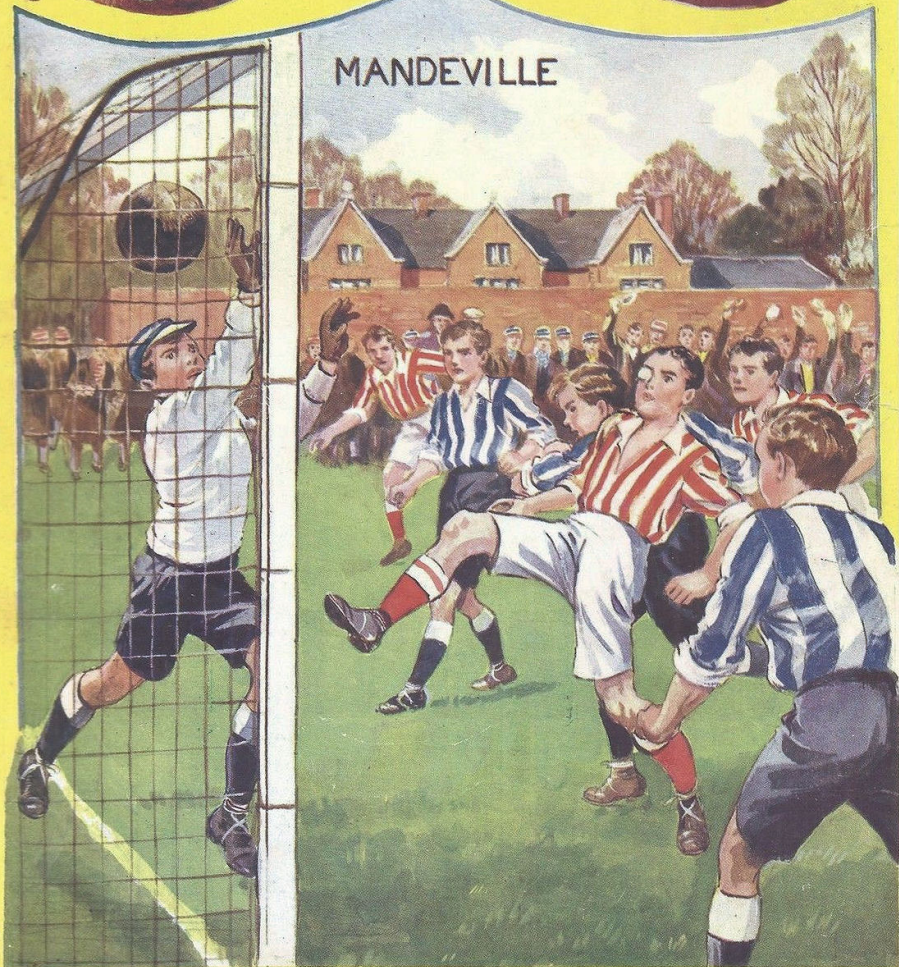


The TOM MERRY'S OWN

MANDEVILLE



THE NEW
TOM MERRY'S
OWN



MANDEVILLE PUBLICATIONS

CONTENTS

	<i>Page</i>
FOREWORD	iv
GUSSEY'S ISLAND <i>by</i> Martin Clifford	5
THE RIO KID RIDES AGAIN <i>by</i> Ralph Redway	65
STUDY FOUR AT FELGATE <i>by</i> Frank Richards	79
BESSIE BUNTER FORGETS! <i>by</i> Hilda Richards	107
STOLEN AWAY <i>by</i> Clive Fenn	119
THE REBEL OF GREYFRIARS <i>by</i> Frank Richards	121

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FOREWORD

ALREADY our fifth issue of Tom Merry's Own.

Here are all our friends again: Harry Wharton and Co., of Greyfriars: with, needless to say, the one and only Bunter: Tom Merry and Co., of St. Jim's, and others whom we know and remember so well. They appear once more in modest but confident anticipation of the usual hearty greeting.

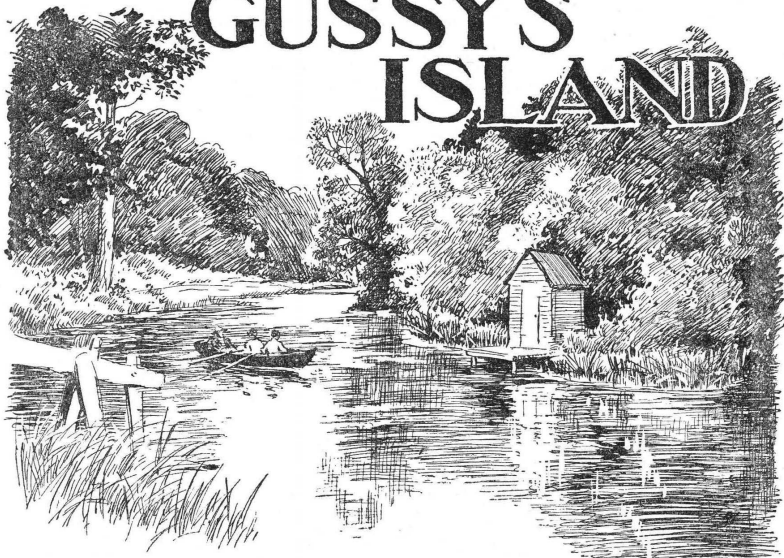
And this year, for the first time, Tom Merry's Own appears in company with a friendly rival: Billy Bunter's Own. Our readers seem to be of the opinion that one cannot have too much of a good thing: an opinion with which Frank Richards and Martin Clifford couldn't agree more!

Good luck, and—we hope!—good reading, to all of you.

MARTIN CLIFFORD

FRANK RICHARDS

GUSSY'S ISLAND



by *MARTIN CLIFFORD*

CHAPTER I

FIGGINS IN A FIX!

“O H, gum!” breathed George Figgins.

Figgins was dismayed.

He had cause for dismay.

Figgins, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, belonged to the New House. He was the great chief and leader of the New House juniors in their incessant alarms and excursions against the rival house. And he was, at the moment in Study No. 6 in the School House, engaged in the pleasant task of packing a bundle of over-ripe tomatoes into Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's Sunday hat.

Figgins had been grinning over that task, apparently finding it amusing—though it was quite certain that Arthur Augustus, when he found the tomatoes in his hat, would feel like the old Queen, distinctly “not amused”.

But Figgins ceased to grin, and his face registered dismay, at the sound of footsteps and voices in the passage outside.

Figgy had, as he fancied, chosen his time well for a raid on Study No. 6 in the School House. He had seen D'Arcy and his study-mates in the quad, talking to Tom Merry and Co. of the Shell. Why the whole crowd of them had come up to the study Figgins did not know—but he knew that they had, for he could hear them coming.

He dropped the last tomato into the top hat on the study table, and spun round towards the door.

St. Jim's was about to break up for the summer holidays. Figgy had been very keen to play a last jape on his old rivals, to give them something to remember him by till next term. Now he rather wished that he hadn't. He was fairly cornered. There he was, in the study, with six or seven School House men almost at the door. The least George Figgins had to expect was the cramming of his own juicy tomatoes down the back of his neck, if he was caught there. And there was no escape.

He gave one glance at the door. Then he gave another, hurriedly, round the study, with a faint hope of hunting cover and eluding discovery till the coast was clear again.

There was only one possible spot of cover—the study cupboard. Figgins shot across to it and tore open the door.

The cupboard was divided midway from the floor to the top by a large shelf. Above that shelf, the cupboard was a larder. Below, it was a lumber room. All sorts of odds and ends were pitched out of the way into the lower half of the study cupboard. There did not seem much room for Figgins who, though lean, was lengthy.

But it was a case of any port in a storm. Figgy had to evade detection or take the ragging of his life. He plunged in. He crammed and squeezed, and somehow curled up his long legs, and drew the cupboard door shut after him. It was a warm corner on a hot summer's day—and it was stuffy, and it was undoubtedly overcrowded now that Figgins was inside. But he had to make the best of it. Perspiration clotted his brow unheeded, and he tried to suppress his breathing as the study door opened and a crowd of juniors tramped in.

"Twot in, deah boys," He heard the dulcet tones of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, the elegant ornament of the Fourth. "Pewwaps you fellows would like a spot of lemonade in this wathah hot weathah, while I am telling you the news."

"No perhaps about it, Gussy," said Tom Merry. "We would!"

"Gussy has good ideas sometimes," remarked Monty Lowther. "Rare but good."

"Very rare—but quite good," agreed Manners.

Seven fellows were in the study—without counting the hidden inhabitant of the cupboard. Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther looked round for

the lemonade. Blake and Herries and Digby looked round for it. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy jammed his eyeglass into his noble eye, and looked round for it also. Then he ejaculated:

"Bai Jove!"

Figgins almost trembled. He had seen nothing of lemonade while he was busy in that study. So he concluded that it must be in the cupboard. If they came to the cupboard for lemonade Figgy's game was up. He could almost feel the tomatoes squeezing clammy down the back of his neck!

"Well, where's that lemonade, Gussy?" asked Jack Blake.

"O where and O where can it be?" sang Monty Lowther.

"In the cupboard, Gussy?" asked Tom Merry. "I'll get it out if you like."

Figgy almost ceased to breathe!

"No, deah boy! Now I wemembah, I forgot to bwing it across fwom the tuck-shop. I was goin—to—"

"Ass!" said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Fathead!" said Digby.

"Weally, Dig—"

"Blithering idiot!" said Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"As guests in this study," remarked Monty Lowther, "we can't possibly call Gussy an ass, a fathead, or a blithering idiot. But be it clearly understood by all gentlemen present, that if we weren't guests in this study, we should call him an ass, fathead, a blithering idiot, and a burbling cuckoo."

"Hear, hear!" said Tom Merry and Manners, heartily.

"Bai jove! I am weally vevy sowwy I forgot to wemembah—OH!" Arthur Augustus broke off as he noticed the top hat on the table. "Look heah, you fellows, I don't want to be watty, but you know vevy well that I stwongly object to fellows messin' about with my hats. I am wathah particulah about my hats, as you are vevy well awah. I would like to know who has taken my toppah out of the hat-box."

"Oh! My hat!" ejaculated Blake, staring at the topper on the table.

"It is my hat, Blake, not yours—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" Blake gave a yell. "Look here, Gussy, you've always refused to let me use your topper for a coal scoop—"

"You uttah ass!"

"And now you're using it yourself to carry tomatoes in—"

"What?"

Arthur Augustus made a bound towards the study table. He had not yet looked into the hat. Now he did—and the expression on his aristocratic face, as he looked, was inexpressible. King Priam of Troy, when a dread figure drew his curtains at dead of night, could hardly have looked so startled and horrified as the swell of St. Jim's at that awful moment.

"Oh!" gasped Arthur Augustus. He stared almost dazedly into the top hat. His eyeglass fell from his eye—into the hat. It floated in tomato-juice. "Oh! What uttah wottah has done this—Blake— Have you—"

"Not guilty, my lord!" chuckled Blake.

"Lowthah! If you have been larkin' with my hat—" roared Arthur Augustus. "It is just one of your wotten japes—"

"Not guilty!" grinned Monty Lowther.

"Bai Jove! I will go all ovah the House lookin' for the fwrightful wuffian who has put tomatoes in my hat!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry chuckled.

"More likely to find him in the other House, Gussy. I expect some New House man has been here."

"That's it," agreed Manners.

Figgins, in the cupboard, caught his breath. They had guessed that it was a New House raid. If they guessed that the raider was still there—!

"Yaas, wathah! One of those New House wuffians—Figgins, or Kerr or Wynn! Bai Jove! I will go ovah to the New House at once, and thwash them all wound," exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You fellows come and back me up, and we will mop them up all ovah their wotten House." Arthur Augustus fished his eyeglass out of the tomatoes, wiped it on his handkerchief, and jammed it back into his eye, and surveyed his friends with an indignant glare. "What are you fellows laughin' at?" he demanded, hotly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! If you fellows think it funny to put tomatoes in a fellow's hat—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am goin' ovah to the New House—"

"Hadn't you better look after the topper first?" suggested Tom Merry, "That cargo of tomatoes won't be doing it any good."

"Oh! Bai Jove! Yaas, wathah!"

Arthur Augustus lifted the top hat from the table. He pitched out its contents into the fireplace. Then he grabbed a duster and began to wipe out the hat. Luckily, the tomatoes had not been many minutes in the topper. They had not had time to do their worst. But Arthur Augustus, as he rubbed and scraped, could not feel that that topper was likely ever to be its own beautiful self again. Concentrated on the topper, Arthur Augustus seemed to have forgotten the purpose for which the gathering had been called in Study No. 6. He dabbed, and rubbed, and scraped, and breathed wrath, while six fellows sat down round about the study, and watched him with smiling faces—and Figgins, closely-packed in the study cupboard, perspiring, with pins and needles assailing his cramped legs, wished from the bottom of his heart that he was safe back in the New House.

CHAPTER II

GUSSY'S ISLAND!

"Gussy, old man—!" said Tom Merry.

"Wottah!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

"Thanks! If you've asked us to this study to call us fancy names—"

"I was not addressin' you, Tom Merry! I was speakin' of the wottah who put those tomatoes in my hat."

"Well, I was addressing you, old bean. You told us you had a spot of news—and we're here to hear it."

"What are we going to hear?" asked Monty Lowther. "If it's anything good, we shall say hear, hear!"

"It's about the summah holidays," said Arthur Augustus. "We are just goin' to bweak up, you know. I can tell you while I get this toppah clean. I have had a lettah fwom my governah—oh, the uttah bwute!"

"Draw it mild, Gussy," remonstrated Blake. "You can't talk of your governor like that—a peer of the realm, too."

"Shocking!" said Herries, shaking his head.

"Bad form!" said Dig.

"You uttah asses!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I was not speakin' of my governah, as you know very well. I was speakin' of the uttah bwute who has been larkin' with my hat! If you suppose for one moment that I was speaking of my pater in such an oppwobwious mannah, you are an uttah ass, Blake, and you are an uttah ass, Hewwies, and you are anothonah uttah ass, Wobert Digby."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"To wesume," said Arthur Augustus, with a devastating glare at his grinning chums. "I have had a lettah fwom my governah, and he has bought an island. How do you fellows like the idea of a week's campin' on an island in the Thames in the summah hols?"

"Oh, my hat! Fine! exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Top-hole!" said Manners.

"Hear, hear!" said Monty Lowther. "If that's what we're to hear here, Gussy, we all say hear, hear, here!"

"Bai Jove! Is that a wotten pun, Lowther?"

"No—a rather good one!" answered Monty Lowther, modestly.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, wats! The patah has told me all about the island," went on Arthur Augustus. "It's about two miles—or thwee—or perhaps six or seven—I forget—fwom Staines, or Cookham, or Kingston, or somewhah—"

"Nothing like having it exact!" said Tom Merry, gravely. "A man blindfolded could not miss it, with precise directions like that."

"Well, I want to give you quite a cleah ideah of the place," said Arthur Augustus, innocently. "It is a vewy small island, called Togg's Eyot—I believe it belonged to a man named Toggs, see? But there are twees on it, and bushes and things, and a bathin' and boatin' hut, and of course we can wow acwoss to Staines, or Cookham, or Kingston, or somewhah, for food—though pwobably I shall catch enough fish to see us through. It will be wathah like Wobinson Cwusoe, campin' on an island, what?"

"Good man!" exclaimed Blake, heartily. "So that's the news, is it?"

"Yaas, deah boy. I have been thinkin' it ovah, since I wead my governah's lettah. I am goin' to pwopose—"

"You are!" ejaculated Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah! I am goin' to pwopose—"

"Who's your lady friend?" asked Lowther.

"Wha—a—t?"

"If you're going to propose, I suppose there's a lady in the case?"

"You unuttewable ass!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I do not mean pwopose, you duffah—I mean pwopose," shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I am goin' to pwopose that we all meet at Staines, or Cookham, or Kingston, or Wichmond, or somewhah, and pwocceed to the island, in the hols."

"Hear, hear!"

"The patah has awwanged for a boat to be weady for us at Smith's Yard, at Staines, or else Cookham, or somewhah. Well, we pick up the boat, and put our baggage on board, and wow up the wivah to Togg's Eyot, and there we are!" said Arthur Augustus. "Evevythin' will be weady for us exceptin' food—we shall have to manage that. Lots of fish in the wivah, pwobably."

"People on islands often live on shell-fish," remarked Monty Lowther.

"I hardly think there will be shell-fish on an island in the Thames, Lowther," said Arthur Augustus, doubtfully.

"But you'll be rowing in the boat, won't you?"

"Yaas, wathah!"

"That's all right then! You'll catch enough crabs for a dozen Robinson Crusoes."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! Are all you fellows agweed that we are goin' to camp on that island in the hols?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Yes, rather!"

"Passed unanimously!"

"Hear, hear!"

"Vewy good, then," said Arthur Augustus. "Pewwaps I had bettah warn you to twavel light. There won't be a lot of space in a boat, you know, or in a bathin' hut on the island. I shall only take one hat-box and one twunk—"

"Eh?"

"And a suitcase, and pewwaps a few bags—"

"Oh, my hat!"

"And a sleepin'-bag, and a gwound sheet, and some blankets and things—" went on Arthur Augustus, thoughtfully, "and I mustn't forget a change of shoes, and some slippahs—"

"You said it was a small island, didn't you?" asked Monty Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Then it's lucky you're travelling light! If you were travelling heavy, we should want a rather big one."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That's all right," said Blake cheerily, "If Gussy turns up with a hat-box and a trunk, we'll slip them overboard—"

"Bai Jove! I should uttably wefuse to have my hat-box and twunk slipped ovahboard, Blake," said Arthur Augustus, warmly. "Pway do not be an ass! And don't you fellows forget your waincoats. I twust that the weathah will wemain fine, but it might wain, you know, and if it wains it will be wet."

"Gussy ought to be in the Weather Department at the Air Ministry," remarked Lowther. "He knows all about the weather! Take note, you men, that if it rains it will be wet! Will it be dry if it doesn't, Gussy?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Wats! Fwom what my governah says, it is wathah a jolly little island, with a vevy big oak twee gwoin' in the middle. You can see that twee for miles up and down the wivah, you know. If you fellows get lost, when I haven't got an eye on you, you will be able to find your way back to camp by lookin' for that twee. Of course, I shall do my vevy best to look aftah you," added Arthur Augustus, in his most fatherly manner. "I shall wegard myself as bein' wespensible for you while you are in my care."

"You'll be responsible for our actions?" asked Monty Lowther, while the other fellows grinned.

"Yaas, deah boy."

"That's jolly good of you, when you're not responsible for your own!" said Monty, heartily.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pway don't be such a funnay ass, Lowthah. I wathah think you fellows will like the island—Bai Jove! The tomato juice has soaked wight through it."

"Through the island?" exclaimed Lowther, in astonishment.

"No, you ass—through the hat—"

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

"Weally, you fellows, it is not funnay. That hat is pwactically wuined. I am goin' to thwash the awful wottah who cwammed tomatoes into my toppah," hooted Authur Augustus. "Bai Jove! I wish we had come in a little soonah and caught him at it! Bai Jove! What's that?"

Arthur Augustus jumped at a sudden sound from the study cupboard. Six other fellows fairly bounded, staring round at the cupboard in astonishment. Something had stirred there—and several articles of lumber had crashed. Clearly, there was something alive in the study cupboard.

It was not Figgy's fault. He really couldn't help it. His long legs, curled up in too narrow space, were cramped, and pins and needles had attacked him mercilessly. For a long time—it seemed centuries to the unhappy New House junior—he had borne it stoically. But endurance had its limits. Pins and needles crept up those long legs from the ankles to the knee—till, at long last, George Figgins realized that he had to move his legs or scream. He moved them—with all the caution he could—but that did not avail. There really was no room to move. A box rocked—a frying-pan crashed—a saucepan clanged. And seven juniors in the study jumped to their feet.

"Bai Jove! There's somethin' in the cupboard!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "If it is your dog Towsah, Hewwies—I insist upon your takin' the bwute away at once. That bwute has no wespect for a fellow's twousahs."

"Towser can't be here," said Herries. "What's the thump—"

Tom Merry pulled open the cupboard door.

Then there was a yell from seven fellows: at the sight of a New House junior, with crimson face and curled-up legs, packed among the varied assortment of articles in the lower half of the study cupboard.

"Figgins!"

"New House smudge!"

"Bai Jove! That must be the wottah who wagged my toppah!"

"Collar him!"

Tom Merry grasped one long leg, Jack Blake grasped the other. George Figgins came out of the cupboard, travelling on his back, with a frantic yell.

CHAPTER III

NOT NICE FOR FIGGINS!

FATTY WYNN, the plumpest junior in the New House at St. Jim's, munched a ripe pear with enjoyment and satisfaction, and looked across the study table at Kerr. There was quite a pile of good things on the table in that study in the New House. Fatty had unpacked a parcel from a relative in Wales: and that relative had evidently known that Fatty had a good healthy appetite. There was going to be quite a feast in that study when Figgins came back. In the meantime Fatty Wynn started on the pears, loth to waste time while he waited for his absent chum. His plump face registered contentment. Kerr,

on the other hand, looked a little worried, and seemed indifferent to the good things.

"Do try the pears, old chap!" said Fatty. "I can tell you they're good. Everything in the parcel was jolly good, excepting the tomatoes. They'd gone off a bit. But the pears are prime."

"It's high time Figgins was back," said Kerr.

"Well, we'll wait for him, of course," said Fatty. "But no reason why we shouldn't scoff a few of the pears to go on with."

"He's been gone a long time."

"Well, he will have to be a bit careful," said Fatty. "Not so jolly easy to dodge in and out of a School House study without being spotted."

"If they've spotted him—"

"Oh!" said Fatty Wynn.

Kerr crossed to the study window and looked out. It had been quite a bright idea of Figgy's. Those tomatoes had gone "off" in the parcel, owing to delay in the post. No longer edible, they were exactly the thing, in Figgy's opinion, to cram into Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's top hat. His comrades concurred, so far as that went. But Figgy had been gone quite a long time, and Kerr could not help feeling a misgiving. He looked rather anxiously from the window.

"See him?" asked Fatty, pausing before taking another generous bite at the luscious pear.

"Yes: here he comes."

"Oh! Good!" said Fatty.

Kerr was not quite so sure that it was "good". He spotted George Figgins, in the quad, heading for the New House. But Figgins did not seem to look his usual bonny self. He was coming at a trot, and seemed in a hurry: but as he trotted, he contorted himself quite oddly, and a good many fellows in the quad stared at him. A squeak from Baggy Trimble reached Kerr's ears at the window.

"He, he! Like tomatoes, Figgins?"

And Kerr noted that quite a crowd of School House juniors were laughing.

He guessed that something must have happened to Figgins. Matters had not gone wholly according to plan in that jape on the rival House.

Figgins disappeared at the doorway below, and Kerr turned from the window. There was a sound of hurried footsteps in the passage, and the study door flew open, and George Figgins hurtled in.

Kerr looked at him. Fatty Wynn ceased to munch, and stared. Figgins looked wildly excited. He contorted and wriggled in the most extraordinary way. His collar was strangely stained. He gasped for breath.

"What's happened?" exclaimed Kerr.

"Urrrrrgh!" gurgled Figgins, wriggling wildly. "Oh, crumbs! Urrrgh!"

"Did you leave the tommies in Gussy's hat?" asked Fatty Wynn.

"Urrrrggh! No! I put them in—urrggh! But I've brought them back with me," gasped Figgins.

"Eh! Where are they, then?" asked Fatty. Figgins's hands were empty: and he could hardly be carrying over-ripe tomatoes in his pockets.

"Oooogh! Down my neck!" groaned Figgins.

"Oh, crikey!"

Figgins tore off his collar. He hurled off his jacket. He wrenched open his shirt. He grabbed at squashed tomatoes.

"B—b—but what have you got them down your neck for, Figgy?" stuttered Fatty Wynn, in astonishment.

Figgins gave him a glare.

"Oh! Because I like tomatoes down the back of my neck, of course," he bawled. "Tomatoes are nice down the back of the neck, ain't they? Idiot!"

"They got you?" asked Kerr. He suppressed a smile. Figgins did not look as if he would have appreciated smiling faces at the moment.

"Urrgh! I'm all clammy and sticky!" groaned Figgins. "By gum! I'll make those School House smears sit up for this! Get me a sponge and a towel from somewhere, Kerr—can't you do anything but stand there staring at a chap like a sheep at a train?"

"I say, it's no good slanging Kerr," pointed out Fatty Wynn. "Kerr didn't put those tommies down your neck—"

"Fathead!" roared Figgins.

"Well, he didn't," said Fatty Wynn. "Keep your temper with your pals, old chap."

"Idiot!"

"If you're going to call a fellow names because you let the School House men put tommies down your neck—"

"Shut up!" roared Figgins. "Go on eating! That's your mark. Just eat, and shut up, see?"

"Fatty Wynn looked, as he felt, indignant. Still, he seemed to think that there was something in Figgins's advice: for he selected fresh ripe pear, and started on it. Kerr sped forth in search of sponge and towel, and Figgins hurled a shirt with a clammy neck across the study.

There was no doubt that over-ripe tomatoes, pushed down between a fellow's collar and his neck, were distinctly clammy and uncomfortable. Perhaps it was not surprising that Figgy was a little excited.

"Here you are, old chap!" Kerr reappeared with a tin bowl of water, a sponge floating in it, and a towel.

"I'm all clammy! Grooogh." Figgins sponged at clammy tomato. "I say—urrggh! The rotters—ooogh! What are you grinning at, Kerr?"

"Was I grinning, old chap?"

"If you want this bowl of water up-ended over your silly head, you've only got to say so."

Kerr did not say so. He retreated to the window. Figgy's Scottish chum had lots of tact. Fatty Wynn paused in his operations on the pear.

"Look here, Figgy—!" he began, warmly.

Figgins lifted a sponge dripping with water, and regarded him with a deadly eye.

"Well?" he yapped.

"Oh! Nothing!" said Fatty: and he went on with the pear. Fatty was not quite so tactful as Kerr: but he discerned that Figgy was not in a mood of sweet reasonableness, and he said no more.

Figgins, snorting, sponged away sticky clammy tomato. Then he proceeded to towel himself. He was red and breathless and wrathful.

"Think I can stick that shirt on again, all cloggy with tomato?" he suddenly demanded of his chums.

"I shouldn't!" said Kerr, mildly.

"Well, I think somebody might cut up to the dorm and get a fellow a clean shirt," said Figgins. "I think he might get a fellow a collar, too, if it wasn't too much awful trouble."

Kerr smiled, and quitted the study again. Figgins was dry, by the time he returned with collar and shirt. Figgy accepted them with a snort in lieu of thanks.

However, once more clean and comfortable, the great chief of the New House juniors became a little more placable. No doubt it was borne in upon his mind that his faithful chums were really not to blame if he had been caught by the enemy in the rival House. Figgy was never in a bad temper for long. Now he began to approximate more to his usual sunny self.

"It was pretty ghastly, you know," said Figgins, half-apologetically.

"Must have been, old boy," agreed Kerr.

"It was rotten luck! I'd got D'Arcy's topper out of the hat-box and bunged in the tommies, when they came up to the study in a crowd, and I was cornered. I dodged into cover in the cupboard to wait for them to go."

"Oh, crumbs!" said Fatty Wynn. "Must have been a cram! Where did you put your legs?"

"I didn't take them off and drop them out of the study window," snapped Figgins, sarcastically. "I took them into the cupboard with me. And I had to curl up like a hedgehog, and got pins and needles— You fat ass, what are you laughing at?" roared Figgins. "Think it's funny for a fellow to get pins and needles crammed in a cupboard, with a crowd of School House smudges in the study?"

"Oh! No!" gasped Fatty. "Ha, ha—I—I mean, not at all! Oh! No!"

"Oh! Laugh!" hooted Figgins. "I got pins and needles all over my legs, and had to move—and then they heard me, and yanked me out! They pulled me out by my legs—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh! Laugh!" bawled Figgins. "It was frightfully funny—especially when they collected the tomatoes out of the fireplace, and crammed the whole lot down the back of my neck!" Figgins snorted, "It was funnier still when they rolled me down the stairs. Laugh!"

Kerr and Wynn, with many efforts, contrived not to laugh. They seemed to be able to see—though Figgins could not—something of a comic nature in this disastrous outcome of Figgy's jape on Study No. 6 in the School House. But it was clear that it did not appeal to Figgy's sense of humour.

"I say, old chap, have some of this tuck!" suggested Fatty Wynn. "You'll feel better if you do."

"Oh! Stuffing will cure anything, won't it?" jeered Figgins. "That's you all over, Fatty—stuff, and be happy."

"These pears are good, Figgy," said Fatty, patiently. "I've had seven—and I can tell you, they're prime."

Figgins gave a snort. Nevertheless, he sat down and joined his comrades in an attack on the pile of pears. Perhaps, after all, it did him good, and he felt better: for his rugged countenance grew more and more equable.

"Well, it was rotten," said Figgins, again half-apologetically. "Clammy and sticky all over—and those School House smudges killing themselves with laughing! I can tell you I felt beastly! And—and I was going to wind up the term with that jape on the School House—and look how it turned out!"

"We'll give 'em the kybosh next term," said Kerr, comfortingly.

"We're jolly well going to give them the kybosh before next term!" said Figgins, emphatically. "We're going to give them the kybosh in the hols, and I know how."

"In the holidays!" ejaculated Kerr.

"We shan't see them in the hols, old chap," said Fatty Wynn.

"Shan't we?" snorted Figgins. "Well, I can jolly well tell you that we shall! You see, while I was in that cupboard, those smudges were jawing over their plans for the holidays, and I heard them. They're going to camp on an island in the Thames, called Togg's Eyot, somewhere up by Staines or Cookham. It's a little spot in the river that belongs to Lord Eastwood, and they're going to have it all to themselves—so they think! See?"

Kerr and Wynn did not seem quite to "see". They gazed inquiringly at their great chief and leader.

"Well," said Figgins, "They won't have it to themselves! They're going to have a high old time on that island—because three fellows about our size will be spotted around, making things warm for them. Now do you see?"

"Oh!" said Kerr.

"Oh!" said Fatty Wynn.

"They thought it funny, jamming tomatoes down a fellow's neck!" said Figgins. "Perhaps they'll think it funny when their tent comes down on their nappers in the middle of the night! Perhaps they'll think it funny when their

boat disappears and strands them on their island. Perhaps they'll think a lot of things funny that are going to happen to them. Or, "added Figgins, with a chuckle, "perhaps they won't!"

"But—!" said his two chums together.

Figgins gave them a glare.

"Did you say 'but'?" he asked. "If you did, don't! Nothing to butt about. That's what we're going to do these hols. And that's that!"

Which settled the matter without appeal.

CHAPTER IV

WET!

"Wow, bwothahs, wow! The stweam wuns fast,
The wapids are near and the daylight's past!"

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY'S voice was raised in song. It was a glorious day. Summer on the Thames seemed to have put on its best bib and tucker, so to speak, to welcome the St. Jim's holiday party.

Perhaps it was a shade too warm for some of the party. Tom Merry and Manners, Jack Blake and George Herries, pulling at the oars, found it fairly warm. Monty Lowther, sitting rather precariously on three or four bags, fanned himself gently with a straw hat. Digby swiped at a buzzing insect that persisted in haunting him. Arthur Augustus was steering. In spotless flannels and a beautiful Panama hat, the swell of St. Jim's looked a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. His eyeglass flashed back the rays of the sun: his aristocratic face was calmly cheerful and contented: and his melodious voice floated over the shining Thames.

"Look out, you!"

It was a sudden shout. Who shouted and why, Arthur Augustus did not know, or care. He chanted on regardless.

The boat was fairly well laden. Gussy's benevolent pater seemed to have played the part of universal provider. Tom Merry and Co. had met at Staines in the morning, as per programme: they had found the boat ready at Smith's yard: and the camping paraphernalia on board. All they had to do was to step on and pull up the river to the island, camping paraphernalia filled some space—and more was filled by the junior's own belongings. Arthur Augustus had been gently but firmly dissuaded from bringing either a trunk or a hat-box. But every fellow had a bag, and Gussy had two. So there was plenty on the boat when the St. Jim's fellows pulled out of Staines and started up the

river. The oarsmen had rather an impression that they were pulling a heavy bus up a hill.

Steering, however, was easier work. Arthur Augustus, sitting at the lines, had both energy and breath for a boat song.

"Hi! There! Look out! You!"

"Bai Jove!" remarked Arthur Augustus. "I wish people would not shout on the wivah! This is weally a vevy peaceful and idyllic scene, you know, and it is quite spoiled by people shoutin'! I wondah who it is, and why he is shoutin' like that."

Six fellows in the boat grinned.

Coming up astern was a launch. A man with a red face, who looked rather excited, was shouting. He was shouting to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy; but Arthur Augustus was not yet aware of that trifling circumstance. The St. Jim's boat was in the way. Six fellows looked back at the launch. Arthur Augustus did not. Having no eyes in the back of his noble head, Arthur Augustus did not see the launch, and remained happily unaware of its existence.

There were quite a lot of craft on the river. The glorious summer weather seemed to have brought them out in myriads. Skiffs shot by. Canoes whizzed. Bright dresses and parasols added gay spots of colour to the scene. It was, as Arthur Augustus remarked, a peaceful and idyllic scene—but it was rather spoiled by an angry and excited voice shouting, waking the echoes among the leafy old trees that shaded the bank.

"Here! You! Have you bought the river?"

"What a widuculous question, you chaps," remarked Arthur Augustus. "I wondah who is shoutin' like that!"

"Will you clear the way? Do you want all the Thames, and some over?" came the shout from astern. "Want to be run down? You! You with the window-pane in your eye!"

"Oh, bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus. Apparently the man on the launch had had a glimpse of the eyeglass flashing back the sun. It dawned upon Arthur Augustus that he was being addressed.

"Pull into the bank," said Tom Merry, laughing. "We're in the way of that launch, Gussy."

Arthur Augustus looked round. His eye, and his eyeglass, gleamed at the red-faced man on the launch, now very near at hand.

"Steer for the shore, boys, steer for the shore!" sang Monty Lowther.

The red-faced man waved an excited hand.

"Are you going to clear the way, or do you want to go under the water?" he bawled.

"I wegard that question as uttahly widuculous!" retorted Arthur Augustus.

"I wathah think you have forgotten your mannahs. Wats!"

And Arthur Augustus pulled at the wrong line, with considerable energy. The result—unexpected on Arthur Augustus's part—was to whirl the boat

almost athwart the bows of the launch, and for a moment it looked like a crash.

"Oh, my hat!"

"Look out!"

"You mad ass, Gussy!"

"Bai Jove!"

The launch rushed by with about a quarter of an inch to spare! The red-faced man, looking back, told Arthur Augustus what he thought of him, at the top of a powerful voice, still further detracting from the idyllic calmness of the scene. But nobody on the St. Jim's boat heeded the red-faced man. The boat was left rocking wildly on the swell, baggage was tumbling about, and Monty Lowther was rolling and yelling. Herries appeared to be trying to dig up the river-bed with his oar. Blake had pulled his oar in so hurriedly that it unfortunately clumped against Digby's head, and Dig's voice almost equalled that of the red-faced man on the launch as he roared. Arthur Augustus had leaped to his feet—that being about the most injudicious thing he could possibly do on a rocking boat.

"Look out, Gussy!" shrieked Tom Merry.

"Yawwooh!"

Splash!

"Oh, crumbs!"

"Man overboard!"

"Great Pip!"

How and why he went over the side Arthur Augustus did not know. But he knew that he went. He was left in no doubt about that, as he plunged head-long into the waters of the Thames. Manners, grabbing at him as he went, caught a Panama hat and saved it. But the inhabitant of the hat plunged head-long into the water and disappeared.

"Gussy!" yelled Blake.

"Oh! The ass!"

"Oh! The fathead!"

"Oh! The chump!"

These ejaculations did not sound sympathetic. Arthur Augustus's comrades seemed more exasperated than sympathetic.

A head rose beside the boat. A minute before, it had been a well-brushed head. Now it looked like a wet mop.

A startled face, streaming with water, looked up at the boat's crew, as Arthur Augustus grabbed the gunwale.

"Ooooooooooogh!" was his first remark.

"You silly ass!" roared Blake.

"Weally, Blake—ooooogh!" gasped Arthur Augustus. "Pway help me in! Keep that boat-hook away, Lowther, you howlin' ass—if you touch me with that boat-hook I will punch you in the eye."

"What about leaving him in the water?" asked Manners. "He's less trouble in the water than on the boat!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Good egg!" said Blake. "Hang on, Gussy, and we'll tow you."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass!" yelled Arthur Augustus. "Will you give me a hand in, or will you not give me a hand in?"

"Hold on, Gussy," said Monty Lowther. "Wait till I get this boat-hook under your ear, and I'll have you in in a jiffy."

"Keep that boat-hook away!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "You dangewous maniac, keep that boat-hook away fwom my yah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Blake and Digby grasped the swell of St. Jim's, and hauled him in. He sat down squelching in a pool of water.

"Oh, cwikey!" he gasped, "I'm all wet! I'm feahfully wet, you fellows."

"That's because the water's wet," explained Monty Lowther. "If you gave more attention to natural history, Gussy, you'd know that."

"You uttah ass!" hooted Arthur Augustus. "Oh, cwumbs! I shall have to get a change at once!"

"Oh, do!" gasped Tom Merry. "There's about a thousand eyes on us, and it will be a free entertainment for the whole river."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I cannot sit heah in wet clobbah, Tom Mewwy. Pewwaps I cannot vewy well change heah. But I must change! I am dwippin'. Cannot you see that I am dwippin'?" howled Arthur Augustus. "I feel like a wet wag! I shall pwobably catch a cold. I wefuse to sit heah like a wet wag and catch a cold. Pull for the bank, and I will take a bag ashore and change in the twees."

"Wait till we get to the island," suggested Blake.

"I wefuse to sit heah like a wet wag till we get to the island, Blake. And what do I look like?" demanded Arthur Augustus. "I uttahly wefuse to go up a cwowed wivah lookin' like a wet wag. Look at those boundahs in that punt—they are laughin'!"

"You'd make a stone image laugh, old pippin."

"I wefuse to make a stone image laugh—I mean—"

"Oh, pull for the bank," sighed Tom Merry. "We shall get to that jolly old island about midnight, I expect."

The boat pulled in to the tow path, on the left going up from Staines. Arthur Augustus scrambled ashore—the cynosure of all eyes on the tow-path. He was no longer a thing of beauty and a joy for ever. His once spotless flannels hung round him clinging and dripping. He jammed a wet eyeglass into his eye, and gave a devastating glance at grinning faces. There was no doubt that the swell of St. Jim's was adding considerably to the gaiety of existence for the crowds that the beautiful summer weather had brought out along Father Thames.

"Bai Jove! I feel like a drownded wat!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"You look it!" agreed Blake.

"Wats! Hand me that bag!" hooted Arthur Augustus.

Luckily, at that point the tow-path was bordered by an open wood. It was practicable to get out of sight in the wood and change. Gussy simply had to change. Sitting in wet clothes was asking for a cold. Still more important, from Arthur Augustus's point of view, was the matter of appearances. A fellow really couldn't proceed up a crowded river looking like a drowned rat. At all events Arthur Augustus D'Arcy couldn't.

He grasped the bag, and turned to cut across the tow-path. Tom Merry and Co. resigned themselves to wait—probably an hour! Changing his clobber was not quick work with Arthur Augustus. But Gussy, always considerate, turned back.

"You fellows need not wait for me!" he called out. "Pull on to the island—I will walk the west. I can walk fastah than you can wow, anyway. You can fewwy me acwoss at the island when I awwive."

"Look here, we'll wait if you'll buck up," said Blake.

"I wufese to huwwy—"

"Fathead!"

"Wats!"

"Well, give us a call when you arrive, if you ever do, and we'll fetch you across to the island," said Tom. "Give way, you men."

And Arthur Augustus D'Arcy disappeared into the wood with his bag, and Tom Merry and Co. pulled on up the Thames.

CHAPTER V

CATCHING A TARTAR!

PUG JUDSON raised his frowsty head, and blinked round him at the sound of a footstep. In the warmth of the summer's afternoon, Pug had been sleeping in the shade, amid the trees and thickets of the little wood bordering the tow-path. His resting-place on a green grassy bank was hardly more than a couple of hundred yards from the river: but thick underwoods screened it from view. Pug was content to frowst there during the heat of the day: his activity, in fact, was scheduled for nightfall, after which he carried on his calling as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles. Pug was dog-stealer, chicken-rustler, occasionally when opportunity offered in lonely spots a footpad. An unguarded boat, a stray wheelbarrow, apples from an orchard, even washing left out on the line, were all grist to Pug's mill. But at the moment, Pug Judson

was taking his ease in the shady wood, when he was disturbed by a footstep and brushing twigs.

He stared round at a wet but still elegant figure that came through the thickets. Quite unaware that a particularly frowsy and unpleasant tramp was dozing there, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy stopped under the tree whose wide branches shaded Mr. Judson from the sun.

Pug looked at him.

His reddened eyes gleamed. This young fellow was what Pug would have called a "toff", obviously well off, and carrying a bag. Why he came into the shady wood, Pug did not know: but there he was—more grist for Pug's mill, if the spot was not too dangerously near the tow-path, which was well populated that summer's afternoon. Pug debated in his mind whether it would be safe to give the young "toff" a "oner" on the jaw, knock him out, rifle his pockets, grab his bag, and run. He did not feel sure, and he lay in the grass and thought it out.

Had Arthur Augustus glanced round him attentively, no doubt he would have observed the frowsy figure sprawling half-hidden by bracken. But Arthur Augustus was not an observant youth. Satisfied that he had penetrated to a sufficiently solitary spot, he set his bag on the ground and sorted out a change of clobber and a towel and a small mirror which he stuck on the trunk of the tree, which now interposed between him and Pug, and barred the tramp from his sight even if he had looked round attentively.

The Pug comprehended. The young toff had had a ducking, and had come into the wood to change his clothes.

While Arthur Augustus towelled away Thames water, and donned dry attire, Pug meditated. The greedy gleam in his reddened eyes intensified. That young toff had money about him, he was sure. The bag, with its contents, was a prize. And the crowded river and the tow-path were a couple of hundred yards away, and the trees were thick. It would be safe, Pug considered—as safe, at least, as he could reasonably expect in his peculiar line of business.

Pug made up his frowsy mind at last. He rose to his feet, with a rustle of bracken.

Arthur Augustus had finished changing and shut his bag with the damp clothes in it. He was now getting as good a view of himself as possible in the little mirror on the tree-trunk. That was a rather important matter to the swell of St. Jim's. But he ceased to gaze into the mirror, and gave a start, and looked round, as a burly, frowsy, and very unpleasant-looking tramp came round the tree.

This was Gussy's first intimation that he was not alone in the wood. He looked at Mr. Judson. It did not occur to him, for a moment, to be alarmed: but he certainly did not like Pug's looks. As Mr. Judson came closer, it was not alarm, but the unpleasant aroma of spirits and stale tobacco surrounding Pug, that caused Arthur Augustus to back away.

"'Old on!" rapped Pug, sharply.

"Do you want anything?" asked Arthur Augustus.

Pug stared at him, and then grinned. In all his career as tramp, footpad, and sneak-thief, Pug thought that he had never come across a softer specimen than this. He anticipated no trouble with him. The mere sight of Pug's knucky fist would be enough. If it was not, Pug was quite prepared to land that knucky fist in the middle of D'Arcy's aristocratic features.

"Do I want anything?" repeated Pug. "I fancy so, you young idjit! I want all you've got about you, and sharp! And don't yell—if you do, it will be the last 'owl you'll give for some time. I'd knock your block off as soon as look at you."

"Bai Jove!"

Pug picked up the bag in his left hand, and came closer to Arthur Augustus, with his right clenched and raised.

"Nar then!" he rapped. "Turn out your pockets—sharp! I ain't got any time to waste on you."

It dawned upon Arthur Augustus that the frowsy man was a footpad, and that his intention was robbery—with or without violence, according to whether resistance was offered or not.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus, startled.

"You 'ear me?" snarled Mr. Judson.

Arthur Augustus's noble eye gleamed through his eyeglass. "Soft" as he looked to Mr. Judson, he was by no means so soft as Pug supposed. Physically, the burly, thick-set ruffian was a match for half-a-dozen of him. But Arthur Augustus did not even think of submitting to robbery.

"You howwid wuffian," he exclaimed. "Dwop that bag at once! Do you heah! Put down my bag, you wascal."

"Wot!" ejaculated Pug, staring.

"Put down that bag at once, or I will knock you down!" exclaimed Augustus, hotly. "If you fancy that you can wob me, you wottah, you are vewy much mistaken. Put that bag down."

For a moment, Pug stared at him, quite surprised. Then an extremely unpleasant expression came over his unshaven face. He dropped the bag, to have both hands free, and came straight at Arthur Augustus. One jolt to the jaw from that knucky fist would suffice.

Had that jolt landed, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would have known nothing of what happened next. But it did not land. The St. Jim's junior could not have stopped it—but he dodged it with an active spring aside, and a heavy fist swept empty space.

"Gor!" panted Mr. Judson. He swung round at Arthur Augustus, and rushed at him—and had he not caught his foot in a trailing root, that rush would have overwhelmed the swell of St. Jim's. But by great good fortune, Mr. Judson did catch his foot in a trailing root, and he pitched headlong forward, and crashed fairly at Arthur Augustus's feet.

"Oh, cwikey!" gasped Arthur Augustus, staring down at him.

"Gor!" gurgled Mr. Judson.

He heaved up.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not, perhaps, always quick on the uptake. But in the stress of the moment, his noble brain worked quickly. In a manner of seconds, the frowsy ruffian would be on his feet again, and once on his feet, D'Arcy's number was up. Arthur Augustus did not give the ruffian the necessary few seconds. As the red, savage, bristly face was upturned, Pug heaving up, Arthur Augustus hit out, with all the strength he could put into the punch, and landed his clenched fist in Judson's right eye.

It was a tremendous punch, and Mr. Judson was unfavourably placed to receive it. It fairly crashed into his eye, and rolled him over. He sprawled in the grass yelling frantically.

Arthur Augustus did not linger.

He had knocked down that hefty, muscular tramp. Only too well he knew what would happen when Mr. Judson got up again, if he was still within reach. To run from so unpleasant and disreputable a rascal was not agreeable—but to be smashed up under a rain of blows from those knucky fists was still less so. Arthur Augustus did not hesitate. He clutched up his bag and bolted. Like a deer he sped through the trees in the direction of the tow-path.

He had nearly a minute's grace. Pug Judson sprawled, spluttering, his hand to an agonized eye. He sat up, still caressing that eye—swollen, and already blackening. When he did, at last, scramble to his feet, Pug's face was like unto that of a demon in a pantomime. He gave a savage glare round—with one eye—and then charged after Arthur Augustus.

Brushing and crackling in the wood guided him. Burly and heavy as he was, Pug ran fast, only longing to get his hands on the schoolboy who had knocked him down and blacked his eye. Had it been a long race, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's last state would have been worse than his first, for Pug assuredly would have had him. Luckily, it was a short race—the tow-path was near: and Mr. Judson, breathing profanity, was still a dozen yards behind, when the swell of St. Jim's bolted out of the trees, into the midst of two or three dozen loungers by the river. And Mr. Judson came to a sudden halt, as he found himself in the public view.

Promptly, he vanished into the wood again.

His intended victim had escaped, and Mr. Judson had to be content with retreat, taking his black eye with him.

"Gor!" breathed Pug, as he went. "Gor! If I come across that young toff agin—Gor!"

Mr. Judson scuttled away through the wood, guided by only one eye—the other shut and swollen and black. He hoped, indeed yearned, to meet that young "toff" again: in the meantime, he had a fearful black eye to remember him by.

On the tow-path, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy slackened to a walk. Occasionally he sucked his knuckles, as he walked on up the river. He had barked them on Pug Judson's unpleasant face, and they felt rather hurt—though not so much so as Pug's face. But he was feeling, on the whole, quite merry and bright, when he arrived in sight of the tall spreading oak-tree on Togg's Eyot.

CHAPTER VI

ON THE ISLAND

TOM MERRY shaded his eyes with his hand, and looked up the shining river. "That's it!" he said.

"Looks like it!" agreed Blake.

"Gussy wouldn't be on the spot to tell us, of course," remarked Monty Lowther. "But he said there was a big oak—and that must be it. If we land on the wrong island, I daresay the natives will tell us where we get off."

Tom Merry laughed.

"That's it all right," he said. "Give way!"

The St. Jim's boat pulled on. They knew that Togg's Eyot was somewhere between Staines and Bell Weir Lock: and the spreading oak was, as D'Arcy had told them, a landmark. High and stately, with vast spreading branches, it towered over the little eyot, in the midst of smaller trees and bushes. Certainly it did not occur to the boat's crew that, from the masses of foliage of the great oak, eyes might be watching them as they came. The School House fellows had forgotten all about Figgins and Co., since St. Jim's had broken up for the summer holidays.

"Jolly, and no mistake," said Dig, as the boat floated under shady branches to a grassy margin.

"Topping!" said Manners. "Lucky I brought my camera. I shall get some good pictures here. I wonder whether I shall be able to get films at Staines."

"I wonder!" said Monty Lowther, with deep sarcasm. "It won't be much of a holiday if you can't get films for your camera."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Grunt, from Manners. As a matter of fact, Harry Manners did not see how there could be much in a holiday, minus a camera.

Tom Merry caught an overhanging branch, and, standing up, guided the boat to the little landing-place. There he tied up, and the six juniors jumped ashore.

They looked round then with great satisfaction.

The little island, green and shady, in the wide river that rolled gleaming between leafy banks, was undoubtedly a very attractive spot.

There was level green grass round the landing-place, but the greater part of the eyot was thickly wooded. Between the water's edge and the trees, stood a small hut—the bathing-hut Arthur Augustus had mentioned in Study No. 6. It was large enough to accommodate two or three fellows: but for the whole party, the tent was needed.

The door of the bathing hut was padlocked. The grass before it had a rather trampled look, and Jack Blake scanned it curiously.

"Didn't Gussy tell us that there was nobody on this island, since the Toggs man sold it to his pater?" he exclaimed.

"He did," answered Tom Merry. "What—?"

"Well, this jolly well looks as if somebody has been tramping around here," said Blake.

"By gum! It does! Picnickers landed here, perhaps!" said Tom. "After all, it's a jolly spot for a picnic, and no harm done."

"Can't get into the hut," remarked Herries. "Gussy's got the key on him—and he won't blow in yet awhile."

