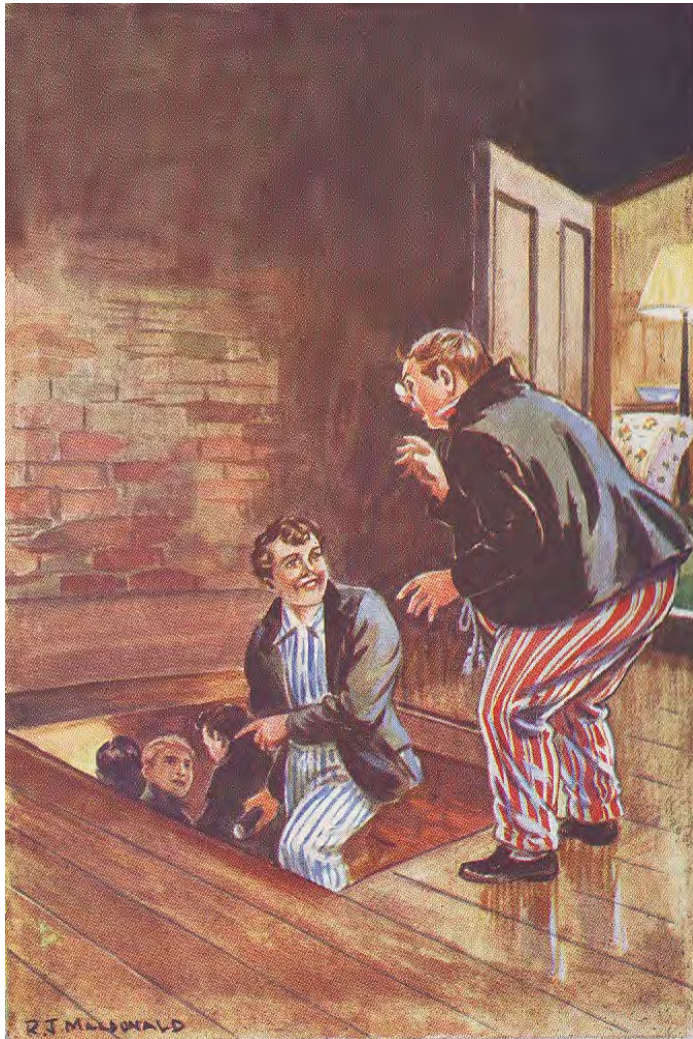


BILLY BUNTER'S CHRISTMAS PARTY

By
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Illustrated by R.J. McDonald



THE MORE BUNTER BLINKED AT THOSE STEPS, WINDING AWAY INTO UTTER DARKNESS, THE LESS HE
LIKED THEM

CHAPTER I NOTHING DOING!

“Busy?” asked Billy Bunter, sarcastically.

They looked busy in No. 1 Study in the Greyfriars Remove.

As it was a half-holiday, and a fine day for December, Harry Wharton and Co. might have been expected to be out of doors, pursuing the strenuous life in the open air.

Instead of which, there they were in the study, busily and somewhat unusually occupied.

Billy Bunter blinked at them in surprise.

They were tidying up the study. Junior studies often required tidying up, but did not so often get what they required. Now, however, the Famous Five were at work in earnest.

Harry Wharton was polishing the cracked glass over the fireplace. Frank Nugent was dusting the mantelpiece. Johnny Bull was collecting scattered books and stacking them in neat order on the bookshelf. Bob Cherry was tacking up a Japanese fan to conceal a gash in the wall. Hurree Janset Ram Singh was arranging a bunch of evergreens tastefully in a jam-jar. The study had quite a newly swept and garnished look, as if in preparation for distinguished visitors.

The Co. were all busy — too busy, indeed, to heed the fat Owl of the Remove, blinking in at the doorway through his big spectacles. Only Harry Wharton paused for a moment, polishing-rag in hand, to glance round, and answer briefly.

Yes, cut!

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“And shut the door after you.”

Billy Bunter neither cut nor shut the door. He remained in the doorway, which his ample form almost filled.

“Quelch coming up?” he asked.

“Eh! No.”

“Then what are you cleaning up the study for?”

“Marjorie and Clara are coming over from Cliff House to tea. Now roll away, like a good barrel.”

“Unless you’d like to lend a hand, Bunter,” suggested Frank Nugent. “The fender could do with a polish.”

“And we shall want a couple of extra chairs from my study,” said Bob Cherry. “Cut along the passage and fetch them, Bunter.”

“And that rug could do with a shake,” remarked Johnny Bull. “Take it down the passage and give it a good shake, Bunter.”

Billy Bunter did not seem to hear those suggestions. He evinced no desire whatever to polish the fender, fetch the chairs, or shake the rug. Like Gallio of old, he cared for none of these things. Billy Bunter was often unemployed — as often, in fact, as he could contrive it — but he had never been known to be genuinely seeking work.

