

BILLY BUNTER

for

CHRISTMAS

by
**FRANK
RICHARDS**

CHAPTER I

WHO SNOWBALLED QUELCH?

MR. QUELCH smiled.
He suddenly ceased to smile!

A snowball, crashing suddenly into the middle of the Remove master's majestic countenance, was more than enough to wipe away the smile.

It was morning break at Greyfriars School. There had been a sudden, heavy fall of snow that morning. It had ceased to fall: but snow was thick in the old quad, thick on roofs and window-sills, and ridging the branches of the leafless old elms. A merry mob of Remove fellows were snowballing one another, at a little distance from Quelch's study window, with plenty of rushing, and trampling, and shouting, evidently enjoying themselves in the keen frosty air.

Mr. Quelch, standing at his study window, which was wide open, looked on the scene with a genial smile, quite unlike his usual rather crusty expression.

Christmas was coming: and no doubt Henry Samuel Quelch already felt its genial influence. And Quelch had been a boy once himself: though that, of course, was a very long time ago. The ruddy faces and cheery shouts of the snowballers perhaps reminded him of ancient boyish days. Anyhow, he smiled, as he looked on the merry scene from his study window.

The Remove had rushed out joyously in break, into the snow. Nearly every fellow in the form had joined in the game. Harry Wharton and Co., of course, were there—and Vernon-Smith, and Redwing, and a crowd more—even Skinner and Snoop, who generally slacked about with their hands in their pockets while other fellows did more strenuous things, had joined up. Even Billy Bunter, the fattest and laziest fellow at Greyfriars or anywhere else, was in the crowd, hurling snowballs with great vim, his fat face red with exertion, and his very spectacles gleaming with excitement.

Quelch gazed on with a benevolent eye.

In the distance Gosling, the old Greyfriars porter, was looking out of his lodge at the scene, and even old Gosling's gnarled visage was less pessimistic than was its wont. The prospect of Christmas—or at least of Christmas tips—had an ameliorating effect even on William Gosling.

It was all quite a happy scene. Genial and benevolent, Quelch gazed at it, and then—!

Then it happened.

Who hurled the snowball that landed on his majestic features, and smashed there, Quelch did not know. It was so very unexpected. Twenty fellows were chucking snowballs about: and it might have been any one of them, so far as Quelch knew—for all he really knew was that something soft suddenly smashed in his face and toppled him over backwards.

So suddenly, so unexpectedly, did it come, that Quelch, wholly taken by surprise, was up-ended.

He staggered back, and sat down, with a heavy bump, on his study carpet.

Bump!

"Oh!" gasped Mr. Quelch.

He sat, for a moment or two, in quite a dizzy state. The smile had vanished from his face. There was not a vestige of a smile now—not the ghost of a smile. In the place of that smile, gathered a terrific frown. Quelch was no longer genial. He was no longer benevolent. He was infuriated.

He staggered to his feet.

He passed a hand over his face, wiping away clinging fragments of snow. He felt his nose tenderly. There was rather a pain in it. Snow spattered his gown, and was scattered on the carpet. Thunder grew in his brow. He had been knocked over—by a snowball deliberately hurled at him from the quad. It could not have been an accident, at the distance. Some young rascal in the surging crowd had spotted him at the open window, and deliberately "got" him with a snowball. It was an unprecedented happening—almost unthinkable—but it had happened! A Remove junior had up-ended the Remove master with a snowball!

Quelch stepped back to the study window. The snowball game was going on—apparently the merry crowd had not noticed the incident at the window—the distance was considerable.

"Boys!"

Quelch's voice was not loud, but deep. It needed to be a good deal louder

to reach the merry mob of snowballers, amid the shouting of many voices. Besides, the merry mob had something else to draw their attention at that moment. Gosling had stepped out of his lodge, and started towards the House. Why Gosling showed up at that moment, the juniors neither knew nor cared—but as they saw him coming along, they gave him their attention.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry. "Here comes Gosling! Give him a few."

"Good egg!" exclaimed Frank Nugent.

"Give Gosling a few!" yelled Johnny Bull.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Go it!" howled Skinner.

A dozen snowballs shot at Gosling. That ancient gentleman came to a sudden halt, as the missiles broke all over him.

"'Ere, you chuck it!" spluttered Gosling.

"We're chucking it, old man!" chuckled Vernon-Smith. "Here it comes!" And the Bounder landed a well-aimed ball under Gosling's ancient chin.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The chuckfulness is terrific, my esteemed Gosling!" chortled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, landing a whizzing ball in Gosling's ear.

"Oooogh!" spluttered Gosling. He waved horny hands wildly to fend off snowballs. "I'll report yer! I'm going to Mr. Quelch now to say—yaroooooop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I'm going to—Yoo-hoo-hoop!" roared Gosling, as snowballs smashed all over him. "Oh, gosh! You young limbs, you! Oooogh! Wot I says is this 'ere—Yoo-hoop!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Man down!" chuckled Smithy, as Gosling, slipping over in the snow under the shower of missiles, bumped on the earth.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Gosling sat and spluttered.

"I say, you fellows, roll him over!" squeaked Billy Bunter.

"Good egg—roll him, you men!" shouted Bob Cherry.

"BOYS!"

Quelch was repeating himself! Five or six times he had called "Boys" unheard and unheeded. Now he fairly bawled. And that bawl reached the ears of the merry mob at last, and they looked round.

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "Quelch! He looks waxy."

"Rot!" said Vernon-Smith. "Why shouldn't we roll Gosling? Get on with it."

"Hold on, fathead," said Harry Wharton. "Quelch looks fierce—"

"BOYS!" roared Mr. Quelch. "Wharton! All of you! Come here at once."

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

The whole crowd came over to their form-master's study window. One of them, at least, knew why Quelch was looking "fierce": but most of the fellows were still unaware of what had happened to Quelch, and supposed that it was

the rag on Gosling that was all that was the matter. They came breathlessly up, surprised and a little alarmed by Quelch's thunderous glare.

Close at hand, they became aware of flakes of snow on their form-master's cap, on his gown, and all over him generally. Then it dawned upon them that something had happened to Quelch.

"Wharton!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir!"

"Who threw that snowball at me?"

"Did—did anybody, sir?" gasped the captain of the Remove.

"Oh, my only winter bonnet!" murmured Bob Cherry.

"I have been hurled over—hurled headlong—by a snowball smashing in my face!" roared Mr. Quelch. "One of you threw it!"

"Oh!" gasped the Removites.

"The boy who threw it will be reported to the headmaster for a flogging. Let him stand forward!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

Not a fellow stood forward. The fellow, whoever he was, was undoubtedly there. But the prospect of being reported to his headmaster for a flogging did not seem to be attractive to the unknown marksman. The juniors looked at one another, and looked at Mr. Quelch—but nobody spoke, and nobody stirred.

Quelch's gimlet eye gleamed over the dismayed crowd under his window. It lingered on Billy Bunter. Bunter had been whopped, that morning, in the Remove form-room, for having handed out the very worst "con" ever handed out in that form-room. Perhaps Quelch suspected that the snowball was the result of the whopping: for his gimlet eye almost bored into the fat Owl of the Remove. It made Billy Bunter quake.

"I—I, say, sir, it wasn't me!" gasped Bunter. "I never—I didn't—I wasn't—I—I wouldn't—oh, crikey!"

Some of the juniors grinned. The unknown marksman had "got" Quelch from a good distance with a well-aimed snowball: and it did not seem probable that the cack-handed Owl of the Remove could possibly have been that marksman.

"It really wasn't, sir!" gasped the alarmed Owl. "I—I wasn't snowballing at all, sir! All the fellows know I wasn't, sir—they all saw me—"

Then there was a chuckle. But it died away at once as Quelch's glinting eye, quitting the fat Owl, swept round over the crowd, scanning every face.

"I order the boy who threw the snowball to stand forward!" said the Remove master, in a grinding voice.

"No takers!" murmured the Bounder to Skinner. Skinner grinned, but he became grave again at once, as Quelch's eye swept round in his direction.

"Did you speak, Vernon-Smith?" rapped Mr. Quelch.

"I only told Skinner my feet were gettin' cold, sir!" answered the Bounder, meekly. "It's a bit chilly standin' in the snow, sir."

Mr. Quelch breathed hard.

"Go into the House, all of you," he said, "I shall investigate this matter with the utmost strictness. That is all for the moment."

The Remove fellows marched off. Break was not yet up: but there was no more snowballing for them. They went quietly into the House, as Gosling, gasping for breath and smothered with snow-flakes, arrived on the spot.

"Mr. Quelch, sir!" gasped Gosling. "I got to report—"

"I saw all that occurred, Gosling," rapped Mr. Quelch, "and the matter will be dealt with severely."

And Mr. Quelch shut his study window.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERY!

"I SAY, YOU fellows—!"

"There's goin' to be a row."

"Somebody's for it!"

"But who?"

"Think Quelch thinks it was me, you fellows?" asked Billy Bunter, anxiously. "I say, he looked at me—"

Bob Cherry laughed.

"You're all right, fathead," he said. "Quelch knows as well as we do that you couldn't hit a house with a snowball."

"Oh, couldn't I?" exclaimed Billy Bunter, warmly. "I could jolly well have got Quelch, I can jolly well tell you—"

"Did you?" asked Skinner.

"No!" roared Bunter. "I didn't! Did you?"

"Too jolly dangerous for me," said Skinner, "but look here, it must have been somebody—who was it?"

"Whoever it was, would be a wise man to keep it dark," remarked the Bounder. "It means callin' on the Head if he's nailed."

"You, I suppose, Smithy," said Peter Todd.

"Wrong in one," answered Smithy. "I never thought of it! I might have, if I'd known Quelch was puttin' his beak out of window. But I never saw him."

A good many of the Remove fellows gave Herbert Vernon-Smith doubtful glances. Snowballing a "beak" was a dangerous game: from the point of view of the masters, it amounted to nothing less than an assault upon a member of the staff. It was certain to be followed by condign punishment if the culprit was discovered. And Quelch was likely to be on the track of that snowballer like a bloodhound. The Bounder of Greyfrairs was reckless enough for such a dangerous prank—it was, in fact, quite in his line.

"Well?" snapped the Bounder, unpleasantly, catching Harry Wharton's eye. "Do you think I did it?"

"It would be rather like you, Smithy," answered Harry.

"I've said it was not I," Smithy's eyes glinted. "Isn't my word good enough for you, Harry Wharton?"

"If you say so, all right!" said the captain of the Remove, "but I'm dashed if I can guess who did it, if you didn't, Smithy."

"Perhaps you did!" sneered Smithy.

"Oh, don't be an ass."

"I say, you fellows, if it was Wharton, he ought to own up if Quelch jumps on me," squeaked Billy Bunter. "I could see in Quelch's eye that he was thinking of the whopping he gave me in first school. Look here, Wharton, if you did it—"

"I didn't, you fat ass."

"Yes, but if you did, you know—!" persisted Bunter.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean to say, I take your word, of course, old chap, but all the same, if you did it—!"

"Didn't anybody here see who did it?" asked Johnny Bull, glancing round.

The Remove were gathered at their form-room door, waiting for Mr. Quelch. They were in a rather subdued mood as they waited. Obviously there was going to be trouble over that snowball: a form-master could not be up-ended with impunity. And trouble with a beak like Quelch was real trouble!

There was a general shaking of heads in reply to Johnny Bull's question. One fellow, at least, knew who the culprit was: but nobody else knew.

"Quelch will spot him!" said Frank Nugent.

"The spotfulness will probably be terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, "and the whopfulness will be a deadly cert."

"Well, I don't see how Quelch will spot the man, when we can't guess who it was ourselves," said Bob Cherry, slowly. "I never knew Quelch had been snowballed at all, till he called us to his window. But if he doesn't spot the sportsman, he will be wilder than ever."

"Silly ass, whoever he was!" remarked Lord Mauleverer. "Rotten bad form to rag a beak."

"Rot!" said the Bounder. "Whoever saw Quelch pokin' his boko out of window must have been tempted to let him have a dot on it. If I'd noticed him—"

"Sure you didn't?" asked Skinner, laughing.

"If you're askin' for a thick ear, Skinner—"

"Not at all, old bean! But who the dickens was it?" asked Skinner, looking round. "I don't see why the chap should keep it dark among ourselves."

"Least said soonest mended," remarked Squiff, "I shouldn't shout it out if I'd done it—with a beak's flogging in prospect."

"I say, Field, if you did it—!" squeaked Bunter.

"I didn't, fathead," answered Squiff.

"Well, who did?" asked Hazeldene.

Nobody answered that question. The secret snowballer, whoever he was, evidently intended to keep his own counsel.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here comes Henry!" murmured Bob Cherry, as Mr. Quelch's angular figure appeared in the corridor.

Bob was careful not to let that remark reach "Henry's" ears! Quelch did

not look, at the moment, as if he would have liked to hear a member of his form speaking of him as "Henry".

Quelch's face was grim. There was a rather unusual redness at the tip of his rather sharp nose: undoubtedly that feature had had rather a knock. And over his reddened nose his eyes were glistening.

Obviously the incident of the snowball had roused Quelch's deepest ire. The genial influence of coming Christmas had quite disappeared. Henry Samuel Quelch was in his grimmest mood.

