

The Ghost of Billy Bunter



by

FRANK RICHARDS

CHAPTER I

JOLT FOR BILLY BUNTER!

“CHEEK!”

Billy Bunter uttered that word in tones of the deepest indignation. In fact his fat voice fairly thrilled with it.

Billy Bunter was often indignant. He was indignant when Mr. Quelch expected him to know his lessons. He was indignant when a long-expected postal order failed to arrive from the old folks at home. He was indignant when a Remove man kicked him for raiding a study cupboard. But never had he been so indignant as now.

His little round eyes fairly flashed, behind his big round spectacles. He breathed hard through his little fat nose. His plump brow corrugated into a frown rivalling the frightful, fearful, frantic frown of the Lord High Executioner. He glared at the letter in his plump hand, with a glare that might have endangered his spectacles.

“Cheek!” he gasped.

It was morning break at Greyfriars School. A good many fellows had stopped before the letter-rack, to look for letters. Break-up for the Christmas holidays was near at hand: and Billy Bunter, at least, hoped that the approach of the festive season might have loosened the parental purse-strings, and that the spirit of Yuletide might materialise in the shape of a remittance. And

a cheery anticipative grin came over his fat face at the sight of a letter addressed to himself in the hand of Mr. William Samuel Bunter. It was a letter from home, at any rate: and surely Mr. Bunter would not have written to his hopeful son at Greyfriars, just before the Christmas hols, without enclosing something more valuable than parental advice!

But when he had opened that letter, the grin vanished from Bunter's face as if wiped off by a duster. It was replaced by an expression that was almost inexpressible.

A dozen fellows looked round at him.

Bunter did not heed them. He glared at the letter, and for the third time gasped out:

"Cheek!"

"Anything up, old fat man?" asked Bob Cherry.

"Is the upfulness terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter?" inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Cheek—sheer cheek!" gasped Bunter, "Me, you know! Me! I'll watch it. I say, you fellows, it must be a joke! The pater can't mean it, can he?"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"That depends on what it is," he said. "But a fellow's pater generally means what he says, I believe."

"But it's the limit!" howled Bunter.

"What's the limit?" asked Frank Nugent.

"What he says in this letter," gasped Bunter. "He can't mean it! Catch me washing up—!"

"Washing up?" repeated Johnny Bull, staring at him. "Do you mean washing? If your pater's advised you to wash, it's a jolly good idea. You've wanted a wash for a jolly long time."

"Beast!"

Billy Bunter gave the letter from home another inimical glare. Then he crumpled it in a fat hand. He breathed hard, and he breathed deep.

"Me!" he gasped. "Me work in the hols—!"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Poor old Bunter!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, gad!" ejaculated Vernon-Smith. "Does your pater want you to do the washing-up for the party of dukes and marquises at Bunter Court this Christmas, old fat man?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

There was a clue to Billy Bunter's breathless indignation now. Apparently that letter from home contained a suggestion that Bunter should do something in the nature of work. Such a suggestion could hardly fail to rouse the fat Owl's deepest and most indignant ire.

"Work!" repeated Bunter, as if dazed by the bare idea. "Me, you know!"

"Not in your line!" grinned Bob.

"Work in the hols! That chap Mark Linley works in the hols, as I jolly well know—"

"And why not?" grunted Johnny Bull.

Sniff, from Bunter!

"Well, he's here on a scholarship, and his people are hard up," he said. "It's all very well for him! But me—"

"You fat frump—!" said Bob Cherry. "Old Marky's worth billions of Bunters."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"A spot of work won't hurt you, old fat man," said Harry Wharton, comfortingly. "Lots of people work, and they seem to survive somehow."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Think of the dignity of labour!" suggested Frank Nugent, grinning.

"You silly ass!" hooted Bunter. Evidently the dignity of labour had no appeal for the Owl of the Remove.

"If you read Carlyle—"

"Blow Carlyle—!"

"But he's awfully eloquent about the dignity of labour—"

"I'll bet he never did any!" yapped Bunter.

"Oh! No! I suppose not! But—"

"Blow him, anyway! Uncle Carter must have been potty to think of it, and the pater ought to have told him at once where he got off! Cheek!" hissed Bunter.

He breathed wrath and indignation.

"My dear Owl," said Bob Cherry. "If your pater wants you to do a job of work in the hols, you'd better make up your mind to it. Lots of fellows have to. These are tough times, you know."

"Not at Bunter Court!" grinned Skinner. "At Bunter Court they roll in gold on the tessellated marble floors—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bunter's often told us so, at any rate," chuckled Smithy. "Has the glory departed, old fat frump? Are they hard up in the ancestral halls of the Bunters?"

"Oh!" gasped Bunter. "Not at all! Nothing of the kind! I—I mean—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Really, what Bunter had revealed of that letter from home, did not seem quite to tally with his oft-repeated description of the glories of Bunter Court. Often and often did the fat Owl wax eloquent over the unlimited wealth and luxury of that enviable abode. Really, a "job in the hols" was not quite in the picture.

"I—I mean—!" stammered Bunter.

He realized, rather late, that in his wrath and indignation, he had let the cat out of the bag! It was rather too late to recapture that cat!

"The—the—the fact is, I—I mean that the pater hasn't said anything about work in the hols—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And he's only said it for a joke, too—"

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

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at! What—what the pater really says is that I'm to go to my Uncle Carter's for Christmas, because—because he's throwing a magnificent party—"

"Is that all?" chuckled Bob.

"That's all, old chap! There's nothing about washing-up!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"My Uncle Carter doesn't keep a boarding-house, you know—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"Nothing of the kind, you know. Of course, my pater wouldn't hear of such a thing! It's only his little joke—I—I mean, he hasn't mentioned anything of the kind—not a word—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Look here, you cackling beasts—!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, there's the bell," exclaimed Bob Cherry, as the clang announcing third school was heard. "Come on, you men! Hope you'll enjoy that magnificent party at Uncle Carter's, Bunter—"

"Thanks, old chap—"

"—especially the washing-up—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

Harry Wharton and Co., laughing, trooped away to the Remove form-room. Billy Bunter rolled after them, with a frowning fat brow, the letter from home crumpled in a fat grubby fist.

That letter, evidently, had given William George Bunter a jolt: a very severe jolt. His only hope—a faint one—was that it might turn out to be merely a horrid joke! Certainly Mr. Bunter seemed hardly likely to have written to his son at Greyfriars School for the sole purpose of pulling his fat leg. Still, it couldn't be true! It was too appalling to be true! Billy Bunter could only cling to that very faint hope like a drowning man clinging to a straw.

CHAPTER II

NO GO!

"I SAY, YOU fellows!"

"Hook it!"

"Oh, really, Bull—"

Five fellows, in No. 1 study in the Remove, looked round at a fat face in the doorway of that study. Tea was on in No. 1 study, and the Famous Five were about to begin, when Bunter happened.

Automatically, as it were, Johnny Bull bade Bunter "hook it". But, as he glanced at the fat face, he did not repeat that injunction. There was deep affliction in the fat countenance of the Owl of the Remove.

Generally, Bunter's fat face was cheerful. Now it looked as if the fat Owl was seeking to understudy the ancient king who never smiled again.

His plump brow was gloomy. His eyes blinked dismally behind his big spectacles. Seldom had he looked so pessimistic. The universe, it was clear, was not running to Billy Bunter's satisfaction at the moment.

"Anything the matter, Bunter?" asked Harry Wharton.

"Oh, lor'!" said Bunter: a reply which seemed to indicate that something was indeed the matter.

"Smithy been booting you?" asked Bob Cherry. "Has he guessed where his chocs went?"

"Oh, really, Cherry! I never had Smithy's chocs. I expect he ate them and forgot all about it. Just like Smithy to make a fuss about a few chocs that lasted a fellow hardly a minute," said Bunter, scornfully.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"But it ain't Smithy," went on Bunter. "I say, you fellows, I—I'm up against it."

"Quelch after you for your lines?" asked Nugent.

"Blow Quelch!" said Bunter, irritably, "Tain't that!"

"Well, give it a name, old fat man," said Bob. "Has a prefect called you up for six?"

"Blow the prefects! It's worse than that," moaned Bunter.

"Trot in and try a slice of this cake," suggested Harry Wharton.

Billy Bunter's gloomy face brightened a little—just a little. Deep in woe as he appeared, cake offered comfort. There was solace in cake! He rolled into the study, evidently interested.

It was not a large cake. It was, in fact, rather a small one. But in view of the sad aspect of the woeful Owl, Harry Wharton cut a generous slice, detaching about a quarter of the cake from the remainder.

"Here you are, Bunter," he said.

"Thanks, old chap!" said Bunter. He picked up, not the slice, but the bulk of the cake, leaving the slice on the plate.

Munch!

Five pairs of eyes fixed on Bunter as he munched. Apparently he had mistaken the cake for the slice. At all events, he was munching the cake, leaving the slice to be apportioned among five fellows.

Bob Cherry grinned.

"Go it, Bunter," he said, with mild sarcasm.

Munch! munch! munch! Bunter did not need telling—he was going it!

“Like it?” asked Johnny Bull, also sarcastic.

“Eh? Oh! Yes! Not a bad cake,” said Bunter. “Not like our cakes at Bunter Court, of course: but not bad. I say, you fellows.” Bunter’s fat voice came a little muffled through a barrage of cake. “I say, I’m rather in a jam over the Christmas holidays, and I want my pals to help me out.”

“Trot off and tell them!” suggested Johnny Bull.

Billy Bunter disdained to heed that. Apparently the pals to whom he alluded were the fellows in No. 1 study.

“It’s about that letter,” he explained.

“What letter?” asked Nugent.

Billy Bunter blinked at him. That letter from home had haunted the fat Owl all through the day. It had weighed on his podgy mind. It had caused him to be even more inattentive than usual in class, earning him lines from Quelch. But the Famous Five, sad to relate, had forgotten all about it! Somehow or other, their own affairs, not Bunter’s, occupied their minds!

“Oh, really, Nugent! You jolly well know that I had a letter from my pater this morning—!”

“Oh, that!” said Frank. Thus reminded of it, he remembered. “Looking forward to that magnificent party at Uncle Carter’s?”

“Is that what you’re looking so jolly cheerful about?” asked Bob.

“I say, you fellows, it’s awful!” moaned Bunter. “Unless the pater’s joking—think it might be a joke?”

Bunter blinked hopefully at five grinning faces. He drew a crumpled and grubby letter from his pocket.

“Look here, you fellows read it, and tell me what you think,” he said. “I—I can’t make it out, unless the pater’s joking. But—but if he means it, I want you fellows to stand by me and help me out, see?”

The fat Owl laid the letter on the table.

“You want us to read it?” asked Harry.

“Haven’t I said so?” yapped Bunter.

“Oh, all right.”

The Famous Five read the letter together. Billy Bunter munched cake, and watched them as they read, with perhaps a lingering hope that they might be able to reassure him with the opinion that it was some inexplicable joke on the part of Mr. Bunter. The letter ran:

Dear William,

I am requesting your headmaster to permit you to leave school in advance of the vacation. You will proceed to your Uncle Carter’s boarding-house, Aspidistra House, on the Leas at Folkestone, where you will spend your Christmas holidays.

As you are aware, William, these are hard times, and I shall have difficulty

in meeting income tax due in January. In these circumstances, I have no choice but to exercise economy. Your sister Bessie will go to Aunt Jane's for Christmas, and your brother Samuel to Uncle Tuck's. At your Uncle Carter's, everything will of course be provided for you, but you will be expected to make yourself useful in return. Your uncle expects a brisk business with Christmas boarders, and labour is both scarce and expensive. Your chief duty will, I think, consist in washing-up in the kitchen: but if anything else be required of you, you will of course be ready, industrious, and obliging.

Your affectionate Father,

W. S. BUNTER.

Harry Wharton and Co. read the letter through, looked at one another, and looked at Billy Bunter. If Bunter fancied that it might be a "joke", they quite failed to see upon what he founded that fancy. Only too plainly, Mr. Bunter was quite in earnest about it. Neither did it seem to them so fearfully appalling as it apparently seemed to Bunter. The Bunter household was not the only one that felt the pinch of hard times. Washing-up was not, perhaps, a particularly attractive occupation, especially in the hols; but really the prospect was not one to make a fellow look so utterly woebegone. Really and truly, there was no reason why Billy Bunter shouldn't make himself useful for once in his fat life, to ease the family finances.

"Think it's a joke?" asked Bunter, hopefully.

"Of course not, you ass," said Harry.

"Think the pater means it?"

"Of course he does," said Bob.

"But—but—but it's too jolly thick!" gasped Bunter. "All very well for a chap like Linley to work in the hols. But me—"

"Fathead!"

"It's cheek!" said Bunter. "Just pure cheek of Uncle Carter. The pater ought to have shut him right up. I—I say, you fellows, suppose—suppose I—I go home instead of going to Uncle Carter's, what—what do you think the pater will do?"

"I wouldn't chance it!" grinned Bob.

"Well, I ain't going to Uncle Carter's! Catch me washing-up! I—I suppose the pater would be waxy if I took no notice of this, and—and just went home—"

"Don't be a goat, Bunter," said Harry Wharton. "If money's tight at home, it's up to any fellow to help if he can. Look at it like that!"

"Oh, really, Wharton! Money ain't tight at home—"

"Wha-a-t?"

"Nothing of the kind! I've told you often enough that my people are rich—"

"Too often!" agreed Bob Cherry.

"The oftenfulness has been terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But the factfulness appears to be a boot on the other leg."

"Tain't that at all," explained Bunter. "It's just the pater's way. He often makes out that he can't afford things, because he has three of us at school. It's that beastly income-tax really! I think it ought to be stopped."

"Hear, hear!" chuckled Bob. "A lot of fellows' paters would agree with that, old fat man."

"You just say 'income tax' to the pater, and he goes right off at the deep end, as if it was a fellow's fault!" said Bunter. "He's thinking about income tax in January, and taking it out of us! Blow the income tax!"

"Everybody gets the income tax in the neck," said Frank Nugent. "It's just one of those things!"

"Well, I jolly well ain't going to Uncle Carter's to wash up for his blessed boarders," snorted Bunter. "But look here, you fellows, if you're sure that the pater means what he says in that letter—"

"Bank on that!"

"Well, I know a way out, and it's up to you, Wharton."

"To me?" said Harry Wharton, blankly: and the other fellows stared at Bunter. No member of the Co. could see in what way the captain of the Remove could save Bunter from the awful prospect of a spot of work.

"Don't you see?" urged Bunter. "Suppose I was fixed up for the hols. already, and you wouldn't let me off, Harry, old chap—"

"But you're not."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"And if you were, I'd let you off like a shot."

"Beast! I—I mean, look here, old chap, be a pal! Of course I shouldn't tell the pater that I've just fixed it up to keep away from Uncle Carter's. I'll write to him that it's been fixed up for weeks—"

"You fat villain!"

"Wharrer you calling a fellow names for?" demanded Bunter, indignantly. "Look here, I'll come home with you for the vac, see? That will wash out Uncle Carter. I'll explain that I simply couldn't let you down, as you're relying on me for Christmas—"

"But I'm not."

"I wish you'd keep to the point, Wharton," yapped Bunter, peevishly. "The point is to pull the pater's leg and keep clear of Uncle Carter's—"

"Do you think I'm going to help you pull your pater's leg?" roared the captain of the Remove.

"Eh? I'd do the same for you, old chap! I know it will be rather roughing it, at your small place," went on Bunter, thoughtfully. "I mean, after what I'm used to at home. But I don't mind that."

"You don't mind that?" gasped Harry Wharton.

"Not at all, old fellow! I shan't expect too much," assured Bunter. "I know your people can't afford things like I'm accustomed to, but I'm no snob, I hope! I suppose these fellows will be coming home with you—well, if I can stand them at school, I can stand them in the hols. That's all right."

"Thanks!" said Bob Cherry.

"The thankfulness is terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"And I can jolly well stand your uncle and aunt too, Wharton, if you come to that. They're rather a pair of old frumps—"

"What?"

"Old frumps! But I've stood them before, and I can stand them again. I'm an accommodating chap. That's all right."

"There's one thing you've overlooked," said Harry.

"What's that?"

"They can't stand you!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"And now you've said your piece, roll away," added the captain of the Remove. "Nobody's going to help you pull your pater's leg, and if I see you within a mile of Wharton Lodge these hols, I'll boot you all round Surrey and back again."

"Beast!"

"Shut the door after you!"

"Look here, you rotter—I mean, look here, dear old chap—Wow! Wharrer you grabbing my ear for?" yelled Bunter. "Will you leggo my ear?"

Harry Wharton, with a fat ear between finger and thumb, led Billy Bunter to the doorway. There he twirled him into the passage, and released the fat ear.

"Hook it!" he said. And the door closed on Bunter.

"Beast!" came in a howl through the keyhole. "Yah! Rotter! Cad! You come out here, and I'll mop up the passage with you."

"Coming!"

The door reopened. But by the time it was open, Billy Bunter was disappearing across the landing; having apparently decided after all not to mop up the passage with the captain of the Remove.

CHAPTER III

BOOT FOR BUNTER!

"V^{ERNON-SMITH!}"

"Yes, sir."

"Please tell Bunter to come to my study."

"Oh! Very well, sir."

Mr. Quelch, master of the Remove, walked on to his study; and as his back was turned to Herbert Vernon-Smith, he did not see the scowl on the Bounder's face.

To Quelch, it was a trifle light as air to tell a Remove fellow to find another Remove fellow and send him in. To Smithy it was not a trifle, as Smithy, it so happened, had no time to waste just then, as he was about to go out.

Certainly, he could not have explained to his form-master that he was going out, as it was after lock-ups, when of course no Greyfriars fellow was supposed to be thinking of going out. Smithy's intention had been to slip quietly out of the House, steal across the dusky quad, and drop from the school wall—secretly, silently, and surreptitiously, unknown to Quelch or anyone else. It was just ill-luck that Quelch happened to call on him to tell Bunter that he was wanted.

It was very irritating to the black sheep of the Remove who had to see Joey Banks that day, if he was to be "on" for the three-thirty at Wapshot on the morrow. He was tempted to disregard Quelch, and cut out all the same. But Quelch was not a man to be lightly disregarded: neither did the Bounder want to call special attention to himself, in the circumstances. So, having scowled at Quelch's departing back, Smithy proceeded to look for William George Bunter, the fat ornament of the Remove.

He did not expect to have to look very far. As tea was over. Bunter was not likely to be in hall or in a study. As it was lock-ups, he could not be out of the House, or in the tuckshop. In cold December weather Bunter was most likely to be found frowsting before the fire in an armchair in the Rag, unlikely to heave his weight out of the armchair till the bell went for prep. So to the Rag Smithy directed his footsteps.

He looked in at the open doorway. There were a good many fellows in the Rag, but he did not discern a familiar fat figure among them.

"Bunter here?" he called out.

Two or three fellows looked round.

"Not here," answered Tom Brown.

"Bother the fat ass! Know where he is?"

"Haven't the foggiest."

"Is he up in the study, Toddy?"

"Shouldn't think so," answered Peter Todd, who shared No. 7 in the Remove with Billy Bunter. "Nothing to eat there, that I know of."

"What the dickens do you want Bunter for, Smithy?" asked Skinner.

The Bounder gave an angry growl.

"Think I want him? Quelch has just told me to send him to his study! I hope it's a whopping, bother him."

