



'Fetch me a meal large enough for ten, my man!' That sort of order existed only in Billy Bunter's dreams—*until now*. Masquerading as a circus boss, Billy finds life far nicer than at school. But difficulties arise. The real owner returns to uncover him, masters and schoolboys come searching for him, a violent thug arrives to 'bash him'. The Fat Owl might not enjoy his adventure after all, but one thing is certain —you'll enjoy reading about it!

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

PAUL HAMLYN

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FRANK RICHARDS

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Enter Mr. Whiffles!

THUMP, thump, thump!

Ta-ra-ra-ra-ra!

Thump, thump!

Bang!

'What the merry dickens—' ejaculated Harry Wharton.

Thump! Bang!

'I say, you fellows!' yelled Billy Bunter. 'It's a circus!'

'Sounds more like an earthquake!' remarked Bob Cherry.

Thump, thump! Bang, bang! Toot, toot! Ta-ra-ra-ra!

It was quite an unaccustomed sound in the old quadrangle of Greyfriars.

The thumping of a big drum mingled with the strains of a cornet and a

trumpet, and the trampling of many hoofs, the rolling of many wheels.

It was morning break at Greyfriars, and all the boys were out of the Form-rooms.

There was a rush to the gates at once.

Remove fellows rushed, and Third and Second Form fags rushed, and Shell

fellows rushed. Seniors of the Fifth and Sixth did not rush to see the circus

passing the school. They were too dignified to appear to take much interest in

circuses. Still, they strolled in the same direction. That terrific uproar, growing

louder and louder as it came up the road from Friardale, awoke every echo of

the ancient buildings of Greyfriars. Had classes been on, classes undoubtedly

would have been interrupted. Had examinations been on, certainly many would have lost marks. To the Lower School, at least, a circus was more attractive than classes or exams. Fortunately the school was at leisure now; and the boys were able to swarm down to the gates.

Thump, thump, thump! Bang, bang! Rat-a-ta-tat!

A gigantic elephant lumbered up, with a clown seated on his back, beating the drum. For a great distance down the road, behind the big elephant, the procession extended. There were caravans, men on horseback, and men on foot, gay banners and streamers, elephants and camels. The gateway of Greyfriars was crammed with fellows, deeply interested.

'I say, you fellows, it's Whiffles' Circus!' said Billy Bunter. 'I've seen their posters up. They're going to give a show at Courtfield.'

'Halt!'

The word ran along the line.

A large caravan, gaily painted and adorned with streamers, halted opposite the gateway of Greyfriars.

With a buzzing and a trampling and a crowding, the long procession came to a stop.

'They're calling here,' remarked Bob Cherry. 'What price asking the Head to let them give a show in the quad?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The juniors chuckled at the idea of a circus performance in the school quad. Such a suggestion appealed strongly to the Lower School; but it was not likely to appeal to the Head. But it was evident that the circus had some business at Greyfriars. From the big, painted caravan a fat gentleman alighted, and came towards the gateway, over the wide stretch of grass that separated it from the highway.

He was a short man—remarkably short—but what he lacked in the perpendicular he made up in the horizontal. His circumference was generous—rather resembling that of Billy Bunter.

His plump little nose, in the middle of a fat, smiling face, was adorned by a pair of gold-rimmed pince-nez. His clothes were of a light grey, with a well-marked vertical blue stripe, no doubt to give an effect of the height that Nature had denied him. Those clothes were cut on generous lines; but the plump person of the circus gentleman filled them to their fullest limits.

He wore his hair rather long and curly—almost a mane of nut-brown hair. A silk hat, with an unusually wide and curly brim, was set on those ample locks. His fat chin was adorned with a little pointed beard; and a long moustache, with the ends waxed upwards, adorned his upper lip.

Arriving at the school gates, the fat gentleman swept off his silk hat, with a stately bow, to the smiling crowd there.

The boys could not help smiling.

'Gentlemen,' said the circus proprietor, 'this is, I think, Greyfriars?'

'Right on the wicket, sir!' said Harry Wharton.

'Allow me to introduce myself—Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, proprietor of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus! I have called to see the headmaster. Take me to your headmaster.'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I—I say, is Dr. Locke expecting you, sir?' asked Johnny Bull.

'Probably not,' said Mr. Whiffles. 'But I have brought my circus this way, on purpose to call upon the headmaster of this scholastic establishment. I desire to call the attention of the young gentlemen of this—this academy of learning, to the attractions of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus! Every afternoon and evening for a week we give regular performances on Courtfield Common. The show is unrivalled, the prices of admission moderate. Owing to the crush of business wherever we go, the free list is entirely suspended. I desire to see your headmaster. Take me to him!'

Mr. Whiffles rolled onward. Mr. Whiffles being almost as broad as he was long, his motions rather resembled those of a barrel.

There were grinning faces on all sides.

Gosling, the porter, stared at him from his lodge. Gosling had an impression that it was his duty to turn back such a remarkable visitor as this. But Gosling had no chance; the crowd was too thick for him. He stared in disapproval.

Mr. Whiffles blinked round through his gold-rimmed glasses. 'This way, sir!' chortled the Bounder.

'Come right in, Mr. Whiffles!'

'Jolly glad to see you at Greyfriars, sir.'

'Hear, haer!'

'I say, you fellows, the Head will be waxy—'

'Shut up, Bunter!'

'Come on, Mr. Whiffles!'

'Quelchy's staring out of his study window!' chuckled Frank Nugent. 'He looks surprised.'

'And not pleased!' murmured Wharton.

'What—what—what—' ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

And he fairly blinked at Mr. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, as that gentleman reached him, halted, and took off his silk hat with a sweeping bow.

Exit Mr. Whiffles!

'SIR, I am honoured to meet you!' said Mr. Whiffles.

'What—what——'

Mr. Whiffles looked up amiably at Mr. Quelch.

Mr. Quelch looked down blankly at Mr. Whiffles.

Never had the angular Remove master looked so tall and angular as he did now, facing the circus gentleman. It was rather like a meeting between a tortoise and a giraffe.

'What—what—' repeated Mr. Quelch helplessly.

'I am honoured to meet the headmaster of this—this scholastic establishment!' said Mr. Whiffles.

'I am not the headmaster!' snapped Mr. Quelch; 'I am a Form master! Kindly tell me at once what this means.'

'I should like to see the headmaster, sir!' said Mr. Whiffles. 'My business, sir, is with the proprietor of this academy.'

'The—the what?'

'The proprietor, sir!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Apparently Mr. Whiffles was under the impression that the headmaster was the proprietor of Greyfriars School, as Mr. Whiffles was of the World-Famous Circus.

'Bless my soul!' said Mr. Quelch. 'You—you cannot see Dr. Locke. Dr. Locke, I am sure, does not desire to see you. Kindly explain at once who you are, and what you want here.'

Mr. Whiffles produced a morocco card case, and extracted therefrom a card, which he presented to the Remove master.

Mr. Quelch gazed at it.

It bore the style and title of Mr. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, Proprietor of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus.

'Dear me!' said Mr. Quelch.

'That is my card, sir,' said Mr. Whiffles. 'No doubt you have heard of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus! We have performed, sir, to every crowned head in Europe, and innumerable uncrowned heads. Wherever we pitch our tents, sir, we do business to capacity. Our attractions include—'

'My dear sir—'

'Mumbo, the performing elephant—'

'Sir—'

'Nobby Nobbs, the funniest clown in the universe——'

'Sir—'

'Texas Bill, the celebrated bronco buster—'

'Upon my word!'

'Tomasso Tomsonio, the king of the trapeze—'

'Mr. Whiffles—'

'And numerous other attractions. See small bills. The free list, sir, is entirely suspended. But special cards of invitation will be sent to the master, sir, of this scholastic establishment. The young gentlemen will be heartily welcome, at the usual prices of admission.'

'Really, Mr. Whiffles—'

'In order, sir, that the boys of this—this learned academy may see for themselves what the World-Famous Circus is like, I propose to process round this play-ground—'

'Upon my word!' gasped Mr. Quelch. 'This—this is—is—is most extraordinary! Sir, you must not introduce your—your procession into the precincts of this school! Such a proceeding is unheard-of. Absolutely unheard-of, sir. Nothing of the kind can be allowed. Bless my soul!'

Mr. Whiffles sniffed.

'I take it, sir, that you are not the proprietor of this academy,' he said. 'Kindly call the proprietor.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Here comes the Head!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Here comes the giddy proprietor.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Dr. Locke came out of the big doorway of the House, with a startled and shocked expression on his face. Mr. Quelch turned to him. Perhaps he was relieved to turn over Mr. Whiffles to the headmaster.

'What—what—what is all this, Mr. Quelch?' exclaimed the Head. 'What is all this dreadful uproar? Who is this person?'

Mr. Whiffles answered for himself.

'Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, sir, proprietor of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus, sir! Delighted to make your acquaintance, sir! I take it that you are the proprietor of this scholastic academy.'

'I—I am the headmaster, certainly,' gasped Dr. Locke. 'But what—what.— what. —'

'Then you are cordially invited, sir, to witness the first performance of the World-Famous, this evening, sir, on Courtfield Common,' said Mr. Whiffles.

'The Royal Box, sir, will be placed at your disposal. No charge, sir, for the admission of so distinguished a scholastic gentleman.'

Tramp, tramp, tramp!

'I say, you fellows, he's coming in!' shrieked Billy Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, my hat!'

Without waiting for the instructions from Mr. Whiffles, Nobby Nobbs had turned the elephant in at the gates.

With a tramp that almost shook the quadrangle, Mumbo came thudding in.

The Head and Mr. Quelch gazed at him in horror.

'Take—take—take that dreadful animal away at once, sir,' stuttered the Head. Gosling, in great indignation, rushed to oppose the entrance of Nobby Nobbs. He planted himself in the path of the elephant, and brandished an indignant fist at the grinning clown on the great animal's back.

'Ere, you!' roared Gosling. 'Take your leave! You 'ear me! Wot I says is this 'ere, you ain't allowed in 'ere, you ain't!'

The next moment there was a fearful yell from the school porter. The long trunk of Mumbo whipped out, and curled round the horrified Gosling. He jumped away too late.

'Oh, my hat!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'Bless my soul!' said the Head, in horror.

Gosling's voice could be heard all over Greyfriars School as he was swept off his feet in the elephant's trunk.

'Yaroooh! 'Elp! Police! 'Elp!'

'Release that man at once, sir!' shouted Mr. Quelch, in consternation.

Gosling, with earth and sky spinning before his dizzy eyes, yelled and roared and wriggled.

'Elp! Stop him! Call him off! 'Elp!'

Mr. Whiffles rolled back to the gates.

'Now then, no larks Mumbo!' he said chidingly. 'You put the man down. Don't you tread on him!'

'Yarooogh!' roared Gosling.

He seemed quite alarmed at the suggestion of being trodden on by the elephant.

Mumbo obediently lowered the dizzy porter, and set him safely on his feet.

Gosling stood for a moment spluttering. Then he bolted into his lodge, the door slammed, and a bolt was heard to shoot home. Gosling had had enough of the elephant at close quarters.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Gentlemen—' said Mr. Whiffles, turning to the convulsed crowd of Greyfriars fellows.

'Sir—sir! I insist upon your taking your immediate departure!' hooted Mr.

Quelch, who had followed the circus gentleman down to the gates. 'You hear me, sir! Immediate!'

'Keep your hair on, sir!' said Mr. Whiffles genially. 'We're going on! Get going, Nobby.'

'Gentlemen,' repeated Mr. Whiffles, 'I 'ope I shall see you at the circus, afternoon and evening, gentlemen All are welcome! Bring your sisters and your cousins and your aunts! Whiffles' World-Famous, gentlemen, is a 'igh—toned performance, to which any young gentleman could bring his father and his grandfather! Gentlemen, good morning!'

'Bravo!' roared Bob Cherry. 'Three cheers for Whiffles!'

'Hurrah!'

'Silence!' hooted Mr. Quelch. 'Gosling, close the gates! Where is Gosling? Wingate—Gwynne, kindly close the gates! Bless my Soul!'

Bang, bang! Rat-a-tat-tat! Thump! Blare! With a burst of emphatic music Whiffles' World-Famous Circus wound up the road, on its way to Courtfield, leaving the Greyfriars fellows yelling with merriment.

There were smiling faces in third lesson that morning. Mr. Whiffles' visit had been enjoyed by all the Lower School, at least, even if Mr. Quelch and the Head had not shared their enjoyment. And there was hardly a fellow at Greyfriars who did not make up his mind to visit Whiffles' Circus during its stay at Courtfield.

Whether Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles had planned it or not, his visit to Greyfriars had been extremely effective in the way of advertisement.

'Ware Beaks!

MR. QUELCH, the next morning, glanced over his Form with a frown. He was suffering from a twinge of neuritis, and the Remove, who 'knew the signs,' played up warily.

Not a fellow in the Remove was late; all were there before Mr. Quelch himself arrived. But that was not all. Every fellow was quiet, orderly, attentive, and hung on his Form-master's words as if they were pearls of wisdom falling from the lips of Henry Samuel Quelch. Every fellow who was called on to construe, showed up an unusually good 'con'—except Bunter.

There were fellows in the Remove, such as Mark Linley, who were always keen on the acquisition of knowledge. Now all the Lower Fourth seemed to be equally keen. It was exactly as it should have been—but as it seldom was! Mr. Quelch was a keen and wary gentleman; often described by his Form as a downy old bird. But he was not a suspicious gentleman, and so he did not suspect that this remarkably uniform good behaviour on the part of the Remove was due to the proximity of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus. Detention that afternoon would have been a terrible blow to any Remove man. The bare possibility of detention was unnerving. Fellows who loathed Latin, and would have been glad to begin the study of history at the reign of George the Fifth, now took the deepest possible interest in the classic tongue of Horace and Caesar, and were absorbed in the reign of Queen Elizabeth—except Bunter.

Bunter had a rooted objection to learning anything, and, as usual, was

prepared to take a chance. It was unfortunate, for Mr. Quelch, possibly looking for a victim in his 'model' Form, picked on Bunter in the history class. Bunter's knowledge of history was dim. He did not hate history as he hated Latin, or loathe it as he loathed maths. He had only a mild dislike for it. When Mr. Quelch asked Bunter who succeeded Queen Elizabeth, he did not doubt that even Bunter would be able to reply. Fellows were supposed to know their 'kings and queens' before they got into the Lower Fourth at all. But Bunter hesitated.

'Come, Bunter,' said Mr. Quelch testily. 'You can tell me what monarch came after Queen Elizabeth?'

'Oh, yes, sir!' said Bunter confidently.

'Well, who was it, Bunter?'

'Philip of Spain, sir.'

'What?' ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

'But she wouldn't have him, sir!' added Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!' shrieked the Remove.

Mr. Quelch gazed at Bunter. The Remove yelled. They could not help it.

'Bless my soul!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch. 'Silence—silence!' The merriment died away quite suddenly.

'You misunderstand me, Bunter,' said the Remove master severely. 'I did not mean "came after" in that absurd sense of the expression. Give me the name of the monarch who succeeded Queen Elizabeth on the throne.'

'Oh!' said Bunter.

Here he was at a loss. Any fag in the Second Form could have told him, but no fag of the Second was there to do so. Skinner, from behind Bunter, could not resist the opportunity. In a whisper heard only by Bunter and fellows close at hand, he gave Bunter the information.

'Solomon!'

Had Bunter paused to reflect, even Bunter would have realised that that was not quite right. But Bunter did not pause to reflect. He was too anxious to get on the right side of Quelch that morning.

'Solomon, sir!' he said promptly.

Mr. Quelch jumped.

'What?' he hooted.

'Sus-sus-sus-Solomon, sir!' gasped Bunter, realising that something was wrong, but sticking to his guns.

'You absurd boy!'

'Oh, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'Your crass ignorance is really astounding, Bunter. You will be detained for the afternoon, and you will write out from your book the names of all the queens and kings of England from the Norman Conquest a hundred times.'

'Ow!' groaned Bunter.

'I hope this will be a lesson to you,' said Mr. Quelch severely.

'I—I say, sir—'

'Enough!' snapped Mr. Quelch.

'But—but I can't be detained this afternoon, sir!' gasped Bunter.

'What?'

'You—you see, sir, I want to go to the circus.'

'Silence!' said Mr. Quelch, in a formidable voice. 'You will be detained until six o'clock, Bunter.'

'Oh, dear!'

'If your task is not completed by six o'clock, Bunter, I shall cane you.'

'Wow!'

'Silence! Another word and I shall cane you severely!' barked the Remove Form-master.

Billy Bunter, writhing inwardly, relapsed into silence. Throughout the remainder of classes there was a sulky, defiant look on his fat face. The very thing he had fervently hoped would not happen had happened. While the rest of Greyfriars enjoyed the fun at Whiffles' Circus he, William George Bunter, was to be detained!

Bunter's fate served as an extra warning to the Remove; and for the first time that term Mr. Quelch's Form—often referred to in Masters' Room as the most unruly Form at Greyfriars—was a model of behaviour—all through Whiffles' World-Famous Circus!

Bunter's Bolt!

WILLIAM GEORGE BUNTER groaned.

It was a deep and dismal groan.

Life was not looking bright to William George Bunter. He sat in the Remove Form-room, with a clouded fat face, and groaned.

Really, it was too bad! It was not only too bad, but it was intolerable. Bunter made up his fat mind that he was not going to stand it.

Almost all Greyfriars had gone to the circus that sunny half-holiday. Bunter wanted to be at the circus, too. Sheer tyranny was keeping him away.

Bunter had not touched his detention task. Instead of settling down to work, Bunter thought it out.

As he was not going to do his task there would be trouble, anyway, when Quelchy came to release him from detention. As there was going to be trouble, anyway, he might as well 'hook it'—on the principle that it is no worse to be hung for a sheep than for a lamb.

Sitting through that hot afternoon in a stuffy Form-room was impossible.

Bunter was not going to stand it. Quelchy might not find out that he had hooked it. Even if he did there was a licking coming to Bunter for leaving his task undone, and Quelchy couldn't give him two lickings at once. He couldn't be gated for half-holidays, because this afternoon was the last half-holiday of the term. In a few more days the vacation would begin, and he would be quit of Quelchy for quite a long time, so it didn't matter whether he was in Quelchy's black books or not.

Bunter thought it out, and made up his mind—such as it was. He was going to break detention.

Having allowed a quarter of an hour to elapse to give Quelchy time to settle down in his study, Bunter left his seat and tiptoed cautiously to the door of the Remove-room. Mr. Quelch had shut that door behind him, and Bunter listened intently for some minutes before he opened it. There was no sound in the corridor outside.

Most likely Quelchy was in his study. True, he might wander along to see that Bunter was still here. But that was a chance that had to be taken if Bunter was

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going to the circus. And he was going.

The fat junior opened the door at last, and blinked out into the passage. It was deserted, and he stepped out.

Bunter drew a deep breath. He was going to the circus. He still lacked the price of admission. But that was not an insuperable difficulty. By that time the performance would be beginning. An astute fellow might be able to creep round the tent and insinuate himself inside under the edge of the canvas. That was not a new experience for Bunter. He had patronised a circus before in that inexpensive manner. His difficulty was to get clear of the school, and he resolved to make a rush for it. Scudding swiftly down the corridor, scudding out of the House, scudding down to the gates—he would be gone in a minute or a little more. Bunter breathed hard. The way was open—and one rapid rush would do it.

He started.

Like a charging hippopotamus the Owl of the Remove raced down the corridor.

Crash!

He had realised that there was a chance that Quelchy would come back to see if he was getting on with his task. That chance materialised.

Bunter reached the corner of the passage from the Form-room just as Mr. Quelch reached it from the other direction, from his study.

Mr. Quelch suspected that Bunter intended to bolt. But he did not suspect that the fat junior would be charging round the corner like a bull.

He discovered that all of a sudden.

Crash! Bump!

'Ow!' gasped Bunter.

'Oh!' spluttered Mr. Quelch.

Bunter reeled against the wall. Mr. Quelch sprawled. A charge with Billy Bunter's weight behind it was something like that of a battering-ram. The Remove-master fairly crumpled up under it.

'Ow! Oh, good gracious!' spluttered Mr. Quelch. 'What— what—what— Good gracious, what—'

He sprawled dizzily.

Bunter gazed at him in horror. Breaking detention was a serious matter. Knocking over a Form-master was a much more serious matter. Bunter's eyes almost bulged through his big glasses in horror at what he had done. He leaned on the wall and gasped helplessly.

Mr. Quelch sat up. His gimlet eyes turned on Bunter. There was a deadly gleam in those gimlet eyes, a gleam that made Bunter quake.

'Bunter,' gasped Mr. Quelch—'Bunter, you—'

'Ow!' gasped Bunter.

What would happen to him when Mr. Quelch got his second wind he knew only too well. Terror lent the fat junior wings. He dodged round the Form-master and fled for his life.

Mr. Quelch staggered up.

'Bunter, stop at once! Bunter, do you hear! I command you to stop! You young rascal, stop! Bunter, I am going to chastise you with the utmost severity!

Stop!

Bunter was not a bright youth, but he was too bright to stop at that moment.

Mere prudence would have urged him to give Quelchy time to cool down even

if he had thought of stopping. He did not think at all. He tore on. Footsteps sounded behind him. Dignity, in ordinary circumstances, would have restrained Mr. Quelch from giving chase to a fleeing junior. But the circumstances were not ordinary. Mr. Quelch was hurt. He was sore. He had reached a time of life when it was impossible to be butted over headlong without feeling the effects severely. He was hurt, and he was more enraged than hurt. He was very nearly foaming at the mouth. Dignity was thrown to the winds. Bunter tore on, and after him rushed the Remove-master. Bunter darted out of the House and rushed for the gates. After him darted his Form-master. They flew across the quad, both going strong.

'Gosling!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

William Gosling, sunning himself outside his lodge, turned his ancient head in a leisurely way. Bunter flew past him and vanished out of gates. It was too late for Gosling to stop him.

Mr. Quelch did not stop to tell Gosling what he thought of him and his leisurely movements. There was no time. He rushed out of gates after Bunter.

'Bunter, stop!'

The fat junior had been about to stop and take breath. That infuriated voice behind him urged him to fresh efforts.

He flew up the road.

'Loder!' shrieked Mr. Quelch.

Sauntering along the road was Loder of the Sixth—ahead of Bunter. Loder stared.

Never had Loder beheld such a sight—a hatless, crimson-faced junior fleeing, a crimson-faced Form-master rushing on his track with his gown sailing out behind him in the wind. Loder blinked. But he understood that he was to stop Bunter.

'Ow! Oh, lor!'

Bunter halted for a moment. The road ahead was closed—the road that was the way to the circus, though even Bunter would hardly have thought of going to the circus while Mr. Quelch was sprinting close behind. Bunter was not quick in the uptake; but Bunter could act quickly at times—such times as this! With Loder in front, and Quelch in the rear, Bunter had little choice. He turned from the road and darted into a footpath that led down to the river. Loder rushed and grabbed too late. Bunter, panting and puffing and blowing, flew on, turned into the tow-path, and raced on desperately up the bank of the Sark.

Mr. Quelch stopped, reeled against a tree, and panted. His scholarly face streamed with perspiration.

'Loder! Grooogh! Loder!' he spluttered.

'Yes, sir!' said Loder, concealing a grin. He was making mental notes for a description of this remarkable scene in the Sixth Form studies later.

'Loder, that young rascal—that—that Bunter has broken detention—grooogh! Loder, kindly follow him and bring him back to the school. Use force! Bring him back! Do not let him escape you! Go at once! Oooch!'

'Oh!' said Loder.

It had been Loder's intention to drop in at the circus that afternoon. Loder did not relish the task set him. Loder was not a dutiful prefect; but he desired to stand well with the masters, and it was scarcely possible to refuse.

'Very well, sir,' he answered. 'I'll get him!'

'Thank you, Loder! Grooogh! Lose no time! I—I will follow when—when I have—oooch!—recovered my breath a little! Go at once! Ooooh!' And Loder of the Sixth sprinted along the towpath to take up the chase.

Bunter's Lucky Find!

BILLY BUNTER blinked back over his shoulder.

On his left was the shining river, rippling and murmuring through the reeds and rushes. On his right was the wood, deep and shady, with many little grassy paths running up from the towpath to be lost among the trees and ferns. Behind him, on the towpath, was the figure of Gerald Loder, running; and, farther back, the angular form of Mr. Quelch, following at a more moderate pace. Bunter gasped.

'Ow! That beast Loder! Wow!'

Bunter was not much of a sprinter, but no doubt he could have distanced a middle-aged gentleman not accustomed to athletics. But he had no chance of distancing Loder. The Sixth- Former was certain to run him down—absolutely certain. Bunter had a start, but Loder of the Sixth was coming up hand over fist.

'Oh, dear!'

Bunter rolled on, puffing and blowing. He was not thinking of the circus now. He was thinking only of escape. The expression on Loder's face was not engaging. The bully of the Sixth did not like chasing about on a hot afternoon, and he looked as if he intended to indemnify himself as soon as his grasp closed on the fugitive Owl. And after Loder had done with him there was Quelchy, who also had strong emotions to express. The prospect was appalling.

Bunter dodged into a woodland path, and ran.

He left the path, and dodged through thickets and ferns and brambles in hot and breathless haste. Escape was his only thought. Somehow or other he had to get away from that beast Loder, and the other beast Quelchy. Nothing else mattered at present.

Speed could not save him—but in the wood it was easy to dodge. Loder was no scout to pick up a trail.

Bunter, breathless and fagged out, dropped at last into a thicket and rested.

He screened himself from sight, and lay palpitating.

There were footsteps close at hand.

Bunter crouched lower.

Footsteps and voices! The beasts were at hand—though evidently they did not see him.

'Have you found him, Loder?'

'No, sir.'

'He cannot be far away.'

'Hiding somewhere, I think, sir.'

'Search for him, Loder—search for him! The wretched boy, I am sure, is planning to go to the circus against my express orders. Kindly search for him without losing time, Loder.'

'Yes, sir!'

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Bunter, as he crouched in cover, heard a rustling and stirring in the wood. He breathed more freely as the sound drew farther away.

He ventured to rise to his feet at last, and blinked round him. Through the openings of the trees he could see the shining river. Out on the river was a shining spot that reflected the rays of the sun. Bunter blinked at it, puzzled to know what it was, for some moments. Then he realised that it was a bald head. There was a swimmer in the water, and his head was as bare of hair as a billiard ball. Loder's voice came suddenly to Bunter's ears; he was hailing the swimmer.

'Hallo, you there! Have you seen a boy along the towpath?'

There was no reply from the swimmer.

He struck out for the farther side of the river, as if desirous of avoiding observation.

Loder grunted, and tramped on, still searching for Bunter, his temper growing worse every moment, as Bunter could easily guess.

'Oh, lor!'

He rather wished that he had remained in the Form-room. Detention was not so bad as this! But it was too late to think of that now.

There was silence round him in the wood, there was a chance of getting away along the towpath. He knew where to strike the footpath that led from the river to Courtfield Common if only the way were clear. The circus might be a possibility, after all.

He crept cautiously towards the stream. But before emerging into the towpath Bunter put his head out, like a tortoise putting its head out of its shell, and blinked cautiously to and fro. He drew his head back quickly. In the distance an angular figure was visible.

'Beast!' gasped Bunter, as he popped back into cover.

Mr. Quelch apparently was watching the towpath, while Loder searched the wood along the path. Bunter quaked. Escape was cut off, and at any moment the Sixth-Form prefect might fall upon him. He groaned dismally.

There was nothing for it but to keep in cover, and Billy Bunter plunged into a thicket. He stumbled over something and grunted.

Then he stared.

It was a silk hat he had stumbled over.

Bunter blinked.

In that little thicket the swimmer in the Sark had evidently deposited his clothes, when he changed into a bathing-costume, out of sight of passers-by. A bell-brimmed silk hat, a suit of checks with vertical blue stripes, a fancy waistcoat, lay there—and they seemed vaguely familiar to Bunter. He was sure that he had seen those clothes before somewhere. He remembered all of a sudden. These were the striking garments of Mr. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, proprietor of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus.

Bunter was perplexed for some moments.

These clothes, beyond a doubt, belonged to Mr. Whiffles. But the swimmer in the Sark was bald-headed; his head reflected the rays of the sun from an absolutely bald surface. And Mr. Whiffles wore his hair long.

But the mystery was explained the next moment as Bunter's blink fell on some articles that had tumbled out of the silk hat when he tumbled on it.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

An ample wig of nut-brown curly hair lay there, and in it a little pointed beard,

and a moustache with curled-up waxed ends.