"We'll get the boat unloaded while we're waiting for Gussy to blow in," said Tom Merry.

Blake scanned the padlock on the door of the bathing-hut.

"We needn't wait for Gussy to blow in, to get into the hut," he said. "Somebody's been in already."

"It's locked," said Dig.

"That padlock's been cracked open, and shoved together again to look as if it's locked," answered Blake. "Look here."

He snapped the padlock open. Evidently, it was unsecured.

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom Merry. "That's pretty plain proof that somebody has been here."

Blake threw the door of the hut wide open, and the juniors looked in.

The hut was empty, save for half-a-dozen deck-chairs stacked in one corner. Blake gave a sniff, as he stepped in.

"Somebody's had an oil stove here," he remarked.

In one corner of the hut, there were plain signs where an oil-stove had stood, and there was a lingering and unmistakable aroma of paraffin. There could be no doubt now that some person or persons unknown had been camping on the island, and that they had made use of the hut. Other signs met the eyes of the juniors as they looked round—two or three burnt matches, a fragment of egg-shell, and a spot of orange-peel. And there were many traces of muddy shoes on the wooden planks of the floor.

"Picnickers, I suppose," said Tom. "Myriads of them up and down the river at this time of the year."

"Might have run into them when we landed," said Blake. "Some of these signs are pretty fresh—I'll bet they were here to-day. Like their cheek!"

"Never mind—they're gone now," said Tom, cheerily. "After all, this is a

jolly spot for camping—can't blame a boating-party for landing, when there was nobody about."

"Looks to me as if they didn't just land," grunted Blake. "Looks as if they made a regular camp of it. Might have been here for days, from the look of things. And they were here quite lately—I shouldn't wonder if they saw us coming, and cleared off."

"They wouldn't know we were coming to this eyot, if they saw us in the boat," said Manners.

"No! I suppose not!" admitted Blake. "But they haven't been long gone—I can see that."

"Well, they're gone, anyhow," said Tom. "Now let's get the boat unloaded, and the tent up. We'll have tea ready for Gussy when he blows in. We'll shove the oil-stove in here, and the cooking things, and the grub-box. Now, then, you fellows—all hands shift cargo!"

And the juniors proceeded to unload the boat: every now and then glancing across at the tow-path, to see whether Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in the offing. The camping outfit was taken ashore and sorted out, and a spot marked out for the erection of the tent, in which seven fellows were to sleep, and in which, as Jack Blake remarked, they would be rather like sardines in a can.

Manners disinterred the leather case, containing his precious camera, from the boat's locker, and carried it into the hut, where he hung it on a hook in the wall. Then he lent a hand with less important gear. Monty Lowther set up the oil-stove in the corner of the hut, which, to judge by the lingering aroma, had been used by the unknown campers for the same purpose. Then all hands set to work erecting the tent. Many hands made light work, and the tent was soon up, and ground-sheets, blankets, and Gussy's sleeping-bag packed within.

By that time, Tom Merry and Co. expected to see Arthur Augustus: but among the figures passing and re-passing on the tow-path across the stream, the elegant figure of the swell of St. Jim's was not yet visible. Monty Lowther stood looking out on the sunny river, and the passing craft, with a thoughtful expression on his face. Then he turned to Manners.

"This would make a jolly good picture, old chap," he said. "Why not a snap to stick up in the study at St. Jim's next term?"

Manners glanced at him, a little surprised, and rather pleased. This was the first time on record that Monty had displayed a keen interest in photography. His remarks on the subject of cameras were generally flippant, and often sarcastic. It was quite pleasant to see him taking an interest in a subject that was, in Manners' opinion at least, among the most important in the universe.

"Not a bad idea, old fellow," assented Manners. "I'll get my camera." And he cut into the hut.

Monty Lowther bestowed a wink upon Tom Merry, Blake, Herries, and Dig. What that wink implied, the four juniors did not know: though they could guess that the funny man of the Shell was "up" to something.

Manners came cheerfully back, carrying the leather case by the strap. But the cheerful expression faded from his face, as if wiped away by a duster, as he opened the case. He stared into it blankly. It was empty.

"Oh!" gasped Manners.

He stared and stared into that empty leather case, in amazement and dismay. But he could not stare a camera back into it. The camera was gone.

"Anything up?" asked Lowther.

"My camera—!" gasped Manners.

"Short of films, or what."

"No—no—it's the camera! It's not here!" exclaimed Manners. "I'm absolutely certain I packed it in the case. I could swear to that. Did you fellows ever know me to be careless with my camera?"

"Never!" said Tom Merry, laughing. "Anything but that!"

"Sure it isn't in the case?" asked Monty.

"You silly owl, do you think I can't see whether a camera-case has a camera in it or not?" hooted Manners. "I must have taken it out at the last minute for something—I just can't understand it! My camera's been left behind!"

Manners made that announcement, as if announcing that the crack of doom was impending.

"Well, perhaps we could manage to rub along without it, somehow!" suggested Jack Blake, with mild sarcasm.

Manners looked at him.

"Fathead!" he said.

"Well, if it isn't here, it isn't!" remarked Herries. "After all, what does it matter?"

"Idiot!"

"Calling fellows names won't fetch the camera along!" remarked Digby.

"Chucklehead!"

"My dear chap—!" said Tom.

"Don't be an ass, Tom," said Manners, crossly. "This is supposed to be a holiday, isn't it? I shall want my camera."

"It has been known, since history was first recorded, for people to take holidays without cameras!" murmured Monty Lowther.

"I suppose I can't expect any sense from you fellows," said Manners. He looked at his watch. "If I get back to Staines at once, I can get a train—I can get back here some time to-morrow—"

"Oh, my hat!" ejaculated Tom.

"Goodness knows where I left that camera, if I didn't pack it in the case as I thought I did," said Manners, anxiously. "I just can't understand it—it's the first time such a thing has ever happened. I'd better take the boat at once—"

"But we've got to ferry Gussy across, when he shows up!" exclaimed Blake.

"Don't jaw," said Manners. "I've no time to listen to jaw."

"Look here—!" bawled Herries.

Manners did not "look there". He slung the empty camera-case over his shoulder, and made for the tied-up boat. Picking up Gussy, when he showed up on the tow-path, was evidently, in Manner's opinion, a trifle light as air, in comparison with that precious camera. He was going back for that camera, and all lesser considerations had to fade out of the picture.

"Manners, old man!" exclaimed Tom Merry. "You—Oh! Monty, you ass!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Blake and Herries and Dig.

Monty Lowther's right hand had been behind him. He now brought it into view, and there was something in it. That something was a camera. He held it up, with a cheery grin on his face.

"O.K. Manners," he yelled. "I've found it."

Manners jumped, and spun round.

"Fuf—fuf—found it!" he stuttered.

"Look!"

Manners looked—and made a rush. He grabbed the precious camera. The expression on his speaking countenance made the juniors yell.

"I—I—what—where was it?" gasped Manners. "It's my camera—it ought to have been in the case—where did you find it?"

"In the case," answered Lowther, affably.

"In—in—in the case?" stuttered Manners. "Why, you funny ass—you practical joking idiot—you blithering cuckoo—playing tricks with my camera—why, you footling fathead—you—you—you—you."— Words failed Manners, and he proceeded to action. Tom Merry grabbed him, just in time, as he hurled himself at Monty Lowther.

"Hold on, old chap—!" gasped Tom.

"Leggo!" roared Manners. "I'm going to punch him—I'm going—will you leggo, Tom, you fathead?"

But Tom Merry did not let go: instead of that, Blake and Herries and Dig added their grasp to Tom's: and Manners was safely held till he agreed to cut out the punching. An elegant figure being sighted on the tow-path by that time, the Fourth-formers pushed off in the boat to ferry Arthur Augustus D'Arcy across, leaving the Terrible Three on the island, and Manners telling Monty Lowther what he thought of him, in a voice that could be heard on both banks of the Thames.

CHAPTER VII

CAMPING OUT!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY stepped from the boat, as Blake tied up at the little landing-place. He jammed his eyeglass into his eye, and glanced at the three Shell fellows. All was not calm and bright, at the moment, on Togg's

Eyot. Monty Lowther was smiling sweetly, it was true: but Harry Manners was glaring at him as if he could have bitten him: and Tom Merry, between the two, was making soothing gestures and uttering placatory murmurs. Manners had ceased to tell his playful chum what he thought of him, having run out of breath—but his looks were as expressive as his verbal eloquence.

"Anythin' the mattah, deah boys?" asked Arthur Augustus. "I twust that you fellows are not wowin'."

"Manners seems a bit shirty," said Lowther, shaking his head. "He couldn't find his camera, and I found it for him—"

"Look here, I'm jolly well going to punch him!" roared Manners. "Ger-raway, Tom."

"Bai Jove! That's wathah ungwateful, Mannahs, if Lowthah found your camewah when you had lost it—"

"Chump!"

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"For goodness sake, let's hear the last of that camera," exclaimed Blake. "What's the matter with your knuckles, Gussy? We're just going to have tea, if you're hungry—no need to chew your knuckles—"

"I am not chewin' my knuckles, Blake. But they are wathah sore—I barked them, hittin' a twamp in the eye. I wathah think it must have blacked his eye, and it has left my knuckles wathah waw."

Six fellows gazed at Arthur Augustus. Manners even seemed to forget the exciting episode of the camera for a moment.

"You've been hitting a tramp in the eye!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Isn't he the limit?" sighed Blake. "The minute he gets out of our sight he lands in trouble. We ought to keep him on a chain. I've said so lots of times."

"Weally, Blake, you ass—"

"What on earth have you been scrapping with tramps for?" asked Monty Lowther.

"I have not exactly been scwappin' with twamps, Lowthah. It was when I changed my clobbah in that wood," explained Arthur Augustus. "A huge hulkin-wuffian twied to wob me, so I knocked him down—"

"You knocked down a huge hulking ruffian!" yelled Herries.

"Yaas, wathah."

"And he let you do it?" asked Dig. "Must have been a jolly good-natured huge hulking ruffian."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"As a mattah of fact, I was wathah lucky. He would have been wathah more than a match for me, I think," confessed Arthur Augustus. "But, you see, he twipped ovah a woot, so I was able to land him in the eye befoah he got his paws on me, and then I don't mind admittin' that I cut. You see, he

was vevy huge and vevy hulkin', and it seemed only pwudent to cut while I had the chance. The howwid bwute wushed aftah me, and I can tell you fellows that I was wathah glad to get back to the tow-path and among a cwowd."

"Oh, you ass!" said Tom.

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"We won't let you out of our sight again," said Tom. "Next time you try to wreck a launch, and get a ducking, we'll hang you out on a line to dry."

"Wats! I must unpack some cold cweam now, to wub on my knuckles—they are weally vevy waw, aftah punchin' that bwute in the eye."

While Arthur Augustus attended to his noble knuckles, the other fellows attended to tea: and a cheery party sat round in deck-chairs, or in the thick grass, to dispose of it.

Arthur Augustus glanced, every now and then, at the tent. Some campers would have been rather glad to find the work done when they arrived in camp: but the swell of St. Jim's seemed a little dubious. Arthur Augustus had a fixed belief that his own supervising eye was required in all operations—a belief that was not in the least shared by his friends.

"I see that you've got the tent up, deah boys," he remarked, after awhile.

"Just noticed it?" asked Blake. "Observant chap, Gussy! You ought to be a detective, old bean."

"I was thinkin', Blake—"

"Gammon!"

"I was goin' to say that I was thinkin—"

"Tell us an easier one!" suggested Monty Lowther.

"Pway let a fellow speak, you chaps! I was thinkin' that it would have been wathah bettah to leave it till I awwived. You have to be vevy careful in puttin' up a tent, you know—that is one of the most important things in campin' out," explained Arthur Augustus. "Don't you think it would have been bettah to wait till you could put it up undah my instwuctions?"

"Ass!" said six voices, speaking as one.

"Well, it would be no joke if it tumbled down on our nappahs, in the middle of the night," said Arthur Augustus, shaking his head. "That would be vevy disturbin', especially if it was wainin'."

"It's just barely possible that we know how to put up a tent, Gussy," remarked Tom Merry.

"Even without instructions from the biggest ass at St. Jim's," said Manners, with a nod.

"Weally, Mannahs—"

"Have another sandwich, Gussy," said Blake.

"Thank you vevy much, deah boy, but I have had enough."

"Oh! Do have another," urged Blake. "Look here, here's one with a ghost of ham in it! Do try it, old chap."

"I have weally had enough, Blake."

"Well, have this jam sandwich to wind up! It's jolly good—real raspberry jam, made of the best beetroot—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I am sure it is vewy nice, Blake, but weally I have had enough—I can't go on eatin' for evah like Fatty Wynn."

"Try some nuts, then," urged Blake. "I'll crack them for you."

"You are vewy kind, deah boy, but I don't want any more. You seem vewy anxious for me to go on eatin'," said Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"I am," admitted Blake.

"I weally do not see why, Blake."

"Because while you're eating you can't talk!" explained Blake. "Do have another sandwich, old chap."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You uttah ass!" roared Arthur Augustus. "I wepeat that I do not wegard you fellows as capable of puttin' up a tent on your own: and if it falls down on your heads duwin' the night, it will serve you wight! So wats!"

And the subject of the tent dropped: though Arthur Augustus continued to give it a dubious glance from time to time.

After tea, the St. Jim's party spent a happy hour or two in exploring the little island. Small as the eyot was, there were many nooks and corners, among the trees and bushes, and it was easy for them to lose sight of one another. In several places they found "sign" of previous campers—here and there, firewood had been cut, and in one spot a burnt patch showed where a camp-fire had been lighted. Whoever the unknown campers were, they seemed to have spent some time on the eyot—probably several days. And many of the traces were so recent, that Blake was confirmed in his belief that the intruders had only just cleared off before the St. Jim's party arrived.

They gathered for supper at the landing-place, in the sunset. Many craft passed the eyot, going up or down the Thames: and innumerable walkers passed and repassed on the towing-path. Arthur Augustus was glancing across at the tow-path, when he suddenly uttered a startled exclamation.

"Bai Jove! There he is!"

"Eh! Who?" asked Tom Merry, lazily.

"That twamp!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, excitedly. "The bwute who attacked me."

Arthur Augustus jumped to his feet, and pointed a finger at a disreputable figure lounging along the towing-path on the bank of the Thames. Tom Merry and Co. jumped up also, and they all stared across at Mr. Pug Judson.

"Looks a pretty specimen!" said Blake. "By gum! He's got a black eye! Did you give him that black eye, Gussy?"

"I wathah think I did," chuckled Arthur Augustus.

Pug Judson, catching sight of the crowd on the margin of the little island,

stared across at them—and in the bright sunset, his black eye showed up to great advantage. It was swollen, and black as the ace of spades—it was clear that Gussy must have landed a remarkably good one in that eye!

The tramp's scowling face was indifferent, as he stared across—but suddenly that look of indifference vanished, and his scowl deepened, and his sound eye glinted, as he spotted an elegant figure in the little crowd. The savage hostility that blazed in his face, as he recognized Arthur Augustus, was quite startling. He raised a knucky fist and shook it at the St. Jim's crowd.

"He knows you again, Gussy!" grinned Blake.

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Nice man to meet in a lonely lane," said Tom. "We mustn't let Gussy go wandering again."

"Wats!" said Arthur Augustus, disdainfully. "I should certainly not take any notice of such a wotten wuffian. Bai Jove! He seems in a vewy bad tempah."

There was no doubt about that. Mr. Judson was shaking a brawny fist, and scowling like a demon. It was quite plain that he would have enjoyed planting that brawny fist in the middle of Arthur Augustus's aristocratic features. The swell of St. Jim's gave him a look of superb disdain, which certainly did not have the effect of improving Pug's temper. He brandished his fist, and roared:

"Wait till I get 'old of you!"

Then he slouched away, and disappeared up the tow-path.

"Good widdance to bad wubbish!" said Arthur Augustus.

Fewer and fewer passers appeared on the banks, and the craft on the river thinned out, as the sun sank lower in the west, and the shadows deepened over the Thames valley. And Tom Merry and Co. at last, turned into their blankets in the tent, for a peaceful night's repose—which was not, as it happened, destined to be so peaceful as they happily anticipated.

CHAPTER VIII

TROUBLE WITH A TENT!

TOM MERRY awoke suddenly.

He hardly knew what had awakened him. Something seemed to be squashing down on him, flapping and wallowing over him. He started up, and his head banged into something soft and clinging. The darkness was like the inside of a hat.

"What—?" gasped Tom.

"Oooooogh!" came a splutter from the darkness. "What's up? Who's that? Stop kicking me, you maniac."

"Gweat Scott! What's the mattah? Oh, cwikey!"

"Look out!"

"I say what's up? What idiot is shoving his hoof into my eye? Oh, crikey!"

Confused voices were heard on all sides. Tom struggled with whatever it was that was flapping over him and pinning him down, and realized that it was loose canvas. It billowed and wallowed.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom. "The tent—it's down!"

That was the simple explanation of the mystery. The tent had collapsed on the occupants, and seven sleepers had awakened in a state of wild confusion. Quite unlike the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, the seven sleepers of Togg's Eyot jumped into wide wakefulness.

Tom Merry struggled up. Other fellows were sprawling and struggling. Somebody's foot caught him in the ribs, and he yelled.

"Ow! Look out, fathead!"

"What's up?" yelled Blake. "Is it the tent—?"

"It's the tent!" yelled Monty Lowther. "But nothing's up—it's down!"

"You silly chump!" howled Blake. It was no time for Monty's jests.

"Can't you help being funny, you blitherer?"

"I say, gewwoff my legs, will you!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "Who's spwawlin' ovah my legs! Pway gewwoff!"

For some minutes there was wild confusion in the camp. Seven fellows, in pitchy darkness, rolled and wrestled and struggled to get out of billowing, wallowing canvas. They bumped into one another, elbowed one another, stumbled over one another, pushed and shoved one another. Panting and gasping and yelling made a chorus that echoed over the eyot.

Tom Merry was the first to struggle out to freedom. He emerged into the open air, and the glimmer of the summer stars, and staggered to his feet.

"Oh, my hat!" he ejaculated, as he stared at the billowing canvas that still covered his struggling, wriggling, kicking comrades.

The tent was a wreck. It really looked as if all the tent-pegs must have pulled out at once, at one fell swoop. The night had brought a wind on the river: but the wind did not account for it. It looked as if Arthur Augustus's doubts about that tent and its erection had been justified. It was a complete collapse.

Blake wriggled out, and Herries and Dig followed him. Then they dragged flapping canvas away, and Monty Lowther was rescued.

Manners was a little more difficult to rescue. His struggling in the dark had rolled him up in canvas, and he had to be unwound, like a mummy. But he was got out at last, and sat in the grass gasping for breath.

Only Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remained in the collapsed tent. D'Arcy was the only one of the party provided with a sleeping-bag. It was easy enough to slip into that sleeping-bag. But it seemed difficult to slip out of it, with the canvas billowing over him.

"Pway lend me a hand, deah boys," came a breathless howl. "Pway dwag that wotten canvas off. I can't get out of this beastly bag! Blake—Hewwies—Dig—where are you, you asses? Can't you lend a fellow a hand?"

Six fellows dragged flapping canvas away, and the sleeping-bag was revealed, with Arthur Augustus's noble head sticking out of it. He blinked in the starlight, spluttering for breath.

"Oh, cwumbs!" he gasped. "I can't get out of this wotten bag! I think the stwing at the neck has got knotted, or somethin'—I am a pwisonah in this bag! What are you gwinnin' at, Blake, you ass? Will you help a fellow out of this beastly bag, or will you not help a fellow out of this beastly bag?"

"Isn't it Gussy all over to tie himself up in a bag?" sighed Blake.

"You uttah ass! I have not tied myself up in a bag!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "It has got knotted somehow, and I cannot get out. Will you help me out of this beastly bag, Jack Blake, instead of standin' there makin' idiotic wemarks?"

"Oh, pull him out," said Blake. "You take the end of the bag, Herries, and I'll take hold of his ears, and jerk him out—"

"Leave my yahs alone, you wuffian!" yelled Arthur Augustus.

"Oh, all right! I'll get a grip on your hair—"

"Bai Jove! If you touch my hair, I will give you a punch in the eye! I wufuse to be dwagged out of this bag by my hair!" shrieked Arthur Augustus.

Tom Merry, laughing, got a grip on Arthur Augustus's shoulders, and Herries dragged at the sleeping-bag; and Arthur Augustus came out of it like a wrinkle out of a shell. He sprawled and spluttered.

"Well, this is a sell," said Tom Merry, surveying the wreck of the tent. "I thought we had it up safe enough. You put in a lot of the tent-pegs, Blake! Think you hammered them in safe?"

"I know I did!" snorted Blake. "But you put in some—I have my doubts about those."

Arthur Augustus sat up.

"What did I tell you?" he hooted. "I jolly well knew that it wasn't all wight. You ought to have waited for me, befoah you put up the tent. You could not expect to do it without pwopah instwuction fwom a fellow who undahstands. Now look what's happened!"

"Can it!" hooted Blake.

"I wufuse to can it, Blake! I warned you that the tent would pwobably come down, and now it has come down. I twust that you will not deny that I told you so!"

Six fellows glared at Arthur Augustus. They had been quite satisfied with the way they had put up the tent, without either assistance or instruction from the swell of St. Jim's. Still, there was no doubt that it had come down: and no doubt that Arthur Augustus had told them so. Gussy's reminder that he had told them so did not, however, seem to produce any gratifying or soothing

effect on them. They looked at Arthur Augustus rather as if they could have eaten him.

"Anothah time," continued Arthur Augustus. "I twust that you will listen to me!" Arthur Augustus rose to his feet, still rather breathless. "I don't want to wub it in, but it is vevy fatheaded not to listen to instwuction fwom a fellow who undahstands the whole thing."

Blake breathed hard.

"What about chucking him into the river?" he asked. "It's quite handy."

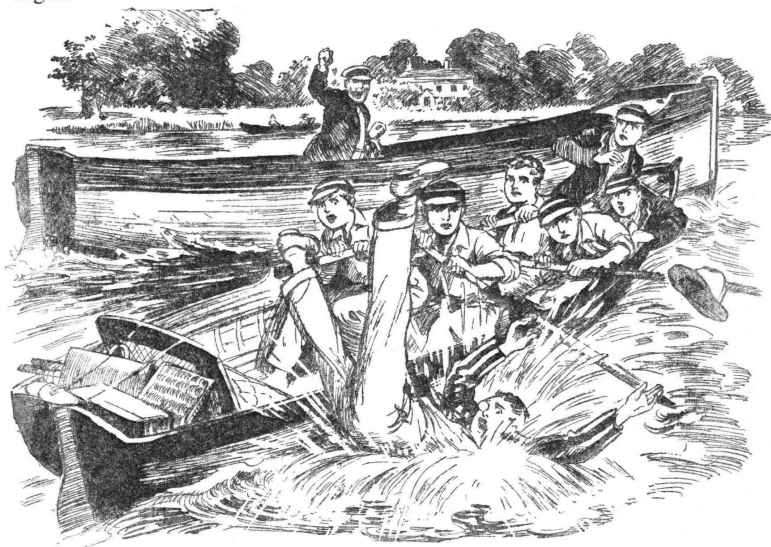
"Weally, Blake—"

"Or we might head him up in that sleeping-bag of his," said Monty Lowther, thoughtfully. "Then he could keep on talking without bothering anybody."

"Weally, Lowthah—"

"Well, we've got to get the tent up again," said Tom. "Blessed if I know how the dashed thing came down—but we've got to get it up again."

"Yaas, wathah! And this time, you can do it undah my eye," said Arthur Augustus. "I will stand wound and give diwctions, and then it will be all wight."



"Man overboard!"

"You're asking for it, Gussy!" said Blake, warningly.

"I twust, Blake, that you are not thinkin' of diswegardin' my instwuctions, aftah the tent has fallen down on our heads! Do you want it to come down again before mornin'?"

"He's got to have it," said Blake. "Shove his head into the sleeping-bag."

"Hear, hear!"

"Bai Jove! I wefuse—I say—yawoooh! Welease me at once, you uttah wuffians!" yelled Arthur Augustus, as six exasperated juniors grasped him as one man. "You know vewy well that I told you so—you all heard me say—yawoooh!"

Kicking wildly, Arthur Augustus was shoved head first into the fleecy sleeping-bag! It was pulled down round him to his noble ankles, and his voice died away in a suffocated splutter.

Tom Merry and Co. set to work on the re-erection of the tent, in the light of the stars. Every now and then they grinned round at a strange object in the grass—a sleeping-bag that seemed endowed with life, that rolled and bumped and tumbled and wriggled. Only Arthur Augustus's feet projected from the neck of the bag, and the swell of St. Jim's seemed to experience great difficulties in crawling out of it backwards.

He succeeded at last, emerging with his hair like a mop, his face crimson, gurgling for breath. But he was in no state to give directions for tent-building—for quite a long time he sat in the grass, gurgling for wind. Once more the tent was put up without expert assistance from Arthur Augustus.

"Come on, Gussy," called out Blake, when all was ready. "You're not going to sit there all night, are you?"

"I shall not entah that tent, Blake! It will pwobably fall down again—"

"Sitting it out for the rest of the night?" asked Lowther.

"I shall take my sleepin'-bag into the hut. I shall not twust myself in a tent you fellows have put up. I wegard you all as clumsy asses."

"Fathead!"

"Wats!"

Six fellows turned in again, in the tent. Arthur Augustus, having recovered his noble wind, carried his sleeping-bag into the hut, inserted himself into it—feet first, this time—and went to sleep. Slumber descended once more upon Togg's Eyot, and seven schoolboys slept peacefully, lulled by the murmur of the rolling Thames.

That state of blissful repose lasted about an hour. Then Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was awakened by strange, startling sounds from the night. He sat up and listened. Sounds of struggling and breathless voices reached his ears.

"Oh, my hat!"

"What the thump—"

"Look out—"

"It's down again!"

"Oh, holy smoke!"

Arthur Augustus peered from the hut. The glitter of the summer stars showed him a mass of billowing, wallowing canvas, with legs sticking out from under it in all directions, and suffocated voices came from the wreck, yelling and spluttering. The tent was down again!

Arthur Augustus chuckled! Tom Merry and Co. had disdained his expert assistance a second time, and a second time the tent had collapsed on their heads! And Arthur Augustus, chuckling, returned to his sleeping-bag, and left them to it.

CHAPTER IX

A MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE!

BRIGHT morning on the Thames!

There were cheery faces and cheery voices on Togg's Eyot.

Tom Merry and Co. on holiday, seemed to be enjoying life. They had turned out at quite an early hour—despite the interruptions to slumber during the night. Twice had the tent collapsed upon them, unexpectedly and inexplicably—so very inexplicably, indeed, that they could almost have fancied that somebody had come along in the dark and unhooked ropes and loosened tent-pegs!

Had they been camping on shore, it certainly would have looked like it. But on an island it did not seem possible. So the persistent collapsing of the tent remained inexplicable.

However those little nocturnal misadventures had not affected their cheery spirits. They turned out bright and early, enjoyed a dip in the Thames, and gathered for breakfast. It was, they all agreed, jolly on the island. Sitting round on logs or deck-chairs or camp-stools, under shady branches, they had a wide view of the shining river, already dotted with early craft, of the green banks and the rolling woods. Over breakfast they discussed the programme for the day, which, so far as Manners at least was concerned, included taking photographs of scenes on the Thames. There was a limit to Harry Manners' enthusiasm as amateur photographer; and had there not been a limit to his films, the camera might have been clicking all day long.

"What about Wunnymede?" asked Arthur Augustus.

"Is that a conundrum?" inquired Monty Lowther.

"Certainly not! Wunnymede is a vewy historowical spot, and within easy weach fwom heah," explained Arthur Augustus. "Sewewal centuwies ago—I forget how many—King What's-his-name signed the Great Thingumbob at Wunnymede. It is vewy historowical indeed."

"We haven't had King What's-his-name in history class with Linton at St. Jim's," said Tom Merry, gravely. "Was he King What's-his-name the First, or King What's-his-name the Second, or what?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, I did not mean that his name was King What's-his-name, but I forget it for the moment."

"John, perhaps?" suggested Manners, sarcastically.

"Yaas, wathah," agreed Arthur Augustus, "that was the chap! King John—I wemembah now that Spokeshave—I mean Shakespeare—w'ote a play about him."

"Sure you've got that right?" asked Manners, still sarcastic.

"Well, I wathah think so, Mannahs—I am suah I wecollect it—we have had it in English Litewature with Lathom at St. Jim's. Yaas, I feel quite suah about it—it was King John all wight."

"And he signed the Great Thingumbob," said Blake, thoughtfully. "Are you sure whether it was a thumgumbob? or a thingummy?"

"Wats! It was a gweat somethin-or-othah, but I wathah forget what it was, for the moment—"

"Possibly the Great Charter!" suggested Manners, with more sarcasm.

"That's wight! The Gweat Charter—othahwise called Magna Charta," said Arthur Augustus, with a nod, "Charta of course is Latin—"

"Not always," said Monty Lowther.

"Weally, Lowthah, a Latin word is always a Latin word, and cannot vewy well evah be anythin' else."

"My dear man, there are English carters," answered Lowther. "Why, I saw one in Staines yesterday."

"You uttah ass, it is not that kind of a carter!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "You weally don't seem to learn vewy much in the Shell, Lowthah."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Pewwaps you are makin' one of your wotten puns, though—"

"Not at all: one of my rather good ones," explained Lowther.

"Wats! Well, you fellows, King John signed Magna Charta on the island at Wunnymede, and it is feahfully histowical—"

"He didn't sign it," said Manners. "He put his seal to it. He couldn't write."

"Oh, wats—I don't care a wap whethah he signed it or sealed it—whatevah it was, he did it on the island at Wunnymede, which has been feahfully histowical evah since. We ought to wow down to Wunnymede and give it the once-ovah, as the cwadle of fweedom and all that."

"It's not certain whether John did it on the island, or on one of the banks," said Manners. "Nobody knows really."

"Perhaps the Great Charter was taken to one of the banks afterwards," suggested Monty Lowther.

"I don't see why it should, Lowthah," said Arthur Augustus, puzzled. "If it was signed, or sealed, on the island, why should it be taken to one of the banks aftahwards?"

"Much safer in a bank," explained Lowther. "Valuable documents are generally kept in banks."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! You keep on makin' wotten puns one aftah anothah, Lowthah! Is there a single subject you have not made a pun on?" hooted Arthur Augustus.

"Yes—I don't think I've ever made a pun on an old bachelor," said Monty, thoughtfully.

"An old bachelor?" repeated Arthur Augustus.

"Yes: an old bachelor is a single subject."

"Oh, cwikey! Pway give us a west! Now, what about a wun down to Wunnymede, deah boys. You can take a photogwaph of the place, Mannahs," added Arthur Augustus: a suggestion that interested Manners immediately.

"Not a bad idea, you men," said Manners. "I'll get my camera." And Manners walked across to the hut, where the camera in its case had been left on the hook.

"Runnymede it is," said Tom Merry, cheerily. "We get a pull on the river—that's the chief thing—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy, the chief thing is to wevive histowical associations, and weflect on a gweat pewiod of English histowy. While we are there, I will tell you fellows, if you like, all I wemembah of the histowy of those stiwwing times."

"We'll let you do that," agreed Jack Blake. "It won't take you a minute."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Weally, Blake, you ass—"

Arthur Augustus was interrupted. Manners had gone into the hut for his camera. He emerged with an excited expression on his face. Six fellows stared at him, wondering why he was coming back without his camera, and why he was looking so excited.

Manners did not explain. His view seemed to be that it was a moment for action, not for words. Red with wrath, he came striding back: and, without a word, grasped hold of Monty Lowther, and got his head into chancery.

Thump! thump!

Lowther gave a startled roar. He struggled wildly in the grasp of his chum, while the other fellows jumped up in amazement.

"Manners!" exclaimed Tom Merry.

"Bai Jove! What's the mattah, Mannahs?"

Monty Lowther yelled and struggled frantically. But his neck was securely enclosed in Manners' left arm, and Manners punched and punched with his right.

"Leago!" shrieked Lowther. "Gone mad?"

"Where's my camera!" yelled Manners, punching.

"Blow your camera! Bless your camera! I'll chuck your rotten camera into the river! Leago!" roared Lowther. "Oh, crikey! Draggimoff!"

"Pewwaps we had bettah westwain Mannahs, you fellows—"

"Manners, you mad ass, stop it—"

The juniors rushed at Manners. They grasped him on all sides, and dragged him away from Lowther by main force.

Lowther tottered, and sat down in the grass. He sat gasping, for breath, with his hand to his nose. His excited chum had got in quite a few hefty punches before he was dragged off. And even now he did not seem satisfied. He struggled in the grasp of many hands, striving to break loose, evidently anxious to get at Lowther again, and administer some more of the same.

"Let me go, you dummies!" roared Manners. "I tell you I'll punch him—I'll spifigate him—playing tricks with a fellow's camera—"

"Oh! That camera!" sighed Tom.

"You mad ass!" yelled Lowther. "I haven't touched your rotten camera! I wish I'd chucked it into the Thames—but I haven't! Blow your silly camera."

"Where is it then?" howled Manners.

"How should I know where it is!" howled back Lowther.

"You had it yesterday, and I was just going back to Staines when you owned up. What have you done with it?"

"I haven't done anything with it!" shrieked Lowther. "I wish I had—but I haven't! I hope it's lost for good this time, though."

Manners wrenched at holding hands.

"Will you let me get at him?" he roared. "I tell you I won't have tricks played on my camera. This is the second time, and it's going to be the last. Let me go, I tell you."

"Let him go!" hooted Lowther, scrambling to his feet. "I'll mop up the island with him, and then I'll find his rotten camera and jump on it. Let him go."

"Hold on," gasped Tom Merry. "Keep that ass back, Blake! Grab him by the ears if he won't keep quiet, Herries. Collar him, Dig."

"Will you let go?" roared Manners.

"Will you let go?" roared Lowther, like an echo.

"Pway keep the peace, deah boys! You fellows hold that ass Lowthah—and we'll hold this feahful idiot Mannahs—"

Harry Manners and Monty Lowther were great chums. But, at the moment, their chief object in life seemed to be to get at one another and alter one another's features. By main force, they were kept apart. Blake and Herries and Dig dragged Lowther back—Tom Merry and Arthur Augustus held Manners by either arm. The foemen were reduced to exchanging glares, instead of punches.

"Look here," gasped Tom, "Has anything happened to your camera again, Manners?"

"It's gone!" yelled Manners, "and I'm going to punch that silly idiot's head till he turns it up."

"Isn't it in the case now?"

"I don't know whether it's in the case or not—the case is gone too! That blithering idiot has taken it off the hook—"

"I haven't!" shrieked Lowther.

"Oh, don't talk rot! Nobody but you is idiot enough to lark with a fellow's camera! Didn't you yesterday!" roared Manners.

"Yes, I did, fathead—but I haven't touched it since, lunatic—I haven't even seen it, dummy—I only hope it's gone for good, chump!"

"Will you let me gerrat him—?"

"Easy does it, old chap," said Tom, soothingly. "If Lowther says he never touched the camers, he never did. You know that."

"Then who did?" hooted Manners.

"Are you sure it's gone—"

"Idiot!"

"You might have put it somewhere else—"

"Fathead!"

"Well, let's look," said Tom. "If you put it in the hut, it's still in the hut, that stands to reason."

"That dummy Lowther—"

"Lowther hasn't had it, fathead. Come on," said Tom.

"Let him come on this way," howled Monty Lowther. "Think I'm going to have my nose punched—"

"Shut up, old man," said Blake.

"I tell you I'm going to punch him! Look at my nose!"

"Well, you asked for it yesterday, and you've got it to-day," said Blake. "That's all right!"

"Yaas, wathah," chuckled Arthur Augustus. "Keep him safe, deah boys. We can't have fwiends fallin' out and punchin' noses on a holiday. Come on, Mannahs—I'll help you find the camewah, deah boy."

"Can you find what's not there?" hooted Manners.

"Oh, come on, and let's look!" said Tom.

Manners, snorting, suffered himself to be led back to the hut: Blake and Herries and Dig taking care of Lowther in the meantime. In the hut, Manners pointed to the hook, on which the camera, in its case, had hung by the strap. There was nothing on the hook now.

"See?" snorted Manners.

"Well, let's look round," said Tom. "You mayn't have put it there—"

"Talk sense!" snapped Manners.

To Tom Merry, it seemed quite possible that a fellow might have put down a camera, without remembering exactly where he put it down. To Manners, that was not only impossible, but unthinkable. He had left the camera-case

hanging on that hook, and that was that. If it was elsewhere in the hut, somebody had taken it down and put it there. Manners would not have been very much surprised to find it in the "grub" box, or behind the cooking-stove, or under Gussy's sleeping-bag—that was the sort of funny ass Monty Lowther was!

But he did not find it in any of those places, or in any other spot in the hut. Three juniors searched the little hut meticulously, looking in every possible and impossible recess. But the camera was not there. That Manners had left it in the hut, whether hanging on the hook or not, was certain. And it was certain that it was not now in the hut.

"Well?" snorted Manners.

"Blessed if I can make it out," said Tom. "That dashed camera will be the death of us! It must be somewhere."

"Yaas, wathah! But where?"

"That ass Lowther—!" hooted Manners.

"Well, it's not here," said Tom, and they quitted the hut—Tom and Arthur Augustus greatly puzzled: and Manners more convinced than ever that Monty Lowther, and Monty Lowther alone, could account for the mysterious disappearance of his precious camera.

CHAPTER X

STILL MORE MYSTERIOUS!

"Is this dashed island haunted?" growled Jack Blake.

"Blessed if I don't half think so," said Tom.

Seven fellows were looking, and feeling, puzzled and perplexed and worried.

It was altogether too mysterious.

"Look at the way the tent came down in the night—twice," went on Blake. "Now something vanishes—without leaving a trace! What the thump can it mean?"

"It's a dashed mystery," said Herries.

"It does seem wathah a mystewy about Mannahs' camewah," remarked Arthur Augustus. "But there is no mystewy about the tent, Hewwies. I told you chaps it would come down if you put it up without my help. Don't you wemembah?"

"Kill him, somebody!" hissed Blake.

"Weally, Blake—"

"Twice in one night, and we put it up all right each time," said Blake, "and now—this! Can't be some practical joker about, dodging on the island and away again while we were asleep, can there?"

"Some funny ass like Lowther—" suggested Manners. Manners, at long last, had allowed himself to be convinced that Monty had not been larking with his camera. But perhaps a doubt lingered in a corner of his mind. Undoubtedly he was very exasperated.

Tom Merry glanced about him, at the distant banks of the Thames. The distance was not great, certainly—anyone with a boat could have pushed across in the night and landed on the eyot, no doubt without awakening sound sleepers. But it seemed extraordinarily improbable.

"Can't imagine any man staying up all night along a river, to push a boat around and play idiotic practical jokes on strangers," said Tom.

"Well, it does seem a bit thick," said Dig. "But where's the camera? And it was jolly queer, the tent coming down—twice!"

"I do not wegard that as queeah, Dig—"

"Shut up, Gussy!" shrieked Blake.

"I do not want to wub it in, Blake! But surely you wemembah that I told you that the tent would pwobably come down. Don't you wemembah my sayin'—yawoooh!"

Blake and Herries suddenly seized Arthur Augustus D'Arcy and sat him down in the grass. He sat hard and suddenly, and roared.

"Now can it!" howled Blake. "You tell us that again, and we'll roll you into the river—and leave you there."

"Ow! Oh, cwikey! You uttah wuffians—I have a gweat mind to give you a feahful thwashin'," gasped Arthur Augustus. "You have wumped my twousahs, you wottahs."

"It's all rot," said Manners. "Nobody would hang about the banks of a river to play silly japes on strangers in the night. And how would anybody know anything about my camera, or where to find it in the dark?"

"But it's gone," said Tom.

Manners gave a snort.

"I know that! And I jolly well know that it's still on the island, too."

"Think I had it, when I've told you honour bright that I never touched the rotten thing?" bawled Monty Lowther.

"You're not the only fathead here," snapped Manners. "Of course I thought it was you at first, after you did the very same thing yesterday. If it wasn't you, it was somebody else."

"Oh, rot!" said Tom, with rather a doubtful glance, however, at the Fourth-form members of the party.

Monty Lowther grinned.

"Shouldn't wonder," he said. "You're such a potty ass about that potty camera, that you ask fellows to pull your potty leg."

"If we're going to Runnymede, I want that camera," said Manners. "The joke has gone far enough, if you call it a joke—where's that camera?"

He looked at Blake and Herries, Digby and D'Arcy in turn. Blake and

Herries and Dig shook their heads: and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, screwing his eyeglass into his noble eye, bestowed a stare of disapproval on Harry Manners. Apparently the Fourth-formers knew nothing about the mysterious disappearance of the camera.

"Dashed if I make it out," said Tom, in perplexity. "But if you feel sure that it's still on the island, Manners—"

"I know it is," yapped Manners.

"Well, if so, it hasn't been pinched, and it will turn up, and there's nothing to worry about," said Tom. "Let's get out in the boat, and see about it later."

Manners gave him a concentrated look. Five heads nodded assent to Tom's suggestion: but Manners, judging by his look, seemed to regard it as the very last word in sheer idiocy.

"Well, what about it?" asked Tom. "Time's passing, you know, and it's a lovely morning for the river."

"I suppose," said Manners, thoughtfully, "that you can't help talking like an idiot, being one. But don't talk any more idiocy to me—you make me tired."

"Well, what are we going to do?" asked Blake, impatiently. "We didn't come here to stand round talking about cameras, did we?"

"I know what I'm going to do," said Manners. "I'm going to find that camera, and if I can find who hid it, I'm going to push his silly nose through the back of his silly head. You fellows can get off in the boat, if you like—I'm not taking a step anywhere till I've found my camera."

And Manners stalked away to begin the search.

"Bai Jove!" said Arthur Augustus, gazing after him, "Mannahs seems wathah shirty, you fellows. What a feahful fuss to make about a camewah! I mean to say, it isn't as if it had been his hat or his twousahs—it's only a camewah!"

"Who's coming in the boat?" asked Blake.

Tom Merry and Monty Lowther exchanged a glance. They both wanted to go in the boat—but Manners was their chum: and the fact that he had punched Monty's nose, and called Tom an idiot, did not alter that. They were perhaps fed up with the camera: but they felt that they had to stick to Manners.

"You fellows get off," said Tom. "We'll stay with Manners."

"After all, we oughtn't all to leave the island at once," said Lowther. "Somebody ought to look after the camp—lots of river pilferers about."

"Yaas, wathah! I nevah thought of that," asserted Arthur Augustus. "That howwid twamp whose eye I blacked might dwop in and cleah off the things. We'll come back early, as I am goin' to cook dinnah. You fellows don't know much about cookin', and I think I had bettah undertake that."

"You're going to undertake the cooking?" asked Lowther.

"Yaas, wathah."

"Might mean a lot of work for the undertaker," said Lowther.

"I don't mean a little work, deah boy—I am no slackah, I hope—bai Jove what are you fellows laughin' at?" asked Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh! Are you makin' wotten puns again, Lowthah? Pway come on, deah boys, and let's get goin' befoah he thinks of anothah one."

Blake and Co. proceeded to embark and push off. It was, as Tom said, a lovely morning for the river, and they headed for that very historical spot, Runnymede, in cheerful spirits—perhaps relieved that they would hear nothing more about Manners' camera for a couple of hours or so.

Tom and Monty looked at one another with a sort of comical resignation.

"It's up to us, Monty!" murmured Tom.

"O.K.," said Lowther. "Anyhow we shall get out of listening to Gussy at Runnymede, when he goes all historical. Do you think that one of those Fourth-form fatheads has hidden the beastly thing, Tom?"

"N—n—o!" Tom shook his head. "Manners does rather ask for it—but I don't think so. I just can't make it out. But Manners is going to root all over the shop after it, and it's up to us to help. Come on."

Manners' face was wrathful; but it cleared a little, when his two chums joined him to take part in the search. Having realized at last that Monty was not the culprit, Manners had no doubt that one of the Fourth-form fellows had hidden the camera for a lark: there seemed to be no other explanation. It was only a question of hunting for it until it was unearthed.

They gave the hut the twice-over, as Monty Lowther expressed it: and then rooted through the tent, and the baggage, and even the blankets and the coats. For a long hour they searched up and down and round about, with the happy result of ascertaining, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that the missing camera was not in the camp at all.

By that time, Tom Merry and Monty Lowther were wishing, from the bottom of their hearts, that photography had never been invented at all. But if they were getting tired of cameras, Manners was not. Manners had his teeth into it now, and he was going to find that camera, if he rooted under every bush, and examined every blade of grass, on Togg's Eyot.

"He took it out of the camp," said Manners. "That's pretty clear now."

"Who did?" murmured Lowther.

"The idiot who's as big an idiot as you are, who hid the camera." Manners started for the trees. "I'm going to look among the bushes." He did not ask his comrades to follow on. Manners' temper, generally very placable, was now very near boiling point.

"Come on, Monty," murmured Tom. "We're for it!"

"What a life!" sighed Monty.

And they followed on. Another long hour was spent in rooting among trees and bushes, all over the little island. Manners even groped over the trunk of the big oak tree in search of a possible hollow in which the precious article

might have been shoved. Then they went further on, their search taking them right across the eyot to the further side.

Manners seemed tireless. Tom and Monty could not help wondering a little whether life was really worth living for fellows who chummed with an enthusiastic photographer. But they kept manfully on. They wouldn't give in till Manners did—and Manners kept it up, till even he had to realize that if the precious camera was still on the island at all, it was hidden beyond his ken. But Manners was now veering round to the opinion that some idiotic practical joker might have visited the island surreptitiously during the night.

"After all, that may be it," he said when at length they walked back through the trees and thickets to the landing-place and the camp. "It was jolly queer about the tent coming down twice—and the camera's gone. It does begin to look as if there's some sort of a japing idiot like Lowther about."

They reached the camp, and dropped into deck-chairs. Even Manners was tired. Far in the distance, amid innumerable craft on the river, they sighted the boat, with Blake and Co. in it coming back after the visit to Runnymede. As he saw the Fourth-formers, Tom Merry heaved himself out of his deck-chair.

"Better get the cooking-stove going," he remarked.

Lowther nodded—Manners did not even hear. With a deeply-corrugated brow, Harry Manners was trying to think out the mystery of the vanished camera. Tom went across to the hut, and went in. The next moment his voice was heard, in a shout.

"Oh, great pip! Manners!"

Manners did not answer. But Lowther called out:

"What's up, Tom?"

"It's here!" yelled Tom.

"What?"

"The camera!"

"Oh, holy smoke!"

Manners bounded from his deck-chair, and rushed to the hut, Lowther at his heels. They rushed in. Tom Merry, with a face of blank astonishment, pointed to the hook in the wall, where the camera in its case had been left hanging by the strap the night before—and from which it had mysteriously disappeared. There it was again—restored to its place as if by magic!

"Mum—mum—my camera!" stuttered Manners.

"But how—who—why—what—!" Lowther stammered helplessly.

Manners grabbed the strap off the hook. He almost tore open the leather case, to ascertain whether the camera was safe inside. He gasped with relief as he saw that it was!

"Well," said Tom Merry, blankly, "This beats it! There's the camera—"

"Put back while we were across the island!" said Lowther. "But who—what—who's been here—somebody in a boat, it must have been—but who—"

why—? It wasn't one of the Fourth-form men—they're not back yet—but who—!"

There was no answer to that. The disappearance of the camera had been a mystery—its reappearance was a deeper mystery still. That some practical joker was at work, seemed clear—but who he was, and where he was, and why he was, Tom Merry and Co. did not know and could not begin to guess.

CHAPTER XI

GUSSY KNOWS HOW!

"STWATEGY—"
"Eh?"

"Stwategy is the thing!" said Arthur Augustus.

His friends looked at him. Arthur Augustus had a thoughtful wrinkle in his brow, over dinner. Now, as the meal ended, he enlightened the camping-party as to the subject of his deep cogitations.

"Strategy!" repeated Tom Merry.

"Yaas, wathah! Look at it," said Arthur Augustus. "Some pwactical jokin' wottah is playin' twicks on us. We don't know who he is, or where he spwings from—except that he must come in a boat—bein' on an island heah, you know. Vevy likely it is the same person who had the cheek to camp heah befoah we awwived, and cleahed off just befoah we came—he may be watty at havin' to get off our island, you know."

"That may be it," assented Tom. "But what—"

"Well, we've got to catch him," said Arthur Augustus. "We can't have the wottah waggin' us like this all ththrough the hols. When we get hold of him, we'll jolly well duck him in the wivah, as a warnin'."

"First catch your hare!" remarked Blake.

"That is what I am comin' to, Blake. That is where stwategy comes in," explained Arthur Augustus. "I have wathah a stwategic bwain, you know. That extwaordinary twick with Mannahs' camewah shows that he keeps an eye on the island. Pwobably he pwiggid the camewah last night while we were all asleep—he must have come acwoss to the island in the dark—"

"Twice," said Blake. "The tent came down twice."

"I wathah think that that was because of the way you fellows ewected it—"

"Blitherer!"

"Weally, Blake—"

"That's pretty plain now," said Tom. "Now that we know that a japer is at work, we know what happened to the tent. He came across twice to let it down on us. He must have bagged the camera then. But—"

"But he must have come across in the daylight to weplace it," said Arthur Augustus. "He picked a time when four of us were away, and you Shell fellows on the othah side of the eyot. That shows that he is keepin' an eye on the island".

"You think so?" asked Monty Lowther, thoughtfully.

"I am suah of it, Lowthah."

"Then we ought to be able to get him," said Lowther. "If he keeps an eye on the island, he must keep the rest of him along with it, mustn't he? He can't have a semi-detached eye to leave about."

"Bai Jove! You are wathah dense, old chap! When I say that he keeps an eye on the island, I mean that he keeps an eye on the island, not that he keeps an eye on the island—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"I mean, I am speakin' metophowically, you ass. I mean that he keeps a watch on the island."

"Oh! You think that he keeps a watch on the island?"

"Yaas, of course."

"Then shouldn't we hear it ticking?" asked Lowther.

"Wh—a—t?"

"We should be bound to hear it ticking sooner or later, if he keeps a watch on the island," said Monty shaking his head.

"I do not mean that kind of a watch!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I mean a watch, not a watch."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bai Jove! I don't believe that you misundahstand me at all, Lowthah—you are just twyin' to be funnay—"

"What a brain!" said Monty, admiringly. "He's guessed that!"