The juniors went in very quietly to take their places. Even the Bounder assumed his meekest manner. Quelch was not in a mood to be trifled with, and even the most reckless member of his form realized that it behoved him to walk warily. Billy Bunter eyed Quelch in deep alarm through his big spectacles. It was, at least, a coincidence, that Bunter had been whopped in the form-room that morning, and that Quelch had been snowballed in break. It was only too likely that Quelch might suspect that these two incidents were cause and effect. Certainly his penetrating eye seemed to linger on Bunter:

All the fellows knew that third lesson was not going to begin at once. The snowball on Quelch's "boko" was a more pressing matter even than lessons. Mr. Quelch stood by his high desk, scanning his silent and subdued form. If keenness of vision could have picked out the culprit, Quelch would not have been left in doubt—for his gimlet eyes almost bored into his class. But the unknown marksman, whoever he was, showed no signs of confusion or guilt for Quelch to spot—unless, indeed, William George Bunter was the man. Bunter showed plenty of signs of trepidation—not because he was the snowballer, but because he dreaded that Quelch might believe that he was!

"Before we commence," said Mr. Quelch, in a deep voice, "I must inquire into the incident at my study window. I have said that the delinquent will be reported to Dr. Locke for a flogging. I now give him one more opportunity to stand forward and admit his guilt."

Dead silence.

Mr. Quelch compressed his lips very hard.

"If the delinquent does not come forward," he said, "I shall give him the opportunity to come to my study later and confess. If this does not occur, I shall punish the whole form. Such an outrage cannot possibly be passed over."

Silence.

"In the meantime," continued Mr. Quelch, grimly, "Gosling has very naturally complained of the rough horseplay to which he was subjected in the quadrangle during break. I can make allowance for the exuberance of youthful spirits: but I am bound to take notice of Gosling's complaint: and the whole form will be detained for one hour after class as a punishment."

"I say, sir, I never snowballed Gosling—!" squeaked Billy Bunter.

"I saw you doing so, Bunter."

"Oh, lor'! I—I mean—"

"We shall now commence," said Mr. Quelch, "be silent, Bunter. I

recommend the boy who threw the snowball at me to come to my study during the day and confess to his act. Otherwise, severe measures will be taken. That is all for the present."

And third lesson commenced, in rather an electric atmosphere.

It was not a happy hour for the Remove. Quelch's temper was often sharp—now it had an unusual edge on it. Almost every fellow in the form had the keen edge of Quelch's tongue during that lesson. Quelch was angry: and, like the prophet of old, he seemed to think that he did well to be angry! Billy Bunter seemed to come off worst. It was only too likely that Quelch had his suspicions of Bunter—and Bunter, anyhow, was always a rather exasperating pupil. The lesson was geography, and Billy Bunter's knowledge of geography was fearful and wonderful. Even a good-tempered form-master might have been irritated when Bunter told him that the Danube was the largest river in the United States, and that Lisbon was the greatest city on its banks. Bunter, catching Mr. Quelch's expression, added hurriedly that he meant to say Montreal—but that did not improve matters. Bunter was in a quite scarified state when his form-master had done with him.

He was perspiring when the Remove went out at last—never so glad to be dismissed.

"I say, you fellows, ain't he a beast?" groaned Bunter. "I say, if he's going to be a beast like that till he finds out who coshed him on the conk, I think the fellow ought to own up."

"Get on with it, then!" grinned Skinner.

"Oh, really, Skinner, it wasn't me—"

"Quelch seems rather to think it was!" chuckled Skinner. "He's got his jolly old eye on you, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

"Bother the fellow, whoever he was," said Harry Wharton. "We shall all be in the soup if Quelch doesn't spot him. It was a fool trick, anyway, and the fellow who did it ought to be jolly well kicked."

"But who the dickens—!" said Bob.

"Doesn't look as if Quelch is going to spot the sportsman," said Skinner. "He's got nothing to go on, really. It's a jolly old mystery that might beat Ferrers Locke himself—the Case of the Mysterious Marksman! If it wasn't Bunter—"

"It wasn't!" yelled Bunter.

Skinner laughed, and walked away with his pal Snoop, to the Rag. In the Rag, Sidney James Snoop gave his friend a rather peculiar look. Skinner, catching that look, started a little, glanced round hurriedly to see that no one else was within hearing, and muttered in a low voice:

"Well! What's biting you, Snoopey?"

"Oh! Nothing!" said Snoop. He grinned. "I'm mum, old man."

"Mum—about what?"

Snoop winked.

"Well, what do you mean?" muttered Skinner.

"Only that I was right at your elbow when Quelch got that snowball on the boko!" grinned Snoop.

Skinner caught his breath.

"If you think—!" he began.

"I don't think—I know," said Snoop, coolly. "O.K. old man—I'm not giving a pal away. Nobody else noticed—you're all right."

And Harold Skinner certainly seemed "all right", for if Snoop knew who the "mysterious marksman" was, nobody else in the Remove knew or guessed: and the matter remained a mystery. And if Mr. Quelch expected the culprit to arrive in his study that day with a confession, he was disappointed. Nobody called on Mr. Quelch to confess—and it only remained for the Remove master to decide upon the "severe measures" he intended to take with his form.

What those "measures" were going to be, the Remove did not yet know: but they hardly needed telling that the measures, whatever they were, would be "severe". The sun went down on Mr. Quelch's wrath—and was only too likely to rise upon it again and find it unabated.

CHAPTER III

ABOUT CHRISTMAS!

"**A** BOUT CHRISTMAS, you fellows—"
"Help!"

"Oh, really, you know—!" Billy Bunter blinked into No. 1 study in the Remove, with a reproachful blink through his big spectacles.

The Christmas holidays were a rather important and pressing matter to Billy Bunter. Greyfriars School was breaking up in a week more, and Bunter had not yet completed his plans for the Christmas "hols".

Bunter Court did not seem to attract him a lot—perhaps because on a nearer view it diminished to Bunter Villa. His titled relations, of whom the Remove fellows often heard from Bunter, seemed rather to have overlooked him—he was not booked for any of their wealthy mansions.

The fat Owl was very keen to get "fixed up for the hols". But other fellows did not seem interested in helping him to make that fixture. Considering what a really attractive fellow Billy Bunter was, it was rather surprising that there was not quite a rush. But there wasn't.

Harry Wharton and Co. were not in the least interested in Billy Bunter: and, at that moment, not in the Christmas holidays. The Famous Five were in No. 1 study, discussing a football match with Carcroft School, which was booked for Wednesday: and discussing the weather at the same time. The Carcroft match was their last fixture for the term, the last away game before Greyfriars broke up: and they were very keen on it. Snow was seasonable at

Christmastide, and welcome on its own account: but it was possible to have too much of a good thing, from the soccer point of view.

"It's all right," Bob Cherry was saying, when Bunter dawned in the doorway. "It was only a spot—not a flake since this morning. It will be all right on Wednesday—right as rain! Bank on it."

Bob always took the cheery view.

"I say, you fellows, I've looked in—!"

"Look out again," suggested Johnny Bull.

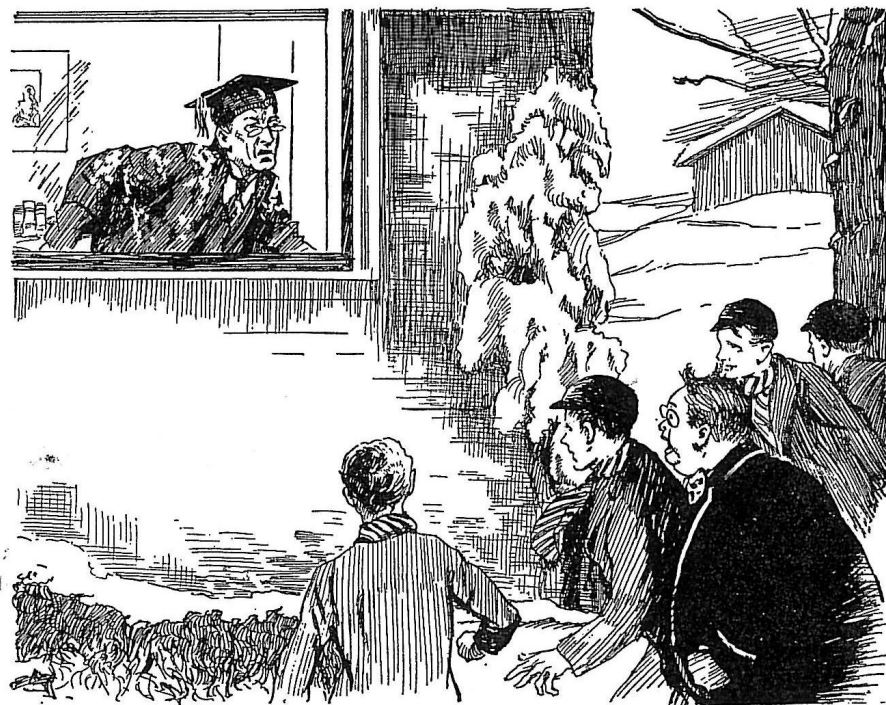
"Oh, really, Bull—!"

"Roll out the barrel," said Bob Cherry.

"I say you fellows, about Christmas—"

"Try next door!" suggested Nugent.

"Beast! I mean, what about it?" asked Bunter. "I'm not going home with Mauly after all. I thought of it, but I can't stand Mauly at any price. I've turned Mauleverer down flat."



"Wharton!" thundered Mr. Quelch, "who threw that snowball at me?"

"Happy man!" said Bob. "I noticed that Mauly was looking rather bucked—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If you want to make sure of fellows getting a really merry Christmas, old fat man, treat 'em alike," said Bob. "Turn 'em all down flat!"

"Oh, really, Cherry! Mauly fairly begged me to come, almost with tears in his eyes. He said it wouldn't be like Christmas at all at Mauleverer Towers without me. He never said he would kick me if I mentioned Christmas again—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And Smithy was keen, too," went on Bunter, warmly. "He'd jump at it. But I can't stand those rich City people. The fact is, Harry, old chap—"

"Help!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! I suppose these fellows will be with you for Christmas at Wharton Lodge?" said Bunter. "Well, I don't mind."

"You don't mind!" ejaculated the captain of the Remove.

"Not at all, old chap," said Bunter, affably. "I'll come all the same."

"Will you?" Wharton seemed to doubt it.

"Yes, old fellow! Dash it all, if I can stand them at school, I can stand them in the hols," said Bunter. "I'm an accommodating fellow. Don't mind me—"

"I won't!" said Wharton, laughing.

"After all, it's your place—ask anybody you like," said Bunter, generously. "I should think you'd like a rest from them in the hols—I know I should—but if you want them, have them, and I'll stand it somehow. I can stand your uncle and aunt, and I can stand your friends—so that's all right. It's settled, then."

"Not quite! You see, they can't stand you!" explained the captain of the Remove. "Shut the door after you."

"Oh, really, Wharton—!"

"Try Smithy again, and give him a chance to jump!" suggested Bob Cherry. "I can sort of see him jumping."

"Beast!"

"I fancy the weather will be all right for Carcroft," said Bob, "and we're jolly well going to put the kybosh on them. They've got some good men—Compton, and Drake, and Vane-Carter—but we've got better—"

"The betterfulness is terrific," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"I say, you fellows—!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Are you still there, Bunter?" Bob Cherry looked round. "Buzz off, old fat porpoise—we're talking football. Hand me that cushion, Franky, and see me get Bunter's boko just like somebody got Quelchy's this morning."

"Here you are," said Nugent, laughing.

Billy Bunter glared into No. 1 study with a glare that might have cracked his spectacles. He had come there to fix up for Christmas. Mauleverer and

Smithy had been drawn blank: and Harry Wharton and Co. were the next best thing. But it looked as if they were going to be drawn blank also.

"Look here—!" roared Bunter.

"Stand steady!" Bob swung up the cushion, and took aim. "Right on your boko in one, Bunty—stand steady! Here she comes!"

The cushion swung through the air. Bob did not let go of it, however—but to Billy Bunter, it seemed that it was whizzing straight for his fat little nose, and he made a sudden hurried jump backwards into the passage.

The next moment there was a fearful yell.

"Aw! Wake snakes!" yelled Fisher T. Fish, as Bunter landed. "Carry me home to die! Yarooooop!"

Bunter had, of course, no eyes in the back of his fat head. He had, therefore, not seen Fisher T. Fish coming up the passage. But really it was rather thoughtless to jump suddenly backwards into a passage where fellows were constantly passing to and fro. Bunter crashed backwards into Fisher T. Fish, as he came by, and hurled him against the opposite wall. Fishy's bony head crashed on that wall, and Fishy's frantic yell, as it crashed, might almost have been heard in his native city of New York.

"Ooooh!" gasped Bunter.

"You fat clam!" shrieked Fisher T. Fish. "Gone loco, you piecan? You've sure cracked my cabeza! I guess I'll make potato-scrappings of you, and then some! You take that—and that—and that—"

"Yoo-hoop!" roared Bunter, as he took them. "I say—leave off—keep away—you mad Yankee—stopit—Oh, crikey!"

Billy Bunter fled for his fat life, with an infuriated Transatlantic junior in hot pursuit. Bob Cherry threw down the cushion and shut the door of No. 1 study. The Famous Five resumed discussion of soccer and Carcroft, uninterrupted further by the Owl of the Remove. Billy Bunter's plans for Christmas were still unsettled—and they had—to remain unsettled.

CHAPTER IV

BUNTER'S BIG IDEA!

HARRY WHARTON and Co., and the rest of the Remove, were in a state of not wholly happy anticipation, when they took their places in the form-room the following morning.

Nobody, it was known, had gone to Quelch to "confess" to the snowball. Quelch was not the man to let the matter drop. So that morning the Removites expected to hear of the "severe measures" that were in store.

Rather to their surprise, and greatly to their relief, the Remove master made no allusion to the matter in the form-room.

Quelch was not in his bonniest mood that morning. His temper was sharp, and his tongue was sharper. It was not a happy morning in the form. Obviously, the Remove master had not forgotten the incident.