Billy Bunter chuckled.

He forgot for a moment his danger in his interest in this remarkable discovery. Evidently Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles was not the natural owner of that ample head of hair he sported.

No doubt he was the legal owner. He had bought and paid for it. Mr. Whiffles' ample locks were a wig!

'Oh, my hat!' murmured Bunter.

Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles fancied himself as a man with an ample head of hair, a moustache, and a beard! But he happened to be one of those men whose natural crop is sparse.

Neither beard nor moustache would grow on Mr. Whiffles' smooth face. But, where nature had failed, art had come to the rescue.

No doubt Mr. Whiffles had once had hair on his head, though nature denied it to him on his chin and upper lip. But it had gone, and its place had been supplied by the skill of the hairdresser.

Probably this accounted for the fact that Mr. Whiffles did not care for sea-bathing, and preferred a quiet and secluded spot far from the madding crowd! He could not bathe in his artificial hirsute adornments, that was certain. Once the adhesive gum was wetted, wig and moustache and beard would have floated off. It was rather hard on Mr. Whiffles, who was keen on swimming. But there was no help for it; only in quiet and secluded spots such as this did Mr. Whiffles venture to disport himself in the water.

Billy Bunter blinked out of the thicket across the stream. Far across, close to the opposite bank, he caught a glitter from the water, and knew that it was the bald pate of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. Mr. Whiffles was keeping as far away as he could, until these unwelcome intruders had cleared off from the solitary towpath.

Bunter sat down and eyed the possessions of Mr. Whiffles.

The swimmer's clothes were at his mercy! And the idea germinated in Bunter's fat brain of changing his clothes for Mr. Whiffles', and thus escaping. His eyes glimmered behind his big spectacles at the thought.

Mr. Whiffles was scarcely half an inch taller than Bunter. Sideways, he was about the same. His clothes would fit Bunter almost perfectly. And if the beasts who were watching for Bunter saw him emerge in such garb, surely they would not know he was Bunter, and he would be able to walk away in security. He debated it in his fat mind. If he could cover up his face somehow, it was as safe as houses. He might hold a handkerchief to his face, like a man with a cold. But—

Then he suddenly chuckled.

Wig and beard and moustache were all there! He had only to stick them on to be Mr. Whiffles to the life.

'He, he he!'

Bunter heard a distant rustling in the wood. Loder was searching the footpaths for him. Bunter could imagine with what feelings. He remained as quiet as a startled rabbit till the rustling died away again. Mr. Quelch was still on the towpath. Mr. Whiffles—unwilling to display his shiny scalp to the public gaze—was still on the other side of the river. Billy Bunter made up his mind to it. Any other fellow, whatever his own difficulties, might have hesitated to deprive a swimmer of his clothes and so leave him in an extremely uncomfortable and

unenviable position. But considerations of that kind did not trouble the Owl of the Remove. All his thoughts were concentrated on one individual— W. G. Bunter.

He grabbed up the striped trousers and started. But, ample as were Mr. Whiffles' garments, Bunter found that he could not get them on over his own. In circumference he ran Mr. Whiffles very close. He had to change his own clothes for those of Mr. Whiffles, and that he proceeded to do. Some people, stealing a bather's clothes in this way, would have been quite pleased to leave their own in exchange. Not so Bunter. He had no desire whatever to part with his own suit. Certainly, Mr. Whiffles would have looked very remarkable in Bunter's clothes. They would have fitted him, no doubt; but the contrast between the schoolboy's clothes and Mr. Whiffles' bald head would have been very striking. Still, it was probable that Mr. Whiffles would have been glad of them when he found his own clothes gone.

Bunter, however, was not bothering about Mr. Whiffles. He had his bathing costume, anyhow. And, fortunately, it was a very warm day. It was probable that the loss of his wig would trouble Mr. Whiffles even more than the loss of his clothes. But, again, Bunter had no time to worry about that. This discovery was a stroke of the purest luck for him, whatever it might be for Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles.

In a few minutes William George Bunter was attired in Mr. Whiffles' clothes, and his own were rolled up in a bundle. That bundle he crammed into a little attaché-case that lay in the grass, and in which, as he guessed, Mr. Whiffles had brought along his bathing costume. In that attaché-case was a hand-mirror, which Mr. Whiffles would have needed for the proper adjusting of his hirsute adornments. Bunter stuck it in a forked bough, and proceeded with his further disguise, with the aid of the mirror.

On the wig and the moustache and the beard were little adhesive patches, which had only to be damped to make them stick. Bunter knew all about this; he had come across such things as a member of the Remove Dramatic Society. He fitted the ample wig on his head, and his own crop of hair completely disappeared under it: He fixed the waxed moustache on his upper lip, and the little pointed beard on his chin.

He almost jumped at his reflection in the glass when he had finished. It was not the face of Billy Bunter that looked back at him: it was the face of the proprietor of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus.

The only difference was that Mr. Whiffles wore gold-rimmed glasses and Bunter's had rims of steel. He could not, of course, adopt the circus gentleman's glasses, as he could not see through the lenses. But that was only a detail. In all other respects he was Mr. Whiffles' twin. His fat cheeks and podgy little nose were very like those of Mr. Whiffles, and the wig, the beard, and the moustache did the rest. Bunter himself could hardly believe that it was not Mr. Whiffles who was blinking at him from the looking-glass. He grinned cheerily.

He had not the slightest doubt of getting clear in this rig. Once safe at a distance he could change back. Then he could go to the circus. By the time he returned to Greyfriars he hoped Mr. Quelch would have cooled down. Anyhow, Loder would be done with. Bunter was beginning to think that he was in luck, after all, that afternoon.

He put Mr. Whiffles' silk hat on the curly wig; it fitted him almost to a hair.

Then he blinked out of the thickets to the river again. Mr. Quelch was pacing at a distance. The bald scalp still gleamed from the water on the other side of the Sark. From behind Bunter came a rustling, and a muttering, angry voice. Loder was not far off. Billy Bunter drew a deep breath. His fat heart palpitated with funk; but that rustle in the wood decided him. Loder was close at hand, and it was neck or nothing.

Taking his courage in both hands, as it were, Billy Bunter stepped out of the thickets into the open towpath, and into the full view of Henry Samuel Quelch.

Getting Away With It!

MR. QUELCH frowned.

Glancing along the towpath as he observed a movement in the thickets that bordered it, he had expected, or at least hoped, to see Billy Bunter emerge—to fall into the hands of vengeance.

Instead of which, he saw a little, fat, bearded man in striped checks—a man he had seen once before, or believed he had, and did not like or approve of. He frowned, and sniffed impatiently.

He wanted Bunter, and he had no use for Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. Certainly it did not occur to him that the striped suit, the fancy waistcoat, the silk hat, the nut-brown wig, the moustache and the beard of Mr. Whiffles concealed the Owl of the Remove.

Had he known that the bald-headed swimmer across the river was Mr. Whiffles, even then he would not have suspected that this was Bunter. But he did not, of course, know that the swimmer was Mr. Whiffles. He had last seen Mr. Whiffles with a thick head of hair. The billiards-ball scalp that shone from the Sark bore no resemblance whatever to that.

Bunter hesitated on the towpath.

He was ready to bolt back into the wood at a sign of suspicion from Mr. Quelch, though it would very likely have been to belt into the arms of Loder of the Sixth.

But there was no sign of suspicion from Mr. Quelch.

All Mr. Quelch saw was a fat circus man, with an attaché-case in his hand, and there was nothing suspicious in that.

He frowned, he sniffed, and he turned aside, to stare up one of the little grassy paths in the wood and to call out to Loder.

Bunter breathed hard and deep.

He had to pass Mr. Quelch to get along to Courtfield Common, and he had thought of retreating in the other direction, back towards the school. But he felt that it was not necessary now to waste time. Boldly he rolled on up the river.

'Sir! Excuse me!' Mr. Quelch, struck by a sudden thought, turned back from the wood and addressed the fat gentleman as he came by. 'Will you be kind enough to tell me if you have seen a schoolboy lurking in the wood or along the towpath?'

Bunter stopped, almost gasping for breath. He did not trust himself to speak. He pointed back along the towpath.

'You have seen him?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

Bunter nodded.

'In that direction?'

Another nod.

'A schoolboy—a very fat and somewhat clumsy and unwieldy boy,' said Mr. Quelch, in order to leave no room for a mistake. 'A short, fat, clumsy, unwieldy boy in spectacles?'

The fat gentleman glared at him through the very spectacles to which Mr. Quelch was alluding. The description Mr. Quelch gave of Bunter might have enabled anyone to recognise him—except Bunter. The Owl of the Remove did not recognise the description at all. To describe a well-set-up, good-looking, sturdy, distinguished fellow like Bunter as a fat, unwieldy, clumsy schoolboy was manifestly absurd. It was annoying, too. Bunter did not like it. Billy Bunter turned his back on Mr. Quelch and marched off.

Mr. Quelch stared after him. He had not approved of Mr. Whiffles at Greyfriars, and he approved of him still less now. He thought his manners shocking.

However, he had learned what he desired to know—where Bunter had been seen. He hurried down the towpath in the direction pointed out by the fat gentleman. He called to Loder as he went; but the tired and exasperated Loder was still beating the wood for Bunter, and did not hear—at least, did not answer. Loder was yearning, by this time, to get his hands on Bunter. Had he succeeded in collaring the fat junior, little of Bunter would have been left for Mr. Quelch.

But Bunter was safe from being collared now. He hurried up the towpath, with a fat grin displayed between Mr. Whiffles' beard and Mr. Whiffles' waxed moustache.

'Hi!'

Bunter started.

'Hi! Stop! You!'

It was a shout, or, rather, a frantic yell, from the river. Bunter blinked across the water.

He had forgotten Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. But he was rolling up the towpath in full view of that gentleman; and the feelings of Mr. Whiffles, when he suddenly sighted his clothes, his hat, his hair, and his beard and moustache, walking away up the river on another person, may be better imagined than described.

Treading water, Mr. Whiffles shouted frantically.

'Hi! Stop! Thief! Villain! Blighter! Stop!'

Bunter did not stop.

An anxious blink behind showed him that Mr. Quelch had disappeared round a curve in the towpath, where the winding river turned. Loder was still swallowed up by the woods. Mr. Whiffles came swimming back across the river with long strokes. On land, Mr. Whiffles resembled a barrel in his motions, but he was very active in the water, and he came swiftly. Bunter broke into a run. A bald head and two fiery eyes glittered from the river, as Mr. Whiffles swam furiously across. But the Sark was wide at that point, and the current fairly strong and, good swimmer as Mr. Whiffles was, he was some time getting across, and then the current had carried him down, while Bunter was going up.

By the time the circus gentleman had dragged himself, dripping and panting,

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

through the rushes to the towpath, Bunter had vanished into the footpath that led to Courtfield Common, and was going at a trot.

Mr. Whiffles stood on the bank, streaming with water, gesticulating and almost raving.

The sound of a footstep startled him. It was only Loder rooting about in the bush. But it was enough for Mr. Whiffles. He wore quite a nice bathing-costume, but the top of his head reflected back the rays of the sun like a mirror and, in that state of beauty unadorned, as a poet would say, Mr. Whiffles objected to being seen.



Bunter did not stop

Nobody at the circus—so far as he knew—even suspected that his hair was false—not a member of the public dreamed of it—so far as he knew. To be seen hairless was the greatest blow that could have befallen Mr. Whiffles. Vanity was his little weakness. He turned towards the river and dived in. Anyhow, it was impossible to overtake the thief, the villain, the blighter who had annexed his clothes.

The thief, the villain, the blighter might have taken any of a dozen paths up from the bank through the woods, all of them equally unknown to Mr. Whiffles. All Mr. Whiffles could do was to keep his shining scalp out of the public view; and that he did. He plunged into the river and swam away. Seen from a distance he could not be recognised as Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, and his bald head might be supposed to be anybody's bald head.

With feelings too deep to be expressed in any known language, Mr. Whiffles swam.

His first thought—naturally the first thought of any bald gentleman whose wig had been feloniously abstracted—was to keep out of sight, till he could think what to do.

But when Mr. Whiffles tried to think out what to do, he was at a loss. There was nothing to do.

He could not remain in the river for ever. It was impossible for him to begin his career again, in middle life, as an amphibian. He could not, on the other hand, leave the river. Even if he could have walked abroad in a bathing-costume, he

could not walk abroad minus his hair. That was impossible.

As it was impossible to remain permanently in the river, and impossible to leave it, Mr. Whiffles was hemmed in between two impossibilities—a most unenviable situation for any gentleman.

Bunter might have felt rather concerned and worried about the hapless position in which he had left Mr. Whiffles had he been accustomed to wasting his valuable thoughts on others.

Fortunately, he wasn't.

Bunter trotted along the footpath, blinking over his shoulder several times. No fat gentleman with shining scalp was to be seen in pursuit. There was no sign of Mr. Quelch or Loder. It was all right for Bunter! As it was all right for Bunte, there was, of course, nothing to worry about. Dismissing Mr. Whiffles wholly from his mind, Billy Bunter rolled on, his spirits rising at every step, and rolled out at last on Courtfield Common in quite a cheery mood.

Billy Bunter at the Circus!

'GUV'NOR!'

Billy Bunter started.

He had come to a halt on the wide, grassy common. In the far distance he could see the banner that floated over the summit of the big circus tent, and strains of more or less harmonious music reached his ears on the summer breeze, Bunter was considering where to look for a place of concealment in which he could change back into his own clothes and resume his own identity. He had adopted Mr. Whiffles' outward aspect to escape pursuit, and now he had left pursuit far behind. To change into his proper person again, and get to the circus, was the next item on the Programme. The performance, probably, was half over by this time, but that made it all the easier to sneak into the big tent under the canvas flap. That was what Bunter was thinking of, when a man leading two horses came in sight round a clump of hawthorns and touched his hat and addressed him as guv'nor.

Bunter drew a hurried breath.

Obviously, this was a circus man. Obviously, too, he took Bunter for Mr. Whiffles, as indeed, he could hardly fail to do.

To keep up the game was imperative.

The circus man looked rather a rough fellow. But the nicest and best-mannered circus man would certainly have collared Bunter without ceremony had he known that the person before him was a schoolboy who had bagged his employer's clothes. It suddenly rushed into Bunter's mind that he might be accused of stealing those clothes! He had not thought of that before! He might be run in! Bunter felt a cold thrill down his spine at the thought.

The circus man had stopped, with the two horses. There were many horses attached to the circus, and these two, apparently, were being led farther off to pasture. Bunter would have been pleased to see an earthquake engulf the circus man and his horses. But no such cataclysm was likely to occur on Courtfield Common, and Bunter had to face it out.

'Oh!' he gasped. 'Yes! What?'

'Ad a good swim, guv'nor?'

'Oh! Ah! Yes. Fine!'

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

Bunter noticed that the man looked at him, and wondered for an awful instant whether he was spotted.

But there was no suspicion in the circus man's face. No doubt he had noted that his gov'nor's voice was a little different from usual. The rest of him was quite the same as usual.

'I've been wanting to speak to you, sir, if you'll allow me,' said the man in a very civil tone.

'Oh! Yes!'

'I never meant to give Mr. Dance no offence, sir!'

'Oh! Didn't you?' gasped Bunter, wondering who Mr. Dance might possibly be. No doubt someone connected with the circus.

'No, sir! Mr. Dance is rather a 'ard man, sir!'

'Ah! Yes! Quite!'

'If you'd ask 'im to look over it, sir, I'd take it kindly.'

'Oh!'

'Tain't that I can't get another job, sir,' said the man. 'But I don't like leaving you, gov'nor. That's what it is! There ain't a man in the circus willing to leave a gov'nor like you, sir!'

Bunter grinned.

Evidently Mr. Dance was someone in authority in the circus, and he had given this chap the sack. And this chap knew what was Mr. Whiffles' little weakness and was flattering him—as he supposed—to get the order of the sack rescinded.

That grin on the fat face encouraged the circus man. He did not know its cause.

'P'raps you'll kindly ask Mr. Dance to look over it, sir,' said the man. 'I'd take it very kindly, gov'nor.'

'Certainly!' said Bunter. 'I'll ask him—I mean, I'll tell him. That's all right!'

'Thank you kindly, sir! There ain't a gentleman like you in the business, sir, in the 'ole kingdom!' said the circus man. 'It's a pleasure to work for you, sir, if you don't mind my saying so, gov'nor!'

'Not at all,' said Bunter. He was quite confident now, and his manner was genial and patronising. Bunter liked civility and flattery, even if they were intended for someone else. 'I'll see to it! Rely on me! Let's see, what's your name, my man?'

The man blinked at him.

'You've forgot my name, gov'nor?' he ejaculated involuntarily. Bunter breathed hard. It was a slip, but Bunter carried it off with an air of fat importance, very like that of the genuine Mr. Whiffles.

'My good man, you can't expect me to remember the names of all the hands I employ,' he said loftily.

'Very good, sir! Name of Slaney, sir.'

'Oh! Yes! I recall it now,' said Bunter calmly. 'I'll speak to Ms. Dance, Slaney! That's all right.'

'Thank you kindly, sir.'

'Not at all, my good fellow, not at all!' said Bunter. And he rolled on, glad to escape.

He rolled towards the circus, realising that Slaney would be surprised if he proceeded in any other direction. He stopped at a clump of bushes that looked like a favourable spot for changing, out of sight. He blinked round, and

jumped as he saw the circus man in the distance, following him. For a second, Bunter's fat heart stood still. He saw himself suspected, discovered, denounced, run in for stealing clothes from a bather—and his blood turned cold.

The next moment he recovered as he saw that Slaney was not hurrying and not looking in the least suspicious. The man was simply walking back to the circus after placing the horses to graze, and naturally he had taken the same direction as Bunter.

The fat Owl of Greyfriars rolled on.

Slaney was not suspicious, but he would have become extremely suspicious, it was certain, had Mr. Whiffles disappeared into a clump of bushes and a schoolboy emerged instead of him.

There was nothing for it but to keep on, and Bunter kept on, slowly, with the result that the circus man drew nearer and nearer.

Bunter was on open ground now, past the last of the bushes, and there was no cover to dodge into, unless he changed his direction entirely, and walked away from the circus altogether.

Three or four hands belonging to the show were loafing about, while the performance was on in the big tent, and they all touched their hats very respectfully to the new Mr. Whiffles—evidently seeing no difference whatever between the new Mr. Whiffles and the old.

Bunter acknowledged the salutes in a lofty way, quite like Mr. Whiffles' own. When it came to swanking, Bunter did not need to play a part, he had only to be his natural self.

More and more encouraged at passing muster in this way, Bunter rolled on, no longer thinking of changing back into his own clothes. Why should he not enter the circus as he was? Half a dozen men who knew Mr. Whiffles had seen him, and obviously taken him for Montgomery St. Leger himself. He realised that it would be quite safe to walk into the tent as the circus boss. Indeed, much safer than attempting to creep in under the canvas flap, with so many eyes about to spot him.

Bunter grinned at the idea.

It was risky, perhaps, but one of Bunter's missions in life was to exemplify the truth of the ancient proverb, that fools rush in where angels fear to tread.

Besides, it was only a choice of risks that he had. If he was spotted changing out of Mr. Whiffles' clothes into his own, there was trouble to be looked for. If he was spotted sneaking in under the tent flap, he could expect trouble.

Matters having gone so far, it really was safer to keep on as Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles than as William George Bunter.

Bunter rolled on and reached the caravans camped at a little distance from the big tent. He easily picked out the gorgeously-painted van from which he had seen Mr. Whiffles alight at the gates of Greyfriars, the previous day. That undoubtedly was Mr. Whiffles' van—Bunter's van now. The caravan was painted in a rather striking scheme of blue and red and gold, doubtless to catch the public eye when Mr. Whiffles was 'processing'. Bunter glanced round and beckoned to Slaney,

'Here, my man!'

'Yes, guv'nor!'

Slaney hurried up. Being under the order of the sack from Mr. Dance, he was very anxious to propitiate Mr. Whiffles.

'Put that attaché-case in my van.'

'Suttingly, sir.'

Slaney took the attaché-case from Bunter and carried it into the blue and red van, as Bunter expected. Bunter was tired of the weight of that attaché-case. The circus performance could not last more than another hour or so, and Bunter considered it unlikely that the real Mr. Whiffles would, in that short space of time, obtain a suit of clothes from anywhere, to enable him to return. Bunter had plenty of time to see the rest of the show and leave before there was any likelihood of the circus proprietor showing up.

Bunter rolled round to the entrance of the tent.

It did not occur to him, for the moment, that the circus boss would be more likely to enter from the back, where the performers went in.

But, as a matter of fact, Mr. Whiffles sometimes went 'in front' in order to sit with the audience and see how they were 'taking' it. So there was nothing unusual in his present proceedings.

The man in the ticket-box saluted Bunter respectfully. Bunter gave him a patronising nod.

'Er—how's business going?' he asked. He was feeling quite equal to playing his part now and making a venture.

'Nearly full, sir,' said the man. 'Lot of schoolboys 'ere from the big school near Friardale, sir.'

There was a burst of hand-clapping from within the tent.

'Thompson's getting the 'ands, sir,' said the ticket man.

But Bunter did not know what 'getting the hands' meant; neither was he aware that Signor Tomasso Tomsonio was, in private life, Tommy Thompson.

'Oh! Ah! Yes!' Bunter assented.

He rolled in.

An attendant touched his hat to him. Bunter remembered that Mr. Whiffles had mentioned a Royal box in speaking to Dr. Locke.

'Here, my man,' he said.

'Yes, sir.'

'Anybody in the Royal box?'

'No, sir; vacant to-day.'

'Take me there,' commanded Bunter.

The attendant blinked at him. Perhaps he expected Mr. Whiffles to know his way to his own Royal box.

Bunter realised that he had made another slip. A fellow couldn't think of everything at once. At all events, Bunter couldn't. Again he resorted to the high hand and again he got away with it.

'Don't stand gaping there!' he snapped. 'Do as you're told!'

'Oh! Yes, sir!' gasped the attendant.

He led the way to the Royal box. That box, when Bunter reached it, did not appear wholly worthy of its grandiloquent title. Still, it was the best box in the tent, though its walls were only of canvas. There was a comfortable chair, and that was what Bunter wanted after his many exertions that warm afternoon. He sank into the chair with a gasp of relief.

'I suppose you can get refreshments in here?' he said.

'Eh?'

The attendant quite jumped. Undoubtedly he expected Mr. Whiffles to know whether he could get refreshments in his own circus.

Bunter breathed hard. He had seemed to put his foot in it.

'I—I mean—' he stammered. 'I—I mean— Look here, I want a lemon squash! Trot it along! If you want the sack, say so!'

'Oh, sir! Yes, sir!' gasped the man. 'Less'n a minute, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Hurry up, then,' growled Bunter. 'I'm jolly thirsty after— after—after that swim.'

'Yes, sir.'

The attendant hurried away. From behind a canvas wall Bunter heard an agitated whisper; the attendant had doubtless forgotten that canvas walls were thin.

'The old covey's come back in a blinking bad temper, Bill.'

'Umour him, George,' said another voice. 'He ain't a bad sort when he's 'umoured.'

Bunter grinned.

In less than the promised minute George was back with the lemon squash.

'Anything else, sir?'

'No, George.' Bunter knew the man's name now. 'You can hook it.'

'Oh! Yes, sir.'

George hooked it. And Bunter settled down luxuriously in the comfortable chair in the Royal box, sipped his lemon squash and watched the show. He was at the circus after all! And he was seeing the circus in very distinguished and comfortable circumstances. Mr. Quelch might rage at Greyfriars—Mr. Whiffles might rave in the River Sark. Bunter dismissed both of them from his fat mind. The present was enough for him, and the future could take care of itself. Billy Bunter sipped lemon squash, watched the show, and felt very satisfied with himself and things generally.

A Pig in Clover!

HALF-AN-HOUR later, Billy Bunter decided that he was enjoying life.

It was like William George Bunter to pass, at a bound, from uneasy doubt to overwhelming confidence. If he was not in a funk, he was sure to be indulging in swank.

So it was with Bunter now. The circus performance was over, and Bunter was ready to conquer new fields. Finding that the circus men—much to his surprise—obeyed his orders without question, Bunter naturally spread himself and gave orders right and left. It was his nature to, as it were.

Treated on all sides with great respect as Mr. Whiffles, the Owl of the Remove almost began to believe that he really was Mr. Whiffles.

For all practical purposes, at present, he was Mr. Whiffles, anyhow, and that was enough for Bunter.

He was in no hurry to part with his new greatness. So long as the absence of the genuine Whiffles left him in command at the circus, Bunter intended to exercise his powers to the full.

He had always believed that he was a fellow designed by nature to hold authority; that he had, like Hamlet's father, an eye like Mars, to threaten and command. Now that he was in a position of authority, Bunter felt that things were exactly as they ought to be, but as they had never hitherto been. It was

like the king coming into his own!

From the big tent, Bunter rolled away to the blue and red caravan. He mounted the steps of that caravan with the air of a proprietor. For the present, at least, he was the proprietor.

He was quite interested in the interior of Mr. Whiffles' van.

It was a large van, and luxuriously fitted up. Mr. Whiffles, who did well in the show business, did himself very well, too, in his quarters. There was a comfortable-looking bed in the van, and a little table and chair, and a desk, and several other things. Bunter sat down in the chair, and stretched his fat limbs in comfort there.

He was feeling quite at his ease. Mr. Whiffles' ample curly wig made his head feel rather warm, in the hot weather. But that was a trifle. Bunter would have stood more than that, for the sake of what it was worth to him. He felt sure that Mr. Whiffles would not, and could not, return till dark. He had plenty of time on his hands. It was not Bunter's way to look ahead. He was booked for a terrific reckoning at Greyfriars. But that was not at hand yet. It was unpleasant to think of, so Bunter did not think of it. The fat Owl had a wonderful way of disregarding unpleasant things, just as if they were not there.

There was a brass hand-bell on the table in the caravan. Bunter could easily guess that this was used by Mr. Whiffles to summon an attendant when he wanted one.

Bunter smote on the bell.

A sonorous jangle rang and echoed for quite a considerable distance round the caravan.

The man George, who served the refreshments in the Royal Box, put his head in at the door the next moment.

'Sir!' said George. 'You rang, sir?'

'I did,' answered Bunter. 'Tea!'

'Very good, sir,' said George.

Bunter guessed that Mr. Whiffles was not accustomed to having Jam-tarts for tea. As far as possible, it was Bunter's cue to act in accordance with Mr. Whiffles' customs. But there had to be exceptions. This was one of the exceptions. Bunter knew what he wanted eat. Mr. Whiffles had sandwiches and beer for his tea. Bunter did not know that; but certainly he did not want sandwiches and beer.

'Not less than a dozen, George,' said Bunter.

'Oh! Yes, sir!'

'And a dozen cream puffs.'

'Oh! Ah! Yes.'

'A four-pound Madeira cake, and a four-pound sultana cake. A dozen meringues, and mind the cream is fresh. Six pounds of strawberries. Lots of cream, and a jar of ginger, Pots of jam— strawberry, raspberry, plum and apricot. Fresh rolls! Best fresh butter. Box of preserved fruits. I think that will do—for the present.'

'That—that—that will do, sir, will it?' babbled George.

'Yes. If you haven't got the stuff here, send into Courtfield for it. Tell the man that if he's more than ten minutes, I'll sack him.'

'Oh! Ah! Yes, sir!'

'And bring me something to go on with,' said Bunter. 'I know you've got ices

and cake here. Bring me a dozen ices, and a cake. I'm hungry. And send for those things at Courtfield. Sharp.'

'They—they will have to be paid for at Courtfield, sir,' gasped George.

'Oh! Ah! Yes! Pay for them and tell me what they come to, later,' said Bunter carelessly.

'Shall I ask Mr. Dance for the money, sir?'

'Certainly,' said Bunter, wondering again who Mr. Dance was. He did not care much who he was, or what he was, so long as he provided the ready cash for that extensive feed. That was the important point.

George retired from the van in a dazed state. A minute later, a rather slim, dark man, whose face expressed surprise and irritation, stepped up to the door of the van. Bunter had seen him in the ring, with a whip under his arm, acting as circus master, and he guessed that he was Mr. Whiffles' manager.

'Mr. Whiffles!' exclaimed the manager.

'Well, what do you want?'