“I say, you fellows —!”

“That’s all right.” Harry Wharton stepped back, and surveyed the looking-glass.

“Clean as a new pin. Pity it’s cracked — but that can’t be helped.”

“You shouldn’t look into it, old chap,” remarked Bunter. “I expect that’s what did it! He, he, he.”

“You fat ass —!”

“He, he, he!” chuckled Bunter.

Bob Cherry glanced round.

“What on earth have you brought an alarm-clock here for, Bunter?” he asked.

“Eh!” Bunter blinked at him. “I haven’t.”

“Then what’s that row?”

“You silly ass!” roared Bunter. Billy Bunter was unaware that his fat cachinnation bore any resemblance whatever to the raucous note of an alarm-clock, “Look here —.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,” snorted Bunter. “I say Harry, old chap —!”

“Sorry!”

“Eh! What are you sorry about?”

“Stony!” said Wharton, sadly. “No good Harry-old-chapping me.”

Billy Bunter breathed hard.

“And now run away and play,” added the captain of the Remove. “Nothing doing, old fat man — unless you’d like to polish the fender.”

“Oh, don’t be an ass,” grunted Bunter, peevishly. “Look here, you ain’t the only fellows getting visitors this afternoon. My uncle’s coming to see me — my Uncle Carter from Folkestone. My rich uncle,” added Bunter, impressively. “You’ve heard of him — I’ve told you fellows about my rich relations often enough —.”

“Too often!” agreed Bob Cherry.

“The too-oftenfulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Well, he’s coming,” snapped Bunter. “I expect it means that he’s going to ask me for Christmas. He thinks a lot of me, you know.”

“There’s a lot of you to think of!” remarked Bob. “Tons!”

“You silly ass! I can jolly well tell you fellows that Christmas at his mansion is something like! You could put Wharton Lodge into Tankerton Hall, and never notice that it was there! I fancy he’s going to ask me for the hols. It’s the first time he’s ever remembered me — I — I mean, he’s awfully fond of me, you know — and very proud of being related to the Bunters —.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, do stop cackling. You can see that this is important,” urged Bunter. “I’ve simply got to stand him tea in the study. He will want it, after coming over here from Folkestone. And I want to get him in a good temper, see?”

“I see! Good-bye.”

“But I happen to be short of money,” explained Bunter.

“I’ve heard that one!” said Frank Nugent.

“Beast! I — I mean, look here, old chap, lend me ten bob, will you? What about you, Bob? Will you lend me ten bob, old fellow?”

“Stony!” grinned Bob. “No more good old-fellowing me than old-chapping Wharton.”

“Look here, who’s going to lend me ten bob?” demanded Bunter.

“Echo answers who!” said Johnny Bull.

“A fellow expects his pals to stand by him,” said Bunter. “What’s the good of pals, if they don’t stand by a fellow in a jam? Well, I expect my pals to stand by me!”

“Jolly good idea,” agreed Bob Cherry, heartily. “Go and tell them about it, and give us a rest.”

“Beast!” roared Bunter. “Look here, you can’t all be stony, if you’re standing tea to those Cliff House girls —.”

“That’s why!” explained Harry Wharton. “It’s all gone to the tuck-shop — not a single solitary sixpence left in the study.”

“Better go and look for Mauly!” chuckled Bob.

“I have — only he’s gone out —.”

“Try Smithy’s study. Smithy’s got tons of oof, and he might part with some of it — perhaps!”

“The beast chucked a cushion at my head when I looked in to speak to him —!”

“And so the poor dog had none!” sighed Nugent.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Billy Bunter blinked at the Famous Five in great exasperation. Serious as the situation, undoubtedly was, they did not seem to be taking it at all seriously.

“Sorry, old porpoise,” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “Nothing doing — and we’re rather busy just now. Shut the door after you.”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Unless you’d like to polish the fender —.”

“Talk sense!” hooted Bunter. “I say, you fellows, we can manage all right. If you’ve blowed all your tin on tuck for tea, you can let me have the tuck, see? That will come to the same thing, and it will be all right.”

“What?” exclaimed five voices in unison.

“I’ll square for it to-morrow. I’m expecting a postal-order to-morrow. That will be O.K. I suppose.”

“And what about tea for Marjorie and Clara when they come!” exclaimed Harry Wharton, staring blankly at the Owl of the Remove.

“That’s all right! You can ask Quelch to let you use his phone, and ring up Cliff House and put them off.”

Billy Bunter blinked quite cheerily at the Famous Five as he made that happy suggestion. Apparently he considered that he had found quite an easy and simple way out of the difficulty.