But he made no mention of it: and there was a general impression in the form that it was going to blow over. Quelch would not let it drop if he could help it: but after all, the juniors argued, what could he do, when there was absolutely no clue to the culprit?

"All serene, I fancy," remarked Bob Cherry, when the form came out in break. "The fact is, he can't do a thing."

"Looks like it," agreed Nugent.

Harry Wharton shook his head.

"We haven't heard the last of it yet," he said. "Quelch is giving the man time to own up, I fancy. He can't let it drop."

"After all, it was only a snowball on the beezee," said Bob.

"But it was a beak's beezee—and a beak is frightfully particular about his beezee," said Johnny Bull. "Quelch is still broody about it—you could see that in his face. He's taking his time."

"Well, if he takes enough time, we shall be off for Christmas, and it will be all right," chuckled Bob. "If he's taking time, let's hope he will take plenty of time. I wonder who the silly ass can have been. It was like Smithy—but Smithy wouldn't keep it dark in the form. More likely to shout it from the jolly old house-tops."

"Some lad, whoever he was," said Nugent. "It wanted some nerve to buzz a snowball at a beak's boko."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Harry. "With twenty fellows all chucking snowballs, it was easy to do it without being spotted. Even Bunter would have the nerve if he was sure of getting by with it."

"Think it was Bunter?"

"Blessed if I know," said the captain of the Remove. "He's too cack-handed to bring off a shot like that from a distance, unless by luck. He might have hit Quelch if he was aiming at somebody else."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I say, you fellows—!" Billy Bunter rolled up in the quad.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Jolly good news, Bunter," exclaimed Bob.

"Eh! What's that?" asked Bunter.

"Can't you see the weather's improved? Looks all right for the game at Carcroft to-morrow."

"You silly ass!" hooted Bunter. It was true that the snow had vanished overnight, and that it was a fine clear morning. But Billy Bunter was not interested in Carcroft or football. "Do you ever think about anything but soccer? I was going to say—"

"Not Christmas!" said Bob, warningly. "If you say 'Christmas' you get bumped. That's a tip."

"Beast! I say, you fellows, think Quelch has given up looking for the chap who buzzed that snowball at him?" asked Bunter, blinking seriously at the

Famous Five through his big spectacles. "Lots of fellows seem to think he's chucked it."

"Looks like it to me," answered Bob. He chuckled. "If you were the happy man, Bunter, old fat bean, looks as if you're safe."

"The esteemed and ridiculous Quelch will have to give it up, in my idiotic opinion," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Was it you, after all, Bunter?" asked Frank Nugent, and the chums of the Remove regarded William George Bunter very curiously.

Billy Bunter grinned.

"I'm not saying anything," he answered. "Least said soonest mended, you know. It might have been me, and it mightn't have. That's telling."

"Which means that it was you, I suppose," said Bob.

"Perhaps it was, and perhaps it wasn't," said Bunter, astutely, and he rolled away, leaving the chums of the Remove staring.

"Bunter after all," said Bob. "Who'd have thought it? I shouldn't have expected him to hit the House with a snowball, let alone Quelch's proboscis."

"Must have been a lucky shot," said Frank.

"The luckfulness must have been terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, there's Smithy with a footer!" exclaimed Bob: and the Famous Five rushed off to join in a punt-about, and forgot the fat existence of William George Bunter.

Billy Bunter rolled into the House, with a sly grin on his fat and fatuous face.

Who the "mysterious marksman" was, was not known in the Remove, and was certainly not known to Billy Bunter. Whoever he was, it was clear that he was going to keep his own counsel. A reckless fellow like the Bounder would have told all the form, and chanced the danger of a careless word coming to the ears of authority. Whoever the "marksman" was, he was evidently a fellow much less reckless than Smithy, and much more wary. He was keeping his secret from his form-fellows, aware that discussion was dangerous, and that walls have ears. Nothing had transpired in twenty-four hours concerning his identity: and it was fairly clear now that nothing was going to transpire.

That was what had put a new and bright idea into Billy Bunter's fat and fatuous brain.

Nobody was claiming the distinction of having got Quelch on the nose with a snowball. That distinction was, as it were, going begging. Any fellow—that is, any fellow who was ass enough—was free to lay claim to that distinction! Any fellow who admitted being the "mysterious marksman" might be in danger from Quelch—but he would be sure of being regarded as "some lad" by the majority of the Remove. Bunter liked the idea of being regarded as "some lad".

That kind of distinction never came Bunter's way. Billy Bunter would have liked to "rag" Quelch—but Billy Bunter never ventured to do anything of the kind. He had too much regard for his fat skin.

But it seemed to the fatuous fat Owl now that here was a chance of the glory without the risk!

The identity of the "marksman" was a secret, and was going to remain a secret. That was all right for Bunter. Quelch, in the opinion of most of the Remove, had realized that he could do nothing, and was letting the matter slide. That made it safe in the direction of Quelch.

So Billy Bunter could see no reason why he should not spread himself, as it were, and reap undying glory as a bold, bad Bunter who dared what no other fellow dared—getting his beak on the boko with a snowball!

"Safety first" was of course Bunter's chief consideration. But so far as he could see—which was not perhaps very far—all was safe!

Already a good many fellows wondered whether Bunter was the marksman, having no doubt that Quelch had some such suspicion in his mind. Bunter was going to let them know that he was the man! Bunter, for the first time in his fat career, was going to be pointed out as "some lad"—as a reckless ragger who didn't care a boiled bean for beaks and their wrath—the only fellow at Greyfriars wildly reckless enough to give a beak a bang on the beezel! It seemed quite a happy and glorious prospect to Bunter.

He rolled into the House, and grinned as he entered the Rag, and heard six or seven voices in discussion of the snowball mystery. Skinner and Hazeldene and Stott, Bolsover major and Russell and Newland, were in a group by the window, talking it over.

"The beak's chucked it," Bolsover major was saying. "That's pretty plain. Quelch can't do anything."

"He's a downy bird," said Russell.

"But he can't do a thing. Safe as houses for the fellow to let us know he did it," said Bolsover major.

"Oh, quite!" said Skinner. "Seems to be rather a cautious johnny, whoever he is. I wonder who it was—simply can't guess. Looks as if nobody will ever know, now."

"He, he, he!"

The juniors looked round at that cachinnation. They stared at Billy Bunter's fat, grinning face.

"Well, where does the cackle come in, you fat image?" asked Skinner. "Think anybody will ever know who snowballed Quelch?"

"He, he, he! Yes, rather!" chuckled Bunter. "I jolly well know! He, he."

Harold Skinner gave quite a jump.

"You know?" he ejaculated.

"He, he, he! What-ho!" chuckled Bunter.

Skinner made a step towards him. The colour wavered in his face, and his eyes gleamed and glinted. For one terrifying moment he wondered whether Bunter had seen him "buzz" that snowball at Quelch the previous day. If so, it was as good as all Greyfriars having seen him—Bunter would tell every fellow he met. But the next moment he realized that that could not be how it

was—for Bunter would have chattered it out long ago, if he had seen the snowball-hurler in the act. But what did the fat Owl mean?

Harold Skinner had believed himself absolutely safe. Snoop knew—but Snoop was his pal and would keep mum. How did Bunter know?

“You—you know?” Skinner breathed hard. “You fat frump, you don’t know anything about it.”

“Don’t I just?” grinned Bunter.

“Then who was it?” demanded Bolsover major. “Tell us who it was.”

“Mind, you’re to keep it dark,” said Bunter. “I don’t mind telling you fellows—but Quelch ain’t to get a whisper of it. It would mean a flogging.”

“Who was it, fathead?” exclaimed Russell.

“He doesn’t know, any more than we do!” muttered Skinner. His eyes gleamed almost wolfishly at the grinning fat Owl. If Bunter knew—!

“Tell us who it was, if you know, porpoise,” said Newland.

“He, he, he! Keep it dark,” chuckled Bunter. “Of course, I know I can trust you fellows not to give a man away—”

“You!” roared Bolsover major.

“You!” exclaimed Stott.

“Little me!” chuckled Bunter. “Didn’t I get him a treat? Right on the boko! He, he, he! Mind, not a word where a pre, or a beak might hear! I don’t want to be up before the Head! But did I get Quelchy a treat! He, he.”

Skinner gazed at him, dumbfounded.

He had dreaded that Bunter might have found out somehow, the identity of the snowball-hurler. He was relieved of that fear now: but he was amazed. Other fellows had wondered whether Bunter was the man—Skinner, of course, had not. Other fellows might not be surprised to hear Bunter admit that he was the man—but Skinner was very much surprised indeed—amazed—astounded—almost stupefied.

“You—you—you say you did it!” gasped Skinner.

“What do you think?” grinned Bunter.

“Well, I wondered whether it was Bunter,” remarked Russell, “but I can’t make out how he got Quelch, if he was aiming at him. Were you chucking the snowball at somebody else, Bunter?”

“Oh, really, Russell—”

Skinner opened his lips—and shut them again. That Bunter was fibbing, he knew, if nobody else did. But if Bunter chose to fib on that perilous subject, it made it all the safer for the real culprit. Skinner, at least, did not believe that Quelch had shut down on the matter—on the contrary, he was convinced that the Remove master would be on the track of the “mysterious marksman” like a dog after a bone. Discovery seemed unlikely, indeed impossible: but with a “downy bird” like Henry Samuel Quelch, there was a risk. One moment’s reflection was enough for Harold Skinner—he realized how useful it would be, to have Bunter interpose himself like a fat screen between him and danger.

“Did I get him?” chuckled Bunter, happily unconscious of the thoughts

passing through Skinner's wily mind. "Did I buzz it right at his boko? You couldn't have got him at that distance, Russell, and chance it."

"Well, I think I could, if I'd been idiot enough," said Russell. "You're idiot enough, I suppose: but blessed if I'd have believed you could pull it off."

"Well, I jolly well did—!"

"Bunter's some lad," said Skinner, blandly. "Who'd have thought he had it in him? Bunter—the jolly old mysterious marksman—! Bravo, Bunter!"

By the time the bell rang for third school, all the Remove knew that Bunter was the man! The name of Bunter was on almost every tongue in the form. Bunter, for the first time, was the cynosure of all eyes—the centre of attention.

It was just pie to the fat and fatuous Owl.

Billy Bunter rolled into third school, with his blushing honours thick upon him, like a fellow walking on air. Bunter, for the moment, was the goods! And Bunter fully enjoyed being "the goods."

CHAPTER V

THE HEAVY HAND!

MR. QUELCH, from his high desk, looked at his form. His face was grim, and his gimlet eyes had a glint in them. The Remove, silent, waited.

Third school had ended. But the word to dismiss was not uttered. It seemed that Mr. Quelch had something to add before he dismissed his form.

Most of the fellows could guess what it was. The incident of the snowball had not, after all, been dismissed—it was not over and done with, as careless fellows had concluded. Quelch had been giving the culprit time for reflection—time to think it over and make up his mind to confess. As nothing had transpired, he was now coming to the "severe measures" at which he had hinted. The more thoughtful fellows in the Remove had supposed so all along—and now it was clear to all, even to Billy Bunter.

The fat Owl felt an inward tremor as he blinked through his big spectacles at Quelch's grim face. For a moment or two, he repented him of having laid claim to the great and glorious distinction of being the fellow who had snowballed a beak. Quelch's expression was rather alarming.

But after all, what could Quelch do? Certainly he couldn't have found out that Bunter had snowballed him—as Bunter hadn't. The fat Owl found comfort in that happy reflection.

There was a brief silence—brief, but it seemed long to the waiting juniors. Then Quelch spoke, in quiet acid tones.

"No confession has been made to me, and I must now conclude that the member of my form who attacked me at my study window yesterday has no intention of admitting his action and facing the just punishment."

Deep silence.

Only too evidently Quelch was very bitter about it. To the Remove, it had been a matter of snowballing. To the Remove master, it was an "attack". There was a wide difference in the point of view, between form and form-master.

"I have allowed ample time for the delinquent to come to my study and confess," went on Mr. Quelch. "I must now take further measures."

Another long pause.

"For the last time, I give the boy an opportunity to stand forward!" said Mr. Quelch.

Two or three fellows glanced at Bunter. Bunter did not stir. Nobody stirred. Mr. Quelch waited a whole minute—and it seemed a very long minute. But the silence was unbroken: and at length he spoke again.

"Very well! The culprit is here, a member of this form! I have little doubt that his identity is known to many others. It is not unlikely that the whole form were concerned in the outrage." Quelch's lips closed hard. Evidently the suspicion was in his mind that the snowball was not an isolated act by some unthinking fellow, but a "rag"—an end-of-the-term rag. He paused a moment, and went on. "The culprit shall and must be discovered and punished. Nothing will induce me to let the matter close without justice being done. The whole form will be detained for the remaining half-holidays of the term—"

"Oh!" gasped some of the juniors.

"And there will be one hour's detention every day after class—"

"Oh!"

"This will continue until the identity of my assailant is known," said Mr. Quelch, grimly. "Now dismiss."

Harry Wharton drew a quick breath.

"If you please, sir—!" he began.

"You need not speak, Wharton," snapped Mr. Quelch. The Remove master was not often snappish to his trusted Head Boy. But he snapped now. Only too clearly, the snowball on his nose had embittered Quelch.

"But, sir—"

"That will do!"

"Please let me speak, sir! If we're to be in detention for the half-holiday to-morrow—"

"I have said so, Wharton."

"To-morrow's the Carcroft match, sir," said Harry. "We're booked to go over to Carcroft for our regular fixture there, sir."

Mr. Quelch gave just a slight start. Probably he had forgotten all about Remove football fixtures, at the moment, his mind being filled with other matters. As a rule, Quelch was extremely considerate in the matter of games. He would not willingly or unreflectingly have done anything to interfere with matches. But he had spoken now—and what he had said, he had said. And his answer came in tones that seemed to proceed from the deepest depths of a refrigerator:

"That is immaterial, Wharton."