"Well, he can't be far away, Smithy," said Bob Cherry. "Make a noise like a jam tart, and he will come running."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"The runfulness will be terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Blow him!" grunted the Bounder. "Have any of you fellows seen the fat idiot?"

"He was in my study after class," said Harry Wharton. "Haven't seen him since. That was more than an hour ago, though."

"Anybody seen the blithering Owl since?" yapped the Bounder.

There was no answer to that question. Apparently nobody had. Vernon-Smith turned away, breathing hard.

Generally, Bunter was easily to be found. Now nobody seemed to know where he was, or where he had been for the last hour. It was unusual: and it was very annoying to a scapegrace who had to find him, before he sneaked out of bounds to see a sporting friend.

The Bounder tramped away, inwardly resolving to kick Billy Bunter all the way to Quelch's study when he had found him.

But finding him did not seem easy. He looked into hall, but Bunter was not there. No fat figure was to be seen in the passages. Smithy went up the staircase at last, to look in the studies.

Most of the Remove studies were untenanted, as it was not yet time for prep. Smithy looked into No. 7, and found it empty. Then, with increasing exasperation, he looked into study after study. Most of them were vacant: but he found Hazeldene in No. 2: who, in answer to a snapped question, replied that he hadn't seen Bunter and didn't want to. In No. 6 he found Wibley, pottering about with his property box, but Wibley had not seen Bunter. In No. 12 he discovered Lord Mauleverer, reclining on his sofa with his noble head resting on his hands clasped behind it.

"Seen Bunter?" snapped Smithy.

"Yaas."

"Oh, good! Where is he?"

"Haven't an idea."

"You silly ass, where did you see him?"

"He was cutting away from Wharton's study—"

"When was that?"

"About an hour ago, I think."

"You silly chump!" roared the Bounder. He did not want to know where Bunter had been an hour ago. He wanted to know where Bunter was now.

"Thanks," yawned Mauleverer. "Are you always as polite as that, Smithy, when you butt into a fellow's study?"

"Oh, go and eat coke."

Smithy banged the door and departed. The only other fellow he found up in the studies was Fisher T. Fish. Fishy was sitting at the table in No. 14 with a pencil in his hand, and a paper before him, deep in calculations. He gave the Bounder's frowning face an impatient glance as Smithy looked in.

"Beat it!" he said, tersely. "I'm doing my accounts! Don't spill anything."

"Counting your money?" snapped Smithy.

"Sure! There's threepence I can't track," said Fisher T. Fish, with an anxious pucker in his brow. "I sure got to track it, feller. I know I ain't spent it, and I ain't lent it to any guy—that ain't possible—and I can't have lost it—I got to get on the track of that threepence—"

"Have you seen Bunter?"

"Nope! Shut the door after you."

Vernon-Smith shut the door after him, with a bang that woke most of the echoes of the Remove passage.

He stood in the passage, wondering where Bunter might possibly be. It was quite mysterious. Billy Bunter, generally too much in evidence, seemed to have vanished like the ghost of a fat Owl. Where was Bunter?

Smithy was growing more and more exasperated. He had none too much time to cut out and see Joey Banks, and get back before prep, without wasting a minute. And now he had wasted many minutes, and looked like wasting more. It looked as if he would have to give Mr. Banks a miss, and all because a fat and fatuous Owl had, for some mysterious reason of his own, disappeared from knowledge.

"Blow the fat frump!" hissed Smithy. "I've a jolly good mind to cut, and leave Quelch to find him himself if he wants him, blow him."

But that was merely "hot air". Even the reckless Bounder could not venture to pass Mr. Quelch by like the idle wind which he regarded not. He had to find Bunter.

Where was he? He thought of the boxroom. Skinner and his friends sometimes sneaked up to the boxroom for a quiet smoke. That was not in Billy Bunter's line: and the boxroom, certainly, was an unattractive spot for a sojourn on a cold December day. However, as he had now looked everywhere else, the Bounder went up the stair at the end of the passage, to look in the boxroom.

He crossed the little landing at the top of the stair. There was another stair, narrow and winding, which led up to a disused attic, from the boxroom landing. But it was hardly imaginable that the elusive Owl could have gone up to a cold dark attic, and Smithy did not glance in that direction. He hurled open the boxroom door, and stared in.

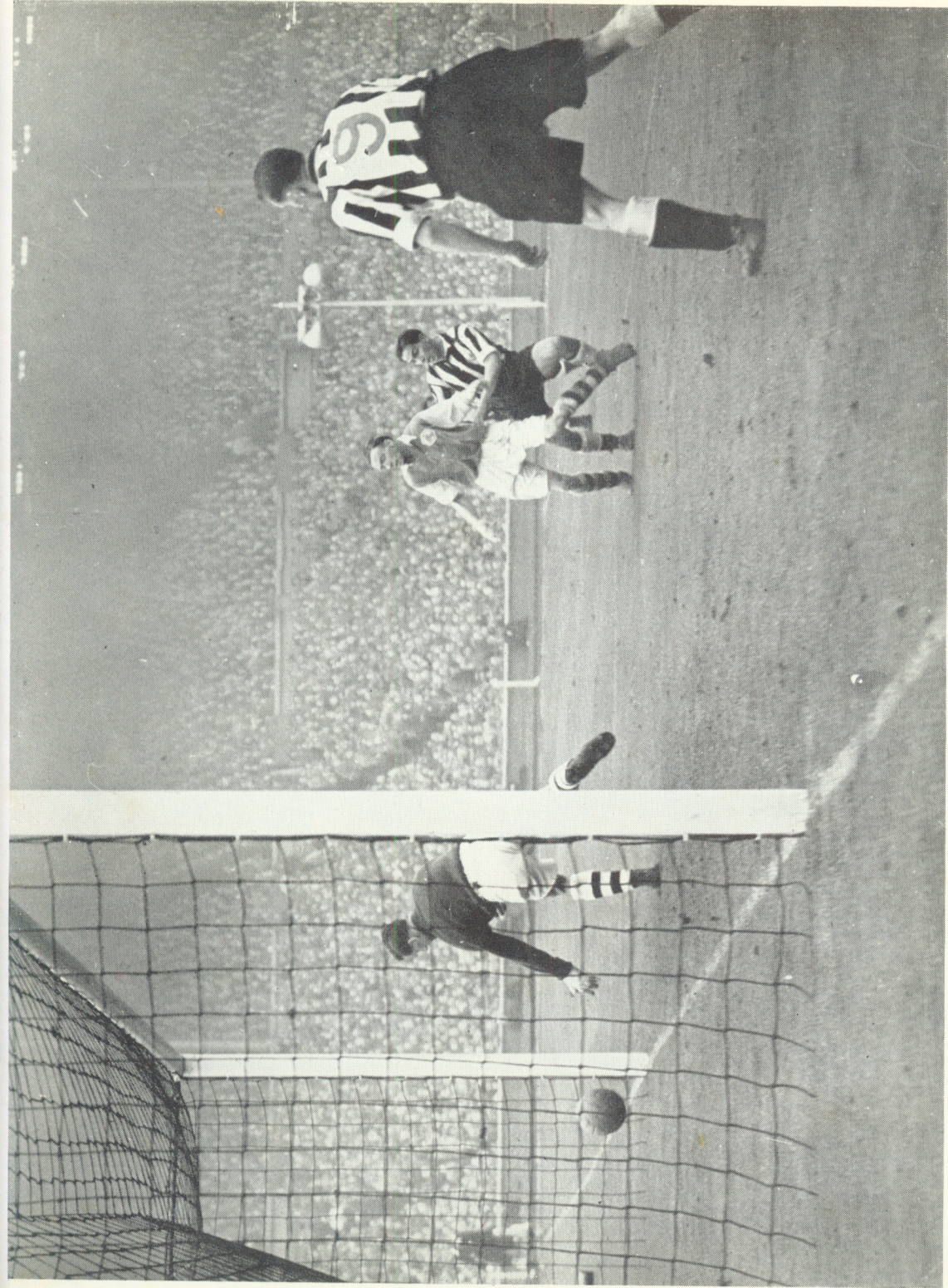
But all was dark within. Bunter was not there.

"Blow him!" hissed the Bounder.

He turned back.

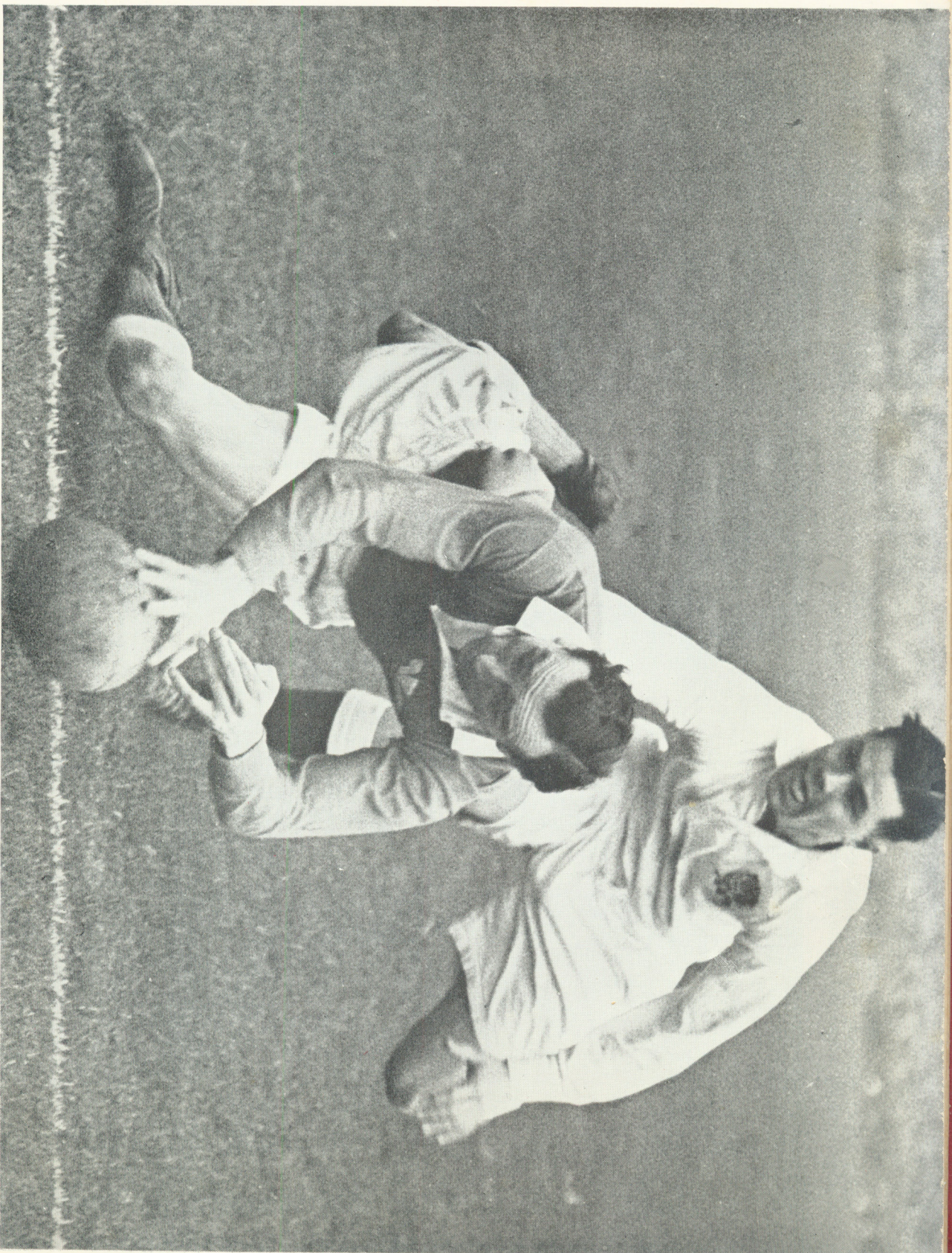
As he did so, a sound caused him to glance towards the narrow attic stair across the landing. To his astonishment, he caught the gleam of a pocket-torch in the darkness on the old stair. Someone was coming down. In the gleam of the light he caught a glimmer of spectacles.

"Bunter!" he roared.



THE WINNING EFFORT I.

Newcastle's cup-winning goal passes Arsenal's goalkeeper Swindin. Scored by George Robledo who is seen behind Arsenal left-back Lionel Smith. Right Foreground : Newcastle centre-forward Milburn.



THE WINNING EFFORT 2.

K. J. Jones, Wales, scores the try which gave Wales their victory over England at Twickenham.

There was a startled exclamation on the attic stair, and the flash-lamp was promptly shut off.

"Oh, crikey!"

"Bunter, you fat ass, so you're there."

"Oh! No! I—I ain't here—!" gasped a fat voice. "I—I—I mean—I—I haven't been up in the attics—I—I mean—oh, crikey!"

"You blithering idiot, I've been hunting for you everywhere."

"Oh! I—I—I—"

"You fat scoundrel, have you bagged tuck from somebody's study, and gone up there to scoff it?" hooted the Bounder. That seemed, indeed, the only possible explanation. There was nothing in the top attic to attract Bunter or anyone else: and Bunter hated stairs, having so much weight to carry up them. And it was not uncommon for the fat Owl to annex foodstuffs from a study cupboard, and retire to a secluded spot to devour his prey. Smithy had no doubt that that accounted for Bunter's mysterious disappearance, and for his discovery of him on the attic stair.

"Eh! Oh! No! Yes! I mean—!" gasped Bunter.

"You're wanted, you fat ass."

"Oh! All right! Is it a feed?"

"It's Quelch, you blitherer."

"Oh, blow Quelch! What does he want?"

"You!" snapped Smithy. He groped for Bunter, in the dark, and caught a collar. "Come on!"

"Yaroooh!" roared Bunter, as he came. "Leggo my collar! You've banged my head on the wall! Will you leggo? Whooooooop!"

Smithy did not let go. He yanked the fat Owl down the attic stair, yanked him across the little landing to the lower stair, and yanked him, headlong, down to the Remove passage. There, in the light, Billy Bunter rolled and roared and spluttered, as the angry Bounder landed him in a heap on the floor.

"Yow! ow! ow! Beast! Keep off, Smithy, you rotter! Wow! Ow! I'm all out of breath! Wow! Oooooogh!"

"Get going, you fat freak!" exclaimed Smithy. "I'm going to boot you as far as Quelch's study—!"

"Yaroooh! Stop kicking a fellow!" yelled Bunter, "Oh, crikey! Wow! I'm going, ain't I? Yow-ow-ow-ow!"

Billy Bunter scrambled wildly to his feet. Two or three articles dropped from his pockets as he scrambled. One was a flash-lamp, another was a rather rusty iron key. The fat Owl clutched them up in haste: and, with Vernon-Smith's boot thudding on his tight trousers, tore down the passage. After him rushed the Bounder, dribbling him. It was too late now for Smithy to think of getting out and back again before prep: his interview with Joey Banks had to be postponed. There was some solace in booting Bunter: and the Bounder booted him with tremendous vim, as he raced roaring down the Remove

passage. It was a breathless and wildly spluttering Bunter that escaped, at last, down the stairs—even Smithy not venturing to boot him quite so far as Masters' Studies.

But Bunter, no doubt, had had enough. Certainly he was feeling as if he had had too much. It was quite a little while before he recovered sufficiently to roll along to his form-master's study to ascertain what Quelch wanted.

CHAPTER IV

TO GO OR NOT TO GO?

MR. QUELCH was frowning when the fattest member of his form rolled into his study at last. It was half an hour or more since Smithy had been bidden to send Bunter in. Quelch did not like to be kept waiting. His expressive face was a little more expressive than usual, as he glanced up from a pile of form papers at the fat flustered face of a breathless Owl.

"Bunter!" he rapped. "I sent for you half an hour ago—thirty-three minutes ago," added Mr. Quelch, with a glance at the clock. Quelch was always exact.

"Did—did—did you, sir?" gasped Bunter. "I—I haven't had time to do my lines yet, sir—I—I was just going to begin—"

"I have not sent for you about your lines, Bunter. I sent for you—"

"I—I came as—as soon as Smithy told me, sir. I—I think he couldn't find me, sir—I was—was in the library, sir, looking for a book—"

"Very well!" rapped Mr. Quelch. "Now you are here, Bunter—"

"If—if it's about the oranges, sir—"

"Oranges!" repeated Mr. Quelch, staring at him.

"I never had them, sir," said Bunter, earnestly. "So far as I know, Coker never left them in the lobby, sir."

"Coker!" repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly.

"If—if he did, sir, I never saw them there, and I certainly never helped myself—I wouldn't, sir. I didn't know there were oranges in the bag, sir—I never saw the bag at all—Coker may have thought so as he came back and saw me eating one, but—"

"Bless my soul," said Mr. Quelch. "If you have been purloining fruit belonging to a Fifth-form boy, Bunter—"

"Oh, no, sir! Nothing of the kind! I—I thought that Coker wouldn't miss one or two—I—I mean, I—I never touched them—"

Mr. Quelch breathed hard.

"On any other occasion, Bunter, I should cane you for taking oranges belonging to a Fifth-form boy—"

"But—but I—I never!" gasped Bunter. "If Coker says—"

"That will do, Bunter! I shall not cane you, neither need you write the lines, as—"

"Oh!" Bunter's fat face brightened. Quelch seemed to be in an unusually placable mood. "Th-th-thank you, sir! May I go now?"

"Will you kindly allow me to finish speaking, Bunter?" snapped Mr. Quelch. "I was about to say, as you are leaving the school to-morrow, Tuesday, morning—"

Billy Bunter jumped.

"L-l-leaving, sir!" he stuttered. "D—did you say l-l-leaving, sir?"

"That is why I have sent for you, Bunter. Dr. Locke informs me that your father has made a particular request that you shall be permitted to leave before the accustomed date of the Christmas holidays—"

"Oh!" mumbled Bunter. He understood now. It was not Quelch's lines! It was not Coker's oranges! It was Uncle Carter and his washing-up!

"From what the headmaster has told me," continued Mr. Quelch, "your father desires you to go to your uncle Mr. Carter's residence at Folkestone to-morrow, where, I understood, you will pass the Christmas vacation."

That, apparently, was all Quelch knew! He was not aware of the washing-up! Billy Bunter was only too painfully aware of it.

"You will not, therefore, attend classes to-morrow, Bunter," went on Mr. Quelch. "After breakfast you will pack your box, instead of going to the form-room as usual, and you will be given your journey money. You will take the ten o'clock train at Courtfield Station. A taxicab will be here at twenty minutes to ten to take you to the railway station."

"B-b-b—but, sir—!" stammered Bunter. "If—if—if you please, sir, I—I—I'd rather not go, sir—"

"What?" ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

He stared quite blankly at Bunter. That was the very last thing he would have expected to hear from the fat Owl.

Even a studious fellow, keen on school work, would probably have been pleased to get a little extra holiday. Bunter was not a studious fellow. He was very, very far from being keen on school work. So really he might have been expected to beam all over his fat face at the happy prospect of getting away early for the vac. Instead of which, it appeared that he didn't want to go! Quelch, unaware of the washing-up that awaited the fat Owl at Mr. Carter's boarding establishment on the Leas at Folkestone, could only stare.

Billy Bunter blinked at him, not very hopefully. He did not want to go to Uncle Carter's. He jolly well wasn't going to Uncle Carter's if he could help it. If he didn't turn up at Uncle Carter's, Mr. Carter would be obliged to engage a washer-up, even if labour was scarce and expensive: and that, Bunter hoped at least, would see him through for the vac! And surely Quelch ought to sympathise with a fellow who wanted to stay on at school till the very last

minute, absorbing knowledge in the form-room instead of jumping at the chance of an extra spot of holiday!