'George Mix has asked me for money to send into Courtfield for some extraordinary things,' said the manager. 'I suppose he has been drinking. Jam-tarts, and cream puffs, and—and—'

'Oh! Are you—' Bunter stopped just in time. He had been about to ask the dark-complexioned man if he was Dance. He recollected in time that Mr. Whiffles was supposed to know these things. 'Look here, it's all right! I've told George—George Mix, what I want. Send for the things at once! Never mind the cost! Pay for them! That's enough.'

'But, sir—' gasped Mr. Dance, wondering whether his employer had taken leave of his senses.

Bunter thumped the table with a fat fist.

'Who's boss here?' he demanded.

'Eh? You are, sir!'

'Well, then, do as you're told! I pay my men to do as they're told,' snorted Bunter. 'I don't like backchat. Make a note of that.'

'Oh, yes. Very well. Certainly! But—'

'Cheese it!'

'Wha-a-at?'

'Cheese it! Ring off! Send for those things at once. Mind, if I'm kept waiting you'll hear of it.'

'Oh, yes. Right!'

In a dazed state Mr. Dance tottered away from the caravan. Bunter grinned with triumph. There was no doubt that he was in authority here. And he was going to make his authority felt. There was no doubt of that, either.

Bunter stood and gazed cheerily out of the open door of the caravan. He noticed that a number of circus men were looking towards the van. Their faces wore surprised and curious expressions. They were accustomed to somewhat unusual manners and customs on the part of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. But he had never surprised them so much as this before. Mr. Dance was hovering about, looking astonished, perplexed, and more irritable than ever. As he sighted the fat Owl at the door of the van he came up.

'Mr. Whiffles—'

'That man back from Courtfield yet?' snapped Bunter.

'N-no. But—'

'The slacker! I'm hungry! There's too much slacking here,' said Bunter darkly.

'I'm going to make a change. Look out!'

There was a grin among the circus hands, looking on from a little distance. Mr. Dance was not popular, having a sharp tongue, which he used freely. Mr. Whiffles was liked—and liked more than ever now. The second edition of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles was liked more than the first edition now that he had set down the manager before the grinning hands.

There was a rattle of hoofs and wheels; the trap had returned from Courtfield, Bunter sat down in Mr. Whiffles' chair with great dignity. George brought in the supplies. There was not room on Mr. Whiffles' table for all of them. But the supply rapidly diminished as Billy Bunter attacked the good things. Jam-tarts went down like oysters. Cream puffs vanished as if by magic. Meringues disappeared faster than the eye could follow them. Bunter used a table-spoon for the jam. Goods of this kind he liked to take on board in bulk. Preserved fruits went down after the Jam, and strawberries and cream followed in pursuit, and preserved ginger followed close in the wake of the strawberries. But there were still many things left when Bunter felt he could do no more. He was toying with a cake when he rang the bell for George. But he could only toy with it. For once Bunter had had enough, and actually left something uneaten on the table. It was a day of wonders.

The eyes of George Mix almost bulged from his head as he witnessed the havoc Bunter had wrought in the supplies. Where Mr. Whiffles had put it all perplexed George. Mr. Whiffles always had a good appetite, to which, no doubt, he largely owed his circumference. But Mr. Whiffles had never performed a Gargantuan feat like this before. George Mix almost expected to see the gov'nor burst all over the caravan. Bunter had unfastened a couple of the buttons of Mr. Whiffles' waistcoat. His breathing was rather hard and laboured. Otherwise, he showed no sign of damage. There were some things that Billy Bunter could do really well. Disposing of a spread was one of them. In that line Bunter was always an easy first, and the rest nowhere.

'You can clear the table, George,' said Bunter.

George cleared the table and departed like a man in a dream. Bunter leaned back in his chair and breathed hard. He had done himself well—remarkably well. Indeed, he almost felt as if he had overdone it.

Certainly, he was disinclined for exertion. He gazed out of the doorway of the van at the summer sun sinking behind Friardale woods in the distance. It was lock-up at Greyfriars now, Bunter, added to his many other sins, was missing calling-over. But the thought of getting back to Greyfriars was too unpleasant. Trouble awaited him there. Trouble could not be put off too late. His exploits that afternoon had earned him, at the very least, a Head's flogging. A Head's flogging did not attract Bunter back to the school.

Bunter sighed, partly with repletion, partly at the thought of how ripping it would be if he could keep this game up. Life at Greyfriars was nothing to this! If only that beast Whiffles kept away for good!

Bunter blinked at the setting sun. It would not be dark for a couple of hours yet, and he had quite made up his mind that Mr. Whiffles could not return before dark. In fact, if he could have done so, he would have been at the circus before this—and he had not come. There was plenty of time yet. Bunter was tired; the stowing away of the cargo he had disposed of would have tired any man. He rose from the chair, rolled over to Mr. Whiffles' bed, and stretched himself luxuriously there.

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

His idea was to take a little nap for an hour or so. After that he would consider his future plans.

His eyes closed in slumber.

People who came near the caravan while Bunter was taking his nap started and listened. Some of them fancied for a moment that the deep rumbling sound was a warning of a thunderstorm. But it was not. It was only Bunter's snore.

The sun descended lower and lower, and disappeared behind the horizon. Darkness spread over Courtfield Common. Lights twinkled from the tents and the caravans. Lights flared in the big tent, strains of music were heard, men moved busily to and fro, preparing for the evening performance. Those sounds did not reach Bunter's ears.

Bunter was deep in the arms of Morpheus, sleeping as soundly as he had ever slept in the Remove dormitory.

Bunter had intended to wake before dark. He expected Mr. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles to return at dark. Now it was dark, and Bunter, fast asleep, still snored in Mr. Whiffles' van.

If Mr. Whiffles was now on his way back to the circus— It was to be hoped, for Billy Bunter's sake, that he wasn't!

Where is Bunter?

'BUNTER!'

Silence!

Mr. Quelch, who was calling the roll, spoke in a voice that was not loud, but deep.

Anyone might have guessed from his tone, when he came to Bunter's name, that Mr. Quelch's feelings towards that member of his Form were inimical.

There was quite a vibration in Mr. Quelch's voice as he called the name. It told all the Remove that Billy Bunter was for it.

But from the ranks of the Remove came no answer.

Bunter should have been there with the rest of the Form, and he should have answered 'Adsum' as soon as his name was called.

He did not answer. All the Remove were present, with one exception. That exception was William George Bunter.

Bunter!

Mr. Quelch repeated the name in a still deeper and more vibrating voice.

The Remove fellows looked at one another. Fellows in other Forms glanced across at the Remove. Everybody knew that the Owl of the Remove had been kicking over the traces that after-noon. Now, apparently, he had added to his offences by cutting callover.

'The fat idiot!' murmured Bob Cherry. 'Fairly asking for it!'

'Begging for it!' said Harry Wharton.

'Silence!' called out Wingate of the Sixth. Fellows were not supposed to talk during roll-call.

'BUNTER!'

For the third time Mr. Quelch uttered the name, which was unusual. But the Remove master seemed to find it difficult to believe that Bunter was not there.

But no fat voice squeaked 'Adsum.' Difficult as it was to believe, Mr. Quelch had to be convinced that Bunter was not present.

His jaw shut like a vice, as he marked Bunter absent. Mr. Quelch's face was generally impassive. Dignity forbade him to reveal emotion of any sort. But just for one second Henry Samuel Quelch's face betrayed him. His look, for that one second, told what Bunter had to expect when he did turn up at Greyfriars again.

Then, with his usual calmness, the Remove master went on with the roll; and fellows answered to their names, and never had they listened so attentively, and answered so promptly. Nobody—not even great men of the Fifth and Sixth—wanted to attract Mr. Quelch's particular attention just then.

The roll finished, the school was dismissed. As they marched out of Big Hall, Wingate of the Sixth called to Harry Wharton, the captain of the Remove.

'Wharton! Go to Mr. Quelch's study!'

'Yes, Wingate.'

And the Remove went out.

Most of the Remove fellows went along to the Rag, where they discussed Billy Bunter and his remarkable proceedings that day. Generally, Bunter was not regarded as an important person. Indeed, his unimportance was unlimited.

Bunter was nobody; if possible, less than nobody. But any fellow who had got on Quelch's temper so seriously as this was sure of a share of the limelight. It was, in a way, a distinction to bag a flogging. And there was no doubt that William George Bunter was booked for a flogging. Indeed, Skinner averred that Quelch looked as if he were going to bite him.

Harry Wharton proceeded to his Form-master's study, not in the happiest of moods. He guessed that, as Head boy of the Remove, he was to be questioned about Bunter. It was not upon his head that the vials of wrath were to be poured. Still, he would have preferred not to interview his Form-master in his present mood. Form-masters who looked as Mr. Quelch had looked, when he had called Bunter's name the third time, were better kept at a safe distance.

But as there was no choice about the matter, the captain of the Remove presented himself in Mr. Quelch's study as cheerfully as he could.

'You sent for me, sir?'

Mr. Quelch had returned to his study immediately after call-over. He stood by his table, on which lay a stout cane. Wharton could easily guess for whom, and what, that cane was intended. Had Billy Bunter turned up at roll-call, after breaking detention that afternoon, Bunter would have been feeling already the weight of that cane. His yells would have been awakening every echo in the masters' passage. But he had not returned, and so his dulcet tones were not to be heard awakening the echoes. The cane was there for Bunter; but Bunter was not there for the cane!

'Yes, Wharton! Bunter, it appears, has not yet returned to the school,' said Mr. Quelch.

'I—I suppose not, sir, as he wasn't at call-over.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'No, sir.'

'I understand,' said Mr. Quelch, 'that there is a circus on Courtfield Common, Wharton, to which many Greyfriars boys went this afternoon.'

'Yes, sir. Whiffles' Circus.'

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

'Did you go there, Wharton?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you see Bunter there?'

'No, sir.'

'You are aware, Wharton, that Bunter was under detention this afternoon!' said Mr. Quelch. 'With unexampled audacity he left the Form-room, leaving his detention task untouched, and ran out of the school. I have no doubt that his intention was to visit the circus.'

Wharton looked as shocked as he could.

Obviously, Mr. Quelch regarded Bunter's action as serious—unexampled—not to say awful and iniquitous.

Wharton—privately—was prepared to make allowances for Bunter. Any fellow in the Remove would have understood readily that the circus at Courtfield had a more powerful attraction than the Form-room at Greyfriars.

'I have no doubt,' rapped Mr. Quelch, 'that Bunter went to the circus. I am aware that it was his intention to go to this—this somewhat childish entertainment, when I detained him this afternoon. I am convinced that he was there. You are sure you did not see him there?'

'Quite sure, sir. I think I should have seen him if he had been there,' said Harry. 'In fact, I looked round for him, as I thought he was coming. But I did not see him, sir.'

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips.

'Probably he remained out of gates for fear of the consequences,' he said. 'He will, of course, be dealt with all the more severely. You have no knowledge of his present whereabouts, Wharton?'

'No, sir.'

'Very well, you may go. You will tell Bunter to come to my study immediately he returns.'

'Certainly, sir!'

And Harry Wharton departed, greatly relieved to escape. He left the Remove master's study feeling a good deal as Daniel might have felt when he quitted the lion's den. In his present frame of mind Quelch really was not safe at close quarters.

'Bunter come in yet?' he asked, as he entered the Rag.

'No. Is Quelch wild?' asked Bob Cherry.

'Just on foaming at the mouth. That fat chump will get the licking of his life when he comes in.'

'Perhapsfully that is the absurd reason of the stayfulness out,' suggested Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Very likely. But the fat Owl is only making matters worse. I suppose he will come in for prep.'

'And then look out for fireworks!' grinned Skinner.

But William George Bunter did not come in for prep. There were no fireworks when the Removites went to their studies for preparation. And after prep Bunter still had not come in. And the Remove fellows, in a state of breathless excitement now, wondered whether William George Bunter was going to make a night of it.

The Sleeping Beauty

SNORE!

That deep, resonant sound proceeded from the blue-and-red painted caravan on Courtfield Common.

Had any Remove man been near that caravan as the deep snore rumbled from it, that Remove man would have hazarded a guess that William George Bunter, of the Remove, was inside that van.

And the Remove man would have guessed correctly.

Snore!

Although there were no Greyfriars ears to hear, there were many other ears. Five or six persons belonging to the circus had gathered about the steps of the caravan, listening in surprise and wonder.

Snorrrr!

'He's going it!' remarked George Mix, the attendant who handled the refreshments, more commonly known in the circus as 'Chocklitz.'

'He are!' agreed Slaney.

'Never heard the boss kicking up a row like that before,' said Samson.

'It was that tea he ate,' said George Mix. 'Never knowed the governor to stow it away like that afore. He came back 'ungry after his swim.'

Snorrrrr!

Mr. Dance came out of the staff entrance of the big tent. Outside it, he looked irritable and cross.

Mr. Dance had enough to do, in the way of general utility work, supervising the staff, acting as ringmaster in the afternoons, and so forth, without having the evening performance thrown on his hands. Mr. Dance's opinion was that it was too thick.

He came over to the van scowling.

'Is the boss awake yet?' he rapped out.

'No, sir. Listen to him!' said George Mix.

Snorrrr!

Mr. Dance snorted.

'Well, it's the big equestrian turn next, and the boss is sure to want to take that on. He'd better be woken up.'

Mr. Dance, intensely irritated, opened the door of the van. The interior was quite dark. Night had fallen on Courtfield Common, only the lights of the circus illuminating the scene. They did not penetrate into the interior of the blue and red caravan. There the darkness was intense; and from the darkness came the rumbling, reverberating snore from the recumbent figure on Mr. Whiffles' bed.

'Mr. Whiffles!' shouted Dance.

Snore!

The manager entered the van. He dimly discerned the recumbent figure on the bed, bent over it, and grasped its shoulder and shook it.

Snore!

Shake! Shake! Shake!

Mr. Dance was warming to it now. He was going to wake up Mr. Whiffles, whatever happened. Shaking him by the shoulder seemed futile. Mr. Dance decided on tugging at his hair. As it was dark in the van it would be easy to explain, when Mr. Whiffles awoke, that he had grasped the hair by mistake. With a determined grip Dance fixed his fingers in the long, curly hair of the

circus proprietor.

Tug!

There should have been a howl from the sleeper, and sudden awakening.

But there wasn't!

Snore!

But Mr. Dance stood petrified. That vicious tug at the long, curly hair had not hurt Mr. Whiffles—for a good reason. The long, curly hair had parted from the sleeper's head, and it hung now in the horrified manager's hand, completely detached from the sleeper!

It was a wig!

Mr. Dance stood rooted to the floor of the van in utter horror and dismay. More than once he had suspected that Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles' ample nut-brown locks had not grown naturally where he sported them. More than once he had suspected that Mr. Whiffles owed those ample locks, not to Nature, but to Art.

Now he knew!

He knew, too, that Mr. Whiffles, whose weakest point was personal vanity, never would or could forgive anyone who discovered his secret. If he awakened now and found Dance standing there with the detached wig in his hand, it was the sack for Mr. Dance—even if it did not mean Mr. Whiffles' boot added to the sack. Dance knew it, and he almost trembled. For a moment he stood, overcome with horror at what he had done. But he saw, with intense relief, that there was no sign of awakening on the part of the sleeper. Ignorant of the wholly detached state of the nut-brown locks that had before been semi-detached, he slept on. Not for worlds now would Mr. Dance have awakened him.

Softly, silently, he dropped the wig beside the sleeper's dimly-seen head—softly, silently, he tiptoed out of the caravan. A deep, resonant, reverberating snore followed him.

Mr. Dance's face was quite pale when he stepped down from the van, having closed the door after him.

'Ain't awake?' asked Samson.

'No; I think I'll let him have his sleep out!' faltered Mr. Dance.

He walked back to the big tent.

It was not till he reached it that he grinned. Mr. Whiffles would never know that he knew; but his knowledge would be a source of entertainment to himself in private. Moreover, he had a pull over Whiffles now. If it came to a row, and the sack, he would be able to cover Whiffles with ridicule—and several times of late Dance had thought that it might come to a row and the sack. He grinned as he went into the big tent.

From the blue and red caravan the resonant sound of snoring still proceeded. It made a sort of deep bass accompaniment to the circus music, a nasal obligato, as it were. And it was quite late in the evening when the sleeper at last awakened.

The Sleeper Awakes!

BILLY BUNTER sat up.

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

He sat, like the heathen, in darkness.

And he sat in great astonishment.

What had happened, and where was he? He blinked into the darkness of Mr. Whiffles' van and rubbed his eyes.

'Oh crikey!' ejaculated Bunter.

He began to remember.

'My hat! It must be call-over—past call-over! The fellows will be at prep—or gone to bed! Oh dear! Jimminy!'

He shivered.

Suppose that beast Whiffles came while he was still in the van—why, he was bound to come!

He could not remain permanently lingering along the wooded banks of the Sark, clad in a bathing-costume and a bathing-towel.

He was sure to come! The surprising thing was that he hadn't come already!

'Oh dear!' groaned Bunter.

He rose from the side of the bed.

It was Bunter's obvious move now to get clear. His own clothes were in the attaché-case that lay in the van. Inside the van he could change easily enough. The question was whether he could slip away unobserved when he had become a schoolboy again.

He peered from the window of the van.

There was a neat little curtain to the window, and Bunter was able to peer out unobserved.

'Oh, lor!'

Darkness surrounded the circus encampment; but close at hand it was light—very light. Half a dozen lamps were burning in various places, and a glow came from the direction of the big tent. He could see figures moving as clearly as by daylight. Worst of all, four or five of the circus people were loafing about, staring towards the van. They seemed specially interested in that van. Bunter heard a voice:

'He's woken up!'

Bunter was not aware that it was the cessation of his reverberating snore that apprised the onlookers of that fact. Bunter firmly believed that he did not snore, disregarding contemptuously all that the Greyfriars Remove had told him on that subject.

He popped back from the window.

Sneaking out of the van as a schoolboy was obviously impracticable. He would be spotted instantly, and certainly collared at once; the circus people were not likely to let him go without investigation, if they discovered that a schoolboy had been shut up for hours in Mr. Whiffles' caravan. They might even suspect him of being a sneak-thief. There was money—a lot of money—in Mr. Whiffles' pockets, in the clothes Bunter was now wearing. Indeed, he remembered that he had tipped George a half-crown from Mr. Whiffles' pocket. He might be suspected of stealing—he might be run in! He sat on the bed again and palpitated.

If he was going to get out of that beastly caravan before that beast Whiffles came back, obviously he had to do so as Mr. Whiffles, in the garb and the hair and the beard and the waxed moustache. He recovered his courage as he thought of that. It was easy enough. He had passed muster so far, and could pass muster again. He could take the attaché-case in his hand, with his own

clothes in it, and walk away, and in some shady spot change back, and scuttle to Greyfriars as Billy Bunter once more.

Then the thought of Greyfriars, and what awaited him there, made the fat Owl palpitate once more.

A Head's flogging, at least! That was the very least he could expect!

He had broken detention; he had bumped over his Form-master in his flight; he had led Mr. Quelch a dance along the river—last, but not least, he had cut call-over, and stayed out late at night! That the Form-master would make an example of him did not admit of doubt.

Billy Bunter groaned.

After the feast came the reckoning. The feast had been all right. The reckoning was superfluous—and now it was due!

'Oh lor'!' groaned Bunter.

If only that beast Whiffles could have vanished into thin air, leaving Bunter to carry on at the circus! If only Mr. Whiffles, like the Hunters of the Snark, had met a Boojum, and 'suddenly, silently vanished away'. It was an ecstatic thought, but it was hopeless. Obviously, Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles was not going to vanish into thin air to oblige Bunter. He might be back at any moment—might even at this instant be sneaking back to the circus, wrapped in a bathing towel, and carefully avoiding the public gaze. Bunter realised that he had no time to waste.

It was safe to go as Whiffles, anyhow—that would see him clear of the circus. What had to happen at Greyfriars had to happen, and could not be helped.

Bunter ran his fat hands over his face and cranium to make sure that his disguise was in place, and jumped as he felt his own close crop on his scalp.

The wig was off!

'Oh crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He shuddered at his narrow escape.

Had he walked out of the van in Mr. Whiffles' beard and moustache, but without his hair, certainly he would have caused a sensation.

He realised that.

He groped over the bed, and picked up the wig, which he concluded must have fallen off while he was asleep.

He damped the adhesive patches inside the wig, and adjusted it to his bullet head.

Knock!

It was a loud knock at the door of the caravan, and Bunter started. His blood almost ran cold. If it was Whiffles— 'Are you awake, sir?'

It was Mr. Dance's voice.

'Oh! No! I—I mean, yes!' gasped Bunter. 'What do you want?' He gave another blink in the glass, and beheld there the countenance of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. All was well! He summoned his nerve to play his part again.

You can come in!

Mr. Dance opened the door of the van, and glanced very Curiously at the occupant. The wig was in place now, as he expected. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles was himself again. Mr. Dance's eyes lingered on those ample, curly, nut-brown locks for a second.

'I thought it best not to wake you, sir,' he said. 'You seemed to be having a good sleep.'

'Oh! Yes, quite!'

'But the performance is nearly over, sir.'

The—the performance?'

'Yes, sir. The last turn is on now. I suppose you will be going on in the ring?'

Mr. Dance spoke with suppressed resentfulness. All his evening, which had been scheduled for the billiard-room at the Courtfield Arms, had passed away—in the ring. Now that the old blighter—as Mr. Dance mentally called his employer—was awake, the least the old blighter could do was to take the last turn, and let Dance off. There was time for some refreshment, anyhow, before the Courtfield Arms closed.

Bunter blinked at him through his big glasses blankly.

'IN—in—in the ring!' he stuttered.

Playing the circus boss in Mr. Whiffles' caravan was one thing. Playing it in the circus ring was quite another.

Certainly, Bunter was not prepared to undertake the duties of ring-master. Moreover, he had no time. He had to get clear before the genuine Whiffles turned up like a bad penny.

'Nunno!' he stammered. 'Oh, no! Certainly not!'

'But, sir—'

'Don't argue!' snapped Bunter.

So long as he was Mr. Whiffles he could give orders. Bunter liked giving orders.

'Mr. Whiffles—'

'That's enough. I shall not be in the ring to-night. Don't argue! Just get out!'

Suppressing his feelings with difficulty, Mr. Dance got out.

He waited until he was in the staff entrance of the big tent before he shook his fist in the direction of Mr. Whiffles' caravan.

Many times Mr. Dance had felt fed-up with his employer. Often he had longed to tell Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles what he thought of him, and shake the dust of the circus from his feet.

But there were difficulties in the way. Mr. Dance had a good post in the World-Famous Circus, and good posts were not easy to get. But that was not all. There were certain little irregularities in Mr. Dance's accounts which would have had to come to light had he left the circus. They would have been called by the nasty name of speculation. Certain sums which should have passed through Mr. Dance's hands had stayed there, to be placed upon certain absolutely certain winners at certain races, which had turned out to be certain losers. Until Mr. Dance had some luck in the racing line and could replace those little sums he could not afford to quarrel with Mr. Whiffles.

So he shook his fist in the direction of the blue-and-red caravan, and went back into the big tent to take the last turn.

Bunter was glad to see him go.

Evidently the right Mr. Whiffles had not turned up yet. The coast was clear for the wrong Mr. Whiffles.

Bunter blinked round cautiously through his big spectacles, and met many glances from various directions. But there was nothing like suspicion in any of the glances. He picked up the attaché-case that held his own clothes. From the direction of the big tent came the sound of voices.

Billy Bunter jumped.

'It's very late to see Mr. Whiffles, sir.'

'I must see Mr. Whiffles! It is important!' came a deep, sharp voice—a voice that Bunter knew.

He backed away from the door of the van.

The attaché-case dropped with a bump from his hand. Bunter would have fled, but terror rooted him to the caravan. A tall, angular figure was coming towards the van, following a circus man. And Bunter gazed at Mr. Quelch, the master of the Grey-friars Remove, as he might have gazed at a Gorgon!

A Startling Encounter!

'SCANDALOUS!'

Mr. Quelch repeated that word several times as he walked along the road towards Courtfield Common.

There was no doubt that it was scandalous. Bunter's conduct was really unprecedented. Mr. Quelch was beginning to think that such scandalous conduct merited not merely a flogging—a very severe flogging. He was beginning to think that only expulsion from the school would meet this serious case.

He left the road and walked rapidly along a grassy path. It was rather a lonely place, and cases of assault had been known on the lonely common after dark. Mr. Quelch had no fear of thugs but he glanced about him sharply at the spot where the footpath skirted the deep shadows of a corner of Friardale Wood. From the distance he could hear a blare of music—it came from the circus. But the intervening trees and bushes hid the circus from view for the present. He reached the last of the bushes and before him lay the open common, with the lights of the circus gleaming in the distance towards the town. In the gloom of the hawthorns a dim, white figure moved, and there was a rustling sound, and Mr. Quelch started violently.

A superstitious person might have supposed that a ghost was lurking in the deep shadows. Certainly, the dimly-seen figure was very ghostly to the view. It was short of stature—hardly more than a boy's stature—but rather bulky; and it was all white.

Mr. Quelch stopped and stared at it.

'Who is that?' he rapped out.

He heard a gasping sound.

The dim, white figure rustled hastily away in the bushes. Then there was a sudden howl—such a howl as anyone might have uttered who had found a thorn with a bare foot. But it was unimaginable that anyone could have been walking abroad at night with bare feet on Courtfield Common.

'Whooooh!' came the startled howl.

Mr. Quelch frowned and stared.

The figure in white was evidently trying to avoid observation—doubtless taken by surprise by the arrival of a pedestrian on the lonely path. It had run into cover—and found thorns! It came barging back out of cover—apparently fed up on thorns—and almost barged into the Remove master of Greyfriars. Mr. Quelch, being dressed in a dark coat, was not nearly so visible as the figure in white.

'Who—what—what—' ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

He did not retreat, as a nervous man might have done. If this was some fool playing ghost to startle unsuspecting pedestrians on a lonely, dark path, Mr. Quelch was the man to deal with him. He had a stick under his arm and he grasped it and strode straight at the ghostly figure.

'Who are you?' he thundered.

'Oh, dear!'

The ghostly figure backed off.

Mr. Quelch followed it up angrily. He remembered that he had put his electric torch in his pocket before starting, and he jerked it out with his left hand and flashed on the light.

Then he jumped almost clear of the ground in his amazement.

The light gleamed on a bald head, a podgy face that was clean-shaven, and a short, stout figure in a bathing-suit, wrapped round with a large, flowing bathing-towel.

Mr. Quelch gazed at it almost in stupefaction.

'Oh!' gasped the figure.

It bounded back.

'Bless my soul! It is some lunatic!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch aghast. 'Upon my word! Stand back! Keep off! I shall strike you with this stick if you approach me! Go!'



Mr. Quelch gazed in stupefaction

Holding the electric torch in his left hand, Mr. Quelch brandished the stick with his right. Though not a nervous man in any way, he could not help being alarmed at this strange unnerving apparition. A man who walked about a common at night, dressed in a bathing-towel, could scarcely be anything but a lunatic—perhaps a dangerous maniac!

But if the man was a dangerous maniac, he was daunted by the Remove master's firm front. He showed no desire to come out. All his desire, evidently, was for retreat.

He blinked in the light and backed away, and suddenly took to his heels and ran.

'Bless my soul!' murmured Mr. Quelch.

He hurried on.

It was quite a relief to Mr. Quelch when he reached the circus at last. The band was still playing; the last turn was approaching its end, but the evening performance was not quite over yet. Some of the circus hands were loafing about the big tent waiting for the finish, and they stared curiously at the well-dressed gentleman who arrived suddenly from the surrounding darkness.

'Just over, sir,' said one of them. 'You're too late, sir!'

'What? What?'

'Course, you can go in if you like, sir, but it ain't 'ardly worth while. Pay at the box, sir!'

'Upon my word! I have not come to see the circus!' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, scandalised at the idea. 'Nothing of the kind! I am looking for a boy who is missing from school—I desire to see Mr. Whiffles, the proprietor.'

And a minute later Billy Bunter was blinking from Mr. Whiffles' van in dire terror at his Form-master.

Face to Face!

BILLY BUNTER quaked.

He forgot for the moment that he was Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles; he remembered only that he was W. G. Bunter, of the Greyfriars Remove, and that it was for W. G. Bunter that Mr. Quelch must have come.

He blinked through his glasses at the Remove master like a fat rabbit fascinated by a serpent.

The attaché-case dropped unheeded at his feet. Bunter had some wild idea of slamming the door and locking it. But it was too late. Mr. Quelch was standing at the steps of the van, looking in, and the lamp in the van, burning brightly, revealed William George Bunter in all his glory.