There were anxious and clouded faces in the Remove now. An hour's

detention every day was bad enough, and nobody liked the idea. But detention on the date of a football fixture was a crushing blow—to the footballing fraternity. Bob Cherry's ruddy face was blank with dismay. Vernon-Smith scowled savagely. Johnny Bull grunted in a very expressive way. Other fellows showed their feelings—very plainly. If Quelch observed them, he did not heed. Quelch was adamant.

"It's a regular fixture, sir," said Harry, biting his lip. "If you'd let the football eleven off to play the match, sir—"

"I cannot have two weights and two measures, Wharton," answered the Remove master, coldly.

"But, sir—"

"That will do, Wharton," said Mr. Quelch, raising his voice a little. "You will now dismiss."

"We can't scratch the match, sir, at the last minute like this!" blurted out Bob Cherry.

"Take a hundred lines, Cherry."

"Oh!" gasped Bob.

"But, sir—!" began Johnny Bull.

"Take a hundred lines, Bull."

"Shame!" came a voice from the form.

Mr. Quelch's cheeks flushed, and his eyes flamed. Perhaps Herbert Vernon-Smith had not expected to be spotted when he snapped out that word. But the gimlet eyes fixed on him immediately.

"Vernon-Smith!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

The Bouncer set his lips.

"You spoke, Vernon-Smith! Stand out." Mr. Quelch picked up the cane from his desk. "I will tolerate no insolence in this Form! Bend over that desk, Vernon-Smith."

Smithy, with a brow as black as thunder, bent over.

Swipe! swipe! swipe!

Quelch put plenty of beef into those swipes. The cane fairly rang on the Bouncer's trousers. Three anguished yelps from Smithy accompanied the swipes.

"Now dismiss!" said Mr. Quelch, breathing hard. "Any boy uttering a single word will be caned."

The Remove filed out in grim silence.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Billy Bunter, in the corridor. "I say, you fellows, Quelch is in an awful wax! I say, I'm jolly glad to get out of the form-room, with Quelch going on like a tiger. I say, Smithy, did it hurt?"

The Bouncer gave him a look. He was twisting as he walked down the corridor. Undoubtedly it had hurt!

"You fat idiot!" he snarled.

"Oh, really, Smithy—"

"All your fault, you fat frump," hissed the Bouncer. "You had to play potty tricks snowballing Quelch, and get us all detention. We're got to scratch a soccer match for your fatheaded fooling. Take that!"

"Yaroooooh!" roared Bunter, as the Bounder's foot landed. Vernon-Smith slouched on, and went scowling into the quad.

"I say, Toddy," gasped Bunter. "Toddy, old chap, go after that beast Smithy and punch him, old fellow! You saw him kick me—"

"You fat frumptious, fozzling, footling freak," said Peter Todd, in measured tones, "you dished us over the Carcroft match. Take that!"

"Yoo-hooop!" roared Bunter.

The fat Owl rolled away in haste.

"I say, you fellows." He joined the famous Five, a dismayed group in the quad. "I say, that beast Smithy—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, here's the fravjous frump," exclaimed Bob Cherry. "You potty porpoise, why couldn't you leave Quelch's boko alone? Boot him!"

"The bootfulness is the proper caper!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, "boot him terrifically."

"Oh, crumbs! Oh, crikey! Leave off kicking me, you beasts!" roared Bunter. "Ow—ow!—oooooooooooh!"

Bunter dodged, and fled, roaring.

Billy Bunter had enjoyed a brief glory as the bold bad ragger who had "got" Quelch! But he had to realize now that there were drawbacks!

CHAPTER VI

MAULY TRIES IT ON!

LORD MAULEVERER, of the Remove, gazed at William George Bunter with a thoughtful gaze.

It was after class.

Class, in the Remove form-room that afternoon, had not been a happy function. Mr. Quelch was grim. Many members of his form were disgruntled.

Slackers like Skinner and Co., who disliked work even in small doses, jibbed emphatically at regular detentions—accompanied, of course, by detention tasks—which looked like lasting till the school broke up for the Christmas holidays. But if Skinner, Stott, Snoop, and other such fellows jibbed, their feelings were mild compared with those of the footballing fraternity.

Washing out a soccer match was the limit—miles over the limit. It was, in the opinion of the footballers, a thing that couldn't be done.

But Quelch had done it! Quelch's word was law in his form-room. There was only one power greater than a form-master's—that was the headmaster's. And the Head backed up his staff, in matters of discipline, as a matter of course. There was no appeal from Quelch's sentence. The only hope was that Quelch might relent, and change his mind. And that hope amounted to precisely nil. Quelch had got his teeth into this, so to speak. Only one thing could placate Quelch—the discovery of the "mysterious marksman". And he

was not going to make that discovery. All the Remove knew—or thought they knew. But Quelch did not know, and was not going to know. And that was that!

On the morrow the Carcroft fixture was due. Compton and his merry men were expecting the Greyfriars footballers over at Carcroft. And the fixture would have to be scratched! Feelings were deep on the subject—very deep. But there was no help.

Lord Mauleverer, who never got anywhere near a soccer ball if he could help it, might have been supposed to be unconcerned. But, as a matter of fact, his lazy lordship was very much concerned. He hated to see his friends down in the mouth. He had exercised his noble brain on the subject: and now he was looking at Billy Bunter, thinking the matter out.

Bunter was in high feather.

He was, at the moment, standing near the tuck-shop window, with five or six fellows round him, telling his tale of derring-do. Footballing fellows had kicked Bunter for landing them in the soup, but other fellows still regarded the fat Owl as "some lad". His fame had spread outside the Remove by this time. Fellows in other forms had heard of his wonderful exploit. They were keen to hear it from the fat lips of the fellow who had done it. Temple, Dabney and Co. of the Fourth, were with Bunter, and Hobson of the Shell, and Tubb of the Third. And they were all duly impressed.

"Right on the conk!" Bunter was saying. "Pretty good shot from such a distance—I wasn't sure I'd get him, really! But I did! Got him fair and square—bang on the beezers! Bit of a surprise for Quelch, what! He, he!"

"Dashed if I'd like to get a beak on the beezers with a snowball," said Cecil Reginald Temple, shaking his head. "Too jolly dangerous."

"Oh, rather," said Dabney.

"What do I care?" said Bunter, valorously. "I don't give a boiled bean for beaks! Not me!"

"Wait till your beak spots you, old fat man!" grinned Hobson.

"Oh, he won't!" said Bunter. "I'm not telling Quelch! He, he, he! Nobody will give a man away, I suppose. No sneaks here! Safe as houses. Not that I care! After all, what's a flogging?"

Lord Mauleverer grinned. Bunter asked "What's a flogging?" like a fellow who was hard as nails and tough as hickory. Bunter was brave as a lion when there was no danger nigh. One flip from Quelch's cane was wont to make Bunter wake the echoes on his top note; but he could ask quite airily "What's a flogging?" while the Head and his birch were at a safe distance.

"Well, you'll know what it is, old barrel, if Quelch hears you bragging about getting him on the boko!" said Fry of the Fourth.

"Lot I care!" said Bunter, disdainfully.

"Better not talk too much, all the same," said Cecil Reginald Temple, in good-nature warning, "Quelch might catch a word, and—"

"Let him!" said Bunter. "I don't care."

When Bunter's hearers moved off, Lord Mauleverer ambled towards the

fat junior, and tapped him on a plump shoulder. The fat Owl blinked round through his spectacles.

"I say, Mauly, old man, I was going to look for you," he said.

"Here I am," said Mauly, amiably.

"I've been disappointed about a postal-order, old chap," said Bunter. "I don't quite understand why it hasn't come—I expected it this morning. If you've got a couple of half-crowns you don't want, Mauly—"

"Come up to the study to tea?" asked Mauly.

"Eh! What! Yes, rather," said Bunter, promptly. He blinked at Lord Mauleverer in surprise. Not infrequently, Billy Bunter tea'd in Mauly's study—pushing in on his long-suffering lordship. But it was very uncommon for Mauly to ask him there—very uncommon indeed. "I—I'll come with pleasure, Mauly! I say, like me to do any shopping for you? I'll carry the parcel, if you like! I'd do more than that, for a fellow I really like."

"Good man," said Mauleverer, "come on!"

Billy Bunter came on, joyously. He rolled into the tuck-shop by the side of Lord Mauleverer. In days of sparse supplies and high prices, Billy Bunter missed his postal-order sorely—really, he could have done with quite a lot of postal-orders. So shopping with Mauly was a real treat. Mrs. Mible had many things that were available to a fellow whose supplies of cash were practically unlimited. Mauly himself, as it happened, cared little for such things—but Bunter cared a lot. Bunter's fat face expanded with happy satisfaction as he made purchases right and left: and it was quite a considerable parcel that he carried out of the school shop.

They repaired to No. 12 study in the Remove. Billy Bunter unpacked the parcel on the study table.

His fat face beamed.

A feast of the gods was soon proceeding in No. 12. Billy Bunter did most of the feasting. Lord Mauleverer held a watching brief, as it were.

"Tuck in, old chap," said Bunter. "Don't leave it all to me." When there was plenty, Bunter liked to see other fellows feed as well as himself. If there was enough for seven, Bunter could do with only enough for six. "I say, these sosses are prime!"

"It was you, after all, who landed that snowball on Quelch's boko yesterday," remarked Lord Mauleverer.

"What-ho," said Bunter, with his mouth full. "Right on the beezel! Was Quelch surprised? He, he, he."

"You're not scared of Quelch, are you, old fat man?" asked Mauly.

"Me scared!" Bunter sniffed, "hardly! Why, I'd tell him to his face, as soon as not, that it was me! Me scared!"

"That's the spirit," said Lord Mauleverer. "What about tellin' him, old chap?"

Bunter jumped.

"Eh! No fear! I—I mean, I—I ain't afraid to, of course. Still a fellow doesn't want to go up to the Head! Mind if I finish the sosses, Mauly?"

"Go ahead, old scout! But look here," said Mauleverer. "Wharton and his lot are feelin' awfully cut up about cuttin' the soccer. Quelch has washed out the fixture at Carcroft, you know. It's a bit tough on Wharton."

"Serve him right," said Bunter, "look how he treats me in the footer! Didn't I offer to play at Carcroft? And what did he say? He said he'd remember me if they ever played Carcroft at marbles! Yah!"

"Yaas! But—"

"And Bob Cherry said that if I showed up on the footer ground, they'd start singing 'Roll out the barrel'," said Bunter, indignantly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at, Mauly. They can jolly well go and eat coke," said Bunter. "Are you having any of the cold chicken, Mauly? If not—"

"Go it, old fat man!" Bunter went it, not requiring a second bidding. "But look here, Bunter, it's tough on the whole form—especially tough on the footballin' chaps. You did it, didn't you—?"

"I did—right on the boko!" said Bunter. "I say, this chicken is prime! Right on the beezee—it fairly melts in your mouth—"

"Well, look here, you ought to own up," said Mauly. "Look at it, old chap! You've landed the whole form in the soup. If you went to Quelch—"

"I'll watch it."

"Chap's expected to own up, when he's landed a lot of fellows in the soup," urged Mauleverer. "After all, what's a flogging, as you said to those fellows in the quad. You can stand it."

"Easily!" said Bunter, "I'm not soft. Not like you, Mauly. I could stand it without turning a hair. But I ain't going to."

For the next ten minutes two sounds mingled in No. 12 study—Bunter's champing jaws, and the voice of Lord Mauleverer. While Bunter ate, Mauly argued. Bunter's answers were few—his fat jaws were too busy for much speech. Mauly was quite eloquent. He pointed out that a fellow couldn't leave a whole form in the soup. It was up to him to own up, if it came to that. He couldn't let a football fixture be scratched to save himself a licking he had really asked for. Why not go to Quelch, and show all the fellows that he didn't funk doing the right thing?

Bunter let Mauleverer run on—Bunter was an accommodating fellow. He didn't mind if Mauly talked while he ate. But all his lordship's persuasive arguments rolled off Bunter like water off a duck! Bunter was willing to tell all the Remove, and the Fourth, and the Shell, that he was the bold bad ragger who had "got" Quelch. But he was not willing to tell Quelch. Bunter drew the line at that.

All his lordship's eloquence was a sheer waste. Billy Bunter let him run on till the table was cleared of eatables. Then he rose to his feet, a little breathless, and very sticky and shiny.

"Thanks for the spread, Mauly," he said, affably, "I'll be pushing along now—"

"But what about Quelch?" asked Mauly.

"Nothing about Quelch!" answered Bunter, promptly.

"Look here, you fat villain—"

"Oh, really, Mauly!"

"It's up to you," said Mauleverer. "Be a sport, Bunter! You can't land fellows in the soup and leave them there."

"I think that's Toddy calling," said Bunter. "Cheerio, old chap!" Bunter rolled to the door.

Lord Mauleverer breathed hard. He had done his best: he had stood Bunter a gargantuan spread, and for half-an-hour he had watched Bunter eat—and it was all for nothing. After taking was the same as before taking—Bunter was no nearer going to Quelch.

"Look here, Bunter—!"

"Ta-ta, old fellow! Jolly good spread—I'll stand you one in my study when my postal-order comes," said Bunter. And he rolled out.

Lord Mauleverer stepped after him, and lifted his foot. But he lowered it again. Really he couldn't kick a fellow he had asked to his study. Bunter, unknicked, rolled down the Remove passage—and then there was a sudden shout:

"Here he is!"

"Bag him!"

There was a rush of feet, and the fat Owl was surrounded.