"I—I'd much rather stay till the end of the term, sir," stammered Bunter.

"I—I should miss my—my lessons, sir—"

"What?" Quelch doubted his ears.

"You—you've told me yourself, sir, that—that I'm backward in class, and—and I'm anxious to—to pull up, sir."

"Bless my soul!"

"If you'd kindly let me keep on to the end of the term, sir—" mumbled the fat Owl.

Mr. Quelch gave him a very fixed and suspicious look. It was very true that Bunter was backward in class. It was true that his form-master had told him so, not once but many times. Never before had Billy Bunter displayed the slightest sign of a desire to get a little "farrarder", as it were. Now he was all eagerness. But the change was a little too sudden to impress Mr. Quelch.

It was plain enough that Bunter did not want to go to his Uncle Carter's. But whatever his reason for that, Quelch was not likely to believe that it was a sudden eager desire to add to his stores of knowledge.

"So—so if you'd write to the pater, sir—I mean my father, sir—and—and say that it would be better for me to stay on to the end of the term as usual, sir—" mumbled Bunter.

"I can do nothing of the kind, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir—"

"I am glad, Bunter, to see this desire on your part to do your form, and your form-master, more credit—if it be genuine!" said Mr. Quelch, grimly. "In that case, Bunter, you will receive every assistance from me—next term!"

"Oh!" moaned Bunter. Next term was of no use to Bunter!

"As the headmaster has complied with your father's request, the matter is not in my hands," continued Mr. Quelch. "If, however, the statement you have just made is sincere—"

"Oh, yes, sir."

"—then I will set you a holiday task—"

"Eh?"

"If that will meet your wishes, Bunter—"

"Oh, crikey!"

To judge by Bunter's look, a holiday task would be far from meeting his wishes. It couldn't have been farther, in fact.

Bunter gave his form-master a horrified blink, and backed to the door. He was glad that Mr. Quelch did not pursue the subject, and that he was able to get out of the study at that.

He gasped as he closed the door. Having closed it, he shook a fat fist at it.

"Beast!" he breathed.

Then he rolled dismally down the passage. But mingled with the dismal

pessimism in his fat face, was a look of obstinacy. All his hopes had failed him. He had hoped that that awful proposition of washing-up at Aspidistra House might have been only a ghastly jest: and that hope had failed. He had hoped that Quelch, finding him keen on school work, might have put the stopper on. That hope too had failed. To all appearance, Billy Bunter was booked for Aspidistra House, to wash up, and wash up, and wash up, world without end, for Uncle Carter's boarders in that boarding establishment on the Leas at Folkestone. But the worm will turn! A horse may be taken to water, but cannot be made to drink! Billy Bunter, as a rule, was not stubborn. But there was a spot of obstinacy in him. And if anything could call it forth, it was the prospect of endless washing-up at Aspidistra House. Billy Bunter, now, was not merely obstinate—he was as obstinate as a mule! He was not going to wash up! He was not going to Aspidistra House. Whatever might betide, Billy Bunter's fat mind was made up on that—as fixed and immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians! And that was that!

CHAPTER V

MYSTERIOUS!

“HALLO, HALLO, hallo!”
Bob Cherry noticed it first, and uttered that surprised ejaculation. But all the Remove fellows noticed it in a moment or two. And they all stared at Billy Bunter's bed in the Remove dormitory.

“Some ass japing—!” said Harry Wharton.

“The japefulness seems to be terrific.”

“What silly ass—?”

“Poor old Bunter! You'll be chilly to-night,” grinned Skinner.

“I—I say, you fellows, my bedclothes are gone!” exclaimed Billy Bunter, blinking at a denuded bed through his big spectacles.

Really, it was surprising. “Japing” was not uncommon in the Greyfriars Remove. This, apparently, was a jape: but it seemed to most of the fellows rather the limit. Billy Bunter's bed had been stripped of blankets, pillow, and quilt. Every other bed was quite in order. But some surreptitious person had entered the Remove dormitory and taken Bunter's bedclothes away. There was no sign of them to be seen.

“Well, of all the silly asses!” said Bob Cherry. “If that's a joke, it doesn't seem to me funny.”

“Must be a joke, I suppose,” said Frank Nugent. “But what silly ass—”

“I say, you fellows, I can't sleep without blankets,” squeaked Billy Bunter. “It's too jolly cold, you know.”

"Your fat will keep you warm, like a polar bear," suggested Skinner.

"Oh, really, Skinner—"

"Was it you, Skinner?" asked Harry Wharton. "If so, you'd better cough up those blankets before Wingate comes in to put off the light."

"Not guilty, my lord."

"Man from another dorm, perhaps," said Vernon-Smith.

"Blessed if I see why he should pick on Bunter," said Johnny Bull. "All the other beds are all right."

Wingate of the Sixth, who was seeing lights out for the Remove that night, looked in at the doorway.

"Now, then," he called out. "What's up there? Turn in."

"Bunter's bedclothes have been taken away, Wingate," said Harry Wharton.

"What?"

The Greyfriars captain came striding in. He stared at the blanketless bed, as all the Removites were doing, and frowned.

"Who's done that?" he rapped.

He glanced round at a crowd of staring faces. But there was no reply. If the unknown japer was in the Remove, evidently he did not intend to reveal the fact. Wingate knitted his brows.

"Do you hear me?" he rapped. "Where are Bunter's bedclothes?"

Still no reply.

"Do you know anything about this, Wharton?"

"Not a thing," answered Harry. "I suppose it's a practical joke, but I don't know who the silly ass is."

"I say, Wingate, I can't sleep without bedclothes," squeaked Billy Bunter.

"I know that, you young ass! They've got to be found! All of you look for them, and look sharp!" rapped Wingate.

Wingate had no doubt that the unknown practical joker had hidden the blankets somewhere in the dormitory. And at his order, all the Remove fellows started searching for them.

But they searched in vain. They looked under the beds, and into the cupboard: everywhere up and down the long room: but not a sign was discovered of the missing blankets, quilt, and pillow. It was soon clear that the missing articles were not in the dormitory at all.

"They're not here, Wingate," said Bob Cherry, at last.

"Somebody's taken them out of the dorm." said Squiff.

"One of you young sweeps, I've no doubt," growled Wingate. "Look here, if this is an idiotic joke on Bunter, it's gone far enough. Whoever took those bedclothes away, go and get them at once."

But not a man in the Remove made any movement to go.

Wingate's frown intensified. His time was being wasted, and a Sixth Form prefect's time was not to be wasted with impunity. Gladly he would have given the unknown practical joker "six": if only he had known who it was.

But there was no clue. If the japer was a Removite, he was very carefully keeping his own counsel: but it was, of course, possible that some fellow from another form had been "larking" in the Remove dormitory.

"Very well," said Wingate, at last. "I shall have to go down and speak to the Housedame. Whoever played this silly trick may expect the licking of his life when I get hold of him."

With that, Wingate tramped angrily out of the dormitory. Evidently Billy Bunter couldn't sleep without blankets on a cold December night: and a fresh supply had to be obtained. Which was a further waste of a prefect's valuable time, as well as a very unusual and extraordinary occurrence. The juniors were left in a buzz as the Greyfriars captain departed.

"I wouldn't like to be in the silly ass's shoes, when Wingate spots him," remarked Peter Todd. "He will get six of the very best."

"But who the dickens can have played such a fool trick?" asked Bob Cherry, "Sure it wasn't you, Skinner?"

"Oh, don't be a goat," snapped Skinner.

"Well, you're always playing some rotten trick or other, you know—you put treacle in a fellow's bed once—"

"Well, I didn't snoop Bunter's blankets," snarled Skinner, "and don't you get putting it into Wingate's head that I did. There will be a row about it."

"If you did it—"

"Don't I keep on telling you that I didn't?" yelled Skinner.

"Oh, all right! If you didn't, you didn't! But if you didn't, I'm dashed if I can guess who did."

A good many fellows were regarding Harold Skinner rather suspiciously. He was well known for his practical jokes, which were seldom good-natured. And his denial did not count for very much, for Skinner was far from being a stickler for facts.

"Look here, Skinner," said Harry Wharton. "If you've hidden Bunter's bedclothes somewhere, you've got time to cut out and get them while Wingate's gone—"

"And the soonerfulness is the betterfulness, my esteemed japing Skinner," advised Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

"Oh, go and eat coke!" yapped Skinner.

And he turned into bed, scowling. If Harold Skinner was the culprit, evidently he did not intend to let it be known. The other fellows turned in, and all but Billy Bunter were in bed, by the time Trotter, the House page, arrived in the dormitory with a big bundle on his shoulder. That bundle consisted of blankets, pillow, and quilt, from Mrs. Kebble's stores: and Trotter, grinning, proceeded to make the bed. Billy Bunter was grinning, too, as he watched him, though what Billy Bunter saw to grin at in the affair was rather a mystery.

Trotter, his task done, departed, and Billy Bunter turned into his new-

made bed. Wingate of the Sixth came back into the dormitory, still frowning. The mystery of the missing blankets evidently irritated him. He glanced up and down, scanning face after face, as if in search of a clue to the culprit. Then he stared, or rather glared, at Bunter.

"What are you grinning at, you young ass?" he rapped.

A grinning fat face immediately became grave.

"Oh! Nothing, Wingate," stammered Bunter. "I—I mean, I—I wasn't! I—I—I wouldn't! I—I—"

"Do you think it's funny for a prefect's time to be wasted like this?"

"Yes—I—I mean, no—no—nothing of the sort—"

"Do you know who played this silly trick on your bed?"

"Oh! No! It—it wasn't me—"

"You young ass!"

With that, Wingate put out the light, and left the dormitory. The Remove, rather later than usual, were left to slumber. A fat chuckle was heard from Bunter's bed, after the door had closed on Wingate.

"He, he, he!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Who's that letting off an alarm clock?" came from Bob Cherry's bed.

"Oh, really, Cherry—!"

"Bunter seems to think it funny to have his bedclothes snooped," remarked Vernon-Smith.

"He, he, he!"

With that last fat chuckle, Billy Bunter settled down to sleep. It was, according to schedule, his last night at Greyfriars that term: and all the Remove knew that he objected strongly to getting off to Aspidistra House in the morning. All the same it seemed quite a cheery fat Owl: and in a few minutes more his resounding snore was rousing the echoes of the Remove dormitory as he peacefully slumbered.

CHAPTER VI

GOOD-BYE, BUNTER!

"GOOD-BYE, BUNTER!"

"I say, you fellows—"

"Jolly hols, old fat man."

"Hold on a minute, you chaps!"

"Oh, all right!"

Remove fellows did not always "hold on" when adjured by Billy Bunter

so to do. But circumstances alter cases. On this particular morning, Bunter was leaving Greyfriars, an early starter for the Christmas holidays. For the last week of the term, Bunter was to be absent from his accustomed place. No more would his heavy tread and his fat squeak be heard in the Remove passage—no more would his “howlers” in the form-room cause Quelch to wonder whether, after all, a schoolmaster’s life was worth living: no more would fellows miss tuck from their study cupboards, or be beseeched to advance a fat Owl a little loan on a postal order he was expecting. Greyfriars was losing its Bunter: and it was certain that there would be plenty of dry eyes at Greyfriars following his departure. Nevertheless, as he was going, fellows were feeling kindly: and as he requested Harry Wharton and Co. to hold on, the Famous Five held on accordingly: though the bell for morning school was already beginning its clang.

Bunter was going, while they were in form. When they came out in break at ten-forty-five, he would be gone: gone from their gaze, though not perhaps like a beautiful dream! They were willing to hear his last words before they went into form with Quelch, leaving him to go up to the dormitory to pack his box.

“You see, old fellows,” said Bunter, blinking at the chums of the Remove through his big spectacles. “You see, this is rather sudden—I didn’t expect to be leaving early for the hols like this—missing the last week of term, you know—”

“The suddenfulness is terrific,” agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Rushing off like this, I shan’t get a letter I was expecting to-day,” continued Bunter.

“Quelch will see to that,” said Harry Wharton. “If there’s any letters they’ll come along to Aspidistra House.”

“Oh! Yes! But—”

“But what?”

“But I may want the money on the journey,” explained Bunter.

“Eh! What money?” asked Nugent.

“My postal order—”

“What postal order?”

“Oh, really, Nugent! Didn’t I tell you fellows that I was expecting a postal order?” demanded Bunter.

“Oh, my hat! You certainly did! More than once.”

“The didfulness is terrific.”

“Well, I’m expecting that postal order in a letter to-day, see? Now I shan’t get it, hurrying off like this. I suppose one of you fellows could let me have the pound—”

“What pound?”

“Oh, really, Cherry! The postal order will be for a pound! You can take it when the letter comes with the postal order in it—”

"When!" murmured Johnny Bull.

"The whenfulness will probably be preposterous."

"I think you might lend me the pound, Cherry," urged Bunter. "You'll only have to wait till that postal order comes."

"I shall be a tottering old man by that time, getting my old-age pension, and shan't want it," said Bob, shaking his head.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Beast!"

"Besides, I've only got ninepence," added Bob. "Try next door!"

"I say, Harry, old chap—"

"No good Harry-old-chapping," said the captain of the Remove, sadly, "I've got only a tanner."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Franky, old fellow—"

"No good Franky-old-fellowing!" grinned Nugent. "I've got just half-a-crown."

"Well, if you don't want it, old chap—"

"But I do!"

"Beast! I say, Inky—"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo, the bell's stopping!" exclaimed Bob. "Dash for it."

The Famous Five dashed for it.

"I say, you fellows," yelled Bunter. "Hold on a minute—don't cut off while a fellow's talking to you—Beasts!"

But the juniors had no choice about cutting off, as the bell was giving its last clang. They shouted their farewells over their shoulders as they cut.

"Good-bye, Bunter."

"Have good hols!"

"Put your beef into the washing-up!"

"Cheerio!"

"Beasts!" roared Bunter, in response to those cheery valedictions: which was the last they were to hear from Bunter, for some time: the last, in fact, that they expected to hear until the next term: though perhaps it was the unexpected that was scheduled to happen. They vanished into the House, and Billy Bunter was left frowning in the quad.

"Bunter!"

It was Mr. Quelch's voice. The fat Owl blinked round morosely at his form-master. Quelch was due to take his form: but apparently he was sparing a minute or two for the departing Owl.

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Bunter.

"You will now go in and pack your box, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch. "You will be ready, at twenty minutes to ten."

"Oh! Yes, sir."

"I trust, Bunter," added Mr. Quelch, with frosty kindness, "that you

will enjoy your extra days of holiday at that very healthy resort, Folkestone."

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I shall have a splendid time in my uncle's mansion at Folkestone, sir," mumbled Bunter, dismally.

"And I trust, Bunter, that next term I shall see some improvement in you in the form-room."

"Oh! Yes, sir! Beast!" breathed Bunter, in addition, as Mr. Quelch turned away.

The Remove master spun round.

"What? What did you say, Bunter?"

"Oh! Nothing, sir! I—I never said anything," gasped Bunter, in alarm. "I—I didn't think you'd hear me, sir—I mean, I—I never opened my lips—I only said thank you, sir—"

Mr. Quelch gave that fat member of his form a fixed look. Probably it was only Bunter's imminent departure that saved him from the vials of wrath. Mr. Quelch turned away without speaking again, and went into the House. The fat Owl gasped with relief.

"Beast!" he breathed again: but this time not till he was quite, quite sure that Henry Samuel Quelch was safe out of hearing. Bunter did not want to start on that journey to Folkestone: still less did he want to start wriggling with twinges from Quelch's cane.

"Yah!" went on Bunter, addressing Quelch's vanishing back in the distance. "If you jolly well knew!—Yah!"

The fat junior rolled into the House at last. He had his box to pack, and other preparations to make. The House seemed deserted, with all the Greyfriars fellows in the form-rooms. Billy Bunter passed Mary, the housemaid, hoovering the carpet: and on the staircase he passed Trotter, the page, coming down. But his eyes and his spectacles fell on no other person, as he rolled across the study landing to the Remove passage.

Had any eye fallen on Bunter then, his next proceeding would have caused surprise. He might have been supposed to have something to pack, from his study, No. 7 in the Remove: but he did not stop at a Remove study. He rolled the length of the passage, and mounted the stair at the end of the box-room. He rolled into the boxroom, crossed to the little window that looked out on the leads, and carefully unfastened the catch of that window. After which inexplicable and quite mysterious proceeding, he rolled away grinning, and went down to the Remove passage again.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

There was no ear in the offing to hear the fat Owl's unmelodious chuckle, and no eye to witness his proceedings in the Remove passage. Billy Bunter's mysterious activities that morning, while everyone else was in form, were known only to Billy Bunter himself.

CHAPTER VII

WHOLESALE

HERBERT VERNON-SMITH came into his study after third school that morning, and slammed his books on the table. Then he was about to turn to the door again: but he stopped, suddenly, staring across the room at the study cupboard.

"What—!" ejaculated the Bounder.

He stared blankly.

"What's up, Smithy?" Tom Redwing came into the study.

"Look!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Redwing stared, too.

What met their eyes was a surprise. It would not have been so surprising, had Billy Bunter been still in the school. But as the grub-raider of the Remove was gone—long gone—it was very much of a surprise.

The cupboard door was wide open. It had been left open by a late visitor. On the floor lay a biscuit, evidently dropped, and overlooked, in haste. The Bounder's study cupboard was always well supplied. Smithy had ample pocket money, unlimited credit at the tuck shop, and innumerable parcels from home. No. 4 in the Remove was, in fact, generally like unto a land flowing with milk and honey. Now it was as bare as Mother Hubbard's well-known cupboard. The biscuit that lay on the carpet was the sole, single, solitary representative of what had been there.

"Gad!" said the Bounder. "Look! Cleared out—clean as a whistle! Isn't Bunter gone?"

"He went by the ten train," answered Redwing. "We heard the taxi, in the form-room. He's at Folkestone before this."

"Then somebody's following in his footsteps, now he's gone." The Bounder set his teeth. "By gum, I'll—I'll—but who the dooce was it, Reddy?"

Redwing smiled. He thought he could guess.

"Bunter may have looked in before he went," he said.

"Oh! That's it! The fat scoundrel! While we were all in form!" exclaimed the Bounder. "He had lots of time, and he was gone before break. He couldn't have scooped the lot—why, there was a cake, and a bag of doughnuts, and a carton of eclairs, and pots and pots and pots—the fat villain must have stacked his pockets, as well as his inside! Crammed every one of his pockets, by gum, walked off with the lot! And—we shan't see him again till next term!"

The Bounder glared into the empty study cupboard. The raider had undoubtedly made a clean sweep. Even Bunter, as a rule, when he paid surreptitious visits to other fellows' studies, did not raid on such a wholesale

scale. This time he had left nothing—nothing but an overlooked biscuit! Evidently the fat Owl had considered it safe to go the “whole hog”, as it were, as he would be far from the reach of reprisals before the Removites came out of the form-room.

“I—I—I’ll!” hissed the Bounder. He stamped out of the study, with glinting eyes.

Skinner stared at him, in the passage.

“What’s up?” he asked.

“That fat villain Bunter—”

“Bunter? He’s gone.”

“He cleared out my study before he went!” roared the Bounder.