"Wats! But to wesume, aftah Lowthah's idiotic intewwuptions, that wottah, whoever he is, is keepin' an eye on us," said Arthur Augustus. "He won't show up while we are on our guard. That is where stwategy comes in. You fellows are thinkin' of pullin' up to Datchet and Windsor this afternoon. Well, if we all go, you can bank on it that the pwactical jokah will pay the camp anothah visit while we are gone—and pewwaps bag the tent next time instead of a camewah—"

"He won't bag the camera again," said Manners. "I'm keeping it on me after this."

"He might walk off with the oil-stove, or the kettle, or the blankets," said Herries. "It's plain enough that it's somebody larking, or the camera wouldn't have been put back. Anything might go, next time."

"Yaas, wathah."

"We can't leave the camp unguarded," said Tom. "We shall have to take it in turns to stay in camp when the boat is away."

"I am goin' to stay in camp this aftahnoon, Tom Mewwy, and catch the pwactical jokah."

"And how are you going to catch him?"

"By stwategy!" smiled Arthur Augustus. "I've got it all cut and dried. When you six fellows cleah off in the boat, you can wely upon it that the wottah will see you go. He will know that only one fellow wemains on the island. You can be suah he will be watchin', and I shall let him see me walk away through the twees, as you Shell fellows did this mornin'. Then he will think that the coast is cleah, and he will nip acwoss for anothat twick. What?"

"Very likely," said Dig, staring at the swell of St. Jim's. "But with six of us away, and you on the other side of the island, what's to stop him from doing what he jolly well likes in our camp?"

"I have already wemarked that I am goin' to use stwategy, Dig. I shall disapeah into the twees. But," added Arthur Augustus, with a look of great astuteness, "I shall not go fah! I shall take covah behind a twee and watch for him. Now do you get it?"

"By gum!" said Blake. "Gussy's a jolly old strategist, and no mistake. Ten to one the blighter will come across, if he thinks the camp deserted. Gussy will catch him all right if he does."

"Yaas, wathah!"

"Only," added Blake, "he might cut up rusty at being caught, and knock you into a cocked hat, old scout."

"I should wefuse to be knocked into a cocked hat, Blake. But I shall keep the boat-hook with me," said Arthur Augustus. "If the boundah has the cheek to cut up wusty I will pwod him with it. In fact I will pwod him anyway. I will pwod him back to his boat, and pwod him off the island. I think that will pwobably make him fed up with waggin' our camp."

Tom Merry laughed.

"It's a jolly good idea, Gussy," he said. "But perhaps I'd better stay in camp to carry it out, while you go in the boat up to Windsor—"

"Wats!"

"Or I," said Blake.

"Wubbish!"

"Now, look here, Gussy—!" said Herries.

"I wefuse to look there, Hewwies. It is my ideah, and I am goin' to cawwy it out," said Arthur Augustus, firmly. "I know you chaps would do your best," he added, graciously, "but what this mattah wequiah is a fellow of tact and judgment. Leave it to me, deah boys, and it will be all wight."

"But, old son—"

"Wats!"

Arthur Augustus closed the discussion by going down to the boat to take out the boat-hook. Six fellows smiled at one another.

"After all, Gussy will be all right," said Blake, "whoever that japer is, he's only some bounder looking for larks. He will make just one jump back to his boat, when he finds a fellow after him with a boat-hook."

"And ten to one Gussy will show himself when he's in cover and the boulder won't come across at all," remarked Lowther.

"A hundred to one," agreed Tom, laughing. "We know Gussy—when he's in cover he will stick out about a mile."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"That boulder on the bank will know he's being watched for, and won't come," said Dig, with a chuckle. "It's all right."

Arthur Augustus came back with the boat-hook under his arm.

"You fellows gettin' off?" he asked.

"Well, we may as well make a move," said Tom.

"If you like, I will give you some historical information about Windsor Castle befoah you go—"

"Run for your lives!" exclaimed Monty Lowther.

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Tom Merry and Co. scampered to the boat. They did not, apparently, desire to be primed with historical information before they paid a visit to Windsor.

"Good-bye, Gussy," called out the boat's crew, as they pushed off.

"Cheewio, deah boys."

The boat rocked out into the Thames. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, having seen it off, proceeded to carry out his strategy. With boat-hook under his arm, he walked into the trees back of the camp, and disappeared. From the boat on the river, six grinning fellows watched him go. He disappeared—but from the thickets, a spotlessly white Panama hat remained in view. That hat, glaring white from the green, was about the most prominent object on Togg's Eyot.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Blake. "That's Gussy in cover!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

A merry laugh floated back over the shining Thames as Tom Merry and Co. pulled away for Bell Weir Lock, and Datchet and Windsor beyond. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy remained, in deep cover, on the island—with his white Panama hat gleaming in the sunshine from the green bushes, happily unaware that it could be seen by every person on every craft going up or down the Thames.

CHAPTER XII

QUITE UNEXPECTED!

"Oh, cwikey!" breathed Arthur Augustus.

His heart gave a sudden little jump.

Half an hour had passed since Tom Merry and Co. had pulled away. By that time they were on the other side of the lock. Arthur Augustus, greatly

pleased with his strategy, was on the watch. He grinned cheerily at the thought of the unknown practical joker sneaking across to the island, believing the camp deserted, and suddenly finding himself confronted by a fellow with a boat-hook! It was quite an entertaining thought. And when Arthur Augustus heard a sound of some craft at the landing place, and a rustling as somebody tied up there, he had no doubt that the expected japer had arrived, and was about to step ashore. With great caution he peered through the thickets, revealing not only the Panama hat, but considerable amount of white flannels, to see who it was. And the grin faded completely off his aristocratic face, as he beheld a burly, disreputable figure, and a rugged face adorned by a tremendous black eye!

"Oh, cwikey!"

Arthur Augustus gazed in something like horror at the burly tramp. This was the man who had attacked and sought to rob him in the wood by the tow-path near Staines. Arthur Augustus had almost forgotten his existence by that time. No doubt Pug Judson's memory was more retentive—assisted by the black eye. A black eye is undoubtedly one of those things which it is more blessed to give than to receive.

The burly tramp came up from his boat—a little skiff which he had found tied up under the tow-path, and borrowed with his accustomed disregard for the rights of property, to carry him across to the island. Pug did not intend to remain long on the island—only long enough to beat up the "toff" who had given him a black eye, and to fill his ragged pockets with anything of value he might find in the schoolboy camp.

There was a grin on Pug's face—an evil grin.

He had had bad luck in his previous encounter with that young toff. But this time luck seemed to be Pug's way.

It had not even occurred to Arthur Augustus that the ruffian might be watching for a chance to get at him when he was away from his friends. But that was exactly what Pug had been doing. Having seen the St. Jim's party on the island he knew where to look for him. That morning he had watched Blake and Co. pulling down to Runnymede. That afternoon, he had watched Tom Merry and Co. pulling up to Windsor. This was his chance. Of the existence of a practical joker who had been ragging the schoolboy campers, or of Arthur Augustus's strategical plans for catching that practical joker. Pug of course knew nothing at all. But he knew all that he wanted to know—that the young toff who had blacked his eye was alone on Togg's Eyot. That was enough for Pug.

He stared round him, grinning, for that young toff, and grinned more widely at the view of a Panama hat among the bushes. Nothing could have suited Pug better. He might have hesitated to carry on, at the landing-place, in view of passing craft. But among the trees and bushes, what he did would be screened from the public view. Gussy in cover, was just asking for it.

"Oh, cwikey!" breathed Arthur Augustus, for the third time: his eye, and his eyeglass, glued on Pug from the thickets.

He knew, of course, that the ruffian could not be the practical joker for whom he had been watching. That practical joker had not, after all, arrived. It was this burly brute who had arrived: and Arthur Augustus knew what to expect if those evil eyes fell on him, and those muscular hands grasped him.

His programme had been to issue forth from cover, boat-hook in hand, and prod the practical joker back to his boat. But he realized very clearly that prodding with a boat-hook was not a resource in dealing with a powerful ruffian. He sagely decided to remain in cover so long as the tramp was on the eyot.

So he was quite dismayed when Pug, after a stare round, started straight in his direction, just as if Pug knew that he was there—as, in fact, he did, having a plain view of a Panama hat, and glimpses of white flannels.

"Oh, cwikey!" said Arthur Augustus, for the fourth time.

He retreated through the bushes. He had a vague idea of dodging Pug round the big oak tree, and keeping him off somehow with the boat-hook. Pug came plunging through rustling thickets with a rush.

"'Old on!" roared Pug. "I gotcher! I gotcher all right."

"Oh, cwumbs!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Pug was almost upon him, under the great spreading branches of the oak. He turned, lifted the boat-hook, and made a desperate jab at the pursuing ruffian. Pug gave a yell, as the business-end of the boat-hook jabbed at his shoulder. But the next moment he had grasped the boat-hook, and it was wrenched away from D'Arcy's grasp, and pitched aside. He leaped at the schoolboy.

Arthur Augustus made a rapid bound, and side-stepped the rush. He whirled round the massive trunk of the big oak, desperately dodging the clutching hand behind him.

After him flew Pug.

"Oh! cwikey! Help!" yelled Arthur Augustus, in the faint hope that his call might reach someone in a passing boat, and bring aid. "Help!"

"Gotcher!" hissed Pug.

His grasp was on the St. Jim's junior. Arthur Augustus knew only too well that he was powerless in that muscular grasp: but his courage, at least, did not fail. He turned desperately on the clutching ruffian, and hit out with all his strength. There was a spurt of crimson from Pug's pug nose, as his knuckles landed.

A roar of mingled rage and pain came from Pug. A moment more, and the hapless swell of St. Jim's was crumpling in his grasp. Under the thick canopy of foliage of the oak tree, Arthur Augustus struggled in that grasp, and struggled in vain. An evil face leered at him, a sound eye and a black swollen eye glinted at him, and heavy fists beat on him with a rain of blows—for a few seconds! And then—!

What happened next seemed like a dream to Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. It must have been equally astonishing to Pug Judson. Neither of them knew, or had the remotest idea, that there was any other person on Togg's Eyot. But now it suddenly transpired that there was—for there came a rustling and scrambling and panting in the canopy of foliage overhead, and three figures dropped, one after another, from the tree.

The first was a long-legged figure—the second, a sturdy youth with a freckled face—the third, an extremely plump but very active fellow—and they dropped within a second of one another, and all three leaped like tigers at the ruffian whose heavy fists were beating on the swell of St. Jim's.

A crashing fist, with all George Figgins's weight behind it, caught Pug under the ear, and he let go Arthur Augustus, with a startled yell, and staggered—and as he staggered the three piled on him, and dragged him down.

Arthur Augustus tottered, dizzily, to the trunk of the oak, and leaned on it, breathless, bewildered, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels. And as he leaned there, exhausted, panting for breath, Pug Judson rolled in the grass, struggling and kicking and panting profanity, in the grasp of Figgins and Co. of the New House at St. Jim's.

CHAPTER XIII

A CHANGE IN THE PROGRAMME!

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY blinked at the startling scene under his eyes. He was so utterly astonished that he could do nothing but blink.

He had had five or six terrific thumps from Pug Judson, and his noble head was spinning. But rescue had come promptly. Had Pug been allowed to carry on, Arthur Augustus would undoubtedly have been reduced to a state of wreckage. But it was Pug who was getting wrecked now.

Pug was a hefty ruffian: but three sturdy fellows were too many for him—too many and too much. They had him down in a heap, and they were all over him, and for every frantic punch that Pug landed he received four or five, and all of them landed hard. Figgins and Co. did not stand on ceremony with the ruffian. They had to handle him, and they did it with vigour.

For several minutes the struggle went on, under the dizzy eyes of Arthur Augustus, tottering against the oak. Then Pug was down and out. Breathless, spent, he collapsed on his back, and Fatty Wynn sat on his chest to keep him there. He kicked out and Kerr trampled on his legs till he gave it up. He clutched at Fatty and Figgins got hold of his wrists and twisted them. Then Pug surrendered, gurgling feebly for breath.

"Uuurrggh!" gurgled Pug. "'Old on! Leave a bloke alone! I give in—you 'ear me? Strike me pink! I tell you I give in! Urrrrggh!"

"Sit on him, Fatty!" gasped Figgins. He dashed a stream of red from his nose, and picked up the boat-hook. "You give any more trouble, you brute, and you get this—in the neck!"

Pug only gurgled.

"Bai Jove! I wondah whethah I am dweamin' this!" murmured Arthur Augustus gazing with bewildered eyes at Figgins and Co.

It had dawned, slowly, on Gussy's dizzy mind that somebody or other must have been up in the oak tree, and had dropped down to help him. How and why anybody could be up the tree on Togg's Eyot he could not begin to guess. Then, as he discovered that they were St. Jim's juniors—Figgins and Co. of the New House—he really began to wonder whether he might be dreaming.

He had not seen Figgins and Co. or thought about them, since St. Jim's had broken up for the summer holidays. If he had thought about them, he would have supposed that Figgins was home in Somerset, Kerr in Scotland, and David Llewellyn Wynn in Wales. He would as soon have supposed that they were on the top of Mount Everest, as that they were up the oak tree on Togg's Eyot. Yet here they were—very luckily for Gussy!

Figgins dabbed his nose with a handkerchief, and grinned at the amazed swell of St. Jim's.

"Surprised to see us, Gussy?" he asked.

"Is—is—is that weally you, Figgins?" gasped Arthur Augustus.

"Either me or my ghost," answered Figgins.

"And—and is that Kerr?"

"Either Kerr or his double," grinned Figgins.

"And—and Fatty Wynn—?"

"Fatty—as fat as ever," said Figgins. "Has that brute hurt you much, old chap?"

"Not vevy much, I—I think," gasped Arthur Augustus. "But it would have been wathah wuff on me if you fellows hadn't dwopped in. I am vevy much obliged to you, Figgy."

"Oh, don't mench," said Figgins. "As cock-house of St. Jim's, we're bound to look after you School House duffers."

"Weally, you ass—"

"Our game's up, though," said Kerr, "Now we've shown up—"

"Well, we had to show up in the circs," said Figgins. "Couldn't let that brute knock the stuffing out of the one and only."

"I was getting a bit tired of perching up in that tree," remarked Fatty Wynn. "It was a lark, but—"

"But I don't understand," gasped Arthur Augustus. "I am twemendously glad that you fellows were heah, and came to the wescue: but I can't undahstand how you are heah! How did you get heah, Figgins?"

"Train to Staines," said Figgins. "Hired a boat to land us here, and here we are! We were ahead of your party, old bean—"

"Oh!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, a light breaking on his mind. "You were the fellows who camped on the island befoah we awwived—camped in the hut—and cleahed off just befoah we came—"

Figgins chuckled.

"We kept an eye open for you," he said. "When we spotted you coming up the river, you can bet we faded out of the picture."

"Oh, cwumbs! We thought it was some picnicking party—"

"So it was! We've been picnicking here for days," grinned Figgins. "Much obliged to you for telling me about this jolly little island, Gussy."

"Bai Jove! I don't wemembah tellin' you about it, Figgins," exclaimed Arthur Augustus, in surprise.

"You told your pals about it, while I was in the cupboard in Study No. 6, fathead—same thing!"

"Oh! I—I see! I nevah thought—"

"I know that!" agreed Figgins. "You never did—in your life, old scout. Don't try to begin now—it will make your head ache."

"Weally, Figgins—"

"Urrrrggh!" came a gurgle from Pug. "Will you gerroff my bread-basket, you fat bloke? You're a-suffocating of me."

Figgins glanced round at him, and made a motion with the boat-hook.

"Do you want this in your neck?" he inquired.

"'Ere, you keep that blinking thing away from my neck!" howled Pug, in alarm.

"Then suffocate quietly, or you'll get it, see?"

"Urrrrggh!"

"But have you fellows been on the island all the time?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus, "We nevah had an ideah that anybody was on the island. Why, we've been all ovah the place, and nevah saw anythin' of you—"

Figgins chuckled.

"We didn't mean you to," he answered. "When we saw you coming, we took to the tree, and we've been there ever since—living in branches like Mr. Darwin's ancestors. You see, we had it all cut and dried, and we had lots of time to fix up a home-from-home forty feet up, on top of the main trunk—we roped a lot of branches together to make it safe, and packed our things there. We were going to camp up that tree all the while you were on the island."

"Coming down every now and then to rag you," grinned Kerr. "Your tent was coming down once or twice every night—"

"Bai Jove! It was you—?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins. "We heard every word you said, and we jolly well knew none of you would begin to guess that there was anybody on

the island. We'd have kept it up for a week, if we hadn't had to chip in and handle that tramp. That wasn't in the programme."

"You've spoiled the programme, Gussy," said Kerr, laughing.

"And it was you collahed Mannahs' camewah—!" exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

"Just that!" chuckled Figgins. "Lowther put it into our heads—he did it first—so we walked it off. But poor old Manners got so excited about it, that we took pity on him, and put it back, while those Shell fatheads were rooting about on the other side of the island."

"But why—?" exclaimed Arthur Augustus. "Why have you been parkin' yourselves on this island and waggin' us, you asses? Did you think it funnay?"

"As funny as cramming tomatoes down the back of a fellow's neck," answered Figgins. "Funnier, in fact."

"Bai Jove! I had forgotten all about that—"

"I hadn't!" grinned Figgins.

"It is wathah lucky for you that I nevah found you," said Arthur Augustus, "I should certainly have given you a feahful thwashin' all wound."

"Lucky for you, you mean?" asked Figgins.

"Howevah, I shall certainly not thwash you now—"

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Figgins.

"Weally, Figgins, there is nothin' to laugh at in that wemark. Aftah what you fellows have done for me, I should not dweam of thwashin' you."

"If you did dream of it, old man, you'd have a rather painful awakening," chuckled Figgins. "But you're a good little ass, Gussy, and we're fearfully obliged to you. Ain't we obliged to Gussy, you fellows, for not thrashing us all round?"

"Ha, ha, ha!" yelled Kerr and Wynn.

"Urrrrgh! I tell you that fat bloke is a-suffocating of me!" came a wail from Pug. "'Ow's a bloke to breathe under a bloke as 'eavy as a blinking elephant? Will you get orf my bread-basket, blow you? Oooooogh! Keep that boat-'ook away from my neck, you with the spindleshanks. Look 'ere, you let a bloke go, and I'll go quietly."

"I can't sit on him for ever, Figgy," remarked Fatty Wynn.

"Walk him down to the landing-place," said Figgins. "We'll give him a ducking and let him clear."

"You ain't going to duck me!" yelled Mr. Judson, in great alarm. The prospect of being immersed in water seemed to have a very disturbing effect on him.

"You look as if you want a wash," said Figgins. "You look as if you've wanted one for years. You're going to have one, whether you want it or not."

"Look 'ere—"

"Have him along," said Figgins.

Mr. Judson was allowed to rise to his feet. He was glad at least, to get Fatty Wynn's considerable weight off the region which he described as his "bread-basket". By that time, there was no doubt that Mr. Judson repented him of his visit to the island, which had turned out so very different from his happy anticipations. He would have been glad to go. But Mr. Judson was not going just yet.

Kerr grasped him by one arm, Fatty Wynn by the other. They walked him away. Figgins walked behind with the boat-hook ready, and at the first effort Mr. Judson made to break loose, he jabbed. Pug yelled—and did not make another effort. Arthur Augustus brought up the rear: and they arrived at the landing-place.

Pug cast a longing glance at the skiff tied up at the water's edge.

"You let a bloke go—!" he howled.

"You don't want a wash?" asked Figgins.

"No!" yelled Mr. Judson. "I don't!"

"It will do you good!"

"Look 'ere—"

"We can't spare you any soap," said Figgins. "But I daresay you're not keen on it. But there's lots of water—"

"Yaas, wathah!" chuckled Arthur Augustus.

"'Ands off!" yelled Pug. Heedless of even the boat-hook, he began to struggle, on the water's edge. His dislike of water seemed to amount almost to hydrophobia.

But it booted not. Figgins and Co. tipped him over, and in he went.

Splash!

Pug Judson wallowed in water and mud. He came up streaming, and splashed away to the skiff. Spluttering wildly, he scrambled in and tore loose the painter, and went rocking away on the river—a little cleaner than he had been for years and years, but evidently feeling very unhappy about it.

"That's that," said Figgins. "And now I suppose we'd better get our things down from our nest, and pack. Gussy, you've mucked up our programme, and I've a jolly good mind to duck you too, before we go."

Arthur Augustus smiled.

"You're not goin' deah boy," he said.

"We can hail a boat, and get a lift to the bank," said Kerr. "We were going to make a week of it—but I suppose we couldn't let Gussy be chewed up by a tramp—"

"You are goin' to make a week of it all the same, deah boy," said Arthur Augustus. "You came heah to wag us, which was a feahful cheek—you New House smudges are much too cheekay—"

"Better duck him," said Fatty Wynn.

"But aftah the wippin' way you came to my wescue, I wegard you as fwriends. I have the honah of invitin' you chaps to join our campin' party on this island," said Arthur Augustus, in his most stately manner. "I twust you will not wefuse. Your company will be a weal pleasuah."

Figgins and Co. looked at one another. They grinned, and then they nodded.

"Well, we wouldn't like to deprive you of a real pleasure, Gussy," said Figgins, "It's a go!"

And a "go" it was!

CHAPTER XIV

PAX!

TOM MERRY gave quite a jump.

He stared.

"Great pip!"

The St. Jim's boat was coming down the river in the golden sunset. The juniors had intended to be back by tea-time: but there had been delay in getting through a crowded lock, and they were rather late. They were rather curious to learn what adventures, if any, Arthur Augustus might have had—little dreaming of what had happened on Togg's Eyot during their absence.

But whatever they might have expected, they certainly did not expect to see what met their eyes, as they came in sight of the landing-place.

Tom Merry, in fact, could scarcely believe his eyes. He stared blankly at three figures sitting at their ease in deck-chairs.

"What—?" began Blake. He was rowing: but he looked round to see what had so startled Tom. "Great Scott! Figgins!"

"Figgins and Co.!" ejaculated Monty Lowther.

"New House cads!" exclaimed Herries.

"Oh, my hat!" said Dig. "That New House crowd on Gussy's island—"

Manners gave almost a yell.

"They had it!"

"Eh! They had what?" asked Tom.

"My camera. It was that gang—they lifted the camera, and put it back again—pulling my leg, see? Why, they'd have had it again, very likely, if I hadn't taken it with me this afternoon." howled Manners.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom. "It was that gang—not some practical joking ass we've never seen—that gang—it's all clear now."

"By gum!" said Blake.

"But what have they done with Gussy?" exclaimed Dig. "We left Gussy there—never dreaming that those New House rotters were about!"

The boat floated on the current, the oarsmen no longer pulling. All the boat's crew were staring at the island.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was not to be seen. As a matter of fact, Arthur Augustus had gone into the hut, to unpack a further supply of cold cream to rub on the spots where Pug Judson's fists had landed. Tom Merry and Co. naturally, had no idea of that. All they knew was that Gussy was not visible, and that three New House juniors were!

Figgins and Co. sitting in deck-chairs, were looking down the river towards Staines. So they did not see the boat floating down from the direction of Windsor.

They seemed quite at their ease on Gussy's island. Apparently they had had tea. Fatty Wynn was not quite finished yet—he was disposing, happily, of a chunk of cake. The School House juniors in the boat gave them almost wolfish looks.

All that had mystified them since they had camped on Togg's Eyot was explained, as soon as they saw Figgins and Co. They did not guess that the New House Co. had been on the eyot all the time, hidden in the massive foliage of the big oak. But they knew now why the tent had collapsed twice in the night, and how and why Manners' precious camera had so mysteriously disappeared and reappeared. No doubt Figgins and Co. had planned a good deal more to come!

"By gum!" repeated Blake, with a deep breath. "That New House gang, all the time. And they've had the cheek to sit down to tea on our island—"

"And they've parked Gussy somewhere—"

"And they don't seem to expect us back yet, or they wouldn't be sitting there as if the place belonged to them!" said Lowther.

"And we never guessed!" said Tom. "Why, they might have gone on ragging us for a week, and we should never have known—"

"They won't go on now," said Blake, grimly. "We've got 'em! By gum, we'll make an example of them."

"We'll scrag them—"

"And duck them—!"

"We'll snatch them bald-headed."

"They haven't seen us yet," said Tom. "Keep quiet—don't give the alarm! We don't want to give them a chance to dodge off in their boat—can't see where they've left it, but it must be somewhere about—we'll take them by surprise, and collar them—"

"And give them the time of their lives," said Blake.

"What-ho!"

The boat crept in close by the island, Tom Merry punting with an oar. Still closer it came along to the landing-place, and Figgins and Co. never looked round. It was rather curious that the New House trio should be so much off their guard, while they were in occupation of the enemy's territory, so to speak: but there it was—they evidently had not the slightest suspicion of danger. The School House juniors were grinning now, as the boat crept closer and closer to the unwary enemy.

It was not till they were within a dozen yards of the landing-place, that Figgins became aware of them. Then Figgy's eyes fell on the boat—and he spoke to Kerr and Wynn, who both glanced round.

"They've seen us—"

"Quick!"

The St. Jim's boat did the last dozen yards in about a split second, at a rush. The bows bumped on the grassy shore and Tom Merry and Co. leaped out. Dig lingered a moment to tie up—while Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther and Blake and Herries rushed on the enemy.

Figgins and Co. jumped out of the deck-chairs.

"I say—!" began Figgins.



The three piled on him.

He had no time for more. Five School House juniors came on with a terrific rush, and Figgins and Co. were fairly bowled over. They staggered over the deck-chairs, which collapsed under the shock: and there were frantic yells on Togg's Eyot as the three New House juniors went sprawling, mixed up with deck-chairs, in the grass, with Tom Merry and Co. swarming over them.

"I say—!" shrieked Figgins.

"Collar them!"

"Scrag them!"

"Look out—!" yelled Kerr.

"Got you!"

"New House swobs!"

"Bag them!"

"I say, leggo!" raved Fatty Wynn, struggling wildly. "You silly School House fatheads, we're—ow! oh! Gerroff my head, will you? Ooogh."

"Oh, crumbs! Look here—!" roared Figgins. "I was going to say—yaroooooop! Oh, jiminy! You mad asses—wow!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"We've got 'em!"

"Duck them!"

Dig was joining in the fray now, and the School House were two to one. Figgins and Co. simply hadn't a chance! They rolled, and roared, and struggled, and yelled, waking many echoes along the Thames, and drawing startled stares from passing craft.

That terrific uproar drew Arthur Augustus out of the hut. He emerged with a pot of cold cream in his hand, and an astonished expression on his face. He gazed blankly at the hectic scene.

"Bai Jove!" ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

"Duck them!" roared Blake.

"Shove them in!"

"In you go, you New House bounders."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins and Co. struggled frantically. But they rolled and bumped and tumbled towards the water's edge, in spite of their strenuous resistance: and into the silvery Thames they would inevitably have gone, had there not been an interruption.

"Hold on, you fellows!" Arthur Augustus came running from the hut. "Whatevah are you up to? It is fwihtful bad mannaahs to wag our guests! Pway welease them at once."

Tom Merry and Co. stared round at him.

"Oh! Here's Gussy!" exclaimed Blake.

"Lend a hand, Gussy," yelled Herries. "We're going to duck these New House swobs."

"Chuck them in!"

"Stop!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. He rushed into the mêlée and grabbed hold of Figgins, who was just going in, and dragged him back. "Have you fellows gone off your wockahs? Welease our fwiends at once! Figgins and Kerr and Wynn are our guests in this camp, you uttah asses."

"What?" gasped Tom Merry.

"Mad?" hooted Blake.

"Go to sleep again and dream again, Gussy," snorted Herries. "Chuck these New House smudges into the water, you men."

"Oh, crumbs!" spluttered Figgins. "Will you let a fellow speak, you dangerous maniacs? Let a fellow get a word out—"

"It's a pax!" yelled Kerr.

"Pax be blowed!" hooted Blake. "You're going in—"

"You uttah asses, stop!" shrieked Arthur Augustus. "I tell you we are all fwiends now—they saved me fwom bein' feahfully hammered by that howwid twamp—"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"We've made it pax, and they are our guests on this island! Pway welease them at once!" gasped Arthur Augustus.

Figgins and Co. were released at last. They sat and spluttered for breath, on the very edge of the water. They were quite breathless and extremely dishevelled, but luckily Arthur Augustus's intervention had saved them from going headlong into the Thames. Tom Merry and Co. stared blankly at the swell of St. Jim's.

"Look here, Gussy, what do you mean, if you mean anything?" demanded Tom.

"Sing it over again to us!" said Monty Lowther.

Arthur Augustus proceeded to explain—to an accompaniment of gasps, and gurgles, and guggles, from the New House juniors. Tom Merry and Co. listened in astonishment.

"Well, my hat!" said Tom. "You uttah ass—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"Why couldn't you be in sight when we came back?" roared Tom. "If you'd been with them, we shouldn't have collared them like that—"

"I was lookin' for some cold cweam—"

"Isn't it Gussy all over?" sighed Blake. "These chaps save him from being hammered to a jelly, and he goes out of sight when we're coming back, specially to make us believe that they'd been here ragging him—"

"Bai Jove! I did not mean anythin' of the kind, Blake! I wepeat that I was lookin' for some cold cweam—"

"Let's shove his cold cream down his back," said Herries.

"Weally, Hewwies—"

"Well, we seem to have made a bit of a mistake." Tom Merry looked at the gasping, gurgling, dishevelled three. "Sorry, you men! We're tremendously obliged to you for saving our prize idiot—"

"Weally, Tom Mewwy—"

"He's no use," said Blake, "but we keep him about as an ornament. Much obliged, Figgins."

"Weally, Blake, you ass—"

"It's pax!" said Tom. "If Gussy had had the sense of a bunny rabbit, he would have been on the spot to warn us. But you know Gussy."

"Look heah—"

Figgins found his voice.

"You silly, fatheaded, blithering, idiotic, potty School House swobs—" he began.

"You blithering, benighted dunderheads—!" gasped Kerr.

"You chuckleheaded chumps—!" gurgled Fatty Wynn.

They paused for breath.

"Carry on," said Tom, encouragingly. "If it's any comfort to blow off steam, old scouts, go ahead, and don't mind us."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Figgins grinned, a breathless grin.

"O.K.," he said, "It's pax!"

And "pax" it was! Alarums and excursions were over—at least until the new term began at St. Jim's—School House and New House buried the hatchet, and in happy amity enjoyed the summer days on Gussy's Island.

THE END

The RIO KID RIDES AGAIN!



CHAPTER I

THE RIO KID lay very low.

He had camped in thick, shadowy chapparral, on the slope above the stage-trail that ran from Apache to Frio. The hot sun of southern Texas blazed down on the chapparral, but it was shady under the branches, clustered with masses of Spaniard's-beard. The Kid had ridden hard that morning, with the sheriff's posse from Frio on his trail. They had trailed him as far as the Huecas: and he grinned as he thought of them hunting for him in the stony gulches up in the hills, never dreaming that he had doubled back, and left them to it. Almost within a riata's cast of the stage-trail, the Kid was in

deep cover, taking a needed rest after hard riding: and he wished the sheriff and his men joy of their hunt up in the hills. The black-muzzled mustang lay in the shade, half asleep: the Kid sat with his back to a trunk, tired but content. He was secure there: they had lost the trail, and would never dream of looking for him so near to Frio: the cow-town on the Pecos where his name was a byword, and where every gun would have leaped from its holster at the sight of the handsome boyish face under the Stetson with its band of silver nuggets. But he gave a little start, and then sat very still, at the sound of horses pushing through the thickets from the slope above.

It was a lonely trail from Apache to Frio. Once a day the little two-horse hack trundled and bumped along the rugged way. Twice or thrice in a day some cow-puncher from the ranches might ride it. But the hack from Apache was not due yet: and no puncher had ridden by since the Kid had camped in cover there. And it was not from the stage-trail that the sound of horses came. It came from higher up the slope. Horsemen were pushing down through the thickets towards the stage-trail below.

The Kid's face set hard, and a glint came into the blue eyes. He did not stir: but his hands were very near the walnut butts of the guns in his low-slung holsters. He had felt sure that he had eluded the chase: that he had left the sheriff of Frio hunting in the Huecas for a vanished outlaw. But if they had, after all, tracked him down—

So still sat the Kid, that a green lizard crawled over his goatskin chaps, unafraid. If the approaching horsemen were the sheriff and his men, there would be gun-play in a matter of minutes. But he hoped not: for the Kid hated gun-play. In every cow-town on the Rio Grande, at every round-up in the valley of the Pecos, wild tales were told of the Rio Kid, the boy outlaw: and only the Kid himself knew that there was no truth in them. Not so long ago he had punched cows on the old Double-Bar ranch, as happy and care-free as any hombre in the outfit: and it was Old Man Dawney's hot and imperious temper, his stubborn refusal to believe that the boy puncher was innocent of what had been laid to his charge, that had driven the Kid outside the law. But the Kid, outlaw as he now was, was no trigger-happy gunman. From the bottom of his heart he hoped that the horsemen, whoever they were, would push by unseeing, and that the walnut-butted guns would be left silent in their holsters.

The tramping and rustling came closer.

The riders were nearing him. The Kid, without moving his head, had a glimpse from the corner of his eye of a Stetson hat, for a moment, among the hanging Spanish moss. But it disappeared again. The riders were passing—within a rope's length of him, but never dreaming that he was there. It was not, after all, the sheriff and his posse: they were still up in the Huecas. Who they were, the Kid did not know, and he cared little, so long as they passed him unseen. And they were passing him unseen. Except for that glimpse of

a Stetson for one moment, he saw nothing of them: but his ears told him that there were four of them, riding down to the trail through the chapparral.

They passed, unseeing: and the tramping and rustling sounded lower down the slope. The Kid expected to hear them ride out on the stage-trail, and ride away. To his surprise, the tramping and rustling ceased, on the very edge of the stage-trail. They were going no further.

"Gee-whiz!" murmured the Kid, inaudibly.

Faint sounds came to him, through the trees and the tangled thickets, of horses being tethered. They had dismounted, and were staying there—for what reason the Kid could not begin to guess. His first guess had been that a party of punchers had taken a short cut through the chapparral, to reach the open stage-trail, bound either for Frio or Apache. But it was not that. They had stopped on the edge of the trail, and evidently intended to remain there, in cover of the trees.

Slowly, a grin dawned on the sunburnt face of the Rio Kid. He guessed at last how the matter shaped. So far as he could see, there was only one reason why any bunch should wait in cover on the edge of the stage-trail. It was a hold-up. They were waiting there for the hack from Apache, due to pass in the afternoon. Likely enough, some rancher who had sold steers at Apache might be returning to Frio in the hack, with a roll of greenbacks, and they aimed to cinch that roll. The Kid grinned sarcastically, and shrugged his slim shoulders.

It was no business of his. Had he been still the cow-puncher of the Double-Bar, it would have been different. He would have horned in as a matter of course. But a hold-up was no concern of an outlaw, hunted by half the sheriffs in Texas, with a price of a thousand dollars on his head. It was sheriff's business, not his. Sheriff Watson of Frio, combing the Huecas for an outlaw who was not there, would have been more useful nearer to Frio, with this gang waiting to hold up the hack on the trail. They could get on with it, for all the Kid cared.

He could hear the sounds of their movements, and in the stillness of the hot afternoon, the murmur of voices came to his ears. They were hardly the length of a lasso away.

"How long we got to hang on here, Two-gun?" It was a muttering voice, but the words came distinctly to the Kid's keen ears.

"How'd I know?" came a growling reply, in a voice the Kid knew. He had heard Two-gun Carter's voice before, more than once, in the streets of Frio, before he had hit the outlaw trail. "Andy Jones don't keep to no schedule. The hearse will be along before sundown."

"We got to wait!" said another voice.

"It's sure worth waiting for." There was a chuckling laugh from Two-gun Carter. "I'm telling you guys that I saw Old Man Dawney packing a roll of twenty thousand dollars, for steers he's sold at Apache—and I had it from

Andy that's he coming back to Frio in the hack. Twenty thousand bucks don't grow on every pecan in the chapparral."

"You said it, Two-gun."

The Kid drew a deep, deep breath, as the muttering voices died away.

He could have laughed.

It was Old Man Dawney for whom that bunch of rustlers were waiting by the stage-trail. The boss of the Double-Bar was not a man to be robbed easily. He was the man to pull a gun in defence of his roll. But there were four of the rustlers, and he hadn't a chance if it came to that. Old Man Dawney—once the Kid's boss on the Double-Bar, whose doubting suspicious mind and arrogant temper had driven him out of the ranks of honest men. To him the Kid owed it that he rode wild trails with a price on his head. The Kid owed him a long score. Let him take what was coming to him.

And the Rio Kid settled back against the trunk, indifferent to what might pass on the stage-trail below—determined, at least, to be indifferent.

But it did not last. For the Kid, outlaw as he was, with a rope and a branch waiting for him if the sheriffs trailed him down, was still at heart what he had always been: no gunman, no rustler, but a puncher born and bred. Even as he settled back against the tree, he knew that he could not stand for it. His brow grew dark with gloomy thought. But at length he stirred.

"You sure are loco, Kid!" he muttered, in amused self-contempt. "That's the guy that drove you off his ranch with a gun in his hand, and made an outlaw of you—and you don't need to worry if they cinch his roll, and fill him with lead in cinching it. You sure are plumb loco to horn into this circus. But you always was a bonehead, Kid!"

Bonehead or not, the Kid knew what he was going to do. He made no sound as he rose to his feet: and from Side-Kicker, the black-muzzled mustang, came no sound, as the Kid saddled up: Side-Kicker was as accustomed to caution as his master. Taking the bridle, the Kid led his mustang away through the chapparral, up the slope: and he did not betray his motions by sounds of rustling and brushing as Two-gun and his bunch had done. Silent as a cougar creeping on a branch, the Kid wound his way through the thickets, leaving the hold-up gang further and further behind him. It was not till he had covered a good distance, that he mounted and rode, taking a slanting direction to get down to the stage-trail a good mile from the spot where Two-gun and his bunch lay in cover. Then, at last, the Kid put his mustang to the gallop, riding like the wind in the direction of Apache, to meet the hack as it came.

CHAPTER II

"HALT!"

Andy Jones, driver of the two-horse hack, pulled in so suddenly, that his horses almost rolled back, on the vehicle. That one word was enough for Andy: backed by a six-gun that glimmered in the sunshine, with a smiling face behind it under a Stetson hat. That handsome sunburnt face smiled: but the eyes, cool and clear, had a glint in them: and Andy was not the guy to argue with the man who held the gun! Andy was paid to drive that hack, not to mix up in gun-play with hold-up men: and of all the outlaws in the Lone Star State, the Rio Kid was the one Andy would have cared least to argue with. In all the cow-camps they knew that the Kid could shoot, and that a gun in his hand had never missed.

The Kid, sitting his mustang at the side of the trail, hardly needed to lift his gun. He laughed as the horses floundered under Andy's sudden and vigorous drag on the reins. Andy was in a hurry to assure the Kid that he, at least, was not honing for trouble: whatever might be the view of the passenger inside the little hack.

"You sure are a good little guy, Andy," said the Kid. "You don't need to be told to go in when it rains, you sure don't."

"Your game Kid," said the stage-driver. "This ain't my funeral, and I'm sure sitting it out."

"Keep to that," said the Kid, as he rode closer to the hack. "If you forget it, Andy, the company will sure want a new driver all of a sudden, and I should jest hate to spill your juice. It's your passenger I want."

That passenger had already put his head out of the window of the hack, revealing a hard, bronzed, bearded face, and a pair of stern glinting eyes under bushy brows. The rancher of the Double-Bar was a hard man, and he looked it. The glinting eyes fixed on the boy rider, and Mr. Dawney gave a start as he recognized a familiar face—a face which he had not seen for a long time, but of which every feature was familiar to him.

"The Kid!" he ejaculated. And Old Man Dawney reached for his gun.

"Don't!" said the Kid, very quietly. His hand was up now, and the long-barrelled Colt looked the rancher fairly in his bronzed, bearded face. The merest pressure of a finger would have spelt the end of the trail for Old Man Dawney, seconds before his gun was out. And the rancher realized it, and his fingers dropped away from the butt.

He fixed his eyes bitterly on the handsome boyish face of the Kid.

"You, Kid!" he said. "You—riding the trails like Five-Hundred-Dollar Smith and his bunch! You holding up the stage! I reckoned you'd come to it! And you had the dog-goned nerve to tell me that you never did what I fired you off my ranch for! You!"

"And I sure never did, feller," said the Kid. "But I ain't here to chew the rag with you, Mr. Dawney. Light down from that hearse."

The rancher did not stir. Old Man Dawney was accustomed to giving orders, not to taking them. His eyes glittered at the Kid, and his hand made a motion again, as if he could scarce restrain his desire to pull a gun.

"You hear me toot?" said the Kid, softly. "You give orders on the Double-Bar, Mr. Dawney. I guess I give them on this trail. You lighting down from that hack, or—!" The trigger stirred.

The rancher gritted his teeth, and stepped out of the hack. He eyed the Kid almost like a wolf, and gave one glance at Andy Jones. But the stage-driver sat still in his seat, chewing tobacco, while he waited for the Kid to get through. If Rancher Dawney figured on help from Andy, he had to guess again.



It was the kid who fired.

"Put up your hands, feller," said the Kid: and slowly, savagely, reluctantly, the rancher raised his hands above his head.

The Kid nodded approval.

"O.K." he said. "You sure got sense, Mr. Dawney. How long is it since you drove me off the Double-Bar with a gun in your fist? I'm holding the gun now, old-timer: and you got to jump when I say jump."

"What do you want?" muttered the rancher.

"Aw, ain't that an easy one?" grinned the Kid. "You been selling steers down to Apache, and you mosey home with a fat roll in your jeans. Ain't I the Rio Kid, the fire-bug of the Rio Grande: the guy to whose tally they put down half the hold-ups in the State, more'n I ever heard of? What you guess I want, you packing twenty thousand dollars, and me holding a gun?"

He laughed aloud.

"How'd you know?" muttered the rancher. "You dare not show your cabela in Apache, or any other town in Texas—how'd you know?"

"I heard a little bird sing in the chapparral," said the Kid, banteringly. "I'm sure wise to your roll, rancher. Where you pack it?"

"You're not getting twenty thousand dollars from me, you ornery young rustler!" breathed the rancher. "By the great horned toad, I'll have you hunted all over Texas for this, and strung up to a branch."

"I guess they been hunting me some, since I lit out from the Double-Bar," grinned the Kid. "But they ain't put salt on my tail yet, rancher. This hyer minute Sheriff Watson and his posse are combing the Huecas for me, and here I am on the Frio trail, holding up the durndest, orneriest old bonehead in the State of Texas. I'll take a chance on it, rancher—and I'll take the roll. And I ain't waiting, feller."

Old Man Dawney's teeth came together hard. Suddenly, swiftly, his hand dropped to his gun, and he flashed it out.

Bang!

It was the Kid who fired.

The rancher gave a yell, and staggered. His six-gun dropped to the earth, and as he staggered, yelling, his left hand clasped his right. Andy Jones stared from his seat on the front of the hack, but he did not stir. The Rio Kid laughed.

"That sure was foolish, feller," he said, admonishingly. "You ain't quick enough on the draw for it, rancher. But you ain't hurt a whole lot, and there ain't no call to yaup like you was telling them about it in Mexico. I guess I shot a gun out of a guy's grip afore, without hurting him any."

The rancher stood almost stuttering with rage. The six-gun had been shot from his hand, and lay smashed in the trail: but beyond the numbing jar of the shock, Old Man Dawney was not hurt. For a moment he had fancied his hand shot away. But there was not even a speck of red on it.

"You—you—you prairie thief—!" he breathed.

"Aw, can it!" said the Kid. "You're wasting time, rancher. You want to hit for home, and get Bud Wash and the rest of the outfit out on the trail to look for me and your dollars. Are you handing over that roll, or do you want me to crease you like an ornery steer, and take it."

Trembling with rage, the rancher, with his undamaged hand, drew out the fat roll that was the price of many fat steers in the market at Apache. In silent fury he handed it up to the boy outlaw on the mustang.

It was a large sum. But the Kid hardly glanced at it. He dropped the roll carelessly into the pocket of his chaps.

"Now I guess you can burn the wind, as soon as you want," he said. "You can drive on, Andy, and carry this ornery old cuss to Frio, to tell them that the Rio Kid ain't jest where their sheriff is looking for him."

"Sure!" said Andy.

The rancher stepped into the hack again, and Andy gathered up the reins. The Kid sat his mustang beside the trail, and watched it go. Andy drove on, and from the window the rancher looked back, with deadly rage in his look, at the handsome figure by the trail. The Kid swept off the Stetson with its band of silver nuggets, in mocking salute and farewell. Old Man Dawney sat back in the hack, still nursing his numbed wrist, his bronzed, gnarled face almost white with rage.

The hack rolled on its way: the boy outlaw disappeared from sight behind it. He passed from Old Man Dawney's vision, but not from his mind. The Kid was riding away with twenty thousand dollars: a heavy loss even to a rich rancher like George Dawney. The sheriff of Frio, was hunting him in the hills fifteen miles to the westward, while he was riding off with the rancher's roll! Old Man Dawney was in haste to reach Frio, to tell them there of his latest exploit of the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande, and to set his outfit riding after the Kid. But he was not to reach Frio yet. The hack had rolled on a mile from the spot where the Kid had been left, and was bumping along the rough trail bordered by thick chapparral, when there was another stop.

"Halt!"

For the second time, Andy Jones heard that succinct command. For the second time, he pulled in his horses. He grinned as he pulled them in. It looked like another hold-up: but there was nothing to reward the hold-up men this time: the Rio Kid had cut in before them.

Old Man Dawney stared savagely from the hack, as four figures appeared from the shadowy chapparral: four men with neck-scarfs tied across their faces to mask them, and six-guns in their hands. Two-gun Carter and his bunch had waited long: but the hack had arrived at last. One man covered the driver with a revolver: which was not needed, for Andy was taking it like a lamb, as he had taken it with the Rio Kid way back on the trail.

Two-gun Carter threw open the door of the hack.

Three six-guns were aimed at the man inside. He eyed them savagely.

Without the disguising neck-scarfs, he might have known them: rough-necks of the cow-town of Frio. But their features were well hidden: they did not ride the trails with the reckless hardihood of the Rio Kid.

"Step out lively, Mr. Dawney!" said Two-gun.

Old Man Dawney gave a savage harsh laugh.

"You got wise to it too, that I've been selling steers down to Apache!" he jeered. "Wal, you're too late—I've been robbed already on this trail."

"Step out!"

The rancher shrugged his shoulders, and stepped out.

"Say, you guys, it's a sure thing," said Andy, from his perch. "This caboodle was cleaned out back on the trail, by the Rio Kid—"

"The Rio Kid?"

"Surest thing you know! He cinched Mr. Dawney's roll, and I opine he's half-way to Mexico with it by now."

There were muttered curses under the disguising neck-scarfs. But Two-gun Carter was not the guy to take Andy's word for it, or the rancher's either. He snarled an order, and two of the rustlers grasped Old Man Dawney, and went through his pockets: and then they searched the hack. Not so much as a dollar bill rewarded them. They had to chew on it that the Rio Kid had been first in the field, and that they had waited in their ambush for nothing. There was a chorus of oaths and curses that might have turned the atmosphere blue: but that solace, such as it was, was all that was left to Two-gun and his bunch.

The hack was permitted to roll on again at last, and Andy drove on with his passenger to Frio: leaving four disappointed and enraged hold-up men still cursing their luck and the Rio Kid.

CHAPTER III

SHERIFF WATSON lay back lazily in his rocker, in his office in the cow-town of Frio, nodding in the drowsy heat of the day. His feet, in their big cow-hide boots, rested on the desk before him. On that desk lay a six-gun: a sheriff in a wild cow-town like Frio had need to keep his ironware at hand. But Jake Watson was not thinking of guns or gunplay as he nodded in the rocker, in the hot afternoon. It was a hot day, even for the south of Texas in the summer, and the sheriff was drowsy, tired after long and hard riding.

All Frio lay quiet and slumbrous in the semi-tropical heat of the blazing afternoon. When the sheriff, half-heeding, heard the sound of a horse's hoofs outside in the street, he wondered lazily what guy was bonehead enough to be riding in that blaze of heat, quite uninterested.

Jake Watson was a brawny man of iron muscle: but he had had more than enough hard riding of late. The previous day he had hunted for the Rio Kid

up in the Huecas, a long and weary trail that had led him nowhere. And riding back to Frio late, he had heard Rancher Dawney's tale of the hold-up on the stage-trail: and once more he had ridden out with his saddle-sore posse, looking for the elusive boy outlaw. Not before dawn had the sheriff and his men returned, unsuccessful, fatigued to the bone. The Rio Kid had vanished, with the rancher's roll, snapping his fingers once more at all the Texas sheriffs could do. Old Man Dawney had gone back furious to his ranch: Sheriff Watson notched one more score against the name of the Rio Kid: and there was the end of it: and now Jake Watson was taking his ease in his office rocker, drowsing in the heat of the day, forgetful even of the Rio Kid.

The clatter of horse's hoofs in the rugged street of Frio stopped, outside the wide-open doorway of the sheriff's office. A shadow fell across the bright sunlight in the doorway. Sheriff Watson turned his head idly—but the next moment, he was not idle—he dragged his feet from the desk, with a shrieking of spurs, and they crashed on the floor, as he reached for his gun. But he did not touch the gun. The bluish barrel of a Colt, was looking him in the face, and Jake Watson was not honing for sudden death. He sat in his rocker, and stared with almost unbelieving eyes at a handsome sunburnt face, under the rim of a Stetson hat that was adorned with a band of silver nuggets.

"The Kid!" he stuttered.

The Rio Kid grinned at him.

"You been looking for me, sheriff!" he drawled. "Wal, here I am. You look kinder surprised."

The sheriff was not merely surprised. He could scarcely believe his eyes as he stared at the Kid.

"You—here in Frio!" he breathed.

"Me—here in Frio!" assented the Kid. "A hundred galoots within call, and every one of them honing to draw a bead on me—and here I am, Jake, talking to you nice and friendly and pleasant in your own office, like we was old side-pardners."

The Kid laughed: the low musical laugh the sheriff knew. He was cool—cool as ice—and he had ridden into the cow-town, into the midst of a host of enemies, where every gun would have leaped from its holster at the sight of him. It was like the Kid to take wild chances: but the sheriff could scarcely believe that he had taken so wild a chance as this. Yet here he was—smiling at Jake Watson over the long barrel of the levelled six-gun.