CHAPTER VII

SMITHY'S WAY

"I SAY, YOU fellows!" gasped Bunter.

He blinked round in alarm.

Herbert Vernon-Smith had grabbed him by a fat shoulder. Squiff had taken hold of a fat ear. Tom Brown had the other ear. Johnny Bull and Hazeldene and Ogilvy and several other fellows were all round him. Apparently they had been looking for Bunter—and now that he had emerged from Lord Mauleverer's study, they had got him. Why they had got him, Bunter did not yet know—but he knew that they had got him. He could have no doubt on that point.

"I—I say, leago!" gasped Bunter. "Leago my ear, Field, you beast! Leago my ear, Browney, you rotter! Look here, Smithy—"

"Shut up," said Vernon-Smith. "We've been looking for you, and now we've got you. You got Quelch, and we've got you, see?"

"Leago!" howled Bunter.

"You've landed the lot of us," said Smithy. "Now you've got to put it right! You're going to Quelch—"

"I'm not!" roared Bunter, in alarm.

"It's up to you, Bunter," said Squiff. "We can't have a football fixture washed out because you're afraid of a licking."

"Who's afraid?" hooted Bunter.

"Well, if you're not, all the better," said the Australian junior. "If you don't funk it, get on and do the right thing."

"After the feast comes the reckoning, old fat man," said Ogilvy. "You had the fun of getting Quelch on the nozzle. Now you must let Quelch have his fun—and wash out the detention, see?"

"I've had all that from Mauly!" squeaked Bunter, indignantly, "and I jolly well shan't go to Quelch. Think I want a Head's flogging?"

"Now, look here, Bunter," said the Bounder, quietly. "It's up to you. You can't let the whole form down. We're all landed for what you did: and any decent fellow would own up, in the circumstances."

"Even Bunter can see that, I suppose," grunted Johnny Bull.

"Rot!" howled Bunter. "You leago, see? I'm not going to Quelch! He said plainly it would be a flogging. Think I want to be whopped by the Head?"

"Think we want a soccer fixture washed out?" roared Johnny Bull.

"Blow soccer!"

Other fellows joined the crowd in the Remove passage. Billy Bunter's alarm grew. He had gloried in being identified as the fellow who had "got" Quelch. He was "some lad"—he was a reckless ragger—he made the fellows stare—he was the fellow who did not give a bean for beaks—he was the goods. That was all very well, and all very satisfactory—if it had been all. Unluckily, it was not all. Quelch had come down with a heavy hand on the whole form. At that point, it was up to the bold bad ragger to do the right thing. And the right thing was to own up and take his gruel, not to leave the trouble on other shoulders.

"Go it, Bunter, old man," said Peter Todd, coming out of No. 7 study. "Any man would own up, now it's come to detention for the whole form."

"Shan't!" howled Bunter.

"You've got to!" snapped Vernon-Smith. "Any other man would in your place. You go to Quelch, and tell him it was you—"

"I jolly well won't!"

"You'll be jolly well ragged if you don't!" exclaimed the Bounder, "and you'll be jolly well ragged till you do!"

"Beast!"

"Do the decent thing, Bunter," urged Squiff. "Any man here in your place would own up now: why shouldn't you?"

"Go to Quelch and tell him!" said Tom Brown.

"I—I won't! I—I mean. I—I can't! The—the fact is, I—I—I never did it!" gasped Bunter.

"What?" roared all the juniors.

"I—I never! It—it was only a joke!" spluttered the fat Owl. "I—I just said I—I did, just to pull your legs, you know! I—I never did it—I—I don't know who did! Now you leago."

Billy Bunter had not intended to admit the facts. He wanted to cling

to the glorious distinction of being the boldest, baddest ragger in the Remove. But he had not foreseen that it would turn out like this! It was better to part with his glory, than to go to Quelch, or to be ragged for not going! In sheer desperation, Billy Bunter told the truth! It was not a resource to which he was accustomed—but there seemed no help for it now. Out came the truth!

But it was too late!

There was a roar of angry disbelief from the Removites. Not a fellow believed Bunter. It was only too clear—to them—that the fat Owl was spinning this yarn because he jibbed at going to Quelch. He had made all the Remove believe that he had “got” Quelch—but he could not make a single fellow believe that he hadn’t!

“Well, of all the fibbish freaks—!” exclaimed Peter Todd.

“Of all the lying toads—!” growled Johnny Bull.

“That won’t wash, Bunter.”

“Pack it up!”

“Too late to tell whoppers about it!”

“Are you going to Quelch?”

“I—I—I say, you fellows, it’s true!” gasped Bunter. “I—I never got Quelch! I never even thought of it! I—I—”

“Pack it up, Ananias!”

“I never—I didn’t—I—I wasn’t—I tell you, I don’t know who did! I—I—I never knew it had happened till Quelch told us—”

“You can cut all that out!” snapped Vernon-Smith. “Are you going to Quelch or not?”

“No!” yelled Bunter. “I tell you—”

“Rag him!”

“Bump him!”

“Boot him!”

“Oh, crikey! Oh, scissors! Yaroooh! Leago! Leave off kicking me, you beasts! I never quelched snowball—I mean, I never snowballed Quelch! I wasn’t there—I never—I wasn’t—I didn’t—I wouldn’t—I say—yarooooooh!”

Billy Bunter rolled on the passage floor, roaring.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” came a roar from the landing, as Bob Cherry came into the passage, with Wharton and Nugent and Hurree Singh. “What on earth’s the row?”

“Yarooooh! Help! I say, you fellows—yurroooooop!”

“Ragging Bunter!” said Bob, with a whistle. “Smithy said he ought to own up. I suppose he’s trying to make it clear to Bunter.”

Bump! bump! bump!

“Yoo-hooop! Oh, crikey! Leago! I say, you fellows—!”

“Will you go to Quelch and own up, you fat funk?” shouted the Bounder, savagely.

“Ow! wow! How can I go to Quelch and say—yarooop!—how can I say—yow-ow-ow—how can I say I did it when I didn’t—”

“Bump him again!”

"Oh, scissors! Yoo-hoo-hoop! Wow!"

Billy Bunter was having the time of his life. But Harry Wharton pushed through the crowd. Wharton was captain of the form and Head Boy of the Remove—and duty called!

"Hold on, you fellows!" he said.

The Bounder gave him an angry glare.

"Don't you butt in here, Wharton! We're going to rag that fat funk till he does the decent thing, and you're not going to stop us."

"Wash it out!" said Harry, quietly. "Bunter ought to own up, as it's turned out, and get us all out of the scrape he's landed us in. But there's a limit. If he won't, he won't, and that's that."

"I say, you fellows, I never did it!" yelled Bunter.

"Shut up, you fat spoofer," said Harry. "We all know you did it, and you know jolly well that you ought to go to Quelch and own up you did it."



He was in Quelch's study now, under the Remove master's gimlet eye.

"But I never—"

"Chuck it! And you chuck it too, Smithy—you can't rag a man into owning up. Leave Bunter alone."

"I tell you we're going to rag him till he goes to Quelch!" roared the Bounder, furiously.

"And I tell you you're not!" said the captain of the Remove. "Cut off, Bunter."

There were very dubious looks among the juniors. Plenty of Remove fellows were ready to back up the Bounder in the drastic measures he was using with Bunter. But Johnny Bull—though with a discontented grunt—lined up with Wharton, and Bob Cherry and Frank Nugent and Hurree Singh did the same. Peter Todd and Lord Mauleverer joined them, and then Squiff and Tom Brown. Vernon-Smith made an angry grab at Bunter, but Bob Cherry pushed him back.

"Nothing doing, Smithy," he said. "Wharton's skipper, and what he says, goes."

"That fat rotter—!"

"Cut off, Bunter," said Harry, again.

Billy Bunter was only too glad to cut off. He did not look much like a bold bad ragger as he cut. He scuttled away like a scared rabbit. The Bounder scowled savagely, but the Remove were backing up their captain, and he had to give in.

Smithy tramped into No. 4 study and slammed the door. The crowd in the Remove passage broke up, in a buzz of excited discussion. Billy Bunter, wished from the bottom of his fat heart that he hadn't laid claim to the glory and distinction of snowballing Quelch. But it was too late for Billy Bunter to wish that—he had claimed the distinction, and the distinction was his, and it was not to be got rid of.

CHAPTER VIII

HARRY WHARTON KNOWS HOW!

"GET OUT!"
"Oh, really, Wharton—!"

"Get out!" roared the captain of the Remove.

It was after prep.

Wharton and Nugent, in No. 1 study, were discussing what was now the chief, if not the only topic, in the Remove—what was to be done about the Carcroft fixture. The sight of Billy Bunter's fat face and glimmering spectacles in the doorway had an exasperating effect on the study.

Billy Bunter was the cause of all the trouble. He had snowballed Quelch—at least he was believed to have snowballed Quelch. That was all right—if

he had had the nerve to stand the racket for what he had done. Most fellows in the Remove would have faced the music, when trouble fell on the whole form. Smithy was quite capable of snowballing Quelch—but in the present circumstances, he would have owned up like a shot. A fellow might rag a beak, and be admired by thoughtless juniors for his nerve—but he couldn't let other fellows take his gruel for it. That, apparently, was Bunter's idea—to the general exasperation. The captain of the Remove had put a stop to ragging the fat Owl—but he was quite as exasperated with Bunter as the rest of the form.

"I say, you fellows—!" squeaked Bunter.

"Roll away, you fat rotter!" exclaimed Nugent, picking up a Latin dictionary from the table, and taking aim.

"Look here, what are you so jolly shirty about?" demanded Bunter, with a wary eye on the dictionary. "What's a fellow done? I've just looked in to speak to you fellows about Christmas—"

"What?" roared Wharton.

"The hols, you know," said Bunter. "We break up next week, and I want to get fixed. Beast!" added Bunter, suddenly, as the dictionary flew. He dodged just in time.

"Boot him," said Nugent.

"I say, you fellows, don't be stuffy," urged Bunter. "I say, I'm having a rotten time. Toddy kicked me in No. 7—hard, too. I don't know why—but he did. Then Smithy kicked me in the passage. I say—"

"Get out."

Billy Bunter blinked round in the passage. Squiff was coming along from No. 14, and his eye gleamed as it fell on Bunter. Instinctively Bunter knew that the Australian junior was going to land a kick as he passed. So, instead of getting out, he got in, and slammed the door of No. 1 study before Squiff arrived.

"I say, you fellows, this is getting too jolly thick," gasped Bunter. "Everybody seems down on a fellow, just because I snowballed Quelch—"

"You jolly well know that you ought to own up, now Quelch has got his teeth into the whole form!" growled Wharton.

"Quelch said it would be a Head's flogging, you fathead."

"You risked that when you snowballed him. You can't set up as a ragger, and leave other fellows to take your medicine," snapped Wharton.

"But I don't want to be flogged!" howled Bunter.

"You should have thought of that before you biffed Quelch," said Nugent. "Get out of this study, anyhow."

"I believe that beast Field's watching for me in the passage. I—I'll stay here for a few minutes," mumbled Bunter. "Besides, I want to speak to you about the hols, Harry, old chap."

"Shut UP!" roared the captain of the Remove.

The door opened, and Sampson Quincy Iffley Field, of New South Wales, glanced into No. 1 study.

"Bunter here?" he asked. "O.K. I'll wait."

He shut the door again.

"Oh, crikey," groaned Bunter. "That beast is going to kick me when I go out of this study. I could jolly well see it in his eye."

"Serve you jolly well right," said Nugent.

"Beast!"

"Look here, Bunter," said Harry Wharton, quietly, "I suppose you can't help being a frightened rabbit—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"But you found enough nerve somewhere to snowball Quelch, and you ought to find enough somewhere to stand the racket. We're dished over the Carcroft match—we shall have to call it off by phone—unless you do the right thing."

"I'm not going to be flogged!" wailed Bunter.

"Oh, come on, Franky! Let's go down," said Harry.

"I say, you fellows, don't go yet," exclaimed Bunter, in haste. "Wait till that beast Field's gone, you know. Besides, about Christmas—I—I say, never mind the Carcroft match. That isn't really important, you know. But it's rather important about Christmas. I daresay Carcroft will give you another date later. But you can't get another date for Christmas. See? I'm thinking about Christmas."

"Oh, dry up," said Harry. "If you want something to think about, think about going to Quelch—"

"Blow Quelch!" said Bunter, "I'm fed up with Quelch. Besides—" A sly gleam came into the round eyes behind the spectacles. "I—I might think about going to Quelch, after I've settled about the hols."

Harry Wharton looked at him. Lord Mauleverer had tried one way of inducing the fat Owl to do the right thing—and failed. Smithy had tried another way—and failed. There might be another resource. The captain of the Remove paused a moment—a long moment. Then he spoke.

"Look here, Bunter, if you do the right thing, you can join us for Christmas at my place. I'll ask the fellows to stand you somehow."

Snort, from Bunter.

"That's a rather rotten way of putting it, Wharton," he said. "If you think a fellow can accept an invitation put like that—"

"Take it or leave it," said Harry, shortly.

"I mean to say, if you really want me, of course I'll come," said Bunter. "I don't mind your manners, old chap—I don't expect much from you in the way of manners, really. If it's settled, I'll let my people know. They're having some really big things at Bunter Court this Christmas—but I don't care much for that kind of thing—I'll cut it out, if you make a point of it. I'll come, old chap."

"Not unless you go to Quelch and own up!" said Wharton, grimly.

"You've got rather a beastly way of putting things, old fellow. Still, if I'm coming home with you for the hols, it's up to me to stand by you," said Bunter. "I'll see you through about Carcroft. That's all right."