“Oh, crumbs! Ha, ha, ha!” yelled Skinner. “Bunter all over! Ha, ha, ha!”

“Think it’s funny?” howled the Bounder.

“Ha, ha, ha!” Skinner, evidently, thought it funny, for he yelled “Jolly glad he picked your study, Smithy, and not mine—I had a parcel from home this morning, and there’s a whacking cake in my study. Ha, ha, ha!”

“You cackling fathead—”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” Bob Cherry came up the passage. “Enjoying life, you men? What’s the jolly old joke?”

“Bunter,” gasped Skinner, almost weeping with merriment. “He’s gone but he’s left us something to remember him by! Ha, ha, ha! He’s cleared all the grub out of Smithy’s study—ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, my hat!” ejaculated Bob. “The fat villain! Much there, Smithy?”

“Ha, ha, ha!” chortled Skinner. “Hasn’t Smithy always got lots? Hasn’t he always got twice as much as any other fellow? Bunter knew which study to head for—ha, ha, ha! Regular shop in Smithy’s study—ha, ha, ha! And Bunter’s bagged the lot! He wouldn’t miss Smithy’s study when he was after tuck! Ha, ha, ha!”

The Bounder gave the hilarious Skinner a glare.

“Perhaps he hasn’t missed yours, either!” he snorted. “He had lots of time before he had to catch his train.”

“Oh!” Skinner became suddenly grave. “Oh! By gum—If—if—if!—” Skinner did not stay to finish. He rushed up the passage to No. 11 study, and rushed in.

The next moment a howl of rage was heard from that study.

“My cake! That fat rascal! My cake!”

“Ha, ha, ha!” roared the Bounder. It was his turn to laugh.

Skinner emerged from No. 11 study with a furious face. He had been almost doubled up with merriment over the raiding of the Bounder’s study—Billy Bunter’s farewell to the Remove had struck him as extremely funny. But clearly he saw nothing funny in the raiding of his own study! He breathed fury as he came down the passage.

"My cake's gone!" he howled. "Whacking cake—gone! That fat villain went to my study too—"

"Ha, ha, ha! Funny, ain't it?" chuckled the Bounder.

"I'll—I'll—I'll—," Skinner spluttered with rage. "Bagging my cake before he went—the pilfering porpoise—the—the—the bloated burglar—"

"Oh, gum!" said Bob Cherry. "I wonder if the fat villain called in at any other study before he went."

The Bounder chuckled. The loss of Skinner's cake seemed to have consoled him for his own much more extensive loss.

"Bet you he did," he said. "He had bags of time—shouldn't wonder if he looked into every study in the Remove."

"There's a pie in my study cupboard—"

"Or was!" grinned the Bounder.

Bob Cherry cut into No. 13. Then there was a roar.

"Gone!"

Evidently it was a case of "was".

Bob Cherry came out of No. 13 with a pink face.

"My pie's gone! It came from home only this morning! That fat villain must have had it—why, I'll burst him all over Greyfriars next term—"

Lord Mauleverer came along the passage from No. 12. He glanced at the Remove fellows with a perplexed expression.

"Anybody been larkin' in my study?" he asked.

"Oh, my hat! You too!" exclaimed Bob.

"Anything missing?" chuckled the Bounder.

"Yaas! I was goin' to stand a spot of a spread to some fellows at tea—but—somebody's cleared out the study cupboard—"

"Bunter was busy this morning!" chuckled Smithy.

Hazeldene came out of No. 2 study, with an excited face. All the fellows in the passage looked at him.

"Who's been in my study?" shouted Hazel. "Who's been snooping my pineapple, and Browney's chocs?"

"By gum! That fat villain's made a clean sweep, and no mistake," said Bob Cherry. "Must have been Bunter, of course. But how the dickens did he get all the stuff away? Must have packed a suitcase with tuck, I should think."

"Coming down with that footer, Bob?" called out Harry Wharton, from the Remove landing.

"Bunter's been here," called back Bob.

"Bunter? He's gone!"

"So has my pie, and Skinner's cake, and Smithy's tons of tuck—"

"Wha-a-at?"

"Better look in your studies, you fellows," chuckled Smithy. The Bounder seemed to be quite enjoying the joke now. "I'll bet that that fat owl hasn't forgotten anything!"

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent cut into No. 1 study. Hurree Jamset Ram Singh went into No. 13, and Johnny Bull into No. 14. They came out again with their faces registering excitement, all speaking at once.

"That fat scoundrel—!"

"Cleared out the lot—"

"Not a crumb left!"

"I'll scrag him!"

"The scragfulness of the execrable Bunter will be terrific."

"Going over to Folkestone to scrag him?" chortled Smithy. "Ha, ha, ha! Bunter wasn't losing a chance like this! By gum, he must have bagged enough to last him for a week! Ha, ha, ha!"

As the news spread, other fellows came up to the studies: and from almost every study in the Remove the sounds of wrath were heard. Every study in the passage had been visited by the grub-raider: and no supply, large or small, had been spared. Bunter had had plenty of time: but he had used every moment of it efficiently. How he had carried off the loot was rather a mystery—even a suitcase could hardly have contained it all. Somehow he must have solved the problem of transport. Anyhow, the plunder was gone: and Bunter was gone: and that was that.

CHAPTER VIII

TWO IN THE DARK

HARRY WHARTON stirred in his bed, and opened his eyes. It was black as a hat in the Remove dormitory. Hardly a glimmer of a star came through the deep December darkness. Something had awakened the captain of the Remove: perhaps the winter wind that wailed round the ancient chimneypots of Greyfriars. But it seemed to him, as he stared round in the deep gloom, that there had been some sound nearer at hand.

The next moment he was sure of it. Faint sounds came to his ears, though he could see nothing. He sat up in bed.

"Who's that?" he called out.

The faint sounds instantly ceased.

"Somebody up?" asked Harry, staring into the darkness. "Is that some fellow out of bed?"

Then a whisper came back:

"Don't shout, you fool! Do you want to wake the whole dorm?"

"Is that Smithy?" Wharton could see nothing, but it was the Bounder's voice.

"Yes: shut up, can't you?"

"What's up?"

"I am."

"But what—?"

"Oh, be quiet!"

"Oh!" Harry Wharton understood. "You silly chump, is this one of your breaking out stunts? Go back to bed and don't be a fool."

"Mind your own business."

The faint sounds from the dark were resumed. They were the sounds of a fellow hurrying on his clothes.

The captain of the Remove knitted his brows. It was no new thing for Herbert Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfairs, to "break out" after lights out. It was not without reason that he had been nicknamed "The Bounder". It was not exactly any concern of Harry Wharton's: but he had his own opinion about it, which he certainly had no intention of keeping to himself.

"Don't you want to come back to Greyfairs after the hols, Smithy?" he asked.

"Eh? Yes! What do you mean?"

"You won't, if Quelch spots you to-night."

"Oh, chuck it!" snapped Smithy. "Did you wake up specially to hand out a sermon in the middle of the night?"

"You ought to be jolly well kicked."

"Thanks! Now shut up," yapped Smithy. "You'll be waking all the fellows! Is that what you want?"

"One's awake already," came a quiet voice from Tom Redwing's bed. "Is that you, playing the goat again, Smithy?"

"Find out!"

Redwing was Smithy's chum, and a good chum. But that reply from the Bounder did not sound very chummy!

"Look here, Smithy—!" muttered Redwing.

"Pack it up!"

"If there's a pre. on the prow!"

"Oh, rats!"

"For goodness sake, Smithy, don't be such a fool, and such a rotter! Do you want to risk getting sacked just before Christmas?"

"Rats again!"

That reply was followed by a sound at the door. It had opened and shut softly.

"He's gone!" muttered Redwing.

"Shady sweep!" grunted the captain of the Remove. And he laid his head on the pillow again.

Heedless of either of them, Vernon-Smith crept on tiptoe down the dark passage to the landing. He cared a little for Redwing's opinion, perhaps, if not for Wharton's: but certainly not to the extent of giving up his nocturnal

escapade. That there was risk in it mattered nothing to the Bounder: indeed, a spice of danger gave it a zest.

But there was, after all, little risk unless the unexpected happened. It was past eleven o'clock: and all was dark and silent and still. He had only to creep stealthily down to the Remove passage, reach the box-room, and let himself out by the window onto the leads. From the leads an old rain-pipe gave easy descent to the ground. Even Billy Bunter could climb that rain-pipe, and it was nothing to the lithe and active Bounder. Smithy was not thinking of the risk, but of his sporting friends at the Cross Keys, as he crept across the landing to the stairs, and groped his way down with a hand on the banister.

All was dark on the study landing below, with hardly a glimmer of starlight from the high windows. He crossed the landing to the Remove passage, and flitted up the passage, past the doors of the Remove studies, silent as a ghost.

He reached the boxroom stair at the end, and mounted it, silently and swiftly to the little landing, outside the box-room. The attic stair beyond was swallowed up in blackness: but Vernon-Smith had no interest in that direction. He groped to the boxroom door, opened it, and stepped silently in, shutting the door after him with scarcely a sound.

In another moment, he would have been crossing the room to the little glimmering window over the leads. But in that moment, he caught his breath suddenly, and stood perfectly still, his heart beating in jumps. From the dense darkness of the boxroom came a sound—faint but unmistakable—the sound of hurried, suppressed breathing.

The Bounder stood rooted.

He was utterly startled.

Someone was in the boxroom—at that late hour, when all Greyfriars slept. Someone, unseen, his breathing barely audible, was within a few feet of him in the darkness.

Redwing had suggested that a prefect might be on the prowl. Was it possible that a suspicious and watchful prefect might have thought of watching the boxroom? Vernon-Smith's brain almost swam, at the thought that Wingate or Gwynne or Sykes, of the Sixth, might be there, almost within hand's reach of him. It might even be Quelch! More than once, as he knew well, Quelch had had a doubting eye on that particular member of his form. If Quelch had a suspicion that the boxroom window was used as a mode of egress and ingress by a breaker of bounds—!

Or was it some other young rascal like himself, out of his dormitory to break bounds after lights out, and as startled and scared as himself?

He could not tell.

Or might it be some burglarious prowler of the night, who had picked that window over the leads to make his lawless entrance—was it some ruffian, perhaps with a "cosh" in his hand, who lurked in the darkness there?

Smithy had plenty of nerve: but his heart was beating very unpleasantly, as he stood, blotted in darkness, still listening. Many a time had the reckless scapegrace of Greyfriars "broken out" in the dark hours, and sometimes there had been critical moments—but never anything like this! It seemed to him that he could hear his heart thumping. He was alone, in that dark remote room, with someone, someone he could not see, but whose hurried breathing came distinctly to his ears. Who—what—was it? It was a cold December night, but he felt the perspiration trickling down his face.

If it was a prefect, or a master, surely he would speak, or at least turn on a light! If so, the Bounder's game was up—he was discovered, and was faced with an interview with his headmaster in the morning: only likely to be followed by the train home. But—but it could not be master or prefect—whoever it was, knew that he was there, and master or prefect could have no reason for prolonging this anguish of suspense. It was forced into the Bounder's mind that the unseen person in the dark was neither master nor prefect. Either it was a burglar, or it was some breaker of bounds like himself—sharing his fear of discovery, afraid to speak lest his voice should be recognized, doubtless dreading that Smithy himself might be a master or a prefect!

Not a Remove man—Smithy knew that all the Remove were in bed. Angel of the Fourth, perhaps—or Price of the Fifth—both were black sheep like the Bounder. He resolved to speak at last. He had nothing to fear from a fellow scapegrace if that was it.

He spoke in a whisper.

"Who's that? Who's there?"

He heard a faint gasp in the darkness. His whisper had been heard: but there came no reply to it. That was proof enough, if he had needed it, that the unknown was neither a master nor a prefect.

"Will you speak, you fool?" breathed the Bounder. "You needn't be afraid—I'm not a beak or a pre. you fool!"

Still no answer. Was it a breaker of bounds—or was it, after all, some night prowler from without—with a "cosh", perhaps gripped in a ruffian hand? Surely a breaker of bounds would have been relieved to hear his reassuring whisper, and would have answered.

"Will you answer, you fool, whoever you are?" hissed the Bounder.

There was no answer—but there was a sudden rush. The Bounder's hands went up instinctively to protect his head, with the thought of a "cosh" in his mind. But it was not his head that was in danger. Two hands shoved at him from the dark, and that sudden shove sent him reeling.

He reeled helplessly, tripped against a box, and crashed over on the floor.

He lay half-winded by the crash, gasping, and as he lay and gasped, he heard the boxroom door dragged hurriedly open. Whoever it was that had shoved him over, had only wanted to push him out of the way, to escape from

the room. Who was he, what he was like, the Bounder had no idea: only he knew that there had been plenty of weight behind that sudden shove.

He sat up, panting, as the door flew open. He heard a hurried running step—the unknown, still unseen, had darted out of the boxroom to the little landing without.

Panting with rage, the Bounder scrambled up.

Slam!

The door shut after the vanishing unknown, with a hurried, frantic slam, that woke a thousand echoes in the silent night. It seemed to the Bounder to thunder through the silence.

“Oh!” he gasped.

He groped savagely at the door, grasped the handle, and tore it open. As he stared into the dark, a faint sound from a distance came to his ears—from what direction he could not tell. But he knew that it meant that the mysterious lurker in the boxroom was gone—fled without losing a second.

He stood in the dark doorway, gritting his teeth. It was clear now that the unknown could not have been a burglar. Such a night marauder would certainly not have banged a door, rousing out all the echoes of the House, and undoubtedly startling many sleeping ears. It was, after all, Smithy could only conclude, some breaker of bounds like himself, who did not choose to let him discover who he was. Vernon-Smith would have given a great deal to know: and to hand back something for that shove—something with all his beef behind it.

But the unknown was gone: and there was not a clue to him. And the Bounder realized that the sooner he was gone too, the better for him: for it was scarcely possible that the resounding bang of the boxroom door had not awakened a good many sleepers. He was not thinking now of carrying on with his nocturnal escapade: for if there was an alarm, it was very likely that dormitories might be visited, and the discovery of an empty bed in the Remove dormitory would mean the end of things for him at Greyfriars School. Smithy's best guess was to get back to bed in the shortest possible space of time: and he knew that he would be lucky if he succeeded in getting back undiscovered.

He lost no time. The mysterious unknown had vanished, where, Smithy did not know: but his own way lay down the Remove passage—and he cut down the boxroom stair, and past the Remove studies, at a rapid run in the dark. In a matter of moments he was on the study landing again, and running up the dormitory stairs.

He caught his breath, and his heart beat, as he cut across the dark dormitory landing: for he heard the sound of an opening door, and there was a sudden glimmer of light in the gloom. He shot on desperately to the Remove dormitory reached it, and plunged in panting. A second later light was gleaming on the

landing, and he heard the sound of a voice, and then of another. Softly, he closed the dormitory door.

"Is that you, Smithy?" came a whisper.

"Quiet, Reddy, you fool."

"Copped?" came Harry Wharton's voice.

"Do you want me copped?" hissed the Bounder. "Quiet—the beaks are up—quiet, I tell you."

And there was silence in the Remove dormitory, as the Bounder plunged hurriedly into bed.

CHAPTER IX

THE MYSTERY OF MAULY'S STUDY

CLICK!
"Oh!" ejaculated Lord Mauleverer.

His lordship was astonished.

He stopped, in the Remove passage, a few paces from the door of his study, No. 12, and stared at that door. He stared at it blankly. Seldom had Mauly been so surprised.

It was third school at Greyfriars, on the day following Billy Bunter's departure. Third lesson in the Remove was Roman history: and for that lesson books were required: and Mauly, as not infrequently happened, had forgotten his book. Mr. Quelch, frowning, had bidden him fetch it from his study, adding that he might take fifty lines for his forgetfulness. Really Mauly did not feel that he was much to blame. He had been reading *Tom Merry's Own* in his study when the bell went: and having had to cut off in the middle of a quite interesting story, naturally he hadn't thought of that history book. However, it was no use explaining all that to Quelch: and Mauly, the richer by fifty lines, hurried up to the Remove: and he was trotting up the passage to his study, when, to his utter amazement, he heard the key click in the lock of the door he had almost reached.

It was quite startling.

During form, nobody should have been in the studies. But somebody, it was clear, was in Mauly's study: and, hearing him coming, had promptly turned the key in the lock to keep him out!

"Oh gad!" murmured the astonished Mauly. "Who—what—?"

He could hardly believe his ears! Who on earth could be in his study, while everyone was in form, locking him out?

Having stared at the door, Mauly marched on again, and reached it. He turned the handle. The door did not open. His ears had not deceived him. It was locked on the inside.

"I say, who's there?" called out Mauleverer, tapping on the door. "Is that Trotter, or Mary, or whom?"

It was possible, though improbable, that the House page, or a housemaid, might have come up to the study for some reason. But there came no reply from No. 12 study.

Tap! tap! tap!

"Here, whoever you are, unlock this door!" called out Lord Mauleverer. "I've got to get a book and get back to class."

No reply.

There was no sound from within. Someone was there, that was certain, or the key could not have been turned inside. But that someone evidently chose to understudy Brer Fox, and "lay low and say nuffin'."

"Well, by gad!" said the perplexed Mauly. "Look here, is that some fellow larkin'? Let me in, bother you."

Silence.

"I tell you I want my book!" shouted Lord Mauleverer. "You silly ass, whoever you are, let me have my history book."

Deep silence.

Lord Mauleverer breathed hard. He was a good-tempered fellow, but his temper was rising. It couldn't be Trotter, or a housemaid, playing a trick like this. Who it was he could not guess. Whoever it was, Mauly would have liked to punch his head.

But evidently there was nothing doing. The door was fast: and the unknown intruder in the study refused to speak. Breathing hard, Mauly turned away to return to the form-room without his book. There was no help for it.

He was half-way down the passage to the stairs, when a sound behind him made him turn his head. It was the thud of a falling object on the floor.

Lord Mauleverer fairly jumped.

The door of No. 12 had opened from within. Nobody emerged—nobody looked out—nobody was to be seen. But a book had shot out of the study and dropped on the floor. It was Mauly's history book, which he had left on the study table beside *Tom Merry's Own*.

"Oh, gad!" gasped Mauly. He turned back, and ran up the passage: not only for the book, but in the hope of reaching the study before the door was locked again, and discovering who was playing this extraordinary trick.

But he had no time for that. Even as he started, the door was slammed from within, and the key clicked in the lock again.

"You cheeky ass!" roared Mauleverer.

He picked up the book. The door was locked: the locker of the door silent: there was nothing doing in that direction. But the history book, after all, was what Mauly wanted, and the mysterious occupant of No. 12 had let him have it. He picked it up and walked away, leaving the unknown visitor in possession of the study.

Mr. Quelch gave him a sharp glance as he came back into the Remove form-room. Mauly had been absent longer than the Remove master deemed necessary for fetching a book from a study. However, Quelch contented himself with that severe glance, and Mauly went to his place and sat down.

Roman history continued on the even tenor of its way in the Remove. But there was one member of that form who was not thinking wholly about the grandeur that was Rome! Lord Mauleverer could not help wondering who was in his study, and what on earth he was up to there: and whether he be still there when form was over. In the latter event, Mauly considered that a ragging would be an adequate reward for locking a fellow out of his own study.

When the Remove were dismissed, Mauleverer joined Harry Wharton and Co. as the juniors went out.

"Come up to the studies, you fellows," he said.

"Eh! Why?" asked Bob Cherry.

