?'

'Yank him down!' chuckled Nugent.

'Bunter, you funky frump--!'

With the torch in his left hand, Harry Wharton reached up with his right. He grabbed an ankle, and dragged, with all his force. There was a startled howl in the chimney. It was followed by still more startled exclamations in the attic, as the juniors heard it.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! What's that?'

'What the dickens--!'

'Oh! Look! My hat!'

There was a slithering sound in the chimney. Somebody was slithering helplessly down, under that sudden and forceful drag on the ankle. A leg came into view, and the juniors stared at it like fellows in a dream. It was followed by another leg, and then the remainder of the man in the chimney: sprawling on his back, panting and spluttering, as Harry Wharton dragged him bodily by the ankle out of the old fireplace.

Yell, from Billy Bunter: 'It's him!'

It was not a moment to bother about grammar!

CHAPTER 33

THANKS TO BUNTER

'HIM!'

'Oh, crumbs!'

'Collar him!' roared Bob Cherry.

It was the rat-eyed man! Sprawling, panting, spluttering, he made an effort to get on his feet. But he had no chance. The Famous Five piled on him as one man. Amazed, astounded as they were, they were prompt to go into action. Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull grasped his arms: Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, secured a leg each: Harry Wharton, letting go the ankle, seized him by the collar. He wriggled and wrenched, but he had not the ghost of a chance: indeed, so many grasping hands closed on the little rat-eyed man, that there seemed hardly enough of him to go round. Only Billy Bunter remained inactive. But his voice, at least, was on the active list. Billy Bunter spluttered and bumbled in wild excitement.

'It's him! It's jolly well him! It's that man again! I say, you fellows, hold him--I say, hold him tight--I say, don't let him get loose--I say, you jolly well hold him tight--'

'We've got him!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'The gotfulness is terrific.'

'We've got him all right: said Johnny Bull. 'No good wriggling, you rogue--we've got you.'

'We've got him, and we're keeping him,' said Harry. 'By gum, this will be a surprise for my uncle--'

'What-ho!' chuckled Bob. 'We'll take him down, this side up with care, and hand him over on a plate.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

There was breathless laugh in the old attic. The rat-eyed man ceased to wriggle in so many hands. His game was up: five pairs of hands were many too many for him. His look was expressive--very expressive indeed--it could hardly have been more expressive. But he gave in, as there was nothing else that he could do.

'I say, you fellows, what did I tell you?' chirruped Billy Bunter. 'Didn't I say he'd come back again?'

'You did, old fat man!' admitted Harry.

'Didn't I say he might come down the chimney?'

'You did!'

'And if I hadn't--'

'Who'd have thought it?' said Bob Cherry. 'If Bunter hadn't been in a blue funk--'

'Oh, really, Cherry--'

'If that fat ass hadn't been in a blue funk, we should have gone off to bed, and that rat-faced tick would have been in here, ready to walk down and collect what he wanted when everybody was asleep--'

'No doubt about that,' said Harry. 'It's a spot of luck that Bunter was scared out of his silly wits.'

'Oh, really, Wharton--'

'The luckfulness was terrific, in the esteemed circumstances,' concurred Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'But for the idiotic and funky Bunter--'

'Yah! I jolly well knew best, and chance it!' snorted Billy Bunter. 'Fat lot of good you fellows would have been without me! That cat burglar would have walked off with that picture, and everything else he could lay his hands on, while you fellows were snoring--but for me! Me all the time! If it hadn't been for me--!'

'True, O King!' said Bob, 'and now shut up, and let's cart our jolly old prisoner downstairs and hand him over.'

'Your prisoner!' jeered Bunter. 'Mine, you mean! Me all the time--'

'Okay,' said Bob. 'Here he is, if he's yours, old fat man. Hand him over to Bunter, you chaps.'

'Here you are, Bunter!' grinned Nugent.

'Take over, Bunter,' said Johnny Bull.

Billy Bunter backed out of the attic doorway. He did not seem to want to take charge personally of 'his' prisoner. Indeed, he seemed alarmed at the prospect.

'I-I-I say, you fellows--' he stammered.

'Take hold of him, Bunter.'

'We'll leave him to you.'

'I-I-I say, I-I-I think you'd better keep hold of him,' gasped Bunter. 'I-I-I'll carry the light, if you like-- you fellows had better keep hold of him.'

'I think we better had!' chuckled Bob.

'The betterfulness is terrific.'

'Come on,' said Harry Wharton, laughing.

Surrounded by the juniors, with hands grasping him firmly on all sides, the rat-eyed man was marched out of the attic, and down the attic stair. They marched him along the corridor to the landing, and down the staircase into the hall below. Colonel Wharton, at the fireside in the hall, was smoking a last cigar before going to bed. He glanced up at the sound of many footsteps: and quite an extraordinary expression came over his face, as he stared at the procession.

He jumped up.

'What-what-what--?' The old Colonel fairly stuttered. 'Who-who-who-- What-what-what--?'

'The jolly old burglar, sir!' said Bob Cherry, cheerily.

'That man--!' gasped Colonel Wharton. He stared blankly at one face that was scowling, among half-a-dozen that were grinning. 'That man--!'

'We've got him, sir.'

'Got him in the attic--'

'In the chimney--!'

'He's called again, sir--called once too often, this time. We collared him.'

'But how-why-how--?'

'Bunter was in a blue funk, and fancied he might come down the chimney,' explained Bob. 'And he jolly well did!'

'Good gad!'

'And dropped into our hands like a ripe apple,' said Bob, 'and here he is, if Inspector Slade wants him.'