'Mr. Whiffles!' said the Remove master.

He had seen Mr. Whiffles before; he knew the striped checks, the fancy waistcoat, the tubby figure, the big, gold watch-chain, the well-brimmed silk hat, the pointed beard, the waxed moustache, the curly nut-brown locks. He had no doubt that it was Mr. Whiffles standing in the van, blinking down at him with fascinated eyes.

'Mr. Whiffles!' he repeated.

Billy Bunter recovered a little; the name reminded him who he was at the present moment, and also assured him that his disguise was not penetrated by his Form-master's gimlet eyes.

'Oh! Yes!' he gasped. 'Certainly. G-g-g-g-good evening, sir!'

'I am sorry to trouble you at this late hour of the evening, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Oh, don't mention it!' gasped Bunter.

'If you will kindly allow me to explain—'

'Get on with it—I—I mean, yes, sir!'

'A boy belonging to the school where I am a master is missing. A boy named Bunter—but, of course, you would be unacquainted with him.'

'Oh! Yes! Of course! N-n-n-never heard the name in my life!'

'If you have seen him, however, you would probably remember him—an extremely fat boy in glasses—'

'Oh! Ah! No! Never seen him in my life, sir. He—he's not here! No good looking in this van for him, Mr. Quelch!'

'I was not thinking of looking in your van for him, sir,' said the Remove master tartly. 'But I believe he's in your circus.'

'Oh! No! I am sure not! Absolutely certain that he's not anywhere about here, sir! He wouldn't be admitted! I—I think he's at Lantham.'

'What?'

'In—in fact, I'm sure he's at Lantham, sir, or—or Canterbury! I think if you go to Canterbury, sir—or—or Folkestone—'

Impossible! Even so foolish a boy cannot have gone there! Have you any reason to suppose that he has done so, Mr. Whiffles?'

'Yes; lots! I—I saw him in Canterbury this afternoon, sir, when I was at—at Folkestone!' gasped Bunter.

'Wha-a-at!'

'I—I—I mean——'

'Really, Mr. Whiffles—'

'I—I mean, I saw him at Folkstone, sir, when I was at Canterbury,' gasped Bunter. 'That is to say, I—I mean—' Bunter was a little confused. The glint in Mr. Quelch's gimlet-like eyes was quite disconcerting.

'If you know anything of the boy, Mr. Whiffles—'

'Oh, yes! I—I think I—I saw him at Lantham—'

'You know him by sight?'

'Oh! No! Never seen him in my life, sir!' said Bunter promptly. 'Never heard of him till you mentioned him, sir.'

Mr. Quelch sniffed. He could only conclude that this fat circus man had been drinking.

'I have come here, sir, to look for him,' he said. 'The boy is to receive punishment when he returns to the school—severe punishment——'

'Oh, lor!'

'I think for that reason, he may be staying out of gates. The boy is I regret to say, absolutely stupid.'

'Oh, really sir——'

'It is possible—indeed, probable—in view of his unexampled stupidity, that he may have remained here for the second performance at your circus, sir. I think he may be among the audience at the present moment.'

'Oh! Good!' gasped Bunter.

'What?'

'I—I mean, bad—very bad—awful, in fact!' gasped the Owl of the Remove.

'Shocking!'

'You must excuse me for troubling you, Mr. Whiffles, but I am very anxious about the boy. May I beg your assistance in discovering him and placing him in my hands?'

'No jolly fear!' gasped Bunter.

'Mr. Whiffles! What—'

'I—I mean—I mean, certainly! Right on the spot! I—I—I—I'll help round up the young—the young scoundrel!' gasped the fat gentleman in the van. 'He's in the tent all right—in fact, I saw him go in'

'You think you saw him go in?' asked Mr. Quelch, wishing that Mr. Whiffles was a teetotaller.

'I'm sure of it! He's nowhere near this van. That's quite impossible. No good looking for him here. Look in the tent. You'll find him all right. I'll swear he's there.'

'If you saw him go in—'

'With my own eyes, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I——— Now I come to think of it, I know him by sight, Bunter, you said?'

'Yes, his name is Bunter.'

'I—I know him, sir—a rather handsome, distinguished-looking chap—'

'Nothing of the kind!' said Mr. Quelch. 'It is evidently some other boy you have seen. The boy of whom I am in search is not in the least handsome or distinguished-looking. He is short and fat and clumsy, and has an expression of fatuous stupidity——'

'Oh, draw it mild!'

'What?'

'I—I mean—'

'Really, Mr. Whiffles—'

'I—I mean, exactly! That's the chap! He's in the tent. Number ten in the second row of the half-crown seats!' said Bunter recklessly.

Bunter asked nothing better than that the Remove master should start exploring the big tent, where he would have an audience of at least five hundred to choose from. That would give the Owl of the Remove a chance to run for it. He might even get to Greyfriars and scuttle into bed while Quelch was still out. That would put off the painful consequences till the morning. Mr. Quelch might have cooled down by then. Bunter hoped so, at least. Hope springs eternal in the human breast.

'I think, sir,' Mr. Quelch was saying, 'that if the boy sees me, he may attempt to escape——'

'Oh, no, sir, I shouldn't—'

'Eh?'

'I—I mean, I—I shouldn't think so, sir!' gasped Bunter. 'It wouldn't be respectful, would it, sir?'

'Unfortunately, the boy is a disrespectful young rascal!' said Mr. Quelch. 'I was about to suggest, sir, that you might direct some of your employees to detain the boy as he comes out, and then hand him over to me. I am aware, sir, that I am asking a favour at your hands, and am exceedingly sorry to give you trouble; but I am sure you will understand how serious it is for a boy to be out of school at this hour.'

'Oh! Quite! Young villain!' said Bunter. 'Young scoundrel! I—I'm awfully shocked at him! N—n-never heard of such a thing since—since I was a—a boy myself, sir.'

'Thank you, Mr. Whiffles! Then you will be kind enough to act as I have suggested?'

Oh, yes, rather! Anything you like, sir, so long as you clear off—I mean, so—so long as you catch that—that young rascal.'

Bunter blinked round at six or seven of Mr. Whiffles' employees who were standing round looking on and listening.

George!' he gasped.

Yessir!

'You hear what this—this old Beak—I mean, what this gentleman said. G-g-g-go and watch the tent and collar the fellow as— as he comes out!'

'Ow shall I know him, sir?'

'This old blighter—I mean, this gentleman, will give you a description!' gasped Bunter. 'Go with him.'

'Yes, sir,' said George.

'You other fellows go, too,' said Bunter. 'All of you go. You can't be too careful. Every one of you go at once.'

'Thank you, sir!' said Mr. Quelch gratefully. 'I can only apologise, sir, for giving you so much trouble—'

'Don't mention it, sir! It's all right; only buck up! The—the young rascal may be going out this very minute.'

'Quite so! I think I should mention, sir, that my anxiety for this wretched boy has been increased by a very strange thing that happened on my way here. Some lunatic is wandering on the common; and I desire to put you on your guard. Whether the man is dangerous I cannot say; but he is undoubtedly insane. A man is wandering about, sir, wrapped up in a bathing-towel—'

'Oh, crikey!'

'He was lurking in the bushes, apparently watching this circus from a distance, when I came along the footpath. I shall inform the police—'

'The—the police!'

'Yes; if the man is a madman, he must be secured,' said Mr. Quelch. 'I warn you, in case any member of your circus may encounter him.'

'Oh, crikey! Oh, crumbs! Was—was—was he coming towards the circus?' stuttered Bunter, blinking past Mr. Quelch, in terror of seeing Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles in the distance.

'No; he seemed to be lurking in the bushes. Apparently in hiding,' said Mr. Quelch. 'But I had an impression that he was watching this spot from a distance. Undoubtedly a lunatic; he was dressed in bathing clothes and a large towel.'

'Great pip! I—I mean, thanks for the tip—that is, I'll look out for the beast! I—I say, you fellows, you cut off now. If—if you'll go with them, you—'

'Once more, thank you very much, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Not at all, sir! Only go—I mean, buck up! The—fellow may be dodging away this very minute—'

And Mr. Quelch, immensely to Bunter's relief, walked away with the circus men. Bunter could hardly believe in his good luck when they disappeared round the big tent. Bunter did not need telling who was the 'lunatic'. Mr. Quelch had encountered on his way to the circus. A man lurking on the common in a bathing-towel could only be Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. There was not a second to lose.

The moment Mr. Quelch was out of sight Billy Bunter scuttled down the steps of the van, and fairly ran for it.

A Narrow Escape!

ALAS for Bunter!

Clear of the circus, safe from Quelchy, in a shadowy spot where he could

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

have changed his clothes with perfect security, Bunter suddenly realised that in the haste of his departure he had left the attaché-case in the caravan. In his hurried flight he had thought only of getting clear.

He had got clear!

But changing back into his own clothes was obviously impracticable when his clothes remained behind in the attaché-case in Mr. Whiffles' caravan at the circus.

Bunter fairly groaned in anguish of spirit.

This really was a knock-down blow! He could not blame himself. A fellow couldn't think of everything at once. But it was a knockout! He was half a mile from the circus and half a mile from his own clothes.

'Stop!'

Bunter jumped as a gasping yell interrupted his reflections. He was only a hundred yards from the circus now. He blinked round in alarm, and jumped almost clear of the ground at the sight of a dim white figure—a figure he did not see clearly, but which he did not fail to recognise as that of Mr. Quelch's lunatic in a bathing-towel!

'Ow!' gasped Bunter.

It was Whiffles!

The figure fairly hurled itself at him from the shadows of a hawthorn bush, where it had been lurking.

Mr. Whiffles, like Bunter, was short-sighted. But he lacked his glasses now! They were in an attaché-case in the caravan. But even without his glasses he could recognise the glaring pattern of the striped check suit Bunter wore, and which Mr. Whiffles had been accustomed to wearing. He knew that this was the Scoundrel, the villain, the blighter who had robbed him of his clothes and other possessions while he was swimming in the Sark. It could be no other, for those clothes were unique! In a population of fifty millions nobody else wore clothes like Mr. Whiffles.

'Stop! Villain! Thief! Rascal!' Mr. Whiffles hissed out the words as he rushed at Bunter. 'My clothes! Rascal! I will prosecute you! I will send you to prison! Thief! Wretch! Villain—'

'Yaroooh!'

A fat hand was almost upon the dismayed Owl's shoulder when he fled onward, just eluding it.

Mr. Whiffles dashed after him.

Bunter flew!

Mr. Whiffles flew!

They raced across the grass, both going uncommonly strong. It was not only vengeance that Mr. Whiffles wanted—though he wanted that badly. He wanted his clothes. Above all, he wanted his wig!

For hours and hours the wretched Mr. Whiffles had lurked, waiting for the circus camp to fall into slumber, to give him a chance of sneaking back quietly and getting into his caravan unseen.

In a box in that van was a second wig, exactly like the first. Wigs, like other more useful articles of attire, have to be cleaned at times. When one of Mr. Whiffles wigs was at his hairdresser's the other adorned his bald head. It was the second wig that Mr. Whiffles had hoped to don before he should be seen by any of his company. But he dared not venture till the circus was asleep. Fortunately, the summer night was warm; still, the light attire of a bathing-suit

and a bathing-towel swathed round his fat person did not protect Mr. Whiffles from the breeze that came from the sea. Lurking in the shadows round the circus camp was extremely uncomfortable. The sight of his own clothes and hair came as a windfall to Mr. Whiffles. Here was the thief, the blighter, the villain who had robbed him! Vengeance and a renewed thatch were within his grasp at one fell sweep!

His clutch was just behind Bunter as the terrified Owl fled for his fat life.

Billy Bunter ran as he had seldom run before.

Gasping and puffing and panting, he fled onward at a frantic speed.

Once the outstretched fingers behind touched his shoulder and electrified him into greater efforts.

He had one hope. He knew that Mr. Whiffles had been avoiding the lights of the circus and the gaze of his company ever since nightfall. It was obvious even to the obtuse Owl that Mr. Whiffles did not want to be seen wigless. If he could reach the lighted encampment—

He reached it!

He was almost at his last gasp as he rolled breathlessly into the radius of light of the naphtha lamps.

There was a shout.

Half a dozen people saw him rushing frantically in, and caught a glimpse of the wild, weird figure behind. The flaring lights gleamed on a bald head and a bathing-towel.

Mr. Whiffles stopped.

He could not face it. He turned and rushed back into the friendly cover of darkness. Bunter staggered on to the caravans.

He sank down on the steps of the blue-and-gold caravan, and gasped and puffed and blew.

'Ow! Grooogh! Wow! Oh, crumbs! Ooooooch! Grooooh!' But he knew he was safe. The bald head that had shone and gleamed for a moment in the glare of the naphtha lamps was gone. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles was once more 'lurking'.

The Return of the Native!

'Ow! Wow! Ooooooch!'

Bunter gasped spasmodically. Half the circus gathered round him. Mr. Dance came up, Slaney came up, George came up, Tomasso Tomsonio and Samson and Nobby Nobbs, the clown, and a dozen others came up.

'What's happened, guv'nor?' asked Nobby Nobbs.

'Grooogh! Oooch!'

'I saw somebody—something!' said Mr. Dance.

'Whoooooh! Ooooooh! Oooooch!'

'Ave a drink, guv'nor,' said George Mix. 'Shall I bring you a brandy-and-soda, sir?'

'Oh, crumbs!'

Bunter did not want a brandy-and-soda. He did not desire to Play Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles to that extent.

'I—I—I——' he stuttered. He felt that an explanation was needed. 'I—I—I

went for a walk, and that—that——' He remembered Mr. Quelch's description of that figure in the bathing-towel. That lunatic attacked me!

'That there lunatic the schoolmaster saw, guv'nor?' asked George sympathetically.

'That's it!' gasped Bunter. 'A dangerous maniac! He attacked me! Rushed on me! I—I just barely escaped his knife!'

'He's got a knife, sir?'

Uneasy glances were cast around into the encircling shadows. A lunatic with a knife was no joke.

'A—a—a carving-knife, I think!' gasped Bunter. 'Raving mad, you know! Brandishing a knife!'

'No wonder you ran, guv'nor,' said the sympathetic George. 'The perlice ought to be told.'

'The schoolmaster said he was going to phone the police,' remarked one of the men.

'He'll be run in before morning,' said Slaney.

'Got out of some asylum, I s'pose.' said Texas Bill, the bronco buster, 'I'm going to lock my van to-night, I am.'

'Same 'ere.'

'If—if you see anything of him drive him off!' gasped Bunter, 'Don't waste time talking to him. Don't listen to a word he says. Just drive him away. Never mind if you hurt him. Kick him! Kick him—hard!'

'You bet, guv'nor!'

'I am going into the town, Mr. Whiffles,' said Dance. 'I had better call at the police station and warn them.'

'Oh, no! I—I mean, yes!' gasped Bunter.

He staggered to his feet.

'If—if you meet him on your way, knock him down!' he gasped. 'Don't speak to the—the horrible villain! Knock him down! Jump on him! Don't let him say a word! Look out for the carving knife!'

Bunter went into the caravan and closed the door on the buzzing, excited crowd of circus men. He sat down in Mr. Whiffles' chair, and gasped.

'Oh dear! Ow!'

Circumstances had driven Bunter into assuming the character of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. Circumstances seemed determined to keep him in that character.

With all his efforts to change back into William George Bunter, he was still Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles.

To leave the camp in the guise of Mr. Whiffles was impossible with the real Mr. Whiffles lurking just outside the radius of the lights. Bunter shuddered at the thought.

To leave as a schoolboy until the circus was asleep was impossible. Bunter was booked for the part of Whiffles, and could not help it.

There was only one recourse for Bunter to remain where he was until all were fast asleep, and then change into his own clothes and sneak away—

Bunter waited.

He did not dare to go to sleep. He would have liked a nap. The hour was late, and his uncommon exertions that eventful day had tired him. But he knew that if he went to sleep he was more likely to sleep till morning, or at least till Mr. Whiffles came butting into the caravan, as he was sure to do some time

during the night. Fortunately, his lengthy nap in the evening had refreshed him, and he was able to keep awake.

One by one the lights in the circus encampment were extinguished. The sound of voices died away.

Bunter breathed more freely.

A rapid change now into his own clothes—and flight! The coast, at long last, was clear! Bunter closed the door, and turned to the attaché-case. He did not venture to put on a light, lest some wakeful eye in the camp should observe it. He could change in the dark. He opened the attaché-case on the bed, and began to sort out his own clothes. And then—

Then he suddenly stopped, his hair rising on his head with the thrill of horror that ran through him! For he heard a stealthy creeping step without—the door was drawn open; and as he turned, frozen with horror, he saw the glimmer on a bald head! Mr. Whiffles had returned!

Neck or Nothing!

STEALTHILY Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles crept up the stairs of the blue-and-red caravan.

He might have been a cat-burglar, from his stealthy movements, instead of the rightful owner of the van. All that was there was his—excepting Bunter, of course—yet he came like a thief in the night.

He was almost trembling with mingled eagerness and dread,

Like Bunter, he had waited for the last light to be extinguished. Like Bunter, he had prepared for action when that light went out.

Unlike Bunter, he had acted with lightning swiftness.

For hours—or was it centuries?—he had lurked and watched, and watched and lurked. Now his chance had come. To get quietly into the van, to get at the box where he kept his spare parts, so to speak; to get a wig on his bare bald head; to reassume the normal aspect of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles—and to do it all as rapidly as possible—that was the object of the unfortunate occupant of the bathing-towel.

Later, he would hunt for the villain, the blighter, the unscrupulous dastard, who had bagged his clothes and other appurtenances while he was swimming. He would hound that iniquitous wretch without mercy. And he would take care, on future occasions when he went for a swim, that his clothes and wig did not fall into nefarious hands. He would buy a dog—a ferocious dog—the most savage Alsatian he could get for love or money—and leave him on guard over the treasure when in future he went for a swim. He would take a lot of trouble to seek out a fierce, fanged Alsatian with a reputation for biting. This awful disaster should never happen again—once he was out of this fearful scrape.

But he was not out of it yet.

It is always easier to fall into a hole than to climb out of it again. Mr. Whiffles, at long last, seemed to be on the verge of success. But he was only on the verge; and proverbially there is many a slip betwixt the cup and lip.

He did not dream for a moment that his van was occupied. He had spotted the thief, the dastard, the blighter, in his clothes and wig, on the common, and

chased him. The villain had escaped. But it had never occurred to Mr. Whiffles that the iniquitous wretch was in his caravan. He did not dream that the dastardly villain had been playing his part for him. He did not know anything about that yet. He was just going to discover it.

He crept stealthily to the van door, and opened it. He peered into the dark interior of the van. He gasped with relief. It was done—he was in his van at last, and nobody had seen him wigless—nobody should or could ever know that the curly-haired Whiffles was as bald as a billiards-ball. It was done—and he gasped with relief. But he gasped too soon! It was not done!

Bunter blinked at him in horror and dismay.

Self-preservation is well known to be the first law of nature. A rat will fight in a corner—a worm will turn—and it is said that there is no animal so dangerous as the peaceful, placid sheep when it is driven to resistance. Excess of terror will lend courage. Bunter was so thoroughly alarmed and scared that he forgot to be afraid. To be collared by Mr. Whiffles, shown up as a fraud, handed over to the police as a stealer of bather's clothes, confined to a cell in Courtfield Police-station for the night, bailed out in the morning by the headmaster of Greyfriars—the prospect was too awful! Hardly knowing what he did, Bunter made a jump at the shadowy figure in the doorway of the van, and smote.

Crash! Bump!

A smite with Bunter's weight behind it was not a light matter. And it came quite unexpectedly. Mr. Whiffles fairly flew.

Mr. Whiffles was being silent, stealthy, cautious; stealing into the van like a cat-burglar into a window. But as he went backwards down the steps silence, stealth, and caution were naturally forgotten. The yell that Mr. Whiffles let out rang through the circus encampment, and awoke most of the sleepers of Courtfield Common.

'Whooooooooooop!'

Mr. Whiffles landed on the grass, roaring.

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Bunter.

'Yoop! Whoop! Ow! Help! Whoop!' roared Mr. Whiffles.

He sprawled in a dazed state.

Bunter blinked down at him, quaking. There was a shouting from two or three directions; lights flashed from several vans and tents.

Right up to that moment it had never occurred to Billy Bunter to hold on to the identity of Mr. Whiffles, in the presence of the real Whiffles. It came to him like a flash now. It was the only way! Mr. Whiffles' best friend could not have recognised him now as Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. He was the lunatic in the bathing towel! It came to Bunter in a flash, simply because it was the only way to safety, the only way to avoid a rough handling and a cell at the police-station. He was driven to it. There was no escape—only cheek could carry him through. Bunter desperately played up.

'Help!' he roared. 'Burglars! Madmen! Lunatics! Help!'

'Yow-ow-ow!' came from the sprawling Whiffles. 'Yow-ow-ow!' George Mix, half-dressed, came bolting out of the tent, with a lantern in one hand and a chopper in the other. From all quarters came shouting voices, running feet, cries of alarm. Had Bunter wanted to escape, even in his present guise, he could not have got away unseen. Almost in a moment the caravan was surrounded, and a score of pairs of eyes turned on the sprawling, gasping, panting Whiffles.

'It's the lunatic!' yelled Bunter. 'Collar him! Seize him! Look out for his knife! Help! Seize him! Bag him! Help!'

Five or six pairs of hands were laid, not gently, on the sprawling Whiffles

He was dragged to his feet, and held securely.

He struggled furiously, utterly enraged by this attack from his own employees.

He struggled and yelled.

But he was held fast. Slaney had one arm, Tomasso Tomsonio had the other.

Samson the Strong Man took a grip on the back of his neck. George Mix brandished the chopper. Nobby Nobbs grasped him somewhere, and Texas Bill somewhere else. Two or three more men got a grip. Whiffles struggled and roared, and threatened in vain.

'We got him, sir!' gasped George. 'Quiet, you murdering villain! Behave yourself, or look out for this chopper!'

'I'll sack you!' yelled Mr. Whiffles furiously. 'I'll sack the lot of you! Take a week's notice all round!'

'Mad as a 'atter!' said George.

'Poor chap!' said Slaney. 'Fair raving!'

'Let me go!' shrieked the infuriated Whiffles, struggling madly. 'I tell you you're sacked! Sacked! Do you hear?'

'Poor feller!' said George Mix.

'Fair off his crummet, ain't he?' said Nobby Nobbs, 'Who does he think he is, I wonder, poor chap?'

'Hold him tight!' gasped Bunter.

'We got him all right, sir! He won't do any 'arm now.'

'He—he—he thinks he's somebody else, you know!' gasped Bunter. 'Lunatics do, you know. I dare say he thinks he's me, or— or the Prime Minister, or the Pope, you know, Lunatics are like that.'

'Mad as a 'atter! Fancy a bloke going about at night dressed up in bathing clobber and a bathing towel!' said George. 'Keep quiet, you image! We don't want to 'urt a pore lunatic; but you can't be let loose. Look 'ere! What asylum do you belong to?'

'Let me go!' shrieked Mr. Whiffles, almost foaming at the mouth.

He was utterly amazed, and astounded, and bewildered. The dreadful disaster of being seen without his wig had happened. That had been the very worst of Mr. Whiffles' terrors, But, apparently, it was not the worst. As Shakespeare has said: 'Thus bad begins, but worse remains behind.'

Mr. Whiffles forgot even his bald head; that long, and carefully kept secret was revealed at last, in his rage and fury at what was happening now. It seemed to him that the whole circus had gone insane.

'Let me go! You're sacked!' he bawled. 'I'll kick out the lot of you! How dare you! Hands off!'

'Hold him tight!' gasped the Owl of the Remove. 'He's dangerous, you know. Mind he doesn't bite!'

'Release me! Rascals, villains, wretches!'

'Got a fine flow of language, ain't he?' grinned Nobby Nobbs. 'Look 'ere, my pore feller, you take it quiet! Tell us who you are, and we'll see you're took safe home without being 'urt. The pore chap can't help being balmy in the crummet!'

'Who are you?' demanded Slaney.

'What! You fool! I'm Mr. Whiffles!' roared the hapless circus proprietor. 'Don't

you know your own employer, you idiot?’

‘Oh, my eye!’

‘You fools, idiots, dummies, chumps, fatheads, lunatics!’ spluttered Whiffles.

‘Don’t you know me?’

‘Ow should we know you, when we’ve never seen you before?’ demanded George.

‘I’m Whiffles!’

‘Pore feller!’

George had a sympathetic nature. He was really sorry for this poor man who imagined himself to be Mr. Whiffles.

Billy Bunter drew a deep, deep breath.

He had acted upon a sort of inspiration, because there was no other way out. He had got away with it. He was Mr. Whiffles, and this interfering, ill-tempered, troublesome old donkey was a lunatic—that was how the matter stood. As usual, Bunter proceeded at one step from panic terror to self-satisfied self-confidence.

‘Don’t hurt the poor fellow, my men,’ he said loftily. ‘The poor chap can’t help being potty. I—I’ll find out to-morrow what asylum he’s escaped from, and— and have him sent back. But he’s dangerous. He was breaking into my van when I knocked him down. Hold him tight!’

‘Villain!’ roared Mr. Whiffles. ‘Rascal! It’s my van! You are the dastard who robbed me!’

‘Calm yourself, my poor fellow!’ said Bunter. ‘You will be taken care of, and— and treated kindly. I’ll send for a doctor in the morning.’

‘You—you—you’ articulated Mr. Whiffles.

‘Hush! Quiet, my poor fellow!’

‘I’ll break every bone in your body!’ shrieked Mr. Whiffles, ‘I’ll slaughter you! I’ll—I’ll—I’ll—’

‘Ow! Hold him tight!’

‘We’ve got ‘im, guv’nor!’

‘Put him somewhere!’ gasped Bunter, ‘Is there a van he can be locked in?’

Mr. Dance arrived on the scene now, rubbing his eyes. The struggling circus proprietor howled an appeal to him.

‘Dance! You know me, Dance?’

Mr. Dance jumped.

‘Eh! Who—what ——’

‘You fool! Don’t you know me? Whiffles—Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, your employer, you silly idiot!’

Mr. Dance stared at him.

‘He’s mad, sir,’ explained George. ‘Thinks he’s Mr. Whiffles, and the guv’nor standing there right under his nose. He’ll be saying he’s the Pope of Rome next, or the Wild Man from Borneo!’

Mr. Dance looked very hard at the bald man in the bathing-towel, and then at the fat gentleman in the doorway of the blue and red van. There was something in that penetrating glance that Bunter did not like. He hurriedly intervened.

‘Take the man away! Lock him in a van till morning! You can give him some clothes. Now, then, look sharp!’

‘Right you are, guv’nor!’

Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, struggling and yelling and shrieking, was

hustled away, and bundled into an empty van that was used for the transport of circus properties. The door was locked on him, and he was told to be quiet. But he was not quiet.

In the circumstances, it was rather unreasonable to expect Mr. Whiffles to be quiet. No circus proprietor, locked in a baggage van by his own employees, would have been quiet. The voice of Mr. Whiffles came from the van in incessant iteration. It convinced the whole circus—if they needed convincing—that the poor fellow was absolutely off his rocker, and they were glad that there was a strong lock on the van.

News at Last!

'HALLO, hallo, hallo! No Bunter!'

Bob Cherry's first glance turned on Bunter's bed in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars when the rising-bell called the Lower Fourth up to a new day. The bed was still empty! The Owl of the Remove had not returned! Evidently he had made a night of it!

'Good old Bunter!' grinned Skinner. 'It will be the sack now for certain.'

'The sackfulness will be terrific certainly,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a sad shake of the head.

'Must be off his rocker,' said Harry Wharton. 'Staying out all night—phew!'

'May have been an accident,' said Peter Todd. 'He may have been run over, or something.'

'No such luck!' opined Skinner.

'Oh, shut up, Skinner!'

There was no news of Bunter when the Remove went down. He had been out all night, that was clear; and nothing was known of him. The juniors noticed when they saw Mr. Quelch that he had a worried look. Wrath had doubtless given place to anxiety. It was scarcely credible that any Lower boy in his right senses would have stayed out all night. An accident seemed a more probable theory. If Bunter returned, Mr. Quelch's wrath was ready to rise again to boiling-point at a moment's notice. But so long as he did not return it took second place to anxiety.

At breakfast there was much whispering. All Forms were equally interested. What had happened to Bunter? Where was he? What was he up to? What did it all mean, anyway? Not only the Remove, but the Fourth and the Shell were keenly interested. The fags of the Second and the Third were quite excited. Sammy Bunter, of the Second Form, became quite a personage, simply because he was the minor of the fellow who was missing.