Mauly explained the curious occurrence. The Famous Five stared blankly as they heard it.

"Well, that takes the cake!" said Johnny Bull. "Must have been some Fourth Form chap larking."

"Must have been some fellow out of form," said Nugent. "They can always pull Capper's leg, in the Fourth, when they want to get out. But what the dickens did he want in your study, Mauly?"

"Goodness knows! But if he's still there—" said Mauly.

Harry Wharton laughed.

"Not likely!" he said. "Whatever he's been up to, he wouldn't wait to be rooted out. Still, let's go and see."

"I'm jolly well goin' to kick him for his cheek!" explained Lord Mauleverer. "But if it's somebody too big for me to kick, you fellows can lend a hand raggin' him, what?"

"Pleasure!" grinned Bob.

"The pleasurefulness will be terrific, my esteemed Mauly," declared Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Bet you he won't be there now," said Johnny Bull. "Still, we may be able to spot who it was."

Six juniors hurried up to the Remove passage. They had little expectation of finding the mysterious visitor to the study still in occupation: and that he was gone, was soon clear, for the door of No. 12 study was wide open when they arrived there.

"Nobody here," said Nugent.

They tramped into the study, and looked about them. Whoever had been in the study must obviously have had some motive for the visit: and they expected to see some sign of whatever he might have done there. But there was no such sign to be seen. No. 12 study presented its normal aspect: and, having looked round the study, the Famous Five looked at Lord Mauleverer.

"You're sure—?" began Harry Wharton.

"Is the surefulness terrific, my esteemed Mauly, that there was any preposterous person in the study at all?"

"Oh, don't be asses, you know," said Lord Mauleverer. "Think I could fancy that I heard the key click in the lock, and that I couldn't get the door open?"

"Um!" said Johnny Bull.

Really, it seemed inexplicable. There was absolutely no sign of the study having been visited—nothing had been disturbed in any way—the whole thing was a mysterious puzzle. Why any fellow had come there at all, apparently with no object, was not easy to guess.

"Oh!" exclaimed Lord Mauleverer, suddenly. "Where's my *T.M.O.*?"

"Your which?" asked Bob.

"*Tom Merry's Own!*" exclaimed Mauly, staring at a bare table. "I was readin' it here when the bell went—that's how I came to forget that dashed history book when I cut down. It was here on the table—it's gone!"

"Well, my hat!" said Bob. "If you're sure of that, Mauly—"

"Of course I'm sure of that, ass! I left the *T.M.O.* on the table, I tell you, just beside the history book."

"It's not there now," said Johnny Bull.

"The notfulness is terrific."

"Well, this prances off with the Peek Freat!" said Bob Cherry. "If the chap came here to borrow a book, he could have said so, instead of locking you out."

"Dashed if I make it out," said Lord Mauleverer, in great perplexity. "I've lent that *T.M.O.* to six or seven fellows already, and I'd lend it to any other fellow who wanted it. Any chap's welcome. No need to bag it like this. But—he's bagged it."

"Like his cheek!" said Bob. "Look here, let's look for a fellow with a *T.M.O.*, and jolly well bump him for his cheek!"

"Good egg!"

"Yaas," agreed Lord Mauleverer. "I'll let him read it if he wants to, but we'll jolly well bump him first for his nerve."

"Come on," said Bob.

And the juniors went down from the studies, to look for a fellow with a *T.M.O.* It seemed a fairly easy clue: for whoever had bagged that *Tom Merry's Own*, could hardly have taken it for any purpose but to read it: and certainly it was large enough to be seen if it was anywhere about.

But easy as that clue seemed, it led to nothing. Several copies of *T.M.O.* were unearthed, but none of them proved to be Lord Mauleverer's copy. And the dinner-bell rang before the chums of the Remove had made any discovery. One thing was clear—whoever had visited Lord Mauleverer's study during form, had done so to borrow his *T.M.O.* But who he was, and why he had chosen so surreptitious a method to borrow a book which Mauly would willingly have lent to any fellow, had to remain a mystery.

CHAPTER X

WHERE IS BUNTER?

“DR. LOCKE?”

“Speaking!”

“This is Mr. Bunter—”

“Oh! Good-morning, Mr. Bunter.”

“Oh! Good-morning! About my son—”

“Your son?”

“Yes, sir! I have to inquire about my son!”

Dr. Locke, headmaster of Greyfriars, blinked at the telephone. Mr. Quelch, master of the Remove, seated by the headmaster's table, caught the words from the telephone, and blinked also. Both were surprised. Neither had expected to hear Mr. William Samuel Bunter on the telephone inquiring about his son.

Headmaster and form-master had, in point of fact, forgotten the existence of the Bunter clan. They were chatting upon the much more interesting topic of Sophocles, a great Greek, whose obscurities they had a scholarly love of endeavouring to penetrate. The ring of the telephone bell interrupted that enjoyable discussion. Neither of them was pleased to dismiss Sophocles in favour of Bunter. However, the parent of a Greyfriar's boy had to receive attention; Sophocles had to take a back seat for the moment.

“I desire to know where he is, sir!” went on Mr. Bunter's fat and emphatic voice over the wires.

“I do not quite understand you, Mr. Bunter,” said the Head. “If you are referring to your younger son, Samuel Bunter of the Second form here, he is in the school—”

“I am referring to my elder son, William, sir.”

“Then I quite fail to understand you, Mr. Bunter. You have not forgotten that you requested me to give Bunter of the Remove leave from school, a week before the holidays, to go to a relative at Folkestone.”

“Quite so, sir! What I desire to know is, why has he not gone?”

“Eh?”

“Why has William not gone to his uncle's at Folkestone, Dr. Locke? Having received your reply in the affirmative, I concluded that William would leave the school for Folkestone on Tuesday—”

“Naturally,” said Dr. Locke. “And he did so—”

“What?”

“He did so—”

“Do I hear you aright, Dr. Locke?”

“I trust so, Mr. Bunter.”

“You are saying that my son William left Greyfriars yesterday, Tuesday, and started for Folkestone?”

"That, at all events, was the instruction I gave," said Dr. Locke. "It must have been carried out. However, the boy's form-master is present, and I will speak to him: your words seem to imply that Bunter of the Remove has not arrived at his uncle's house."

"Certainly he has not arrived there, sir! This morning I received a telephone call from Mr. Carter, inquiring why he had not come as arranged. I rang you up immediately, sir."

"Bless my soul!"

The puzzled Head turned to Mr. Quelch. Mr. Quelch's face had an expression as puzzled as his own.

"Mr. Quelch! The boy Bunter left—?"

"Certainly he did, sir," answered Mr. Quelch. "He left in a taxi-cab at twenty minutes to ten, to take the ten o'clock train at Courtfield Station yesterday morning. Obviously he must have taken the train, and arrived at Folkestone—"

"It appears that he has not arrived at his uncle's house, Mr. Quelch."

"He should have arrived there by mid-day, sir."

Dr. Locke resumed at the telephone.

"Mr. Bunter! Your son's form-master assures me that your son left the school yesterday morning to take the ten o'clock train at the local station. Is it absolutely certain that he has not arrived at his uncle's house?"

Grunt, on the telephone!

"Absolutely, sir! I repeat that Mr. Carter has inquired this morning why he has not arrived."

"Bless my soul!"

"Certainly he is not at Aspidistra House," snapped Mr. Bunter. "Is it absolutely certain that he left the school?"

Dr. Locke glanced at Mr. Quelch.

"Is it absolutely certain, Mr. Quelch, that Bunter left the school?"

"Quite, sir! I myself handed him his journey money, and instructed Trotter to place his box in the cab. The taxi-cab was here at twenty minutes to ten, and Bunter left in it."

Back to the telephone turned the puzzled Head.

"Your son certainly left the school yesterday, Mr. Bunter, in a taxi-cab for the station."

"He has not arrived at Aspidistra House, sir! Was he actually seen to leave the school?"

Dr. Locke gave Mr. Quelch another glance.

"You saw that boy of your form leave?" he asked.

"I was in my form-room, sir," answered Mr. Quelch. "But I inquired of Trotter later, to make sure that Bunter had caught his train: and he reported that Bunter had left in the taxi-cab at twenty minutes to ten, and that he had seen him go, sir."

"That leaves no doubt whatever in the matter, if doubt could be supposed to exist," said Dr. Locke, and he spoke into the transmitter again. "Yes, Mr. Bunter, your son was seen to leave Greyfriars in the taxi."

Grunt again, over the wires.

"Are you assured that he took the train at Courtfield, Dr. Locke?"

"Bless my soul! I certainly assume so," answered the astonished Head. "I can imagine no reason otherwise."

"Except, sir, that he has not arrived at his uncle's house," grunted Mr. Bunter. "I will be plain with you, Dr. Locke. I do not think that my son was in the least anxious to spend his Christmas holidays at his uncle's house at Folkestone. I even think that he would willingly have avoided the visit if it had been possible. And certainly he has not arrived there."

"Dear me!"

"To be quite plain," went on Mr. Bunter, "My son William was expected to make himself useful, in certain ways, at Aspidistra House."

"Oh!" said the Head.

"If he does not arrive within a reasonable time, sir, Mr. Carter will have no choice but to engage some person to perform the duties that it was intended that my son should perform—"

"Oh!" repeated the Head.

"And in that case, sir, William will not be required at Aspidistra House, and will not be welcome there."

"Oh!" said the Head, for the third time.

"However, if you are absolutely certain that William started for Folkestone on Tuesday morning, sir—"

"There is not the slightest doubt on that point, Mr. Bunter."

Grunt!

"Then I need take up no more of your time, sir."

Dr. Locke, probably was glad to hear it. Apart from Sophocles, he had plenty of matters to think about, more important than the antics of a junior in the Lower Fourth.

"Very well, sir! Good-bye, Mr. Bunter."

"Oh! Good-bye!" grunted Mr. Bunter. "The idle young rascal—"

"Eh!" ejaculated the Head.

"Hem! I—I mean William! He did not wish to make himself useful at his uncle's, I have no doubt—"

"Oh!" said the Head, for the fourth time.

"Probably he has gone to some other relative, as he certainly has not gone to Mr. Carter's, and he certainly has not come home—and he must have gone somewhere—"

"Oh!" said the Head: his fifth "oh!"

"Some other relative, no doubt, as it appears that he did leave school, I shall inquire! Good-bye, sir."

And Mr. Bunter rang off.

Dr. Locke replaced the receiver, and looked at Mr. Quelch. Mr. Quelch looked at Dr. Locke. Both frowned.

"This is very extraordinary, Mr. Quelch," said the Head, after a pause.

"Very, sir," said Mr. Quelch.

"Mr. Bunter thinks that the boy may have gone to some other relative, as he had to leave the school, and apparently did not desire to go to his uncle's as bidden."

"It seems probable, sir!" assented Mr. Quelch. "He certainly must have gone somewhere."

"An accident can scarcely have happened to him on the train journey, Mr. Quelch—"

"Scarcely, sir! There would certainly have been news of such an occurrence, long before this."

"It is a relief to be sure of that, Mr. Quelch."

"Oh, quite, sir."

"But the boy's action is very extraordinary, and extremely irresponsible."

"Very much so, sir! The boy is in fact somewhat irresponsible—Bunter is undoubtedly the most stupid boy in my form," said Mr. Quelch. "I must add that he is also the laziest; indeed I can scarcely imagine any boy more unwilling to make himself useful than Bunter."

"Fortunately, our responsibility ends, when the boy has taken the train for home, or for a destination according to his father's instructions," said the Head.

"Quite so, sir! I recall now that Bunter seemed unwilling to take advantage of the opportunity to begin the holidays a week early," said Mr. Quelch, thoughtfully. "Naturally I supposed that he would be pleased, as it meant exemption from a week's form work, for which certainly he has never displayed the slightest keenness or inclination. But I could not help remarking that it seemed decidedly otherwise—in fact, he stated that he would prefer not to go, sir."

"Dear me!" said the Head. "That is very unusual, Mr. Quelch."

"Very, sir! No doubt it was attributable to the fact that he will be expected to make himself useful at his uncle's house," said Mr. Quelch, drily. "Apparently he had a strong objection to anything of the kind. He is very, very far from being an industrious boy."

The Head smiled faintly.

"It is an extraordinary proceeding on Bunter's part, Mr. Quelch—but no doubt he has gone to some other relative, as Mr. Bunter supposes—"

"I can imagine nothing else that he can have done, sir. It seems evident that his object is to avoid—hem—making himself useful during the vacation—"

"I trust that we shall soon hear from Mr. Bunter that his son has arrived safely—somewhere—"

"I trust so, sir."

"But it is really very extraordinary, Mr. Quelch."

"Very, sir."

"There is at all events, from what Mr. Bunter says, no occasion for anxiety on the boy's account."

"None whatever, sir."

"That is a relief, Mr. Quelch."

"Oh, quite, sir."

And having agreed that it was extraordinary, but that there was no occasion for anxiety, headmaster and form-master let the subject drop and resumed Sophocles, whom they seemed to find ever so much more interesting than William George Bunter of the Remove.

CHAPTER XI

A SHORT WAY WITH COKER!

"WHERE'S Bunter?"

"Eh?"

"Bunter!" hooted Coker of the Fifth.

Harry Wharton and Co. could only stare.

It was break the following morning. The Famous Five were in the quad, when Horace Coker, of the Fifth form, came out of the House and looked about him with a searching eye—evidently in search of someone. That searching eye having failed to alight upon the person sought, he came striding over to the Co., and propounded that rather surprising question.

Coker was frowning. He had a fives bat tucked under his arm. The frown and the fives bat seemed to indicate that somebody was for it, when Coker found the somebody he was looking for. But it was quite surprising that he was looking for a fellow who had left the school a couple of days ago. He could have found any other Greyfriars fellow: but, in the circumstances, not Bunter. Harry Wharton and Co. could only stare.

"Deaf?" yapped Coker, irritably, as they did not answer.

"The deaf-fulness is not terrific, my esteemed idiotic Coker," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, mildly. "But—"

"I want Bunter!" rapped Coker.

"You want Bunter?" repeated Harry Wharton. "Well, you're not likely to find him, Coker. You see—"

"I'm going to find him!" declared Coker. "I'll jolly well teach him to sneak down from the dorm at night and raid Fifth-form studies."

"What!" ejaculated all the Famous Five, all together.

"The fat young cormorant," said Coker. "He's raided my study more than once, as you young sweeps know. But this is the limit—coming down from the dorm after lights out—"

"But!" gasped Harry Wharton.

"Where is he?" demanded Coker. "I'm going to bat him! I'm going to give him a jolly good hiding. I've brought out this fives bat on purpose, see?"

"But you can't!" exclaimed Nugent.

"Can't I?" growled Coker. "You'll see that I jolly well can! This is going to be nipped in the bud, I can tell you. He's had a cake from Hilton's study, and a bottle of currant wine from Tomlinson's, and a bag of doughnuts from Fitzgerald's—"

"But!" stuttered Bob Cherry. "It couldn't have been Bunter—"

"Don't be a young ass!" snorted Coker. "What other fag has the nerve to raid a senior man's study?"

"But it wasn't—"

"It was!" said Coker. "I'm going to bat him, and chance it, anyhow. Didn't he have my oranges the other day—didn't I catch him scoffing them. Is any fellow's tuck safe from Bunter?"

"Well, no! But—"

"It was Bunter," said Coker, "and he's getting this bat for it. Why, he was in my study, too—I found the cupboard door wide open, and I know it was left shut—Potter and Greene know, too. We left it shut, and found it wide open in the morning. Luckily there was nothing in the cupboard for once—if there had been, Bunter would have had it—"

"But it can't have been Bunter," exclaimed Johnny Bull. "You see—"

"I don't see," contradicted Coker. "And I jolly well know that it was Bunter, so don't give me any jaw! He's going to have a lesson!" said Coker, darkly. "As it happens, I've had a hamper from my Aunt Judy this morning. If it had come yesterday, Bunter would have had it! Think I'm going to let him have it to-night if he comes sneaking down? No fear! I'm going to give him a lesson that will make him tired of grub-raiding in the Fifth!"

"But it wasn't Bunter!" exclaimed Bob.

"Don't be a young ass, Cherry."

"It couldn't have been!" said Harry Wharton.

"Don't be a young idiot, Wharton."

"Bunter's not here!" roared Johnny Bull.

"I can see he's not here," snorted Coker. "What I want to know is, where is he? I've got to wallop him before the bell goes. Now, then, where is that grub-snooping young sweep, what? Sharp?"

Harry Wharton laughed.

"If you really want him, Coker!" he said.

"I jolly well do!" said Coker, with emphasis.

"Then you'd better take the train for Folkestone—"

"What?"

"Bunter left on Tuesday morning," explained the captain of the Remove. "He was let off early for the hols, and he went off Tuesday morning to his uncle's at Folkestone."

"Wha—a—a—t?"

"Better look among the Fifth for the snooper," grinned Bob Cherry. "You see, it wasn't Bunter, as it couldn't have been."

Horace Coker stared blankly at the Famous Five. Evidently, he had not taken heed of the trivial and unimportant fact that a member of the Remove had left the school early for the vac. One junior more or less about Greyfriars was not likely to be noted by the lofty Horace. Tuck had been "snooped" in Fifth-form studies, and Coker had taken it for granted that Billy Bunter was the snooper—and generally he was! Taking it for granted, he was looking for Bunter with a fives bat. It was quite a surprise to him to learn that the snooper couldn't, after all, have been Bunter.

"Oh!" said Coker, at last. "Look here, is this straight?"

"Quite!" grinned Bob.

"The straightfulness is terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Bunter's really left?" demanded Coker.

"On Tuesday morning! He's been enjoying life at Folkestone the last couple of days, while we've been grinding in form."

"Well, my hat!" said Coker. "If that fat young scrounger ain't at the school, he can't have scrounged tuck in Fifth-form studies last night." That undoubted fact penetrated Coker's somewhat solid brain. "Then—it wasn't Bunter."

"Not this time!" chuckled Bob.

"He had my oranges the other day," said Coker. "I've kicked him out of my study half a dozen times this term. Of course I thought it was Bunter! But if it wasn't Bunter, who was it?"

"Ask us another," said Harry Wharton.

"If some of you young sweeps are following Bunter's example, and taking to snooping tuck in the studies—"

"Don't be an ass, Coker," said Harry Wharton.

"What?" roared Coker.

"Ass!"

"You cheeky little tick, if you want this fives bat—"

"Bow-wow!"

"Somebody was snooping in our studies last night! He must have sneaked down from a dormitory. If Bunter's not here, it can't have been Bunter. I want to know who it was! I'm going to wallop him. If it was one of you—"

"Fathead!"

"Pack it up, Coker!"

"Run away and play."

"Don't be cheeky, Coker!"

"Did—did you say don't be cheeky?" gasped Coker, as if he could hardly believe his ears, extensive as they were. "Is that the way you talk to the Fifth. Why, by gum, I'll give you the fives bat all round—"

Coker, as he often told his friends Potter and Greene, had a short way with fags. He proceeded to put that short way into practice grabbing Harry Wharton by the collar, preparatory to twisting him over for the application of the fives bat: which, in Coker's opinion at least, he richly deserved.

But that grab was the signal for all the Famous Five to go into action at once. It was demonstrated that the Famous Five had a short way with Coker! Five pairs of hands collared him, and in a moment he was up-ended.