"But you ain't going to give no call, Jake," he went on. "It would be the last yaup you would give on this side of Jordan, if you did! You're going to sit quiet in that rocker of yours, and listen to my say-so. Ain't you?"

Sheriff Watson was wide awake enough now. Under his grizzled brows his steely eyes smouldered at the Kid. Long had the boy outlaw of the Rio Grande defied him, and all that he could do: but this was the climax—holding him up in his own office; the crowning humiliation. Almost the sheriff grabbed

at the six-gun on his desk, to take a desperate chance. But he did not: for he knew that it was not a chance but a certainty.

"You here!" he repeated. "You've played too high this time, Kid. You won't get out of Frio alive."

"Quien sabe?" said the Kid, carelessly. "Say, did you have a pleasant paseo up in the Huecas yesterday, Jake?"

The sheriff gritted his teeth, without replying. At any moment, someone to see the sheriff might have stepped in from the street. Jake Watson longed for it to happen. But the Kid did not seem to care. After all, he had chosen his time well. It was but little past noon, and few if any were stirring in the blaze of the burning sun. Evidently no eye had noted the Kid riding in, or there would have been gun-play already. But if only some guy came in while the Kid was there—!

The Kid laughed, reading the sheriff's thoughts easily in his face. He was watching Jake Watson like a cat: but the corner of his eye was on the open doorway where the sunlight blazed.

"Guess why I've come, Jake!" he said, banteringly.

"If you've come shooting, get on with it," muttered the sheriff. "You got me covered, you durned fire-bug. I guess the shot will bring half Frio on to you, and you'll go up on a branch. Shoot, durn your hide, if that's what you've come for."

"I'm going to surprise you, Jake," grinned the Kid. "I ain't come a-shooting. I come to talk turkey, Jake."

"Aw, can it!" growled the sheriff.

He gave a sudden start, as another shadow fell across the sunlit doorway. The Kid did not start. But his left hand whipped out the second gun from his other holster, and it was up to a level as Hank Hanson, deputy sheriff of Frio, stepped in from the street.

"Say, sheriff," began Hanson. "Great gophers—" Hank Hanson's eyes popped at the Kid, as he suddenly became aware of him.

"Put 'em up, feller!" said the Kid, softly.

Hank Hanson gave one helpless look at the sheriff in his rocker. Then his hands went up over his head.

"The Kid!" he stuttered. "The Kid here! the Kid here—The Rio Kid—in Frio—!"

"Stand over there by the sheriff, Hank, and keep clawing the air," said the Kid. "I ain't here to spill any guy's juice over Jake's office, if I can help: but you got to mind your step."

The burly deputy-sheriff lurched over to Jake, and stood beside him, his hands well up. So long as he was under the Kid's gun, Hank Hanson had no kick coming.

"Now ain't you two guys doing jest as you're told, like you was back with your schoolmarm," said the Kid, pleasantly. "We'll get on fine, so long's

you're so good. Say, Jake, I guess you heard from Old Man Dawney that a fire-bug about my size lifted his roll on the Apache trail yesterday?"

"Sure!" grunted the sheriff.

"You been after that fire-bug?" grinned the Kid.

"I'll get him yet," muttered the sheriff.

"You got him now, old-timer, though you don't seem to be enjoying his company a whole lot," said the Kid. "Mebbe Old Man Dawney mentioned that a bunch of rustlers stopped him, further on the trail, and would have had that roll if it hadn't been cinched earlier."

"Yep!"

"Now I'm going to surprise you!" said the Kid. "I'm telling you, sheriff, that I got wise to them rustlers and their game, and held up the hack afore it got to them, jest to save Old Man Dawney's roll from their grip."

"And you cinched it," said the sheriff.

"I sure did! I got it here now, in the pocket of my chaps."

Jake Watson's eyes blazed, and Hank Hanson caught his breath. There was a bulge in the pocket of the Kid's goatskin chararejos. Was he loco enough to ride into Frio with the plunder on him? If only there came a chance of getting the upper hand of him—!

"Now, you guess why I held up that hack!" went on the Kid. "Spose I'd chirped to Old Man Dawney that there was a hold-up gang on the trail, and that I was telling him for his own good, you figure that he'd have fallen for it?"

"Not so's you'd notice it," grunted the sheriff.

"Right in one!" agreed the Kid. "I guess if I hadn't had my gun on him, he would have had his on me, and I wouldn't have had much time to tell him what a good boy I was. That's why I lifted his roll, Jake. Jest to keep it out of the grip of the bunch that was waiting for it." The Kid laughed. "I reckon, too, that I owe Old Man Dawney a few, and I kinder liked to give him a scare about losing twenty thousand dollars in a lump. But he ain't lost it, Jake! I'm shouting that I lifted it jest to keep it safe."

Jake Watson shrugged his massive shoulders, while Hanson stared curiously at the Kid.

"You don't believe that, Jake?" asked the Kid.

"Not a lot!" jeered the sheriff.

"It's the goods," said the Kid. "That was jest why. You're after me, sheriff, for hold-ups that I never heard of, and for running off steers that I never seen—it's all put down to the tally of the Rio Kid, that never touched a dollar that wasn't his own. But you wouldn't believe that, if I told you from now till the cows come home. But money talks, Jake! Here, you Hank! I got both hands busy, so you take that roll from the pocket of my chaps."

"You don't mean that!" said the deputy-sheriff, staring.

"You talking back?" asked the Kid. "It's sure foolish when I'm getting tired of holding these guns. Jump to it!"

Jake Watson sat and stared as if transfixed. Slowly, unbelievably, Hank Hanson stepped to the Kid, and drew a fat roll from the pocket of the chaparejos. He gazed at it with still unbelieving eyes.

"Wake up, feller," said the Kid. "I sure do enjoy a call on old friends like this, but I got to hit the trail all the same. You count them bills, and see that they pan out right."

Like a man in a dream, the deputy-sheriff ran through the roll of bills, all of high denominations. It was a fortune that the boy outlaw had brought into the sheriff's office. He laid the roll on the desk at last.

"Right?" asked the Kid.

"Every red cent, according to what Old Man Dawney allowed," said Hank. "Say, you gone loco, Kid?"



Swept off his stetson in mocking farewell.

"Aw, guess again!" snapped the Kid. "Them bucks belongs to Old Man Dawney, and ain't it right and proper for an honest citizen to tote them along to the sheriff to go back to the owner? That's what I come for. Now I guess I'm through and I'm hitting the trail. You wouldn't object if I put your hardware out of reach before I vamoose the ranch?"

Jake Watson and Hank Hanson were not in a position to raise objections, as the Kid, holstering one of his guns, took their "hardware" and tossed it into the street. The guns clattered on the rugged ground. The Kid, framed in the sunlit doorway, smiled at them. He knew that the alarm would be raised the moment his six-gun was no longer looking at them; they were waiting and watching for a chance: the big roll of bills that lay on the sheriff's desk made no difference to that. The Kid had thrown back a fortune, because it was not his own: but he was still the Rio Kid, wanted by all the sheriffs in Texas. The Kid smiled at them, and gave a low whistle. The black-muzzled mustang was at the door in a moment.

"I guess I'll mosey on, sheriff," said the Kid, amiably. "Don't move too sudden, or you might get yours, before you knew what hit you. Next time you feel like a pleasant paseo, Jake, you go riding up into the Huecas for a guy that ain't there. And next time you meet up with Old Man Dawney, tell the old bonehead that Kid Carfax wouldn't touch his pesky dollars if he was down to his last continental red cent. So-long, Jake—keep on the trail till the Frio folk find out that you ain't no earthly good and elect a new sheriff!"

The Kid stepped back into the sunlight, and was gone. There was a jingle of reins and a clatter of hoofs in the sunbaked street.

The sheriff leaped up, with a bound that sent the rocker spinning. He rushed to the door, with Hanson at his heels. The Kid, mounted on the black-muzzled mustang, was galloping down the rugged street, heading for the open prairie: and Side-Kicker was going like the wind. The sheriff shook a brawny fist and roared.

"The Rio Kid! It's the Rio Kid!"

But it was too late. At the end of the street, the Kid half-turned in the saddle, and swept off his Stetson in mocking farewell. Then a touch of the spur, and Side-Kicker was galloping out on the prairie. As the alarm spread, there was mounting in hot haste in the cow-town, mounting and riding of angry men with guns in their hands. Not till darkness fell like a velvet cloak on the wide grasslands of Texas did they return from the hunt—but they returned without the Rio Kid. Far away under the stars the Rio Kid was riding, free and carefree.

THE END



CHAPTER I

SKIP WAS to blame, of course. It was Skip's fault. That was nothing new. If ever anything went wrong in Study Four, in the Fourth Form at Felgate, it was generally if not always Skip's fault. Skip Ruggles was born to bungle, as the sparks fly upwards.

Skip protested that it was not his fault at all. How could a fellow help losing his train, when that ruffian Bullinger actually tipped him off at the last minute? Skip, who sat down on the platform with a bump that almost shook Hodden railway station to its foundations, expected sympathy from his chums. He did not get very much. His mishap caused Tom King and Dick

Warren to lose the train too: and that was how the spot of trouble about Study Four started.

On the first day of term, there was always a crowd at Hodden, where you changed trains for Fell, and Felgate School. Felgate fellows of all forms swarmed, and those who did not get seats in the first train had to wait for the second. Nobody, of course, wanted to wait for the second train, and sometimes there was a good deal of pushing and shoving. A great man like Langdale of the Sixth, captain of Felgate, could stroll to the train in the most leisurely manner: prefects like Denver and Loring and Paynter did not need to push or to shove: big Fifth-form men like Perkinson and Purrings shouldered juniors out of their way without ceremony. But the smaller fry rushed for places, bagged them when they could, and got excited when they couldn't.

Tom King and Dick Warren were not going to wait for that second train. They were rather important members of the Fourth—Tom, in fact, captain of the form. They bagged seats in a full carriage, and bagged one also for Skip Ruggles. But Skip had fallen behind in the race, and was not even in sight on the crowded platform when they looked back for him. Guessing that the fat Skip had dodged into the buffet for something to eat on the last lap of the journey to Felgate—Skip was always thinking of something to eat!—they resolved to kick him when he did arrive: but in the meantime they kept that corner seat for him.

Keeping a seat empty on an over-crowded train was not easy. Other fellows claimed it, and did not seem to like taking "No!" for an answer. Reece and Preece of the Fourth planted themselves at the carriage door and argued the point, warmly, indeed angrily. But it booted not: Tom King and Dick Warren, in the doorway, guarded that seat as faithfully as Horatius guarded the bridge in the brave days of old. Reece and Preece were still arguing the point, with growing emphasis and excitement, when at length Skip Ruggles appeared in the offing, with a smear of jam on his fat face, and a paper bag in his plump hand: just as the train was about to start.

But he was a long way down the platform, and had simply no chance of doing the distance and reaching his chums. So he rushed for the nearest carriage, in which Bullinger and seven or eight other fellows were packed. Plump as he was, Skip might have squeezed in: but Bullinger coolly tipped him back, and Skip, instead of pushing into the carriage, sat on the platform.

He sat suddenly and hard, with a loud yell.

"Oh, that ass!" exclaimed Tom King.

"That fathead!" exclaimed Dick Warren.

At the risk, or rather the certainty, of losing that train, they jumped out to dash to Skip's aid. The moment they were out of the carriage, Reece and Preece shot into it, and banged the door after them. They had caught the train after all.

Tom King and Dick Warren had lost it. By the time they reached the

breathless, spluttering Skip, and heaved him to his feet, the train was in motion. Bullinger grinned and waved a hand from his window. From another window Reece and Preece grinned. Tom King and Dick Warren looked at Skip, as he gasped for breath, as if they could have eaten him. A good many other fellows had lost that train, it was true: but that was no consolation.

"You fathead!" said Tom.

"You born idiot!" said Warren.

"I—I say, we've lost the train!" gasped Skip.

"Just found that out?" asked Dick Warren, sarcastically. The guard's van was disappearing down the line. "Why couldn't you keep with us, you owl?"

"I—I—I—!" gasped Skip.

"Half-an-hour to wait for the next!" said Tom King. "All Skip's fault."

"That brute Bullinger tipped me off—"

"We had a seat for you along the train—"

"Well, I—I was delayed, you know—you know how slow they are serving you in the buffet—"

"You didn't stop to scoff anything?" asked Warren, still sarcastic. "Did that jam smear itself on that Guy Fawkes mask you call a face?"

"Well, I might have had a tart or two—or—perhaps three—but—."

"What have you got in that bag?"

"Oh!" said Skip. He had recovered his breath a little, and the thought of what he had in the bag seemed to cheer him. "I say, I've got some jam tarts in this bag. Look here, let's find a seat and—and eat them while we wait for the next train—that will be all right, won't it?"

It was all right from the fat Skip's point of view. They had lost the train: but they had the jam-tarts! The world went very well, for Skip Ruggles, when there were jam-tarts.

Tom King and Dick Warren did not seem to think that it was all right. True, just then they did not foresee, or think of, the consequences that were to accrue from losing that train. But they had lost it, and they were not going to arrive at Felgate in the first flight. They were left behind, like inconsiderable fellows such as Sleake of the Fourth or Boot of the Third. They were not to be placated by jam-tarts.

"Hand me that bag!" said Warren.

"Here you are!" answered Skip, unsuspectingly. He handed the paper bag to Dick Warren.

"Hold his ears, Tom!" said Warren. "Hold his ears, while I plaster him with his measly jam-tarts."

"Oh I say!" gasped Skip. "I—I—leggo—keep off—I say—ooooch!"

Skip liked jam-tarts. But he liked them internally, not externally. Externally, even Stanley St. Leger Ruggles found them horrid.

A jammy Skip gasped and spluttered in indignant wrath. Fellows up and down the platform howled with laughter as Skip, with a fat face plastered

with jam and pastry, rushed away to get a very necessary wash. He was very red, and very indignant, when he rejoined his friends. There was plenty of room on the second train, and the three chums of Study Four packed into it, and rolled on to Felgate—little dreaming of what was awaiting them there.

CHAPTER II

REECE GRINNED.
Preece chuckled.

Both of them seemed highly amused.

Reece and Preece, of the Felgate Fourth, were not really very nice fellows. Reece was as sharp as a needle, and if ever there was some little advantage to be taken of some other fellow, Reece was the man to take it. Reece knew all the rules by heart, studying them with a view to breaking them whenever the same could be done with impunity. Reece was, in fact, as cunning as a fox, which did not make him very popular in his form. Preece always followed his lead, which was useful, for Preece was a burlier fellow, and packed a useful punch, and Reece was not of much use with his hands.

Last term they had shared No. 5 Study, which was a small room with a tiny window, the least desirable of all the Fourth-form studies: but quite good enough, in the general opinion, for fellows like Reece and Preece. Generally a fellow took up his quarters in his old study as a matter of course. So it was rather unusual for Reece to be grinning, and Preece chuckling, in Number Four. But it was in Number Four, which belonged to King and Warren and Skip, that they were now grinning and chuckling.

Looking from the window, they could see King and Warren and Skip in the quad, among the late arrivals. And the sight of them seemed to amuse Reece and Preece. It was a bay window—Number Four was the only study in the Fourth that had a bay window, and a comfortable window-seat in the bay. It looked out on the Felgate quad, which was another advantage, and it was roomier than most of the other studies. Altogether, it was very much preferable to No. 5. There was ample room for three fellows in No. 4: while in No. 5 there was none too much for two. A change of studies would have been a boon to Reece and Preece, though the reverse to Tom King and Co.

"There they are!" grinned Reece.

"Too jolly late!" chuckled Preece.

"Sort of!" agreed Reece.

"There'll be a row!" remarked Preece. "I say, you're sure you've got it right, Reecey?"

"Right as rain!"

"Fellows usually take their old studies—"

"I know! But they needn't!" said Reece, coolly. "Nobody's study belongs to him after the term's end. First in the field has the choice of studies, in the new term. That's the rule, and has always been. Think I don't know the rules?"

"Yes: but—!"

"I've spoken to Charne. We're within our rights, but it's safest to have beak's leave too."

"They'll kick—!"

"Let them!"

"I mean, suppose they pitch us out on our necks? They could, the three of them," said Preece, a little dubiously.

Reece shrugged his narrow shoulders.

"They can't kick against Charne! As we applied for the study first, he said yes, without even thinking about it. He can't go back on it."

"Here comes somebody!" said Preece, hurriedly, as there were footsteps in the passage.

Tom King appeared in the open doorway of the study. He came in, without even noticing that it was occupied, and slammed a bag on the table. Then he stared at the two fellows who had turned round from the window.

"Hallo! What are you fellows doing here?" he asked. Tom was not on the best of terms with Reece and Preece, and the argument at Hodden Station had not poured oil on the troubled waters: so he was surprised to find them in his study.

"Oh, we're just fixing up our study, you know," answered Reece, carelessly.

Tom King stared.

"Your study?" he repeated.

"Just so!" Reece nodded. "Ours this term! Mind?"

"Well, yes, I do mind, just a little," said Tom. "This happens to be my study—"

"Last term isn't this term!" Reece reminded him.

"What difference does that make?"

"Lots!"

Tom King stood silent for a moment, looking at them. It dawned upon his mind that Reece and Preece were taking advantage of their earlier arrival to bag his study. The captain of the Fourth was not likely to stand for that.

"Mind getting out of my study?" he asked at length.

"Ours!" said Reece.

"I've heard that one! Now get out."

"You don't seem to catch on, King," said Reece, patiently. "First in the field has first choice. That's the rule—"

"Never mind the rule! Get out."

"We've chosen this study, and we're sticking to it," said Preece. "If you wanted it this term, you should have turned up on time to claim it."

"Exactly!" said Reece. "Take that bag away with you, King."

The captain of the Fourth breathed hard.

"I'm keeping my temper," he said. "I don't want to start the term with a row. But this is my study, and you fellows are getting out of it. Are you going on your feet or on your necks?"

Preece pushed back his cuffs, apparently in readiness for hostilities. Reece backed a little behind him. Reece's favourite weapon was cunning: and knuckles had no appeal for him.

Tom King also pushed back his cuffs. No doubt Reece, in a legalistic way, had a good claim: but fellows did not do these things. Tom King would never have thought of bagging Reece's study, if it had been as roomy and commodious as the Head's study itself. Reece was the fellow to look out some obscure rule and take advantage of it. Tom was not. But Tom was not the fellow to have his study bagged, as the glint in his eyes revealed very plainly.

"Going?" he asked.

"Not so's you'd notice it!" jeered Preece.

"I fancy I can handle you, Preece," said Tom, "and Reece thrown in won't make much difference. I'm chucking you out if you don't clear. Now, then!"

"This is our study this term—!" said Reece.

"That will do! Are you going?"

"We've asked Charne—"

"Never mind Charne! Get out."

"Rats!" said Preece.

That did it! Tom King came across the study with a rush, and there was war. Preece put up quite a respectable scrap, but he was no match for the captain of the Fourth. Reece lent him but feeble aid: a back-hander sent him tottering across the room to the window-seat, where he sat down very suddenly—and stayed.

Preece whirled in Tom's grasp, and whizzed through the doorway. It was exactly like Skip Ruggles to arrive at the study that very moment. The fat Skip was about to step in, when Preece whizzed out, and there was a terrific crash, as they met.

"Whooooooh!" roared Skip. He staggered across the passage, while Preece rolled at his feet.

Tom King turned to Reece, in the study. Reece, sitting breathless in the window-seat, found that he had breath enough to jump up and bound for the door. It was a rapid bound, and Reece was inches ahead of Tom King's foot as he flew into the passage. There he stumbled over the sprawling Preece, and came down on him with a heavy thud.

"Oooogh!" moaned Preece.

Skip stared at both of them, and then at Tom King, looking out of the doorway. He spluttered for wind.

"I say—!" gasped Skip.

"Help me kick them down the passage," said Tom.

"Oh, all right."

Skip did not yet know in what manner Reece and Preece had offended. But he was an obliging fellow, and did as his chum requested, helping to kick Reece and Preece down the passage. They disappeared yelling. When Dick Warren came up to the study, he found his friends in possession there: and none of the three expected to hear any more from Reece and Preece about the ownership of that study. But it was the unexpected that was scheduled to happen.



He stumbled and came down on him.

CHAPTER III

MR. CHARNE, master of the Felgate Fourth, looked in at the doorway of the Pound, an hour or two later. The Pound, the apartment where Lower boys most did congregate, was crowded. There was often a good deal of noise on the first day of term, before fellows had settled down to the collar, as it were: and there was a good deal in the Pound when Charne looked in. Charne rapped out a name unheard. Many fellows in the Fourth were discussing the affair of Study Four. Public opinion in the form was largely on the side of Tom King and Co. Reece, with his sharp ways, was too much of a lawyer for the taste of most Felgate juniors. Bullinger and Carton inclined to his side, chiefly because they were "up against" the captain of the form on principle: almost all the rest backed the claim of Tom King and Co. to their old study. And in fact Bullinger expressed himself so emphatically on Reece's side, that Tom King and Dick Warren were in the very act of banging his head on the table, when their form-master looked into the room: a sight that did not please Charne. Nor was Charne at his bonniest on the first day of term. There were too many spots of bother in the first day for any form-master to be at his bonniest.

"King!" he rapped out, a second time.

"Oh!" ejaculated Tom. This time he heard the rap, and released Bullinger as suddenly as if Bullinger had all at once become red-hot. "Yes, sir."

Charne frowned at him.

"You are captain of my form, King! You should be keeping some sort of order here, even on the first day of term!" he rapped.

"Oh! Yes, sir!" Tom King mentally promised Bullinger another bang on the table later: but for the moment, he tried to look as if banging a fellow's head was the last thing of which he would have thought.

"I came here to speak to you, King," said Mr. Charne, still frowning.

"Yes, sir!" murmured Tom, meekly.

"I understand, King, that you have taken possession of Number Four study, which was claimed by two other boys in the form immediately on their arrival here, and which was assigned to them"

"Oh!" breathed Tom.

Dick Warren looked serious, Skip dismayed. Evidently, Reece had taken his tale of woe to Charne, and the "beak" was intervening.

"It's our old study, sir!" ventured Warren.

"That is immaterial, Warren."

"But, sir——"

"You need not speak, Warren. I am addressing King."

"I say, sir——!" bleated Skip.

"You may be silent, Ruggles. Number Four Study was assigned to Reece and Preece, and unless you have already found other quarters, King, you will take No. 5."

Tom was silent, with deep feelings. The Co. had been too sure of possession of their old study to think of looking for other quarters. All the studies were booked by this time, and nothing was left but Reece's old study—the most undesirable in the passage.

"Did Reece tell you that he had my permission to take Number Four Study, King?"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" It was not to be denied. Reece certainly had mentioned it, though Tom had not heeded him. He realized now that this would annoy Charne, if it came to his ears—as clearly it had!

"In spite of this, King, you seem to have turned him out of the study."

Tom was silent.

"You will understand, King, that the study is assigned to Reece and Preece, and if there is further trouble on the subject, I shall deal with it personally."

"Very well, sir!" said Tom, quietly.

Mr. Charne paused a moment. Then he said more kindly:

"If Reece and Preece care to change back to their former study, King, there is no objection of course. Otherwise, matters remain as they are."

Charne glanced across at Reece and Preece as he said this. Both of them carefully avoided meeting his eye. Neither had the slightest intention of changing back if it could be helped.

Mr. Charne did not speak again. He had said what he had come to say, and now he revolved in the doorway, and rustled off.

There was a buzz of voices in the Pound when he was gone. Reece winked at Preece, who grinned: Bullinger chuckled. Five or six fellows told Reece, all at once, what they thought of him, in the first place for bagging another fellow's study, in the second place for going yowling to Charne about it. Reece did not mind: he was accustomed to being told what fellows thought of him, and what they thought was seldom complimentary.

"You ass, Skip!" said Tom.

"You fathead, Skip!" said Warren.

Skip looked indignant.

"My fault, as usual?" he snorted.

"If you hadn't lost that train, Reece couldn't have cut in and pinched our study!" hooted Warren.

"Well, look here," said Skip, "I've got an idea——"

"Take it away and boil it!" King and Warren seemed to have no use for Skip's idea, whatever it was.

"Do listen to a chap——"

"Oh, rats!"

"I tell you I've got an idea," howled Skip. "You heard what Charne said. Those two ticks can change back if they like."

"Think they'll like?" snapped Warren.

"That's the idea!" explained Skip. "Let's jolly well punch their heads till they agree to change back, what?"

"Cave!" called out Parrott, as a grim face reappeared in the doorway. Skip spun round and stared in dismay at that grim countenance. It had not occurred to him that Charne might come back. Charne had. And clearly he had heard Skip proposing that drastic method for getting the study back.

"Ruggles!" thundered Charne.

"Oh, crikey!"

"I heard what you said, Ruggles."

"Did—did—did you, sir!" babbled Skip.

"I came back to tell you, King, to remove your belongings from Number 4 Study at once," said Mr. Charne, who had overlooked that item on the agenda.

"Do so without delay."

"Yes, sir!" breathed Tom.

"And now I will add, after hearing what Ruggles was saying, that if any attempt be made to compel Reece and Preece to make a change against their will, I shall deal with it with the greatest severity," said Mr. Charne, sternly, "Ruggles!"

"Yes, sir!" mumbled Skip.

"You will take a hundred lines, and hand them in to me to-morrow."

"Oh, lor'!"

Charne departed again: this time for good.

If Tom King and Dick Warren had fancied acting on Skip's bright idea, they fancied it no longer. Charne was not a man to be trifled with: and they did not need telling that he would have an eye for any dispute about the ownership of Study 4. Reece called out to Tom:

"Mind going up and clearing your things out, King? We want to get our own things in the study, you know."

Tom, with some difficulty, refrained from going across to Edgar Reece and punching his head.

"Come on, you chaps!" he said.

The three left the Pound, and went up to the studies. In Study 4 they exchanged glum glances. They really did not want to get out of that study. It was old and familiar; a sort of home-from-home. And it was their study, whatever Reece might claim, even backed up by Charne. They liked their old room, they had been very comfortable there last term: and there was a loss of prestige, too, in being diddled out of their study by a tick like Reece. But there was no help for it, and they had to get on with the moving.

Skip sadly prised up the short board in the corner, under which he was accustomed to use a hide-out for articles he did not desire to meet the public

eye. He had already deposited in that obscure hide-out a water-pistol—strictly forbidden at Felgate—a bundle of gaudy comics, on which Charne would have frowned, and—sad to relate—a crib to Virgil. These he now extracted from their hiding-place, for conveyance to No. 5 with other properties. He jammed back the board very carefully, so that not a sign could be seen that it was movable: he was not going to let Reece discover it, and use it as a hide-out for cigarettes and sporting papers.

It was quite a sad removal. No. 5 Study was rather pokey. There was no view of the quad from the window. There was no hide-out for Skip's water-pistol, comics, and crib. It was a change very much for the worse, and Tom King and Co. were feeling sore—and but for Charne's authority, would doubtless have made Reece and Preece feel sore too!

But if the three chums were dissatisfied, Reece and Preece rejoiced. They installed themselves in their new quarters, with much satisfaction. They had scored over the captain of the Fourth, and they had the best study in the passage, and were going to keep it: so Reece and Preece, at least, felt that they had started the term well.

CHAPTER IV

“OH, you ass!”
“Oh, you fathead!”

That was the kind of thing Skip Ruggles was used to hearing from his chums. They liked old Skip: but they seldom measured their words in telling him what they thought of him. And Skip, really, was sometimes quite the limit. His unsuspecting innocence was, no doubt, a credit to him: but it was possible to have too much of a good thing. Any fellow with a clock that wouldn't go, or a pocket-knife with the blades broken, could always “swop” it with Skip for something more valuable. Skip accumulated all sorts of useless and valueless articles to lumber up the study. But this time Skip had, so to speak, out-Skipped himself, in the purchase of a basket of eggs he had brought in from Fell. It was surprising that the rich aroma of those eggs had not struck Skip, even in the open air, as he walked back to the school with them. It struck Tom King and Dick Warren very forcibly in Number 5 Study.

The term was now several days old. Tom King and Co. had settled down in Number 5, as there was no help for it. Skip, always good-natured and obliging himself, had an idea that Reece and Preece might relent, and change back, like decent fellows. King and Warren expected nothing of the sort. They made the best of it, as there was nothing else to be done: and were in fact fairly cheerful about it, having neither time nor inclination to weep over spilt milk. Just now they had come up to No. 5 to tea: and as they entered

their new study, they were struck by a scent that was nothing at all like attar-of-roses. It seemed to proceed from a basket on the study table, at which they stared while they sniffed.

Skip explained. He had been down to the village after class, and had made rather a bargain there—a cheap line in eggs. Eggs, of course, were always welcome at tea-time in a junior study. They were too expensive to figure very often on the menu: schoolboys' pocket-money being limited. Skip was as pleased as Punch by his bargain. No fewer than three dozen eggs were packed in that basket, and Skip had bought the lot at a bargain price. It had not occurred to his simple mind to inquire into the age and quality of those eggs. But even Skip, after he had landed them in No. 5, was feeling a little dubious. He had not noticed, at first, the rich aroma that spread out from the basket. It had not been so striking in the open air. In the close confines of a small study it was very striking indeed.

"What's in that basket?" asked Tom.

"Eggs!" said Skip.

"Not a dead cat?" asked Dick Warren.

"Or a nineteenth-century fish?" inquired Tom King.

"They're not so jolly bad!" said Skip, defensively. "The man said that they weren't new-laid—I didn't expect it at the price, you know—but—but—but they ain't too jolly high, you know—it—it's just the smell——"

"You blithering ass!"

"You howling fathead!"

"Well, I thought you fellows would like some eggs for tea," said Skip, warmly. "We don't get too many—and they were a cheap line——"

"If you gave more than a bad penny, you were done," said Warren.

"Not worth that much!" said Tom King, shaking his head.

"I—I—I think perhaps we'd better not boil them" said Skip, cautiously. "But—but what about scrambled eggs? I can scramble them in the pan, and you don't notice the flavour so much when they're scrambled——"

"Fathead!"

"Ass!"

It was kind and thoughtful of Skip to secure an ample supply of eggs for No. 5. But he received no gratitude whatever from his study-mates. He had taken the combined cash resources down to Fell to get something decent for tea in the study. He had returned with those aromatic eggs, and nothing else. It was Skip all over—just the sort of thing that Skip would do. There was no tea in No. 5 for King and Warren, unless they felt disposed to dispose of those eggs—the mere thought of which made them feel faint. Skip hoped that scrambling them might disguise a flavour that would be undoubtedly very rich. Skip had a hopeful nature.

King and Warren backed to the door. No. 5 was not an attractive study anyhow: and with those eggs in it, it was quite uninhabitable.

"Tea in hall, after all," said Tom.

"Look here, I'll scramble them—!" pleaded Skip.

"You won't!" said Dick Warren. "You'll get them out of this study. Hold your silly nose with one hand, and carry them with the other. Get them out of the study anyway—"

"But I've spent the money on them—"

"You would!" said Tom King. "We're not going to slay you, Skip, because you can't help being the biggest idiot at Felgate; but we shall slay you if those eggs are in the study when we come up again. If you want to go to bed alive to-night, get rid of those eggs."

"But I say—" pleaded Skip.

"Chump!"

"Chucklehead!"

With those final remarks, Tom King and Dick Warren left No. 5, leaving Skip alone with his bargain. Tea in hall was the only resource now: and with considerable self-restraint, they went down to tea in hall without first slaying Stanley St. Leger Ruggles.

Skip, left alone with his eggs, gazed at the basket dolefully.

"Rotten!" he said.

He was not referring to the eggs, though really he might have been. He was referring to the sad outcome of his shopping expedition.

Sniffing, Skip had to admit that, so far as scent was concerned, there was a strong resemblance between his basket of eggs and a slimy old ditch suddenly stirred up. Still, cookery could effect all sorts of things: even those eggs might be made edible, and even palatable, by his skill in cookery; if only his comrades had been a little more patient and reasonable. Scrambling them, with lots and lots of salt and pepper, might have worked the oracle.

But his comrades were not patient and reasonable, at least on the subject of those eggs. They were going to slay him if the eggs remained in the study, and Skip could not even cook them for his own behoof, and try his luck with them. It was hard luck on a fellow who, after all, had only done his best. Skip shook a sad head as he sniffed. He simply could not throw away that bargain: after expending all the available cash resources of the study on it. On the other hand he had to get rid of the eggs. He decided to park them somewhere—somewhere where their scent would not betray them to King and Warren—and go down to tea in hall. Later he could decide on some method of cookery which would, after all, justify his expenditure on those aromatic eggs. He would have to choose a time when King and Warren were not likely to come up to the study: perhaps next day when they were at games-practice.

But where could he park those eggs? If he had still inhabited No. 4 Study, the hide-out under the floor would have been the ideal place: the keenest nose would not have scented them through thick oak planks, at all events if they

were not left there too long. But he was no longer in No. 4: he was in No. 5. Those cads Reece and Preece—.

But, after all, why shouldn't he use his own hide-out in what was, really and truly, his own study? If Reece and Preece weren't there at the moment, it was quite easy: and he could choose another moment, later, when they weren't there, to recover his eggs, when he wanted them.

Skip cut out of No. 5, and looked into No. 4. The study was vacant: Reece and Preece were at tea in hall. The next minute, Skip was carrying that egg-basket out of No. 5 into No. 4.

He prised up the short board in the corner with his pocket-knife. Under the floor-boards was an open space, between beams, about eighteen inches deep. Into that space Skip carefully lowered the basket of eggs. Then he replaced the short board, securing it in place with the greatest care, very cautiously leaving no sign that it had been shifted. Reece and Preece were quite capable of bagging a fellow's eggs, if they found them in their study! But there was no danger of that: and Skip retired from No. 4 easy in his mind, and went down to tea in hall.

In No. 5 that evening, at prep, his friends remembered the eggs. That they were no longer in No. 5 was certain: no fellow with a nose could have been unaware of them.

"What did you do with that scent-packet?" asked Warren.

Skip stared.

"That what? Oh, if you mean the eggs—they're not here now—"

"I know that!" Warren sniffed. "If they were, I'd lay hold of them and plaster your silly head with them."

"They're not so jolly bad," argued Skip. "I can jolly well tell you that I know how to cook eggs, and I—"

His chums stared at him.

"Mean to say you're keeping them?" exclaimed Tom King.

"Well, you see—!"

"Now, look here, Skip," said Tom, "you can't help being an idiot, and you can't help being a fathead, and you can't help being the biggest ass that ever assed about at Felgate. But we're not going to let you poison yourself with those eggs. You're not going to cook them—you're not going to do anything with them at all—and unless you promise here and now, honour bright, never to touch those eggs again, we'll jam your silly head in the coal-locker, and pour the ink down your neck. Now, then!"

"Look here—!" objected Skip, feebly.

King and Warren rose to their feet. King opened the coal-locker, and Warren picked up the inkpot. Skip, having watched those proceedings, did not wait for them to proceed further.

"I promise!" he said, hurriedly.

"Honour bright?"

"Honour bright!" said Skip, sadly.

"That's that!" said Tom, and he sat down again.

That was that: Skip, who was a slave to his word, had to keep it. He said a silent farewell to that bargain in eggs: and relinquished all idea of testing his skill in cookery upon them. Those eggs were gone from his gaze like an unbeautiful dream: and the following day Skip had forgotten all about them.

CHAPTER V

SKIP grinned happily.

Gudge, the house-porter, had left the garden-hose lying unattended on the edge of a flower-bed. Gudge had been using that hose, but had been called away; being a man of many duties. He had turned it off at the nozzle, but it was still dripping a little when Skip observed it. Skip probably would merely have given it a cursory glance in passing, but for the fact that Reece and Preece were in the offing. Skip Ruggles, in his own esteem at least, was the man for ideas: and an idea shot at once into his fat brain: as he glanced at the dripping, unattended hose, and then at Reece and Preece.

Those two ticks had bagged No. 4 Study. The former owners of that study were accepting the situation with philosophic cheerfulness: nevertheless, it was a sore point. If ever a pair of sly, underhand ticks deserved to get it in the neck, Reece and Preece did. Punching their heads was out of the question! there was Charne to be reckoned with. But a plausible accident might very easily happen if a fellow handled a hose carelessly: and a drenching from head to foot was as good as a head-punching.

Skip, grinning, stooped and picked up the nozzle of that hose.

Reece and Preece were standing with their backs to him, only six or seven yards away, in conversation. They had not even observed Skip. They were going to observe him shortly, in a very sudden and surprising manner.

Other fellows were about, at no great distance. Some of them, perhaps, might get a spattering, when Skip weighed in with the hose. That could not be helped: Skip did not, in fact, think of it. A fellow couldn't think of everything at once. At the moment, Skip was concentrated on drenching Reece and Preece in retaliation for their unscrupulous appropriation of No. 4 Study.

It was easy work—for any fellow but Stanley St. Leger Ruggles. But if it was barely possible to make a bungle of anything, Skip Ruggles was the man to make it. He turned on the hose, streaming water over the flower-bed. The next act was to swing it round, as it were carelessly, directing the stream at those two ticks. At that point Skip inadvertently stepped on the hose, and tumbled over it. In consequence of that stumble, the nozzle took a wrong

direction—it aimed itself, not at Reece and Preece, but right at Skip's own fat face, and a blinding torrent of water swamped into the middle of his plump features.

"Oooooogh!" gasped Skip, taken by surprise.

He staggered, dropping the nozzle to the ground, and clawing at a streaming face. How a fat leg became entangled in the wriggling hose, Skip did not know. It was the sort of thing that would happen to Skip Ruggles. Blind to the world, with his eyes and nose and mouth full of water, Skip tottered, and rolled over, mixed up with the hose, the nozzle, still streaming, jamming under a fat arm.

Skip's frantic ejaculations were heard far and wide. Reece and Preece looked round, stared, and then roared with laughter. How and why that utter goat, Skip Ruggles, had got himself mixed up with a streaming garden-hose, they did not know, but they found the sight amusing. Other fellows came running up.

"Skip, you ass!" shouted Tom King.

"Skip, you goat!" yelled Dick Warren.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Bullinger. "Here's Ruggles taking a bath with his clothes on! Ha, ha, ha!"

"Urrrggh!" spluttered Skip, frantically. He struggled to release himself from the entangling hose. The nozzle shifted from under his arm, and landed under a fat chin. Then it visited a fat ear. Skip spluttered and rolled and squirmed in a sea of streaming water.

Tom King and Dick Warren rushed to the rescue. It was rather dangerous work, for that nozzle might have turned on them at any moment. Others kept at a safer distance, watching out warily, and yelling with laughter. The mixture of a fat Fourth-former with a tangled hose did not seem funny to Skip himself: but in other eyes it had a comic aspect.

"Oh!" gasped Tom King, as the nozzle, quitting Skip, dashed against his legs, drenching his trousers. "Whooh!"

"You mad ass!" shrieked Dick Warren.

"Oooooooooo!" spluttered Skip. "I say—woooooogh!"

"Go it, Skip!" roared Bullinger. "Give your pals a wash!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Dick Warren plunged at the nozzle to grab it. Skip, unluckily, plunged at it at the same moment. Two heads came into contact with a sharp crack.

"Ow!"

"Wow!"

The nozzle squirmed on the earth. It was at that moment that Mr. Charne, attracted by the uproar, arrived on the scene. Charne's brow was thunderous.

"Ruggles! Warren! King! How dare you play tricks with that hose!" he thundered. "You are drenching yourselves with water! Turn off the water at once! At once! Do you hear?"

Skip grabbed the hose, and groped at it, to turn off the water. In his drenched, confused, and bewildered state, perhaps it was not surprising that Skip, always clumsy, was a little more clumsy than usual. Certainly he never intended to turn the nozzle in the direction of his form-master. Skip would never have dreamed of such a thing. He just did it.

"Oh!" stuttered Mr. Charne, as his gown was suddenly turned into a limp rag hanging round him. "Oh! Stop it! Upon my word! Ruggles! I—I—ooooohh!"

Charne bounded. It was the first time Felgate fellows had ever seen Charne bound, in the quad. Now they saw him bound like a kangaroo.

It was Langdale of the Sixth who rushed up, and somehow got that nozzle away from Skip without further disaster. He shut off the water.

Tom King and Dick Warren stood wet and dripping. Skip sat in almost



"Oooooogh!" gasped Skip.

an ocean. Reece and Preece, dry as dust, did not even know what a narrow escape they had had. Charne looked down at his drenched gown, and the expression on his face would have made that of the fabled basilisk, by comparison, look like a kindly smile.

"Ruggles!" he articulated. "Follow me to my study! King, Warren, take three hundred lines each."

Charne's impression was that the three of them had been larking with that hose. There were lines for King and Warren: Skip, as the worst offender, was to be dealt with more drastically. A dripping Skip followed an incensed form-master to his study.

As he followed him in, Skip gave a loud, prolonged sneeze. He repeated it as Charne picked up his cane from the table.

"Now, Ruggles—"

"Aytishooooooh!" sneezed Skip.

Charne looked at him. He was very keen to get going with that cane. But he felt that he couldn't, in these circumstances.

"You utterly absurd and stupid boy, Ruggles—"

"Woohh! Ooohh!"

"You have caught a cold—"

"Ooooh! Atchooooh! Aytishoooh!"

"I shall take you to the matron," said Charne. He laid down the cane. "Follow me, you inexpressibly stupid boy."

In third school that day there was no Skip. Skip Ruggles, in the throes of a severe cold, had been packed off to the school sanatorium and the care of the Felgate nurse. It was just as well for Skip, in some respects: for King and Warren, with three hundred lines each to write as a result of Skip's antics, were in a mood to boil their fat chum in oil. It was not till the lines had been written, and duly delivered to Charne, that they felt a spot of sympathy for poor old Skip, and wondered how the fathead of the Fourth was getting on in "sanny".

CHAPTER VI

REECE sniffed.
Preece sniffed.

Then they sniffed together.

They looked round Study 4, then they looked at one another: and then they both sniffed again.

"Queer!" said Reece.

"Queer and nasty!" said Preece.

"What on earth's wrong with this dashed study?"

"Something jolly well is."

"Must be the drains!" said Reece. "But I never heard of anything the matter here last term, when King's gang had it."

"I've noticed it several times—but it's getting worse," said Preece.

"Putrid!"

They had come up to No. 4 to tea.

Several times, of late, the new proprietors of No. 4 had fancied that there was a queer smell about the study. Several times they had looked about the room, looking for the cause, but without discovering any cause. It had been just noticeable, but not very noticeable, at first: but, as Preece said, it was getting worse. During the past two or three days, while Skip Ruggles had been in the sanatorium, his fat existence forgotten by Reece and Preece, that mysterious scent in No. 4 had grown more and more perceptible. Now it was really very unpleasant.

"A dead rat behind the wall, perhaps," said Reece.

"Or under the floor," said Preece.

"Or the drains—"

"Or goodness knows what."

"I wonder if Bullinger will notice it," said Reece. Bullinger was coming to tea in No. 4, and they did not want Bullinger to pass unpleasant remarks about their study.

"Bound to," said Preece, shaking his head. "Blessed if I make it out. It's pretty sickening."

There was a tramp of heavy feet in the passage, and the burly Bullinger came in. He gave Reece and Preece a nod: and they looked at him almost stealthily, wondering whether he would detect anything unpleasant about their study. They need not have wondered—Bullinger immediately gave a loud and emphatic sniff.

"What on earth have you fellows got here?" he exclaimed.

"Notice anything?" asked Reece.

"Notice it!" repeated Bullinger. "I should jolly well say I do. Have you been letting off a stink-bomb?"

"Of course not—"

"What is it then?"

"Well, we don't quite know," said Reece. "Only noticed it just lately. There's a niff from somewhere—a dead rat or something—"

"Rot!" said Bullinger. "An army of dead rats wouldn't put up that scent. Been playing about with chemicals?"

"Nothing of the kind. I daresay it will clear off—I'll open the window!" said Reece.

"Sit down, old chap," said Preece.

Bullinger did not sit down. He gave another prolonged and emphatic sniff, and backed to the door.

"If you fellows can stand that niff, I can't!" he said, and he walked out of the study. Bullinger, evidently, was not staying to tea!

Reece and Preece looked, and felt, intensely annoyed. They did not expect much in the way of manners from Bullinger: but this was very disagreeable.

"Dash it all, this won't do," muttered Reece. "This study will get its name up in the Fourth, at this rate. What on earth can be the matter?"

"No. 5's better than this!" grunted Preece.

Reece's narrow eyes glinted.

"By gum! King and Warren have been taking it pretty quietly—I wonder if they found out that there was something wrong with the study, and were glad to get shut of it!—landing it on us, and getting ours." Reece's suspicious mind jumped to that, as it were.

Preece whistled.

"I shouldn't wonder," he said. "Anyhow they've got our study, and we're landed with this reeking hole. Not so jolly clever as you fancied, Reece—doing them out of their study this term."

There was a step at the door, and Parrott of the Fourth looked in, with a grinning face.

"I say, Bullinger says he was coming to tea with you chaps, but he was stunk out of the study," said Parrott. "What—oh, my hat!" Parrott sniffed. "What have you men got in this study?"

"Nothing—!"

"Never heard of nothing with a niff like that. Look here, you ought to keep the place a bit cleaner," said Parrott. "You'll have the house-dame on your track if you make your study smell like this—"

"We didn't—"

"Why, you could cut it with a knife." Parrott retreated into the passage. "Look here, if it isn't the study it's you—have't you washed yet this term? You'd better, or Charne will notice it in form, and you'll get whops."

Parrott departed with that.

But Reece and Preece were not left long alone. Other fellows heard the strange news, and came along to Study 4 to look in and inquire. Reece and Preece, in a very worried and excited state, hunted round the study once more in the hope of tracking the scent to its lair. But there was absolutely nothing in the study of an odorous nature. That scent was quite inexplicable. The worst of it was, that it was getting worse—distinctly worse. It had been mild, so to speak, when it first made itself manifest: but it had strengthened since, and gone on strengthening. This afternoon it was not only worse than it had ever been before, but was really getting quite awful.

Sleake, Valence, Wate, and other Fourth-form fellows looked in. They only looked in—the scent that greeted them made them unwilling to enter. The remarks they made about fellows who kept their study in such a state were neither grateful nor comforting. Some of them seemed to believe that it was

Reece and Preece themselves who were responsible, owing to lack of washing: which was most unpleasant. Reece slammed the door on grinning faces.

"It must be the drains," he said. "I—I wonder if King and Warren knew all the while—the rotters!"

"If it was the drains, the other studies would get it," said Preece. "It's something wrong with this beastly study. I jolly well wish we'd never bagged it! You had to be so jolly clever, as usual!"

"You were as keen on it as I was!" snapped Reece. "We jolly well did King and Warren in the eye, anyhow."

"Fat lot of good doing fellows in the eye—giving them a decent study, and taking over this filthy place for ourselves," jeered Preece.

"Charne said we could change back, if we liked—"

"It takes two to make a bargain! Catch King changing back, once he puts his nose into the room and catches the niff."

Reece breathed hard. He stood by the open window to do it: it was quite unpleasant to breathe at all in any other spot in that odorous study.

"We can't tea here," he said. "Let's go down to hall—it may clear off before we come up for prep—I'll leave the window open."

They went down to tea in hall. Grinning faces greeted them when they arrived there. Study 4 was the topic among the juniors now: and several fellows made it a point to keep a good arm's length from Reece and Preece, as if fearing a noxious contact. Reece and Preece did not stay long at tea. They went up to the studies again, and looked into several: satisfying themselves that there was no "niff" in any of them. Study 4 had that mysterious aroma all to itself. It was mysterious, inexplicable, unaccountable, unnerving. They looked into No. 5, where Tom King and Dick Warren were finishing tea—a rather more ample tea than usual, in the absence of their fat chum.

King and Warren waved dismissing hands at the sight of them.

"Keep out!" said Tom. "You're too whiffy to come in here."

"Keep your attar-of-roses for yourselves," said Dick Warren.

Evidently, King and Warren had heard!

Reece gave them a bitter look.

"You jolly well knew that there was something whiffy in No. 4," he snarled. "You jolly well knew—"

"Nothing whiffy in No. 4, except you and Preece," answered Tom. "It was all right when we had it."

"Why the dickens don't you fellows wash?" asked Warren. "I know you're a pair of slackers: but there's a limit."

"It's the study—!" howled Preece.

"Rot!" said Tom. "Nothing wrong with that study that I know of. We had it last term, and never noticed anything, at any rate."

"Something must have happened in the hols, then, to make it niff like that."

"Something happened on the first day of term, you mean," answered Warren. "It was all right before you fellows got into it."

Reece slammed the door, and went along to No. 4 again with Preece. They looked into No. 4: but did not step in. They had been absent only half-an-hour, but even in that short space of time, the mysterious malodorous scent had distinctly intensified. It was almost appalling.

"We can't stand much more of that," muttered Reece.

"I can't stand any more of it," said Preece. "I'll ask Bullinger to let me do my prep in his study this evening."

"I'll ask Parrott," muttered Reece.

That evening, at prep, No. 4 was a deserted study.

CHAPTER VII

"IF YOU please, sir—"

"What is it, Reece?" rapped Mr. Charne.

He was in his study, after class the next day, when Reece came into speak to him. He rapped at Reece. Charne often rapped: but his rap was a little sharper with Reece than with others in his form. Reece was rather cunning, and rather sly, and a little oily: none of which qualities recommended him to his form-master. Also, Charne was not wholly pleased about the affair of the changed study. The rules were in favour of Reece, and so Charne had upheld his claim: but he did not quite like it, all the same. So, though Reece's manner now was extremely mild and meek and respectful, Charne rapped.

"It's about my study, sir—!" said Reece.

"Well?" another rap.

"We've been thinking it over, sir—Preece and I—and—and we think that King and his friends ought to have it," said Reece. "We—we didn't think much about it at first, but all the fellows seem to think that we've treated King rather badly, and with your leave, sir, we'd like to change back."

"Oh!" said Mr. Charne.

He regarded Reece with a rather less grim eye. This seemed to him rather decent of Reece: it raised him a little in his form-master's estimation.

"Certainly you have leave to change studies, if you desire it, Reece," he said. "I believe I have already said so. You may arrange the matter with King and Warren and Ruggles."

"Thank you, sir." Reece hesitated just a moment. "May I tell them that you have told us we may have our old study, sir?"

"Certainly, if they agree to the exchange," said Mr. Charne. "If they prefer to keep their new study, of course they will do so."

Reece did not let his disappointment show in his face. He had hoped to get

something from Charne in the nature of a direction which Tom King and Co. could not disregard. Charne's authority had served him, in effecting the exchange: he would have liked it to serve him in changing back whether Tom King and Co. liked it or not. However, he said "Thank you, sir," again, very meekly, and retired from his form-master's study.