The Fifth and the Sixth, though usually affecting hardly to know that such a Form as the Remove existed at all, discussed Bunter now with the keenest interest. Even at the high table where the prefects sat, great men sitting apart in Olympian loftiness from the common herd, Bunter was the topic. It was a case of Bunter here, Bunter there, Bunter—Bunter everywhere. Bunter had provided the sensation of the term!

The infinite unimportance of William George Bunter was a thing of the past. Positively for one occasion only, it was Bunter first and the rest nowhere. The possibility of some serious accident was canvassed. But surely news

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

would have reached Greyfriars by this time had there been any accident? Skinner inquired whether Bunter had been in funds, and, learning that he hadn't been, declared that Bunter couldn't have burst in the Courtfield bunshop. That was the only accident that Skinner regarded as at all probable. But some fellows were feeling rather anxious. If Bunter was keeping away all this time just to dodge Quelch, he had done for himself at Greyfriars. He was sure to be sacked! If it was an accident, it was more serious still. The Head was already considering whether he ought not to communicate with Bunter's Parents, Sammy of the Second, be it said to his credit, bore his anxiety—if any—with commendable fortitude. His fat face looked quite untroubled in the Second Form-room. Probably he thought that he would soon see Billy again. Possibly he thought he would see him sooner than he wanted to. Anyhow, he bore the present state of affairs with fortitude.

Bunter's place was vacant in the Remove Form-room that morning. Mr. Quelch's face was gloomy.

He was not in a tantrum. That showed that he was anxious. It was learned that all the prefects of the Sixth had gone out that morning to look for Bunter and make inquiries. If they failed to get any news, it was understood that the assistance of the police was to be called in. Wibley said they would be dragging all the ponds soon. Skinner suggested dragging all the tuck-shops. But Skinner was frowned upon. It was no time for Skinner's little jokes. It was just on morning break when Trotter tapped at the door of the Remove-room and put his head in.

Mr. Quelch glanced round hopefully. He hoped that it was news. It would have been a great relief to Mr. Quelch to hear that Bunter was safe and sound, and to let his suppressed wrath boil up again.

'What is it, Trotter?'

'The telephone in your study, sir,' said Trotter.

'Oh! You have taken the call, I presume? Who is it?'

'Master Bunter, sir.'

'What!'

Mr. Quelch jumped. All the Remove jumped! That reply was utterly unexpected.

'Bunter!' repeated Mr. Quelch dazedly. 'Do you mean that Master Bunter is on the telephone, Trotter?'

'Yessir. Says he wants to speak to you, sir.'

'Bless my soul! Wharton, keep order in this Form-room while I am gone.'

'Oh! Yes, sir.'

Mr. Quelch whisked out of the Remove-room. He almost ran to his study, with his gown blowing out behind him. He fairly jumped at the telephone and clutched the receiver. He jammed it to his ear, and as he did so a voice came over the wires:

'Look here, is that old donkey ever coming to the phone? Blessed if I'm going to wait much longer for the old josser!'

Undoubtedly it was Bunter on the phone!

Quelch Seeing Red!

MR. QUELCH gripped the receiver with a deadly grip. He would have

preferred to grip William George Bunter. His grip would have been deadlier. He fairly hooted into the transmitter.

'Bunter! Is that you, Bunter?'

'Oh, is that you, Quelch?'

'What? What?'

'Good morning, sir! Nice morning!' came the fat voice over the wires. 'I hope you're well this morning, sir! Not tired from your walk last night, what?'

Mr. Quelch would have ground his teeth had they not been an expensive set. So that disrespectful young rascal knew that he had been out in search of him the previous night!

'Bunter! Where are you?'

'Here, sir!'

'Where, you stupid boy? Where are you—" Mr. Quelch nearly said: 'Where are you speaking from?' which would have been twice in one day. But he checked himself in time. 'From where are you speaking, Bunter?'

'Not Courtfield, sir! I'm miles and miles from Courtfield!' came the fat voice, rather hastily.

'So you are in Courtfield!' hissed Mr. Quelch.

It really was odd how people naturally assumed the opposite from any of William George Bunter's statements. The same experience must have fallen to the lot of Ananias, Baron Munchausen, and George Washington.

"Nunno, sir! I've just said not! I—I'm speaking from Lantham! That is to say, Canterbury! Canterbury, sir!'

You untruthful young rascal!'

'Oh, really, sir—"

Return to the school at once. Bunter! Do you hear? You are to return to Greyfriars immediately!'

I'm just going to speak about that, sir! Owing to circumstances, I shan't be able to come back to school this term.'

'What? What? What?'

'It's only a few more days, anyhow, sir. We're just on the hols. hope you won't mind if I start hols now.'

Certainly I shall mind! I shall mind very much! I command you to return instantly, Bunter, and take the punishment that is due for your unexampled audacity and disrespect and rebelliousness. I order you to lose not a moment in returning to the school, where the severest possible punishment is awaiting you!'

'I didn't catch that, sir.'

'What?'

'Would you mind saying that over again, sir?'

'Bunter! I—I—I——"

'The fact is, sir, I've got an engagement, a very important engagement. It's nothing to do with a circus.'

'You are at the circus now!' hooted Mr. Quelch.

Mr. Quelch felt that the telephone was an inadequate instrument. It did not bring you sufficiently in touch with people. He wanted to be in much closer touch with Bunter. He would have touched him hard.

'No, nothing of the kind! I haven't been to the circus at all. In fact, I haven't heard of one in these parts. But——"

'Bunter, I command you to return to Greyfriars!'

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

'Awfully sorry, it's impossible, sir! You see, I've got a rather important engagement. I shall be back next term, if you're anxious to see me, sir.'

'Next term! Bunter—'

'Let my people know I shan't be home for the hols, sir. Tell them I'm all right. Tell my pater there's nothing to fuss about. He might be anxious—I'm the apple of his eye, you know! Tell Sammy—'

'Bunter!'

'Tell Sammy he can keep that bob he owes me. I've got plenty of money now. Tell Wharton and Bob Cherry that I'll kick them next term.'

'Bless my soul!'

'I think that's about all, sir. I thought I'd let you know I was all right, in case you were anxious, sir. Don't come rotting about after me any more. I'm not at the circus.'

'Bunter, you will be severely flogged—'

'I don't think!'

'If you return to Greyfriars at once—'

'No fear!'

'But if you do not return you will be expelled from the school!' boomed Mr. Quelch. 'Do you hear, Bunter? You rascally boy! Expelled! Do you hear?'

But answer there came none.

'Bunter!' roared Mr. Quelch. 'Boy! Bunter!'



There was nothing to be anxious about...

Still there was no answer. Mr. Quelch realised that Bunter had rung off. He jammed the receiver back on the hooks, with a jam that made the telephone rock. Then he paced his study.

Mr. Quelch's anxiety for Bunter was quite relieved now. There was nothing to be anxious about. Evidently the fat junior had had no accident. The Remove-master's wrath, long suppressed by that possibility of an accident, boiled over again.

He paced his study, thinking the matter over. The young rascal—the

rebellious young rascal—must be expelled for this! That was inevitable. But he could not very well be expelled in his absence. Even an expelled fellow had to be handed over to his parents. Bunter had to be found.

Fortunately, owing to Bunter's masterly astuteness, Mr. Quelch knew where to find him. He was at the circus! Those riff-raff, who had pretended to be helping Mr. Quelch to find him last night, must be hiding him—helping him to defy authority, to flout his schoolmaster. Bunter must be found, dragged back to Greyfriars—flogged—and expelled—sent home, never to darken the door of the Remove Form-room again.

Thinking this out—with some solace in the prospect—Mr. Quelch rather omitted to observe the passage of time. It suddenly dawned upon him that there was a crowd and a buzz in the quad—all Forms were out for break—all excepting the Remove. His own Form were awaiting his return patiently—or more probably impatiently—to be dismissed.

'Oh!' ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

He hurried back to the Remove-room. A buzz of voices greeted him as he arrived at the door.

'This is rotten! Look here, I'm going!'

'Where the thump is old Quelch?'

'Can't be phoning to the other silly ass all this time!'

'I say, this is getting thick!'

'Blow old Quelch!'

That excited discussion stopped all of a sudden as Mr. Quelch opened the Form-room door and sailed in. The silence of dismay fell upon the Lower Fourth.

If Quelchy had heard them——

Evidently he had!

'Wharton!' boomed Mr. Quelch.

'Oh, yes, sir!'

'I directed you to keep order in this Form-room during my absence! You will take five hundred lines, Wharton!'

'Oh!'

'Every other boy in the Form will take two hundred lines!'

'Oh!' said all the Remove.

'Dismiss!'

The Remove marched out.

'This is getting rather thick,' remarked Bob Cherry. 'I wonder what Bunter said to him on the phone? It doesn't seem to have soothed him.'

'The soothfulness does not seem terrific,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'We shall have a terrifically high old time in third lesson! I shall not be sorrowful, my esteemed chums, when the term ends and we get a rest from the admirable and absurd Quelchy.'

That feeling was generally shared in the Remove. They admitted that Quelchy had some cause to be wild with Bunter; but he was undoubtedly getting jolly unpleasant. In third lesson the nabob's anticipations were more than verified. The Remove had a high old time. Quelchy was in a tantrum—and it seemed to be his idea to give the Remove a little on account of what was due to Bunter.

All the Form were glad, very glad, when that lesson ended. It was quite a relief to get away from Quelchy for a bit. Fellows who had been looking

forward to the holidays now looked forward to them much more eagerly and intensely. With Quelch in this state, Greyfriars could not break up too soon for the Remove.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! There he goes!' murmured Bob Cherry, as he spotted the Remove-master in the offing. 'He's after Bunter again!'

'Shouldn't care to be in Bunter's shoes when he gets him!' remarked Squiff. Many eyes watched Mr. Quelch when he came back. Bunter was not with him; the Remove-master came in alone, quite pale with the intensity of his emotions. And the whole school wondered.

It was later in the day when they learned that Whiffles' World-Famous Circus was gone.

Billed to stay at Courtfield for a week, and doing great business, it had suddenly packed up and taken the road. Nobody knew why.

Mr. Quelch, arriving on the common, in search of Bunter, had found the encampment broken up—and gone! Holes in the ground, left by tent-pegs; patches of burnt turf; fragments of paper blowing about in the wind; old tin cans and discarded bottles, and such flotsam and jetsam, remained to mark the spot. But the circus was gone, and if Bunter was with the circus, he was gone, too! Little did Mr. Quelch know that it was Bunter himself who had ordered the rapid departure of Whiffles' Circus—fearing just such a visit from his wrathful form-master.

Mr. Quelch walked back to Greyfriars in a mood that was only equalled by the mood of a bald-headed gentleman who was travelling with the circus, locked up in an empty baggage-van.

After Bunter!

'HE'S gone with the giddy circus!'

'The fat idiot!'

'The unspeakable chump!'

'Good old Bunter!' said Skinner heatedly. 'Bunter's a philanthropist! To go and do this, just when we're all bored to death, as usual, at the end of the term! It's kind of Bunter!'

'It's the sack for him, fathead!'

'Well, that's kinder of him than ever,' said Skinner blandly. 'Fancy next term without Bunter! Gorgeous!'

'Oh, shut up, Skinner!'

It was after classes that day that it leaked out that Billy Bunter was still with the circus—or was at least supposed to be still with the circus. It was known that Wingate of the Sixth, instead of class that afternoon, had gone out on his motor-bike.

From one fellow to another the rumour ran that Wingate had gone to look for the circus, which had shifted its quarters; and when Wingate came in he was heard to tell Gwynne of the Sixth that he had located the circus, on the road to Lantham, and he was heard to add that he hadn't seen Bunter with it.

That Bunter was supposed to have gone with the circus was clear, but it was perplexing enough to the Remove fellows.

That he might prefer going with the circus to returning to Greyfriars for a flogging was probable enough. But why had the circus people let him? They

couldn't possibly want Bunter. Anything that was merely improbable might happen, but not anything that was impossible; and all the Remove agreed that it was impossible for anybody to want Bunter. He could not have squared them to take him; he had nothing wherewith to square. Moreover, how could they be such asses to take a runaway schoolboy away with them? They couldn't!

It really was inexplicable.

Greyfriars had only one topic now—Bunter! Bunter filled the bill! All the more or less interesting things that happened at the end of the term took second place to Bunter.

'It will be the finish for Bunter,' said Wharton. 'The fat chump has been asking for trouble all through the term. Now he's put the lid on.'

'He's torn it this time, that's a cert!' said Nugent. 'But I can't understand the circus people letting him go with them—if he's gone!'

'May have taken him as a curiosity,' suggested Skinner. 'After all, Bunter is rather unique. May be taking him as the Fattest Freak on Record, or something like that. There are people who would pay sixpence just to see Bunter.'

'Fathead!'

'They may bill him as Bunter the Boy Barrel, you know—'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'I can't make it out,' said Harry. 'But if Bunter is with the circus he's got to be got away from it. If he doesn't come back and take his licking he will be sacked.'

'The sackfulness is an esteemed cert,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'But the esteemed Bunter may not understand that. His understandfulness is not terrific.'

'Lantham!' said Bob Cherry thoughtfully. 'I hear that Wingate spotted the circus on the road to Lantham. We could do it on the bikes.'

Harry Wharton nodded.

'I was thinking of that. What about going after them? A circus travels slowly, and we may pick them up this side of Lantham. If Bunter's there, we may be able to make the fat idiot see sense. I don't suppose it's even crossed his silly mind that he may be sacked for this.'

'Let's!' said Johnny Bull.

After a few minutes' discussion the Famous Five decided on it. If they were late back for lock-up it meant lines, or perhaps a licking in Quelchy's present mood; but they were really concerned for the fatuous Owl of the Remove. If he was with the circus he might have dodged out of Wingate's sight, but he might listen to fellows of his own Form. And it was a pleasant summer's day, and a bike spin was not unattractive.

So the Famous Five wheeled out their bicycles immediately after tea and started.

The circus, with its train of caravans, baggage-vans, cages, and other paraphernalia, was certain to travel very slowly. It had left Courtfield in the morning, but quite probably it was not at Lantham yet. And the juniors covered the ground very quickly on their machines.

How and why Bunter could possibly be with the circus they did not understand. It seemed incredible that Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles would allow a runaway schoolboy to travel with his show. But it was certain that

Wingate had been sent after the circus to inquire for Bunter, so evidently Mr. Quelch though he was there. Anyhow, the Famous Five were going to see. They did not pick up the circus on the hitherside of Lantham. They arrived at that town and headed for a field where, as they knew from past experience, circuses had often camped. But no circus was there. It appeared that Whiffles' World-Famous Circus had not stopped. Yet the circus was widely billed and advertised to stop a week at Lantham after its stay at Courtfield. The whole thing was puzzling. Mr. Whiffles had not only cut short the stay at Courtfield, after a single day's performance, but had cut out Lantham. It looked as if he was in rather a hurry to get out of the district altogether.

But the chums of the Remove were not to be beaten.

'Keep on—what?' said Bob.

'It means getting back late and getting into a row,' said Harry Wharton. 'But now we've come ten miles we're not going back without seeing what is what! Let's keep on.'

'The keep-onfulness is the proper caper,' agreed Hurree Singh. And they kept on.

The World-Famous Circus naturally attracted a lot of attention wherever it passed, and it was easy enough to pick up information. Plenty of people had seen the procession, and could point out the way it had gone.

Fast on its track rode the five cyclists from Greyfriars—so far out of school bounds now that they hardly liked to think how far they were. Still, if they brought the Owl of the Remove back with them it would be all right. For their own sakes now, as well as Bunter's, they hoped that they would be able to bring him back.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! There's the show!' exclaimed Bob Cherry at last, pointing to a distant field along the winding country road.

There it was—tents and caravans—backed by the setting sun. No performance was on; no strain of music reached their ears. The circus had apparently just camped for the night, and not to give a show. But the juniors were glad to see it, and they rode up to the camp, a little tired and dusty, but hopeful. If Bunter was there—

No Bunter!

'BEASTS!'

Billy Bunter was there.

He was not recognisable by his nearest relation, but he was there—as large as life, though not so natural.

A fat gentleman in curly long hair, pointed beard, waxed moustaches, and remarkable clothes, with a bell-trimmed silk hat on his ample locks, was the first figure to catch the eyes of Harry Wharton and Co. as they came up. They caught his eyes at the same time, and he ejaculated 'Beasts!' before they were in hearing.

Bunter walked quickly towards his van. He decided to let his underlings deal with these interfering beasts, who were butting in when he thought he had seen the last of them.

But the Famous Five were not to be denied. Mr. Whiffles was the man they wanted. They left their bicycles in a bunch and cut across to intercept the

circus proprietor.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, Mr. Whiffles!' exclaimed Bob Cherry. Mr. Whiffles the Second stopped. He had to stop, with five fellows standing in his path, He frowned at them.

'Look here—'

'Good-evening, Mr. Whiffles!' said Wharton, raising his cap Politely.

'Oh, rats!'

'What!'

'Hook it! You're not wanted here.'

'We've come for Bunter,' said Harry Wharton. 'A fellow belonging to our school is travelling with your circus, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Rot!'

'We've come to take him back to Greyfriars.'

'Rubbish!'

'Look here, Mr. Whiffles———'

'Rats!'

'Is Bunter here?' demanded Wharton his temper rising a little. Give us a plain answer, sir. We've a right to know.'

'Oh, go and eat coke!'

'If you've got a runaway schoolboy here, you'll get landed in trouble,' said Johnny Bull. 'You're not allowed to help a fellow run away from school.'

'Its jolly plain he's here,' said Frank Nugent. 'Look here, Mr. Whiffles. You can cut up as rusty as you like, but we've come here for Billy Bunter, and we're not going back without him.'

'You jolly well are!' answered the proprietor of the world- famous circus. 'You get out! See? I don't want schoolboys hanging about here!'

'We want Bunter!' snapped Wharton. 'I can see that he's here all right, though goodness knows why. What on earth do you want the silly chump for?'

'Silly chump yourself!' snapped the fat gentleman. 'I can jolly well tell you that if you had half Bunter's brains you'd do a lot better. Besides, he isn't here. I've never heard of him, in fact. Who is he?'

The juniors gazed at Mr. Whiffles.

'Look here, sir,' exclaimed Harry sharply. 'This won't do. You know jolly well who Bunter is, as Wingate came inquiring after him to-day.'

'Who's Wingate?'

'A Sixth Form man of Greyfriars. He—'

'What's Greyfriars?'

'Eh? That's our school.'

'Never heard of it,' said Mr. Whiffles.

'You never heard of Greyfriars?' roared Bob Cherry.

'No.'

'Well, my hat!'

'And I don't want to hear of it, or of you either,' pursued Mr. Whiffles. 'I'm fed-up with you! I shall have to stand you next term.'

'What?'

'I—I mean—' Mr. Whiffles stammered. 'Look here. Bunter's not here. He's gone home. He went home this morning. See?'

'He's done nothing of the sort,' said the captain of the Remove, 'and your trying to cover up shows that he's here. We want you to hand him over, Mr. Whiffles, so that we can take him back with us.'

'No jolly fear!' said Mr. Whiffles promptly. 'Quelchy's too jolly wild for that! My only hat! Do you mean you're keeping him here because he's got a licking coming to him when he gets back?'

'Yes—I mean, no. I don't know anything about him. The fact is, I never heard of the fellow. Never heard the name in my life; Now get out. Bunter's not here. You can take my word for that.'

'Take your word!' gasped Wharton. 'I think I'd just as soon take Bunter's. Look here, Mr. Whiffles, we want Bunter; and if you don't hand him over, the headmaster of Greyfriars will send a bobby to fetch him. Haven't you sense enough to see that?'

'Oh, lor!'

Mr. Whiffles blinked at the captain of the Remove in dismay, evidently startled by that suggestion.

'But—but— I tell you he's not here! He can stay here if he likes, I suppose? Besides, he isn't here. He—he——' The fat gentleman gasped. 'Now I come to think of it, he's dead.'

'Dead!' yelled the juniors.

'Yes. Run over by a lorry in Courtfield this morning. You'll find him at the—the hospital. He was killed instantly by the motor-lorry running right over him! A—a very sad case! I—I saw him being taken to the hospital. His groans were awful!'

'His groans were awful when he was dead?' gasped Bob Cherry. 'Oh, my only summer hat!'

'I—I mean, his—his groans weren't awful! I mean they would have been awful if—if he hadn't been dead! That's what I really meant to say. Now you fellows clear off. I suppose you can take my word?'

'Great Christopher Columbus!'

The juniors did not take Mr. Whiffles' word. His statements were rather too mixed for that, too reminiscent of the kind of statements Bunter was wont to make in times of difficulty.

'I don't know why you're handing out these whoppers, Mr. Whiffles,' said Harry, 'but I suppose you don't expect us to believe them! You've got Bunter here, and you've got to hand him over—see! Where is he?'

'Looks as if Bunter's been kidnapped,' said Bob Cherry, in Wonder. 'But what could they want to kidnap him for? He's here right enough.'

'The herefulness is terrific.'

By this time a crowd of circus hands had gathered round. Mr. Dance stepped forward. His eyes had been fixed in a very penetrating way on his 'boss,' but now he looked at the juniors.

'What is the boy like who is missing from your school?' he asked.

'A short, fat fellow—just like Mr. Whiffles in build,' said Harry Wharton.

'Oh!' exclaimed Dance.

Bunter felt a shiver run down his back. He had suspected before that Dance suspected something. Now it flashed into his mind as a certainty. It was neck or nothing again.

'Get out of this; Dance!' He exclaimed. 'What the thump are you butting in for? You'll jolly soon be sacked at this rate! Clear off!'

'Mr. Whiffles—'

Mr. Dance obediently cleared off, but there was a glimmer in his eyes as he

went that might have alarmed Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles the Second had he seen it. But Bunter was only too glad to see him go. For the moment he dreaded discovery and denunciation.

'Now, you men, clear those schoolboys away!' he exclaimed. 'See them off the field! They're cheeky! Kick them out!'

'Look here, Mr. Whiffles—'

'Shut up!'

'If you don't hand Bunter over—'

'Cheese it! Turn them out!' roared Mr. Whiffles. 'Kick them out! Chase them off the field! Kick them hard!'

'Right you are, guv'nor!' said George.

Harry Wharton and Co. beat a rather hasty retreat to their bicycles. They had come to the circus for Bunter, but a free fight with a crowd of rough circus hands was not on the programme. Mr. Whiffles blinked after them triumphantly as they went.

'Kick them out!' he roared. 'Yah! Go back to Quelchy and tell him from me to go and eat coke! Tell the Head to go and eat coke! Yah!'

Forgetting the dignity of a circus proprietor, Billy Bunter grabbed up a cabbage-stump and hurled it after the retreating juniors.

'Ow!' ejaculated Bob Cherry.

It was a thick and heavy stump, and Bob caught it with his neck. 'He, he, he!' chuckled Mr. Whiffles. The cabbage-stump was in Bob's hand the next moment, and the next returning to Mr. Whiffles. It landed on Mr. Whiffles' extensive waistcoat.

'Yoooooop!'

The circus-master sat down. He sat down heavily.

'Yow-ow-ow-ow! Grooogh! Ooooch! Whoooooop!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Grooogh! Oooooop!'

Leaving Mr. Whiffles the Second gasping and spluttering wildly, the chums of the Remove mounted their bicycles and pedalled away.

'Grooogh! Ow! I'm winded! Wow! Beasts! Oooooch!' gasped Bunter. 'Ow-owl Wow-w-wow! Oooooo!'

Sympathetic hands helped Mr. Whiffles into the blue and red caravan, where he collapsed into a chair and gasped and spluttered and spluttered and gasped, and his faithful followers left him there, and did not grin till their backs were turned.

Meanwhile, Harry Wharton and Co. pedalled back to Lantham, and took the road to Greyfriars. They had learned as an absolute certainty that Bunter was at the circus; Mr. Whiffles' denials left no doubt on that point. Getting him away was quite another matter, but at least they could report at Greyfriars that there was no doubt now where he was. Darkness had fallen by the time they passed Lantham, and they lighted their lamps and rode on to Greyfriars—not in the happiest moods, in spite of their success in locating Bunter. It was already time for prep, and they were still ten miles from the school.

It was bed-time before they reached Greyfriars.

In a dusty, tired crowd, they arrived at the school gates and rang up the porter.

Gosling came grunting down to let them in.

'Pretty goings hon!' said Gosling. 'Which you're to report yourselves to Mr.

Quelch at once! Wot I says is this 'ere—'

'Oh, rats!' said Bob.

And the Famous Five walked wearily across to the House to report themselves to their Form-master.

The Sad Case of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles!

BILLY BUNTER was sleeping soundly.

From the red-and-blue caravan in the circus encampment proceeded a deep and reverberating snore, indicating that William George Bunter was cosily tucked away in the arms of Morpheus.

In caravans and tents the circus slept round him. All was Peaceful in the encampment under the stars, in the field five miles from Lantham, fifteen from Greyfriars. Fifteen miles from Greyfriars, Bunter could sleep in peace. He was safe from fussy Form-masters at that distance.

But there was one, at least, who was not slumbering in the encampment of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus.

Mr. Dance, the manager, was wide awake.

Mr. Dance was the only member of the circus company who had his doubts about Mr. Whiffles.

They were vague doubts, and did not amount by any means to certainty. But Dance was suspicious—very suspicious.

He was loitering now close by the blue-and-red caravan, listening to the hefty snore that proceeded therefrom.

That reverberating snore was a new development on the part of Whiffles. It was quite an uncommon snore—it was a Brobding-nagian snore.

Dance listened; shook his head, and then moved away at last to the baggage caravan.

He stopped at the window and looked in.

From within he met the glance of two eyes that gleamed with wrath. Mr.

Dance was not the only wakeful person in the camp after all. The occupant of the locked van leaped to the window.

'Dance!' he gasped.

The manager eyed him curiously.

'Well?' he said.

'Dance, you know who I am,' said the prisoner of the locked van hoarsely.

'You know I'm Whiffles.'

'Mr. Whiffles is fast asleep in his van now,' said Dance.

'The villain! The impostor! The rascal!'

'Is that all?' asked Dance calmly.

'He is an impostor!' hissed the man in the locked van. 'I tell you he isn't Whiffles! I don't know who he is! Some wretch— some dastard—some designing scoundrel—'

'Don't wake the camp!'

'I tell you I'm Whiffles!' howled the man in the locked van. 'Don't you know my voice, Dance?'

'Your voice is just like his,' said Dance. 'If you call it a voice—a fat squeak!'

'Look here, Dance, surely you know me! You know I'm Whiffles! Let me out of

this van and seize that impostor.'

'How can you be Whiffles?' said Dance calmly. 'Whiffles has a head of hair like a mane—you're as bald as a billiard ball. Whiffles has a beard and moustache—your face is as smooth as glass.'

Mr. Whiffles panted.

'Don't you see? I kept it a secret—I hated to let anybody know! But it can't be helped now. It was a wig.'

'Sounds a tall story!' said Dance, shaking his head. 'I don't see how another man could get hold of your fixings, even if what you say is true.'

Mr. Whiffles groaned.

'It was all through my going for a swim when the circus was at Courtfield. I left my clothes and—and other things hidden in a thicket by the river. That villain—that thief—that rascal—that dastard—found them, and—and put them on, and—and walked off as me.'

'Oh gad!' ejaculated Dance.

He understood now.

'That's how I came to be hanging about in a bathing-suit and a towel,' groaned Whiffles. 'I—I never imagined, of course, the game the rascal was playing. I hung about till late at night, to get back unseen. I—I didn't want to be seen without my—my fixings. And—and then I found that—that villainous impostor in my place, and—all the silly fools thought I was a lunatic because I didn't look like myself and he did.'

Dance grinned.

'You understand now?' asked Mr. Whiffles hopefully. 'Let me out of this, Dance! I—I—I'll double your salary.'

'Indeed!'

'And—and give you a contract. I—I never really meant to sack you when—when I said I would the other day. It was only— only my fun!' murmured the unhappy Mr. Whiffles.

Dance smiled, not a pleasant smile.

'Sure it was only your fun?' he asked.

'Yes. At least, I take it back! If—if I hinted that I thought there was something amiss in your accounts, I—I was only just talking out of my hat! I—I know you're honest!'

'Sure of that?' smiled Dance.

'Oh! Quite! Anyhow, I'll give you an engagement for as long as you like, at any salary you fix! There! Only stand by me now.'

Dance eyed him curiously.