Coker never counted odds. But the odds were there, counted or uncounted. Coker found himself rolling in the quad, collecting mud from several puddles: and big and brawny as he was, quite unable to deal with five fellows at once.

The Famous Five rolled him over, and rolled him over again: and as he spluttered breathlessly and sprawled, Bob Cherry grabbed the fives bat and jammed it down his back.

Then the chums of the Remove walked away, a little breathless, but quite merry and bright. They left Coker sprawling, extremely breathless, and neither merry nor bright. He sat up, winded and rumped and crumpled, and spluttered and spluttered for breath, and was still spluttering when the bell went for third school. Then Coker had just time to extract the fives bat from the back of his neck, before he limped away to Prout's form-room.

CHAPTER XII

WHO?

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!"

"Trot in, Smithy!"

"Why that sunny smile, old bean?"

Tea was in No. 1 study in the Remove, when Herbert Vernon-Smith looked in at the door. The Famous Five were seated round the table, and they all glanced round at the Bounder as he looked in, frowning, or rather scowling. His expression resembled anything but a sunny smile. Only too plainly, Smithy was in a bad temper—which was not infrequent with Smithy.

"You fellows know who's snooping in the studies, now Bunter's gone?" snapped the Bounder.

"Is anybody?" asked Harry Wharton, mildly.

"Yes, somebody is. You know somebody snooped Mauly's *T.M.O.* yesterday—"

"Only borrowed it to read, I suppose," said Bob Cherry.

"Well, he hasn't borrowed the cushions out of my armchair to read, I suppose?" yapped Smithy.

"Oh, my hat! Your cushions!" exclaimed Nugent.

"They're gone! And I want to know who's got them."

"Oh, gum!" said Bob, with a whistle.

"And that isn't all, either," snapped the angry Bounder. "I've just heard that the spirit-stove and bottle of methylated have been snooped out of Russell's study. Think he wanted them to read, Cherry?"

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Bob. "If you're sure—"

"Russell's saying so in the passage—and I know my cushions are gone. And little things, too—Wibley can't find a box of matches he knows he left in his study on the mantelpiece, and Bolsover's missed a bag of jam-tarts he was going to have for tea."

Bob Cherry whistled.

The Famous Five looked at one another, and looked at the Bounder. Their faces were serious now.

"This is worse than Bunter," said Nugent. "Bunter used to snoop tuck! But cushions—and a spirit stove—"

"Somebody larking," said Bob.

"I don't call it a lark," growled the Bounder. "Cushions cost money. Mine cost my pater three guineas, if you want to know."

Really, the Famous Five didn't want to know. They were aware that Smithy's study was expensively furnished, and did not need telling.

"Must be a lark," said Harry Wharton, decidedly.

"The larkfulness is rather terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "And who is the esteemed and execrable larker? According to the estimable and ridiculous Coker, somebody has been snooping in the Fifth also!"

"What's that?" exclaimed the Bounder, sharply.

"By gum, that's so!" exclaimed Bob. "Coker told us this morning that there had been snooping in the Fifth—he thinks somebody sneaked down from a dorm overnight. He thought it was Bunter, till we told him Bunter had left."

"What was snooped in the Fifth?"

"Oh, that was quite in jolly old Bunter's line. Cake and doughnuts and a bottle of currant wine, Coker said."

"And he doesn't know who?"

"Not now he knows it wasn't Bunter! He fancies that the same chap may come down again, after a hamper he's had to-day."

"Well, it's pretty plain that somebody's following in Bunter's footsteps," said Vernon-Smith. "We put up with a lot of things from Bunter because he's such a blithering idiot, and he only snooped tuck, anyway. But bagging the cushions out of a fellow's study is over the limit."

Squiff of the Remove looked into the study, over the Bounder's shoulder. He had a puzzled look.

"Any of you men borrowed a cushion from my study?" he asked.

"You too!" exclaimed Smithy.

"Oh, crumbs!" said Bob. "Is the snooper collecting cushions? What the jolly old thump can he want cushions for?"

"Well, mine's gone," said Squiff. "The old armchair's a bit rocky, and it needs that cushion. If anybody's borrowed it—"

"Somebody's snooped it!" snapped Smithy.

"Oh, rot!" said Squiff.

"Blessed if it doesn't begin to look like it," said Johnny Bull, slowly. "Somebody must have rooted in the studies while we were in form. But who the dickens—"

"Not a Remove man, anyway," said Bob. "Some chap in the Fourth larking. The Fourth were out before us to-day."

"Silly sort of lark, bagging a fellow's cush," said Squiff. "I'll biff it on his napper when I find out who it was."

"Must have been a Fourth-form man," said the Bounder. "Whether he's larking, or whether he's snooping, he's got to be found. I'll cut along and see Temple—Hallo, here he comes."

Cecil Reginald Temple, captain of the Fourth, came up the passage from the landing. Cecil Reginald, as a rule, cultivated aristocratic calm: but he was looking rather excited now. He pushed between Squiff and Smithy, and stared into No. 1 study.

"Look here," exclaimed Temple, warmly. "I heard that that fat snoopin' porker Bunter was gone—"

"He's gone all right," said Bob Cherry.

"Then who's snoopin'—in the studies?" demanded Temple.

"Oh, my hat! Have the Fourth had some, too?" exclaimed the Bounder.

"Somebody's been in my study!" hooted Temple. "Somebody's snooped a pot of jam and all the marger. If some other Remove fag is takin' a leaf out of Bunter's book—"

"Kick him!" said Johnny Bull.

"Don't be a cheeky goat, Temple," said Squiff.

"Well, who was it, then?" demanded Temple. "I suppose my pot of jam didn't walk off, arm-in-arm with the marger, what? Who was it?"

"Echo answers who!" said Frank Nugent.

"Esteemed echo answers that the who-fulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The snoopfulness has also occurred in our studies, and in the Fifth."

"Must have been a Remove man," said Temple, decidedly.

"A Fourth-Form man, I think," said Harry Wharton, shaking his head.

"Oh, don't be an ass!"

"Well, don't you be a cheeky fathead."

"Look here, you tick—"

"Oh, kick him!" said Johnny Bull, again: and he jumped up: apparently to suit the action of the word.

Cecil Reginald Temple retired rather hastily from the spot. Somebody, it was clear, was following the example of Billy Bunter—carrying on the good work, as it were, where the departed Owl had left it off—and on a considerably more extensive scale. Temple had no doubt that it was a Remove man—the Removites were rather disposed to suspect the Fourth. But who it was, and why he had "snooped" such things as cushions and matches and a spirit stove as well as tuck was quite a mystery.

"I've a jolly good mind to go to Quelch about it," growled the Bounder.

"Oh, rot!" said Harry Wharton. "It can only be a silly lark!"

The Bounder gave an angry grunt and stalked away. Squiff went back to his study, puzzled. Harry Wharton and Co. went on with their tea, in a somewhat perturbed frame of mind.

"Blessed if I make it out," said Bob Cherry. "I can understand that tuck going, if there's some tick like Bunter about," said Harry. "It began before Bunter went—you remember somebody bagged all his bedclothes in the dorm the night before he went—"

"By gum, so somebody did!" exclaimed Bob. "I've heard that those blankets never turned up, and our Dame is still inquiring after them."

"Must be hidden somewhere," said Harry, "and so are Smithy's precious cushions, and the other things. There's some utter ass about who thinks it funny to play such tricks."

"Skinner's a practical joking ass—"

"Thanks!" said a sarcastic voice at the doorway; and the Famous Five looked round to see Harold Skinner, with an extremely sour expression on his face.

"Well, was it you?" asked Bob. "If this is your idea of a joke, Skinner, you'd better chuck it, and chuck it quick."

"Oh, don't be a howling idiot, if you can help it," growled Skinner. "What I want to know is, who's taken the cushion out of the armchair in my study. If you fellows know—"

"Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!" exclaimed Bob. "More cushions! He's got a fancy for cushions, whoever he is."

"I want it back," snapped Skinner, "and if I don't get it back, I'm going to Quelch! I jolly well know I'm not losing it."

"Oh, rubbish!" said Harry Wharton. "It's some idiotic jape, and quite in your own line, too. We don't want a row about it."

"There'll be a row if my cushion doesn't turn up pretty soon," yapped Skinner, and he slouched away scowling.

"This beats the band!" said Bob Cherry. "Some potty practical joker's

stacking up the fellow's cushions—along with Bunter's blankets, I suppose! Must be a bit crackers I should think."

"The crackerfulness must be terrific."

It was a puzzle, and a rather perturbing puzzle, to the Famous Five. But they had not yet reached the end. When they went down after tea, Hobson of the Shell met them at the foot of the staircase. Hobson had a frown on his rugged face.

"Here, look here," said Hobson. "You fellows know anything about somebody snooping in the Shell studies while we were in class?"

"Holy mackerel!" said Bob Cherry. "In the Shell, too!"

"Somebody's bagged the cushions off my armchair—" said Hobson.

"Cushions!" yelled Bob.

"Yes, cushions!"

"Oh, my only winter hat! He's got a mania for cushions, whoever he is! There's cushions missing up and down the Remove."

"Well, I want that cushion!" said Hobson.

"So do Smithy, Squiff, and Skinner want theirs!" chuckled Bob. "Somebody's got a hidden hoard of cushions somewhere! There's a practical joker about, Hobby, and we're going to boil him in oil when we put salt on his tail."

The chums of the Remove went into the Rag, where they found Lord Mauleverer reclining gracefully in an armchair. His lordship glanced at them as they came in. Bob called to him:

"Found your *T.O.M.* yet, Mauly?"

"No! But I say, you fellows got any idea who's snooped the cushions off the sofa in my study?" asked Mauleverer.

"Cushions!" howled the Famous Five, in chorus.

"Yaas! While we were in class, I suppose—they were gone when I went up after class."

"Oh, great pip!"

"What utter ass can be playing this idiotic trick?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

But nobody had an answer to that question. That some practical joker, apparently with a preference for cushions, was at work, was the only conclusion to which the juniors could come. But who it was, they could not begin to guess.

CHAPTER XIII

COKER KNOWS HOW!

"DON'T go yet!" said Coker.

"Eh: why?" asked Potter and Greene together.

It was after prep. There had been a study supper in Coker's quarters. One of Coker's hampers from his Aunt Judith had arrived at Greyfriars that day:

and Coker and Co. had sampled the contents at supper in the study, with complete satisfaction all round.

Three healthy Fifth-form fellows had made a fairly deep inroad into that hamper. But much remained. It was Coker's last hamper before the Christmas holidays, and Aunt Judy had packed it well and truly. Coker, a generous fellow, shared freely with his comrades, and Potter and Greene happily anticipated a reign of plenty in that study till the last day of term. They had enjoyed the supper: even Coker's conversation over the festive board had hardly marred it.

Still, supper was over now, and it was near time for dorm, and Coker's conversation had undoubtedly palled. So when Coker bade them not to go yet, Potter and Greene would have preferred to trot along to the games study for a last chat with the other fellows before dormitory. However, they paused, to hear what Coker had to say: hoping that he would cut it short.

"I shall want you to lend me a hand," explained Coker.

"Lines?" asked Potter, rather dispiritedly. After that ample supper, a fellow could hardly refuse to lend Coker a hand with lines, if that was it.

"Bit late for lines," suggested Greene. "To-morrow—"

"Tain't lines," said Coker.

"Oh!" Potter and Greene were glad to hear it.

"You fellows remember what happened last night," said Coker. "I thought it was Bunter, and went to look for him with a fives bat this morning: but it turned out that that young sweep was away. So it must have been somebody else."

"Must have been," agreed Potter.

"Some Remove kid, I've no doubt," went on Coker. "They're a gang of young sweeps and ticks—some of them rolled me over in the quad to-day—What are you grinning at?"

"Oh! Nothing!" said Potter, hastily. "I say, it's getting late—"

"Never mind that! Now, last night that young villain, whoever he is, raided three studies in this passage," said Coker. "Hilton's, Tomlinson's, and old Fitz's. He was in here too—you remember we found the cupboard door open—but there was nothing there, as it happened. Well, to-night there will be something there—lots! And it's jolly well not going to be snooped by some young scoundrel in the Remove, see?"

"Oh!" said Potter and Greene.

"He may try the same game on again to-night," explained Coker. "As he got by with it all right last night, I expect he will, especially if he's heard that I've had a hamper, as I've no doubt he has."

"Oh!" said Potter and Greene, again. They looked serious now. Certainly they did not want to learn, in the morning, that the good things in the study had vanished overnight, like the cake from Hilton's study, the bottle of currant wine from Tomlinson's, and the doughnuts from Fitzgerald's. Potter and Greene had a deep personal interest in that hamper.

"Well, I've been thinking," said Coker. "I've thought it out!"

Potter and Greene forbore to ask Coker what he had done that with! They only wondered.

"And I'm jolly well ready for him," said Coker, emphatically. "If he puts his head into this study to-night, he's going to get a surprise." And Coker went to the study cupboard. From the lower part of the same, he lifted out, much to the astonishment of his friends, a can of considerable size, which he held up to Potter and Greene's surprised gaze.

"See?" he asked. "Guess what's in that can!"

As the can was splashed outside with whitewash, it was rather an easy guess.

"Oh, jiminy!" said Potter. "That's Gosling's big can of whitewash from the wood-shed! What the dickens—"

"I'll tip Gosling to-morrow, for using his whitewash," said Coker. "That's all right! There's two or three gallons here—as much as we shall want."

"B—b—b—but what do we want whitewash for, Coker?" stammered Greene. "You—you ain't thinking of whitewashing the study are you?"

"Don't be a silly ass, Greene."

"Prout would jolly well rag us, when he saw it—" said Potter.

"Don't be a fathead, Potter."

"Well, what—?"

"You can't guess what it's for?" asked Coker, sarcastically.

Potter and Greene could only shake their heads. Few things from Coker would have surprised them. But that can of whitewash did. It was a large wide can, wide open at the top, and nearly full of whitewash. Coker had to take both hands to it to hold it up. There were, as he said, gallons of it. What Horace Coker intended to do with gallons of whitewash was simply a mystery to his friends. They even wondered whether old Horace had, at last, gone slightly crackers. They had often thought him near it. They could not begin to guess what he was going to do with that big can of whitewash.

"I'm not going to whitewash the study," said Coker, still sarcastic. "But I'm jolly well going to whitewash that snooper if he comes after my hamper to-night."

"Oh!" gasped Potter. "But—but you can't sit up for him, Coker—"

"Dorm, you know," said Greene.

"Who's thinking of sitting up for him?" inquired Coker. "I'm not."

"You're going to tip that whitewash over him, without sitting up for him?" asked Potter blankly.

"Exactly," said Coker, with a nod. "I shall be fast asleep in the Fifth-form dorm when he gets it. Ever heard of a booby-trap?"

"Oh!" gasped Potter and Greene.

They got it at last! Coker evidently, had been thinking, as he had stated, and that was the outcome of his unusual mental exertions. That big can of

whitewash was to be lodged over the study door, to greet the midnight snooper with a sudden surprise if he came.

"That's the big idea," grinned Coker. "I fancy he won't feel like carrying on with snooping, after getting that on his napper, what?"

"Oh! No!" gasped Greene. "But suppose he doesn't come—"

"Then we come and take it down in the morning," said Coker.

"But—but suppose somebody else came to the study—"

"Rot!" said Coker. "Who's likely to come to the study after dorm? I shall cut along first thing in the morning before the maids are about. Didn't I tell you I'd thought it all out?"

"But—but——!" stammered Potter.

"No time for butting," said Coker, decisively, "if you stand there butting like billy-goats, we shall hear the bell for dorm. Lend me a hand in getting it fixed up, see?"

Potter and Greene exchanged glances. Catching the nocturnal snooper with a can of whitewash on his napper was, they admitted, a consummation devoutly to be wished. After all, it was quite unlikely that anyone would come to the study after dorm—unless the snooper did. Anyhow, they knew from of old that it was futile to argue with Horace Coker. Coker was going to plant that booby-trap at the study door: and that was that.

"Now, you fellows get out of the study," said Coker, briskly. "Stick a chair in the passage for me to stand on, Potter. I'll handle the can—you fellows would slop it all over the shop! You hold the door, Greeney."

Potter placed a chair outside the door. Coker mounted on it, can in hands. The can itself was not heavy, but the whitewash within it gave it considerable weight, and Coker did not find it easy to lift.

"Ooogh!" he gasped, suddenly, as a wave of whitewash, over the edge of the can, deluged his waistcoat. "Wooh!"

Potter winked at Greene, who suppressed a chuckle. Coker seemed to be slopping it all over the shop, as he had expressed it. Still, so long as he slopped it only over himself, his friends did not mind.

"Hold the door steady, Greene."

"I've got it, Coker."

"Wide enough for me to push the can up between the door and lintel, you ass! Not so wide as that, fathead! One edge has got to rest on the door, the other on the lintel, idiot! Will you hold that door steady or not?"

"Look here, Coker——"

"I'm not going to stand here holding this can all night, Greene, while you play about with that door handle. Put the door a little shutter—I mean a bit more shut—no, a little wider open—have a spot of sense, for goodness sake—you'll make me spill some more next——"

"Woooooh!" gasped Greene, as another wave of whitewash came over the edge of the can, this time landing in Greene's collar.

"Oh, crumbs!" gasped Potter. "Careful with that can, Coker."

"Wurrrrggh!" gurgled Greene. "It's running down my kneck—"

"Shut up. Greeney, and hold that door—"

"Blow the door!" hissed Greene. "And blow you! Ooogh!" And Greene, letting go the door, stamped away, apparently having had enough whitewash down his neck.

"Hold that door, Potter! Do you want to keep me standing on this chair till the bell goes for dorm? Hold it, you ass."

Potter eyed the can of whitewash warily. He was strongly inclined to follow Greene, and leave Coker to it. However, he held the door, and Coker got going again. At last, at long last, all was adjusted: the can, pushed up between door and lintel, was safely lodged, one side on top of the door, the other on the lintel over the doorway. It required but the slightest push at the door to bring it swooping down.

"O.K.," said Coker, and he jumped down off the chair.

"Yaroooh!" roared Potter.

"Eh! What's the matter?"

"Wow! Ow! Wow! Did you have to land on my foot?" shrieked Potter. "You've squash-squish-squashed all my toes—ow! wow! wooh!"

"You should keep your silly foot out of the way, Potter. Don't make that row and get a crowd here—"

"Yow-ow-wow!" wailed Potter, and he limped away down the passage. "You silly idiot—you frumptious chump—ow! wow!"

"Look here, George Potter—"

"Yow-ow-ow!"

Coker snorted, as Potter trailed away. The door was about a foot ajar, and Coker reached in and switched off the light. The chair could not be replaced, through that narrow aperture: Coker lifted it into the next study. Then he, too, departed. His masterly plan for catching that mysterious and obnoxious snooper had been carried out—at the cost of a whitewashed waistcoat for Coker, a wave of whitewash down Greene's neck, and a set of suffering toes for Potter. These trifling casualties mattered little, in Coker's opinion, compared with catching that snooper. When the Fifth form went to their dormitory that night, Coker, if not Potter and Greene, went in a state of considerable satisfaction. After lights out in the Fifth-form dorm, Coker was heard to chuckle several times before he went to sleep.

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And at a later hour, long after Coker was fast asleep in bed, and the rest of Greyfriars bound in slumber's chain, there was a stealthy footfall, and a gleam of a pocket torch, in the Fifth-form passage: and both stopped at the door of Coker's study. And then—!