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent exchanged a glance. It was a glance of satisfaction. Where Mauly and Smithy had failed, the captain of the Remove had succeeded. Getting fixed up for Christmas was, to Billy Bunter, the most important matter in the universe, just then. It was worth going to Quelch—it was even worth going up to the Head.

"Cut off, then," said Harry.

"I'll go to Quelch in the morning—"

"No time like the present. Quelch will be in his study now. We'll come as far as Masters' passage with you."

"I—I say, I—I'd rather speak to Quelch to-morrow—" stammered Bunter. "After all, what's the hurry?"

"You'll speak to Quelch now," said Harry. He opened the door of the study. Squiff, leaning on the opposite wall, got into motion. "All right—Bunter's going to Quelch, Squiff," said Wharton, laughing.

"Oh, good!" said Squiff.

"Come on, Bunter."

Billy Bunter rolled out of No. 1 study. He had made up his fat mind. He did not want to see Quelch. He did not want to see the Head. But he did want to get fixed up for Christmas—and for the moment, at least, that consideration out-weighed all others. He would rather have left it till the morrow—the interview with Quelch was not attractive. But it had to be—and Billy Bunter screwed up his fat courage to the sticking-point.

"I—I'm ready!" he said.

"Good man," said Nugent. "Come on."

Bunter rolled down the passage, between Wharton and Nugent. They crossed the landing to the stairs. But on the stairs, Bunter paused. His courage, which had been screwed up, seemed to become suddenly unscrewed again.

"I—I say, you fellows, I—I forgot something in my study. I'll cut back—"

"You won't!" said Nugent.

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"Come on!" said Harry.

Bunter was marched down the stairs. He was marched to Masters' passage, his footsteps lagging more and more as he went. He was marched to Mr. Quelch's door, his fat heart palpitating.

"I—I say, I—I think Quelch may be in a better temper in the morning," he mumbled. "Better get him in a good temper. D—d—don't you think he'll be better-tempered in the morning, Harry, old chap?"

"No: worse."

"Beast! I—I mean, look here, old fellow—I say, don't knock at the door yet—I say—"

Tap! Wharton tapped at the study door.

"Come in!" said Mr. Quelch's deep voice.

"Oh, crumbs! I—I'm not going in. I—I—I!" gasped Bunter. Even Christmas faded out of his mind, at the sound of Quelch's bark. "I say—beast!"

Harry Wharton opened the study door. Nugent gave Bunter a push. Willy-nilly, the fat Owl tottered into the Remove master's study. Wharton drew the door shut after him. Bunter was safely landed now.

"That's that!" said Harry.

And they walked back to the corner of the passage, to wait for Bunter.

CHAPTER IX

BRAVO, BUNTER!

MR. QUELCH gave the fattest member of his form a sharp, inquiring glance. Billy Bunter stood palpitating.

He was in Quelch's study now, under the Remove master's gimlet eye, and the door was shut. He was there to own up—to confess that it was he, William George Bunter, who had buzzed that snowball at Quelch's majestic nose. But, as he met Quelch's penetrating eye, he realized that he dared not.

In Wharton's study, with the important matter of the Christmas hols. in mind, Bunter had determined on it. Christmas at Wharton Lodge had seemed worth a whopping. But in Quelch's study it seemed different somehow. Billy Bunter's courage, such as it was, oozed out at his fat finger-tips.

He did not speak: he blinked at his form-master through his big spectacles. He would have spoken—but the words would not come. The fact that, in actual truth, it was not he who had snowballed Quelch, did not worry Bunter. What worried him was the prospect of a flogging. That was the lion in the path!

"Well?" rapped Mr. Quelch, puzzled and annoyed, "you have come to my study, Bunter—what do you want?"

"Oh! nothing, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"You have come here for nothing?" exclaimed the Remove master.

"Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir! I—I—Oh, lor'!" gasped Bunter. "I—I mean—Wharton thought I'd better come—I didn't want to really, sir—I—I—I haven't anything to tell you, sir—not a thing! C-c-can I go now, sir?"

Mr. Quelch started a little. He thought he saw light! He had rather suspected Bunter, in connection with the snowball episode. And very likely he had foreseen that his sweeping sentence on the Remove would cause public opinion in the form to be brought to bear on the delinquent. He was, in fact, rather expecting some member of the Remove to come to his study and own up. And Bunter had come.

"I think I understand," said Mr. Quelch, grimly. "You came here to make a confession, Bunter?"

"Yes, sir—I mean, no, sir! I—I haven't anything to confess!" babbled Bunter. "It—it—it wasn't me, sir."

"What was not you, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing—I mean, anything—I never did it, sir—I wouldn't I mean I wasn't—oh, crikey!" groaned Bunter. "They—they made me come here, sir—I—I'll go now, sir—"

"You will not go yet, Bunter."

"Oh, lor'!"

"Am I to understand," said Mr. Quelch, in a deep voice, "that it was you, Bunter, who hurled a snowball in at this window on Monday morning?"

"Oh! No!" gasped Bunter. "It wasn't me, sir! I—I don't know who it was—but it certainly wasn't me."

"Then why have you come here?"

"I—I haven't—"

"What?"

"I—I—I mean, I—I—I—I!" Billy Bunter's fat voice trailed away, and he blinked helplessly at his form-master.

Quelch eyed him grimly. He had no doubt that he knew how the matter stood. The delinquent—probably under pressure from other members of the form—had come there to own up, but his courage had failed him. Quelch was ready to help him out.

"You came here to confess, Bunter?"

"Yes, sir! I—I mean, no—"

"Yes or no!" rapped Mr. Quelch. "I warn you not to waste my time, Bunter. If you came here to interrupt me, and waste my time, to no purpose, I shall cane you."

"Oh, crikey!"

"Answer me! Did you come here to confess to hurling the snowball in at this window on Monday?" thundered Mr. Quelch. "Yes or no!"

"Oh, lor'! Yes," gasped Bunter.

"I had little doubt that you were the delinquent, Bunter! Now that you have confessed—"

"I—I—I mean—"

"You need say no more, Bunter. Now that you have confessed, the matter will go before the Head. Dr. Locke will deal with you after third school to-morrow. You may now leave my study."

"B—b—but I—I never—"

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

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir! B—b—but I never—I wasn't—I—I—"

"Go!" almost roared Mr. Quelch. "Another word of prevarication, Bunter, and I shall cane you! Go."

Bunter almost jumped to the door. When Quelch spoke in that voice, even Billy Bunter realized that it was time to go. And he went.

Mr. Quelch grunted, and settled down to Form papers again. There was a grim satisfaction in his face. He has suspected Bunter—and his suspicion had been well-founded—and was now borne out by Bunter's confession. The measures he had taken had elucidated the mystery—and the sentence on the Form could now be rescinded. And what Bunter would receive from the

Head, after third school on the morrow, would be a warning to him never, never to throw a snowball at a master's head again. Quelch, naturally, did not suspect for a moment that Bunter hadn't! Quelch was a very keen gentleman, and well known to be a downy bird: but he really couldn't be expected to guess that Bunter hadn't done what he had come there to confess having done!

Billy Bunter almost tottered away from the study.

He had done it now!

Christmas at Wharton Lodge was, no doubt, worth it! But his fat knees knocked together, as he tottered down the passage. The interview with the Head on the morrow was an awful prospect. Afterwards, of course, there would be the prospect of the Christmas hols. That was all very well: but it was the immediate prospect that worried Bunter.

Wharton and Nugent were waiting at the corner of the passage. They eyed the fat Owl as he came along. Bunter had been safely landed in Quelch's study: but they remembered that though a horse might be taken to water, it couldn't be made to drink. Had Bunter owned up?

"Well?" asked Harry.

"Well?" said Frank Nugent.

"I—I—I say, you fellows, I—I—I don't want to see the Head to-morrow," groaned Bunter. "I—I don't mind owning up—but I—I don't want to see the Head! I—I say, Quelch believes now that I did it—"

"So you did," said Frank. "If you've owned up, all right. Never mind the flogging."

"But I do mind!" gasped Bunter.

"You'll get over it," said the captain of the Remove, encouragingly. "Fellows have been flogged before, you know, and lived to tell the tale. You've done the right thing, Bunter."

"Yes! Of—of course! But—but I say, you fellows, think Quelch would believe me if—if I went back and said it—it was all a mistake, and—and I hadn't done it?"

"Not likely," said Wharton, laughing. "Besides, don't you want to come home with us for Christmas, fatty?"

"Oh! Yes! But—"

"All the fellows will think you've done the right thing in owning up," said Harry. "It was up to you, as you did the trick. Well, it will show you've got pluck."

"Oh! Yes! So—so I have," said Bunter. He brightened a little. "Pluck's my long suit, as you fellows know. Who's afraid of a flogging?"

"That's the spirit!" said the captain of the Remove. "Come along to the Rag, and tell the fellows."

Billy Bunter was considerably comforted as he rolled into the Rag. After all, he was going to get the credit for what he had done—he was a fellow who wasn't afraid to face the music—a fellow who not only had the nerve to snowball a beak, but the nerve to own up to what he had done! There was

glory for Bunter—though the prospect of seeing the Head on the morrow did take a good deal of the gilt off the gingerbread.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" came Bob Cherry's roar, as they went into the Rag. "Squiff says that Bunter's owning up—"

"Right on the wicket," said Harry Wharton.

"Gammon!" said Skinner. "I can see him doing it."

"If you'd been in Quelch's study, you'd have seen me doing it, and chance it," snorted Bunter. "Of course I owned up! Am I the man to let the form down?"

"Hear, hear!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"You've been to Quelch?" exclaimed Skinner, eyeing the fat Owl blankly.

"You've told Quelch you snowballed him?"

"Yes, I jolly well have."

"Oh, suffering cats!" gasped Skinner. "You—you—you actually told Quelch you were the man who chucked the snowball?"

"Yes, I jolly well did."

"Oh, fan me!" said Skinner.

"You wouldn't have done it," said Bunter, scornfully. "You'd have let the form go through it! Not my style! I just walked into his study, as cool as a cucumber—I mean as cool as a coolcumber—I mean as cool as a cucumber—and said: 'Look here, I'm the man! I did it, and I'd jolly well do it again'."

"You said that to Quelch!" yelled Johnny Bull.

"My very words," said Bunter. "Quelch can't scare me, I can tell you. Didn't I get him with that snowball, right on the boko? I said: 'I'm the man! Take it out of me! What do I care?' Those were my very words."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And what did Quelch say?" grinned the Bounder.

"Oh, he said I should have to go up to the Head," answered Bunter, carelessly. "I said 'O.K., I'll see the Head if you like. Any old thing.'"

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

"I can sort of hear you talking to Quelch like that, old fat frump," chuckled Bob. "Still, if you've owned up, it's all right. All clear for Carcroft to-morrow, you men. Good old Bunter!"

"The goodness of the esteemed old Bunter is terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Bravo, Bunter!"

Billy Bunter beamed. He was the "goods" once more. To the glory of being a bold bad ragger, was now added the glory of owning up and taking his gruel like a man!

Now that Quelch had got his man, detentions for the Remove would be lifted, and the footballers would go over to Carcroft to play soccer—thanks to Bunter! That evening, in the Rag, Billy Bunter was quite popular: and he banished the thought of the morrow, and enjoyed his popularity. But with the morrow came other thoughts: and it was a dismal and apprehensive Bunter that crawled out of bed at the clang of the rising-bell.

CHAPTER X

FOR IT!

THESE WERE many bright and cheery faces in the Remove form-room that Wednesday morning. There was one long, lugubrious face.

The cheery faces were those of the footballers who were going over to Carcroft in the afternoon. The lugubrious face was Billy Bunter's.

All looked well for the footballers. The weather was fine, clear, crisp: just what they wanted for football. And the match was not going to be scratched at the last minute, after all. Harry Wharton and Co. had reason to feel merry and bright. It was quite otherwise with Bunter.

The nearer came the time for his interview with his headmaster, the less Billy Bunter liked the prospect.

Even Christmas at Wharton Lodge was not a consolation—with the Head's birch impending over him like the sword of Damocles. Christmas was still at some distance—while the Head's birch was near—and drawing terribly nearer.

Bunter had enjoyed his new reputation as a wild ragger. He had enjoyed his still newer reputation as a sportsman not afraid to own up. But he was not going to enjoy the sequel the least little bit.

Before class began that morning, Mr. Quelch had a few words to say to his form which all of them were expecting to hear.

"My boys," said Mr. Quelch, "you are probably aware that the identity of the Remove boy who attacked me with a snowball on Monday has now transpired. Bunter has confessed to the outrage. Bunter will be dealt with by his headmaster after third school—"

"Oh, lor'!" moaned Bunter.

"Detentions for the rest of the form are, therefore, rescinded," said Mr. Quelch. "Bunter will be punished, and the matter at an end."

"I—I say, sir—!" squeaked Bunter.

"You will go to my study after third school, Bunter, and wait for me to take you to your headmaster," said Mr. Quelch, sternly.

"I—I—I say, I—I think I ought to tell you, sir—"

"That will do, Bunter."

"I—I never did it, sir."

"Be silent."

"But I never did—" wailed the helpless Owl, "it was all a joke—I—I mean, it was all gammon—I never—I didn't—"

"I am unwilling to cane you, Bunter, as you are going to your headmaster later for severe punishment. But if you speak again, I shall have no resource but to do so. Be silent."

Bunter groaned, and was silent.

Some of the fellows grinned. Many of them had wondered where Bunter had found the nerve to own up at all—and they were not surprised that the fat Owl's new-found nerve had petered out as the flogging drew nearer. Bunter, indeed, looked more like a fellow who was going to be hanged, than a fellow who was merely going to be flogged. His face was the picture of woe.