He had no further doubt that it was Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles who was locked up in the baggage van.

But he had very great doubts as to whether Mr. Whiffles would remember all this, and stick to it, if he was released and restored to his rightful power and glory.

Whiffles locked in the van, and supposed to be a lunatic by all the circus company—and Whiffles on the high horse again—were likely to prove two very different personages! Mr. Dance, in fact, knew his Whiffles!

'I mean it!' said Mr. Whiffles. 'Only stand by me now, Dance! Help me get rid of that villainous impostor! Stand by me! I'll be Your friend for life! As forsaking you, old fellow, I'd never dream of it! I'm a man of my word! You know that.'

'The trouble is, I hardly think I do,' said Dance coolly. Suppose you're

Whiffles, as you say—'

'I am! I swear—'

'Never mind that! Suppose you're Whiffles, you'd be more likely to kick me out for helping to lock you in this van than to give me a long engagement at double salary. Don't you think so?'

'I—I—'

'If You're Whiffles, conceit is your strong point,' remarked Dance casually.

'Swank, you know! Gas!' 'You impudent rogue—I—I—I mean, look here, my best friend—'

'You don't keep your word—if you're Whiffles,' said Dance, shaking his head.

'Look how you treated that man Huggins, a few months ago.'

'Never mind Huggins—'

'You sacked him for pilfering from your van,' persisted Dance 'That was all right! But you told him you wouldn't prosecute— and then you did, and got him three months.'

'He was threatening me—and he was a hulking ruffian,' pleaded Mr. Whiffles.

'I had to get him out of reach before I had him run in. He was a prize-fighter, and he was going to knock my head off! Be reasonable.'

'You promised him—'

'It wasn't exactly a promise,' urged the wretched Whiffles, 'Besides, he was standing over me with his enormous fist clenched—what could a man do?'

'You broke that promise!' said Dance ruthlessly.

'Well, perhaps I did—come to think of it! But consider the circumstances—a hulking prize-fighter with his fist only an inch from my nose, threatening to knock my head off! I had to be—hem—tactful! In these circumstances, I couldn't do anything but promise.'

'And in these, too?' suggested Dance.

'Oh! Ah! No—you see—' stammered Mr. Whiffles.

'I remember you—if you're Whiffles—explaining afterwards that a promise given under duress wasn't binding.'

Mr. Whiffles groaned dismally.

He had quite forgotten the episode of Bill Huggins, and did not like to be reminded of it now. It was rather awkward.

'Don't you think—if you're Whiffles—you'll forget all about these promises to me—and let me down afterwards?' smiled Dance. 'Same as you did with the Huggins man.'

'I—I—I—' stuttered Mr. Whiffles.

'I'll think over the matter,' grinned Dance. 'Of course, if you're really Whiffles, I'm bound to see justice done. But you don't look like Whiffles. You don't look like him the least little bit! The cove in the caravan yonder does, you see.'

Better go to sleep.'

'Dance—I—'

Mr. Dance walked away.

He returned to his own van and entered it. There was a cheery grin on his face. Dance seemed to find something entertaining in Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles dismounted from his high horse. He closed the door of his caravan and turned in.

Friend or Foe?

BILLY BUNTER was still sleeping the sleep of the just.

Probably the Owl of Greyfriars would not have slept so soundly, could he have known of the interview that had taken place between 'his' manager and the real Mr. Whiffles.

Fortunately, he did not know, and his slumber was peaceful and undisturbed. Bunter was dreaming happy dreams.

In his new character of a circus boss, he was going to cut the last days of the term at Greyfriars, and he was going to enjoy a topping holiday.

If there were troublesome consequences to follow, the consideration of those consequences could be put off till they came along. That was Bunter's happy way.

So he slept peacefully; and Dance, now that he had satisfied himself as to how that peculiar change of identity had come about, slept peacefully also.

Only one member of the encampment remained awake, and that was the dismal gentleman in the locked van.

In the circumstances, Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles found it hard to close his eyes in slumber.

Of course, the present state of affairs could not continue. He told himself that over and over again. The villainous impostor would be shown up; the circus boss would come into his right again. The future was all right! But the present was dismal.

Mr. Whiffles was dressed, negligently, in some discarded clothes that had been put in the van for him. They were quite unlike his own expensive and remarkable clothes. But he had been glad of them. He had become quite tired of a bathing towel as attire.

In corduroy trousers, thick boots, and a cheap pullover, he did not feel like Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles, and certainly he did not look like him. His gleaming bald head was the least of all like the head of Mr. Whiffles, never seen in public without its ample nut-brown lock. His smooth face bore no resemblance to the bearded, moustached face that was so familiar at the circus.

There was not a hair on it. Mr. Whiffles was one of those men whom nature had denied such adornments. Some men would have been glad to have been saved the daily labour of shaving. But is human nature to want exactly the thing that cannot be had. Mr. Whiffles gazed dismally from the little window of the locked van, the starlight glimmering on his shining scalp.

Vanity was the fat gentleman's weakness; and by vanity he had been undone! If only that rascal Dance had let him out! If only some member of the company had sense enough to listen to him instead of regarding his statements as the wanderings of a benighted lunatic!

He was tempted to yell and awaken the whole camp. But he had tried that before, and a bottle hurled by an angry man awakened from sleep had narrowly missed him.

He had to wait till morning—though the morning promised little hope.

Suddenly, as he stared from the window, Mr. Whiffles became aware of a lurking shadow among the vans.

A thick-set, burly man was moving stealthily about, in a manner that showed at once that he did not belong to the camp.

Mr. Whiffles' heart beat.

If it was some sneak-thief, a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, Mr. Whiffles would be glad to see him, all the same. He would have been glad to see anybody who might have let him out of that van. The key was in the outside of the door, if only there were somebody to turn it.

His eyes glistened.

The creeping, shadowy figure skulked by the locked van. Even in the dimness there seemed something familiar to Mr. Whiffles in that thick-set, hulking figure. But the man's movements showed that he did not belong to the circus. 'Hist!'

Mr. Whiffles breathed the word cautiously.

The lurking figure started violently and spun round. He stood staring at the face of Mr. Whiffles framed in the little window.

Then he made a rapid step towards the van.

"Old your row!" he hissed, "Just a word and I'll smash you!"

Mr. Whiffles stared at him.

There had seemed something familiar in the lurking figure. The face was quite familiar.

It was a face of the bulldog type, with deep-set eyes and square jaw, and its beauty was not enhanced by the fact that the nose was broken. It was an ugly, grim, threatening face—and, worst of all, was the face of that very prize-fighter Bill Huggins, whom Mr. Whiffles had sent to three months' hard labour. Evidently the three months had elapsed, and Mr. Huggins was free again. Whiffles did not need telling why he had made use of his freedom to come back to the circus—sneaking into the camp when all were sleeping. He could guess that.

He gazed at Huggins in terror.

Mr. Whiffles was a pompous gentleman. He was an important gentleman. He was an impressive gentleman. But he was not a courageous gentleman. His heart sank almost into his boots at the sight of that bulldog face and broken nose. He knew the size and the weight of Bill Huggins' fist. He trembled.

Huggins stared at him.

It dawned upon Mr. Whiffles that there was no recognition in the ruffian's look. He did not know Whiffles—any more than anybody else knew him in his present plucked condition.

'Oh!' gasped Whiffles.

"Old your row!" growled the man. "You 'ear me? Shut it! You let out a howl and I'll cave in that bald head o' yours! See?"

Whiffles gasped again. The man did not know him, that was certain. For the first time since this strange adventure had befallen him Mr. Whiffles was glad that he no longer presented his customary aspect. Within reach of Bill Huggins' leg-of-mutton fist he could not look too unlike Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles.

'I ain't going to 'urt you,' went on Huggins. 'I ain't 'ere to pinch nothing! I'm looking for a bloke. See? 'Old your row!'

Mr. Whiffles did not need to ask the name of the bloke. He knew that only too well.

A gleam came into his eyes.

A villainous impostor had taken his name and identity. That impostor might as well take also the terrific thrashing that Bill Huggins intended for Mr. Whiffles.

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

He grinned at the thought.

'Look here,' he whispered. 'I'm locked in this van. Let me out and I'll keep quiet. See? Turn the key back!'

Huggins stared at him in astonishment.

'You locked in?' he breathed.

'Yes, yes!'

'Pinching something?' asked Huggins.

'Nunno! It—it's all a mistake—'

Huggins grinned.

'I ketch on!' he assented. 'That old bloke Whiffles has had you locked in this 'ere van, I s'pose, to 'and you over to the police tomorrow, what?'

'Yes, exactly!' gasped Mr. Whiffles.

'Well, look 'ere, I'll let you out if you'll show me his van,' said Bugging. 'I've come 'ere to smash him!' 'Oh!'

'I'm going to bash his face right through the back of his 'ead!'

'Oh!' gasped Mr. Whiffles again.

'I'm going to make 'im a 'orspital case! I'm going to bash the stuffing right out of 'im! See?'

Until the dangerous ruffian was once more in the hands of the police Mr. Whiffles did not want to resume his own identity. He dared not! No disguise could be too deep for him so long as Bill Huggins was at liberty and on the trail of vengeance.

'Is it a go?' growled the broken-nosed man. 'You 'elp me get at that fat old 'ound, and if you've got anything agin him I'll give him some for you as well. See? I'm going to smash him into tiny small pieces! I'll do another three months for him! I'll do six! Just show me where he is, and, s'elp me, he'll want 'arf a 'orspital to put him together agin!'

Mr. Whiffles shuddered.

'Oh! Ah! Yes! Right!' he gasped.

The bruiser went round the caravan, and Mr. Whiffles heard the door unlock. It opened.

'Ere you are, matey!' said Mr. Huggins.

The fat circus proprietor stepped out. He could scarcely restrain the impulse to take to his heels on the spot. But a strong grasp—so strong that it intensified his terror—closed on his arm.

'Now, then, take me to Whiffles!' growled Huggins.

'Oh! Yes! Ow! T-t-this way!' stammered Mr. Whiffles.

He led the ruffian to the blue-and-red caravan. From its interior came a deep and resonant snore.

'He's in there!' breathed Whiffles. 'That—that's Whiffles' van. It's been repainted since you left the circus.'

'Eh? You know I was at this 'ere circus, do you? I don't remember your dial!' growled Huggins, staring at him.

Mr. Whiffles trembled.

'No! I—I mean—I thought—'

'Sure that's the van? I don't remember hearing old Whiffles snore like that afore.'

'Yes—yes, that's it!'

'Orlright!'

Bill Huggins turned to the van. Mr. Whiffles backed away round another van,

and the instant he was out of Huggins' sight he took to his heels. He was not thinking now of reclaiming his identity—very much he did not want to reclaim his identity. He only wanted to get quite clear, lest Huggins should discover his mistake—and to keep quite clear until he was absolutely certain that Huggins was arrested again. The darkness swallowed up the fleeing Whiffles; and Bill Huggins, with vengeance in his eyes, stepped stealthily up the steps of the caravan in which William George Bunter slept the sleep of the just.

A Wild Night for Bunter!

BILLY BUNTER awoke.

It was no sound of alarm, no anticipation of danger, no sort of misgiving at all that wakened him.

He just woke.

He was thirsty. Perhaps it was thirst that awakened him. It was not surprising that he was thirsty; his supper had been rich and varied and extensive, and he had had a few pounds of ginger biscuits as a snack after supper before turning in. Ginger is thirst-provoking. On the table beside the bed in the caravan, however, many things had been placed in readiness in case the 'boss' should want anything before morning. On his way through Lantham the van had stopped at a shop for supplies, On Bunter's table were plates and dishes, with jam-tarts, a cake, bunches of varied fruits, Swiss roll, sausage rolls, all sorts of things. Likewise there was a tumbler, and a bottle of lemonade, a bottle of orangeade, a bottle of limejuice cordial, and a soda syphon. If the boss awakened hungry or thirsty there was ample to supply both wants.

It was dark inside the caravan, and Bunter did not dream of lighting the lamp. That would have entailed some exertion.

Not much, but some, and Bunter did not like any.

He blinked through the gloom, sitting up in bed, and groped. His groping fingers came in contact with a pile of juicy jam-tarts.

Be was groping for something to drink. But he could not resist the jam-tarts. Leaving his thirst to take care of itself for the moment, he negotiated the tarts. One after another they vanished like oysters. He was not really hungry, so a dozen tarts satisfied him. He gave a little fat grunt of satisfaction. This was better than Greyfriars. There was nothing in the Remove dormitory if a fellow woke up with that empty feeling Bunter knew so well. A fellow wasn't even allowed to smuggle tuck into the dormitory. Things were better at Whiffles' World-Famous Circus—for the boss, at least.

Having disposed of the tarts, Bunter was thirstier than before. He found the tumbler, half-filled it with lemonade, and then took the syphon. That made a very pleasant, cooling drink on a hot night. His eyes were accustomed to the gloom by this time, and he prepared to swish the soda-water into the tumbler. All of a sudden he stopped, and his blink turned in the direction of the door. The door was opening.

Of Bill Huggins and his three months' hard, and his vendetta against Mr. Whiffles, Bunter, of course, knew nothing. He was not at all aware that he had taken on the liabilities as well as the assets of the circus boss. One terrifying

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thought was in his fat mind as the door swung back and a shadowy figure appeared—Whiffles had escaped from the locked van and was coming after him!

Bunter had no doubt about it, and he sat frozen with terror.

He did not know, perhaps, what he deserved at Mr. Whiffles' hands. But he knew what he would get.

The dim figure stepped into the van.

'Ow!' gasped Bunter.

There was a horrible chuckle.

'Awake, are you, guv'nor?'

Bunter started.

It was not Whiffles' voice. And now that the man was in the van, he could see that it was not Mr. Whiffles' short, podgy figure. It was quite a hefty and powerful man who was groping towards the bed.

'Who—who are you?' stuttered Bunter.

That horrible chuckle again.

'You don't remember me, guv'nor?'

'Nunno!' gasped Bunter.

'Bill 'Uggins, what you sent to prison for three months.'

'I—I didn't—'

'And what's going to cave in your face, guv'nor!'

'I—I say, I—I didn't—I say, I'm not Whiffles!' gasped Bunter.

'I—I'm somebody else!'

'Are you?' growled Huggins. 'Well, if that shiny-'eaded bloke has pulled my leg I'll look out for 'im and cave in his face, too! Let's 'ave a look at you!'

A match struck.

Bunter sat in the bed, clutching the soda syphon, frozen with horror.

He saw a bulldog face, with a broken nose, a square jaw, and glittering little piggy eyes. It was a face that, at close quarters, late at night, might have shaken a stronger nerve than Bunters. Huggins looked like a man who had done hard labour, and ought to have done a lot more.

Bunter looked like Mr. Whiffles. He dared not take off his disguise when he turned in. Accidents might happen. Night and day he was bound to wear the aspect of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles if he was not to risk discovery. The wig was crumpled— his beard and moustache a little askew. But there he was—Mr. Whiffles to the life!

The match went out. Bunter would have preferred Mr. Huggins to go out. But only the match went out, and Mr. Huggins remained. He chuckled again that horrible blood-curdling chuckle.

'It's you all right, guv'nor! Make up your mind to it! You can 'owl if you like.

'Owl out all you want to. It won't 'elp you. More they can come 'ere I'll 'ave you looking as if you was run over by a lorry! You don't know yet wot it's like to 'ave your nose drove through the back of your 'ead! You're just going to find out!'

Bunter quaked.

This was not better than Greyfriars.

This was worse.

Mr. Quelch, in his most ferocious tantrum, was nothing to this.

The ruffian loomed over the bed, and in a moment more Bunter's fat little nose would have started on its travels towards the back of his head—a frightfully

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

disagreeable experience for any fellow's nose!

Hardly knowing what he did, Bunter shoved forward the soda syphon that was clutched in his fat hand, squeezing it. From the nozzle shot a stream of soda-water, like a jet from a hose. It was the only weapon Bunter had, and he used it without stopping to think. Fortunately, it was effective.

Swish! Swizz! Squish! Splash!

The stream of soda-water caught Bill Huggins fairly in his glaring eyes. There was a gurgling howl from Huggins. He staggered back, howling and spluttering. Soda-water in the eyes is most unpleasant.

Swizzzzzz!

'Help!' roared Bunter as he squirted. 'Help! Burglars! Thieves! Police! Murder! Fire! Help! Fire! Fire! Help!'

Bunter's voice rang far and wide.

Huggins, staggering blindly, caught at the little table, and it collapsed in his heavy grasp. He sat down violently on the floor of the caravan, and the table rolled over him with its contents. Dishes of tarts and cream puffs, plates of sandwiches, and cakes, and fruits, bottles of various refreshing drinks rained on the sprawling Huggins. He yelled and howled and roared like a bull.

There was a painful squeak from the syphon as it exhausted its contents. But it had saved Bunter.



There was a gurgling howl from Huggins

He knew that the ruffian was sprawling, and he leaped from the bed. His foot landed on Huggins' face, and he slipped over and sat down. Fortunately for him, though not for the avenging Huggins, he sat on the ruffian's waistcoat. An agonised gasp exuded from Huggins. Bunter's weight, suddenly dropping on his waistcoat, completely winded him. He lay in anguish, gasping for the breath that would not come. Bunter scrambled up wildly, dropping the syphon, which found a momentary resting-place on Huggins' nose, and then rolled off, Bunter leaped for the door.

'Help! Help! Fire! Murder!' yelled Bunter.

He leaped from the van.

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There were shouts and exclamations on all sides now. Men came running up from caravans and tents.

'Help! Help! Murder! Fire!'

'Wot's the row, guv'nor?' gasped George Mix. 'That blooming lunatic got out, sir?'

'Ow! Help! Help!' roared Burner. 'He's in the van! Collar him! A fearful ruffian! Wow!'

Huggins, in the van, scrambled to his feet, gasping and spluttering. He was a hefty man, but he had got the worst of that encounter with the Owl of Greyfriars. He had a severe pain in his inward regions, and his breath came in agonised gasps.

He glared out of the van, and beheld nearly everybody belonging to the circus gathering at the spot. Bunter, a rather conspicuous figure in flowery blue-and-pink pyjamas, was darting away towards Dance's van. Dance, half dressed, had come running out.

'What?' he gasped.

Bunter did not answer.

He bolted into Dance's van, dragged the door shut, and locked it. The manager stared after him in amazement.

'It's Huggins!' suddenly shouted Nobby Nobbs, the clown.

The broken-nosed man made a leap from the caravan. Huggins realised that there was nothing doing that night, so far as his vengeance on Mr. Whiffles was concerned. He had already done enough to earn another three months, and he was thinking now only of escape. His settlement with Mr. Whiffles was unavoidably postponed.

He made a rush. Slaney made a grab at him, and was knocked over, and then Bill Huggins fled into the night.

He was gone.

But it was futile for Mr. Dance to call out to the refugee in his van that the ruffian was gone. Bunter was not moving. He was not taking any chances. He spent the remainder of that eventful night in Dance's van, and the door was not unlocked until the sun of the summer morning was shining down on the circus camp.

Not the Sack!

BILLY BUNTER had breakfasted, and felt at peace with the world. But after a good breakfast came bad news.

George Mix brought him the news.

'That loony's gone, sir!' he announced.

'Eh, what?' asked Bunter.

He was debating in his fat mind whether he had room for another bun. He hadn't. He sighed, and gave it up, and bestowed his lordly attention upon George.

'That loony, sir, what was locked in the baggage van,' said George. 'The door was unlocked by somebody, and—'

Bunter jumped.

'What?'

'And he's gone, sir!'

'Gone?'

'Vanished!' said George.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

The first part of George's news was startling. The second part was astounding.

That Whiffles, if he was loose again, was gone, was good news. But why he was gone was rather perplexing. If Mr. Whiffles had cleared off, leaving his identity and his circus to Bunter, nothing could have happened better. But it certainly was a very strange proceeding on Mr. Whiffles' part.

'Sure he's gone?' asked Bunter.

'Quite sure, sir! P'r'aps he's back in the asylum by now,' said George. 'I couldn't help feeling sorry for that pore feller, sir, mad as a hatter, him thinking he was you, sir.'

'Oh! Ah! Yes. Poor fellow!' gasped Bunter. 'Send Dance to me, George!'

'Yes, guv'nor!'

Whiffles was gone. That was so much to the good. And Dance was to go that morning. Bunter could not help thinking that the manager suspected something. Exactly how much he suspected, how much he knew, Bunter could not guess; but he knew he would feel safer with the man off the scene. Getting rid of him was easy. He had only to sack him. So long as he was circus boss he could sack anybody he liked.

So Bunter leaned back in his chair, in Mr. Whiffles' caravan, with his fat thumbs in the arm-holes of Mr. Whiffles' fancy waistcoat, and waited for Dance to come 'on the carpet'.

Mr. Dance arrived.

'Good-morning, sir!' said the manager, in his suave, sleek way. Mr. Dance was a very sleek, suave gentleman.

'Er—good-morning, Dance!' said Bunter, in an off-hand way. 'I find that I shall not require your services any longer.'

'Indeed, Mr. Whiffles!'

'Sorry, and all that,' said Bunter airily. 'But there it is! I'm making some changes here. That's the first. Take a week's salary instead of notice. See?' 'I see!'

'You haven't handed over the paybox to me yet,' said Bunter. 'There were very good takings at Courtfield. We'll settle that matter now.'

'We'll settle several matters now, sir.'

'Nothing else to settle. Let's see! What am I paying you?' asked Bunter, with a negligent air. 'I quite forget! I never could remember trifles. Anyhow, you get a week's salary for nothing. I'd be glad if you'd get off this morning. No good hanging a thing out, you know!'

'No good at all,' assented Dance. 'We may as well come to business, Master Bunter!'

'Wha-a-at?'

A bombshell could not have startled Bunter more.

He had feared that Dance suspected something. Apparently Dance suspected more than he had dreamed.

He gazed at the sleek, dark manager in stupefaction.

If Dance had required any further proof, the astounded, terrified stare of the fat impostor would have provided it.

'Wha—a-at did you sa-a-ay?'

'Master Bunter!'

'I—I say, you know—' Bunter tried to pull himself together. 'I—I say, is that a—a—a joke?'

'Not at all, Master Bunter.'

'Wha-a-at are you calling me Bunter for? My name's Whiffles!' gasped the fat junior feebly.

'Let us come to business, my fine fellow,' said the manager quietly. 'I knew there was something wrong at the very start. Last night I talked to Whiffles and got the whole story. I put two and two together. His clothes and things were pinched while he was bathing. A fat fellow, about Whiffles' build, is missing from a school close by the spot. I may not be a good arithmetician in my accounts, but I can add two and two together. I found that you had a wig the first night you butted in. That put me on the scent. I know the whole bag of tricks now. I don't know why I don't send for a policeman to take you in charge, you rascally impostor!'

'Oh dear!'

Bunter collapsed like a burst bladder.

Dance eyed him ruthlessly. He had the fat impostor now where he wanted him.

'Well?' he said.

'It—it—it was really only a—a—a joke,' gasped Bunter. 'Not that you're right, you know. I deny it from beginning to end. I never stole any clothes, or anything. A fellow in a fix with a Form-master and a prefect after him might borrow a suit of clothes and a—a—a wig. I don't say he did, but he might. But, of course, I'm not Bunter! I—I never heard the name in my life. I'm Whiffles! I—I say, Dance, I'm not going to sack you, old chap!'

'Not?' asked Dance.

'Oh, no. Only my little joke!' groaned Bunter. 'I—I like you too much. You—you're such a nice chap, you know.'

'I'm glad to hear it,' said Dance. 'Anything more before I send a man for a constable?'

'Ow! I—I wouldn't do that!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I don't want to give the police a lot of trouble. They—they're a hard-working set of men, you know. I—I'd rather you didn't!'

'You cannot expect an honest man to enter into a scheme like this,' said Dance. 'I'm honest.'

'Are you?' gasped Bunter. 'You don't look it! I—I mean—'

'What?'

'I—I mean I—I know you're as honest as a burglar. I mean, as the day!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I'd trust you with anything. You needn't hand over that paybox; keep it. I—I'll trust you!'

'That's better,' said Dance grimly. 'And the sack is withdrawn?'

'Oh, yes! Rather! I'd like you to stay. I—I want you to stay. Do—do stay, old fellow!'

'If I'm still to treat you as Mr. Whiffles—'

'Yes,' gasped Bunter, with a gleam of hope. It dawned upon his fat brain that the manager had been frightening him, with the intention of making terms.

'Anything you like!'

'Very well. You may suit me better than the other Whiffles,' said Mr. Dance coolly. 'I'm willing to give you a chance to try.'

'Oh! Good! Fine!' gasped Bunter.

'I shall expect you not to butt into the item of accounts, as he did—'

'Certainly, old chap.'

'The paybox will be completely under my control.'

'Yes—anything you like.'

'I shall, of course, render you an account,' said Dance. 'You will not question it?'

'Never!'

'Good, so far! No more cheek and no more swank,' said Dance. 'You can swank around as much as you like with the others— none for me.'

'Oh, no! Nothing of the kind.'

George Mix came up to the van.

'Guv'nor—'

'Oh, yes! What—'

'Police officer wants to see you, sir.'

'Yaroooh!'

George stared.

'Go and bring him here, Mix!' snapped Mr. Dance; and the wondering George departed.

'Ow! Lemme gerrout of this van!' gasped Bunter. 'Gerrout of the way, you beast! I say—'

'You fat fool! It's only somebody come to inquire after the schoolboys.'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'Sure?'

'Yes, you idiot!'

'Oh, really, you know—'

'Shut up! Here he comes.'

George Mix was guiding Inspector Grimes, of Courtfield, to Mr. Whiffles' caravan. Bunter's fat heart quaked at the sight of him. But he pulled himself together, realising that Mr. Grimes could only have come to make inquiries about the junior missing from Greyfriars School. And even Mr. Grimes, keen as he was, was not likely to recognise that missing junior when he saw him.

Bunter is Boss!

'MR. M. WHIFFLES? Good-morning!'

Billy Bunter grinned.

That greeting from Inspector Grimes was more than enough to reassure him.

'Good-morning! Anything I can do for you?' asked Bunter in quite the manner of a busy but polite circus proprietor.

Mr. Dance stepped back. He watched Bunter very curiously. For his own sake, if not for Bunter's, Dance hoped that the spoofer would have the nerve to carry on. It suited Mr. Dance ever so much better to have a boss who was under his thumb, instead of a boss under whose thumb he was. Little errors in Dance's accounts, which would have been difficult to explain to the genuine Whiffles, did not need explaining to the spoof Whiffles.

He need not have doubted Bunter in this case. When there was no danger Bunter was as brave as a lion. There was no danger now, so Bunter's nerve was unbounded.

'George!' rapped out Bunter.

'Yessir!'

'Bring Inspector Grimes a chair.'

The inspector sat down. Mr. Whiffles' van was roomy. In the daytime the bed was transformed into a sofa with a gorgeous silk cover. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles did himself luxuriously in his travelling quarters. If his taste ran rather to gorgeousness, at least it gave an impression of wealth. Bunter pushed a box of Mr. Whiffles' expensive cigars across the little walnut table to the inspector, who smiled and shook his head.

'Thank you, sir, no! I have called to inquire about a schoolboy named Bunter, who is supposed to be here.'

'A schoolboy, named Bunter,' Bunter repeated. 'I think I have heard that name. Did you say Bunter or Punter?'

'Bunter—W. G. Bunter, to be exact.'

'Dance!' called out the Owl of the Remove.

Mr. Dance stepped to the door of the van. He had not gone out of hearing.

'Here, Mr. Whiffles.'

'You remember some schoolboys came along yesterday, asking me questions about some boy who was missing. Was the name Bunter?'

'I think so, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Very good. The—the boy, of course, is not here, inspector,' said the boss of the circus. 'I really can't make out why he is supposed to be here. What's the idea?'

'It seems that the young donkey ran away from school,' explained the inspector.

'The—the what?'

'This young donkey, Bunter.'

'Oh, ah! Yes. He ran away from school, did he?' gasped the Owl. 'I—I see. Bad treatment from a Form-master, I suppose?'

'Oh, no! Mere fatuous folly, I conclude,' said Mr. Grimes.

'Oh, do you?' ejaculated Bunter. 'I—I mean, no doubt! Just so! I suppose old Quelch is frightfully ratty—what?'

'Eh?'

'I mean, Mr. Quelch! I think that's the name—Quelchy, or Squelch, or something of the sort. Or is it Welch?'

'Quelch,' said the inspector. 'Mr. Quelch seems assured that the boy is here, and his schoolfriends have the same belief. Can you give me any information concerning the boy, Mr. Whiffles?'