He joined Preece, and they went out into the quad. Preece eyed him inquiringly.

"Well, did it work?" asked Preece.

"Only as far as leave to change over, if King and his gang agreed," said Reece.

"We had that much! Catch them agreeing!" said Preece. "Think they'll change back into that stinking study if they can help it?"

"We're going to work it somehow," said Reece. "We simply can't stick that study. I just can't imagine what's the matter with it: but I jolly well know that I'm fed up with it, and don't mean to put a foot into it again. I tell you we've got to land it back on them, and get ours back."

"Well, Charne won't order them to change back."

"No, blow him!" Reece wrinkled his brow in thought. "I—I suppose it's no good offering it back to King and Warren—now they know what it's like. If we'd kept it dark about that scent, we might have—"

"Couldn't keep it dark," said Preece. "It's getting worse and worse. You can smell it now as you pass the study, with the door shut."

"I know! No good tackling King and Warren, and Charne isn't any help. But what about that goat Ruggles?" Reece brightened up. "He's coming out of sanny this afternoon, and—"

"First thing he'll hear is that we're stunk out of Study 4—catch even a goat like Ruggles taking it on, after that."

"Might, get at him before he hears—"

"Um! Might! He would smell a rat, though—what would we want to part with the study for, if there was nothing the matter with it?"

"Well, Ruggles is fool enough for anything! If we get him to agree, King and Warren may follow his lead." Reece nodded with satisfaction at his own cunning. "Look here, if Ruggles agrees to changing back, he will have to stick to it, and King and Warren wouldn't let him down. You know how those three fellows stick together—King and Warren have got into lots of scrapes through sticking to that goat. I jolly well tell you that if we can wangle it with Ruggles, it will see us through."

"Um!" said Preece, dubiously. "Well, no harm in trying it on, and we can watch out for Ruggles when they let him out of sanny."

It seemed the last chance of getting rid of that obnoxious, malodorous study. Reece and Preece were waiting for Skip Ruggles, when a little later, he came out of "sanny". They watched him leave the building, and roll down the garden path, and met him as he let himself out of the gate into the quad.

"Hullo, old chap, feeling fit again?" asked Reece, affably.

"Glad to get out?" asked Preece, equally affably.

Skip nodded and smiled.

"Jolly fit, and jolly glad," he answered. "Grub was pretty thin in there, you know! By gum, I hope Tom and Dick have got something decent for tea." He was about to push on, when Reece caught his sleeve.

"Hold on a minute, Ruggles," said Reece. "We were awfully sorry you were ill, Reece and I—"

"Only a cold," said Skip.

"Well, we were jolly sorry, and we've been thinking it over while you've been in sanny, and we're sorry we bagged your study," said Reece, "and look here, if you like you can have it back again."

Skip, about to push on—he liked neither Reece nor Preece—paused. This was unexpected, and it was very gratifying news. He beamed on Reece and Preece.

"Oh! I say, that's jolly decent of you fellows," he said. "Look here, if you mean it—"

"Of course," said Reece. "Like your old study back?"

"What-ho!" said Skip, joyously.

"Well, it's yours, then," said Reece. "You agree, Preece?"

"Certainly," said Preece, heartily. "Have it back, Ruggles, and we'll have our old study back, as soon as you like."

"Well, you fellows really ain't the pair of rotters I thought you were," said Skip. "It's a go, then. I say, King and Warren will be jolly glad to hear this!"

Reece and Preece rather doubted that. But they did not say so.

"It's settled, then?" asked Reece. "I suppose your pals will agree? Can you promise for them?"

Skip chuckled. Happily unaware of the unsavoury reputation Study 4 had acquired, he had no doubt that his pals would be as eager as he was to get back into their old quarters. He had no hesitation whatever in promising for his pals.

"Bank on it," he said.

"Is it a promise?" asked Reece, categorically.

A more suspicious fellow than Skip might have become suspicious, at that. But the excellent Skip never suspected anybody of anything.

"Promise, honour bright," he said. "Blessed if I know why you're so jolly particular: we shall all be jolly glad to get No. 4 back. But it's a promise, if you like."

"O.K." said Reece.

Skip hurried off to find his friends and tell them the good news. He left Reece and Preece grinning. They felt that they were as good as rid of that smelly unpleasant study, No. 4: and they wished Tom King and Co. joy of it!

CHAPTER VIII

"YOU ASS!"

"You fathead!"

"Oh, I say!" protested Skip.

He really had not expected this.

He found Tom King and Dick Warren in No. 5, and burst in with the good news. He expected them to beam as he himself had beamed. He looked for joyful manifestations. Instead of which they called him names. Skip was rather accustomed to being called uncomplimentary names by his friends—it was no new experience for Skip. But it did seem rather hard this time.

"Ain't you glad?" he asked.

"Ass!"

"Fathead!"

"But we get our old study back!" exclaimed Skip. "Don't you understand? Reece and Preece ain't such ticks, after all—they've thought it over, and decided to do the decent thing—"

"Oh, slay him!" said Dick Warren.

"Look here—"

"You benighted, unmitigated owl!" roared Tom King. "Have you ever known Reece or Preece do the decent thing? Couldn't you understand that they were pulling your silly leg?"

"But we get the study back—"

"And why do you suppose that Reece and Preece want to get shut of it?" howled Dick Warren.

"Do they?" asked the innocent Skip.

"They do, ass! They do, fathead! They've been stunk out of that study, and so they've pulled your silly leg to get this one back."

"Oh, I say!" gasped Skip. "But what's the matter with the study? It was all right when we had it before—"

"It isn't all right now, you goat, or Reece and Preece would be sticking to it like glue!" snapped Tom King. "Something's gone wrong, and it smells like a chemical works, or worse. Reece and Preece had to do their prep in other fellows' studies yesterday, because they couldn't stand it. And it's worse to-day."

"But—!" gasped Skip, in dismay.

"You can niff it in the passage outside the door. Goodness knows what's the trouble, but nobody could stand that study now. It's simply mouldy," hooted Warren. "Fellows are making jokes about Reece and Preece not washing—but we've looked into it ourselves, and it's simply petrifying. We're not going back."

"No fear!" said Tom King, shaking his head. "This is a poky little study, but it doesn't whiff. We're sticking here."

"But—but—but—!" babbled Skip. "I've promised—oh, those ticks! That's why Reece made me promise, I suppose."

"Fathead!"

"Chucklehead!"

"And I—I—I promised for you fellows too—!"

"Oh, you goat!"

"Oh, you ninny!"

"Look here," said Skip. "It can't be so jolly bad as all that. It was all right last term, and on the first day of this term, too. I expect Reece and Preece have left something about—some old haddocks in the cupboard, perhaps—they're jolly slovenly, as you know. Let's go and look at it."

"Hold your nose, then," growled Tom King.

The three left No. 5, and went along to No. 4. Skip threw the door wide open. He simply couldn't believe that things were quite so bad as described by his friends. But the next moment Skip was almost tottering in the doorway of Study 4.

"Oh, crikey!" he gasped.

"Like the study now?" yapped Warren.

"Oh, scissors!"

Skip, evidently, did not like the study now. He did not step into it. Though the window was open, and there was a breeze from the quad, the atmosphere of that study was heavy with disagreeable scents. The draught from the window wafted the aroma across to the door, and the three juniors gasped.

Tom King and Dick Warren had been as eager as Skip to recover their old study. But that eagerness had completely evaporated. Indeed, as things had turned out, it seemed to them a spot of luck that Reece and Preece had bagged it. No. 5 was small. It was poky. But it was not malodorous. And that fathead, that goat, that ass, Skip, had promised to change back, for his chums as well as himself!

Skip pressed a handkerchief to his nose.

"I—I say—!" he gurgled through the handkerchief.

"You blithering ass!"

"You benighted cuckoo."

"But I say," gasped Skip. "I—I wonder if it's the eggs!"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"Eggs!" said Skip.

"What eggs, you howling ass? No eggs here," said Tom King. "What are you burbling about now—if you know?"

"Well, it might be the eggs—!" persisted Skip. "I mean to say, they were pretty high, three or four days ago, and since then—"

"What eggs?" shrieked Warren.

"Those eggs—you remember!" said Skip. "I got them at a bargain in Fell, and you fellows wouldn't let me cook them, and I put them away, and—"

"Oh, my hat!" said Tom King. "Wherever you chucked them away, we shouldn't scent them from here, I suppose?"

"They're here—"

"What?"

"You see, I shoved them into that old hide-out under the floor in this study," explained Skip. "As you fellows made me promise not to touch them again, I didn't—and I forgot them afterwards—I was shoved in sanny the next day, you know, and forgot all about them—"

Tom King and Dick Warren gasped.

"You stuttering image!" breathed Tom. "Mean to say you parked those eggs in the study days ago, when they were already fairly shouting—"

"Yes, in the hide out—"

"They're still there?" howled Warren.

"Must be," said Skip. "I—I—I say, think that may be it?"

Tom King and Dick Warren looked at one another. They did not "think" that that might be it! They knew that that was it! They rushed into the study, and across to the corner. They tore up that short length of board that concealed Skip's old hideout. They held handkerchiefs to their noses—they needed to, when that board was up! In the open space was that basket of ancient, almost prehistoric eggs! The mystery of Study 4 was elucidated at last!

CHAPTER IX

REECE and Preece simply stared.

Looking in at Study 4, they beheld three juniors at tea round the table, all with smiling faces and in cheerful mood.

They sniffed! But sniffs failed to detect any unusual odour in No. 4. It had cleared off—utterly.

Tom King and Dick Warren and Skip Ruggles grinned at them. They had brought their belongings back to their old study. They were having tea in their old quarters. Once more they were established in Study 4, to their entire and complete satisfaction. A basket of ancient eggs had been conveyed, very carefully, to a distant dustbin. That had made all the difference. Study 4 was perfectly fresh and sweet.

"Thanks for changing back, Reece!" called out Tom King. "We're no end pleased to be back in this study."

"Tremendously obliged," said Dick Warren. "We've shoved your things into Study 5. You can have it back and welcome."

And Skip chuckled.

"But—but—but—!" Reece was quite bewildered. "I say, the study doesn't seem to whiff now—"

"Can't smell anything here," said Preece, blankly. "What the dickens—"

"Oh, that's an easy one!" said Tom King. "The study's all right with you fellows out of it! That was the trouble, really!"

"Just that!" grinned Warren.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared Skip.

Reece and Preece went on to No. 5, utterly mystified, and considerably annoyed. They simply could not make head or tail of it. The next day they knew: when all the Felgate Fourth were chuckling over the story of Skip and his bargain in eggs, which had been forgotten in the hide-out under the study floor, and there had ripened. And then Reece and Preece felt like kicking themselves, and one another. But Tom King and Co. at all events, were quite satisfied: once more the happy and undisputed owners of Study 4 at Felgate.

THE END

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BESSIE BUNTER FORGETS!



—(B)—
HILDA RICHARDS

CHAPTER I

BESSIE forgot.

That was really the beginning of it.

Bessie Bunter's memory, like that of her brother Billy at Greyfriars, was not good. In fact it rather resembled a sieve.

Such things as meal times, and light refreshments in break, Bessie always remembered quite easily. Other, less important, things she forgot even more easily. She was almost a genius at forgetting her lessons.

Miss Bellew, her form-mistress at Cliff House School, was quite patient with Bessie Bunter. But when Bessie, twice bidden to brush her untidy hair, still forgot to do so, Miss Bellew lost patience, and gave her a translation.

An indignant Bessie rolled into No. 4 Study in the Fourth, which she shared with Barbara Redfern and Mabel Lynn.

"I say, you girls!" squeaked Bessie.

Barbara and Mabel did not immediately heed. Mabel was standing with a tennis racket in her hand, and a slightly impatient expression on her face. Barbara was seated by the window reading. She was reading *Faust*—in German.

Babs was probably the only girl in the Cliff House Fourth who could do it. Still more remarkable, she seemed to like it. She was in fact so deep in Goethe's verse, that she seemed oblivious of the circumstance that Mabel was waiting for her.

"Do come on, Babs," Mabel was saying, as the ample form of Bessie Bunter almost filled the doorway of No. 4.

"Just a minute or two!" said Babs, without looking up.

"Somebody will bag the court if we don't go down—"

"I say, you girls!" squeaked Bessie again.

"Run away and play, Bessie," said Mabs.

"That cat—!" began Bessie.

"Which?" interrupted Mabs, sarcastically. There were few inhabitants of Cliff House School whom Bessie Bunter did not, at one time or another, describe as "cats". Indeed it might sometimes have been inferred from Bessie that Cliff House was an almost wholly feline establishment.

"Bellew!" snapped Bessie.

"Bellew isn't a cat," said Mabs.

"She's given me a translation."

"I expect you asked for it."

"Cat!" said Bessie.

Mabs laughed, and then, disregarding translation and cats, called across the study to Babs again.

"Look here, Babs, come on, and leave that stuffy German tosh alone. You can give Faust and Mephistopheles a rest till after tea."

"Oh, all right," said Babs, and she laid down her book in the window-seat, and rose to her feet.

"I say, Babs, don't you go!" exclaimed Bessie. "I've got a translation from Virgil to do, and I want you to help me."

"Oh, dear!" said Babs.

Barbara Redfern was Miss Bellew's brightest pupil in the Fourth Form at Cliff House. Not only did she read German because she liked it, but Latin, at which the plump Bessie was hopelessly "bottled", seemed to come to her as easily as breathing. That was a circumstance of which Bessie, being in the same study, was accustomed to take full advantage. Babs was good-natured—a little thoughtlessly good-natured, perhaps, at times: and did not like saying "No" even to so persistent a spot of worry as Bessie Bunter. Babs had laid down *Faust* because Mabs wanted her for tennis: now she did not pick up her racket, because Bessie wanted her for Latin!

"Now, look here, Babs, let Bessie get on with it on her own," said Mabel. "Bellew would make no end of a fuss if she knew."

"She won't know," said Bessie. "That's all right."

"It isn't all right!" said Mabs. "It's against the rules, for one thing."

"Bother the rules," said Bessie. "Bellew said I'm to take it in before tea. You go and play tennis while Barbara helps me."

"Come on, Babs," said Mabel, unheeding.

Barbara hesitated.

"Well, Bessie's such a little donkey at Latin," she said. "Perhaps I'd better give her a hand. You ask Marjorie or Clara or Dolly Jobling—"

"Br-r-r-r!" grumbled Mabel: which was more expressive than intelligible. But she walked out of the study with her racket, leaving Babs to Bessie and Latin—neither of which really added to the enjoyment of existence.

Babs and Bessie sat down to Latin. Babs sat at the table with a pen in her hand, and a volume of Virgil open before her at the passage which Bessie had to translate. Bessie sat in the armchair, produced a sticky chunk of toffee from some sticky recess, and proceeded to chew the same. That was Bessie Bunter's idea of being "helped" with a Latin translation. Babs was to do the work while Bessie masticated toffee!

Barbara glanced at her, and frowned.

"You must go through it, Bessie," she said. "Come and sit at the table and work it out with me."

"Well, you get on with it, while I finish this toffee," said Bessie. "It will be O.K. with Bellew—she won't know you did it."

There was a step in the passage which stopped at the open doorway. Babs, supposing that it was Mabel, did not look round: she was beginning on the Latin. But Bessie Bunter blinked at the doorway through the big spectacles that were so like Brother Billy's, and ejaculated:

"Oh!"

"You ought to look at it, at least," Babs was beginning.

"Barbara!" said an unexpected voice.

Then it was Babs' turn to ejaculate "Oh!" and she fairly spun round to the doorway.

A somewhat angular lady stood there, looking in. And the expression on the face of Miss Bellew, the form-mistress of the Cliff House Fourth, was extremely stern and severe. Evidently she had heard Bessie's remark as she stopped at the doorway.

Babs caught her breath.

The two girls rose to their feet: Babs with the pen in her hand, Bessie with the chunk of toffee.

"Barbara!" repeated Miss Bellew, in unusually deep tones.

"Oh! Yes, Miss Bellew!" stammered Barbara.

"I am not wholly surprised at this!" said Miss Bellew, grimly. "I have more than once suspected something of the kind. I came here to ascertain whether Bessie was working on her translation. I find that you are doing the work for her, Barbara, while Bessie is doing nothing."

"I—I—I was helping—!" stammered Babs. "We—we are allowed to help one another, Miss Bellew—"

Miss Bellew dismissed that with a gesture.

"I find you working on the translation, and Bessie eating toffee," she said. "If that is what you call helping one another, Barbara, I do not agree. Bessie, you will translate twenty-four lines instead of twelve."

"Oh, scissors!" moaned Bessie.

"You, Barbara, will be given detention for Wednesday afternoon," said Miss Bellew, "and if this should occur again, I shall report you to the Principal. You are perfectly well aware that one girl is not permitted to do the work of another."

"I—I was only going to help—"

"Do not prevaricate, Barbara."

Barbara Redfern crimsoned.

"Miss Bellew! I tell you—" Her eyes flashed. With all her good nature, Barbara had a temper. "I tell you—"

"Kindly do not take that tone with me, Barbara."

"I tell you—"

"That will do! Take your work to the form-room, Bessie, and do it there."

Miss Bellew turned and swept away.

CHAPTER II

"CAT!" said Bessie.

She blinked out of the doorway through her big spectacles, before she thus expressed her feelings. Miss Bellew was gone: and, apparently finding solace in it, Bessie repeated "Cat!"

Barbara stood with flushed cheeks, breathing hard. She was angry: and like the ancient prophet, she felt that she did well to be angry! That word "prevaricate" was altogether too much. It was true that she had intended only to help Bessie with that wretched translation. She did not reflect, for the moment, that that intention had been unlikely to be carried out. Bessie's intention, of landing the translation entirely on her study-mate, was much more likely to have been carried into effect.

"Cat!" repeated Bessie, blinking at Babs. "I say she says I'm to work in the form-room. You can't come there and help me."

"No!" said Barbara.

"Cat! Coming along quietly and spying into the studies! Cat!"

"Spying?" repeated Barbara.

"Well, what do you call it, then?" yapped Bessie. "I'd jolly well like to tell Bellew what I think of a beak coming along and spying! Yah!"

Bessie rolled disconsolately out of the study with Virgil under a fat arm. Somehow or other, Miss Elizabeth Bunter had to struggle through that translation on her own, unassisted, with two dozen instead of one dozen lines to deal with. That was more than sufficient to occupy Bessie's mind, and left her no time to think about Barbara's detention.

Barbara, left alone in the study, was not thinking so much of the detention, unpleasant as it was, as of Miss Bellew's still more unpleasant words. Seldom had she felt so angry and resentful. In that mood, it seemed to her that Bessie was right: wasn't it "spying", to come suddenly on girls in a study who were not expecting anything of the kind?

In a calmer and more amiable mood, Babs would not have taken that view. Now she did take it, and, like Bessie, wished that it had been possible to tell Miss Bellew what she thought of it.

But a Fourth-form girl couldn't do that.

But could she not?

Suddenly Babs burst into a laugh—a rather sharp and sardonic laugh, which was quite unlike her usual self. A line from the *Faust* she had been reading recurred to her mind: recalled by Bessie's use of that disagreeable word "spying". It was a sentence addressed by Faust to Mephistopheles.



"Do not prevaricate," said the form-mistress.

"Das Spionieren, schein'st, ist deine Lust". Which, translated into English, was "Spying, it seems, is your delight".

Babs laughed again.

She did not give herself time to reflect. When Babs was angry, it seldom lasted long: but it was quite emphatic while it lasted. At the moment, she was very angry indeed: and she had thought of a way of telling Miss Bellew what she—for the moment at least—thought of her. Couldn't a girl in Miss Bellew's form ask her aid in German? Of course she could. And if the chosen sentence hit home, and hit hard, could Bellew do anything about it? Of course she couldn't.

Babs sat down at the table again, and dipped pen in ink. With a firm hand she wrote:

DEAR MISS BELLEW,

Would you be kind enough to give me the translation of this line from Goethe's *Faust*, "Das Spionieren, schein'st, ist deine Lust".

BARBARA.

Babs laughed once more, as she read it over. Bellew would know exactly what it meant, and what it was intended to mean. It was as good as accusing her of spying. Yet it was a perfectly harmless query: it was a genuine line from Goethe: Bellew couldn't do a thing about it. She would have to "take it"; and there was not the slightest doubt that she would be deeply and mortally offended. Just then Barbara rather liked the idea of Miss Bellew being deeply and mortally offended!

She enclosed that precious note in an envelope, and left the study with it. She did not, of course intend to take it personally to Miss Bellew: Barbara had nerve, but not quite nerve enough for that. It was easy to send a note by another hand.

Bessie Bunter, sitting dismally at Latin in the Fourth-form room, blinked round dismally through her big spectacles as the door opened.

She blinked in surprise at Barbara.

"I say, you can't come and help me here!" she squeaked. "Bellew might catch us at it—"

"I want you to take this note to Miss Bellew, when you take in your paper," said Barbara.

"Bother the note, and bother Bellew!" said Bessie. "What's it about?"

"About some German," said Babs, laughing.

"What rot!" said Bessie. "I'll take it if you like." She took the note, and crammed it into a sticky pocket of her tunic. "All right! I say, you get out, or that cat may come spying again."

Barbara got out.

She joined the other girls at the tennis courts, satisfied that she had given Miss Bellew a Roland for an Oliver. And fresh air and healthy exercise soon had the effect of banishing every trace of irate temper.

CHAPTER III

"BABS!"
"Well?"
"What's up?"

Mabel Lynn asked that question rather anxiously in No. 4 study.

They had come in late for tea, after tennis. Being healthy girls with healthy appetites, they were generally ready for tea at tea-time: and having stayed late to finish a set, one of them at least was readier than usual, when at length they did come to No. 4 study. But Barbara did not seem interested in tea.

She was in a very chastened mood now. Bad temper and resentment had vanished, in the fresh air.

Crumbs and unwashed crocks and a general air of untidiness about the study table indicated that Bessie Bunter had been in to tea, and gone. Babs and Mabs being late, Bessie was not likely to wait for them. A meal was a serious matter with Miss Elizabeth Bunter. No doubt she had been more than ready for tea, by the time she had finished that Latin translation and taken it in to Miss Bellew.

Her absence from No. 4 was certainly not the cause of Barbara's restless air of worry. The loss of Bessie's society was something that both Babs and Mabs could bear with great equanimity.

But Barbara, evidently, was worried about something. She moved restlessly about the study. Coming across Goethe, she hurled that German masterpiece into a corner of the room, as if it annoyed her somehow. Her smooth forehead puckered in frowns.

Mabel eyed her. Babs did not answer her question. All she said was: "That little fat idiot!"

"Bessie?" asked Mabs, no doubt recognizing the description.

"Bother her!" said Babs. "If she hadn't said that Bellew came up spying, I should never have thought of it."

Mabel jumped.

"Bellew!" she exclaimed. "Bellew wouldn't! What did the little donkey mean?"

"Well, she came up to the study while I was helping Bessie with her Latin—"

"Oh!" said Mabel. "Do you mean that she came up, and caught you doing that lazy little minx's work for her?"

Barbara made a grimace.

"I suppose it amounted to that!" she admitted. "Still, she shouldn't have said I was prevaricating—I—I was only explaining that I was going to help Bessie, as we're allowed to do—"

"Um!" said Mabel.

Barbara flushed.

"Oh, I know!" she said. "Anyhow, it made me wild, and then that little idiot said that Bellew came up spying—"

"She ought to have her ears boxed," said Mabel. "Bellew wouldn't dream of doing anything of the kind."

"I know she wouldn't. But—"

"But what?"

"I—I—I—!" Barbara stammered. "I—I've told her—or as good as told her—that—that—that she was spying—"

"Barbara!"

Mabs forgot all about tea now. She gazed at Babs in horror. Barbara's face was crimson.

"Well, I was stuffy," she said. "I—I—I thought I'd give her a Roland for an Oliver. Of course I didn't say it out plain. I—I sent her a note by another girl, asking her if she'd be kind enough to translate a verse of Goethe's *Faust* for me. Bessie took it in, when she went."

"Well, there's no harm in that," said Mabel. "What do you mean—?"

"The verse was "Das Spionieren, scheints, ist deine Lust"! mumbled Barbara.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, 'spying seems to be your pleasure'."

"Oh!" gasped Mabel.

"Of course, she can't do anything!" said Barbara. "It's just a line from *Faust*, but—but—but she'll know—"

"She will know what you meant by it, and it will hurt her a lot," said Mabel, quietly. "Didn't you know it would?"

"I didn't care!" said Babs, remorsefully. "I mean, I didn't then! I—I do now."

"Bellew will be down on you, after this!"

"I don't care about that! I—I jolly well deserve it!" mumbled Barbara, miserably. "I—I shouldn't have done it, Mabs. I shouldn't have, only I was in a beastly temper. It—it can't be helped now—it's too late—"

Mabel was silent: and Babs moved restlessly about the study again. Since she had reflected on that hidden taunt to her form-mistress, Babs had realized more and more how recklessly rash she had been: and, worse than that, how disrespectful and unfeeling.

Miss Bellew could take no official notice of it. But certainly she would resent it very deeply, and with a lasting resentment. Barbara, her brightest pupil, was generally in her good graces. That would be over now. In the form-room she could only expect cold looks and the sharpest edge of Bellew's tongue. But that did not trouble poor Babs so much as the knowledge that she had done an unjust and cruel thing, in the heat of temper: and she would have given worlds to recall it. But as she said to Mabel, it was too late. Bessie Bunter had taken her translation to Miss Bellew—with that wretched note to deliver along with it.

Mabel broke a long silence.

"After all, Bellew mayn't guess what you meant—!" she suggested.

Barbara shook her head.

"She's no fool!" she said. "She must have spotted it the minute she read my note. It's practically accusing her of spying in the studies, and—and she isn't really that sort at all. I—I—I feel horribly ashamed of it, Mabs. I was a cat!"

"She can't do anything about it!" said Mabs.

"I know! She couldn't admit that she saw what I meant by it! Wouldn't they snigger in the Staff Room, if it came out! But—but that only makes it all the worse," said Babs, wretchedly. "I wish I hadn't done it."

Mabel made no rejoinder to that. Only too often had hasty-tempered Barbara acted in haste and repented at leisure.

"She won't say a word!" said Babs. "But—but—she will never forget it! She couldn't forgive a thing like that! Oh, dear."

"It's rotten!" said Mabel.

"Putrid!" sighed Barbara.

Marjorie Hazeldene looked in at the study doorway.

"Barbara here?" she asked. "Miss Bellew wants to see you in her study, Babs."

Marjorie passed on, leaving Babs and Mabs looking at one another. Babs drew a deep, deep breath.

"I—I wonder—!" she mumbled. "I—I—I'd better go."

And she went.

It was with a sinking heart that Barbara presented herself in Miss Bellew's study. She fully expected to be greeted by an icy stare: Bellew in her grimmest mood. To her surprise, Miss Bellew was looking serious, but nothing more. She gave the bewildered Babs quite a kindly glance.

"Marjorie said you wished to speak to me, Miss Bellew," breathed Babs.

"Yes, Barbara! I wish to tell you that I regret having used the word 'prevaricate' when I spoke to you in your study," said Miss Bellew. "I know, of course, that while what you stated was not in strict accordance with the facts, you had no intention of prevaricating, and I regret very much that I used the word."

"Oh!" gasped Barbara.

"That is all, Barbara! You may go."

Barbara almost tottered from the study. Miss Bellew, evidently, had realized that she had spoken too severely in No. 4, and was anxious to set the matter right. That only added a keener edge to poor Babs' remorse. It was this kind and considerate form-mistress to whom she had despatched that note with its wretched, unjust taunt.

But what did it mean? Had Bellew failed to see the hidden meaning of that note? That was impossible—she would have seen it at a glance. She could not have read the note yet. That must be it. She must have received it long ago,

but so far she had not read it. That was the only explanation Babs could think of, as she went back wearily to No. 4—the most miserable girl in Cliff House School.

CHAPTER IV

"I SAY, you girls!"
"Oh, go away!"
"Be quiet!"

Bessie Bunter rolled into No. 4 study, and bestowed a devastating blink through her big spectacles on Babs and Mabs. Bessie was indignant. This really was not the sort of greeting that a girl expected in her own study!

"What's the matter?" she demanded.

"You!" snapped Babs.

"Oh, really, Barbara—!"

"Don't bother!" said Mabs.

"Oh, really, Mabel—"

"For goodness sake, don't natter!" exclaimed Babs and Mabs together: which only increased and intensified Bessie Bunter's just indignation.

But really, Babs and Mabs were in no mood for Bessie's "nattering". Both were deeply worried and troubled: Babs, on account of what she had so hastily done and so sincerely repented: Mabs on account of her friend.

There was nothing that they could do. Miss Bellew, it appeared, could not yet have read that wretched note: but that cut no ice: she would certainly read it, and that would be that! Probably by this time she had read it. Miss Bellew was an efficient lady, not at all likely to leave a note about unread for long. Indeed it was rather surprising that she had not read it on delivery. Still, she couldn't have, or she would hardly have spoken so kindly to Barbara afterwards.

She was not likely ever to speak kindly to her again! All the more because she could not very well take any official note of it, that taunt would sink deep, and never be forgotten. And really she was very kind and good, and really Barbara liked her: and—except in a very hasty and disgruntled moment—wouldn't have hurt her for worlds. It was disastrous all round.

"Well, you two look jolly, and no mistake!" said Bessie Bunter, blinking at them. "Anybody would think that cat had given you a translation to do, not me. I say, she jawed me when I took it in. She said it was the worst translation she had ever seen."

"Probably it was!" snapped Barbara.

"Well, you could have helped me, if she hadn't nosed into the study," said Bessie. "I'd like to tell her what I think of her nosing in—"

"Oh, dry up, for goodness sake."

"Cat!" said Bessie. "I tell you she jawed me, and I was afraid she was

going to tell me to do it over again. I can tell you I was jolly glad to get out of her study. I say, I've just been in old Janet's tuck-shop—"

"Go there again!" suggested Mabel.

"I say, she's got in a new lot of cream puffs!" said Bessie. "I'd have brought a whole bag of them up to the study, and treated you two, only—"

"Only old Janet would have wanted to be paid for them!" hooted Mabel.

"Well, she's mean," agreed Bessie. "Mean as they make 'em. I say, you girls, can you lend me half-a-crown between you?"

The reason why Bessie had come up to the study was revealed. But Babs and Mabs were not in the mood in which Bessie had hoped to find them. So far from desiring to produce half-a-crown for the fattest member of the Cliff House Fourth to expend on cream puffs, they were much more inclined to take her by her plump shoulders, and shake her, as the cause of all the trouble.

Bessie blinked from one to the other, and then from the other to the one. Two frowning faces met her blinks.

"No!" said Babs.

"No!" said Mabs.

"I say, is anything the matter?" asked Bessie. It dawned on her fat mind that there was trouble in the air in No. 4 study.

"Oh, take your face away!" said Barbara.

"What are you stuffy about?" demanded Bessie, warmly. "Have I done anything, I'd like to know? Oh!" Bessie broke off. "If you're stuffy about my forgetting that note you asked me to take to Miss Bellew—"

"Eh?"

"What?"

"I didn't mean to forget it. But I told you she jawed me about my translation, and that put it out of my head. "A sticky hand groped in a sticky pocket of a sticky tunic. "Look here, if that's what you're waxy about, Barbara, I'll go down now and take it to Bellew—"

Barbara stared at her, as if petrified. Mabel uttered almost a yell.

"Bessie! You little chump! Didn't you take Barbara's note to Miss Bellew at all?"

"I forgot it—"

"You—you—you forgot it!" articulated Barbara.

"Well, she was jawing me, you know," said Bessie, defensively. "I—I never thought of it till I was feeling in my pocket to see if there was any money there, in the tuck-shop, and—and—"

The sticky hand came out of the sticky pocket with a sticky note in it. Barbara could hardly dare to trust her eyes. It was the note she had handed Bessie in the form-room to take to Miss Bellew! Bessie had slipped it into that pocket. Apparently it had remained there ever since!

"It's all right," said Bessie. "I suppose it wasn't very important, was it,

for Bellew to get it at once? I'll take it to her now, if you like, if you're going to be stuffy about it. Look here, if I take it down to Bellew now, will you lend me half-a-crown till Saturday?"

Bessie made a move towards the door.

Barbara fairly bounded from her chair. That sticky note was clutched from a sticky hand in a twinkling.

"That's it, Babs?" gasped Mabel.

"That's it, Mabs!" gasped Barbara.

"Oh, what a spot of luck!"

"You're telling me!"

"I say, you girls, what on earth do you mean?" exclaimed the mystified Bessie. "What are you tearing up that note for, Barbara? I tell you I'll go down to Bellew at once if you like—"

"If I like!" Barbara chuckled. "I don't like, thanks! You forgetful little goose, thank goodness you've got a memory like a sieve! Bellew never had my note at all, Mabs—"

"And she won't now," chuckled Mabs, as Barbara scattered a handful of tiny fragments over the study.

"Bessie, you little donkey—"

"Bessie, you little fat goose—"

"Did you say half-a-crown?" Barbara picked up her handbag. "Here you are, Bessie! Now roll off and scoff those cream puffs!"

Bessie Bunter blinked at Babs. She blinked at Mabs. She blinked at a half-crown in her sticky palm. What it all meant was a mystery to Bessie. Why Barbara, instead of being "stuffy" about the non-delivery of that note, was delighted to find that it had never been delivered: even to the extent of lending Bessie a half-crown which it was absolutely certain that Bessie would forget to return, was a puzzle beyond the comprehension of Bessie Bunter's fat wits. But there, at all events, was the half-crown: and that, after all, was all that really mattered! It meant cream-puffs: and Bessie Bunter rolled out of No. 4 study, with the coin clutched in a sticky paw, content to leave the mystery unsolved, so long as she lost no time in getting to the cream-puffs.

"Oh, Babs!" said Mabel.

"Oh, Mabs!" said Barbara.

"Thank goodness that little duffer forgot—!"

"Thank goodness she did!"

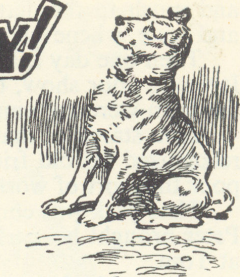
All was calm and bright, in No. 4 study. Bessie Bunter rolled away, leaving two happily-relieved schoolgirls looking merry and bright—as merry and bright as Bessie looked when she arrived at the cream-puffs.

THE END



STOLEN AWAY!

by
— CLIVE FENN —



PETER was some dog!

Tom, the boy at the farm where Peter lived, taught him all manner of interesting tricks. The two were great pals.

Tom, as a matter of fact, was not at the farm to learn farming. He was there to learn Latin from the very old and learned professor who lived in a room there amid the debris of ancient languages, and took an occasional pupil as a side-line.

Tom liked the dog, just as much as he disliked hic, haec, hoc, and all that! "We ought to get away, you and I!" Tom would say to Peter: and Peter would nuzzle him, as if he cordially agreed: as doubtless he did.

Others, as it happened, were of the same way of thinking: at least so far as Peter was concerned.

A travelling show was passing along the country lane, and the showman peered through the hedge into the old garden. That showman was a poor specimen. He was not doing well, and saw bad times ahead. But, looking through that hedge, he saw Peter performing tricks at Tom's command: and decided to take him on as an extra turn.

Soon afterwards, the dog was missing.

Tom called him in the morning, as usual. Peter wasn't there. Peter had gone off in a bag. Nobody knew where. The old professor knew all about the classics, but nothing about Peter: Jake, the odd man, not only didn't know but didn't care. Nobody in fact worried about the missing retriever, excepting Tom. They had been such chums, living in their own little world.

Peter was lost: and Tom felt quite lost without Peter. The old professor chided him over his Latin. Tom couldn't help it. He couldn't help thinking of Peter when he should have been thinking of Julius Caesar and Crassas and Pompey and the rest. Luckily he knew nothing of the dog's desperate struggles in the sack, of the harsh treatment that forced Peter to give in to a new master. Peter proved an asset to the travelling show. But Tom did not know. All he knew was that Peter was gone. And he hunted and hunted for him: in vain,

and much to the detriment of his Latin studies. He ranged the country far and wide, whenever he could get away. But alas! no sign of Peter.

Then one day it happened! Tom looked in at a travelling show in a barn. It was a poor show, but there seemed to be one good turn: for the crowd in the barn were acclaiming a dog!

Tom stared at that dog! And from the dog came a joyous bark, as Peter recognized his old friend. It was Peter: making the best of a hard world: a poor thin sort of world for him without Tom!

That bark was enough! Tom was on his feet in a second, calling to Peter. Peter brought his performance to a sudden end by one frantic bound, leaping at Tom.

"Peter, old dog!" exclaimed Tom. Peter jumped and barked. The showman came on the scene with a rush as Tom moved off with Peter.

"Stealing my dog!" he roared. "I'll have the police after you!" He grasped at Tom.

"It's my dog!" shouted Tom, indignantly.

Everyone was staring. Never had there been such a spot of excitement at that little travelling show. By happy chance the local constable was in the audience. He came up. Policemen are so often found just exactly where they are needed most.

"What's the trouble?" he asked.

The showman pointed to Tom.

"That boy's stealing my dog!"

The constable looked from one to the other.

"Is he your dog?" he asked.

"Of course he is—belongs to my show—"

"Looks uncommonly as if he thought differently!" said the constable, as he bent down and gave Peter a friendly smack. "Whose dog are you, old fellow?"

Peter squeezed against Tom's legs for protection. He showed his teeth at the showman, and gave an angry bark.

"Somehow I don't think you've got it right, my man!" said the constable. "Give a dog credit for sense enough to know his master."

Peter would have spoken if he could. But he did not need to speak: he made it clear enough.

That show had to trundle on without Peter. That showman was, in fact, glad to escape a charge of dog-stealing himself. The show trundled on, and trundled out of Tom's life—and Peter's!

Tom walked home with Peter prancing round him. Life had mended for both of them. Things do come right in the end. They came right for Tom and Peter.

And even the Latin went on ever so much better afterwards!

The Rebel of Greyfriars



by **FRANK RICHARDS**

CHAPTER I

BUNTER THE LEG-PULLER

I SAY, you fellows!"

"Scat!"

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Hook it!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—!"

"Buzz!" exclaimed the five juniors in No. 1 Study in the Greyfriars Remove, with one voice.

Billy Bunter, standing in the doorway of that study, blinked at Harry Wharton and Co. through his big spectacles. He did not "scat". He did not hook it. He did not buzz!

Bunter was not wanted in No. 1 Study just then. Bunter, in fact, was not often wanted anywhere. Especially at tea-time he was superfluous. But it

was at tea-time that Bunter was likeliest to look into some other fellow's study—rather like a lion seeking what he might devour!

There were, as it happened, short commons in No. 1. Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent had been able to supply only toast and a spot of "marger". Bob Cherry and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh had brought along a tin of sardines from No. 13. Johnny Bull, from No. 14, had brought a bag of dough-nuts.

Really, there was little to tempt Billy Bunter. He could have disposed of the whole lot in one brief sitting. An invitation to tea would have been of little use to him—a sixth part of that scanty supply would not have lasted him a minute. Nevertheless, he did not depart.

"I say, you fellows—!" he repeated.

"Nothing doing, you fat ass!" said Frank Nugent. "Cut along to Smithy's study—he's got lots and lots."

Bunter shook a fat head.

"Smithy's in a rotten temper," he said. "Quelch gave him six for smoking. He was rowing with Redwing when I passed his study. I'm steering clear of Smithy, I can tell you."

"Steer clear of us, too!" suggested Johnny Bull.

"The steer-clearfulness is the proper caper, my esteemed Bunter," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, in the remarkable English he had not learned at Greyfriars.

"But I say—"

"Roll away, there's a good barrel," said Harry Wharton. "And shut the door after you."

"Oh, all right," retorted Bunter. "If you'd rather Wingate came up after you—!"

"Wingate!" repeated Harry Wharton. And his comrades sat up and took notice, as it were. Wingate of the Sixth, captain of Greyfriars, was a man having authority: saying "Do this!" and he doeth it! If Bunter had brought a message from Wingate, Lower Fourth fellows had to sit up and take notice.

"If you don't want me to tell you—!" yapped Bunter: and he revolved in the doorway, as if to roll away.

"You fat ass, if it's a message from Wingate, cough it up!" exclaimed Harry.

"You fellows bumped Temple of the Fourth on the stairs after class," said Bunter. "I jolly well saw you—"

"Wingate didn't," said Bob Cherry. "He was nowhere about. Temple asked for it, too—if a fellow turns up his silly nose, he must expect something to happen."

"Temple wouldn't sneak to a prefect," said Nugent.

"That's all you know!" grinned Bunter. "That's what Wingate wants you

for, anyway. I say, you fellows, he looked jolly grim, too—he had his ash on the table. You're jolly well for it!"

And with that, Billy Bunter rolled away, leaving the Famous Five to digest that unpalatable news.

They exchanged dismayed glances. An interview with the head-prefect of Greyfriars—with his ash ready on his study table—instead of tea in No. 1, was a change distinctly for the worse. And they were wrathful, as well as dismayed.

It was true that they had bumped Cecil Reginald Temple, of the Fourth Form, on the staircase after class. That, from the point of view of the Remove fellows, was a trifle light as air. Cecil Reginald Temple had looked supercilious: as he often did: and the chums of the Remove had sat him down on the stairs, rather emphatically perhaps, but quite playfully: certainly never dreaming that any Greyfriars man would carry a complaint to a prefect.

"Rotten!" sighed Bob Cherry. "Bother that ass Temple—"

"He asked for it, too!" growled Johnny Bull.

"The askfulness was terrific," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But perhaps we had better go at oncefully, my esteemed chums. Prefects do not like the waitfulness."

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Harry Wharton. "We're for it, I suppose! We'll jolly well boot Temple for this!"

"Hard!" said Bob Cherry.

"Yes, rather."

The chums of the Remove left the study with glum facts. In the passage they passed Billy Bunter, who grinned at them as they passed. But they did not heed the fat Owl of the Remove. They trailed on, leaving Bunter grinning.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, as they came out on the study landing. "Here's Temple!"

Cecil Reginald Temple, of the Fourth, was lounging elegantly on the landing. At sight of the Famous Five he looked wary—no doubt remembering his recent bumping on the stairs. They gave him almost deadly looks. Temple, no doubt, had not enjoyed his bumping: but it was against all laws, written and unwritten, for any fellow to carry tales to a prefect. And that, it seemed, was what Cecil Reginald had done.

"Collar him!" exclaimed Johnny Bull.

"Boot him!"

"Here, I say—!" exclaimed Temple. He ceased to lounge elegantly, and made a rush for the Fourth Form studies.

But he had no time to escape! The Famous Five rushed after him as one man. Fellows who told tales merited a booting: and every member of the Co. was anxious to plant a foot on Cecil Reginald's elegant trousers.

How many kicks he collected before he escaped into the Fourth Form passage, Cecil Reginald hardly knew. It seemed to him like dozens.

Leaving Temple of the Fourth yelling, and feeling a little comforted, the Famous Five went down the stairs, and headed for Wingate's study in the Sixth.

Harry Wharton tapped at the study door.

"Come in!" called out a cheery voice.

Wharton opened the door, and the five juniors trailed in. Wingate of the Sixth was sitting at his table, a pen in his hand, and a Latin prose before him. The official ash was not to be seen. Wingate, apparently, was at work on that Latin prose, and he did not seem pleased by the interruption. But the big, rugged captain of Greyfriars was always good-tempered, and he laid down his pen, and looked across at the juniors.

"Well?" he said.

"We've come," said Harry.

Wingate stared at him.

"I can see you've come," he answered. "If it's about football, you'd better come another time—I'm busy now."

Five fellows blinked at him.

"But—!" said Harry.

"I've said I'm busy! I know you're playing Carcroft on Wednesday, Wharton, and if you want to consult me about the team, come along later. Shut the door after you."

"But—!" stammered Harry, bewildered. "It isn't about the football, Wingate—it's about Temple—"

"Temple!" repeated Wingate. "What do you mean! What about Temple?"

"About bumping him this afternoon—"

"Did you bump him this afternoon? What have you come to tell me for, you young ass? Do you want six!"

"But—but—but you sent for us!" babbled Bob Cherry. "Bunter told us you wanted us, and that it was about bumping Temple on the stairs—"

Wingate stared, and then laughed.

"Pulling your leg, I expect," he said. "Anyhow I never sent for you, and you're wasting my time. Get out and shut the door."

"Oh!" gasped Bob.

Five fellows crowded out of Wingate's study, and shut the door after them. Outside the door, they looked at one another with feelings almost too deep for words. Wingate had not sent for them. He had never even heard of the bumping of Temple. They had booted Temple for telling him—and Temple had not told him! The whole thing was, apparently, an extraordinary practical joke on the part of the fat and fatuous Owl of the Remove!

Harry Wharton drew a deep, deep breath.

"Come on—and let's look for Bunter!" he said.

And the Famous Five went to look for Bunter—and, judging by their looks, the Owl of the Remove was booked for the time of his life when they found him.

CHAPTER II

SMITHY ON THE WAR-PATH

"SMITHY, old man—!"
"Oh, shut up!" said Herbert Vernon-Smith.

"Look here—!"

"Give us a rest!"

"What are you going to do with that catapult?"

"Find out!"

Tom Redwing compressed his lips, rather hard.

Herbert Vernon-Smith, of the Remove, was nicknamed the "Bounder" in his form, and not without reason. Often and often he did things which, according to the Greyfriars code, were "not done". When Smithy was in a bad temper, as was not infrequently the case, nobody who came near him was left in any doubt about it. Lord Mauleverer had described his manners as deplorable: and other fellows did not find them polished. In his "tantrums", Smithy was not always civil even to his study-mate, Tom Redwing: and there was no doubt that Smithy was in a "tantrum" now! His eyes were smouldering under his knitted brows, as he stood in No. 4 Study, slipping a catapult up the sleeve of his jacket.

With all Smithy's faults of temper, and of manners, he had good qualities: which Tom Redwing seemed able to see more clearly than any other fellow in the Remove. At all events, they were great pals in No. 4 Study: and Smithy in a "tantrum" was rather an object of anxiety than of resentment to his chum.

The Bounder was wriggling a little as he stood. It was half-an-hour since Mr. Quelch, his form-master, had given him "six": but the Bounder was an old and reckless offender, and no doubt Quelch had laid the cane on hard. Smithy was the man to "get back" if he could on a beak for a whopping: and much too reckless to reflect that that might make matters worse instead of better.

"Look here, Smithy—!" Redwing began again. The scowl on the Bounder's brow, the glint in his eyes, were not so alarming, as the sight of the dangerous implement he had slipped up his sleeve, evidently to keep it out of sight when he went out of the study. "You know jolly well that catapults are not permitted in the school—."

"Tell me something I don't know," jeered the Bounder.

"If I'd known there was one in the study, I'd have smashed it!" snapped Redwing, with a flash of anger. "It's a rotten thing for any fellow to have."

"Better tell Skinner that!" sneered Smithy. "It's his—I've borrowed it from him."

"For Quelch!" asked Redwing, with a deep breath.

"Why not?"

"You mad fool! You'd be sacked!" exclaimed Redwing, in utter dismay, "and you'd jolly well deserve it, too!"

"Thanks!"

The Bounder turned to the door. Whatever his purpose was, evidently he intended to carry on with it, regardless of his anxious chum's remonstrances. But he did not open the door: for Redwing, with a quick stride, placed himself in front of it.

The Bounder eyed him, with evil eyes.

"Will you let me pass?" he asked, between his teeth.

"Not with that catapult up your sleeve," answered Redwing. "You're not going to do a dirty, sneaking, rotten, cowardly thing, and get sacked from the school for it, if I can stop you."

"Think you can?" sneered Smithy.

"I'll try, anyhow."

"Will you stand aside?"

"No, I won't."

"I shall shift you if you don't."

Redwing did not answer that. But he stood like a rock at the door. Vernon-Smith clenched his hands hard. He was in a bitter and evil temper: and in that mood, was almost ready to quarrel with friend as with foe. For the moment, he looked as if he would rush at Redwing, hitting out right and left. The merest hint of interference with his liberty of action irked the arrogant Bounder sorely.

But even Smithy hesitated to come to blows with his only friend at Greyfriars School. Perhaps, too, in spite of his black and bitter mood, he was not wholly insensible to Redwing's anxiety for him. He paused.

"Smithy, old man, have a little sense," urged Redwing. "You know jolly well that a fellow gets whopped for smoking if he's caught—what's the good of brooding over it and getting ratty! Look here, you're booked to play Soccer for the school on Wednesday when Carcroft come over. Do you want to be gone when the match comes off?"

"Oh, don't be a fool, Reddy," snapped Vernon-Smith. "They don't sack a man for larking, even if he's caught—which I shan't be."

"Do you call catapulting a lark?"

"I said don't be a fool! Do you think I'm blackguard enough to catapult a man, even a rusty old bean like Quelch, who's given me six?" snarled the Bounder, savagely. "It's nothing of the kind, you dummy. I tell you it's a lark—now get out of the way: you're wasting time."

"What are you going to do?"

"I tell you you're wasting time—"

"You're not going out of this study till I know."

Vernon-Smith breathed hard.

"I tell you it's only a jape on Quelch!" he snapped. "He's grinding in his study now. I'm going to make him sit up."

"I don't see—!"

"Lots of things you don't see! Think he will be amused, up to his neck in Form papers, when he hears gravel clinking on his window, every two or three minutes?"

"It would make him as mad as a hatter, I think," answered Redwing. "But you'd be caught first shot, you fathead—there's dozens of fellows in the quad who couldn't fail to see you—"

"Not if I park myself in that old elm opposite Quelch's window, and buzz gravel with a catapult at ten yards distance."

"Oh!" exclaimed Redwing.

"Now you can get out of the way—now that I've explained that I'm not a hooligan thinking of catching a man in the eye!" snarled Vernon-Smith.

Redwing eyed him dubiously. When the Bounder was in a savage and resentful temper, there was really no telling what he might or might not think of doing, and his pal could not feel quite reassured.

Smithy gave him a very dark look.

"Don't you believe me?" he muttered.

"Yes!" said Redwing, slowly. He moved away from the door. "But look here, Smithy, why not chuck it? Let's go down and punt a footer, and forget all about that whopping from Quelch—"

"I'll forget about it when I've made him sit up!" jeered the Bounder, and he dragged open the door of the study.

"But, old chap—"

"Oh, rats!"