Now it had come to the pinch, Bunter would have backed out—had it been possible. He had not, after all, snowballed Quelch—he had only made the fellows believe so in order to reap a little cheap glory. But it was useless to tell the truth now—it was too late. All the fellows—excepting Skinner and Snoop—believed that he was the man—and Quelch, assuredly, would not have believed otherwise after his confession! Bunter was for it—and his only consolation was to derive what comfort he could from being “fixed” up for Christmas! But that was not a present help in time of need—the flogging filled Bunter's fat thoughts, more and more and more as the morning wore away.

When the Remove came out in break, Bob Cherry tapped the lugubrious fat Owl on a plump shoulder.

“Brace up, old fat bean,” said Bob, encouragingly. “You've done the right thing, you know.”

“Oh, lor'!” mumbled Bunter. “I—I say, I don't want to be flogged!”

“Well, nobody enjoys that kind of thing,” said Frank Nugent, “but after all, you did get Quelch with that snowball.”

“I—I didn't!” gasped Bunter. “I say, you fellows, it's all a mistake. I—I—I never got Quelch!”

“Can it!” grunted Johnny Bull. “No good telling whoppers about it now, Bunter.”

“But it's true!” yelled Bunter. “I—I never got Quelch at all!” He blinked forlornly at the Famous Five. “I—I say, you fellows, do you think Quelch would believe me, if—if I went to him and told him I didn't—?”

Harry Wharton laughed.

“Hardly,” he answered, “not after you've been to him and told him that you did. Too late for fibbing, old scout.”

“The too-latefulness is terrific,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “Stick to the estimable and ridiculous facts, my esteemed Bunter. Great is truth, and it shall prevail over the cracked pitcher that goes longest to the well, as the proverb remarkably observes.”

“But I didn't!” howled Bunter. “I—I say, you fellows, I—I think a chap oughtn't to tell crammers. If I say I did it, it's a crammer. See? I—I'm rather particular about that.”

“Oh, my hat!”

“Fan me!”

“I—I think I—I'll go to Quelch—”

“Better come to the tuck-shop, and have a jam roll! said Bob. “Much nicer than Quelch, old fat barrel.”

Billy Bunter brightened a little, and rolled off to the tuck-shop with Bob.

He realized that it was futile to go to Quelch, and a jam roll was grateful and comforting.

But the comfort was brief. When the bell rang for third school, Billy Bunter rolled into the form-room, sticky, but as lugubrious as ever.

Third school was awful for Bunter. Quelch, who could be considerate, passed him over, so far as the lessons went. But with every minute that ticked off the form-room clock, Bunter seemed to see the headmaster and his birch drawing nearer and nearer.

Seldom, if ever, had Billy Bunter wished that a lesson would last longer than the accustomed hour. But on the present occasion, he would have been glad if third school had gone on for hours and hours and hours.

Third school, however, ended at the accustomed time. The Remove were dismissed: Bunter feeling as if he could hardly drag his fat limbs to the door.

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch, "go to my study, and wait for me there."

"I—I—I say, sir, I—I never—"

"Go!"

Bunter went. From the window of his form-master's study, while he waited for Mr. Quelch, he blinked dismally into the frosty sunshine in the quad. There were plenty of Remove fellows to be seen—most looking merry and bright. Bunter noticed that Skinner and Snoop stared at him, at the window, and exchanged grins, as if they found something amazing in the sight of Bunter in Quelch's study. Billy Bunter did not find it amusing at all.

"Beasts!" mumbled Bunter. Harry Wharton and Co., no doubt, were thinking of soccer at Carcroft, to the exclusion of Bunter and his woes: still, they were sorry for Bunter. But that rotter Skinner was just amused! Bunter would have liked to punch his head.

"Oh, lor'!" mumbled the unhappy fat Owl, as he caught sight of Gosling, the ancient porter, crossing to the House.

He palpitated! A Head's flogging was not like a form-master's caning. It was not a matter of "bending over". For a Head's flogging, the culprit was "hoisted" in the old-fashioned way: and it was Gosling's painful—or perhaps pleasant—duty to "hoist" him. Gosling, evidently, was on his way to the Head's study, to perform that painful—or pleasant—duty! The hour was at hand.

"Beast!" groaned Bunter.

There was a step at last: Mr. Quelch entered the study. Billy Bunter turned a blink on him that might have softened a heart of stone. But the Remove master's heart seemed tougher than any mineral, just then. Even after the lapse of a couple of days, there was still a lingering twinge in Mr. Quelch's nose, still an unusual glow at its tip. And the wound to his dignity rankled yet more deeply. There was no hope for Bunter.

"Follow me, Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch. "Your headmaster is now prepared to deal with you—"

"Oh, crikey! I never—"

"Follow me!"

Billy Bunter followed him, in the lowest of spirits.

CHAPTER XI

NOT BUNTER!

DR. LOCKE fixed stern eyes on Bunter, as he walked—or rather crawled—into his headmaster's study, in the wake of his form-master.

The headmaster was, as Quelch had said, prepared to deal with Bunter now. On the table lay a birch—a dread instrument seldom used at Greyfriars, but very effective when used. By the door stood William Gosling, with a faint expression of anticipation on his gnarled face. Gosling's opinion, in general, was that all boys ought to be "drowned". But whackings were useful to go on with, as it were! Not often was Gosling called upon to officiate at an official flogging—such occasions were rare. Still, he rather enjoyed them when they came.

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

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

"Oh, dear! Yes, sir! It wasn't me—," wailed Bunter.

"What? What? Did I not understand from you, Mr. Quelch, that this boy had confessed to the outrage that occurred on Monday morning?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Then what do you mean, Bunter?" exclaimed the Head, "explain yourself at once."

"Oh, lor! I—I mean, I never did it!" gasped Bunter. Any idea of going through it, if he could possibly escape, vanished from Bunter's mind, at the sight of the awful instrument on the Head's table. Not for Christmas at Wharton Lodge, not for Christmas at Buckingham Palace, would Bunter have been "taken up" by Gosling, to wriggle under the Head's birch, if he could help it. "I—I—I never! I—I said I—I did, sir, but I—I—I didn't! All the fellows thought I did, sir, because—because I said I did—but I did—did—didn't—"

"Take up that boy, Gosling."

"Yessir!"

"Ow! I—I really didn't, sir!" yelled Bunter. "I—I wasn't there, sir—I—I was in my study when Mr. Quelch was snowballed, sir—"

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch, "be silent! Dr. Locke, I saw this boy among the snowballers that morning, with my own eyes. Such reckless prevarication—"

"I—I mean, I—I was there, but I didn't done it—I—I mean I done didn't—I never done—I never wasn't—"

"Silence!"

"I couldn't, sir!" shrieked Bunter, as Gosling stepped towards him, to take him up. "Ask any of the fellows—they'll tell you I couldn't hit a house!

I never got Quelch's boko with that snowball, sir—I didn't—I wouldn't—I couldn't—I wasn't—I never—Ow! keep off! I wasn't—didn't—”

“That is enough, Bunter! I am about to punish you, with the greatest severity, for hurling a snowball at your form-master. You have confessed to the act, and it is too late to prevaricate. Gosling, take up that boy at once.”

Gosling—for the first time in history—paused, when ordered to “take up” a boy for a flogging! The birch was already in Dr. Locke's hand: but there was delay—Gosling, with quite a remarkable expression on his face, paused.

“H'excuse me, sir,” said Gosling. “Is Master Bunter to be flogged, sir, for chucking that snowball at Mr. Quelch's phiz on Monday morning, sir?”

“Yes! You need not speak, Gosling! Take up that boy.”

Still Gosling did not take up that boy.

“H'excuse me, sir, I got to speak,” said Gosling. “That ain't the boy, sir.”

“What!” ejaculated the Head.

“What!” exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

“I got to tell you, sir, if so be you goin' to flog Master Bunter for that there snowball,” said Gosling. “Fair play's a jewel, sir.”

“What! What do you know about the matter, Gosling?” exclaimed the Head.

“I see it all, sir!” answered Gosling. “I was a-looking on, I was, and I see the feller 'url that there snowball at Mr. Quelch, sir, and when I spoke to Mr. Quelch to report 'im, Mr. Quelch says, sir, that he saw it too—”

“What!” gasped Mr. Quelch.

“P'raps you forgot, sir,” said Gosling, “I came up to your study winder, sir, to tell you, and you says, says you, that you see all what occurred, sir, so I s'posed you knowed what you was talking about, sir, as you says so, says you.”

“I—I do not understand you, Gosling. I was not aware that you saw the snowball thrown at me!” exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

“But I comes up to your winder, sir, to report that young rip, and you says, says you, ‘I saw all that occurred, Gosling,’ says you—”

“I was alluding to the boys snowballing you, Gosling. I supposed you intended to report it to me, and I had seen all that occurred—I had no idea that you had seen the snowball thrown at me, and had come to report that—why did you not tell me so?” snapped Mr. Quelch.

“You says, says you, you saw all that occurred, and so I thinks you did, sir, as you says so, says you—”

Dr. Locke broke in.

“That will do, Gosling! Do you mean to say that you witnessed the assault on Mr. Quelch on Monday morning, and can identify the boy who threw the snowball.”

“Course I do, sir, and course I can, seeing him as plain as I see you this 'ere minute, sir. And wot I says is this 'ere, it wasn't Master Bunter, sir,” said Gosling. “I'd 'ave reported him to Mr. Quelch, sir, only he said he knowed—”

“You misunderstood me, Gosling,” snapped Mr. Quelch.

“You says, sir, says you, that you saw—”

"You state that it was not Bunter, Gosling?" interjected the Head. "Then give me the name of the boy at once."

"Master Skinner, sir."

"Skinner!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "You are sure?"

"Course I am, sir, seeing 'im with my own eyes," said Gosling, "and I'd 'ave told you that morning, sir, only you says, says you, you knowed—"

"This alters the case very much, Mr. Quelch," said Dr. Locke, looking at the Remove master. He laid down the birch.

"Undoubtedly," said Mr. Quelch, "but it remains to be explained why Bunter actually confessed to the act, when he was guiltless of it, as now appears."

Both masters glanced at Bunter. Billy Bunter was standing like a fellow in a dream, his eyes, and his spectacles, fixed on Gosling in bemused amazement. He realized dizzily that he wasn't going to be flogged after all. Gosling—crusty old Gosling—knew who had done it, and Gosling had pulled him through. Bunter felt as if his fat head were turning round. He could hardly believe in his good luck.

"Bunter!" rapped the Head.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"It appears that it was not you who hurled the snowball at Mr. Quelch. Yet you have confessed to the act. Why did you do this?"

"I—I didn't—I—I mean, I—I—the—the fellows thought I—I ought to own up, sir!" gasped Bunter.

"Do you mean that your form-fellows believed that you were guilty of the act, and urged you to confess to it?"

"Yes, sir! They—they thought I—I did it, because I said so—"

"What!" exclaimed the Head.

"I—I mean I never said so!" gasped Bunter, "that's what I—I really meant to say, sir! I—I never made out that I'd got Quelch with a snowball, sir—besides, I shouldn't have if I'd known it was Skinner—"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed the Head, "is it possible, Bunter, that you regarded such an assault upon a member of my staff as a creditable matter, and actually boasted of such an act—"

"Yes, sir—I—I mean, no, sir! I—I never knew the fellows would make me own up if I said I did it—besides, I never said so, sir! N—n—never thought of such a thing!" gasped Bunter. "I—I didn't think it funny to get Quelch's beezee with a snowball, sir—I—I thought it awful, sir! I never made out that I did it, sir—and I wouldn't have either, if I'd known they'd want me to own up, and—"

"I think I understand," said Dr. Locke. "Mr. Quelch, I leave this boy to you. You may leave the study, Bunter. Mr. Quelch, will you kindly send Skinner here?"

"Certainly, sir."

Mr. Quelch left the study with Bunter. The fat Owl's face was merry and bright as he rolled down the corridor. He had escaped the flogging, after all—and he was booked for Christmas, according to compact, all the same—so

things looked rather good to William George Bunter. They looked a little less good as Mr. Quelch led him into his study, and picked up a cane there.

Billy Bunter eyed that cane uneasily.

"Bunter! It transpires owing to Gosling witnessing the incident, that you were not guilty of the outrageous act on Monday morning, and you will not, in consequence, be flogged. But I shall cane you for untruthfulness. Bend over that chair, Bunter."

"I—I say, sir, I—I never—"

"Bend over that chair!" repeated Mr. Quelch, in a voice that made Billy Bunter bend over the chair so hurriedly, that he looked as if he were shutting himself up like a pocket-knife.

Swipe! swipe!

"Ooooh! whoop!"

"Now you may go, Bunter!"

"Ow! ow! wow!"

"Find Skinner and send him here at once."

"Yow—ow—ow! wow!"

Billy Bunter trailed away.

It was quite a surprise for Harold Skinner. He did not know what his form-master wanted, when he arrived in Quelch's study. He soon learned!

It was a pale and apprehensive Skinner who was walked off to the Head's study—and a frantically-yelling Skinner who, "hoisted" by Gosling, wriggled and writhed under the Head's birch. Harold Skinner had been feeling absolutely secure—especially since Bunter had "confessed". And now—!

The Head dealt faithfully with Skinner: and by the time he was through, one thing was quite fixed and certain in Harold Skinner's mind—that never, never again would he fall to the temptation, in any circumstances whatever, to give Quelch a "bang" on the "beezer".