Swoooooosh!

“Oh! Urrrgh! Grooogh! Wooh!”

A pocket torch crashed to the floor and went out. A wildly-startled figure staggered and gasped and spluttered outside Coker's study—a plump figure drenched in whitewash, soaked in whitewash, clothed in whitewash as in a garment, almost drowned in whitewash.

Coker's masterly plan had been a success. The mysterious snooper had come to Coker's study, and the booby-trap had worked like a charm. Whoever that snooper was, he had undoubtedly got the whitewash! On that point there was no doubt, no possible probable shadow of doubt, no possible doubt whatever!

CHAPTER XIV

A PHANTOM OF THE NIGHT?

“**B**LESS MY soul!” ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

He was quite startled.

Eleven had boomed out from the old clock tower of Greyfriars. Eleven p.m. was Quelch's bedtime, as a rule. On this particular night, he had put in a few extra minutes, having been busy in his study on the term's reports for his form.

Now, however, Quelch had laid down his pen, put his papers tidily away, and was leaving his study. He had switched off the light, and was about to step into the passage. At that moment, the silence and stillness of the sleeping House were broken by strange unexpected sounds.

From somewhere in the House—somewhere upstairs—came those sounds, distant and rather vague, but breaking on the silence of the winter night with startling effect.

Quelch, startled, listened.

The sounds were strange enough. He heard them, but could not account for them. If a grampus had been washed ashore, and had somehow crawled into Greyfriars School, it might possibly have emitted such sounds. Or a rhinoceros in a state of semi-suffocation might have done so.

Quelch was not likely to suppose that either a grampus or a rhinoceros was to be found within the walls of Greyfriars School. So he just couldn't account for what he heard. Somebody, or something, was making a disturbance up among the studies: that was all of which he could be sure.

The Remove master knitted his brows. This was not the first time that there had been sounds of revelry by night, as it were. On Tuesday night Quelch and several other masters had been startled by the sudden and unaccountable banging of a door that had echoed into almost every corner of

the House. Quelch and Hacker and Prout, and Wingate of the Sixth, had turned out: but they had found nothing out of the normal, and had had to go back to bed puzzled. That incident, curious as it was, had been almost forgotten: but Quelch remembered it now, as he listened to the strange wild gurgling and spluttering sounds that came to his ears in the silent night.

Someone, it was certain, had been up on Tuesday night—some surreptitious person for some reason unknown. Someone was up to-night—again disturbing a sleeping House with unexpected noises. This time Quelch resolved to know who it was, and what he meant by it. It was not, he thought, a Remove boy. On Tuesday night he had glanced into the Remove dormitory, and found all his form in bed there! But he was going to know who it was, and what these nocturnal alarms and excursions meant. And on this occasion he did not need to lose time by getting out of bed and donning dressing gown and slippers. This time he had not yet gone to bed. And, after listening for a long moment, Quelch started down the passage with long strides, and up the staircase two at a time! On this occasion Quelch was going to be very quickly on the spot. His long legs fairly whisked up the stairs to the study landing.

The sounds were nearer and clearer when he reached the study landing, which was in darkness. Quelch was about to grope for a switch, when he gave a sudden convulsive start, and stood petrified.

From the darkness came a sound of gasping, spluttering, and gurgling. But that was not all that came. Faintly in the dark a white shadowy figure loomed. It was very dark on the study landing—only a pale glimmer of winter starlight falling in at the high windows over the staircase. In that faint glimmer, a dark object would not have been seen. But a white object was visible—indistinctly but unmistakably. From the direction of the Fifth-form studies, that white figure came—like a spectre from another world in the winter gloom.

Quelch stood rooted. He was too startled to stir. His eyes almost popped from his face at that ghostly form.

“Who—what—who is that?” he stuttered.

A startled gasp came back. The ghostly figure had heard him, and appeared as startled as Quelch.

Then there was silence: and the spectral form flitted swiftly across the landing, and vanished.

“Bless my soul!” breathed Mr. Quelch.

He stood staring. Dimly in the dark, he had a last glimpse of the figure in white, vanishing across the Remove landing into the Remove passage.

It was gone: leaving Quelch staring and blinking.

Quelch had expected to make some discovery by getting so swiftly on the spot. But he had not expected anything like this. He was very far from being a superstitious man: no mind could have been clearer and more practical than Henry Samuel Quelch's. Nevertheless, he was feeling a strange queer eerie thrill at his heart.

What, in the name of all that was strange and mysterious, could be that white ghostly figure that had flitted in the dark before his eyes?

But it was only for a matter of seconds that Quelch stood as if paralysed. Then, with knitted brows and glinting eyes, he dashed across the landing in pursuit of the vanished figure. Ghost or no ghost, mortal or phantom, Quelch was going to know what it was, and who it was.

He stumbled in the dark on the steps that led up to the Remove landing, recovered himself, and cut on. The Remove passage was black as a hat before him. He groped, and switched on the light.

The long passage, lined by the doors of the Remove studies, was suddenly illumined. The light came on just in time for Quelch to spot a ghostly figure at the other end of the passage, disappearing up the boxroom stair.

It was gone the next second: but Quelch knew the way it had gone. His long legs almost flashed along the Remove passage. A little out of breath he reached the boxroom stair, and looked up.

Nothing was to be seen. Blackness as of the interior of a black hat was all that met his glinting gimlet-eyes.

He mounted the stair. His heart was, perhaps, beating a little faster than usual: but his face was set and determined. Ghost or no ghost, Quelch was after that spectral form like a dog after a bone.

And he knew that he had it now—at least if it was mortal! For that stair led to the boxroom and the attic above, and nowhere else. Either in the boxroom or the attic the phantom would be run to earth, and Quelch had him—unless he dissolved into space as no doubt a genuine spectre might be expected to do.

Quelch stepped firmly on the little landing, switched on the light in the boxroom, and looked in. The room was vacant. One glance satisfied him of that, and he crossed swiftly to the narrow winding stair that led up to the top attic. That—if he was mortal—was the only way the apparition could have gone, and Quelch was close on his track. In a few moments he was on the tiny landing outside the attic door.

Then he heard a sound again. It was a sound of gasping for breath. The stairs, and the haste with which they had been ascended, had apparently told on the phantom.

He heard another sound. It was a sound of fumbling with a key. The phantom, while getting his second wind, seemed to be groping to lock the attic door in the dark.

But Quelch was in time. Before the key could turn in the lock, the Remove master gave the door a violent shove, and it flew open. There was a thud within, accompanied by a sharp squeak. It seemed that the door had banged on the inhabitant of the attic as he fumbled with the key.

There was no light in the attic, save the faintest of faint glimmers from a tiny window. Electric light had not been installed in that remote disused room,

Quelch strode in, in the dark, and stared, or rather glared, about him.

"Where are you?" he rapped. "I know you are here—who are you?—where are you?"

"Oh, crikey!" came a terrified gasp.

Mr. Quelch jumped, almost clear of the floor. There was something familiar in the fat voice that gasped.

But it was impossible—incredible—unimaginable! Billy Bunter was many miles away—he had been gone for days—it could not be the voice that it sounded like!

A glimmer of white met Quelch's eyes. He made a grab at it. His grabbing fingers almost closed on a phantom figure as it shot to the door. But not quite! He touched it—and to his amazement, his fingers came away wet, as the half-seen form eluded him, and bolted out of the attic. He rushed after it, tripped on something unseen on the floor, and stumbled and sprawled upon something that felt like blankets and cushions. And as he lay for the moment winded, a sound of running feet died away down the attic stair. The ghostly figure was gone!



CHAPTER XV

BUNTER'S GHOST

"HALLO, HALLO, hallo!"
 "What—?"
 "Who—?"

There were exclamations up and down the Remove dormitory in the dark. Five or six fellows had awakened, and their startled voices woke up others. Fellows sat up in bed, and exclaimed and stared into the gloom.

All the Remove had been fast asleep, after eleven o'clock at night. But sudden sounds in the silence startled them out of slumber. The door had opened, and shut again sharply, almost with a bang, as if someone had dashed in, in the dark, and closed it hurriedly after him. That was followed by sounds of stumbling and spluttering.

"Who's there?" exclaimed Harry Wharton, sitting up in bed, and peering into the shadows.

"Somebody's up—who the dickens—?" exclaimed Frank Nugent.

"Is that Smithy playing the goat again?" came a growl from Johnny Bull's bed.

"Smithy—!" exclaimed Redwing. "Smithy! Is it—?"

"No, ass!" came the Bounder's voice. "I'm in bed!"

"Somebody's there," said Peter Todd.

"Somebody came in—"

"I heard the door—"

"Who the dickens—?"

"Get a match, somebody."

"Oh!" yelled Skinner, suddenly, as he caught a dim glimmer of something white in the gloom. "What—what—what's that?"

"What's what, you funky ass?" snapped Vernon-Smith. "I can't see anything or anybody."

"I—I saw something," gasped Skinner. "Something white—look!—it—it was coming towards the beds—"

"Ghost, perhaps!" sneered the Bounder. "Put your head under the blankets, if you're afraid of spooks—"

"I tell you—I—I saw—!"

"Rot! Why, what—what—what's that?" ejaculated the Bounder, as his staring eyes caught something white that moved in the darkness. "Oh, gad! Who—who—who—what's that?"

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Look!"

There was but the palest glimmer of winter starlight from the high windows of the dormitory. But in that pale glimmer, a strange figure, deathly white,

showed up for some moments, and a dozen pairs of startled eyes fixed on it, before it vanished into shadow again.

"Oh!" gasped Harry Wharton. "What—?"

"Did you see it?" breathed Bob Cherry.

"I—I—I saw it," stammered Skinner, through chattering teeth. "Get a light—for goodness sake, get a light."

"Anybody got a match?" called out Harry Wharton. He was deeply startled, and an eerie feeling was creeping down his back, as he sat staring into the darkness. But he was not easily scared. "Don't be an ass, Skinner—it's not a ghost—"

"Who's got a match?" asked Lord Mauleverer. "You've generally got matches, Smithy—or have you chucked smokin' like a good boy?" Mauly, evidently, was not scared.

There was a fumbling sound by Vernon-Smith's bed. Then the scrape of a match on a box was heard. A tiny flame flickered, as the Bounder held up and lighted match.

"Oh!" he gasped, the next moment, and the match fell from his hand to the floor and died out. In that moment, the startled Bounder had seen, in the flicker of the match, a figure in white, within a few feet of his bed, with wildly staring eyes that blinked in the sudden light. It vanished as the match was extinguished.

"Oh!" repeated the Bounder, and he sat with his heart thumping. "Did—did—did you fellows see it? Oh!"

"I—I saw it!" Bob Cherry's voice was shaken. "It—it looked like—like—like—!"

"Like Bunter!" breathed Wharton.

"Only all white—" muttered Nugent.

The juniors sat in their beds, almost petrified.

A dozen fellows had glimpsed that startling figure, in the momentary gleam of the match, and all of them had seen in it a strange resemblance, in its plump outlines, to Billy Bunter. But not Bunter as he had been known at the school—a strange, unearthly, ghostly Bunter, white as the driven snow: his hair, his face, his clothes, deathly white, like a spectre from another world.

"It's his ghost!" muttered Skinner, huskily. "Something—something's happened to Bunter, and—and he's come back to haunt us—"

"Rot!" said Harry Wharton, but his voice was a little unsteady. "It—it looked like Bunter—"

"White as a ghost!" muttered Skinner. "Get a light! Will somebody get a light?" Skinner was almost babbling with fright.

"Another match, Smithy—"

Vernon-Smith pulled himself together. He scratched another match, and held it up, this time with a firm hand. Bulging eyes stared round in the glimmer of light.

"Look!" yelled Skinner. And he dived headlong under his blankets, to shut out the dread sight.

"Oh!" gasped Harry Wharton.

All eyes were on the phantom figure now, as the match flamed. There was no mistake about it now—all could see it. It was the plump figure of Billy Bunter, unmistakable in its circumference: it was the fat face of the Owl of the Remove: but if it was not the ghost of Billy Bunter, it looked like it—deathly white from head to foot: even the spectacles were white, and little round eyes blinked over them.

There was dead silence in the Remove dormitory, as the juniors stared at that strange, startling, unearthly figure, dim in the flickering glimmer of the match, yet visible to all. It was only a moment or two, but it seemed an eternity.

Then there was a sharp exclamation from Vernon-Smith. The match had burned down to his fingers. He dropped it to the floor, and all was dark again. In the darkness the ghostly figure vanished.

Harry Wharton set his teeth. He could not help feeling an eerie tremor. It was Bunter or his ghost that the juniors had seen—and it could not be Bunter! Was it possible—was it imaginable—that something had happened to the fat Owl, since he had left Greyfriars, and that his fat phantom had returned to haunt the place that had so long known him? The captain of the Remove, with set teeth, stepped out of bed. Flesh or phantom, he was going to know what it was, and what it meant.

"Harry—!" came a whisper from Frank Nugent, as he heard his chum's movements.

"I'm going to switch on the light."

Wharton groped to the door, and found the switch by the doorway. He pressed it, and there was a sudden flood of light in the long lofty room. Every corner of the Remove dormitory was illumined. And every fellow stared round dreading to see that spectral form again.

"Where is it?" breathed Bob Cherry.

"It's gone—" muttered Nugent.

"The gonefulness is terrific," muttered Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The door was still shut. There had been no sound. But the spectral form had vanished. Up and down the long room the juniors stared, but there was no sign to be seen of the ghost of Billy Bunter.

Then, in the dead silence, came a sound from without—of footsteps coming up the passage towards the dormitory door.

CHAPTER XVI

ON THE TRAIL!

MR. QUELCH stood in the little dark attic, breathing very hard. He had had quite a jolt in stumbling over. Luckily he had fallen upon something soft, though he hardly knew what it was. The other occupant of the attic was

gone—he had narrowly escaped Quelch's clutch, but he had escaped it. His fleeing footsteps had died away when Quelch regained his feet. For some moments the Remove master stood, breathing very hard and very deep. Then he fumbled in his pocket for matches, struck one, and looked about him, to pick his way to the door without another stumble. But what he saw as the light glimmered, caused Mr. Quelch to stand motionless, staring.

He could see now over what he had stumbled. On the attic floor was a conglomeration of cushions and blankets, unmistakably an improvised bed. Someone had been sleeping in that remote attic.

That was not all. A box, no doubt borrowed from the boxroom, served the purpose of a table. On it stood a small spirit stove and a kettle, and a ginger beer bottle with a candle stuck in it, half burned down. Near at hand lay a volume left open: a copy of *Tom Merry's Own*, the open pages showing marks of candle grease, and sticky fingers.

All this the amazed Remove master saw at a glance: though really it was so surprising, that he could hardly believe his astonished eyes.

Then, as his match burned low, he applied it to the wick of the candle in the ginger beer bottle, and there was light.

"Bless my soul!" breathed Mr. Quelch.

In the candle light, he could see all over the little attic, and further details were revealed. In one corner of the room was a stack of pots and tins and packages—quite an extensive store of foodstuffs. Whoever had occupied the attic had apparently laid in provisions as if for a siege.

"Bless my soul!" repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly.

Somebody had been camping in that attic! That was clear. Who, was a mystery—at present. It could hardly be anyone belonging to Greyfriars: for nobody had been missing—excepting, of course, Bunter, who had left the school. But who, in the name of wonder, could have penetrated into the building, and camped in that disused and never-visited attic?

Quelch's impression, in pursuing the strange fleeing figure, had been that the unknown prowler of the night was merely seeking to escape him by dodging along passages and staircases. Now he realized that the prowler, whoever he was, had been heading for home, as it were—he had been camping in the attic, he had wandered out in the night and he had got back as fast as he could—unaware doubtless that Quelch was so close on his trail, and hoping to be undiscovered in his remote hideout. Now that he had been run to earth in the attic, he had had to abandon it, and was at large in the House.

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch, for the third time.

He was looking at his fingers. They had come away wet after touching the elusive figure in the dark. Now he saw why—staring blankly at fingers that were white as chalk. But it was not chalk that whitened them—it was wet whitewash!

It was amazing—astounding—incredible—but there it was—whitewash!

There must have been wet whitewash on the dodging figure he had touched. In some mysterious and unaccountable way, the unknown inhabitant of the attic must have become drenched with whitewash in his nocturnal wanderings. So far as Quelch knew, there was no whitewash nearer at hand than the large can that Gosling, the porter, kept in the woodshed. Still, there could be no doubt about it—it was whitewash!

And now it dawned upon Quelch's mind to what the prowler's white and ghostly aspect was due. It was nothing more supernatural than whitewash!

Whoever he was, he had left his hideout in the attic, late at night, and gone down to the studies. There, in some unaccountable and unimaginable manner, he had been drenched with whitewash—which accounted for the wild strange splutterings Quelch had heard, as well as for his ghostly appearance. It was some unknown person whitewashed from head to foot that had flitted before Quelch's eyes like a spectre of the night.

But who—how—why? Quelch asked himself those questions helplessly: he could not begin to find an answer to them.

But most certainly he was going to know the answers. Some unknown extraneous person was at large in the House, and Quelch was going to lay hands on him. He was gone—he had vanished—he might be anywhere in the great rambling building—in the passages, in the studies, in the dormitories—anywhere. But there was a clue, which Quelch's gimlet-eye was not likely to miss. Whitewash was splashed right and left. The unknown had been drenched and dripping with it. Quelch realized that, had he turned on a light, he could have followed a trail of whitewash to the top attic. No doubt the fugitive, in his terrified haste, had not had time to think of that—and Quelch, at the time, had been quite unaware of it. But he was aware of it now, and he had little doubt of following that trail to a successful end. Taking up the ginger beer bottle, to light his way with the candle, he stepped out of the attic.

Whitewash splashes on the attic stair glimmered in the candlelight. Quelch descended to the boxroom landing—walking delicately, like Agag of old, to avoid the whitewash as much as possible.

The trail, coming and going, led right across to the lower stair: the prowler had not dodged into the boxroom. Quelch, following it, descended into the Remove passage.

There he switched on the electric light, blew out the candle, and set down the ginger-beer bottle. The whitewash trail led back along the Remove passage to the study landing, which it crossed.

Quelch, following it, arrived at the dormitory staircase. Here the trail grew thinner. No doubt by that time the fugitive had shaken off a good deal of the fluid. But there were still ample signs that a whitewashed prowler had gone up the dormitory staircase; evidently to seek refuge from pursuit among the dormitories.

Up went Mr. Quelch, with grim brow and glinting eye!

On the dormitory landing above, he switched on another light. That light revealed once more the peculiar trail. It was, as it were, growing smaller by degrees and beautifully less: the whitewash had been dripping much less freely at this stage. But there were plenty of spots and blotches of it, and they guided the Remove master unflinchingly. Like a bloodhound on the trail, Quelch followed: up the passage to the door of the Remove dormitory.

The gimlet-eyes gleamed.

If the vanished prowler had taken refuge in that dormitory, Quelch had him at last. If he was there he was cornered. There was no escape but by the door—and Quelch would be at the door! Who he was, what he was, would be revealed at last.

Quelch marched on—unaware that wakeful ears in that dormitory were listening to his approaching footsteps! He reached the door—and stopped. The trail, by this time, was slight. But it was visible—and the spots of whitewash that had dripped from the prowler ceased at that door. He had not gone further. Moreover, the door-handle was whitewashed: a hand clothed in whitewash had evidently turned it! It was the end of the trail!