"Smithy—!"

Slam!

The slam of the door cut short Redwing's expostulations. Smithy was gone: and Redwing was left alone in No. 4, with a worried and troubled brow. He believed what his chum had told him, and to that extent he was relieved: but that revengeful strain in Smithy was quite foreign to his own frank and healthy nature, and it jarred on him. And he could not help feeling that Smithy, confident as he was in himself, was heading for more trouble with his form-master. There were masters at Greyfriars who were "ragged": but Henry Samuel Quelch was not one of them: ragging Quelch was about as safe a game as twisting the tail of a tiger.

Quite regardless of what Redwing might be thinking, Vernon-Smith hurried down the Remove passage to the landing. He was anxious to get to work on the "rag" that was to make Quelch "sit up"—if all went according to plan. He was passing the open doorway of No. 1 Study almost at a run, when a fat figure emerged from that study, also in a hurry, and there was a

sudden collision. Smithy did not see Bunter, and Bunter did not see Smithy, till they met—and they met with a crash.

“Oh!” gasped Smithy, staggering back from the shock.

“Oooooogh!” spluttered Billy Bunter. The old oak planks of the Remove passage almost shook, as the Owl of the Remove sat down suddenly. “Ow! Wow! I say, you fellows, it wasn’t me! I haven’t been in your study! I haven’t touched the sardines, and I haven’t got the dough-nuts in my pockets—wow! You keep off, you beasts! Ow!”

“You fat fool!” roared the Bounder.

“Eh!” Billy Bunter blinked up at him. “Oh! Is that you, Smithy? I thought it was those beasts coming back! Ow! Wharrer you knocked me over for, you beast? Ow! Tain’t your sardines, or your dough-nuts, either. Wow!”

Vernon-Smith gave him a glare.

“You fat porker! You’ve been grub-raiding in Wharton’s study.”

“I haven’t!” gasped Bunter. “I never told them Wingate wanted them, and if I did, it was only a joke! I haven’t touched their grub—that wasn’t why I sent them down to Wingate—yaroooh! Leave off kicking me, you beast! You kick me again, and I’ll jolly well—whoooooooooop!”

Luckily for Bunter, the Bounder was in a hurry. He stayed only to bestow a couple of kicks on the sprawling fat junior, and then hurried on his way. A couple, however, seemed enough for Bunter: wild yells followed the Bounder across the study landing and down the stairs.

“Ow! wow! wow! Beast! Yow—ow—ow!”

But Billy Bunter realized that time was precious. How long Harry Wharton and Co. might be gone, he did not know: but it was not likely to be long before they discovered that the fat Owl had sent them on a fool’s errand. Bunter had expended only two minutes in the study: after which there remained no trace of toast or sardines: but he had not ventured to stay to finish the feast: the dough-nuts were crammed into his pockets, to be devoured in a safer spot. Billy Bunter was not very bright: but he was bright enough to know that the Co. would very soon be looking for him! He heaved up his weight, and followed Vernon-Smith down the stairs, and was out of the House only a minute after the Bounder.

CHAPTER III SAFE SPOT!

“SEEN Bunter, Browney?”

“No!”

“Seen Bunter, Fishy?”

“Nope!”

"Seen Bunter, Hazel?"

"No: and don't want to."

Harry Wharton and Co. were asking every fellow they passed as they came up to the studies after their interview with Wingate of the Sixth. Why the fat Owl had played that extraordinary trick, had not yet dawned on them: but they were very anxious for a meeting with Bunter—as anxious as Bunter was to avoid one! But nobody seemed to have seen Bunter about the House.

"The fat villain!" breathed Wharton, as they came into the Remove passage. "Temple never said a word to Wingate—we booted him for nothing."

"We'll boot Bunter for something!" growled Johnny Bull.

"The bootfulness will be terrific!" said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But where is the esteemed and execrable Bunter?"

"Seen Bunter, Skinner?" called out Frank Nugent, as Harold Skinner of the Remove came down the passage.

"Lots of times!" answered Skinner.

"Oh, don't be an ass!" exclaimed Bob Cherry. "Do you know where he is now?"

"I can guess."

"Well, where, then?"

"Somewhere where there's something to eat."

Skinner walked on, grinning: but the Famous Five did not grin. They were in no mood for Skinner's little jokes. Bob Cherry uttered a sudden exclamation. That remark of Skinner's had put a suspicion into his mind.

"Look in the study!" he exclaimed.

"He wouldn't be there," said Harry. "Think he would wait for us to come back and boot him?"

"I can jolly well guess why he pulled our leg, and sent us down to Wingate. He was after the dough-nuts—"

"Oh!" exclaimed four fellows, together.

They rushed into No. 1 Study. It dawned on them now. They realized that it was not merely for an extraordinary practical joke that Bunter had sent them down to Wingate. The fat Owl had had ulterior motives. Bunter had wanted them off the scene while he dealt with the foodstuffs!

If Billy Bunter had still been in No. 1 Study when they arrived, he would most certainly have had a hectic time.

But they had arrived too late!

Bunter was gone! So was the feed—such as it was! Billy Bunter's movements, as a rule, resembled those of a very old and very tired snail. But he could be a quick worker at times. This, evidently, was one of the times! There was no sign of Bunter in No. 1 Study—neither was there any sign of edibles on the study table. Two or three crusts remained of the toast: but only an empty paper bag remained to indicate that there had once been dough-nuts. Bunter had been—and gone!

They gazed at the denuded tea-table.

"So that was his game!" said Harry Wharton. "The fat villain! We might have guessed, really—"

"The mightfulness is terrific."

"Every dashed crumb!" said Johnny Bull, "and it's too late for tea in hall Why, I—I—I—I'll—!" Words seemed to fail Johnny.

"This is the jolly old limit!" said Bob Cherry. "Bunter's got to learn that he can't do these things! After him!"

Five juniors crowded out of the study again. They tramped up the passage to No. 7: Bunter's study and hurled open the door. Peter Todd and Tom Dutton were in No. 7: but their fat study-mate was not present.

"Seen Bunter, Toddy?"

"Not since tea in hall," answered Peter.

"Seen Bunter, Dutton?"

"Eh?" Dutton, the deaf junior, looked at the excited five inquiringly. "Did you speak to me, Cherry?"

"Seen Bunter about?" roared Bob.

"Who's a lout?"

"Oh, my hat! I didn't say lout! I said seen Bunter about?" bawled Bob.

"Bunter. Did you say Bunter?"

"Yes, Bunter!"

"Well, he's not a nice chap, but I don't see why you should call him a lout. What are you calling him a lout for?"

"Oh, crikey! Have you seen Bunter?" roared Bob, in a voice that Stentor might have equalled, but never beaten.

"Oh! Yes! You needn't shout—I'm not deaf!"

"Great pip! Where did you see him?"

"In the quad."

"How long ago was that?"

"I know he's fat! Think I see him every day without noticing that he's fat? What do you mean?"

"Help!" gasped Bob Cherry. He under-studied Stentor again. "How long ago did you see him in the quad?"

"Just before I came up to the study—a few minutes ago."

"Was he going out?"

"Look here, Bob Cherry, I don't think you ought to keep on calling him a lout. What are you laughing at, Toddy? Nothing funny in fellows coming here and calling Bunter a lout, is there?"

"Oh, come on!" exclaimed Bob. "Let's draw the quad for him."

And the Famous Five hurried down the passage again. On the stairs they passed Tom Redwing, going down with a very serious and rather troubled face.

"Seen Bunter, Reddy?"

"Bunter!" Redwing smiled faintly. "He looked into our study and Smithy buzzed a cushion at him! I haven't seen him since. That was some time ago."

"Come on!" said Bob.

They scuttled down the stairs, and out into the quadrangle. There they came on Sampson Quincy Iffey Field, the Australian junior, and hailed him:

"Seen Bunter, Squiff?"

"Yes—over by Masters' Studies—"

"Oh, good!"

Five fellows, more than ever anxious to see Bunter, cut off towards the windows of Masters' Studies. They were on the track at last.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! There he is!"

"Bunter—!"

"Got him!"

But they had not quite "got him". There, certainly, was Bunter: full in view, his spectacles gleaming in the westerling sun. He was leaning on the wall directly under the window of Mr. Quelch's study. The window was shut: but had Mr. Quelch looked out, he could not have seen the fat junior, for Bunter's head did not quite reach up to the high, projecting stone window-sill, which screened him from view had the Remove master glanced from the window.

The Famous Five came to a halt.

They had been hunting Bunter—and they had found him! But dealing with him was quite another matter!

Bunter had found a safe spot!

After his many and manifold sins, they were simply yearning to collar him, bump him, boot him, and generally make it clear to him that there was a seamy side to the career of a fat grub-raider. But collaring him, bumping him and booting him, directly under a form-master's window—especially when that form-master was Henry Samuel Quelch—was what Hurree Jamset Ram Singh would have called a boot on the other leg. It just could not be done!

Billy Bunter blinked at them through his big spectacles.

He did not seem alarmed.

He had selected that safe spot with care! As they gazed at him, almost wolfishly, his fat hand went into his pocket, and he drew therefrom a dough-nut, which he proceeded to devour. Calmly, under the eyes of its proprietors, Bunter ploughed through that dough-nut!

"By gum!" said Bob Cherry.

"Our dough-nuts!" breathed Johnny Bull.

"Bunter, you fat villain—!" breathed Harry Wharton.

"Bunter, you terrific toad—!"

"Bunter, you podgy brigand—!"

Bunter chewed on, regardless.

"Look here, we're jolly well going to collar him!" exclaimed Johnny Bull. "Chance Quelch—!"

"Hold on!" said Harry.

"Look here, I tell you—."

"Fathead! Quelch will go off at the deep end if there's a shindy under his window. Do you want Extra School on Wednesday afternoon when Carcroft come over?"

Johnny Bull breathed hard, and he breathed deep. But he did not want Extra School on Wednesday, when he was booked to keep goal for the Remove. He suppressed his feelings.

For a long, long minute the chums of the Remove stood and gazed at William George Bunter. But there was no help for it—he was in a safe spot, and they had to leave him there. They gave him expressive—very expressive—looks, from a distance: looks which, expressive as they were, did Bunter no apparent damage. Regardless of expressive looks, the fat Owl continued to lean on the wall under his form-master's window-sill, and help himself, with fat and sticky fingers, to dough-nuts from sticky pockets. And with deep feelings, Harry Wharton and Co. departed, and left him to it.

CHAPTER IV

MYSTERIOUS!

PING!
Mr. Quelch, master of the Remove, looked up from his writing-table with a glint in his eyes.

It was the second time that a "ping" had sounded at his study window.

The first time, Quelch had hardly heeded it. But the second time, he sat up and took notice. His eyes fixed on that window with almost the look of a basilisk.

"Upon my word!" breathed Mr. Quelch, "Someone is throwing pebbles at my window. At MY window!"

It was almost incredible.

Henry Samuel Quelch was seldom, or never, "ragged", as other masters sometimes were. Capper, the master of the Fourth, often had his leg pulled. Monsieur Charpentier, the French master, lived and moved and had his being amid incessant rags. But never Quelch! Quelch was made of sterner stuff. One glint from his gimlet eyes was enough to subdue any fellow, as a rule. Even Herbert Vernon-Smith, the Bounder of Greyfriars, the most reckless fellow in the school, was very wary of Quelch. A thoughtless fellow might

have "buzzed" a pebble at Capper's window, or Mossos': or even at Prout's. But Quelch's—!

Yet it was happening!

Twice had a pebble impinged upon the glass. Obviously this could not be accidental. It was a "rag".

Quelch was a busy man. At the moment, he was at work in his study on Form papers. It was a task that required his whole attention. It was not a task to be interrupted by a thoughtless rag! Quelch was not the man to be patient with a ragger at the best of times. And when he was hard at work his patience was absolutely nil.

Ping!

It came again, while Quelch sat staring at the window. For the third time, a pebble tinkled on the glass, and rolled on the broad stone window-sill, where it rested with the two earlier arrivals.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard through his nose.

Some person unknown was pelting gravel-stones at his window: and Quelch was the last man at Greyfriars, or in the wide world, to take it equably.

He rose from his chair, and stepped to the window. He looked out into the sunny quad. Someone outside the House, was pelting his window: thrice had a pebble landed, and apparently the unknown ragger intended to keep up this peculiar game. Quelch glared from that study window rather like a lion from its lair.

There were plenty of fellows in sight, and the gimlet-eyes roamed over them, in search of the culprit. He could see Loder, Walker, and Gwynne, of the Sixth, on the Sixth-form green: but Sixth-form men and prefects could not of course, be suspected of ragging a beak. Coker of the Fifth was walking with Potter and Greene of that form: Temple, Dabney and Fry, of the Fourth, were strolling at a little distance. Lord Mauleverer of the Remove was sauntering under the elms. Skinner, Snoop, and Stott, were standing in a little group. Fisher T. Fish could be seen crossing the quad with his jerky steps. Tunn of the Third was arguing with Nugent minor of the Second Form. Harry Wharton and his friends could be seen, at a distance. Other fellows were spotted about. The gimlet-eye in search of the culprit had plenty to select from. It glinted at one after another. But not a single fellow, so far as Quelch could see, was near enough to have "buzzed" a pebble at his window. It was very strange and puzzling and intensely annoying.

There was one fellow in the quad whom Quelch could not see. That was a fat junior leaning on the wall under the window, screened by the broad stone sill. Bunter was quite invisible to Quelch.

Not that Bunter, of course, had any idea of ragging Quelch: he would as soon have ragged a wild hippopotamus. Bunter, any more than any other fellow in the quad, had no idea that a "rag" was going on at all. If he heard the "pings" on the glass above his fat head he paid no heed, and he saw

nothing of the pebbles, which remained on the broad sill after hitting the glass. Bunter was deeply engrossed in chewing dough-nuts, and so long as the dough-nuts lasted, Bunter was blind and deaf to everything else.

Happily unconscious of the fat Owl under the window-sill, Quelch stared out, scanning fellow after fellow, with keen suspicious eyes. But not a fellow was near his window—no one was even looking towards it. He set his lips hard. He had to conclude that the ragger, after buzzing those pebbles, had hurried on, and dodged round the corner of the building. It was too late to spot him.

Breathing hard, the Remove master returned to his table, and sat down to work again. A considerable pile of Form papers remained for him to travel through: and some of them were not calculated to banish the frown from his brow. Lord Mauleverer's paper, indeed, caused that frown to intensify: and the one that bore the name of W. G. Bunter was still more exasperating. Quelch, gazing at that paper, could not help wondering whether words were a sheer waste on Bunter, and whether he had not better perhaps rely wholly on the cane in dealing with that member of his form.

On the other hand, Mark Linley's paper had the effect of unknitting Quelch's knitted brows, and he almost smiled over it. And he looked quite pleased when he picked up the one that was written in the hand of his Head Boy, Harry Wharton, the captain of the Remove. It was quite a good paper—indeed, excellent, for a boy in a junior form: the fact that Harry Wharton was the best junior footballer at Greyfriars, did not prevent him from being a good man in class also.

Quelch actually forgot those "pings" at his window, and the incredible impertinence of that unknown ragger, as he looked at Wharton's paper, and nodded his head with approval over it. Harry Wharton, at that moment debating with his friends the knotty problem of "scrounging" a tea somewhere in the Remove, did not even dream of the placating effect his Latin paper was having on his form-master! Had the Bounder, hidden in the elm at a distance opposite the study window, abandoned his peculiar "rag" at that point, all would have been well. But Smithy had no intention of abandoning it yet. He was, in fact, now warming to his work!

Quelch's crusty face was quite amiable. Many Removites seemed to be of the opinion that as the tongue of Virgil, Cicero, and Quintus Horatius Flaccus was a dead language, it ought to be buried also: and they had no desire whatever to dig it up. Pupils like Bunter sometimes made Quelch wonder whether a school-master's life was, after all, worth living. But Wharton's paper was good: and a good Latin prose had a calming and cheering effect on Quelch. His brow was unknitting, and he almost smiled.

PING!

"Oh!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch. There was thunder in his brow again. He fairly bounded to his feet.

The unknown ragger was at it again. This time it was quite a hard knock on the pane, which almost cracked under it.

The "rag" was going on! Some young rascal, greatly daring, had set out to worry Quelch: persistently and incessantly. Quelch almost tore to the window, determined to spot him this time.

But he stared out blankly into the sunshine. He had the same view as before—quite a quiet and peaceful scene. Not a man in the quadrangle was near enough to have flung a pebble at the window.

It was perplexing, as well as fearfully irritating. Quelch had reached the window so swiftly, that it seemed impossible for the ragger to have reached a safe distance. Yet nobody was to be seen anywhere near the window.

Who was it?

Quelch thought of Herbert Vernon-Smith—a very reckless fellow, whom he had recently caned. Of all the Remove, Smithy was the most likely man.



Quelch glared down and grabbed.

From the window, a pair of gimlet-eyes searched the quad. But Vernon-Smith was not to be seen at all. He was nowhere in view. Quelch had to conclude that the offender was not Smithy. But who was it?

Quelch, at last, turned back to his table. Then, on second thoughts, he turned to the window again. He did not doubt that there would be another "ping" at the glass before long. This time he was going to watch—and woe betide the buzzer of pebbles when he spotted him!

Standing beside the window, half-hidden by the curtain, Quelch watched, his gimlet-eyes glittering like pin-points. He was, by this time, almost in a boiling state. His work was interrupted—his time was wasted—and some young rascal was laughing in his sleeve! He would have little reason to laugh, once Quelch knew who he was! Quelch's stoutest cane, in a vigorous hand, was going to be featured in the next act.

Crack!

Quelch jumped almost clear of the floor at that crack at the window.

It was a larger pebble, and it cracked the pane. But the amazing thing was, that the form-master, watching from within, could see no one near the window. The pebble had banged on the glass—the pane was cracked—yet everybody visible in the quad was at a distance, not even looking towards his study! It really seemed as if that pebble must have whizzed of its own volition, untouched by human hand!

"Bless my soul!" gasped Mr. Quelch.

For some moments he stared in blank amazement. Nobody was anywhere near the window—yet the pebble had banged. And then, suddenly, a suspicion shot into his mind! There was only one explanation, so far as Quelch could see. As he had not seen the ragger come and go, he must be still on the spot! He had ducked out of sight under the broad stone-window-sill! Was that it?

As soon as the thought of that, Quelch had no doubt about it. Indeed he wondered that he had not thought of it before. It was quite a simple explanation. Anyhow it was easily put to the test. If there was a fellow under the window, with his head ducked under the sill, Quelch had him!

Grimly, Mr. Quelch pushed up the lower sash. He leaned out of the window, and looked down.

His eyes fairly blazed at the top of a fat head.

There was a fellow under his window: the fattest fellow in Quelch's form! He was leaning on the wall under the stone sill. Quelch glared down at him: then he reached down and grabbed. The young rascal was not going to be given time to bolt! A hand like iron grasped the back of Billy Bunter's collar: and from the Owl of the Remove, startled almost out of his wits, came a frantic yell:

"Yarooooooh!"

CHAPTER V

ALARMING!

BILLY BUNTER yelled.

Never had the fat Owl been so suddenly and wildly surprised.

Life is full of surprises: and no doubt William George Bunter had had his share of them. But never, in all his fat career, had he been so taken by surprise as now.

It was true that Greyfriars fellows were not supposed to loaf about under form-masters' windows. Had Quelch looked out, and ordered him off, Bunter would have been annoyed, but not surprised. But this—!

The fat junior hardly knew what was happening, for some moments. Something like an iron vice was gripping the back of his collar, a set of bony knuckles grinding into his fat neck. Bunter sagged in that grip like a sack of coke, yelling and spluttering dizzily wondering whether he was on his head or his heels.

“Urrggh! Leggo!” yelled Bunter, frantically. “Wow! Who’s that? Leggo you beast! Grooogh! Leggo! Oooh.”

“Bunter!” thundered Mr. Quelch.

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Bunter.

He realized that it was his form-master who had so suddenly and unexpectedly gripped him from above.

But that really only made it the more surprising. It was quite extraordinary conduct on the part of Mr. Quelch.

“Ow! Grooogh! Leggo!” wailed Bunter. “Urrgh! You’re chook-chook-choking me! Yurrrrrgggh!”

“So it is you, Bunter!” thundered Mr. Quelch.

“Eh? Oh! Yes, sir!” gasped Bunter, still more surprised by that question. Quelch knew him by sight well enough!

Bunter was happily unaware that a “rag” had been going on. He had not the slightest suspicion—any more than Mr. Quelch had—that a mischievous junior hidden in one of the old elms at a distance, had been pelting the window with the aid of a catapult! That he was supposed to have been “ragging” at that window Bunter had no idea. He could only wonder dizzily what on earth was the matter with Quelch.

“You!” repeated Mr. Quelch. “I have caught you, Bunter!”

“Urrrrgh! I—I say, sir, I—I—I—grooogh!” spluttered Bunter. Quelch, undoubtedly, had caught him. That was only too painfully certain. Bunter could only wonder, in amazement, why!

“You young rascal!”

"Oh, really, sir—grooogh! Leggo my neck!" gurgled Bunter. "I'm chook-chuck-chick-choking—urrgrgh!"

Quelch did not let go. He did not relax his grasp. He appeared to be quite heartlessly indifferent whether he choked the fat member of the form or not! Leaning from the window, he held him fast, with his left hand, while with his right he seized the cane from under his arm.

Billy Bunter twisted his fat head round, and blinked up at his form-master. Quelch glared down at him. Bunter's look was like that of a startled and terrified owl. Quelch's was like that of a Gorgon.

"I—I—I say, sir—!" gasped Bunter, as Mr. Quelch's right hand emerged from the window, with the cane in it. "I say—yaroooooh!"

Swipe!

The iron grip twisted Bunter over into a favourable position for swiping with the cane. The cane came down with all the vigour of the sinewy arm that wielded it. It fairly rang on Bunter's tight trousers like a pistol-shot: and the frantic yell that answered from Bunter woke echoes far and wide.

Swipe! swipe!

"Yarooooh! Yow-ow! Whoooooop!" roared Bunter. "Gone mad! What—Yarooooop!"

Swipe!

"Wow! Ow! wow!"

Fellows in the quadrangle stared round. It was quite an unusual sight, at a study window at Greyfriars School.

Quelch did not heed distant stares. He concentrated on Bunter. Bunter—Quelch had no doubt—had been ragging him: clinking pebbles on his window-panes, and hiding under the sill all the time! Quelch was fairly on the boil by the time he discovered Bunter there. There was only one idea in Quelch's mind at the moment: to make it abundantly clear to Bunter that it did not pay to rag his form-master.

"Swipe! swipe!

"Ow! Help! Wow! oooh!" roared Bunter, struggling wildly. "I say, you fellows—yaroooooh! Oh, crumbs! Oh, crikey! I say, he's gone crackers! Wow!"

He wrenched frantically at the grasp on his collar. Why Quelch had broken out like this, for no apparent cause, was quite inexplicable: unless, indeed, the Remove master had suddenly and unaccountably gone "crackers".

Really there seemed no other explanation of a form-master suddenly grasping a fellow who had done nothing at all, and pitching into him with a cane!

"Crackers" or not, there was no doubt that Quelch was in a fierce mood. The cane fairly rang on Billy Bunter.

Swipe! swipe! swipe!

"Oh, scissors! Oh, help! Yarooooh!" roared Bunter.

Quelch, for the moment, was unheeding, indeed unconscious, of astonished stares fixed on him from various directions. Bunter's frantic yells reached every ear in the quad, and every fellow there stared round towards Quelch's window. Harry Wharton and Co. ceased to discuss the problem of tea, and stared across at their form-master with popping eyes. They had been longing, indeed yearning, to lay hands on the artful fat Owl who had parked himself in so secure a spot, and bestow upon him the "scragging" he richly merited. Now, however, he was getting something much more severe than any "scragging" they would have dreamed of handing out. Quelch was laying it on as if he fancied that he was beating a carpet!

"Great pip!" ejaculated Bob Cherry. "Look! What's the matter with Quelch? What is he pitching into Bunter for?"

"Goodness knows!"

"Serve him jolly well right, whatever it's for!" grunted Johnny Bull. "He's getting it from Quelch instead of us!"

"Not such a safe spot as Bunter fancied!" said Frank Nugent. "But—what is Quelch up to?"

"Can't be whopping Bunter like that just for loafing under his window," said Harry Wharton, quite mystified.

"But what—?"

"The whatfulness is terrific."

"Look at that!" It was the loud voice of Coker of the Fifth. "Look! Has that old bean gone batchy, or what! Look!"

Every fellow in the quad was looking! Frantically from the wriggling, squirming fat Owl came howl after howl.

"Yaroooh! Leggo! Stoppit! Wow! I haven't done anything, have I? Yaroooh! Stoppit! Oh, crikey!"

"You disrespectful young rascal!" Quelch, almost breathless with his exertions, panted. "How dare you pelt my window with stones?"

"Eh! What? I didn't!" roared Bunter. "I haven't done a thing! Will you leggo my collar! Stoppit! Yaroooh."

Swipe! swipe!

"Wow! I say, you fellows—yaroooh! Whoooooop!"

Bunter gave a tremendous wrench, and Mr. Quelch almost toppled out of the window. He caught at the sash to save himself, perforce releasing the fat Owl's collar, and the cane dropped from his hand to the ground.

The instant his grasp relaxed, Billy Bunter shot away like an arrow from a bow. Seldom did Bunter move swiftly. But just then, an arrow in its flight had nothing on Bunter. He whizzed.

"Bunter!" roared Mr. Quelch.

Bunter flew on.

"Bunter! Come to my study at once! Pick up that cane and bring it to my study with you."

Bunter heard, but like the ancient gladiator, he heeded not! He careered on, his fat feet seeming scarcely to touch the ground.

"Wharton!" Mr. Quelch called, or rather shouted, across to his Head Boy. "Wharton! Stop that boy!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" gasped the amazed captain of the Remove. He made a grasp at Bunter as the fat Owl flew by: carefully missing him. Whatever Bunter had done—and apparently he had done nothing at all—Wharton could not help thinking that he had had enough! Bunter charged on past the Famous Five, shot into the House like a fat rabbit into a rabbit-hole, and disappeared.

Quelch compressed his lips, hard.

He was conscious of the amazed stares on all sides. He realized that fellows who did not know how Bunter had offended, must be astonished at that sudden and remarkable scene at a master's study window. He beckoned to Wharton, who came up.

"Pick up that cane, Wharton, please, and hand it to me."

"Certainly, sir."

Harry Wharton picked up the cane, and handed it in at the window. Quelch breathed very hard.

"Wharton! Find Bunter and tell him to come to my study."

"Oh! Yes, sir! Has—has Bunter done anything, sir?" stammered the captain of the Remove.

"What? what? No doubt you saw him throwing stones at my window, Wharton, as you were not very far away," snapped Mr. Quelch.

Wharton jumped.

"Oh! No, sir!" he gasped.

"He was doing so, Wharton, whether you saw him or not! Find him at once and send him to my study."

Harry Wharton stared blankly at his form-master.

"But, sir—!" he stammered.

Mr. Quelch's window shut with a bang. Harry Wharton turned away, and rejoined his friends, quite bewildered. Having been commanded to look for Bunter, he did so—but probably he did not look very hard, or very far: for the Remove master, in a state of intensifying wrath, waited in his study for a fat Owl who did not arrive!

CHAPTER VI

UP A TREE!

WINGATE of the Sixth stared.

"Oh!" he ejaculated.

The Greyfriars captain was sauntering under the leafy branches of one of

the old elms. That leafy tree was just opposite the window of Mr. Quelch's study, at some distance. Wingate, as he strolled past, had no idea that any fellow was hidden in the branches above—he made that discovery suddenly and unexpectedly.

Any fellow who climbed that tree was safely out of sight from the quad, and the windows of the House. On the side furthest from the school buildings, it was easy to climb the gnarled old trunk unnoticed, its massive width being more than enough to hide the climber from general observation.

Not that any fellow was allowed, or supposed to climb trees in the Greyfriars quad. It was very strictly forbidden. Fellows with a fancy for tree-climbing had to indulge that fancy, if at all, outside the precincts of Greyfriars.

But some fellow, undoubtedly, had climbed that particular tree, regardless of rules: for as the captain of Greyfriars was passing under it, a foot emerged from the foliage above his head—obviously that of someone in the act of coming down: no doubt quite unaware that a Sixth-form prefect was in the offing.

Wingate stared at it.

Some fellow was in that tree, against rules and regulations: and for whatever reason he had been there, he was now descending at an unlucky moment for himself. The trunk would have screened him from fellows in the quad: but it couldn't screen him from Wingate, who was passing on the further side. Being right under the tree, the Greyfriars captain could scarcely have failed to observe that foot—in fact it fairly dangled before his eyes.

As he ejaculated "Oh!" there was a quick breath above, as the unseen climber thus became aware of him: the foot ceased to descend, and made a move to jerk up again. But Wingate reached up swiftly and grasped the ankle attached to the foot.

"Oooh!" came a startled gasp, as he grasped it. The owner of the foot above dragged hard: but the Greyfriars captain held on to his capture.

"Come down, you young sweep!" he exclaimed. "I've caught you! Come down out of that tree at once! Do you hear?"

The unseen one certainly heard: but he made no reply, and no move to descend. Holding on to the upper branches, and still hidden in foliage, save for a foot and a length of leg, he dragged desperately to release that foot. As he must have known Wingate's voice, he knew that he was dealing with a Sixth-Form prefect: whose duty it was to call him to account for breaking rules. Perhaps all the more for that reason he strove hard to pull loose: but the Greyfriars captain pulled harder.

There was a slithering sound, and another foot, and another leg, came into view. Wingate was getting the best of that peculiar game of tug-of-war.

"Are you coming down?" he rapped.

A breathless gasp was the only answer. Wingate gave another powerful

tug, and more of the tree-climber came into sight. A crumpled jacket, caught on a jutting twig, was dragged almost up to the climber's ears, revealing a waistcoat. From the pockets of that crumpled garment various articles exuded, and fell to the ground below. A fountain-pen tapped on Wingate's head as it fell: then a handkerchief, a penknife, and a catapult, scattered at his feet. Still the climber held on to an upper branch, while a shower of gravel-stones dropped after the other articles that had fallen.

"Will you come down, you young ass?" exclaimed Wingate. "You'll get a pretty hard bump if I have to pull you down."

"I—I—I can't!" came a panting voice. "My jacket's caught! Let go! I'll come down if you let go, Wingate."

Wingate knew that voice. The tree-climber was Herbert Vernon-Smith of the Remove: the "Bouncer" of Greyfriars.

"You, Vernon-Smith!" exclaimed Wingate.

"Will you let go?" howled the Bouncer. "I can't get my jacket loose—it's hooked."

Wingate released the ankle. Now that the delinquent was known, it was useless for him to dodge back into the higher branches.

"Come down at once," rapped Wingate.

There was a scrambling sound, as Smithy unhooked his jacket. Then he dropped from the branches, and stood facing Wingate, with flushed face, panting for breath. Wingate glanced at the objects that had fallen to the ground, and frowned.

"Pick those things up! Now hand me that catapult!"

Vernon-Smith stooped, and collected his property. He handed the catapult to the Greyfriars captain in silence.

"You young rascal!" said Wingate, angrily. "You'd have had fifty lines for climbing that tree—but a catapult is a very different matter. You know they are not allowed in the school."

Vernon-Smith stood sullen and silent.

"Have you been catapulting the pigeons?" demanded Wingate.

The Bouncer's colour deepened. He was a wild and reckless fellow, and he had his faults—indeed, their name was Legion. But there was nothing mean or cruel in him. His eyes glinted at the Greyfriars captain.

"No, I haven't," he snapped, savagely, "and you've no right to ask me, either."

"You didn't climb a tree with a catapult for nothing."

No answer.

"What were you doing in that tree, with a catapult?"

Still no answer.

"Very well," said Wingate. "I shall take you to your form-master, Vernon-Smith. Quelch will deal with you."

Herbert Vernon-Smith caught his breath. He did not want Quelch to hear

of a Remove fellow in the tree opposite his window, with a catapult! Only too probably, Quelch would guess who was the unknown ragger who had been pelting his window with gravel-stones. Smithy had indulged in that reckless rag, regardless of possible consequences. But the consequences were certain to be very painful, if Quelch discovered who had been ragging him.

"I—I say, Wingate—!" he stammered.

"Well?" rapped the Greyfriars captain.

"You needn't take me to Quelch!" muttered the Bounder. "Look here, fellows have climbed trees before, without a song and a dance about it."

"Not with catapults," snapped Wingate.

"I tell you I wasn't catapulting the pigeons—I wouldn't!"

"What were you doing with the catapult, then?"

No answer.

"That will do," said Wingate, gruffly. "Quelch is in his study now, I believe—I'll take you to him at once."

"I tell you I wasn't—"

"You can tell Quelch that! If it wasn't the pigeons, you must have been watching for some fellow to catapult him. You young ruffian, people have had an eye knocked out by a catapult stone. If—"

"I tell you it was nothing of the kind. I'm not such a fool."

"Then what were you up to?"

Vernon-Smith made no answer. There was a chance, at least, that Quelch might not guess: and he did not intend to confess that he had been catapulting his form-master's window. Such an act of disrespect, if found out, meant dire consequences—it might even mean going up to the head.

"Come with me," rapped Wingate, as the junior did not answer: and he turned and walked away towards the House, the catapult in his hand.

The Bounder followed him, with a dark and sullen face. There was no help for it. He had been caught, and he had to face the music. He could only hope that Quelch would not be able to put two and two together, and jump to it that the gravel-stones on his window-panes had come from a catapult. But that, he knew, was rather under-estimating his form-master's arithmetical powers—and the hope was very faint. In fact, the Bounder's sullen face registered alarm and despondency, as he followed Wingate into the House, and into Mr. Quelch's study.

CHAPTER VII

QUELCH COMES DOWN HEAVY!

"MR. QUELCH—!"

"What is it, Wingate?" snapped Mr. Quelch.

It was not like Mr. Quelch to snap at George Wingate, of the Sixth-Form,

captain and head-prefect of Greyfriars School. In normal circumstances he would never have dreamed of snapping at him.

But circumstances were not normal just now. Indeed they were very far from normal.

Quelch was in a boiling state. Seldom or never had any Greyfriars master been so thoroughly on the boil.

His work had been interrupted: his time wasted: he had been subjected to a reckless "rag": and in addition to all that, the delinquent had had the audacity, the temerity, to keep away from his study when ordered to come there by a just-incensed form-master.

Bunter had been commanded to come to the study. Wharton had been commanded to find him and send him there. Quelch, naturally, had expected to see him in a few minutes.

But no fat Owl had materialized. Quelch had waited, simmering: ready for Bunter. But Bunter had not come.

It was amazing, as well as exasperating. Disobedience in his form was a thing to which Mr. Quelch was quite unaccustomed. Certainly if Wharton could not find Bunter, he could not send him in: but Bunter should have come as ordered—the circumstance that a further licking awaited him should have made no difference to that. Apparently, however, it had! Quelch, still unaware—though he was about to learn—that Bunter was not the culprit, had no idea that the fat Owl, startled out of his wits by what seemed to him an utterly unaccountable outbreak on his form-master's part, had an uneasy dread that Quelch had suddenly gone "off his onion". Unless he was reassured on that point, Billy Bunter was not likely to present himself in that study in a hurry.

The state of affairs was quite sufficient to make any form-master boil, if not boil over. It was an added irritation to Quelch when Wingate came in with Vernon-Smith at his heels. He did not want to be bothered by anyone just then: he wanted to concentrate on William George Bunter. At that moment he might almost have snapped at the reverend Head himself. He snapped at Wingate.

The Greyfriars captain raised his eyebrows slightly. Really, he was not to be snapped at, like some junior in Quelch's form.

However, having registered disapproval by that lift of his eyebrows, Wingate proceeded to explain.

"I have brought this junior to you, sir—"

"Why?" Quelch still snapped.

Herbert Vernon-Smith stood silent. Wingate's eyebrows lifted again.

"If you do not wish me to make my report, sir—!" he said stiffly. Two snaps were more than enough for him.

Mr. Quelch made an effort to control his intense irritation.

"Not at all, Wingate." This time he contrived not to snap. "As a matter of

fact, I have been somewhat disturbed this afternoon—a foolish boy in my form was so irresponsible as to throw stones at my study window—”

“Indeed, sir.”

“That foolish boy Bunter,” said Mr. Quelch, and the Bounder gave a jump.

From the elm branches, he had witnessed the scene at Quelch’s window, following the banging of gravel-stones on the glass: but like other witnesses, he had only wondered why Quelch had pounced on the fat Owl. Now he began to understand.

He realized that Quelch, not having the faintest idea that a young rascal with a catapult was fusillading from a tree, had jumped on Bunter as the offender.

If he had had a hope of getting through this without bad trouble, it was abandoned now. He could guess what Quelch’s feelings would be like when he learned that he had punished a boy in his form without cause. Quelch was a just man. Aristides of old had nothing on Quelch in that respect. And he was now going to learn that those whops of the cane, at his study window, had been administered to Bunter absolutely without cause. Herbert Vernon-Smith had plenty of nerve: but he could not help feeling a tremor now—a very unpleasant tremor. If Quelch guessed how the matter stood—which he could hardly fail to do—the Bounder of Greyfriars was “for it” with a vengeance! He stood in uneasy silence, waiting.

“Pray proceed, Wingate,” said Mr. Quelch, quite unsnappishly, and his gimlet-eyes turned on Herbert Vernon-Smith, with a glint in them that made the Bounder, with all his nerve, quake inwardly. “What has Vernon-Smith done? I shall scarcely be surprised at anything you have to tell me. Only to-day I have caned him for smoking in his study. Is it that again?”

“No, sir!” Wingate laid the catapult upon the table. “I found Vernon-Smith in a tree—”

“In a tree?” repeated Mr. Quelch.

“The old elm tree opposite your study window, sir. He had this catapult, and a lot of gravel-stones—”

“Gravel-stones!”

“He denies that he was catapulting the pigeons, or lying in wait to catapult some fellow passing the tree. I leave it to you to judge, sir.”

Quelch’s gimlet-eyes were fixed on Vernon-Smith’s face. Often, in the Remove, had Quelch’s eyes been compared to gimlets, for their penetrating qualities. But never had they seemed so like gimlets as now. They seemed almost to bore into Smithy.

Quelch did not speak immediately. He stepped across to the window, for what reason Wingate had no idea, though the dismayed Bounder could guess.

From the window Quelch glanced at the sill. Five or six gravel-stones still lay there, that had “pinged” on his panes. Then he glanced across at the

leafy old elm. It was opposite the window—a good way off, but within range of a catapult in skilful hands.

Vernon-Smith, watching him, could read his face! He knew that Quelch knew! And he drew a deep breath. He was aware that Quelch had got after the wrong man—but he knew that Quelch was after the right man now.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard.

He had not, in the first place, thought of a catapult fusillading from a distance, from the cover of a leafy tree. Finding Bunter under the window, he had taken it for granted that Bunter was the pebble-hurler. It now dawned on his mind that he had taken altogether too much for granted.

Vernon-Smith, the most reckless young rascal in his form, whom he had caned that very day, had been hidden in that tree opposite his window, with a catapult and gravel-stones. Quelch did not need telling more! Bunter was not the man! Vernon-Smith was the man!

Mr. Quelch turned from the window. He was calm—with a deadly calmness.

"Thank you, Wingate," he said, quietly. "I am perfectly well aware why Vernon-Smith was concealed in that elm tree with a catapult. Had I been aware of it earlier, I should have known that it was he who was raining pebbles on my window, and not that foolish boy Bunter."

"Oh!" ejaculated Wingate.

"Vernon-Smith has been guilty of a most disrespectful prank, Wingate. It is what he would, I presume, call a 'rag'. Quelch's eyes glittered. "I shall endeavour to make it clear to him that his form-master is not a proper object for such trickery. A short while ago, Wingate, my work was interrupted, and I was extremely annoyed, by stones rattling on my window continuously—"

"Oh!" repeated Wingate.

"I supposed that it was Bunter, as I found him under my window. I know now that it was this disrespectful and malicious junior. Thank you for reporting him to me, Wingate! But for this, a very regrettable injustice might have been done to another boy in my form. I am much obliged to you, Wingate."

"Not at all, sir," said Wingate, and he left the study. Herbert Vernon-Smith would have been very glad to do the same. But there was no escape for Smithy.

"Vernon-Smith!"

"Yes, sir!" muttered the Bounder.

"Do you deny that you were catapulting gravel-stones at my window?"

The Bounder made no answer. The "bad hat" of the Remove was not very particular about facts when he was dealing with a "beak". But it was useless to deny what was obvious.

"You have caused me great annoyance, and much more serious than that, an undeserved punishment has fallen upon another boy!" said Mr. Quelch, sternly. "I supposed that it was Bunter—"

"I—I never knew that, sir," muttered the Bounder.

"Probably not! That does not alter the case," said Mr. Quelch. "I have already caned you to-day; Vernon-Smith! I shall not cane you again."

Smithy brightened up a little. Lines, even a Georgic, or Extra School, were much preferable to a caning from Quelch, in his present mood. But Quelch's next words damped him down again. Mr. Quelch, angry and exasperated as he was, did not feel he could administer a second "six" so soon after the first. But as he went on, the Bounder rather wished that he had! Six, or even a double six, would not have been, to the hardy Bounder, quite so severe a penalty as the one that was coming. Quelch was not going to handle the cane: gladly as he would have done so. But he was not in a lenient mood: far from it.

"You will go into detention for every remaining half-holiday this term, Vernon-Smith!" said Mr. Quelch, in a grinding voice. "On each occasion a special detention task will be set you: and if you fail to complete it satisfactorily, you will be caned. Every Wednesday and Saturday for the rest of the term, Vernon-Smith, you will come to the form-room at half-past two, and I shall leave you there with your task, to remain until five o'clock. But for the fact that I have caned you already to-day, I should cane you in addition to this. Now leave my study."

Herbert Vernon-Smith stood looking at him. His face was sullen, and his eyes glinted. It was a heavy sentence—no heavier, perhaps, than the Bounder might have expected, in the circumstances: nevertheless, such a sentence as was seldom passed on any junior at Greyfriars. It was not merely leisure hours that were washed out: games were washed out also: and the Bounder, as keen a footballer as any man in the Remove, was practically barred from Soccer for the rest of the term. So far from playing in the Carcroft match, as he had intended and was expected to do, he had to cut that match, and all following matches up to Christmas—Rookwood, St. Jim's, Felgate, and the rest. Mr. Quelch, no doubt, was not thinking of football: but the Bounder thought of it at once as he heard his sentence. A caning, a Head's flogging, would have been preferable to this—but this was the sentence.

"Go!" snapped Mr. Quelch, as Vernon-Smith did not stir.

The Bounder opened his lips to speak. But he closed them again: he knew that it was useless. With a black brow and glinting eyes, he left the study, in silence.

CHAPTER VIII

ALL RIGHT FOR BUNTER

"BUNTER, sir!"
"Oh! Come in!"
"Leggo, Wingate—"

"You young ass—"

"Ow! Leggo!"

"Bunter!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "Come in at once! What do you mean by this? Bring him in, Wingate."

"Yes, sir!"

Wingate of the Sixth had been requested, after Mr. Quelch's interview with the Bounder, to look for Bunter, and bring him to the study. Evidently he had been successful: for here he was, accompanied by the fat Owl. He opened Mr. Quelch's study door with one hand, the other grasping the collar that encircled a fat neck. But for that grasp on his collar, Billy Bunter certainly would have bolted. His form-master's study was not an attractive spot, at the best of times. Now it seemed to the fat and fatuous Owl rather like a lion's den. Bunter was no Daniel to venture into the lion's den if he could help it. But he couldn't! With that grasp on his collar, the captain of Greyfriars propelled him into the study, and he had no chance whatever of bolting.

Mr. Quelch—aware now of the mistake that had been made, and that Bunter had had those whops at the window for absolutely nothing, was prepared to be kind and patient. He was not in a genial mood—far from it! but certainly he regretted those rather hasty whops. The fat Owl had nothing to fear, if he had only known it.

"The young ass was hiding in the attics, sir," said Wingate. "I found him in the top attic—"

"The top attic! You absurd boy, Bunter—" exclaimed Mr. Quelch. "How dare you go up to the attics?"

"Oh, crikey!"

"I have been waiting for you for a considerable time, Bunter," said Mr. Quelch, severely. "How dare you—!"

"I—I—I—Oh, lor'!" babbled Bunter. His little round eyes popped through his big round spectacles at his form-master.

"Thank you, Wingate," said Mr. Quelch. "Now, Bunter—"

The Greyfriars captain left the study, and shut the door after him. Billy Bunter made a step in the same direction.

"Bunter!" rapped Mr. Quelch. "Stay where you are!"

"Oh, crikey!" groaned Bunter.

He blinked at his form-master, backing towards the door. The alarm in his fat face made Quelch breathe very hard. But he realized that that sudden whopping at the window must have seemed utterly unaccountable to Bunter: he was determined to be patient.

"I am not going to punish you, Bunter," he said, hastily.

"Oh! Ain't you, sir?" gasped Bunter.

"I have now learned, Bunter, that it was not you, as I supposed, who pelted my window with pebbles."

"Did—did anybody, sir?"

Quelch breathed harder!

"Yes, Bunter! Vernon-Smith was hidden in a tree with a catapult, and it was he who projected the pebbles at my window. Being quite unaware of this at the time, I concluded that it was your action, as I found you under the window, where certainly you should not have been. Do you understand now?"

Bunter, perhaps, began to understand. But he blinked at his form-master very dubiously.

"It was a mistake, which I regret!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Then—then—!" gasped Bunter.

"Then what, Bunter?"

"Then—then you ain't batchy, sir—"

"What?"

"I—I mean crackers, sir—"

"WHAT!"

"I—I thought you'd gone nuts, sir, when you grabbed me and pitched into me for nothing—!"

"Bunter!"

"I—I—I hadn't done a thing, sir—"

Mr. Quelch's hand dropped on his cane. With an effort, he withdrew it. With another effort, he continued to be patient with this remarkable member of his form.

"I am aware now, Bunter, that you had not offended, and I regret that I caned you at the window—"

"So do I, sir!" said Bunter, with a reminiscent wriggle. "I—I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought Bunter!" breathed Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, but I thought you'd gone—"

"That will do, Bunter."

"—crackers, sir! I—I kept out of the way, sir, because I thought—"

"You need say no more, Bunter." Quelch's patience was very near the breaking-point. "I shall excuse your foolish and disrespectful action in disobeying my order to come to this study, in the—the circumstances."

"Oh!" said Bunter. He breathed more freely. Even the fat and fatuous Owl realized that his form-master had not suddenly developed "nuts". It had been a mistake. "I—I never knew anybody was larking at your window, sir, so of course I thought—"

"As you were standing under the window, Bunter, you must have heard the pebbles strike on the glass above your head."

"I never noticed, sir—I was eating—"

"What?"

"I—I mean I wasn't eating, sir," amended Bunter, hastily. "I hadn't any dough-nuts about me, sir—"

"Dough-nuts!" repeated Mr. Quelch.

"Yes, sir—I mean, no sir! I—I haven't tasted a dough-nut for—for weeks, and I certainly never found any in Wharton's study, and they weren't after me, either, and that wasn't why I was sticking under your window, sir—"

"Bless my soul!" said Mr. Quelch. "Bunter, it appears that you had taken refuge under my window, to devour comestibles belonging to another boy. In these circumstances, I no longer regret that I caned you at the window, Bunter. You fully deserved it."

"Oh, really, sir—!"

"You may leave my study, Bunter."

"Oh! Yes, sir!"

Billy Bunter was glad, at least, to leave the study, and he rolled doorwards with alacrity. In fact, he fairly shot out of Quelch's study into the passage, and the door closed on him.

Mr. Quelch was feeling comforted. It had weighed on his just mind that he had administered those whops at the window without cause. But a fat Owl who had parked himself in that spot out of reach of fellows whose tuck he was devouring, certainly deserved "whops": so Bunter, after all, had only had what he merited. Indeed, Bunter's supposition that his form-master had gone "crackers" almost made Quelch wish that he had added a few more!

At last—at long last!—Quelch sat at his table to complete those Form papers: with no prospect whatever of a spot of leisure to follow for his celebrated "History of Greyfriars". He was working his way through the pile, when a distant fat squeak floated in at the open window.

"I say, you fellows, it's all right! Quelch ain't crackers after all! It was Smithy pulling his leg, and he thought it was me—I jolly well thought he was as mad as a hatter—"

Mr. Quelch rose, and closed the window, with lips compressed very hard. It was that young rascal, Herbert Vernon-Smith, who was the cause of all this: if he offended again—!

CHAPTER IX

MAN WANTED

"**T**HAT ass!" said Harry Wharton, frowning.

"That goat!" agreed Bob Cherry. "He ought to be booted."

"That terrific fathead!" remarked Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

"Which doesn't help much!" said Frank Nugent. "Smithy's out of the Soccer, and that's that!"

Johnny Bull contributed a grunt, which no doubt expressed his feelings.

It was the following day: and on Harry Wharton's mind, as junior football captain, there was the weight of a problem. His friends duly sympathized: but describing Smithy variously as an ass, a goat, and a fathead, did not materially help. No doubt he was all these, and more: and no doubt he deserved to be booted for his folly: but the fact remained that he was out of the Soccer. And as Smithy was one of the best men in the eleven, that was a serious matter—especially as a match was due on the morrow, in which Wharton had counted on playing the Bounder in the front line. But in that match and in subsequent matches, obviously he would not be able to count on the Bounder. There were plenty of keen footballers in the Remove, and it was easy enough to fill his place, so far as that went: but filling it with another man of the same quality was quite another question.

The Famous Five were discussing it in No. 1 Study after tea. Harry Wharton's brow was wrinkled in a frown, as he conned over the football list. Originally that list had run: J. Bull: M. Linley, S. Q. I. Field: T. Brown, R. Cherry, R. Penfold: R. D. Ogilvy, P. Todd, H. Wharton, H. J. R. Singh, H. Vernon-Smith.

That was as good a team as the Greyfriars Remove could put into the football field: though there was a good many fellows who fancied that it could have been improved by the inclusion of their noble selves.

A good team was needed: for Compton and Co. of Carcroft were known to be in great form: and nobody wanted the Carcroftians to come over and wipe up the ground with the home team. At best, the game would be touch and go: the best winger at Greyfriars left out, and a second-rater put in his place, prospects seemed more cloudy.