CHAPTER XII

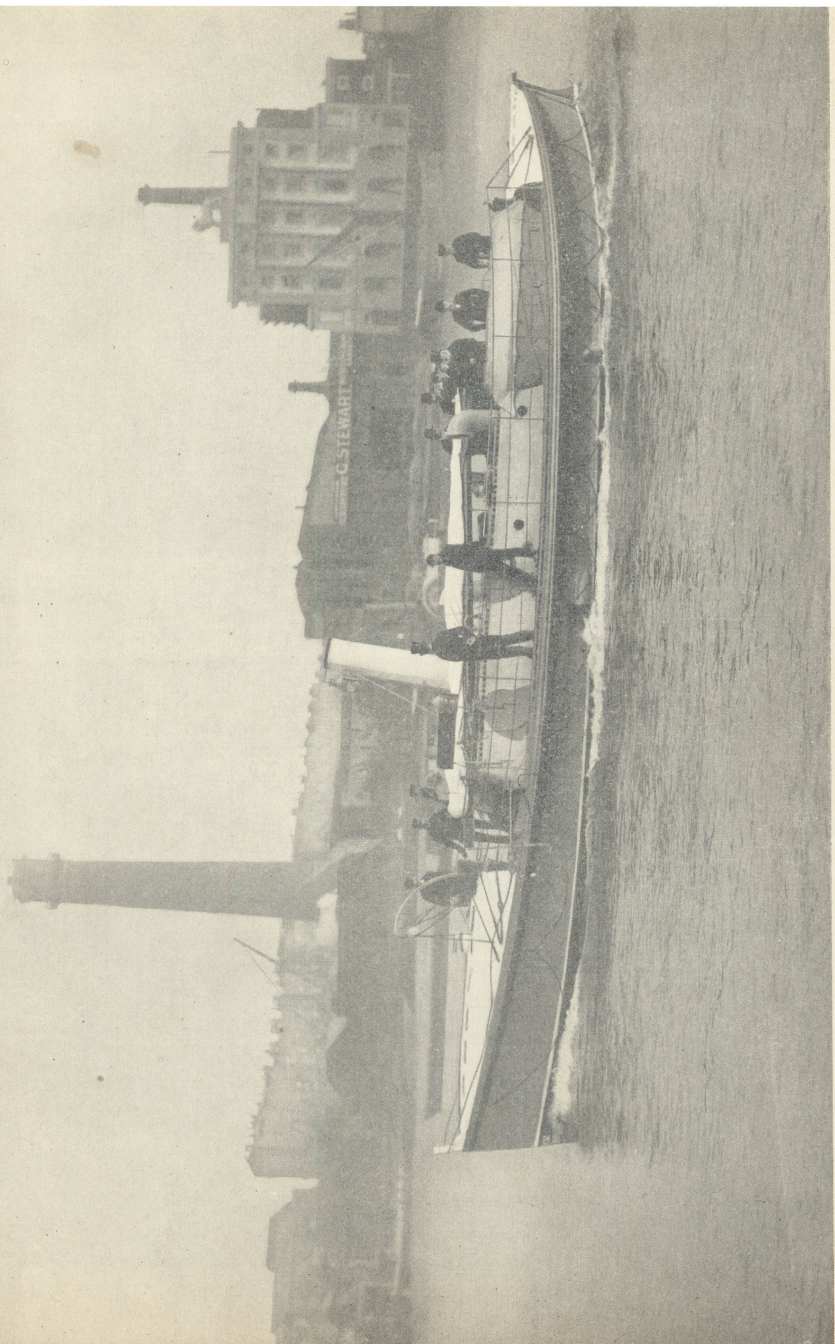
ALL RIGHT FOR BUNTER!

"I SAY, YOU fellows—"

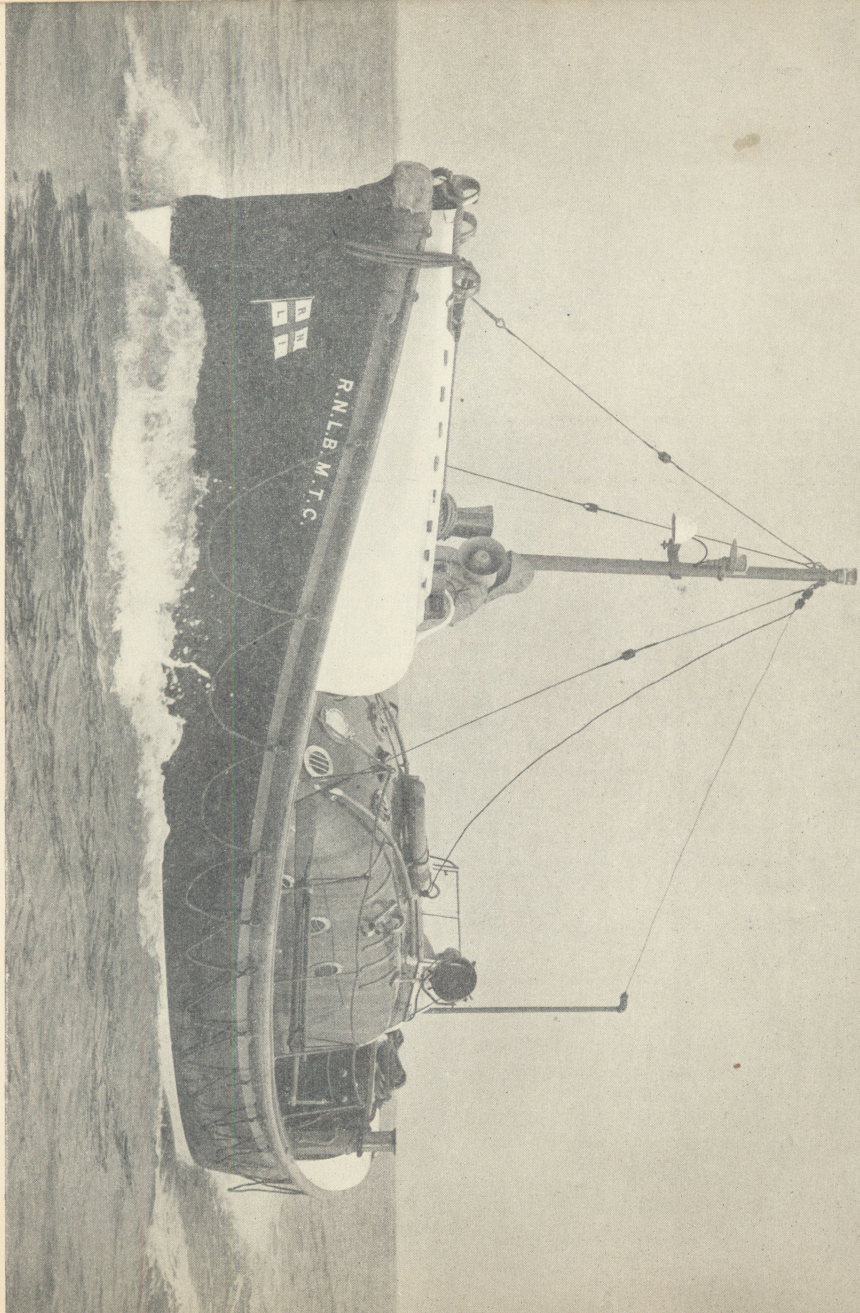
"Hallo, hallo, hallo! We beat them!" roared Bob Cherry.

The footballers were returning, in the winter dusk, from Carcroft. Judging by their looks, Harry Wharton and Co. were satisfied with what had happened there. Dozens of fellows hailed them as they came in—among them Billy Bunter. Not that Billy Bunter was particularly keen to learn how the soccer match had gone. Other and more important matters were on Bunter's fat mind.

"I say, Harry, old chap, is it all right?" asked Bunter, anxiously.



The *Queen*, one of the earliest steam lifeboats, which was stationed at New Brighton from 1897 until replaced by a motor-driven boat in 1923.



One of our newest boats, a beach-launching type.

"Right as rain!" answered Harry Wharton. "They were a goal ahead in the first half, but—"

"That chap Compton bagged it," said Johnny Bull. "He's a good man. But Smithy equalized just on half-time."

"Oh! did he? But—!" recommenced Bunter.

"And in the second half," said Bob Cherry, impressively, "we made the fur fly. Chap named Vane-Carter got ahead again with a pretty good goal: but after that—"

"But I say—"

"After that, Wharton slammed it in," said Vernon-Smith, "and after that—"

"Smithy slammed it in again!" said Nugent.

"That put us one up again," said Harry. "But just at the finish—right on the whistle—Bob banged it in—"

"Four to two!" roared Bob, "think of that, Buntty! Carcroft's a good team, but we whopped them four to two! What!" And Bob, in his exuberance, gave Billy Bunter a hearty smack on the back, and Bunter tottered and roared.

"Ow! wow! oooooogh!" spluttered the fat Owl. "Ooogh! Beast!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Billy Bunter was left spluttering for breath.

The footballers were in great spirits. They had beaten Carcroft School, after so narrow an escape of having to scratch the match. Their happy satisfaction was unlimited.

But Billy Bunter was not bothering about soccer. More important matters were in Bunter's fat mind. When he recovered his breath, he rolled up to No. 1 study, where the Famous Five sat round the table at a late tea. Bob Cherry's voice was heard as he arrived:

"It was Inky's goal really! He got the leather away from that chap Vane-Carter, in the neatest way you ever saw, and dropped it right at my toe. We had them licked, anyhow, three to two, but that goal put the lid on. It was old Inky—"

"I say, you fellows—"

"It was a jolly good game," said Harry Wharton, "and to think that we jolly nearly had to scratch it—"

"The nearfulness was terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, "but the missfulness is a cracked pitcher that is as good as the milefulness, as the English proverb remarks."

"Good old English proverb," chuckled Bob.

"I say, you fellows—!" yelled Bunter.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Roll in, old barrel, and I'll tell you all about the game," roared Bob. "In the first half—!"

"Blow the first half!" snorted Bunter, "blow the second half! Look here, you fellows—look here, Wharton—is it all right?"

"But we've told you," said Harry, "it was quite all right—couldn't have been righter! Four goals to two—"

"You silly ass!" snorted Bunter. "I mean about Christmas! I suppose you know that it turned out that it was Skinner who snowballed Quelch—"

"Yes, you fat fraud!"

"Skinner, all the while!" said Nugent, "and you made out that it was you, you spoofing porpoise. Bragging that you got Quelch—"

"Well, I owned up!" said Bunter, "you fellows can't deny that I owned up! I went to Quelch and said 'I'm the man! Do your worst!'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Those very words," said Bunter, blinking at the hilarious five through his big spectacles. "I said 'Take me to the Head if you like! Who cares?'"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You fat villain!" said the captain of the Remove, "you never did it at all—it was Skinner—and you saw a chance of bragging, because that tick was keeping it dark. You were spoofing us all the time, and we made you go to Quelch, thinking you did it—"

"We might have guessed he hadn't done it, as he said he had!" grunted Johnny Bull. "That was as good as proof that he hadn't."

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Scat, you fat spoofer!"

"Tain't every fellow who'd have gone to Quelch and owned up, especially when a chap never did it," said Bunter. "You wouldn't have, Bull."

"Not if I hadn't done it, certainly," said Johnny, "you ought to be jolly well swiped for going to Quelch and telling lies."

"Why, you all wanted me to go!" roared Bunter. "Wharton told me it was the right thing to do—you heard him—"

"Because you told us you'd done it, you fat frog!" said Harry. "We shouldn't have told you to go to Quelch if we'd known you hadn't."

"Look here, you can't get out of it like that," said Bunter, warmly. "You advised me to go to Quelch—you called me names because I wouldn't—and I went—and if I hadn't, where would you have been? Sticking in detention instead of playing football at Carcroft. That's why I did it, see! I simply couldn't let that soccer match be scratched—you know how keen I am about the matches—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"I simply had to see you through, after you'd asked me home for Christmas," explained Bunter. "I—I—I say, it—it's all right, ain't it?"

Harry Wharton laughed. He understood now what was worrying the fat Owl of the Remove.

"I mean to say, it turned out that it was Skinner," said Bunter, anxiously, "but that don't make any difference, does it? We fixed it up about Christmas, if I owned up to Quelch. Well, I did own up to Quelch, didn't I? I couldn't help it turning out to be Skinner! I never knew that old Gosling saw him buzz the snowball at Quelch's boko. Of course I was jolly glad Skinner got the flogging instead of me! I got two swipes from Quelch—he made out that I was untruthful—you know Quelch, always picking on a fellow for nothing! Me

untruthful, you know!" added Bunter, more in sorrow than in anger, "pretty thick, what?"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"So it's all right about Christmas, Harry, old chap?"

"You fat villain—!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—!"

"You ought to be jolly well booted—" said Bob Cherry.

"The bootfulness is the proper caper—!"

"Let's boot him!" said Johnny Bull.

"I—I say, you fellows—!"

"It's all right, Bunter," said Harry Wharton, laughing. He glanced round at his friends. "Think you can stand Bunter over the hols?"

"That's rather a rotten way of putting it," said Billy Bunter. "If you put it like that, Wharton, I shall have to consider whether I can accept your invitation or not. I'm afraid it couldn't be done."

"Well, I do put it like that!" said the captain of the Remove. "Just like that!"

"I mean to say, I'll come with pleasure, as you're so pressing," said Bunter, affably. "A lot of fellows have been asking me, but I'll turn them down for you, old chap. You can rely on me for Christmas."

"I was afraid I could!"

"Beast! I mean, it's all right, dear old fellow! I'll stick to you over the hols, like a real pal. Rely on me! I won't let you down."

And Billy Bunter rolled away, satisfied.

Billy Bunter was not always a man of his word. He was not always to be relied on. But in this particular instance, Bunter was a man of his word, and proved absolutely reliable. He did not let the chums of the Remove down for Christmas—not Bunter! When Greyfriars School broke up for the holidays, and Harry Wharton and Co. gathered at Wharton Lodge for the festive season, there was Bunter for Christmas!

THE END