Quelch, in his turn, turned the handle, and threw open the dormitory door. Then he stared.

The Remove dormitory was not dark, as he had expected to find it. The light was on. One junior was out of bed—the rest were sitting up in bed, with startled staring faces. Plainly there had been an alarm in the room. The prowler, no doubt, was the cause. But where was the prowler?

“Wharton—!” exclaimed Mr. Quelch. He stared at the junior who was out of bed. Then his sharp eyes swept along the dormitory. Where was the prowler? That he had entered, Quelch was certain. But he was not to be seen. There was no figure in white to meet the Remove master’s searching eyes—only the startled faces of the Remove fellows. “Wharton!” repeated Mr. Quelch. “What has happened here—have you seen anyone—?”

“Yes, sir! We—we saw—”

“It—it was his ghost, sir!” stammered Skinner. “We—we all saw it, sir—it was his ghost—Bunter’s ghost—”

“What? What? Do not be so absurd, Skinner.”

“But—but we saw it—!”

“Wharton! Tell me at once what you saw!”

“It—it looked like Bunter, sir—strangely like Bunter—only—only it—it looked like a ghost—” stammered the captain of the Remove. “It couldn’t be Bunter, as he’s gone—but it looked like him, only all white—”

“Nonsense!”

“We all saw it, sir—!” stammered Bob Cherry.

“He came into this dormitory” snapped Mr. Quelch. “But it certainly

could not have been Bunter, who is at Folkestone. Neither was it a ghost, if any foolish boy needs reassuring that it was no such nonsense."

"But we saw—!" muttered the Bounder. "—I—I know it wasn't a ghost—but—but what was it?"

Snort, from Mr. Quelch.

"It was some extraneous person, who had somehow become drenched in whitewash," he snapped. "He has dripped whitewash all the way to this dormitory, which is why I am here."

"Oh!" gasped the juniors.

"There are traces of whitewash on the floor here," snapped Mr. Quelch.

"Certainly he has been here—where is he now?"

"It—it—it just vanished, sir—!" stammered Skinner.

"Nonsense!"

"It—it—I mean he—he's gone, sir," said Bob Cherry. "Wharton got the light on at once, but it—he—was gone."

Mr. Quelch grunted expressively, and knitted his brows. Had the prowler, after alarming the Remove, dodged out again, before his arrival? Or was he concealed somewhere in the room?

The answer to that question came suddenly and quite unexpectedly. From under one of the beds—Bunter's unoccupied bed—came a startling and totally unexpected sound. It was the sound of a prolonged sneeze!

"Aytishoooooooooooooooooooooh!"

CHAPTER XVII

ONLY BUNTER!

"A YTISHOOOOOOOOH!"

Loud and long, and full of feeling, came that unexpected sound from a hidden sneezer!

Mr. Quelch almost jumped. Every fellow in the dormitory started, and stared. All eyes were directed towards the bed, from beneath which that strange and startling sound had come.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "What—?"

"Under that bed—!" gasped Bob Cherry.

"Oh, my hat!" breathed Harry Wharton. "So that's how—"

"Atchoogh! Atchooh! Aytishoooh!" came another sneeze, almost agonized in its intensity. It seemed as if the hidden sneezer had held it back as long as he could, and, when it escaped it escaped with uncommon force. In fact it almost roared. "Ooooooh! Aytishoo!"

The juniors understood now how the "ghost" had so suddenly disappeared while Wharton was switching on the light. It had not dissolved into thin air!

It had not vanished through a keyhole! It had not faded into nothingness! It had simply ducked under a bed!

"He's there—!" exclaimed Vernon-Smith. "Under Bunter's bed—"

"Oh!" gasped Skinner. "Then—it wasn't—oh!"

"Ghosts don't sneeze!" grinned Bob Cherry.

"And the sneezefulness is terrific," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Nobody in the Remove dormitory was feeling eerie, or uneasy, or uncanny, now! Many of the juniors were grinning. The most superstitious fellow could hardly have fancied a ghost sneezing! That "ghost" obviously was mortal—so mortal that it had caught a cold—no doubt from being soaked in cold clammy whitewash on a cold December night. That gargantuan sneeze quite banished any idea of the supernatural.

Mr. Quelch, with a portentous frown, strode to the bed. He had run the apparition to earth at last!

"Come out!" he rapped.

"Atchooooooh!" was the only reply from under the bed.

"Emerge at once, whoever you are!" thundered the Remove master.

"Oh, crikey!"

That terrified ejaculation made everyone jump. Only too familiar was the fat voice in which it was uttered.

"Bunter!" breathed Harry Wharton. "Bunter! It can't be Bunter—he's not in the school—but—but—"

"Bunter!" said Bob Cherry, dazedly. "But how—how—?"

"It—it looked like Bunter—Bunter whitewashed!" stuttered Vernon-Smith. "But—but it can't be a chap who isn't here—"

Quelch's face was extremely startled. To his ears also that fat squeaking voice sounded familiar, as it had sounded in the attic.

"Upon my word!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible—upon my word! Emerge from under that bed immediately."

"I—I—I ain't here—!" came a fat gasp.

"What?"

"I—I—I mean—oh, lor'!"

"It is Bunter's voice," said Mr. Quelch, almost dizzily. "It cannot be Bunter, yet—Will you emerge from under that bed?"

"Oh! No! Yes! Oh, crumbs. Atchooooooooh!"

"Will you emerge immediately?" thundered Mr. Quelch. And as the hidden delinquent—probably not encouraged by Quelch's voice!—still failed to emerge, the Remove master glanced round, and rapped to Harry Wharton. "Wharton! Assist me to push this bed aside!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped Harry.

There was a startled squeak from underneath, as the bed was shifted. The "ghost" was revealed at last. All eyes fixed on it—Quelch's almost bulging with amazement.

It was a plump figure that was revealed. It glimmered white all over, and smudgy spectacles glimmered on the fat little nose. It was really no wonder that, in the flickering light of a match, it had looked like the ghost of Billy Bunter: for undoubtedly it was Billy Bunter, and his aspect was of the ghosts ghostly! But in the bright electric light it was a different matter—everyone could see now that there was nothing unearthly about that spectrally white figure: it was not Bunter in a phantom state: it was Bunter soaked and drenched and smothered with whitewash. So far from being eerie or uncanny, now that he was clearly seen he looked funny! There was a chuckle up and down the dormitory as the juniors looked at him.

But Quelch did not chuckle. He looked very far from chuckling. The fabled basilisk had nothing on Quelch, as he glared at that member of his form.

“Bunter!” articulated Quelch. “That—that—that is Bunter!”

“Oh! No!” gasped the whitewashed object. “Tain’t me, sir—”

“What! What did you say?”

“Tain’t me—I—I—I mean, I—I ain’t here—I—I mean—oh, crikey!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Quelch stooped, to jerk the sprawling fat Owl to his feet. But he decided not to touch him. Bunter was not really nice to touch, at the moment.

“Rise!” he thundered.

The hapless Owl staggered up. He blinked at Quelch through smudgy spectacles, and backed away.

“It is you, Bunter—!”

“Oh! No! Yes! Oh, scissors!” gasped Bunter.

“What are you doing here? How came you here? Answer me!”

“Aytishoooooh!”

“Answer me at once, Bunter—”

“Atchook—chooh—chooh—”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Silence!” rapped Mr. Quelch. “This boy’s amazing antics are not a matter for merriment. Bunter! You are here—”

“Atchooh! Groogh! Oooogh!”

“You have been hiding in the old attic—”

“Oh! No! Yes! Groooooogh! Atchooh! I—I—I think I’ve caught a kik-kik-cold, sir—I—I—I’ve got a bad—shoo! shoo! aytishoo!”

“Explain yourself,” thundered Mr. Quelch. “You left this school on Tuesday morning—yet you are here! On Wednesday your father notified us that you had not arrived at your uncle’s in Folkestone. Where have you been all this time, Bunter?”

“Oh, lor’! In—in—in—in the attic, sir,” moaned Bunter.

“In the attic!” repeated Mr. Quelch. “Upon my word! Did you not take the train to Folkestone on Tuesday, Bunter?”

"Nunno, sir! I—I kik-kik-kik-came back," stammered Bunter. "I—I didn't want an extra holiday, sir! So I—I came back—"

"Oh, suffering cats and crocodiles!" murmured Bob Cherry. "He never went at all! Oh, holy smoke!"

"No washing-up for Bunter!" grinned Johnny Bull.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence! Bunter, I fail to understand this! You were not seen here again on Tuesday—if you returned that day—"

"I—I came back after dark, sir!" groaned Bunter. "Oh, lor'!"

"Do you mean to say that some other boy in this form let you into the House after lock-ups?" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! No! I—I got in at the boxroom window," gasped Bunter. "I—I'd left that window unfastened, sir, so—so that I could climb in, sir."

"Oh, gad!" breathed the Bounder. He understood now who it was that had been lurking in the Remove boxroom that night, and had shoved him over to escape unseen. "That fat ass—oh, gad!"

"I can scarcely credit this." Quelch almost gasped. "Then—then you had planned this, Bunter! Upon my word!"

"I—I didn't want to go to Uncle Carter's, sir!" wailed Bunter. "I—I wanted to—to stay on to the end of the term, sir!"

"I have found blankets, and cushions, and other things, in the attic, Bunter. You have been inhabiting that attic for days and nights—!"

"Except—except when I—I came out, sir, at night, or—or when all the fellows were in form, sir—!"

"Then it was you, Bunter, who abstracted the blankets from a bed in this dormitory, the night before you left!"

"I—I—I—they were mum-mum-my blankets, sir—" mumbled Bunter. "I—I couldn't sleep without blankets, sir. It was too kik-kik-kik-cold—"

"And the cushions, I presume, were abstracted from the studies!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

"It—it was jolly hard on the floor, sir, so—so I thought of the cushions in the studies, and—and—only this afternoon, sir—"

"You have actually been all this time at Greyfriars, Bunter, when you were supposed to be away!" It seemed as if Quelch could hardly believe it yet.

"Atchooooooooooooooh—"

"And how did you come into this state, Bunter? How did you become drenched in whitewash?"

"That beast Coker—"

"Coker!" repeated Mr. Quelch, blankly.

"It fell on my head, sir!" groaned Bunter. "I—I was pushing open the door of Coker's study, and—and it fell wallop on my head—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence! Why were you going into Coker's study, Bunter?"

"Oh! I—I wasn't!" gasped Bunter.

"What?" almost shrieked Mr. Quelch.

"I—I—I mean, I—I wasn't after his tuck," stuttered Bunter. "I—I never went into the other Fifth-form studies last night, sir—if anybody did, it wasn't me! I—I suppose that beast Coker thought somebody might come to his study too, and fixed up that booby trap—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch. "Bunter, I scarcely know how to deal with you. It appears that you have not only remained in hiding at this school for several days, but that you have emerged from your hiding place from time to time to purloin food and other things in the studies—"

"Oh! No, sir! I—I knew Mauly wouldn't mind me borrowing his *T.M.O.*, sir—I—I had to have something to read up there, sir—it was pretty slow. And—and I—I knew the fellows wouldn't mind me borrowing their cushions, sir—sleeping on the floor, sir! And—and—as for the grub, sir, I—I never had it! I—I mean, I—I'm going to pay for it, sir! I'm expecting a postal order, sir, and—aytishoooooh! Shoo! Shoo! Groogh! Atchoooh!" There was a volley of sneezes from the hapless fat Owl.

"You appear to have caught a cold, Bunter—"

"Urrrggh! Uuuurgh! Atchooh—chooh—choop!"

"Follow me, you utterly absurd and insensate boy. If you are in a fit state to travel, you will certainly leave Greyfriars in the morning—"

"I—I—I don't want to go to Uncle Carter's, sir!" wailed Bunter.

"What? What? That will do, Bunter."

"But, sir—I—I—I—"

"Follow me at once!" rapped Mr. Quelch, in a voice that made Bunter jump. And the dismal fat Owl trailed after him out of the dormitory, still shedding a few drips of whitewash as he went.

Mr. Quelch shut off the light and closed the door. The Removites were left in a buzz.

"We know who the jolly old snooper was, now," chuckled Bob Cherry.

"The knowfulness is terrific."

"Bunter all the time!" said Vernon-Smith. "That fat villain all the time! I'm going to kick him when he comes back to the dorm."

"Same here!" growled Skinner.

But Billy Bunter did not come back to the dormitory. What had become of him the Removites did not learn till the following morning: when they learned that the hapless fat Owl was in bed in the school sanatorium, where perhaps he wished that he was washing-up at Aspidistra House, instead of sniffing and snorting, gurgling and guggling, and sneezing his fat head almost off!

CHAPTER XVIII

MERRY CHRISTMAS!

"POOR OLD Bunter!" sighed Bob Cherry.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Harry Wharton and Co. were rather sympathetic towards the unfortunate Owl of the Remove in his many and varied misadventures and misfortunes. But they could not help laughing.

On the last day of term Greyfriars was in a cheery buzz. The old school was breaking up for the Christmas holidays. Boxes banged, voices shouted, footsteps echoed, vehicles came and went: everyone seemed looking forward to the "hols". Lord Mauleverer had already rolled away in his car—Vernon-Smith was gone in his taxi—Harry Wharton and Co. were going by the school 'bus, but had not yet gone. Among the busy crowd there was one fat familiar face missing—that of William George Bunter. It had been expected to be missing—adorning the washing-up department at Aspidistra House on the Leas at Folkestone: instead of which Billy Bunter was in "sanny"—still at Greyfriars, still sneezing, still sniffing, still snorting, and quite unlikely to depart for Aspidistra House or any other destination that day. Coker's whitewash had done its fell work only too well.

Trotter had brought the Famous Five a message from the hapless Owl, as they were taking a last stroll round the old quad. Bunter wanted to see them before they went.

"Poor old Bunter!" repeated Bob. "Fancy the fat ass being here all the time—"

"Might have guessed, really, when the grub went," said Nugent.

"What a jolly artful old planner," said Bob. "He had it all cut and dried. He must have been snooping those blankets from the dorm when Smithy was looking for him that time—"

"And we wondered how he'd got away with the tuck the day he went," said Harry Wharton. "He only had to cart it up to the attic while we were in form."

"Must have been a bit dismal in that attic," said Johnny Bull. "Blessed if I wouldn't rather wash-up."

"Well, washing-up's work, and sprawling in an attic isn't," said Bob, "and he seems to have got out a good deal, when there was nobody about. He wasn't going short of grub, at any rate."

"The time of his life, so far as grub was concerned," said Harry. "Though I expect he wished afterwards that he had given Coker's study a miss."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Just as well for him that he caught that cold," remarked Nugent. "Quelch couldn't very well whop him in sanny."

"And Smithy's gone without kicking him!" said Bob.

"And we're going without kicking him," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "May as well look in and say good-bye to him! He's still got the washing-up to come, now he's been rooted out."

"The kickfulness would not be the proper caper, in the idiotic circumstances," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Come on," said Harry. "We can give him ten minutes before the 'bus goes."

And the chums of the Remove proceeded to the sanatorium, where Miss Prim admitted them to the bedside of the sad sufferer. Billy Bunter was sitting up in bed, with a dismal fat face, and the blink he gave the Co. through his big spectacles was sad and sorrowful.

"I say, you fellows—!" he squeaked.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Enjoying life, old fat man?"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Like this better than the attic?" grinned Nugent.

"No!" hooted Bunter. "I had lots to eat in the attic—and what do you think they give me to eat here?"

"Only as much as is good for you?" asked Johnny Bull. "Poor old chap—it must be awful!"

"The awfulness must be terrific."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at," snorted Bunter. "I say, you fellows, got any toffee about you?"

"Against the rules, old fat frump—"

"Blow the rules!" hissed Bunter. "Have you got any?"

"Not a spot."

"Any chocs?"

"No!"

"Beasts!"

"Is that what you wanted to say to us before we went, Bunter?" asked Harry Wharton. "If that's all—"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Good-bye, Bunter—"

"Have good hols!"

"Merry Christmas!"

"I say, you fellows, don't go yet," howled Bunter. "I say, I'm in an awful jam! I say, I've had a letter from the pater— I say, he's in an awful wax."

"What did you expect him to be in?" inquired Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Is the waxfulness terrific?" asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"He's frightfully waxy," groaned Bunter. "I don't know why—"

"You don't know why?" ejaculated Bob.

"No! I expect it's the income tax worrying him, and he's taking it out of me," said Bunter. "Quelch was ratty, too—though he couldn't do anything but jaw, as I was laid up with this frightful cold. Of course, I don't expect anything better from Quelch: but it's rather thick the pater cutting up rusty like this. As if I was to blame somehow, you know."

The Famous Five gazed at Bunter.

"The pater's arrangements had been knocked out a bit, of course," admitted Bunter. "It seems that Uncle Carter is annoyed. He's had to engage somebody for the washing-up at Aspidistra House, and it's too late for me to go there—in fact he's said that if I do turn up he will smack my head."

"Well, that's let you out, old fat man," said Bob. "You get out of the washing-up—and think what a gorgeous time you'll have in the marble halls of Bunter Court!"

"But I ain't going home either," groaned Bunter. "There ain't anything at home these hols. My brother Sammy's going to Uncle Tuck's and my sister Bessie to Aunt Jane's: and the pater and mater to Bournemouth—and the pater says he will not think for one moment of altering his arrangements on account of my undutifulness—me undutiful, you know!—and my laziness—he actually said laziness—me lazy—"

"Oh!"

"So there it is!" said Bunter, bitterly. "He says that as I've made my bed I can lie on it, as if it was my fault somehow! I can't go to Uncle Carter's, even if I could stand the washing-up—and I can't go home, because there's nobody there—and I've got to stay at the school over the hols—oh, lor'! If—if—if I'd known that was how it was going to turn out, I'd have gone to Uncle Carter's—washing-up and all! What sort of grub do you think I shall get, sticking here over the hols?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" howled Bunter.

The Famous Five tried to suppress their merriment. Really, Billy Bunter's deep and artful scheming seemed to have landed him out of the frying pan into the fire. He had succeeded to the extent that the washing-up was washed out! But the prospect of "sticking" at a deserted school over the hols was apparently even less attractive than the washing-up department at Aspidistra House. It was a forlorn fat Owl!

"Sorry, old man," gasped Harry Wharton.

"The sorrowfulness is terrific, my esteemed absurd Bunter."

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Time's up!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Good-bye, Bunter!"

"Merry Christmas, Bunter," said Harry.

"Good-bye!"

"I say, you fellows, hold on," squeaked Bunter. "The 'bus will wait—that's all right! I say— Harry old chap—"

"Cut it short," said Harry.

"You just said 'Merry Christmas!'" said Bunter. "If you mean it—"

"Of course I do," said Harry, staring. "I'll say it again if you like! Merry Christmas!"

"Oh, all right," said Bunter. "I'll come."

"Eh?"

"I expect I shall be up in a day or two, and I'll follow on," said Bunter.

"Thanks, old chap! You can expect me."

"Wha—a—at?"

"O.K.," said Bunter, cheerfully. "You'll see me at Wharton Lodge in a day or two, old chap! I'll come all right!"

Harry Wharton gazed at him. Apparently wishing Bunter a merry Christmas amounted, in Bunter's estimation, to an invitation to make Christmas merry at Wharton Lodge. For a long moment, the captain of the Remove gazed at Billy Bunter. Then he laughed.

"Oh, all right," he said. "Do!"

And Bunter did.

THE END