And there was no reason why Smithy should not have played: no reason whatever, except that a well-deserved "six" from Quelch had put his arrogant back up, and he had set out to "get back" on Quelch by catapulting his window while he was at work in his study. He was sorely missed from the team: but all the footballers were feeling like kicking him.

"Well, he's out of it," said Harry Wharton. "It can't be helped, and I shall have to play another man." His glance rested on Frank Nugent, who laughed. Frank knew what was in his chum's mind. He was Harry Wharton's best chum: but the captain of the Remove would never have played him with a better man available: Soccer came first. But now that Smithy was inevitably out of the team, it was a chance for Wharton to do what he would always have liked to do.

"Franky's a good man," said Bob Cherry, catching on at once. "Not in the same street with Smithy, I know—"

"Thanks!" grinned Nugent.

"Well, you know it as well as I do, old chap," said Bob. "But Smithy's

kicked himself out: and you're as good a man as Russell, or Hazel, or Morgan—and better than the others. Why not Franky?"

"I say, you fellows—!"

"Buzz off, Bunter!" roared five fellows all at once, as a fat face and a big pair of spectacles dawned in the doorway.

"Oh, really, you fellows—!"

"No dough-nuts here!" snorted Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"So you needn't hand out another spook message from Wingate!" said Bob. "That reminds me—we haven't booted you for pulling our leg like that! Come in and turn round!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Scat!" snapped Harry Wharton.

"I say, you fellows, I hear that Smithy's out of the team," said Bunter. "I say, he's in a frightful temper about it—I heard him slanging Redwing—"

"Smithy all over!" grunted Johnny Bull. "He would slang somebody if he's in a tantrum! I wonder Reddy doesn't punch his cheeky head."

"But I say, Harry, old chap, you'll want another man to-morrow," said Bunter, with an owl-like blink at the captain of the Remove through his big spectacles. "Chance for you to play a better man than Smithy."

"Eh? If there's a better man than Smithy available, I'd like to hear of him." answered Harry, staring at the fat Owl.

"Well, there jolly well is!" said Bunter. "Smithy's no great shakes, if you come to that. Look how he sticks to the ball when he ought to pass, and thinks he jolly well owns the whole football field! You don't know a lot about Soccer, Wharton, or you'd pick out a better man fast enough."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"I'm willing to learn," he answered. "Go ahead and instruct me from your vast stores of knowledge, old fat man."

"Well, I could name a chap who could play Smithy's head off, and yours too, and chance it," said Bunter. "You'd see, if you gave him a chance."

"Well, who?" asked Wharton, puzzled. "If I've missed some budding International in the Remove, I'll be glad to hear about him. If you mean Russell—"

"I don't mean Russell."

"Or Tom Dutton—?"

"I don't mean Dutton."

"Well, give it a name," said Bob Cherry. "Listen to the oracle, you fellows! Bunter's the man who knows."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"You can cackle!" said Bunter, disdainfully. "But I could name a chap in the Remove who could play all your heads off."

"Cough it up!" said Bob.

"Well, what about me?" asked Bunter.

"You!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Blessed if I see anything to cackle at!" hooted Bunter, as there was a roar in No. 1 Study. "I'll bet Carcroft would sit up and take notice, if they found me playing for Greyfriars—"

"I'll bet they would!" gurgled Bob Cherry, "and they'd want to know how a barrage balloon got loose on the footer ground."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Oh, cackle!" snorted Bunter. "Look here, Wharton, you can't play Smithy to-morrow, and he's no good if you could—I'm a better man any day. If I couldn't play Soccer better than that scowling, ill-tempered rotter Smithy, I'd—yaroooooh!"

Billy Bunter's remarks ended in a frantic yell, as a hand grasped the back of his fat neck. He blinked round over his shoulder at the angry face of Herbert Vernon-Smith. The Bounder had come along at a rather unfortunate moment for Bunter.

"Ow! Leggo!" yelled Bunter. "I say, you fellows—wow!"

Bang!

Billy Bunter's fat head smote the door. Only too clearly, the Bounder was in a very bad temper, which had not been improved by the fat Owl's remarks.

"Yoo-hoop!" roared Bunter, wriggling frantically in the Bounder's grasp. "Leggo! I—I wasn't calling you a rotter, Smithy—I—I was speaking about another rotter—"

Bang!

"Yow-ow-ow! wow!" roared Bunter. "I say, you fellows, make him leggo! Wow!"

"You can chuck that, Smithy!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, sharply.

"I'll do as I choose."

"You won't!" The captain of the Remove jumped to his feet. "You can keep your rotten temper to yourself, Vernon-Smith! You bang Bunter's head again, and you'll get some of the same."

"Yes, rather!" said Bob Cherry, emphatically.

"The ratherfulness is terrific, my esteemed scowful Smithy."

"Get out, you fat fool!" snarled the Bounder. He swung Bunter out of the doorway: and, with another swing of his sinewy arm, sent him spinning and tumbling along the passage. Then he walked, or rather stamped, into No. 1 Study—under five grim and unwelcoming pairs of eyes.

CHAPTER X

NOTHING DOING!

“WELL?”

Harry Wharton snapped out that monosyllable.

Nobody in No. 1 Study was feeling like wasting much civility on Herbert Vernon-Smith just then.

The Bounder, evidently, was in a towering temper. They had no doubt that his pal Redwing had been getting the benefit of it, as Bunter had said: and the fat Owl had had his turn. But if Smithy fancied that he could throw his weight about in No. 1 Study, he had quite another guess coming: and five fellows were prepared to tell him so in the plainest possible language.

“It’s about the Soccer,” yapped Smithy.

“Well?” repeated Harry.

Smithy glanced at the football list on the table, and his scowl became blacker as he noted that the name “H. Vernon-Smith” was crossed out. He could hardly have expected anything else, as he was booked for detention on Wednesday afternoon: but all the same, it seemed to have on him much the same effect as a red rag on a bull.

“So you’ve chucked me?” he breathed.

“You’ve chucked yourself, you mean,” snapped Harry, “and left us in the lurch too, with your fool tricks on Quelch.”

“You’d like to leave me out—”

“Oh, don’t talk rot! You know I don’t want anything of the kind. You ought to be jolly well booted for letting us down as you’ve done!” exclaimed Harry, angrily.

“Look here—!” The Bounder’s voice rose.

“Don’t shout in this study! This isn’t No. 4: and we’re not a party of Redwings to put up with your airs and graces. If you can’t speak civilly, get out.”

“And the sooner the better,” grunted Johnny Bull.

“The betterfulness will be terrific, my esteemed Smithy!”

“Oh, shut up, you!” snarled Smithy.

“Shut up yourself!” snorted Johnny Bull. “You’ve let us all down, with your silly tricks to get back on Quelch for a whopping, which served you jolly well right! You’re a rotter, just as Bunter said—and now try banging my head on the door, like you did his, if you feel like it!” added Johnny, with a glare at the Bounder rather like that of the “tyke” of his native county.

For a moment, Vernon-Smith looked like taking him at his word, and Johnny’s substantial fists clenched in readiness. But with an effort, the Bounder controlled his temper.

"I came here to speak about the Carcroft match to-morrow, Wharton," he said, as quietly as he could.

"Nothing for you to say about that," answered Harry. "You're out of it, as you'll be in detention."

"Fellows have cut detention before now."

"Oh, don't be an ass! Do you think you could cut, and play football right under Quelch's nose, without being spotted!" exclaimed the captain of the Remove, impatiently. "Talk sense."

"I'd chance it—"

"I daresay you would! You'd chance anything rather than take what you've asked for!" said Harry, with a curl of the lip. "But you won't find me chancing it. We're not having the Carcroft match stopped by a beak coming down to the ground to march a man off. If that's your idea, you can forget all about it."

Smithy gave him a bitter look.

It was to be said, to his credit, that he was keen on the game, that he wanted to kick goals for his school, and that he knew his value to the team—and that he assuredly never would have set out to "get back" on Quelch, if he could have foreseen this outcome. Now that it had happened, he was reckless enough to take the wildest chance to get out of the pit he had dug for his own feet.

But the captain of the Remove had not the slightest idea of backing him up in anything of the kind. Even had he felt disposed to do so, he knew that there was not the remotest chance of success: as indeed Smithy himself would have realized if he had considered the matter coolly. It was quite certain that a fellow supposed to be sitting in the form-room over a detention task, could not play Soccer almost within sight of Quelch's study window, without being spotted. It was equally certain that Quelch, when he discovered what was going on, would intervene in the most drastic manner. Smithy might be prepared to risk such a sensational episode on the Greyfriars football ground: but the captain of the Remove certainly was not.

"If that's all—" added Harry, as the Bounder did not speak: and he glanced at the door, as a hint that the caller's room was preferable to his company.

"I'm going to play, somehow," muttered the Bounder, sullenly. "You can't beat Carcroft without me, and you know it."

"Oh, we'll try," said Johnny Bull, sarcastically. "Of course we know that you're practically the whole bag of tricks, and every other fellow just an also ran: but we'll do our poor little feeble best!" And there was a chuckle in No. 1 study.

"What sort of a dud are you going to shove in, in my place, if I don't play, Wharton?" snapped Vernon-Smith, after scowling at the sarcastic Johnny.

"Oh, you're not the only pebble on the beach, Smithy. I know you're our best winger, and there's no need for you to shout it out yourself: but there are other fellows in the Remove who can play Soccer."

"Up to my form?" sneered the Bounder.

"No! But that can't be helped, as you've chucked yourself out, since you prefer catapulting windows to playing soccer. We've got to play without you."

"And get licked?" snarled Smithy.

"Is soccer a one-man game, and is Smithy the one man?" inquired Bob Cherry. "Or is that an error on your part, Smithy?"

"You've not told me who's taking my place, Wharton."

"I've been thinking it out, and it's only just settled," answered Harry. He took up his pencil, and wrote "F. Nugent", under the crossed out name in the list. "There you are!"

"Nugent?" said the Bounder, with a bitter sneer. "Chance for you to play your own pal, as you've always wanted to do, now I'm out of it, what?"

Frank Nugent flushed, and Harry Wharton's brow knitted.

"Yes," he said quietly. "It's a chance for me to play my own pal, as I've always wanted to do—but never done when a better man was available. Anything else you want to know?"

"There's one thing you've forgotten, in picking Nugent."

"What's that?"

"We're playing Carcroft at soccer, not at marbles. Marbles is Nugent's game, isn't it?"

Harry Wharton rose to his feet.

"That's enough from you, Herbert Vernon-Smith," he said. "You can get out of this study on your feet, or on your neck, just as you please. You're a better man than Nugent on the footer field: but in everything else you're not good enough to clean his boots. Get out!"

"Oh, I'm going," sneered the Bounder. "You can chuck away a football match, for the pleasure of playing that milksop, if you like, as you happen to be skipper. But I can tell you—!"

"Get out!" roared Johnny Bull.

The Bounder stepped out of the study. He stepped out only in time: for in another moment he would have been pitched out "on his neck". Johnny Bull slammed the door after him with an emphatic slam.

Vernon-Smith, with an expression on his face that made several fellows in the passage exchange grinning glances, tramped back to his own study. In that study Tom Redwing met him with a rather anxious glance. No one would have guessed that he was Smithy's best pal, from the look Smithy gave him. No doubt his chum had been trying to reason with him.

"I've spoken to our Great Panjandrum, and he won't hear of playing me to-morrow if I cut," muttered Vernon-Smith.

"You might have known that! He couldn't," said Redwing, quietly.

"I'd risk it, if he would."

"Wharton's got more sense."

"Oh, shut up." The Bounder gritted his teeth. "I'll tell you this, Tom

Redwing—I'm going to play soccer to-morrow, Quelch or no Quelch. Wharton's jumping at the chance of playing his pal in my place—"

"That's rot, and you know it."

"It's not rot, and I don't know it! He's not going to give my place to that dud if I can help it."

"Nugent's not a dud."

"Is he anything like my form?" snarled the Bounder.

"No: but he can play soccer: and he won't play silly tricks and get detention on a match day, either," said Redwing, tartly. "You've asked for this, Smithy: and now you're letting your silly temper rip, because you've got what you asked for. You make me tired."

Vernon-Smith stared at him. This was unusually plain speaking from Redwing to his wayward chum. It looked as if even Tom's almost inexhaustible patience was running out.

"If you're asking for a row—!" muttered the Bounder, with an evil look.

"Oh, rats!"

Tom crossed to the door and left the study. He did not want a "row" with his pal: but he was on the verge of one: and he sagely decided to leave Smithy alone with his "tantrums".

Vernon-Smith gave the door a savage kick, shutting it after Redwing, and then threw himself into the armchair, with a black brow.

There was nothing doing! He was out of the football, and there seemed no help for it! But the arrogant and obstinate Bounder was determined that somehow, anyhow, there should be some help for it! His mutinous mind was made up on that point: he was going to play in the Carcroft match on the morrow, though the stars in their courses fought against him as against Sisera of old. His captain had taken his name out of the list: his place in the team had been filled: he was booked for detention when the Carcroft match was played, and a gimlet-eye would be upon him:—a series of obstacles that might well have seemed insuperable to any other fellow, but which only made the Bounder of Greyfriars more passionately determined to follow his own bent, whithersoever it might lead him. He was going his own way, at any risk and at any cost—and the only question was, how? But that was a question which certainly did require some very considerable thinking out!

CHAPTER XI

TRYING IT ON!

"SI VERA est fama—"

"Construe!"

"If Vera was hungry—"

"What?"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Why Mr. Quelch ejaculated "What!" in a voice not unlike that of Stentor of old, and why there was a ripple of merriment in the Remove, Billy Bunter did not know. When the fat Owl perpetrated one of his many "howlers", in class, it was wont to afford a little comic relief in the form-room: but Bunter himself remained in blissful ignorance of the enormity he had committed. On the present occasion, Bunter had excelled even himself: this really was one of his best! Even Lord Mauleverer would hardly have construed "si vera est fama" into "if Vera was hungry". Only Bunter was capable of it.

Every fellow in the Remove form-room grinned or chuckled or both. The only person present who was not amused was Mr. Quelch. Quelch's gimlet-eyes fixed on Bunter as if they would bore holes into the fattest member of his form.

"What—?" repeated Mr. Quelch.

"If Vera was hungry—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Bunter! How dare you!"

"Eh?" Billy Bunter blinked at his form-master. "I'm construing, sir—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Silence in the form! Bunter, is this intended for an impertinent jest?" demanded Mr. Quelch.

"Oh, really, sir—!" protested Bunter.

It was quite an unfounded suspicion. Bunter was feeling in no jesting mood. Construing Virgil was no jesting matter: especially when a fellow had not looked at his prep the previous evening.

Bunter had been too busy for prep—busy sitting in the armchair in No. 7 study while Peter Todd and Tom Dutton were at prep. So that section of the Third Book of the Aeneid, assigned for preparation, remained a mystery to him: and he had hoped, as usual, that Quelch might not call on him for con. Called upon, Bunter could only do his best! No fellow could do better than his best: but it unfortunately happened that his best was worse than any other fellow's worst.

"You have not prepared this lesson, Bunter!" said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh, yes, sir! I was—was working like anything at it sir!" Truth had never been one of Billy Bunter's resources, and he was not likely to think of it now, with that thunderous frown on Quelch's speaking countenance. "I—I was simply slogging at it, sir! You can ask Toddy, sir—he knows that I wasn't sitting in the armchair all the time—"

"You will write out the whole lesson after class, Bunter."

"Oh, crikey!"

"Silence!"

"But—but have I—I got it wrong, sir?" babbled Bunter. He blinked at the Latin page again. "I—I think that's right, sir."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

Quelch's gimlet-eye glittered over the form.

"The next boy who laughs in class will be detained this afternoon!" he rapped.

Sudden gravity descended on the Remove. Especially the footballing fellows looked—or tried hard to look—as sober as judges. Wednesday afternoon was a half-holiday, and the Carcroft match was due. Nobody wanted to share the Bounder's fate, and sit in the form-room at a detention task, while other fellows were playing soccer. Billy Bunter's howlers might be funny: but detention was not funny at all—it was awfully serious.

Having restored gravity to his form, Quelch fixed that gimlet-eye on Bunter again.

"Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" moaned Bunter. "I—I think that was right, sir—"

"Are you so stupid, Bunter, are you so utterly ignorant of the rudiments of Latin, that you cannot construe that simple phrase, which would present no difficulties to a boy in the Second Form?" Quelch almost hooted, "si vera est fama, Bunter, means 'if the tale be true!'"

"Oh! Does it, sir?" gasped Bunter. He seemed rather to doubt it: it was so very different from his own masterly rendering.

"You will bring me the whole lesson written out, after tea to-day," said Mr. Quelch, "Vernon-Smith, you will go on."

It was a relief to Bunter, at least, not to have to go on. Herbert Vernon-Smith took up the tale, and the fat Owl was given a much-needed rest.

But his fat face was very morose. Bunter, certainly, was not thinking of football that afternoon, like so many other fellows: whether Carcroft walked over the Greyfriars team, or were sent defeated home, Bunter couldn't have cared less. Frowsting in an armchair before the fire in the Rag interested Bunter more. But a whole lesson to write out was calculated to interfere very extensively with that comfortable frowst. Bunter was annoyed and indignant. It was like Quelch, he reflected bitterly, to pick on him like this! Only last Monday he had whopped him for nothing—grabbing a fellow by the back of the neck and pitching into him!—and now he was picking faults in his "con", and giving him lessons to write out on a half-holiday! Bunter could not help feeling indignant. Full of his own woes and grievances, the fat Owl gave no heed to what followed: he was not interested in Virgil: in fact he could not have been more uninterested in anything. But all the other Removites gave Smithy attention as he went on "con". Never had a better "con" been handed out in the Remove form-room. Evidently the Bounder had not followed Bunter's example and neglected his prep.

That Smithy was in a fixed mood of bitter resentment and irritation, was no secret: he had made it plain enough to all the form. The previous afternoon he had come very near to leaving No. 1 study "on his neck": he had been on the

verge of a "row" even with his patient chum, Redwing: he had hardly been able to speak without a snap. Nobody expected him to be in a mood that morning to please Quelch: and he would naturally have been expected to hand out the most slovenly "con" he could venture upon. Instead of which, he proceeded to construe Virgil without a fault: and the Remove fellows stared, and Mr. Quelch's frowning brow relaxed. The Bounder's construe that morning was as good as Harry Wharton's or even Mark Linley's: which was very unusual, and seemed to indicate that Smithy, for once, was on his best behaviour.

Skinner winked at Snoop, as he listened. As Quelch's attention was fixed on the Bounder, he ventured to whisper:

"Greasing up to Quelch to get off detention this afternoon, what? Bet you it won't work!"

And Snoop nodded and grinned.

Quelch, undoubtedly, was pleased. Such an excellent con, especially coming just after Bunter's remarkable performance, was naturally gratifying to the Remove master. It was unexpected, too, from the most mutinous and troublesome boy in his form, under sentence of detention.

"Very good, Vernon-Smith—very good indeed!" he said, with a nod of approval. "You may go on, Wharton."

For once, Wharton's con was no better than the Bounder's. Tom Redwing nudged his friend.

"You've pleased Quelch for once, Smithy," he whispered.

"Think he'll let me off this afternoon?" sneered Smithy.

"Oh!" Redwing's face clouded. "If that's it—no, I don't think that's likely, Smithy."

"You never know!"

Redwing said no more.

When the Remove were dismissed, Vernon-Smith lingered behind the rest, as they filed out, and Skinner gave Snoop another wink.

"Trying it on!" he murmured. And Snoop giggled.

Mr. Quelch, at his desk, gave Vernon-Smith an inquiring glance. His look was more kindly than usual. Any sign of improvement in that hard and obdurate member of his form was welcome to Quelch.

"What is it, Vernon-Smith?" he asked.

"May I speak to you, sir?"

"Certainly."

"About this afternoon, sir." The Bounder's manner could not have been more meek and respectful. "There's a football match, and—"

The Remove master's face hardened, and he held up his hand.

"That will do, Vernon-Smith," he interrupted, and the kindly look was quite gone from his face—no doubt what had occurred to Harold Skinner much earlier, now occurred to the Remove master. "You will be in the form—"

room at two-thirty, and I shall set you a detention task. You may go.”
For a second the Bounder's eyes glinted. But he answered quietly and respectfully:

“Very well, sir!”

And he left the form-room without another word.

CHAPTER XII

BUNTER'S BRIGHT IDEA!

“I SAY, you fellows—”

“Scat!”

“Oh, really, Bull—”

“Is Vera very hungry?” asked Bob Cherry.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Billy Bunter blinked morosely at the Famous Five through his big spectacles. After dinner, they were strolling in the quad, discussing the coming match and Frank Nugent looked the cheeriest of the cheery five. While he did not flatter himself that he was as useful as Smith in a soccer match, now that Smithy was unavoidably out of the team, he was elated by the chance to play for his school, and in great spirits. Billy Bunter, on the other hand, was looking far from cheery. All the helpings he had been able to obtain at dinner, though a great comfort, had not quite consoled him for the prospect of writing out a Latin lesson on a half-holiday.

“We shall get through all right without Smithy,” said Johnny Bull, ruthlessly regardless of Bunter. “You'll have to pull up your socks, Franky.”

“I say, you fellows—”

“Roll away, Bunter.”

“For goodness sake, stop chewing the rag about soccer for a minute!” yapped Bunter, irritably. “I say, you heard what Quelch said to me in the form-room this morning—”

“And we heard what you said to him!” chuckled Bob Cherry.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Well, I expect I had it right,” yapped Bunter. “Quelch isn't the whale on Latin he makes out. Vera—”

“You howling ass!” said Johnny Bull. “Vera is an adjective, meaning true—verus, vera, verum—”

“You can't teach me Latin, Bull.”

“I wouldn't like to try!” grunted Johnny. “Quelch doesn't seem to have much luck!”

"The fact is that Quelch is down on me," said Bunter, with a morose and sorrowful blink. "He didn't like me thinking he'd gone crackers on Monday—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"Now he makes out that I've skewed in con, and gives me a lesson to write out on a half-holiday! It's pretty thick, I think. I'd jolly well like to make him sit up: and I jolly well know how," said Bunter, darkly.

"You fat ass!" said Harry Wharton. "Smithy's got detentions for the rest of the term, for playing fool tricks on Quelch! Do you want to keep him company in the form-room every half-holiday?"

"It's as safe as houses," said Bunter. "Quelch wouldn't know a thing. Easy enough to nip into his study while he's jawing with the other beaks in Common-Room. Now, you know that rot he types on his machine on half-holidays—"

"You'd better let Quelch hear you call it rot!" chuckled Bob. "That jolly old History of Greyfriars is the jolly old apple of his jolly old eye!"

"That's just it!" said Bunter, eagerly. "There's a stack of it in his table drawer—lots of fellows have seen it. What would Quelch feel like if he couldn't find it?"

"Like a tiger, I fancy," said Bob. "You mad porpoise, if you're thinking of meddling with Quelch's precious manuscripts—"

"I tell you it's as safe as houses!" said Bunter. "Quelch will be jawing in Common-Room. A fellow nips into his study, and hides that stack of typescript in his bookcase or somewhere—see? Won't he be shirty? He, he, he!"

Billy Bunter emitted an unmusical chuckle, evidently entertained by the idea of Quelch missing his precious typescript. The Famous Five did not chuckle. They regarded the fatuous fat Owl almost with horror. There was no doubt that if Quelch missed that typescript, he would be "shirty"—only "shirty" was much too mild a word for it! The feelings of a lioness robbed of her cubs would, in fact, be quite gentle, in comparison with Quelch's, robbed of his *History of Greyfriars*, the work of so many leisure hours during so many years.

"You unutterable idiot!" gasped Harry Wharton. "Quelch would raise Cain all over the school if anybody laid a finger on it."

"He, he, he!"

The idea of Quelch raising Cain seemed to amuse Bunter.

"You potty porpoise," said Bob. "You'd better steer clear of Quelch's study and his typescripts. Henry would be as mad as a hatter."

"I tell you it's as safe as houses! I—I ain't exactly going to do it myself," explained Bunter. "Quelch might think it was me, as he's down on me—but one of you fellows—"

"Fathead!"

"What about you, Bob? Quelch jawed you in form this morning for

shuffling your feet. You'd like to make him sit up, old chap. I say, will you nip into Quelch's study—"

"Not in these trousers."

"What about you, Bull? You're a Yorkshire chap, so you've got plenty of pluck! Will you—?"

"Kick him!" said Johnny Bull.

"Beast! What about you, Inky? You've got more pluck than all these chaps put together! Will you—"

"The answer is in the absurd negative, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter," grinned the nabob of Bhanipur.

"Well, if you're all too jolly funky, I'll jolly well ask Smithy," said Bunter. "Smithy ain't funky of Quelch like you fellows. I say, know where Smithy is?"

"You howling ass—!"

"Yah!"

Billy Bunter revolved on his axis, and rolled away—in search of Smithy. That bright idea for making Quelch "sit up" was, in Bunter's opinion, one of his brightest: but he was not disposed to carry it out personally. What the fat Owl wanted was a catspaw: and having drawn the Famous Five blank, as it were, he hoped for better results from the disgruntled Bounder. Smithy was the man for any reckless enterprise: and there could be no doubt about his keenness to make Quelch "sit up". On the other hand, the penalty he was paying for his last attempt in that line might have warned him off. Bunter could only hope for the best as he proceeded to look for the Bounder.

Smithy was not easy to find. Several fellows had seen him in the quad since dinner, but did not know where he was now. Bunter rolled, at last, into the quiet secluded walk by the school wall, under the elms, and there at length he sighted the fellow of whom he was in quest. Vernon-Smith was not alone. Tom Redwing was with him: and Billy Bunter blinked at the two curiously. Even the short-sighted Owl of the Remove could see the trouble and dismay that were very plainly written in Redwing's face, as he listened to the Bounder, and he wondered what Smithy was saying, to bring that look to his chum's face. Redwing's voice came suddenly and sharply to his fat ears, interrupting the lower voice of the Bounder.

"The top attic?"

"Don't shout, you fool!"

"You're mad, Smithy! After what you've done already, and after what you've got for it—oh, you're mad."

"I didn't bring you here to listen to a sermon." The Bounder's angry voice was raised a little. "It's all cut and dried, and what I want to know is, whether you will help. You know I can't ask any other fellow."

"I should think not! And you're mad to ask me." The handsome, sunburnt face of the sailorman's son was flushed with anger. "Mad to think of such a thing! I certainly won't have a hand in it."

"Safer if you help! I don't want to be seen near Quelch's study, or near the the attic, either. He would never dream of suspecting you—"

"No—because I'm not fool enough, or disrespectful rotter enough, to play such a mad trick on a master!"

"And you call yourself a pal!" sneered the Bounder. "Well, let me down if you like—I can go it alone."

"Smithy, for goodness sake—"

"I've swallowed humble pie, and asked him to let me off. You know that! It didn't buy me anything. I'm going to play soccer this afternoon."

"It's mad—"

"It's fixed and settled, whether you take a hand or not. Keep it under your hat, if you won't help—I—"

"Quiet—there's Bunter—he will hear!" breathed Redwing, hurriedly, as he caught sight of Bunter under the elms.

Vernon-Smith stared round, with a black brow and glinting eyes.

Billy Bunter had been looking for Smithy, and had run him down, at last, in that secluded spot. But the look on Smithy's face decided Bunter at once that he didn't want Smithy's company. Instead of rolling on to join him, he revolved rapidly, and rolled away—but he did not roll quite rapidly enough. The Bounder, with a savage face, rushed after him, and his foot shot out, and landed with a crash on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School.

"Yaroooh!" roared Bunter.

And he flew.

Whatever it was Smithy was discussing, in that quiet corner, with his chum, Billy Bunter heard nothing more of it. Having quite abandoned his idea of enlisting Smithy in his campaign against Quelch, the fat Owl departed from the spot on his highest gear.

CHAPTER XIII

OUTRAGEOUS!

MR. QUELCH started.
He frowned.

His gimlet eyes glinted.

A moment ago, Mr. Quelch had been looking unusually genial and indeed pleasant. He was looking forward to a happy afternoon. A half-holiday for the Remove was a half-holiday for the Remove master also: and Quelch had very pleasant plans for that afternoon.

He was not, certainly, thinking of Soccer, like many fellows in his form. He was not thinking of pushing out a bike, like many other fellows. But his

intended occupation, though less strenuous, was quite as agreeable: at least in the estimation of Henry Samuel Quelch. He was going to spend that happy afternoon on his celebrated *History of Greyfriars*. His typewriter stood ready on the table, and its cheery click would soon be sounding: adding another page or two, to the considerable stack of typescript already reposing in a drawer of that table. It was two o'clock. Quelch had only one task on hand, before he relaxed into a happy historian. He had to prepare a detention task for Herbert Vernon-Smith—which was not going to be a very easy one!—and see that recalcitrant junior duly sitting at his desk in the form-room and at work on it. Then he would be free for the afternoon: and as happy in his own way as the boys of his form in theirs. After a pleasant after-lunch chat with his colleagues in Common-Room, Quelch walked along to his study, walked into it, and closed the door after him. And then, as already related, he started, frowned, and his eyes glinted.

The cover had been removed from his typewriter on the table. Quelch, a careful man, always kept his machine covered, safe from dust. Now the dust cover had been taken off, and thrown carelessly on the floor.

Someone had been in that study while Quelch was chatting in Common-Room with the other beaks. It looked as if that someone had had the temerity to use the typewriter: otherwise, why was the cover off?

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch, apparently addressing the typewriter, at which he was staring. "Upon my word! What impertinent boy has been here?"

No fellow was entitled to enter that study unbidden. Certainly no fellow was entitled to touch that typewriter. Someone had done both: and Quelch now observed that the roller was not vacant, as it should have been: a sheet of paper had been put into the machine, and something was typed on it.

"Upon my word!" repeated Mr. Quelch. "Who has been here! If it is that obtuse, that stupid boy Bunter again—!" His lips closed in a tight line.

He recalled an incident of the previous term. He had found a sheet of paper in his machine, with a single word typed on it. That word was "BEEST". Bunter had had no idea that he had left a clue behind! Unluckily for the fat Owl, his original style in orthography had betrayed him: and to his surprise and dismay he had been what he called "copped": and the outcome had been quite painful! Recalling that incident, Quelch wondered whether the fattest and most fatuous member of his form had been at his antics again.

He stepped closer to the table, and fixed his eyes on a single line of writing typed on the paper on the roller.

He stared at that typed line. Evidently it had been typed to meet his eyes when he came to the study. But what it meant puzzled him. It ran:

If you want your rubbish, you can fetch it down from the top attic.

Quelch fairly blinked at it. He did not, for the moment, see what it could mean. If it was Bunter's work, his spelling seemed to have improved, since his former exploit on that typewriter. But what did it mean?

Had something been taken from the study and conveyed to that remote attic at the very top of the building, for the impertinent and iniquitous purpose of giving Quelch the trouble of ascending endless stairs to retrieve it? It seemed incredible to Quelch that any boy in his form could have the hardihood to think of playing such a trick.

And what was the "rubbish" alluded to? So far as Quelch knew, there was no "rubbish" in his study.

From a schoolboy's point of view, perhaps, many of the abstruse volumes in Quelch's book-case might come under that description. But a glance showed that no books were missing from their places.

Then Quelch, with a jump, noticed that one of the drawers in his writing-table was partly open. It was the drawer in which, as a rule, reposed a pile of typescript: all that had been written, so far, of his *History of Greyfriars*. He caught his breath.

Was it possible, was it imaginable, that his precious typescript had been meddled with: that it was his *History of Greyfriars*, that beloved work of many years, that some disrespectful young rascal described as "rubbish"?

With a hand that almost trembled, Quelch pulled the drawer further open. Then his worst dread was confirmed. The drawer was empty.

Not a single typed sheet remained in it. There had been at least fifty sheets, clipped with a paper-clip. Not one remained.

Henry Samuel Quelch gazed into that empty drawer. His typescript—his *History of Greyfriars*—the apple of his eye as Bob Cherry had truly remarked, was gone—it had been meddled with—it had been taken away: it might be damaged—lost—! Quelch's feelings, as he gazed into the empty drawer, could not have been expressed in words.

For a long, long minute he gazed. Then he strode across to the door of his study.

Quelch was a vigorous man, for his age: but he did not like stairs very much. And it was a long way—a very long way—up to the top attic, in the oldest portion of the ancient building of Greyfriars. But twice the number of stairs would not have deterred Quelch, in his anxiety for his precious typescript.

That typescript, impertinently described as "rubbish", had been taken from his study, and carried up to the top attic: by some utterly disrespectful young rascal: whose discovery and punishment had to wait till he had recovered it. Anything might have happened to it, in careless hands: not a moment was to be lost in retrieving it. Afterwards, Quelch would investigate, and discover who had done this—and the doer would find life scarcely worth living, even at Greyfriars! Quelch's stoutest cane, in a very heavy hand, would get more

exercise than it had ever had before—once he knew the perpetrator. But that had to wait till the precious typescript was safe.

Mr. Quelch strode away, at unusual speed, with grim brow and rustling gown. Generally his motions were leisurely and stately. But he was neither leisurely nor stately now! His long legs fairly whisked up the staircase.

CHAPTER XIV

BUNTER WANTS TO KNOW!

“SEEN Smithy?”

“No!”

Tom Redwing asked that question, looking into the Rag. Harry Wharton and Co. were there, and, while Bob Cherry answered Redwing's question, all the Co. looked rather curiously at Redwing. Tom was not much of an adept at hiding his feelings: and it was easy to see that he was troubled and uneasy.

“Not here,” said Harry Wharton. “Haven't seen him since dinner, Reddy.”

“He, he, he!” came a fat cachinnation from an armchair. Billy Bunter, blinking at Redwing through his big spectacles, emitted that cachinnation. Bunter seemed to be amused.

“Is Smithy playing the goat?” asked Bob. “He's got to turn up for detention at half-past. He can't be ass enough to cut.”

“The esteemed Quelch would be terrifically infuriated,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Better look for him, Reddy, and persuade him not to play the goat, if you can,” said Harry Wharton, drily.

Redwing nodded and walked away. The Co. looked at one another, while the fat Owl sat grinning in the armchair.

“The silly ass!” said Harry. “He knows jolly well that he can't play in the match, even if he does cut. He can't be ass enough to cut just to get Quelch's rag out.”

“Reddy's an ass to bother about the sulky tick at all,” grunted Johnny Bull.

“Oh, he's his pal, you know,” said Bob tolerantly.

Another grunt from Johnny!

“He, he, he!” came from Bunter: and the Co. glanced round at the fat Owl.

“For goodness sake stop that alarm-clock, Bunter,” said Bob.

“Eh! I haven't got an alarm-clock! Wharrer you mean?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, really, Cherry!” Bunter realized that Bob was comparing his unmusical chuckle to the note of an alarm-clock, and in fact there was some resemblance.

“Look here, you cheeky ass—”

"You'd better get on with that Latin paper, Bunter—and don't make Vera hungry this time," said Bob.

"I say, you fellows, what is Smithy up to?" asked Bunter. "He's jolly well up to something, as I jolly well know. I heard him talking to Redwing under the elms—"

"You hear too much, with those big ears of yours," said Johnny Bull, with a snort. "Can't you mind your own business?"

"Oh, really, Bull!" Minding his own business had never had any appeal for Billy Bunter. "I say, I jolly well know that Smithy's got something on, and Reddy said he wouldn't have a hand in it. Do you fellows know what Smithy's got on?"

"I do!" said Bob.

"Oh! What is it, then?" asked Bunter, eagerly.

"His socks!"

"You silly ass!" yelled Bunter.

"And his collar and tie—"

"Look here—"

"And other things, I expect," said Bob.

"Oh, don't be a goat!" yapped Bunter. "I say, you fellows, what on earth can Smithy be up to in the top attic?"

"The what?" ejaculated Bob.

"The which?" exclaimed Frank Nugent.

All the Famous Five stared at Bunter.

"The top attic," repeated Bunter. "That's what they were talking about, and Redwing looked flabbergasted, I can tell you—but I never heard any more—of course I wasn't listening to what they were saying when I came up—"

"You wouldn't!" said Johnny Bull, with deep sarcasm.

"Of course not!" agreed Bunter. "Not my style! But they were talking about the top attic—"

"Rot!" said Bob.

"I tell you I heard them—"

"Without listening?"

"Eh! Oh! Yes! But Redwing saw me, and that beast Smithy rushed at me and kicked me—"

"Good!" said Bob.

"Hard, I hope!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Beast! But I say, you fellows, it's jolly queer, ain't it?" said Bunter. "Smithy's up to something, and it's got something to do with the top attic, but I can't make it out! What do you fellows think?"

Billy Bunter blinked inquiringly at the chums of the Remove. Bunter was deeply interested. As it did not concern him in the very least, he was curious to know all about it. Inquisitiveness was Bunter's besetting sin. The fat Owl always wanted to know.

"I'll tell you what I think," said Bob Cherry. "I think you're a fat inquisitive ass!"

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"I think you're a nosey Parker!" growled Johnny Bull.

"Beast!"

"Come on, you men," said Bob. "If that ass Smithy is up to something, let's hope that Reddy will make him see sense, for once."

"I say, you fellows—"

"Bow-wow!"

The Famous Five went out of the Rag: not sharing Billy Bunter's curiosity in the very least. Certainly, they hoped that the Bounder was not meditating some new act of defiance, or that, if he was, his chum would succeed in persuading him to think better of it. But they were more interested in Soccer than in Smithy, and the Bounder was dismissed from their minds.

He was not dismissed from Bunter's, however. With a Latin lesson to write out that afternoon, the fat Owl really had other matters to think of. But Bunter's curiosity was too keen. And really it was rather mysterious. The few words he had caught under the elms had roused his curiosity without satisfying it. What on earth could Smithy be up to, in which the top attic, that remote spot out of sight and hearing of all Greyfriars, played a part?

Hardly a fellow ever went up that dim winding stair to the disused attic. Billy Bunter had done so to dodge Quelch on Monday: but it was not to be supposed that Smithy had any such idea in his head—if he was thinking of "cutting" he would go out of gates: assuredly he would not think of hiding in the attic as the fat Owl had done. It was now nearly two o'clock, and until half-past Smithy was free to do as he liked: and he could be miles away, if he chose, when the time for detention came.

As Redwing was seeking him, and evidently could not find him, it looked as if he might have gone out of gates. But if that was so, what did he mean about the top attic? Whatever it was that Smithy was scheming, had something to do with that—clearly, something was going on, or was scheduled to go on, in the top attic that afternoon.

It was, of course, quite easy to ascertain, by ascending the stairs, and looking into the attic! Whatever might be going on there, would be discovered at once by the extremely simple process of looking in at the door! But there was, so to speak, a lion in the path. Bunter hated stairs: the weight he had to carry up was a deterrent. An ordinary staircase was enough for Bunter, if not a little too much. The addition of a narrow winding stair at the top of the House was very discouraging.

Bunter sat in the armchair and pondered it over. But curiosity got the upper hand. Bunter wanted to know: and when Bunter wanted to know, he was capable of exertion. And at length he heaved his rotund form out of the armchair, and rolled out of the Rag.

In the passage he passed Tom Redwing, standing at a window and looking out moodily into the quad, and he gave the sailorman's son a curious blink. Redwing was, apparently, no longer looking for his chum. He did not heed the fat Owl rolling by: but even the short-sighted Owl could read the trouble in his face. His curiosity was keener than ever to know what was going on: and he rolled away quite briskly to the staircase.

As the fat Owl went up the stairs, Mr. Quelch, in his study, was making a startling discovery. Had Bunter been aware of it, the mystery of the top attic would have been a mystery no longer. Quite unaware, however, of what had happened in Quelch's study, Bunter negotiated the staircase, and rolled across the landing into the Remove passage.

At the further end of that passage was the stair to the box-room. By the time he reached the box-room landing, Bunter's breath, never in good supply, was giving out.

He stopped to rest his fat legs, and pant for breath, blinking morosely at the narrow winding stair that led upward. However, having recovered his breath a little, he started up that stair, at the pace of a snail.

It seemed endless to the fat Owl: but at last he rolled out on the little landing at the top.

Half that landing was taken up by a large cupboard, with old oaken doors from floor to ceiling. That cupboard was never used, and had probably never been used for centuries, and was inhabited only by spiders. One of the oak doors was half an inch ajar, though Billy Bunter did not note the circumstance. He would have been very much astonished, had he become aware that a pair of glinting eyes were watching him from the narrow opening. But no such idea occurred to the fat Owl as he rolled across to the attic doorway, which was wide open. It was not likely to occur to him that any fellow was hidden in that spidery old cupboard, waiting and watching.

He rolled into the attic.

There he came to a halt, blinking round him through his big spectacles, with eager curiosity.

The attic was dim. There was only one small window, which gave on old red roofs, with a view of chimney-stacks. The panes were thick with dust and cobwebs. Save for an old box in a corner, the room was quite empty. Bunter blinked to and fro in irritated surprise. He had toiled up all those stairs to discover what was going on there: but, so far as he could see, there was no sign of anything going on, or of anything having gone on. The old attic presented its usual aspect, precisely as when the fat Owl had visited it a couple of days ago. There was nothing, apparently, to be discovered.

"Oh, lor'!" breathed Bunter.

He blinked round and round, and blinked round and round again. Nothing met his eyes, or his spectacles, but dimness, and dust, and cobwebs. With deep feelings, he sat down on the old box in the corner, to rest his weary

fat limbs. It dawned on his fat brain that he had had that laborious ascent for nothing—there was nothing to be discovered! Bunter had clambered up to that remote attic to gratify his curiosity: and all that remained for him was to go down again with his curiosity ungratified: like the famous Duke of York, who marched up the hill and then marched down again!

“Beast!” hissed Bunter.

But Bunter’s return journey was not to be made so soon as he supposed. As he sat gasping for breath on the box, a sound of hurrying footsteps came to his fat ears. Somebody was coming up the attic stair: at a pace much more rapid than Bunter’s had been. Was it Smithy? If it was Smithy, the inquisitive fat Owl was on the spot to see what he was “up to” in that old attic. He blinked across at the open doorway.

Hurried footsteps crossed the little landing, and a figure appeared in the doorway. But it was not Smithy! Billy Bunter’s little round eyes almost popped through his big round spectacles, as Mr. Quelch, with thunderous face and billowing gown, strode into the attic.

CHAPTER XV

CAUGHT IN THE TRAP!

MR. QUELCH billowed into the attic, panting a little. His gimlet-eyes swept round sharply, in the dim light from the little cobwebby window. They did not light on the missing typescript. They lighted upon a fat form seated on a box in the corner, and on a fat face, and a pair of round eyes popping through big spectacles. And they fixed there: and Quelch’s brow, already thunderous, became positively terrifying.

“Bunter!” he exclaimed.

“Oh! Yes, sir!” gasped Bunter.

“So it was you!”

“W-a-was it, sir?” gasped Bunter. He had not the faintest idea to what his form-master was alluding.

“You!” repeated Mr. Quelch. “What have you done with it, Bunter?”

“Eh?”

“Where is it?” thundered Mr. Quelch. “If it is damaged, Bunter, you will regret it. In any case your punishment will be most severe—”

“Oh, crikey!”

“But if it is damaged, I shall make an example of you, Bunter! What have you done with it? Answer me at once. Is it here?”

The fat Owl could only blink at him in terrified bewilderment. Indeed he

almost feared, for the second time, that Quelch had gone "crackers". What he could possibly mean was beyond Bunter.

"Will you answer me, boy?" Quelch strode across to the corner where Bunter sat as if glued to the box, grasped him by a fat shoulder, and hooked him up. "Now, Bunter—"

"Ow! Leggo!" Bunter tottered. "I—I haven't—I didn't—I—I wasn't—it wasn't me—I never didn't wasn't—oh, lor—"

"Where is it, Bunter?" The thunder rolled again.

"Where is what, sir? stuttered Bunter.

"What? what? You know perfectly well, Bunter! I find you here—no doubt you intended to be gone before I came up—but I find you here—it was you, Bunter, who removed the typescript from my study, and left that impudent message on my machine—"

Bunter jumped.

"The—the—the tut-tut-top-tap-typescript!" he stuttered. "Oh, crikey!"

"What have you done with it, Bunter?"

"N-n-nothing, sir—"

"I do not see it here! Where is it?"

"I—I—I—" Bunter babbled helplessly. Evidently, something had happened to Quelch's precious typescript! Bunter, it seemed, was not the only fellow who had had the bright idea of giving Quelch a hunt for it! Bunter, certainly, knew nothing about it: nothing would have induced him to act personally on that bright idea of his. "I—I—I—"

"Answer me, boy!"

"I—I haven't touched it, sir!" wailed Bunter. "I—I—I never meant to, sir—if any of the fellows have said so, sir, tain't true—"

"What? No one has said anything on the subject, Bunter! What do you mean?"

"Oh! I—I—I mean, I—I was only joking, sir—I—I never meant to hide it to make you shirty, sir—" babbled Bunter. "Never even thought of it, sir! I—n-n-never dreamed of it, sir, and I never said anything about it to the other fellows, sir—besides, I only said it for a joke—I—I—I don't know anything about it sir—"

That statement was not likely to convince Mr. Quelch.

He had come up to the top attic in quest of the missing typescript. He had found Bunter there, where neither Bunter nor any other fellow had any business. And the fat Owl's incoherent babble revealed that he had, at least, entertained the idea of playing tricks on that typescript.

"I—I—I hope you believe me, sir!" gasped Bunter. "I never—"

"I do not believe a single word you have uttered, Bunter."

"Oh, really, sir—"

Quelch's eyes fairly glittered at the fat Owl. Had he had his cane with him, there was no doubt that the fat Owl would have felt its weight at that moment.

Luckily for Bunter, Quelch had not brought up his cane. But his look was almost as alarming as his cane.

"Bunter!"

"Oh, lor! I—I mean, yes, sir," moaned Bunter.

"A pile of typescript has been removed from the table-drawer in my study. It was removed by you—"

"Oh! No, sir—"

"An impudent message was typed on my machine that it had been taken up to this attic. I find you here—and the matter is clear. I command you to tell me at once what you have done with the typescript."

"I—I—I haven't—"

"Immediately!" thundered Mr. Quelch.

"I—I didn't—I—I wasn't—I never didn't—!" stuttered Bunter.

Mr. Quelch breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He regretted that he had not brought up his cane: as certainly he would have done, had he anticipated finding the delinquent in the top attic. Quelch had never been known to smack a boy's head—such an act was miles below his dignity: but at the moment, he required all his self-control to keep from smacking Bunter's.

But he turned from Bunter, for the moment, and looked round the attic again. Bunter either would or could tell him nothing: but if the typescript was there, it only needed looking for.

Quelch's gimlet-eyes scanned the room again. The missing article was not to be seen. If it was there at all, there was only one place in which it could remain out of sight—in the box on which Billy Bunter had been sitting.

The Remove master turned to the box, grasped the lid, and raised it: Billy Bunter blinking at him in silence. The lid creaked up on rusty old hinges.

"Oh!" exclaimed Mr. Quelch.

That old box was not quite empty! At the bottom lay a pile of type-written sheets, neatly fastened at the corner with a clip!

Angry as he was, indeed exasperated to the utmost degree, Quelch's thunderous brow cleared a little, as he beheld it. There it lay—undamaged: simply laid at the bottom of the old box! Bunter, all unknowingly, had been sitting on it.

Quelch lifted it out, with tender hands.

He was about to examine it, to make assurance doubly sure that it was not damaged, when suddenly he started, and stared across towards the door of the attic. Billy Bunter, equally surprised, blinked in the same direction. For a moment, Quelch could hardly believe his eyes, or Bunter his spectacles. For the attic door, which Quelch had left open, was suddenly drawn shut from outside: and as Quelch and Bunter stared at it, it banged, and the bang was immediately followed by the click of a key in the lock outside!

Click!

"What—!" ejaculated Mr. Quelch.

"Oh, scissors!" breathed Bunter.

The fat Owl stood blinking. Quelch, for a moment, stood quite still, staring. Neither of them had seen the person who had pulled the door shut: whoever he was, he had taken care not to show himself. The door-handle on the other side had been grasped, the door dragged shut—and the key turned in the lock on the outside: not even a footstep had been heard, and nothing had been seen. It was amazing—astounding!

But it was only for a moment or two that Quelch stared. Then he strode across to the door, grasped the handle, and tugged. He could scarcely believe that he had been locked in—it was too incredible! But the door did not open at his tug.

"Upon my word!" breathed Mr. Quelch.

He tugged again! The door remained unresponsive. A faint scuttling sound was heard without, dying rapidly away: Quelch knew that it was the sound of footsteps hurriedly retreating down the attic stair. With an extraordinary expression on his face, Mr. Quelch rapped on the door with his knuckles.

"Open this door at once!" he thundered.

But answer there came none! There was no sound, save the echo of Quelch's angry tap. The door was locked: the unknown person who had locked it was gone: and Henry Samuel Quelch and William George Bunter were prisoners in the top attic!

CHAPTER XVI

O.K. FOR SMITHY!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" ejaculated Bob Cherry.

"Smithy, you ass!" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Hunting for more trouble?" asked Johnny Bull, sarcastically.

"The troublefulness will probably be terrific, my esteemed Smithy," said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Several other fellows stared, or made remarks, as Herbert Vernon-Smith, with his hands in his pockets, strolled into the changing-room. Harry Wharton and Co. and the rest of the Remove footballers, were there. The Bounder had been due for detention a quarter of an hour ago: yet here he was: obviously not sitting in the form-room at a detention task, as he should have been.

"You'll have old Quelch after you, Smithy," said Frank Nugent. "For goodness sake don't be such an ass. Quelch will be waiting for you."

"Some fellows ask for trouble, and no mistake!" remarked Squiff.

"Cut off, Smithy, and don't play the giddy ox!" said Peter Todd.

"Hook it, fathead!" said Ogilvy.

The Bounder laughed.

"Anybody know where Quelch is?" he asked

"Waiting for you at the form-room door, of course," said Harry Wharton, "and getting madder and madder every minute he waits, too."

"Wrong!" said the Bounder, coolly. "Think he's gone out? He's not at the form-room, and not in his study."

"Oh! exclaimed Harry.

The impression in the changing-room, when Vernon-Smith walked in, was that he was cutting detention, regardless of Quelch, with rather more than his usual recklessness. In which case, Quelch would be either waiting for him, or looking for him: with dire results to follow. But his words caused a general stare of surprise.

"Quelch can't have gone out and forgotten you," said Bob.

"Looks as if he has."

"Have you been to the form-room?" asked Nugent.

The Bounder raised his eyebrows.

"I'm for detention, ain't I?" he asked. "Of course I went to the form-room at exactly half-past two, as ordered by my respected and beloved form-master. Think I wanted Quelchy to chase me round the quad?"