'Fraid not,' said Bunter regretfully. 'Dance!'

'Yes, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Can you give Mr. Grimes any information about a boy named Bunter, who has run away from school?'

'No, sir—none.'

'Does anybody in my circus know anything of the—the young rascal?'

'So far as I know, nobody, sir.'

'Well, Mr. Grimes, there seems to be nothing doing,' said Bunter. 'But I'll tell you what—look round for yourself, and see whether you can pick up any information. Question the hands. If I find that any man in my—my employ has sheltered a runaway schoolboy here, I shall discharge him on the spot! I shall be glad to know if such is the case. Search the whole show! Look anywhere

you like! If you find the young—hem!—rascal hanging about my circus, take him away at once!

'With your permission, Mr. Whiffles, I will look round,' said the inspector, rising.

'Oh, quite,' said Bunter. 'A matter like this can't be cleared up too thoroughly, Dance.'

'Yes, Mr. Whiffles.'

'Go with the inspector; show him round, and give him any assistance you can. If you find that any man in my employ has been helping a runaway schoolboy to stay here, report him to me.'

'Very good, sir.'

Inspector Grimes walked away with Dance, and Bunter grinned as he watched him go. The fat junior was full of confidence now.

He watched the inspector for some time, rooting up and down the circus camp, asking questions here and there.

Finally he watched him taking his departure; obviously satisfied that, wherever the missing schoolboy might be, he was not at Whiffles' World-Famous Circus.

'Beast!' murmured Bunter, as Mr. Grimes disappeared in the distance.

He was glad to see him go.

'All safe now,' said Dance, with a sour grin, as he came back.

Bunter blinked at him.

'Next stop Sevenoaks,' said Dance. 'We're billed to stop there, and we're likely to do good business.' 'Next stop nothing of the sort,' said Bunter coolly.

'I'm going to decide where we stop, and where we do business.'

'Look here—'

'I suppose I can manage my own circus as I think fit,' said Bunter. 'We're keeping on the road till we're right out of Kent— see? Give the men the orders.'

Dance gave the fat junior a long, long look. Bunter grinned at him. The manager gave in.

'Very well, sir!' he said.

And he went to give the orders.

'Cheeky cad!' murmured Bunter. 'I'm afraid that man's dishonest—he's jolly well got his fingers in my cash-box, I believe. Still, I never was mean about money. So long as he's not cheeky, all right.'

Dance was not cheeky again. It was so very much in his interest to keep the impostor as a figurehead, while he privately dealt with the takings, that he made up his mind to toe the line. He only promised himself the satisfaction of kicking Bunter most severely, when the arrangement came to an end—and obviously it could not last for ever. An hour later, the circus was packed up and rolling westward; far from Greyfriars, far from the fussy Form-masters and headmasters; far—Bunter hoped—from meddling Whiffleses. Bunter lolled in the blue-and-red caravan, and ate jam tarts and sipped lemon squash, and was happy—quite enjoying his career as a circus 'boss'.

Breaking Up at Greyfriars!

HARRY WHARTON and Co. wondered whether they would see Billy Bunter again before Greyfriars broke up for the holidays.

They didn't.

The Remove men learned that Inspector Grimes' had visited the circus, and reported to Mr. Quelch, over the telephone, that Bunter was not there; and that nobody at the circus knew anything of him. That, naturally, was the only report the inspector could make. It leaked out in a day or two, and though the Famous Five kept to their belief that Bunter was at the circus all the same, the matter was closed. Mr. Quelch had to be satisfied.

He consulted the Head, and Dr. Locke was satisfied also. A police inspector had searched through the circus, with the fullest concurrence of the proprietor. That made the matter clear.

'But where can the boy be?' asked the Head.

'I cannot imagine, sir.'

'No accident, surely—'

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips.

'From what the boy said to me on the telephone the other day, sir, it is obvious that he is remaining away from school of his own accord.'

'This is very serious, Mr. Quelch.'

'Very serious indeed, sir.'

'He has perhaps gone home?'

'His father tells me that he has no news of him whatever.'

'Bless my soul!' said the Head.

'Something must be done, sir,' said the Remove master.

'Undoubtedly!'

'But what—'

'Really, I hardly know.'

'After this, sir, the boy can scarcely be allowed to return to the school.'

'I fear not, Mr. Quelch.'

'Such unexampled audacity and impudence, sir—'

'Quite! Nevertheless, I am very uneasy, and something assuredly must be done,' said the Head.

But it was a little difficult to see what could be done.

Bunter had, apparently, vanished into thin air.

If he was not with the circus—and it seemed, after all, that he was not—his whereabouts were a complete mystery.

The last few days of the term glided by. Every day Mr. Bunter rang up the school to inquire whether his son was found. It did not seem necessary to the worthy stockbroker to come down to Greyfriars personally to inquire. After all, he could have done nothing there. That the boy was absenting himself from school of his own accord was clear; and it had to be supposed that he could have come back if he had liked. So the matter, while mysterious, was not alarming.

It was on the last day of the term that Mr. Bunter had news. When he rang up, Mr. Quelch grunted as he heard the fat voice of the City gentleman on the phone. He was getting tired of these daily talks with Mr. William Samuel Bunter. He was, in fact, tired of the whole clan of Bunter. Mr. Quelch felt that life would be more restful without any Bunter at all. However, he answered politely.

'Mr. Quelch—' came the stockbroker's fat voice.

'Speaking!'

'I have received a letter from my son.'

'Indeed.'

'It was postmarked Lewes. I think that is in Surrey, or Sussex, or Hampshire—' It was quite a long time since Mr. Bunter had been to school.

'Sussex!' grunted Mr. Quelch.

'I cannot imagine what he is doing in Sussex. Can you?'

'I have given up attempting to account for the vagaries of this very extraordinary boy, sir!' said Mr. Quelch tartly.

'William tells me that he is travelling with some friends,' said Mr. Bunter.

'Apparently he is well and enjoying a holiday. You will be relieved to hear that, no doubt.'

Mr. Quelch did not look relieved on hearing that Bunter was enjoying a holiday before the end of the term. Bunter certainly would not have been enjoying himself had he been within reach of Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Indeed!' said the Remove master.

'In the circumstances, there is no occasion for any further worry in the matter, I take it,' said Mr. Bunter. 'As the boy is travelling with friends, I shall not expect him home for the vacation. He does not mention the names of his friends, but he has, I believe, many friends; he has often told me so, and, in fact, he generally spends the greater part of the vacation away from home. I gather from his letter that all is well with him. He does not ask for money.' Apparently, so long as Bunter did not ask for money, all was well, in Mr. Bunter's opinion.

'After all, the boy is old enough to take care of himself,' said Mr. Bunter.

'Indeed, a boy is sent to a public school to learn self-reliance. I have no doubt that all is well. Good-bye, Mr. Quelch!'

'I must tell you, Mr. Bunter, that this unexampled conduct on the part of your son cannot possibly be passed over here. It is not to be expected that after his impudent defiance of all authority he will be allowed to rejoin the school next term. You hear me?'

Dead silence.

'Sir! Are you there?'

Mr. Bunter was not there. He had rung off after saying goodbye—not, it appeared, interested in any further remarks Mr. Quelch might have to make. The Remove master breathed hard and put up the receiver. He resolved to write Mr. Bunter a very stiff letter.

The next morning, when the school broke up, Harry Wharton ventured to ask his Form-master whether there was any news of Bunter. Mr. Quelch briefly informed him that the boy's father had received a letter post-marked Lewes, in Sussex, stating that all was well with him.

That news was passed on to the Remove, and no doubt all of them were glad to hear that nothing had happened to Bunter. As a matter of fact, the excitement of break-up put the Bunter sensation into the background.

But as the train bore the Famous Five, with crowds of other fellows, away from Courtfield, they discussed the Owl of the Remove.

'Bet you Bunter's with that giddy circus all the time,' said Bob Cherry. 'I'm absolutely certain he was there when we butted in.'

'The certainfulness is terrific,' agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton nodded.

'I think so. And that letter to his pater was dropped in at a post-office in Lewes, which shows that the circus has gone into Sussex.'

'That's it,' agreed Nugent.

'But can anybody guess what it means?' asked Johnny Bull. 'If Bunter's free to write letters and post them, he must be his own master; it's not a case of kidnapping. He can't have got a job at the circus; he's too jolly lazy, even if he had brains enough, which he hasn't. So what the thump does it all mean?'

'I give that one up,' said Bob.

The Famous Five all had to give it up. It was a conundrum beyond their powers of solution. And the subject of Bunter dropped; the Famous Five expected to hear no more of him before the new term at Greyfriars. But they were destined to hear from him, and before very long. They were by no means done with William George Bunter.

Awful for Bunter!

BILLY BUNTER walked round the big tent, and blinked to and fro through his big spectacles, with great satisfaction.

The circus was pitched in Surrey now, for the first time since it had left the neighbourhood of Greyfriars.

Hitherto the 'boss' had kept on the road, refusing to stop for performances, in spite of the fact that the World-Famous Circus was billed in advance to perform at various places.

Bunter was of the opinion that a fellow could do as he liked with his own. And the circus was his own now.

Dance had been growing more and more impatient. He wanted to see the takings coming in again. But for days the circus kept to the road—first in Sussex, and then in Surrey. Not till he knew that Greyfriars had broken up for the holidays did Bunter feel safe.

Of Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles nothing had been heard. Why he was keeping away and letting the impostor run the circus at his own sweet will perplexed Bunter when he thought of it. But he thought of it little and seldom. Bunter was boss now, and he liked being boss; and if he held his boss-ship on an uncertain tenure, he preferred to dismiss that disagreeable reflection from his fat mind.

By this time he had grown quite used to a nut-brown wig, a pointed beard, and a waxed moustache, and was almost persuaded that he was really Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles. So long as Whiffles, for whatever reason, kept away, all was serene, and he was keeping off the grass. There was only one fly in the ointment—the fact that Bill Huggins, on the track of vengeance, supposed, like everybody else, that Bunter was Whiffles, and desired to push Bunter's nose through the back of Bunter's head.

But by this time Bunter hoped that the unpleasant Mr. Huggins was done with. He locked his caravan door very carefully every night, in case of accidents; but there was no alarm.

And Dance pointed out that money would run short if the circus did not perform. So the boss consented, at last, to pitch the camp in Surrey; and now

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

the big tent was up, and preparations were going forward for the afternoon show.

Bunter walked round the Big Top, and blinked with satisfaction. Bunter was 'bossy' by nature—or born to command, as he expressed it himself. Never before had he been able to boss. Now he could boss to his fat heart's content, and he was enjoying it.

'You'll take the ring this afternoon, Dance,' he said. 'Keep them up to mark!'

'I shall have to take both performances,' said Dance, with a stare.

Bunter shook his head.

'No, The evening show is more important; I shall manage that myself. The master's eyes, you know—what?'

'Don't be a fool!' said Dance brusquely. 'You don't know even the beginning of the business. For goodness' sake keep out of the ring, and don't butt into things you don't understand!'

Bunter gave him a freezing look.

'You forget your place, I think, Dance,' he said. 'Haven't I warned you that I don't want any cheek from my employees?'

'Look here—'

'That's enough! I'm taking the ring this evening,' said Bunter. 'I fancy I know how to manage! I suppose I can do as I like in my own circus?'

'I tell you—' hissed Dance.

Bunter waved a fat hand.

'That will do! Shut up!'

Dance glanced round to make sure that no one was in hearing. 'Look here, you fool, you'll spoil everything! You don't know anything about it. Leave it to me, and mind your own business.'

'I'm leaving the cashbox in your hands,' said Bunter. 'I may mention that I'm not wholly satisfied with your accounts, Dance.'

'What?'

'If you don't keep your place, and treat your master with proper respect, I shall have to go into the matter,' said Bunter, blinking at him. 'I hope you will be able to account for all the money that has passed through your hands, Dance.'

Dance gritted his teeth. During the past few days he had been backing some more horses. Consequently he was not in a position to have his accounts examined by Bunter or anybody else. He opened his mouth and closed it again.

'Understand this,' said Bunter. 'I want no argument from any man in my employ, from the manager down to the doorkeeper. I resolutely decline to put up with any back-chat. See? I'm taking the evening performance. Don't say another word! Just shut up.'

And Dance, with feelings that were quite homicidal, shut up. Bunter was boss, and he rubbed it in.

'You're not a bad manager, Dance. Your fault is that you're too cheeky. Cut it out! I don't like it! Bear that in mind.'

Bunter strutted away; only the exercise of great self-control keeping Dance from helping him on his way with a kick. He promised himself that pleasure later; looking forward to it with keen anticipation.

Bunter rolled out of the big tent.

The circus was pitched in a large field, bordered by a road with a village in

sight in the distance. Bunter blinked towards the Village, and called to George Mix.

'George!'

'Yes, guv'nor?'

'What's that place called?'

'Wharton Magnus, sir.'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Bunter.

'Know the place, sir?' asked George.

'Yes! No! Exactly!'

Bunter rolled on, leaving George staring. It had been Bunter's intention to walk into the village in search of ice-cream. He abandoned that intention now. That village lay within half a mile of Wharton Lodge, the home of the captain of the Greyfriars Remove. Bunter had no desire to fall in with Harry Wharton, or any of the other beasts who might be staying with him over the holidays. He decided to go in quite a different direction in search of ice-cream.

He rolled away cheerily down the road, with his back to the village. It was a blazing day in August, and Bunter was warm. A wood bordered the road, and Bunter rolled into a shady footpath. There was a town on the other side of the wood, from which Mr. Dance expected a large contingent of 'people in front'. Bunter rolled on still thinking of ice-cream. He did not observe that a man followed him from the road into the wood. Bunter was not an observant fellow. But the sound of hurried steps behind him made him turn his head. He was almost in the middle of the wood now. He had a vague feeling of alarm as he turned; perhaps some lingering thought of Mr. Huggins was in his fat mind. But the man that met his view was nothing like Mr. Huggins. Bunter saw a little fat man with a smooth, hairless face, familiar about the podgy features. But Bunter did not know the man; though evidently the man knew Bunter.

'Ho!' he said. 'Here you are! You scoundrel!'

'Eh?'

'Blighter!'

'Oh, draw it mild, you know,' said Bunter, in astonishment. 'What's biting you? What's the row?'

'Impostor!'

Bunter started.

'You don't know me?'

'No!' gasped Bunter.

'You don't know the man whose name you've borrowed, you impostor, and whose clothes you are wearing at this very moment!'

'Oh, my hat! Whiffles!' gasped Bunter.

Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles glared at him. Bunter backed away cautiously. He did not want to meet him at all; and especially not on a lonely footpath in a wood.

Mr. Whiffles followed him up. Even now that he knew who he was, Bunter could not recognise Whiffles—so different did the circus proprietor look without his hair, his moustache, and his beard. And Mr. Whiffles was dressed now very quietly in black.

'I've been keeping an eye on you!' said Mr. Whiffles. 'I've been keeping an eye on the circus! I've been watching you! Wait till my time comes! You just wait till then!'

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'Do you know why I'm letting you run on?' hissed Mr. Whiffles. 'Do you know why I haven't had you arrested?'

'Ow!'

'Do you know why I've held my hand? Can you guess?'

'Nunno!' gasped Bunter.

Mr. Whiffles laughed derisively.

'You'll find out! You'll learn in time! Impostor! You will pay for this! Keep on! Keep on this—this trickery! Nothing could suit me better—for the present! Wait till you've got what you're asking for! Then you'll hear from me! Not yet! Ha, ha! No! Just wait!'

And having uttered those mysterious words, Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles shook a fat fist at Bunter, turned on his heel, and disappeared.

Bunter blinked after him in amazement.

His relief at Mr. Whiffles' departure was enormous. He had dreaded first a terrific thrashing, and then the stripping off of his borrowed plumes. But that, evidently, was not Mr. Whiffles' intention. For some mysterious reason it suited the circus proprietor to let Bunter continue playing the remarkable part he had assumed.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Mr. Whiffles vanished from sight; his footsteps died away. Bunter stood where he was, rooted to the ground with astonishment.

'Must be potty!' he gasped, at last. 'Absolutely potty! Beast! If it suits him, as he says, he might at least be grateful! It's a beastly, ungrateful world. I suppose he's potty! Beast!'

There was a rustle in the wood behind Bunter. He turned—and jumped. It was a powerful, hefty figure that emerged from the wood; and a battered face, with a broken nose, glared at Bunter.

The Owl of the Remove would have run, but his fat legs refused to stir. He blinked in terror at Bill Huggins. The bruiser came slowly towards him, grinning horribly.

'Got you at last, Whiffles!'

'Ow!'

'Nobody 'ere to interfere this time!' grinned Huggins. 'Got you all to myself, Whiffles! What?'

Bunter staggered against a tree. Like a flash of illumination it came into his fat mind why Mr. Whiffles was leaving him in quiet possession of his name, his identity, and his circus. This fearful ruffian was after Whiffles. Whiffles was in a blue funk. So long as Bunter was Whiffles this awful character was after Bunter. Mr. Whiffles was lying low, leaving the impostor to bear the brunt.

It was all clear to Bunter now—awfully, fearfully clear. Looking at the beetling brows, the bulldog jaw, and the broken nose of Bill Huggins, Bunter did not wonder that Mr. Whiffles was eager to avoid an encounter with that gentleman at any price. Bunter would have given the circus, with every other circus thrown in, at that moment, to be at a safe distance from Bill Huggins.

His fat knees knocked together.

'I—I say,' he gasped, 'I—I ain't Whiffles!'

Huggins laughed—a blood-curdling laugh.

'Wot's the good of that?' he jeered. 'You're for it, Whiffles!'

'Ere's the man you sent to three months' 'ard! Now, then—'

He came on with huge fists clenched.

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

'Yarooooh!'

Billy Bunter leaped away and ran for his life. He charged down the footpath at a frantic speed. Bunter, as a rule, was no sprinter. But circumstances alter cases. He ran like the wind now.

But close behind him sounded the heavy footsteps of the bruiser. He heard the panting breath of Bill Huggins—he felt a touch on his shoulder where the outstretched hand almost grasped him. Frantic with terror, the hapless impostor, who was paying so dear now for his imposture, rushed on. He rushed round a bend in the winding footpath—and there was a terrific crash as he rushed into a bunch of cyclists who were coming on from the opposite direction, the wheels making no sound on the grassy path. But there was sound enough when Bunter rushed into them.

Crash! Thud! Jingle! Bump! Crash, crash, crash!

'Yarooogh! Yooop! Help!'

Yelling with terror, Billy Bunter rolled among upset bicycles and upset cyclists. And Bill Huggins, coming round the bend in the path like a charging bull, rolled over and added himself to the heap.



A fat figure came flying at frantic speed

An Unexpected Meeting

'LATE for lunch!' remarked Bob Cherry.

'The lateness will be terrific.'

Harry Wharton shook his head.

'That's all right; there's a short cut home.'

Five cheery juniors of Greyfriars were riding along a shady Surrey lane. Early in the vacation the Famous Five of the Remove had gathered together at Wharton Lodge. The colonel and his sister, Miss Amy Wharton, were always glad to see Harry's chums from school. On this particular morning the Famous Five had gone out on a long bike spin, and now they were on their homeward

way. By the road they were still a good many miles from the Lodge, but Harry Wharton knew every path and by-way round his old home. He waved his hand towards a dusky wood that bordered the road.

'There's a footpath and bridle-path through there,' he said. 'We turn in a bit farther on.'

'Cycling allowed on the footpath?' asked Frank Nugent, with a grin.

'Well, it's a bridle-path, so one is allowed to ride there,' said Harry. 'I'm not sure about bikes, but we'll chance it.'

'Hear, hear!'

And a little farther on the juniors turned into a grassy path through the old wood of elms and beeches.

They proceeded at a moderate pace. The path was a rather winding one, and they really did not want to charge over any pedestrian who came round a bend under the overhanging branches. It certainly did not occur to them that a pedestrian might come round a bend and charge them over. But that was what happened.

Round a bend in the path a fat figure came flying suddenly, without the slightest warning, at frantic speed.

Before the riders could jam on their brakes, before they even knew he was coming, he had charged into them.

The path was not wide; the cyclists rode bunched together. The heavy charge fairly knocked them over.

Wharton and Nugent, who were riding ahead, went whirling on their machines, and sprawled over, the newcomer sprawling with them. Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull and Hurree Singh were too close behind to stop in time. They pitched over the sprawling bikes and sprawling juniors. And the next moment confusion was worse confounded by a hefty man, who came racing round the bend and rolled over the whole party.

'What the thump—' gasped Wharton.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Yow-ow!'

'Whoooooop!'

'Yow-ow! Help! Fire! Yarooogh!'

'Strike me pink! Ow! My eye!'

'Yoop! Help!'

'Great Scott!'

Harry Wharton and Co. scrambled to their feet, amid a sea of sprawling, clattering bicycles.

They were hurt!

Every fellow in the party was hurt; and they were more wrathful than hurt. It was quite an exciting moment.

'Hello, hallo, hallo! It's old Whiffles!' roared Bob Cherry, staring at the sprawling fat figure in the path.

'Whiffles! My hat!'

'The esteemed circus merchant!' gasped Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'The fat chump!' howled Johnny Bull. 'What did he want to charge into us for? The—the podgy fathead!'

'Ow, my elbow!' moaned Nugent. 'I've banged my funny- bone on something! Ow! Wow! Oh!'

'It was my nose!' hissed Johnny Bull. 'You've nearly caved in my nose with your silly elbow!'

'Blow your nose! My elbow—ow!'

Bunter scrambled wildly to his feet. His hat had been knocked off; but, fortunately, his hair was more firmly attached, and it was still there. He was damaged in several places—a fellow could not charge into a bunch of cyclists without getting hurt. But, for once, Billy Bunter was not thinking of his hurts. He was only thinking of that fearful Huggins who was after him. Hurt or not, he was thankful to have run into somebody. Solitude, at the moment, had lost its charm. He scrambled up, yelling for help.

'Keep him off! Yarooogh! Help! Murder! Fire!' shrieked Bunter, staggering against a tree. 'Keep that beast off! Help!'

'What the thump—'

'Who the dickens—'

Bunter gave a wild blink round. Bill Huggins was sprawling breathlessly in the grass. One of his feet had gone through a wheel, and the spokes were holding him by the leg. As he tried to scramble up the bike scrambled with him and he sprawled again.

It was Bunter's chance—and he took it. The poet has told us that there is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune. Bunter took the tide at the flood. Huggins was for the moment held, Bunter, after one terrified blink round, resumed his frantic flight, and went along the footpath like a racer. Gasping and panting, puffing and blowing, the Owl of the Remove charged on and disappeared.

'Strike me pink!' gasped Huggins. 'Ow! What's holding my blinking leg? Gerroff! Oh!'

'Well, my hat!' said Harry Wharton.

Huggins sat up. His leg was still through the wheel of Wharton's bike, and he grabbed at the machine savagely.

'Get this thing off me!' he roared. 'I'll smash you! I'll smash the blooming bike! Get it off! You 'ear me?'

'Mind how you handle that machine!' snapped Wharton. 'Nobody asked you to shove your hoof through it!'

Huggins glared at him and yanked at the bike savagely. Obviously he did not care how much damage he did.

'Stop that!'

'Yah! I'll thrash you if you talk to me like that! Strike me blue! That old covey is getting away! Gerrout of it!'

Bill Huggins held terrific terrors for Billy Bunter; but he had none for the Famous Five of the Remove. As he wrenched fiercely at the clinging spokes Wharton grabbed him unceremoniously by the collar and dragged him over on his back.

There was a roar of wrath from Huggins, and he turned on the captain of the Greyfriars Remove and grasped him.

Wharton was a sturdy fellow, but he had no chance in the hefty grasp of Bill Huggins.

'Lend a hand, you men!' he panted.

'What-ho!'

Four pairs of hands grasped the ruffian at once. Huggins was hefty, but five boys were rather too much for him.

He was fairly squashed down on the grassy path, and Bob Cherry sat on his chest to keep him there. As he kicked out, Johnny Bull trampled on his legs.

Each of his huge fists was secured by a junior, while Hurree Jamset Ram Singh took a grip on his neckcloth.

Huggins spluttered and gasped, and still struggled.

'Shut up, you rotter!' said Bob.

Huggins heaved at the weight on him, and almost succeeded in throwing off the juniors.

'Bang his napper, Inky! That will take some of the fun out of him!' gasped Wharton.

'The bangfulness will be terrific.'

'Look 'ere! Strike me pink! Yoooooooooooooop!' roared Huggins.

Bang, bang, bang!

Huggins' bullet head smote the earth with considerable force. His head was hard, but the solid earth was harder. Huggins' frantic roars awoke every echo of the wood.

'Chuck it! Leave off! You hear me! Strike me blue! Ow, ow, ow! Look 'ere! I ain't going to touch you! I'm arter that old covey! Let a bloke gerrup!'

Bang, bang, bang!

'Yow-ow-ow! Stoppit! Oh, my 'ead! Ow! My napper! Yow-ow!'

Bob Cherry chuckled breathlessly.

'Will you keep quiet for a bit?' he asked.

'Ow! Wow! I'll keep as quiet as you like!' gasped Huggins 'Oh, my head! Stoppit!'

Argument would have been wasted on Bill Huggins. He was not open to reasoning. But banging his head on the ground was a thing that even his limited intellect could understand. He lay gasping and spluttering, looking as if he would like to bite, but behaving himself quite nicely.

Looking after Mr. Huggins!

HARRY WHARTON detached his damaged bike from Huggins' leg. The bike was in considerable need of repair. So was Huggins' leg, for that matter.

'Keep the brute safe for a bit,' said Harry. 'He seems to have been after that man Whiffles, and we may as well give the old johnny time to get clear.'

'You let a bloke up!' said Huggins. 'I ain't got any row with you blokes! I'm arter that old covey.'

'Thief, I suppose,' said Nugent.

'No, I ain't!' hooted Huggins. 'I'm arter him to paste him! I'm going to knock his blooming features through the back of his 'ead! That's what I'm going to do, strike me pink!'

'Not today!' grinned Bob Cherry. 'We're going to see that you don't, you beauty!'

'Let a bloke up, I tell you!'

'Sit on the brute!' said Wharton.

'What-ho!'

'Strike me—'

'Look here, I'll strike you all the colours of the jolly old rainbow if you don't shut up!' said Bob. 'You talk too much!'

'Look 'ere, you young limb——'

'Bang his head again, Inky!'

'The bangfulness will be terrific.'

"Old on!" roared Huggins. 'I'll be quiet. You've nearly busted my blinking nut already! Chuck it!'

'The behavefulness is the proper caper, my esteemed and ridiculous ruffian,' said the nabob of Bhanipur. 'Otherwisefully, look out for the bangfulness of your absurd napper!'

'Oh, my eye!' gasped Huggins. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's remarkable flow of English seemed to take him by surprise.

Harry Wharton collected the bicycles, while the other fellows Pinned Huggins to the ground. All the machines were more or less damaged, but they were, fortunately, still rideable. He also collected up Mr. Whiffles' bell-brimmed silk hat, which Bunter had left behind in his flight.

'Fancy meeting old Whiffles here!' he said. 'I suppose that means that the circus is pitched somewhere by. Whiffles wasn't very civil the last time we saw him; but we'll give the circus another visit.'

'Yes, rather.'

'Are you going to let a bloke go?' demanded Bill Huggins, in a sulphurous voice.

'Not yet!' answered Wharton coolly. 'You're not going to be let loose till Mr. Whiffles has had time to get clear.'

'I tell you I'm *arter* that old bloke!' hissed Huggins.

'What the thump are you after him for?' demanded Bob. 'What has old Whiffles done to you?'

'Sent a bloke to prison!' hissed Huggins. 'Three months' 'ard!'

'You look as if three years would have done you good!' said Bob cheerily.

'Take it calmly! We're saving you from doing another three months for assault and battery.'

'I'll do a ten-year stretch for him!' gasped Huggins. 'I tell you, I've got it in for that covey!'

Bob Cherry settled himself more comfortably on Mr. Huggins' chest.

Obviously, Mr. Huggins was a man who needed looking after. Mr. Whiffles had not been very civil to the juniors on the occasion of their last visit to the circus in search of Bunter. But they did not intend to let this hefty ruffian get within hitting distance of the fat gentleman if they could help it. And they could.

'I've follered that old covey miles and miles!' gasped Huggins. 'I'm arter him, I tell you. Three months' 'ard—'

'If you got three months' hard you asked for it!' said Harry, 'You must have done something to deserve it!'