'Good gad! Hand him to me,' said Colonel Wharton.

His grasp closed on the prisoner's collar, and the juniors released him. 'Harry, go to the telephone and call Inspector Slade. Cherry, please ring for Wells. Good gad! And it was Bunter--that absurd boy Bunter--'

'Me all the time!' chirruped Billy Bunter. The fat Owl was in high feather. 'Those fellows would have gone off to bed, but I jolly well made them come up to the attic, and if I jolly well hadn't--'

'You rang, sir?' Wells came in. He gave a jump, at the sight of the rat-eyed man in the Colonel's grasp. Portly as he was, Wells jumped nearly clear of the floor, his eyes popping at the prisoner.

'That man again!' gasped Wells.

'Yes, and caught this time: thanks, it appears, to Master Bunter,' said the Colonel.

'Me all the time!' chirruped the fat Owl.

'You will lock him in a room until Inspector Slade calls, Wells. I will take him there and see him safe. Come, you rascal!'

The rat-eyed man was led away. He gave the cheery juniors a scowl as he departed, which did not disturb their equanimity in the very least. He had paid his last nocturnal visit to Wharton Lodge: and all that remained was for Inspector Slade of Wimford to call and collect him. The old Colonel's precious Tintoretto was safe in its frame at last! And that was--amazing as it was--thanks to Billy Bunter.

That was a fact--an undoubted fact! True, it had come about because Bunter was in a blue funk! Nevertheless, there it was! It had to be admitted: and the Famous Five admitted it. Billy Bunter's remarkable antics that Christmastide had had a very unexpected, but very happy, outcome. Billy Bunter, amazing to relate, had been the right man in the right place!

Colonel Wharton gave the fat Owl a very kindly glance when he came back into the hall.

'Bunter!' he said.

'Yes, sir--me all the time!' said Bunter. If I hadn't--'

'Quite so! And--'

'If I hadn't--!'

'Yes, yes, yes! Quite so! I am very glad you were here, Bunter--very glad indeed that you came for Christmas!'

'And so say all of us!' grinned Bob Cherry.

'Hear, hear!'

And Billy Bunter grinned a complacent grin: a grin so wide that it seemed almost to meet round his fat head. Bunter, in coming for Christmas in so remarkable a way, had feared the worst while he hoped for the best. But in his most optimistic moments he couldn't have expected this! Actually, everybody at Wharton Lodge was glad that Billy Bunter had come!

CHAPTER 34

A MERRY CHRISTMAS!

'OOOOOOH!' murmured Billy Bunter.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'Ooooooh!'

'Anything the matter?'

'Wooooooh!'

Dinner was early on Christmas Day. It could not have been too early for Billy Bunter. The fattest face at the festive board was also the brightest. The viands were ample and attractive: and Billy Bunter's onslaught on them was quite a record, even for Bunter. Wells and Young John exchanged glances, wondering where he packed it all. Aunt Amy gave him some somewhat anxious glances, perhaps fearing that disaster might accrue. But hospitality was unlimited: and when hospitality was unlimited, Billy Bunter was the man to make the most of it. It was against Billy Bunter's principles, if he could help it, to leave anything eatable uneaten. But on this occasion he simply had to. Even Bunter had to roll away, reluctantly, leaving delightful things unconsumed.

He rolled as far as an armchair by the fire in the hall.

He sat, or rather collapsed, into that armchair. He gazed at the fire with a glassy eye through his big spectacles. Bunter had done well at dinner--a little too well. He could not help feeling that perhaps he had overdone it a little.

'Oooooogh!' murmured Bunter.

The Famous Five gathered round him. They had enjoyed their Christmas dinner, with the excellent appetites of healthy youth. But the whole Co., probably, had not done quite so well as Bunter. His single performance had put them all in the shade.

'Enjoying life, old fat man?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Oooh!'

'What's up?' asked Nugent.

'Wooooooh!'

'Feeling ill?' asked Harry Wharton, sympathetically.

'Nunno! I-I-I'm all right!' gasped Bunter. 'I-I feel a-a-a little queer, that's all. I don't know why.'

'He doesn't know why!' grinned Johnny Bull.

'The whyfulness is terrific,' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'It wasn't the turkey!' mumbled Bunter. 'I'm sure it wasn't the turkey! I had only four helpings of turkey.'

'Then it couldn't be that!' said Bob, gravely.

'It wasn't the Christmas pudding! I had only seven helpings of Christmas pudding--'

'Couldn't be that either, then!'

'No! And it wasn't the mince pies--I had only a dozen, so it wasn't the mince pies--'

'Perhaps it was the lot together,' suggested Bob.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ooooooh!' mumbled Bunter. 'Wooooh! I say, you fellows--ooooh! Wooooh! I-I-I don't feel quite well! Ooooooh! Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! Ooooooh!'

The Co. were sympathetic. But sympathy was not of much use to a fat Owl within whose extensive circumference four helpings of turkey were on bad terms with seven of Christmas pudding, and all of them at war with a dozen mince pies. So they went out for a run in the open air, leaving Billy Bunter

to recover at his leisure.

When they came in, an hour or two later, Billy Bunter was still sitting in the armchair by the fire. But it was a much brighter Bunter that blinked at them through his big spectacles.

'I say, you fellows,' squeaked Bunter.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'I say, is it tea time?'

'Ha ha, ha,!'

Evidently Bunter had recovered.

IT was a merry Christmas at Wharton Lodge: and, as it had happily turned out, none the less merry because Billy Bunter had come for Christmas.