"Quelch wasn't there?" asked Harry.

"Not the ghost of him."

"Well, that's dashed queer," said Johnny Bull, with a suspicious stare at the Bounder. "Quelch isn't the man to forget things like that."

"The queerfulness is terrific!"

"Deep in that jolly old History of Greyfriars, perhaps!" chuckled Bob Cherry. "You'd better have gone to his study, Smithy, instead of coming here. If he's forgotten, you can bank on it that he will remember later."

"I did go to his study."

"And he wasn't there?" asked Bob.

"No."

"Might have been in Common-Room," said Squiff. "When the beaks get jawing they forget time and space."

"I did look into Common-Room. Prout was there, and I asked him, and he said he had not seen Quelch since he left Common-Room, at about two."

"Well, my hat!"

"So I hiked back to the form-room, and waited," drawled Smithy. "We have to wait a quarter of an hour, you know. But Quelch never came."

"Blessed if I understand it!" said Harry Wharton. "If Quelch doesn't turn up—!" He paused.

"He hasn't, at any rate!" said Vernon-Smith, "and you know the rule, Wharton, as well as I do. A quarter of an hour is the limit, and if the beak doesn't turn up, it's washed out."

Bob gave a whistle.

What the Bounder said was true enough. Not often, but sometimes, it happened that a beak was late: and in such cases, fellows were not expected to wait for ever. From time immemorial it had been an unwritten law that, if a master did not materialize, no fellow, or even a whole class, was bound to wait longer than fifteen minutes. Indeed it was on record that the Fourth Form had once escaped a whole lesson, by the simple expedient of Cecil Reginald Temple jamming a wedge under Mr. Capper's study door: it having taken the luckless Capper more than a quarter of an hour to deal with it. If the Bounder as he stated, had waited fifteen minutes for Quelch, and Quelch had not come, he was free to go, and do as he liked.

"Oh!" said Harry Wharton, slowly. He could guess what was in Smithy's mind now. If matters were as he stated, he was free from detention, and there was no reason why, being free, he should not play in the Soccer match.

But the captain of the Remove had doubts. It was singular, indeed almost unimaginable, that Quelch could have forgotten—especially in the Bounder's case. And he knew Smithy: knew only too well that he would stick at little, or nothing, to carry on in his own wilful way.

Yet the Bounder seemed to have done all, and more than all, that was required. According to him, he had not only waited the full time, but had looked for Quelch in his study and in Common-Room, which he was not bound to do. But was he telling the truth? Smithy was not very particular on such points if he had a purpose to serve.

Frank Nugent's face was a little clouded. He, as well as his chum, knew why the Bounder was there. If all went well for Smithy, Frank's chance of playing for the school was gone. True he was willing, and more than willing, to stand out for a better man, and he freely admitted that Smithy was a better man at the game. But it was a jolt all the same.

The Bounder looked at the captain of the Remove, with a faintly mocking expression on his face.

"Well, what about it, Wharton?" he asked. "As Quelch hasn't turned up, my detention's washed out, isn't it?"

"I—I suppose so. But—" Wharton hesitated.

The Bounder's eyes glinted.

"You've given Nugent my place, because I was under detention. Is he keeping it now that I'm free to play?"

Nugent coloured.

"I'm ready to stand out, Harry," he said, quietly. "If Smithy can play, he's the man that's wanted."

"Well, that's so," said Bob, uncomfortably. "But—"

"Soccer's soccer!" said Squiff, oracularly. "If Smith's available, we want Smithy in the team."

"That's so, Wharton," said several voices.

"Yes, that's so," said Harry Wharton, slowly. "But we've got to be jolly sure of this. If it's as Smithy says—"

"If!" repeated the Bounder, with a black look.

"Yes, if!" said the captain of the Remove, coolly. "You're ready to play any fool trick, Vernon-Smith, and you wouldn't care two straws if you landed us all in a row with Quelch, and had the Carcroft game stopped in the middle, to get you own way. If you're free to play, Nugent will stand out and you'll play—but I'm not taking the chance on nothing but your word."

Vernon-Smith gritted his teeth.

"Like to go and look for Quelch yourself?" he sneered.

"Exactly!" answered Harry. "It won't take me a few minutes to see whether he's about. If he's not at the form-room, or in his study, or in Common-Room, as you say, all right! If he's gone out and forgotten you, your detention is washed out, and I'm glad of it. But I'm going to be sure."

"Go ahead!" said Vernon, shrugging his shoulders.

Harry Wharton left the changing-room at once. Many doubtful looks were cast at the Bounder by the other fellows. Every man in the team, including even Nugent, would have been glad to see him in the ranks to face Carcroft. But no one had any use for a reckless act of defiance and mutiny which could only end in disaster for all concerned. They waited anxiously for the captain of the Remove to return with confirmation, or otherwise, of what the Bounder had stated.

Smithy seemed to have no doubts. He peeled off his jacket, and proceeded to change for football. That certainly looked as if he had told the truth, and expected Wharton to confirm it. He was in footer rig by the time the captain of the Remove came back.

All eyes were on Harry Wharton when he entered.

"What's the jolly old verdict?" asked Bob Cherry.

Wharton was looking perplexed, but relieved.

"O.K.," he answered. "I've looked in the form-room, in Quelch's study, and in Common-Room. Quelch must have gone out."

"Good luck!" said Bob. "Couldn't have gone for a walk at a better time what?"

"I can't make it out," said Harry. "It's not like Quelch—but there it is! It's all right for Smithy." He glanced at Nugent. "Sorry, old chap, but—but—" Nugent laughed.

"All right," he said, "Smithy's the man to take the goals. I'll stand around and watch him doing it."

And that was that! When the Greyfriars footballers went into the field, Herbert Vernon-Smith was one of them: and the crowd that gathered to watch the game were all glad enough to see him there: with one exception. Tom Redwing looked on with a dark and troubled face, which did not lighten even when the Bounder kicked the first goal for his side.

CHAPTER XVII

IN DIREST PERIL

HENRY SAMUEL QUELCH set his lips hard. Billy Bunter—sitting on the box again—eyed him with uneasy eyes. Never had he seen his form-master in such a "bait".

From the bottom of his fat heart, the Owl of the Remove repented him of the inquisitiveness that had led him up to that remote attic. Certainly he had never dreamed of anything like this. He was a prisoner in the attic. That was bad enough, but it would not have been so bad without Quelch. The hapless fat Owl, as he blinked at Quelch, felt rather like a fellow shut up in a cage with a lion.

Bunter sat on the box—he never stood, if there was anything he could sit upon. Quelch did not seem to want to sit down. He roamed about the attic like an imprisoned wild animal. Even yet Quelch found it hard to believe that any person at Greyfriars could have had the temerity to lock him in that attic. He had banged on the door. He had shouted. But he knew all the time that neither bangs nor shouts could be heard from that remote spot. Indeed, he knew that that was the reason why the top attic had been chosen for entrapping him: the whole thing would have been futile had it been possible for him to make himself heard below. Whoever had locked him in, had done so with the intention of keeping him there: for how long, and for what reason, Quelch did not know, and could not guess.

He had ceased to bang and to shout. Both proceedings were somewhat undignified: and as they were also useless, he gave them up. Now he paced about the little attic, thunder in his brow and lightning in his eyes: more intensely angry than he had ever been in his life before. He, Henry Samuel Quelch, master of the Remove, an honoured member of Dr. Locke's staff, was locked in an attic—to remain there till the young rascal who had locked him in chose to let him go! It was incredible—unbelievable—unthinkable—but it had happened, and there it was.

Who had done this?

Quelch was, undoubtedly, in a towering rage. But he was thinking too, as he roamed the attic like a caged lion. Who had done this? He had not had a glimpse of the person who had pulled the door shut and locked it. It might have been anybody. Who had it been?

Quelch was going to discover him, of course. He was going to take him to Dr. Locke, and demand his instant expulsion from Greyfriars School. But how was he going to discover him?

He stopped at last, and fixed his gimlet eyes on Bunter. A cold shiver ran down the fat Owl's podgy back.

"Bunter!"

"Oh, crikey!" moaned Bunter. "It—it wasn't me, sir! I—I never locked the door, sir—really, sir—"

"You utterly absurd boy, do not talk nonsense. Do you know who locked the door, Bunter?"

"Nums, sir! I—I haven't the foggiest, sir."

Quelch eyed him, with gimlet-eyes that almost penetrated the fat Owl. He had had no doubt that it was Bunter who had conveyed the missing typescript to the attic, since he had found him there. But since the locking of the door, he had realized that the taking away of the typescript, and the impudent message left on his typewriter, had been a deliberate device to draw him up to the attic, so that this final trick could be played on him. Someone had planned this from the beginning, laying the trap into which he had walked. Certainly it was not Bunter who had locked him in. Bunter was a prisoner in the attic along with him. How far Bunter was concerned in the matter, Quelch did not know: but plainly he was not the prime mover in this iniquitous scheme.

"Bunter!"

"Oh! Yes, sir!" moaned Bunter. "I—I never—"

"Was it you, or was it not you, who abstracted the typescript from my study, and brought it here?"

"Oh, no, sir! I wish I'd never thought of touching it!" groaned Bunter. "Besides, I—I didn't think of it, sir—the idea never entered my head—"

"I found you here, Bunter—"

"Oh! Yes, sir! I—I wish you hadn't! I—"

"I can only suppose, Bunter, that you have acted in collusion with the boy who has turned the key on me here."

"I—I—I never—oh, lor'!"

"That boy, whoever he may be, must have followed me up—or—" Quelch guessed it suddenly, "or probably, he was already concealed in the cupboard on the landing, outside, waiting for me to come up. Yes, that is more probable. You were aware of this, Bunter."

"Oh! No!" gasped Bunter. "I—I never knew there was anybody about, sir—I—I never knew there was anything in this box—I—I—oh, crikey! I—I never had anything to do with it, sir."

"I cannot believe you, Bunter: I found you here, though doubtless you had intended to go before I came up: and certainly you must have had some reason for coming up so many stairs to this remote attic. If you were not acting in collusion with the—the person who has locked me in, Bunter, why are you here at all?"

"I—I—I just wanted to know what was going on, sir," groaned Bunter. "I—I wish I hadn't, now. That's all, sir—I—I only wanted to know what was going on—"

"What was going on?" repeated Mr. Quelch. "Do you mean, Bunter,

that you knew that something was going on in this attic, and that you were not concerned in it, but only wished to find out what it was?"

"Yes, sir!" gasped Bunter. "That's all, sir. I couldn't make out what it was, and—and I just came up to see, sir, and—and then you came in—"

"And how did you know that something was going on, Bunter, as you express it, if you had no hand in it?"

"I—I heard a fellow talking, sir—he said something about the top attic, and I jolly well knew there was something on, and—and—"

"Nonsense!"

"Oh, really, sir, I did hear him, sir," gasped Bunter. "I—I couldn't make head or tail of it, sir, but I knew Smithy must be up to something, and I—I just came up to see what was going on—"

"Smithy!" Quelch jumped. "Do you mean Vernon-Smith, Bunter?"

"Yes, sir! Reddy said he was mad to think of such a thing, so I jolly well knew something must be on, but—but when I came up here, there was nothing going on at all, and I—I was just going down again, sir, when you—"

"Upon my word!"

The fat Owl's voice trailed off. Quelch was no longer listening to him.

What he had said already, was enough for Quelch. The mere mention of the name of Vernon-Smith was enough.

Vernon-Smith: the young rascal who had catapulted his window, and caused him to act hastily and unjustly: the mutinous junior who was booked for detention that afternoon: it was Vernon-Smith. Quelch, in his stress of mind at finding himself a prisoner in the top attic, had forgotten the Bounder and his detention—but he remembered now. The fat and fatuous Owl, whose fat brain worked slowly when it worked at all, had not connected the typescript in the box with what he had heard Smithy and Redwing discussing: but Quelch leaped to it at once. Vernon-Smith had done all this, from start to finish: and he had done it to evade detention, added doubtless to revengeful motives. But for Bunter, there would not have been a clue to him—Quelch might, perhaps, have suspected, but he could not have acted on vague suspicion. Now he knew.

The thunder in his face made Billy Bunter quake.

"I—I say, sir—!" babbled Bunter. "I—I really never—"

"That will do, Bunter."

"But I never—"

"Be silent, Bunter! I am satisfied that you were not concerned in this outrageous occurrence: you need say no more."

"Oh!" gasped Bunter, in great relief.

Quelch gave him no further heed.

He paced the attic, with deep feelings, growing deeper and deeper. There was no doubt in his mind—Vernon-Smith had done this. Back into his mind came the recollection of the Bounder in class that morning. The young rascal

had been on his very best behaviour: which had surprised Quelch, but had surprised him no longer when Vernon-Smith revealed his motive by asking to be let off for the football match. That was it! It was not only to harass his form-master—it was not only to escape detention—it was to play football, that Vernon-Smith had done this! Quelch was assured of it—assured that in these very moments, while he paced the attic like a caged animal, that young rascal, laughing in his sleeve, was playing football! Quelch trembled with anger at the idea.

The Soccer was going on—Vernon-Smith playing in the ranks of the Remove! He had to be permitted to get away with this amazing, this insolent, this unheard-of trickery! Quelch had to remain a prisoner in the attic, while the reckless young rascal carried on, in defiance of all authority! There was no remedy.

But was there not?

Quelch stepped to the little cobwebby window. The sash groaned and creaked as he dragged it up. He looked out—on a vista of sloping red roofs. Only in a mood of such bitter anger could Quelch ever have thought of such a



A strong firm grasp

feat as clambering out of one high window and clambering into another—he was long past the age of clambering. But he was thinking of it now.

He stared out. Below the little window was a roof-ridge, at right-angles to the window. On either side it sloped down to a gutter. At the end of the ridge was the window of another attic.

Quelch breathed hard as he looked.

There were fellows in his form who had the activity, and perhaps the nerve, to work their way along that high ridge from one window to the other. But it would have been at the risk of a fall: and a fall from that terrible height meant only one thing. Mr. Quelch stood looking out, for long minutes. He could do it—it required only nerve, and the Remove master's nerves were of tempered steel. If he hesitated, it was because such a resource was undignified, not because it was perilous. But there were no eyes on him—that high roof-ridge was invisible from below. Quelch made up his mind.

Billy Bunter gave a jump, as he blinked at his form-master, squeezing out of the little window.

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Bunter. “I—I say, sir—”

Quelch disappeared from the window.

“Oh, lor’!” gasped Bunter.

He rolled across to the little window, and blinked out through his big spectacles. Quelch was already three or four yards along the ridge of red tiles, working his way along slowly but surely.

Bunter's eyes almost bulged through his spectacles with terror as he watched him. A mere blink at the yawning gulf on either side of those sloping roofs made Bunter giddy. And Quelch—!

The fat Owl hardly breathed as he watched.

Slowly, slowly, Quelch worked his way along, till he was half-way to the window of the opposite attic. Then he stopped, no doubt to regain his breath. The exertion was telling on him, more than he had expected. But after a few minutes' rest he started again. And then—!

Bunter, almost unconsciously, uttered a shriek. Under his starting eyes, the long lean form on the ridge-tile slipped. For a dreadful second, it seemed that Quelch would roll down the sloping roof, to shoot off into space. But he had grasped at the ridge, and was holding on.

Bunter, dumb with horror, watched him strive to drag himself up to the ridge again. But the effort was too much for his strength. He could not regain the ridge. With his hands grasping, his long lean form extended at full length down the slope of the roof, Quelch hung on. His face was set, and as white as chalk: his lips tight. Once his eyes turned on the fat terrified face staring from the attic window. But there was no hope in his look. Bunter could not help him.

He hung on.

It was death to lose his grasp. But there was no help—no hope of help!

No one but Bunter could see him: and Bunter could not help him. In his anger, in his determination not to be flouted by a rebellious schoolboy, he had taken too great a risk.

"Oh, crikey!" gasped Bunter.

He turned from the window, and rushed across to the attic door. On that door he thumped and banged with both fat fists, yelling at the top of his voice.

"Help! Help!"

But there were no ears to hear.

CHAPTER XVIII

FRIENDS OR FOES?

"GOAL!"
"Bravo, Smithy!"
"Good old Bounder!"
"Goal! Goal!"

There was a roar round the junior football ground. Fellows shouted, and yelled, and waved their caps. Even Tom Redwing, for the moment, forgot the weight of trouble on his mind, and cheered that goal of the Bounder's—the winning goal in a hard-fought game. Frank Nugent, a looker-on at the match in which he had expected to play, shouted as loudly as any. It was in fact a magnificent goal, just what was wanted and just when it was wanted. There was no doubt that Smithy was the right man in the right place, in the Carcroft match.

It had been hard and fast from the start. Carcroft had come over in great form: Compton, and Drake and Lee, and Vane-Carter, and the rest, had put up a first-class game. The first goal had come to Greyfriars, from the Bounder's foot: but it had been followed up for Carcroft by Vane-Carter: and at the interval it was one all. In the second half Harry Wharton had led off with a score, but Compton of Carcroft put the ball in to equalize again: and after that it was ding-dong right up to the finish: and many fellows in the crowd looked up at the clock-tower, and noted the brief minutes that remained, and opined that it would be a draw. And it very nearly was. In the very last minute Greyfriars were penned in their half, Carcroft attacking hotly: and somehow, fellows could hardly see how, the Bounder had emerged from the press with the ball at his feet, for a run up the field: two Carcroft halves had rushed him down and almost got him, but as if by magic he eluded them: he evaded one back and shouldered the other, and kicked for goal—a hurried kick that, with the Bounder's usual luck, shot straight for the spot, missed the goalie's

outstretched finger-tips by an inch and landed in the net. And the whole crowd roared with glee.

"Goal! Goal!"

"Good old Smithy!"

"Good old Bounder!"

"Good man, good man!" roared Bob Cherry, with a clap on the Bounder's shoulder that made him stagger. "That's the stuff to give 'em! Good man!"

"The goodness is terrific, my esteemed and idiotic Smithy!" gasped Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Topping, old man!" said Harry Wharton. "Smithy's the man to deliver the goods, and no mistake."

The Bounder, panting for breath, grinned as he panted. This was the moment of his triumph, and he enjoyed it to the full—all the more, perhaps, because of the reckless risks he had taken to win back his place in the eleven. Life seemed very good to Smithy just then.

It was the finish: the Bounder's goal was almost on the stroke of time. Greyfriars had won a hard-fought match by three goals to two: and the footballers trooped off the field, Smithy the cynosure of all eyes.

There was only one clouded face in the crowd in the changing-room: and Smithy made a grimace as he looked round at a touch on his shoulder, and met the troubled eyes of Tom Redwing.

"Good game, what?" he grinned.

"Fine!" said Tom. "That was a splendid goal, Smithy! But—"

"Never mind your buts now!"

"Did you—?" whispered Tom.

The Bounder laughed.

"You know I did," he answered. "I couldn't have played otherwise. You refused to help me: but I managed all right on my own."

"It was mad," muttered Tom.

"We beat Carcroft!" answered the Bounder, with a shrug of the shoulders.

"But Quelch—?"

"Don't jaw here, you fathead!" breathed the Bounder. "Do you want others to hear? Don't you know there will be a fearful row about it?"

"Only too well," answered Tom. "Get out of this as soon as you can, Smithy—I must speak to you."

"What's the hurry?" said the Bounder, coolly.

Redwing compressed his lips. He had known, or as good as known, that Vernon-Smith had carried out his wild and reckless plan: that the Remove master had been tricked up to the top attic and locked in there: otherwise, as Smithy had said, he could not have played. Now that the match was over, the Bounder did not seem to care how long it went on—but Redwing did.

"Look here, Smithy—!" he said.

"Oh, give us a rest!"

"If you don't want me to speak about it here, you'd better join me outside pretty soon, that's all."

Redwing left the changing-room without speaking again, but his face was expressive. And Vernon-Smith lost no time in changing, and getting away from the crowd, to join him. He found Redwing waiting.

"Now—!" began Redwing.

"Don't jaw here—come up to the study," snapped the Bounder.

Redwing followed him in silence up to the Remove passage. The Bounder did not speak again, till they were in No. 4 Study, with the door shut. Then he gave his chum a rather unpleasant look.

"You'd better steer clear of this, Tom Redwing," he said. "Quelch will be as mad as a hatter when he gets out—"

"No doubt about that," said Tom, dryly, "and he will be after the fellow who locked him in, like a tiger. And he will suspect you."

"Let him!" There isn't a clue!" said Smithy. "I've done all that any beak could expect a fellow—didn't I wait the full fifteen minutes at the form-room door—half-a-dozen fellows saw me there!" He grinned. "Quelch hasn't any kick comin'. He can suspect me if he likes—I'm goin' to be as astonished as anybody, when it comes out that he's been coolin' his heels in an attic all this while."

Redwing knitted his brows.

"I hope you'll get clear, Smithy—it means the sack if you're nailed: but I suppose you know that."

"Quite!"

"But Quelch—he's got to be let out—you've got the key, I suppose?"

"Here it is."

"Well, then—for goodness sake, Smithy, think of him, shut up alone in that attic all the afternoon—"

The Bounder chuckled.

"He's not alone."

"Not alone?" repeated Redwing, staring.

"No: he's got company," grinned Smithy. "That fat fool Bunter—"

"Bunter?"

"He had to butt in, and I shouldn't wonder if he's sorry for it by this time. Quelch has had his company, and he's had Quelch's—I hope he enjoyed it, the meddlin' fat idiot!"

"But I don't understand—how did Bunter—?"

"He came up, the fat Owl, goodness knows why. You see, I snooped that precious typescript from Quelch's study, while he was chinning in Common-Room, and left a message on his typer which I knew would bring him up after it. I was hidden in that old cupboard on the attic landing, and when I heard somebody comin' up, of course I thought it was Quelch—but it was Bunter—"

why the fat chump was nosin' in, I don't know and don't care—but there he was. He went into the attic, and a couple of minutes later, Quelch came, never dreamin' that a fellow in that old cupboard was waitin' and watchin' for him—” Smithy chuckled.

“But Bunter—”

“Quelch found him in the attic. I heard him hooting. I had the key ready, and—tiptoed out, pulled the door shut—”

“He didn't see you?”

“Think I'm fool enough? Of course he didn't see a thing! I pulled the door shut from outside, locked it, put the key in my pocket, and cleared. The dear man hasn't been on his lonely own—he's had Bunter to keep him merry and bright. What are you lookin' so solemn about?” added the Bounder, with an impatient snap. “Quelch can't put it on me. He mayn't even think of me at all. If he does, he hasn't a clue—”

“Bunter!” breathed Redwing. “Why was he there?”

“I've told you that I don't know and don't care.”

“Oh, you ass!” breathed Redwing. “Can't you see—why do you fancy Bunter clambered up all those stairs? He must have heard something when he nosed us out under the elms—he must have guessed that something was cooking—he must have gone up there prying—”

The Bounder started. He had given hardly a thought to the fat Owl who had been caught in the trap with Quelch—as he had said, he did not know and did not care, why Bunter had been there. But he looked as if he cared now! Redwing's words startled him.

“Oh!” he breathed. “You think—”

“Bunter knew, or guessed, something, and that was why he was there—and whatever Bunter knows, you can bet Quelch has screwed out of him by this time,” said Redwing.

“Oh!” repeated the Bounder.

There was something like consternation in his face for a moment. Then he burst into an angry laugh.

“I don't care! I can face the music, if there's a row. If they boot me out, I shall go with my chin up, at any rate. Now I've had enough of your croaking, I expect you've worked it out all wrong, anyway—”

“Give me the key!”

“Let Quelch stick where he is!” snarled the Bounder. “If you're right, he's going to walk me off to the Head to be sacked, as soon as he gets loose! Think I'm in a hurry for that?”

“It's bad enough already, Smithy—don't make it worse! Give me the key and I'll go up, and—”

“You won't!”

“Smithy, don't be a mad fool! You've got to let him out sooner or later—”

"I know that! I was going to slip up quietly and put the key in the outside of the lock. Then, when they hunt for Quelch, somebody would spot it sooner or later. But I'm in no hurry now—the longer he cools his heels in that attic the better, if he's wise to me as you think," snapped the Bounder, savagely.

"It won't do, Smithy."

"Won't it?" sneered Smithy. "Why, you fool, if you went up and unlocked the door, are you going to tell Quelch that you got the key from me?"

"I shall say nothing, as you know very well, Smithy. But Mr. Quelch has got to be let out of that attic, and at once."

"Forget it!"

"Will you give me that key?"

"No, I won't!"

Redwing drew a deep, deep breath.

"It can't go on, Smithy! I can't let it go on! If you don't give me the key, I must take it from you."

The Bounder's eyes blazed.

"Here's the key, in this pocket," he said. "Take it—if you can, and dare!"

"Give it to me, old chap."

"Rats!"

"Smithy, old man—"

"Oh, shut up!"

The Bounder swung towards the door. But he did not reach the door. Redwing grasped him and pulled him back. He made a last appeal:

"Smithy! Do listen to reason! I—" The Bounder interrupted him with a violent shove on the chest, which made him stagger.

"Now let me go, you fool!" hissed Vernon-Smith.

But Redwing's grasp did not relax. It hardened. Vernon-Smith, with a furious face, struggled in that grasp, and struck out, and struck again. But strong and sinewy as he was, the Bounder was no match in a struggle with the sturdy sailorman's son: and he was forced to the wall, and Redwing pinned him there with one strong hand, while he dragged the key from his pocket with the other. Then he released the Bounder.

"I'm sorry for this, Smithy! But—"

"You rotter! You rat!" Vernon-Smith choked with passion. "I'm done with you, you rotter—I'm through with you! By gad, I'll—I'll—" He came at Redwing with clenched fist and blazing eyes.

Redwing pushed him back and he staggered against the table. As he reeled there, panting, Tom Redwing hurried out of the study: and in a few seconds more he was racing up the winding stair to the top attic.

CHAPTER XIX

BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH!

“O H, crikey!” groaned Billy Bunter. He blinked from the little attic window, through his big spectacles, his fat face white as chalk: at the long, lean figure stretched on the sloping tiles, dreading every moment to see it roll down the slope and shoot off into space.

For long, long minutes, the hapless fat Owl had yelled, and shouted, and shrieked for help, and thumped and banged on the attic door till his plump knuckles were sore. But there were no ears to hear: and he had given it up at last, and returned to the window. Mr. Quelch was still there—he was still holding on, though with weakening grasp. In terror Bunter had watched him make a last desperate effort to drag himself up to the ridge. But that last effort had failed: and the Remove master had given himself up for lost. Yet he still held on, as if hoping against hope. Still his tenacious fingers gripped the ridge-tile, holding him back from death.

He did not even look at the terrified fat face peering from the window. He could expect nothing of Bunter. Other boys in his form might have been able to help—Harry Wharton, or Bob Cherry, or even the reckless young rascal Vernon-Smith—or Tom Redwing, the sailorman’s son, accustomed in early boyhood to clambering in high rigging, indifferent to heights. But the hapless Owl was as helpless as Quelch himself. Indeed, had Bunter made an attempt to come to his aid, the Remove master would have ordered him back, with his last failing breath, for it was certain that, had he climbed out of the window, he would have rolled off the sloping tiles like a stone.

Bunter was not thinking of that. All he could do was to watch the man in such desperate peril, in horrified fear.

There was no help—no hope! No one below could hear a sound from that remote attic—no one could see—no one could know! Bunter knew it, and Mr. Quelch knew it, as he still clung on for his life. But with numbed fingers that threatened every moment to slip from their hold, he held on.

Click!

Billy Bunter jumped, as he heard that click behind him, and spun round from the window. It was the click of a key in a lock!

“Oh, crikey!” gasped Bunter, as the attic door flew open. His eyes popped behind his spectacles at Tom Redwing.

Redwing stepped quietly in.

Then he stared, in surprise, round the attic. He had expected to see Mr. Quelch there, as well as Bunter. From what Smithy had said, the Bounder had locked his form-master in the attic, along with the Owl of the Remove. Had

he made some strange blunder, and failed, after all, in what he had intended? Redwing's heart lightened at the thought.

"Bunter!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, crikey!"

"I thought Quelch was here! It's all right, you fat ass—you can get out now," said Redwing, staring at the fat Owl's chalky face. "What's the matter with you? Nothing to scare you in this attic, is there?"

"Oh, scissors! I—I—Quelch!" articulated Bunter.

"Quelch hasn't been here—"

"Oh, crikey! Yes. He—he—he—"

"But the door was locked," exclaimed Redwing. "I had to unlock it to come in. What do you mean?"

"He—he—!" Bunter's gasping voice failed, and with a trembling fat finger, he pointed to the open window.

Tom Redwing caught his breath.

"What? You don't mean—?" He did not finish the question: he leaped across to the attic window.

His sunburnt face was almost as white as Bunter's as he looked out. His starting eyes fixed on the long lean form in the master's gown, stretching down the slope from the roof-ridge, to which the aching, numbed fingers clung.

He understood. Quelch had attempted to get along that ridge to the opposite attic window—and failed! It was this—this, to which the Bounder's reckless folly had led—it was this, for which the rebel of the Remove was responsible—for this, and for what must follow, if no help came to the man clinging desperately to the ridge of the roof.

But help was at hand now.

For a moment, Tom Redwing's brain almost swam with horror. But in a second he had pulled himself together. There was no time to lose now—seconds were precious, if Quelch was to be saved: if the Remove rebel's recklessness was not to end in overwhelming, irretrievable disaster.

"Mr. Quelch!" Redwing steadied his voice, and called, "Hold on, sir! For heaven's sake, hold on! I can help you."

The Remove master's head turned. His colourless face, his eyes in which there was no hope, looked towards the junior at the window. For a moment his face lighted. But it was only for a moment.

"Go back!" Tom Redwing was already clambering through the little window. "Go back, Redwing." His voice came faint with exhaustion. "Go and get help, if you can—I forbid you to risk your life."

It was the first time that Tom Redwing had passed unheeded an order from his form-master. But he passed it unheeded now. Before Quelch had finished speaking, he was out of the window, and astride of the roof-ridge. Quelch's haggard eyes fixed on him.

"Redwing—!"

"I can help you, sir! Hold on, for mercy's sake! I'm used to heights, sir—this is nothing—hold on, and I will save you."

Mr. Quelch said no more. There was, in fact, something reassuring, in the way in which the active sailorman's son worked his way along the narrow ridge of tiles. It was not exactly "nothing", as Tom Redwing had said: but it was easier to him than it could have been to any other Greyfriars man: to him, who had been at home in tossing rigging in a North Sea gale. The frightful gulf on either side did not affect his nerves—death lay on either hand, but he gave it not a thought. Swiftly, he worked his way along the ridge towards the clinging man: and as he came, there was a glimmer of hope in the form-master's face. Billy Bunter, from the window, watched with bulging eyes.

"Oh, crikey!" breathed Bunter.

"Here, sir!" Redwing's voice was steady. "Grip my hand, sir—I've got you! Steady!"

He had reached the clinging man. Quelch's grasp was slipping. How long he had hung there, between life and death, he did not know—it seemed an eternity. But he knew that he could not have held on many minutes longer. Redwing had come only in time. But a strong, arm grasp closed on a slipping hand, and it was as if new strength was infused into him from that helping grasp.

Redwing astride the ridge, had to lean down to him. But he clamped his legs firmly on either side of the ridge, as in earlier boyhood he had clamped them on a swaying boom over stormy waters. And he exerted all his strength—and his strength was great. As cool and steady as if he had been on the firm earth, heedless of the dizzy space round him, he pulled. And between his own efforts, and that steady pull from above, Mr. Quelch was drawn higher, till he was able to throw an arm over the ridge.

"Oh, crumbs!" breathed Billy Bunter, blinking dizzily from the window.

For several minutes, Mr. Quelch lay with his arms over the ridge, safe from falling, while he breathed hard, and something of his strength returned. Then he spoke, faintly:

"God bless you, Redwing! You are a brave lad! Get back now—I shall manage—get back, my dear boy."

"If you're sure, sir—"

"Quite!" said Mr. Quelch, in something like his old tone. "Go back at once, Redwing—I shall follow."

"Very well, sir!" said Tom, quietly.

Quelch was in fact, safe now so long as he did not lose his head—which Henry Samuel Quelch was not likely to do. Redwing clambered back to the attic window, active as a squirrel: the Remove master, sprawling on the ridge with his head and arms on one side, his legs on the other, followed more slowly—much more slowly, working his way along with painful efforts. Billy Bunter

blinked almost incredulously at Redwing, as he backed to give the sailorman's son room to clamber in.

"I—I—I say, you—you—you ain't been killed!" babbled Bunter, as if he could hardly believe it: as indeed he hardly could.

"Not quite," said Tom, and he smiled. But his face became grave again, as he stood at the window, watching Mr. Quelch's slow progress towards safety. He leaned from the window, with arm outstretched, hand ready to give aid. It was only minutes, but it seemed hours, before Quelch reached the window, and Tom's ready hand grasped him and helped him in.

"Thank heaven!" breathed Tom, when Mr. Quelch was in the attic at last. The Remove master sank down on the box: exhausted, breathing in gulps, but with the colour slowly returning to his waxen cheeks.

CHAPTER XX

A BLOW FOR THE BOUNDER!

"I SAY, you fellows."

Billy Bunter fairly yelled.

There was a crowd of fellows in the Rag. The Carcroft men had gone, but the Carcroft match was the topic on all tongues. All the fellows who had played in that match, and all the fellows who had watched it, were playing it over again, as it were: and Soccer being much more interesting than Bunter, nobody heeded the fat figure that rolled in, or the excited squeak from the fat Owl.

"That was a topping goal, Smithy," Bob Cherry was saying, for perhaps the tenth time.

"The topfulness was terrific," agreed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Dashed if I thought you'd make it," said Johnny Bull. "But you did, Smithy." Johnny was not always very cordial to the Bounder: but he was cordial now.

Smithy was, in fact, the hero of the hour. He had brought off the winning goal, against all chances: there had been luck in it, no doubt, but there had been a good deal more: and all the footballing fellows had something to say about it, and all that they said was very agreeable to the Bounder's ears—"kudos" was like meat and drink to Smithy. "Swank" was one of his failings: but he had proved, at all events, his value to the side, and that he was not a man who could be left out.

"Jolly glad Quelch went out for a walk and forgot you, Smithy," said Frank Nugent, laughing. "I was jolly keen to play, but—I couldn't have bagged that goal in a lifetime."

The Bounder made a grimace.

So far all the fellows supposed that Quelch had gone out, and forgotten him and his detention, unaccountable as it was in the methodical Remove master. The Bounder was enjoying the ovation he was receiving: but there was a spot of grim trouble at the back of his mind. Nugent's words reminded him of what was coming. Redwing had gone up to the attic to release the Remove master: and Smithy knew that he might hear from him at any moment. But his face did not reveal that spot of trouble at the back of his mind: he was cool and careless in his manner as usual.

"I say, you fellows—!"

"Buzz off, Bunter."

"Oh, really, Cherry—!"

"Right at the finish, you know," said Bob. "Right on the tick of time! And the way Smithy dodged the halves—"

"The backs ought to have had him," said Squiff. "But—they didn't."

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

"You'll have to be on your best behaviour, Smithy, after this, and get Quelch to let you off more detentions," said Harry Wharton. "We simply can't spare you from the side."

The Bounder laughed. Quelch was not likely to "let him off", if Redwing was right, and he knew who had locked him in the attic! Quelch was much more likely to take him to the Head to be "sacked" if Redwing was right!

"I say, you fellows, will you give a chap a chance to speak!" yelled Bunter, indignantly. "I say, Quelch—!"

Bunter liked to be the fellow with the news. Now he had news that was calculated to make every fellow who heard it jump: and they went on talking Soccer, as if Bunter mattered no more than a buzzing insect! It was very annoying to Bunter. However, the mention of Quelch drew a little attention at last.

"Quelch!" repeated Peter Todd. "Has he come in?"

"He hasn't been out!" gasped Bunter. "You see—"

"Rot!" said Bob Cherry. "I can see him forgetting Smithy, and letting him play football, if he was in! I don't think!"

"I tell you he hasn't been out at all!" howled Bunter. "He's been in the top attic all the time. He was locked in by somebody."

"What?"

Bunter had attention now! There was no doubt about that. Even the Carcroft match, and Smithy's magnificent goal, were forgotten. Every fellow in the Rag stared at the fat Owl.

"Quelch—locked in the attic—!" exclaimed Harry Wharton, blankly.

"Rot!" said Squiff.

"Great pip!"

"The great-pipfulness is terrific."

"I say, you fellows, it's true!" spluttered Bunter. "You see, I was there! I was locked in with him! I can tell you he was waxy!"

"We could have guessed that one!" said Bob Cherry. "But if Quelch was locked in the attic, who locked him in?"

"I don't know," confessed Bunter. "Quelch knows it wasn't me, because I was locked in too. Somebody bagged that fatheaded *History of Greyfriars* from his study—"

"So you did it after all!" exclaimed Bob.

"No!" yelled Bunter. "I didn't! Never touched it! It was somebody else, and he carted it up to the top attic, and Quelch came up after it and found it there, and the fellow must have followed him up, and locked him in—"

"But who—?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

He broke off, his eyes fixing on the Bounder. A dozen other fellows followed his glance. If Quelch had not, after all, gone out: if some fellow had contrived somehow to lock him in an attic out of the way, a good many of the Remove fellows could guess whose hand had turned the key.

"Smithy, you mad ass—!" breathed Bob Cherry.

The Bounder shrugged his shoulders.

"So that was how you got off to play soccer!" said Johnny Bull. "Quelch locked in an attic—phew!"

"If you fancy so, don't yell it out!" said the Bounder, sarcastically. "Walls have ears, you know! If Quelch was locked in, Bunter—"

"He jolly well was—"

"If he was, does he know who did it?"

"Well, I don't see how he can know," said Bunter. "He never said so, anyway, only he knew it wasn't me. I say, I can tell you he was like a jolly old tiger in a cage! Fancy Quelch climbing out of the window—at his time of life, you know—"

There was a general jump.

"What do you mean, you fat idiot?" exclaimed the Bounder. His face had gone white. "He wouldn't—he could—that window!—it's impossible—"

"He jolly well did!" gasped Bunter. "Trying to get across to the other attic window, you know—the one opposite! I can tell you I felt jolly queer, watching him clamber over that high roof—"

"He didn't!" yelled the Bounder. "He couldn't have! You fat owl—"

"He did!" yelled back Bunter, "and he couldn't make it, either, and he would have fallen off the roof but for Redwing—"

"Redwing!" exclaimed a dozen voices.

"You see, Redwing got hold of the key somehow, and came up!" explained Bunter. "Blessed if I know where he got the nerve to go out of the window after Quelch—but he did—"

"Redwing did!" panted the Bounder. He made a savage stride towards

Bunter, and grasped him by a fat shoulder. "You fool—you babbling fool—tell me what's happened—quick—!" He shook the fat Owl fiercely.

"Oooooooooogh—!" spluttered Bunter. "Stop shaking me you beast—"

"Tell me!" yelled Smithy.

"Ow! Leggo! I'm all out of breath—groooooogh! If you don't stop shaking a fellow, I'll—I'll—ooooooooogh!"

"Let him speak, Smithy, you ass!" Harry Wharton caught the Bounder's arm, and dragged him away from Bunter. "Now, what's happened—?"

"Oooooogh! Shaking a fellow—!"

"Has anything happened, you fat chump?" roared Bob Cherry.

"Ooogh! Yes! Quelch was hanging on the tiles, and he was going to fall any minute—groogh—only Redwing got to him and pulled him up—ooogh—and they got in all right—woooooogh—"

"They're safe?" exclaimed Harry Wharton.

"Eh! Oh! Yes! Quelch was hanging on—you see, he slipped down the slope, and couldn't pull himself up—but Redwing got to him—ooogh—!"

"Oh!" breathed the Bounder. His face was like chalk. He put his hand on the table to steady himself. He had quarrelled with his friend: in the struggle in the study he had struck him—and if Redwing had not gone up to the attic, what would have happened? Only too well he knew, now, that his reckless and rebellious arrogance would have led to a tragedy that would have haunted him with remorse for the rest of his days. And Redwing—Redwing had risked his life to save the man whom the Bounder's mutinous folly had endangered—he had done what only he, perhaps, in all Greyfriars, could have done, but he had done it at the risk of a terrible death! Vernon-Smith leaned weakly on the table. The rebel of Greyfriars was shaken to his very soul.

Billy Bunter blinked at him.

"I say, Smithy, was it you locked Quelch in? I jolly well knew you had something on in that attic—"

"Where's Redwing now?" asked Harry Wharton.

"He was coming down with Quelch. I say, you fellows, if they'd both fallen off that roof—"

"Shut up, you fat ass."

"Oh, really, Cherry—"

"Brace up, Smithy," said Harry Wharton, softly. The Bounder's face was ghastly. "It's all right now—"

"Yes," muttered Smithy. "It's all right—but—but if it hadn't been! If—if Reddy—" He broke off. "I'm going to Quelch—he needn't hunt for the man who locked him in—I'm going to tell him—" He broke off again, and crossed to the door, and all eyes were on him as he went out of the Rag.

CHAPTER XXI

THE LAST CHANCE

“REDWING!”

“Yes, sir,” said Tom.

They were in Mr. Quelch's study. The Remove master sat at his writing-table, on which lay the typescript of the *History of Greyfriars*—unheeded now. Quelch's face was still a little pale: otherwise, he looked his normal self. No doubt the strain had told on him: but iron self-control was Quelch's long suit. Anything in the nature of an exciting episode was abhorrent to Quelch: he liked to go on the even tenor of his majestic way, calm and unmoved. Indeed his chief desire was that there should be as little talk as possible about



Billy Bunter's fat head smote the door.

that exciting episode in the top attic: and that, the offender once expelled and done with, it should be forgotten. But there was an unusual kindness in his look, and in his voice, as he spoke to Redwing.

"My dear boy," said Mr. Quelch, "what you have done is beyond thanks. You have shown a courage, an intrepidity, beyond all praise. I can only say, Redwing, that if an opportunity should occur to repay something of what I owe to you, I shall welcome it gladly."

"Thank you, sir," said Redwing.

"Now you may go, my boy."

"Yes, sir! But—" Redwing hesitated.

"What is it, Redwing?"

"May—may I ask you a question, sir?" Redwing's face flushed.

"Certainly."

"Someone locked you in the attic, sir—"

The Remove master's brow darkened. He had no doubt who had locked him in the attic, and he was prepared to deal with him. The Bounder of Greyfriars had had many narrow escapes: but he was not to escape this time.

"May—may I ask if you know who it was, sir?" faltered Redwing.

Quelch's jaw set grimly.

"I have no doubt who it was, Redwing. I intend to send for Vernon-Smith at once, and question him. I do not expect the truth from him: but the matter will be made clear—and he will be expelled from the school, if it was he who did this, as I have no doubt whatever that it was."

Redwing stood silent, his cheeks burning. He hardly dared say what was in his mind. But he was resolved to say it.

Quelch gave a little start, as he remembered that Redwing and Vernon-Smith were close friends: indeed more than once he had been puzzled, as many of the Remove fellows had been, by that friendship between the headlong, reckless Bounder, and the quiet, steady Redwing: between the millionaire's son, and the sailorman's son who had come to Greyfriars on a scholarship. He recalled it now, as Tom stood before him with flushed face, hesitating. And he frowned.

"I am sorry, Redwing, as I understand that Vernon-Smith is a friend of yours," he said, and his voice was colder. "I have thought that such a friendship might lead him into better ways: but it has not proved so."

"Smithy's a good chap, sir, really," faltered Redwing. "One of the best, sir, though I know he has his faults. If—if it was he who locked the attic—"

"There can be no doubt about that, Redwing."

"Couldn't you, sir—couldn't you?" Redwing's voice trailed off.

"What?"

"I—I—I—" Redwing stammered. Then he got it out. "You said, sir, that you'd be glad to do something for me, if you could—"

"I trust that you do not doubt that, Redwing."

"No, sir! Oh, no, sir! But—but—if you'd give Smithy another chance, sir—if—if—if—"

"Redwing!"

"I—I know I've no right to ask, sir! But—but—if Smithy's sacked, I wouldn't care to stay at Greyfriars—he's my pal sir, and—and—and nobody understands him as I do, sir—with all his faults, he's one of the best chaps breathing, sir—really and truly—"

Redwing's voice faltered into silence. But his face was eloquent. He hardly knew how he had dared to speak to Quelch like this. But Smithy was his pal, and only he could save him, if he could be saved. He stood with crimson face and sinking heart, as he waited for Mr. Quelch to speak. It was Smithy's last chance.

There was a long, long silence. Then the Remove master spoke at last.

"What you have done for me to-day, Redwing, leaves me no choice but to grant what you ask. For your sake, certainly not for Vernon-Smith's, I shall allow the matter to close here. You may tell Vernon-Smith that there will be no inquiry." Quelch breathed very hard. "You may tell him that the whole matter is at an end."

"Oh! Thank you, sir—!"

"You may go, Redwing."

Redwing, in silence, turned to the door. As he reached it, there was a hurried knock, and it opened. Tom Redwing stared at the Bounder's white face.

"Smithy, old man—!"

"You're safe, Reddy." The Bounder's voice was husky. "Reddy, old man—"

"It's all right, Smithy—"

"It isn't! It isn't! I've got to speak to Quelch." Vernon-Smith pushed past his chum, and crossed the floor to the Remove master's table, unheeding the cold, icy stare of the gimlet-eyes that met him. "Mr. Quelch—"

"Why are you here, Vernon-Smith?" Quelch's voice seemed to come from the deepest depths of a refrigerator.

"I've got to tell you, sir! I've only just heard of what happened—it was all my fault—all my fault—it was I locked you in the attic, sir—now you can take me to the Head to be sacked!" panted the Bounder.

"Upon my word!" said Mr. Quelch, rather blankly.

"I—I—I never dreamed of anything like that, sir—you believe me?—I couldn't have dreamed of it!" panted Vernon-Smith. "I—I locked you in, sir, but you know—you must know—that I never dreamed—"

"I am aware of that, Vernon-Smith," said Mr. Quelch. "Nevertheless, your act endangered my life, and that of Redwing—"

"I know! I know! But I never dreamed—but I'm not making excuses, sir—you know what I did now—I know I'm going to be sacked, and I don't care—I came here to tell you as soon as I heard—"

The grim, crusty face staring at Smithy across the table softened.

"I was already aware, Vernon-Smith, that you were the culprit, said Mr. Quelch.

"Oh! You knew—?" stammered the Bounder. Redwing had been right!

"And I had already granted Redwing's request to pardon you."

"Oh!" gasped Vernon-Smith.

He stared at his form-master, almost bewildered. Then he looked at Redwing, waiting at the door. Then he stared at Quelch again.

"You—you don't mean that I'm let off, sir, now you know—!" he muttered.

"I mean exactly that, Vernon-Smith! You may leave my study."

"Oh!" gasped Smithy. "I—I—I—I'm sorry, sir! Do believe that I'm sorry. I—I've been a fool, sir—a cheeky fool, and a rotter too—I—I hope you believe that I'm sorry, sir—"

"I believe you, Vernon-Smith." Quelch's keen eyes read the Bounder's face, and his voice was quite kind. "You need say no more: the matter ends here."

Herbert Vernon-Smith went unsteadily from the study. Redwing caught his arm, and drew him into the passage, and closed the door. Mr. Quelch was left with a very thoughtful expression on his face. Possibly he was not sorry, after all, that he had yielded to Tom Redwing's plea, and that the rebel of Greyfriars had been given another chance.

In the passage, Vernon-Smith pressed Redwing's arm.

"Reddy, old man—" he muttered.

"All right now, Smithy," Tom Redwing smiled. "Thank goodness it's ended like this—"

"You saved Quelch, and—and you've saved me, from the sack, and I—I—I—I punched you in the study," muttered the Bounder, remorsefully. "I'm a brute—a rotter—Reddy, you're a silly ass to stick to me—"

"I'll stick all the same," said Reddy.

CHAPTER XXII

NOT TAKING ANY!

"I SAY, you fellows."

"Blow away, Bunter."

"But I say—"

"Hook it!"

"I say—"

"Shut the door after you."

"Will you listen to a chap?" howled Billy Bunter, with an indignant glare at

the five fellows in No. 1 study that might almost have cracked his big spectacles, "I say, you know Quelch told me to write out that rotten Latin lesson yesterday—!"

"Roll away!"

"And how could I, when I was locked up in that attic with Quelch? demanded Bunter. "I couldn't, could I?"

"You had lots of time afterwards."

"Oh, really, Wharton—"

"Too jolly lazy?" inquired Johnny Bull.

"Oh, really, Bull—"

"Travel!" said Bob Cherry.

"I wish you'd let a fellow speak! I never did it, and now, what do you think Quelch has done? He's told me to write it out twice!"

"Then you'd better go and do it, before he makes it thrice!" suggested Nugent.

"Oh, really, Nugent—"

"Take your face away, anyhow."

"Beast! I mean, look here, old chaps! Quelch is in his study now—I heard his typewriter going—that fatheaded *History of Greyfriars* of his, you know—well, what about ragging him?"

"What?"

"Serve him jolly well right, what?" asked Bunter. "He was as mad as a hatter the other day when Smithy catapulted his window from that tree. You know how he pounced on me, grabbing a fellow by the back of the neck, and making a fellow think he'd gone crackers—"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"What, about banging at his door, and then cutting away down the passage?" asked Bunter. "Make him wild, what?"

"No doubt about that!" chuckled Bob.

"The wildfulness would probably be terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "The esteemed Quelch would be preposterously infuriated."

"Well, which of you fellows is going to do it?" asked Bunter. "I—I'd do it myself—but—but—but Quelch might guess it was me, you know! What about you fellows?"

"Nothing about us fellows," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Now shut up, and roll away, like a good barrel."

Sniff, from Bunter.

"Might have known you'd funk it, in this study," he said. "I'll jolly well go and put it up to Smithy—he's the man for it! Bet you he'll jump at it."

"Smithy's on his best behaviour now—"

"Oh, that's all gammon!" said Bunter. "Catch Smithy behaving himself! I'll jolly well go and put it to him, and you'll see."

And the fat Owl rolled out of No. 1 study and rolled up the passage to

No. 4. Hardly a minute later, there was a startling sound in the Remove passage. It was the sound of a heavy bump, followed by a loud yell:

"Yaroooooh!"

Harry Wharton and Co. chuckled. Evidently Billy Bunter's latest proposition for a "rag" on Quelch had met with a negative—a very emphatic negative—from the rebel of Greyfriars!

THE END