'P'r'aps I did!' snarled Huggins. 'But that ain't the point. P'r'aps I picked up something from the old covey's van. But he promised to let it drop. Give me his word, he did. Then I was caught, arter he was out of reach. Let a bloke down, he did! I'm going to give him something worse'n three months' 'ard! His own blinking circus won't know him when I'm done with him, strike me pink!'

'We shall be late for lunch at this rate,' said Harry. 'But we'll give old Whiffles another five minutes. That ought to see him clear. He was going strong.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

And the juniors waited five minutes, heedless of the growling oaths of Bill Huggins. By that time there was little doubt that Mr. Whiffles was in safety.

Undoubtedly he had been going strong when they had seen him vanish along the footpath.

'Let the brute go,' said Harry.

The juniors released Bill Huggins. That gentleman scrambled to his feet and clenched his huge fists, and glared at them. It was plain that he was strongly inclined to run amok, hitting out right and left. But the Famous Five faced him coolly, quite prepared to handle him again if he wanted more; and the ruffian thought better of it.

'Blow yer!' he snarled. 'Blow the lot of yer!'

And he tramped away along the footpath, evidently without any hope of catching Mr. Whiffles now.

Harry Wharton and Co. remounted their machines and rode on. Wharton took Mr. Whiffles' silk hat in his hand. It was unlikely that Mr. Whiffles would return to that lonely spot in quest of it, and the captain of the Remove good-naturedly took charge of it.

'We'll go to the circus and take his tile back with us,' he remarked.

'Good egg!' agreed Bob.

The juniors had almost reached the end of the footpath when a figure appeared from the trees, and signed to them to stop. He was a little, podgy man in a bowler hat, with a smooth, fat face.

'Stop a minute!' he called Out.

The juniors stopped, wondering who the man was, and what he wanted.

'What's up?' asked Bob.

'You've just come through this wood by the footpath?'

'Yes. What about it?'

'Did you see anything of a man?' asked the stranger eagerly. 'Did you see anything of a row? I thought I heard something—'

The juniors stared at him.

'There was a bit of a row,' said Bob. 'An old johnny butted into us, with a hefty rough after him. Friend of yours?'

'Friend! Ha, ha! A blighter—a dastard—a rogue!'

'Here's another chap who doesn't like old Whiffles!' grinned Johnny Bull. 'He doesn't seem popular in these parts.'

'Did the man get him?' asked the stranger eagerly. 'Did he Smash him? Did he assault and batter him? Did he leave him for dead?'

'No fear! We stopped him.'

'What! You stopped him!' yelled the little fat man furiously.

'Yes, rather!'

'You young idiot!'

'What?'

'You meddling puppy!'

'Eh?'

'You rascally, interfering young jackanapes!'

'Oh, draw it mild!' said Bob. 'What's the matter with you, old gent?'

'You—you—you meddling chump!' roared the fat little man. 'Why couldn't you mind your own business? You've spoiled everything! Mean to say that that wretch—that dastard—was not assaulted and battered?'

'Not the least little bit!' chuckled Bob. 'We held the other man to give him time to get clear.'

'Jackanapes! Rascal! Fool! Idiot! Meddling ass!'

'Oh, my hat! Come on, you men! It isn't worth while being late for lunch to listen to his cheery conversation.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The juniors rode on, leaving Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles shaking his fist after them, and never dreaming that the stranger was the genuine Mr. Whiffles, and that their intervention had completely spoiled his plans.

Fed Up!

BILLY BUNTER plunged into the blue-and-red caravan, collapsed into a chair, and spluttered.

He was gasping for breath, streaming with perspiration. The Owl of the Remove had not slackened speed till he arrived at the circus camp. He hardly noticed that his hat was gone. He was conscious of nothing but the terror of the avenging Huggins behind him. The sight of the boss streaking through the camp, hatless, panting and puffing and blowing, caused quite a sensation in the circus. Bunter did not heed it. He did not stop till he was in his van, and then he fairly collapsed. He was too exhausted even to shut the door. He sprawled in the chair and spluttered for breath.

'Ow, ow, ow! Grooogh! Wow!'

George Mix looked in, with a wondering face.

'Anything happened, guv'nor?' he asked.

'Ooooooch! Ow!'

Mr. Dance came up, with a surprised and angry face. He ordered George away, and stepped into the van. Bunter blinked at him over his glasses, which had slid down his fat little nose.

'What does this mean?' growled Dance. 'This isn't the way to keep up appearances! What the dickens is the matter with you?'

'Groooogh!'

'What's happened?'

'Oooooooch!'

Bunter got a little breath back at last, He blinked nervously at the open doorway of the van.

'Is he coming?' he gasped.

'He? Who? Nobody's coming.'

'Sure?' gasped Bunter.

'Yes. What——'

'I'm fed up with this!' gasped Bunter, 'I'm not standing it any more! I'm off! I'm going home!'

'What?' ejaculated the manager.

'I'm going home! Back to Bunter Court!' gasped the fat Owl. 'I've had enough of this! Oh dear! He nearly had me! Wow!'

'Who did?' howled Dance.

'That beast Huggins! Ow!'

'You've met Huggins?'

'Ow! Yes! I'm going home! I ain't having any more of this! I know now why that beast Whiffles is leaving me to it! He's afraid of Huggins! He wants me to get bashed instead of him! I'm jolly well not going to be bashed! I'm going home!'

Ow!

'Pull yourself together!' snapped Dance. 'You're safe from Huggins here. He won't dare show up here. He can be arrested—'

'I'm fed up!' gasped Bunter. 'I'm not afraid of the brute, of course, Any chap at Greyfriars will tell you that I'm as brave as a lion. But I'm fed up! Come to think of it, it ain't right to take a man's circus away from him. I've got a conscience, if you haven't! It ain't right! I'm going to chuck it. Ow!'

'It's rather late in the day to think of that.'

'Rats! Besides, my people want me home for the hols!' gasped Bunter. 'They'll miss me! My dear old pater—and Sammy—ow! The dear old home—groooh! I can't let them miss me like that—breaking their hearts! I'm going home. It's a fellow's duty. Ow!'

Conscience and duty had suddenly awakened in William George Bunter. Bill Huggins had awakened them.

'Look here—' muttered Dance.

'It's no good talking!' hooted Bunter, 'Think I'm going to stop here and be bashed to pieces by a fearful ruffian? It's not good enough! See? I'm fed up with it! Grooogh! The awful villain nearly had me! He was going to bash me, thinking that I was that other beast, Whiffles! Oh dear!'

Dance stared at him morosely. In the peculiar circumstances, he could not spare Bunter from the circus. Mr. Whiffles had to be supposed to be there for Dance to carry on. He did not want the real Mr. Whiffles, but he very much wanted the spoof Mr. Whiffles. Bunter's desertion would have knocked all his schemes into pieces.

The fat junior staggered out of the chair at last.

'I'm going!' he gasped. 'Oh dear! I was a fool to come here at all! It was your fault! You persuaded me! I'm going to chuck it! Whiffles can come back and be bashed himself, blow him! If he thinks I'm going to stay here and take his bashing, he's jolly well mistaken! I'm off!'

'Look here—'

'Shut up! I'm off, I tell you!' howled Bunter. 'Old Whiffles is hanging about in that wood, if you want him! I met him there. He wants me to stay here; he wants me to get his bashing! Blow him! The awful rotter letting a chap in for this! Unscrupulous! I never could stand an unscrupulous chap! You can shut up! I'm going!' Bunter paused a moment, as an important consideration occurred to his fat mind. 'I mean, I'm going after dinner!'

'Tell me what's happened,' muttered Dance.

Bunter gasped out his story. He blinked nervously from the doorway as he told it. He feared at every moment to see the burly figure of Bill Huggins in the offing.

'Nothing could have happened better,' said Dance.

'What?' yelled Bunter.

'Don't you see—'

'No, I don't! I know I'm going—after dinner! George!' yelled Bunter from the van.

'Yes, guv'nor.'

'Buck up with dinner! I'm hungry! Famished!'

'Yes, guv'nor.'

'Just as soon as I've had a snack I'm going!' gasped Bunter.

'You needn't jaw! I'm off! Catch me sticking here and getting bashed by that

fearful ruffian! He nearly had me! Ow!

'He can't get near you here,' said Dance reassuringly. 'I'll warn all the hands to keep watch for him. If he shows up, he will be collared. But he won't. He knows he could be run in again.'

'It ain't safe!' gasped Bunter.

'Don't you see, that funky old fool Whiffles has made it as safe as houses?' urged Dance. 'He's going to keep away so long as Huggins is around. He's scared to death of Huggins. It makes it all safe. I'll take care that Huggins doesn't get near you. It's all right.'

'Tain't!' said Bunter. 'I'm going after dinner.'

And all Dance's persuasions were lost on Bunter, and the manager quitted the van with a black brow. Bunter, though he was too obtuse to realise it, was acting as a screen for Dance's speculations. If that screen was withdrawn, the unfaithful steward was likely to find himself in considerable difficulties. Mr. Dance's ultimate intention was to bolt, when he had lined his pockets to his satisfaction. But that time had not come yet.

Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles' terror of Huggins gave the impostor a chance to carry on for an indefinite period. Unfortunately, the impostor was as frightened by the hefty Huggins as Montgomery St. Leger himself. Mr. Whiffles was only too glad to leave Bunter in his place while the redoubtable Huggins was on the war-path. For the very same reason Bunter was extremely unwilling to remain in Mr. Whiffles' place. It was an awkward situation for Dance; but it was said of old that there is no rest for the wicked. But after dinner Bunter was more amenable to argument.

It was a Gargantuan dinner—such a dinner as made the school dinner at Greyfriars look like the diet of a jockey.

As soon as Bunter had eaten enough for one he felt a little better.

When he had eaten enough for two he felt much better.

By the time he had eaten enough for three he was growing quite comforted.

And when his inner Bunter had disposed of enough for four he felt that life was worth living again.

Having by this time taken the edge off his appetite, Billy Bunter proceeded to enjoy his dinner.

He could not help reflecting that spreads like this, regardless of expense, were not to be had in the Bunter home. Bunter Court—in spite of Bunter's descriptions of that lordly abode—was not a land flowing with milk and honey. Only in Bunter's fertile fancy did it reek with wealth. The actual facts were quite different. So far as tuck was concerned, the change from the circus to the Bunter home would be a fall from the sublime to the ridiculous. On the other hand, Bunter quaked at the thought of Bill Huggins. Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles evidently dared not make an attempt to resume his identity till Mr. Huggins was disposed of somehow.

Billy Bunter had a naturally strong objection to taking the terrific 'bashing' that Huggins intended for Mr. Whiffles. He did not mind taking over Whiffles' World-Famous Circus. He did not mind taking over Mr. Whiffles' name, and beard, and moustache, and wig. But he strongly objected to taking over Mr. Whiffles' bashing. He realised that he was simply playing into Mr. Whiffles' hands by keeping up the imposture. And yet— With enough dinner for six inside him, and slowly and thoughtfully disposing of a large plum pudding, Bunter sighed to think of all that he would give up if he gave up being the boss

of the circus.

Dance found him in a more amenable mood. So long as the supply of tuck was absolutely unlimited, Bunter felt that he could run risks—at all events, so long as the risks were not near at hand. Fortunately, anything that was out of Bunter's sight was generally out of his mind. He had generally found himself able to face danger when it was nowhere near. Moreover, with that dinner inside him, he was disinclined for exertion. He decided to carry on, and see! When the big tent was crowded that afternoon, and the circus performance was on, the strains of music mingled harmoniously with a deep snore from the blue-and-red caravan. Bunter had not fled; he was having a nap. And his dreams were not of the ferocious Mr. Huggins, or of the wily Mr. Whiffles, but of unlimited tuck, and he smiled sweetly as he slumbered.

Astonishing!

HARRY WHARTON and Co. walked over to the circus in the early evening in a cheery mood. One advantage of being on holiday was that they could witness an evening performance, there being no schoolmasters, or prefects, or bounds, or lights-out to bother them.

They had learned that Whiffles' World-Famous Circus was pitched about a mile from Wharton Lodge, and though they had seen the show near Greyfriars during the term, they were quite willing to see it again. Moreover, the still unexplained mystery of Billy Bunter interested them in the circus. They were quite certain that Bunter had gone with the circus people, though they could not guess how, or why, or wherefore. They wondered whether they would see anything of him there.

Strains of more or less melodious music wafted across the field, greeting the Greyfriars juniors as they arrived. Plenty of people were going in. All sorts and conditions of local inhabitants were crowding into the field, towards the big tent from which the music proceeded. Mumbo, the elephant, could be heard trumpeting. Harry Wharton and Co. moved out of the crowd and approached the staff entrance. They wanted to see Mr. Whiffles first, to return the silk hat, George Mix was hurrying out of the big tent, and Wharton called to him.

'Hold on! Is Mr. Whiffles about?'

'In his van, sir, preparing for the show, sir,' said George. 'Other entrance for the public, sir.'

'We met Mr. Whiffles today, and he lost his hat,' explained Wharton, with a smile. 'I've brought it back.'

George grinned.

'Oh!' he said, 'Something 'appened to the guv'nor today, when he was out for a walk, and he come back in a hurry, without his 'at. If you want to take it to him, sir, that's his van over there, painted blue and red.'

'Thanks!'

The juniors walked across to the conspicuous caravan, of which the brilliant decoration caught the eye from afar. Dance was standing on the step of the van, talking to someone inside— apparently Mr. Whiffles,

'Do listen to reason, sir! Let me take the show this evening. I really do not object to the trouble—'

'Rats!' came a voice from within the caravan.

'You'll make a muck of it!' snapped Dance.

'Rubbish!'

'You don't know how to manage—'

'Chuck it!'

'If the whole thing goes wrong—'

'That's enough! Hook it!'

Dance came down the steps and stamped away. He did not look at the juniors, but they noticed that his face was dark with anger, and that it had an uneasy, apprehensive expression. No doubt Dance was apprehensive of the results when Bunter took the management of the show in hand. Bunter's self-confidence was unbounded, but that was a feeling that Dance did not share. But Bunter was 'boss'—and Bunter intended to have his own way.

The Famous Five came up to the van. The door was half-open, and they heard a fat voice muttering within:

'Beast! Of all the cheek! As if a fellow can't manage his own circus! I've a jolly good mind to sack him, after all! Oh, dear! Where's that stud? Blow it! Blow! Harry Wharton and Co. paused, looking at one another rather queerly. The voice from the caravan reminded them of the fat voice of William George Bunter. They had noticed before that Mr. Whiffles' voice was very like Bunter's—a sort of squeak that seemed smothered in fat. But now that he was off his guard, talking to himself, the voice was more like Bunter's than ever. Indeed, the juniors could hardly believe, for the moment, that it was not Billy Bunter who was in the van.

Bunter was groping in the van for a dropped stud. He was dressing for the show, in evening clothes that belonged to Mr. Whiffles. As he blinked in the glass again, adjusting his collar round his fat neck, he caught the reflection in the glass of the juniors outside.

Bunter jumped.

'Those beasts here!' he ejaculated.

The juniors grinned. Wharton mounted the step of the van and tapped at the door.

'Mr. Whiffles—'

'I say, you fellows—'

'What?' roared Wharton.

'I—I say, you fellows—'

'Bunter's there!' exclaimed Bob Cherry, in amazement. 'If that isn't Bunter it's his ghost!'

'Oh, really, Cherry—'

'Bunter!' gasped Nugent.

'My only hat!'

'The esteemed and absurd Bunter is there!' exclaimed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Oh, really, Inky—'

'Well, my hat!' exclaimed Wharton, and he pulled the door of the van wide open. For the moment the Famous Five were all convinced that they had found the missing Owl of the Remove.

But as they looked into the van it was Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles who met their gaze. Nobody resembling Billy Bunter was to be seen.

Bunter blinked at them wrathfully. He had been taken by surprise, but he

recovered himself.

'Look here, you fellows, you clear off!' snapped the boss of the World-Famous Circus. 'I'm fed-up with you. I—I'm much obliged for what you did this morning—not that it was anything to speak of. I—I should have stopped and thrashed that rotter, only I was—was in rather a hurry.'

'You looked in rather a hurry,' grinned Bob. 'A fellow could have guessed you were in a hurry, Mr. Whiffles.'

'I don't want any cheek!' snorted Bunter. 'Keep your rotten jokes for the Remove passage, Bob Cherry!'

'What the thump do you know about the Remove passage?' gasped Bob.

'You seem to know a lot of things about us, Mr. Whiffles.'

'The knowfulness is terrific.'

'Oh, hook it!' said Bunter. 'I'm busy!'

'I've brought back your hat. Mr. Whiffles,' said Harry. 'You were in such a hurry this morning that you left it behind you. Here it is.'

'Oh! Thanks!'

Bunter took the hat. Then he felt in Mr. Whiffles' pocket for some of Mr. Whiffles' cash.

'Here's half-a-crown for you, my lad.'

'You cheeky ass!' said Harry indignantly. 'Keep your silly half-crown!'

'Oh, really, Wharton—'

'Come on, you men,' said Wharton; and the juniors walked away from the van. As they made their way round to the entrance of the big tent they were wondering. That Mr. Whiffles should have a fat, squeaky voice like Bunter's was not surprising, but that he should have Bunter's fat, squeaky voice *and* Bunter's peculiar expressions of speech, was very surprising indeed. It really seemed as if the ghost of Bunter's voice haunted the fat person of the circus master. It was extremely perplexing, and they were still thinking of it when they made their way into the big tent and found their seats.

And when Mr. Whiffles, resplendent in evening clothes and fancy waistcoat, with the silk hat on his ample nutbrown locks, and a whip under his arm, rolled magnificently into the ring, they watched him with deep interest. Somehow, the proprietor of Whiffles' World-Famous Circus was indissolubly connected with William George Bunter in their minds.

Beastly for the Boss!

BILLY BUNTER blinked round the great arena, and at the rows and rows of 'people in front,' with great satisfaction.

Bunter was in his element now.

That he could manage the circus performance he had no doubt whatever. His abilities were equal to any test.

Genius can be turned in any direction. Bunter had no doubt whatever that he would have shone in any walk in life. At Greyfriars, it had never been hidden from Bunter that he could have run the school ever so much better than Dr. Locke. He never read a book without realising that he could have written it better if he had had the time. He never watched a county cricket match without reflecting what valuable tips he could have given to batsmen, bowlers,

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

and field. If a fellow had genius he simply had to mount it, as it were, and drive it in any direction he liked. Bunter had genius, so there it was! Considering the number of things that Bunter thought he could do, it was sheer cheek on the part of Dance to fancy that he could not manage a circus performance. It was simply pie to Bunter.

The performance started with a number of horses galloping round the ring, with Tomasso Tomsonio, the acrobat, standing on them, leaping from back to back as they galloped. Bunter proceeded to crack the long whip as he had often seen ring-masters do.

Cracking a whip was surely the easiest part of a circus boss' job. But when Bunter came to handle that long whip, the natural clumsiness that was one of his many gifts got in the way. Nobby Nobbs, the clown, was turning somersaults on the tan, while the galloping horses circled the ring. Bunter certainly had no intention of touching up Nobby Nobbs. His intention was simply to crack the whip in professional style. But what he actually did was to deliver a terrific slash that took effect on Mr. Nobbs' legs.

There was a yell from Nobby Nobbs that woke every echo of the big tent.

He rolled over and sat in the tan, blinking at the ringmaster.

'Here, what's this game?' he bawled.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!' came a roar from the audience.

The people in front took this as part of the performance, and they seemed to think it funny.

Mr. Nobbs did not think it funny.

Bunter brandished the whip again.

'Look out, guv'nor!' shrieked Nobby.

He caught the long lash this time with his neck.

'Yooop!'

Mr. Nobbs scrambled up and fled. There was a yell of delight from the audience. This was quite amusing—to everybody except the unfortunate Mr. Nobbs. Mr. Nobbs made a beeline for the staff exit.

'Here, you come back!' roared Bunter.

Mr. Nobbs turned a deaf ear.

He scudded down the canvas passage and almost ran into Dance. The manager caught him by the shoulder.

'Look here! What are you going off for? What—'

'I ain't going to be larruped with that whip!' bawled Mr. Nobbs. 'The guv'nor's mad or drunk! Let him keep that blinking whip to himself!'

'The fat idiot!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' came in a roar from the packed tent. Dance stared in round the canvas flap. Billy Bunter had got in the way of the galloping horses.

Fortunately, he jumped out of the way in time as they thundered down on him; but he jumped in such a hurry that he lost his footing in the sawdust, bumped into one of the wooden supports and rolled over.

'Yaroooh!' roared Bunter.

His silk hat spun from his head as he rolled, under the galloping hoofs.

Crunch!

'Oh crumbs!' gasped Bunter, sitting up in the sawdust and blinking round him in bewilderment. 'Where's my hat? Oh crikey!'

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

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

'I say, this is funnier than usual!' chuckled Bob Cherry. 'That old Whiffles is no end of a funny merchant!'

'The funnifulness is terrific.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Bunter scrambled up and grabbed up the crunched hat before the horses came thundering round again. He blinked in dismay at the hat, and tried to punch it out into some semblance of a topper again. The audience roared. This unrehearsed turn was going well with the people in front.

Tomasso Tomsonio guided his horses out of the ring at last, while Bunter, having restored his hat to something like the shape of a hat, jammed it on his head again. Then Mumbo, the performing elephant, came lumbering into the ring, with Nobby Nobbs seated on his neck. Mr. Nobbs kept a wary eye on the boss now. His impression was that Mr. Whiffles had been drinking.

Mumbo lumbered round the ring, Nobby performing acrobatic feats on his back. At this point it was Mr. Whiffles' cue to exchange back-chat with the clown, and Nobby wondered why he did not 'go it'. But Mr. Whiffles did not go it. He was quite unaware of what was expected of him. Dance scowled at him from behind the canvas flap, which perhaps relieved Mr. Dance's feelings, but was not helpful in any other way.

Having waited in vain for the gov'nor to bandy the usual back-chat and crack the ancient jokes of the circus, Nobby Nobbs proceeded to the next item, in which Mumbo, the elephant, had to pick up Mr. Whiffles in his trunk and raise him in the air, Mr. Whiffles at the same time affecting to be terrified. In Bunter's case, terror was not at all affected. The huge elephant stopped in front of him, and Bunter jumped back in alarm.

'Here, keep that beast off!' he yelled.

Mumbo followed him up, whipped his trunk round the ring-master, and swept him from his feet.

'Yaroooh! Help!' roared Bunter.

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yow-ow-ow! Leggo! Help! Fire! Murder!' roared Bunter. 'Oh crikey! Leggo! I shall be killed! Help! Whoooop!'

'Ha, ha, ha!' roared the audience.

'Blessed if a chap wouldn't think he was really frightened, if it wasn't part of the game!' remarked Bob Cherry.

'Bravo!'

'Yarooogh! Make him lemme go!' shrieked Bunter, as he swam between earth and roof. 'I'll sack you! Help! Help! Fire!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Mumbo proceeded to parade round the ring, as was his custom, with the ring-master in his trunk. Bunter wriggled and squirmed and yelled frantically. Every moment he expected to be dumped in the sawdust, and to feel the elephant's gigantic feet treading on him. His hat flew in one direction, his whip in another. His frantic yells rang far and wide.

'Ha, ha, ha! Hooray! Ha, ha!'

'Who—ooooop!' howled Bunter. 'Help!'

He caught sight of the laughing faces of the Famous Five in the front row, as the elephant came opposite the place where Harry Wharton and Co. sat.

'I say, you fellows,' shrieked Bunter, 'lend me a hand! Rescue!'

'Back up, Remove! Rescue! I say, you fellows—'

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

'Great pip!' gasped Wharton. 'What—'

'Yaroooh! Beasts! Help!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Mumbo lumbered on. Nobby Nobbs grinned at the gov'nor over the elephant's head. The boss was playing his part unusually well this time. Never had his terror seemed so real.

'Keep it up, gov'nor!' grinned Nobby.

'Yaroooh! Beast! I'll sack you!' shrieked Bunter. 'Pumme down!

Lemme go! Oh crikey! Beast! Help!'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Ow! Oh! Help! Oh dear, I wish I was back at Greyfriars!

Yaroooh! Make him lemme go! Whooop!'

Mumbo came to a halt at last, the turn being over, and set the fat Owl on his feet. Bunter stood and gasped. Only for one moment he stood, and then he started for the staff exit at top speed. He had had enough of performing elephants.



'I say, you fellows, lend me a hand.'

'I say, you fellows, lend me a hand.

'I say, gov'nor!' stuttered the amazed Nobby.

Bunter did not heed. He burst through the canvas flap, and there was a howl as he collided with Mr. Dance. Dance went sprawling, and Bunter sprawled over him.

'Ow! Gerraway! Keep off!' howled Bunter 'Lemme gerrout! Yaroooh! Beast! Help!'

He scrambled up, stumbled over something—it was only Mr. Dance's face—trod heavily on it without noticing what it was, and tore away. From the circus came peals of laughter. Bunter, quite unintentionally, had brought down the house.

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

It has been explained before that Billy Bunter's powers of sprinting were subject to remarkable improvements when he was fleeing from something that frightened him. And now the Fat Owl was frightened. As he careered across the circus ground like a barque in full sail, terrifying thoughts whirred through his foggy brain. There was Huggins ready to assault him, the Famous Five ready to rag him, Mr. Dance ready to turn him over to the local constabulary, hordes of circus animals ready to attack him. . . the list went on for ever.

All this meant only one thing to the podgy Removite—cut! And cut fast! Billy's masquerade as Montgomery St. Leger Whiffles was now over and not all the quivering jellies, jam tarts and ginger pop in the world were going to change his mind. And so, shedding wig, moustache and all the other garments of the redoubtable showman as he ran the length of the High Street— providing passers-by with a ne'er-to-be-forgotten sight—Billy came to the inevitable conclusion. It was back to Bunter Court for him, and the rages of his father, the headmaster and Mr. Quelch would just have to be faced.

It was, in fact, a doleful and dismal Bunter that left the train at last, and rolled wearily down the road to the villa which, in Bunter's fertile imagination, was a magnificent mansion, but which in cold reality was a detached villa—merely that and nothing more.

His brother Sammy met him at the door.

'You're for it!' grinned Sammy.

'Beast!' said Bunter.

'The pater's in no end of a wax!'

'Br-r-r-r-r!'

'William!' came a fat voice. 'Is that you, William? Come here, William. I have something to say to you, William!'

William came dispiritedly.

Mr. Bunter eyed him severely.

'Have—have you missed me a lot, pater?' asked Bunter.

'Eh—what? Why should I miss you?' asked Mr. Bunter, in Surprise.

'Oh!'

'I have something serious to say to you, William, so please do not talk nonsense,' said Mr. Bunter.

'Oh!'

'Since you ran away from Greyfriars, you have caused me a lot of unnecessary trouble and expense. I have had to make a journey to Greyfriars to see your headmaster—'

Bunter groaned.

'I have interceded on your behalf,' continued Bunter senior, 'and Dr. Locke is prepared to give you another chance.'

'Oh, good!' Bunter brightened.

'After he has administered a severe flogging.'

'Oh, lor!'

'That, William, is the position. You can return to Greyfriars at the beginning of the next term and take your medicine—'

'Groooooough!'

'Or—' began Bunter senior grimly.

'Or what, pater?'

'Or you can start work in my office, where I hope you will be worth the trouble you give. Make up your mind, William! Which is it to be?'

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

Bunter did not take long to decide. He hated the idea of a severe flogging at the hands of Dr. Locke. Still worse did he hate the idea of being made to work in his father's office.

'Oh, crumbs! I—I—I think, pater, I'd—I'd best do the manly thing, you know. That is g-g-go back to Greyfriars and t-take m-my medicine.'

'Very well,' snapped Mr. Bunter. 'Then the matter is settled. I'll write to Dr. Locke to that effect. Really, William, you ought to feel grateful to him.'

But one look at William George Bunter's face showed that he was anything but grateful. He was thinking of that flogging to come—a thought that haunted him until the first day of the new term. He had an idea that Dr. Locke would lay it on with the birch, good and heavy. And in that the erring Owl of the Remove was not mistaken, as the earsplitting howls which escaped from the privacy of Dr. Locke's study on the first day of term plainly testified.

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A new boy joins the Remove form—and task is to get Billy's form leader

BILLY BUNTER'S Big Top

expelled. Billy doesn't mean to get involved, but.

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A tearaway army captain is Out to cause trouble at Greyfriars, and with the Owl on his side, it looks as if he will succeed!

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