Judging by the expressive expressions on their faces, the Famous Five did not see eye to eye with William George Bunter.

“We — we — we can phone up Cliff House, and put Marjorie and Clara off, so that you can walk off with the tuck we’ve laid in for tea!” stuttered the captain of the Remove.

“That’s it, old chap! They can come another time, if you want them. Never mind about that now. I say, I hope you’ve got something decent.”

“You blithering owl —.”

“Oh, really, Wharton! I hope you’re not going to be selfish about this,” exclaimed Bunter, warmly. “It’s jolly important, as I’ve told you. Don’t be selfish, old chap. I never could stand selfishness.”

The Famous Five gazed at Billy Bunter. Busy as they were, polishing up the study to receive distinguished guests, they suspended their various occupations to gaze at the Owl of the Remove.

“Well, what about it?” asked Bunter, briskly. “Marjorie and Clara wouldn’t care for it much, anyway, as I couldn’t be here, as I’ve got to look after my uncle. They’d feel rather sold without me here — only you fellows. You chaps can tea in Hall for once. I suppose. And I say — yarooooop! Leggo my ear, Bull, you beast! Will you leggo my ear?”

Johnny Bull, without speaking, took a grip on a fat ear, eliciting a yell of anguish from William George Bunter. Still without speaking, he twirled the fat junior round in the doorway by that fat ear, and propelled him into the passage.

“Will you leggo!” yelled Bunter. “I say, you fellows —.”

In the passage, Johnny Bull released the fat ear.

“Hook it!” he said, briefly.

“Look here, you beast —!”

Johnny Bull drew back his foot, with so expressive an expression on his rugged face, that Billy Bunter hopped away like a kangaroo.

“Look here —!” he bawled.

Johnny went back into No. 1 Study, and closed the door with a bang.

Billy Bunter rubbed a fat ear, and gave the door a devastating blink. But he did not open it again. It had been made clear, even to Bunter’s fat intellect, that there was nothing doing in No. 1 Study.

CHAPTER II SOLVING THE PROBLEM!

“I SAY, Toddy —.”

“Aut aliquis latet error —.”

“Oh, really, Toddy —.”

“— equo ne credite, Toucri —.”

Billy Bunter glared at a bent head, at the table of No. 7 Study. Peter Todd did not look up when his fat study-mate rolled in. A volume of Virgil was propped up against the inkstand, and Peter was transcribing lines at great speed.

Toddy did not seem to want to be interrupted while he was doing his lines. With the selfishness to which Bunter was sadly accustomed, he seemed more concerned about his own affairs than about Bunter’s.

“For goodness sake, Toddy, stop mumbling that rot, and listen to a chap!” hooted Bunter.

“Quidquid id est —.”

“Shut up!” shrieked Bunter.

“— timeo Danaos —.”

“Beast!”

“—et dona ferentes!” concluded Peter; and he threw down his pen and ceased mumbling that “rot,” as Bunter termed the mighty works of P. Vergilius Maro.

“That’s fifty!”

“Well, if you’ve finished, listen to a chap!” hooted Bunter. “I say, Peter, my uncle’s coming this afternoon —.”

“Oh, bother!” ejaculated Peter. He grabbed up his pen again and dipped it into the inkpot.

“Well, it’s rather a bother, in a way,” admitted Bunter. “The fact is, Peter, my uncle —.”

“Bless your uncle! Shut up a minute! Tain’t fifty — it’s only forty-nine! Quelch always counts the lines. I’ve got fifty to do.”

“Never mind that now —!”

“Sic fatus validis —!” Peter Todd was mumbling again, to the accompaniment of a scratching pen.

“Look here, Peter —.”

“— ingentem viribus —.”

“Will you let a fellow speak?” yelled Bunter.

“— hastam —.” Peter threw down the pen again. “Blessed if I’m going on to a full stop. Quelch said fifty from the second book —.”

“Blow Quelch!” roared Bunter.

Peter Todd rose from the study table.

“That’s done,” he said. “Did you come in to say something, Bunter?”

“Yes, I did!” howled Bunter.

“Well, say it while I’m taking these lines down to Quelch,” suggested Peter. “Your conversation’s a real treat, old fat man, when a fellow’s out of hearing.”

“You — you — you ——!” gasped Bunter. “Look here, Peter — I say, don’t walk away while a fellow’s talking. I say, Peter, I’m in a jam. I think you might try to help a fellow out when he’s in a jam.”

“Oh, all right,” sighed Peter. “Cut it short, old man. I’ve got to change for a pick-up after taking these lines to Quelch.”

“My uncle’s coming this afternoon. He may be here any minute now.”

“Well, worse things than that might happen to a chap! Your uncle doesn’t bite, does he?”

“Oh, don’t be an ass. It’s my rich Uncle Carter. The Carters are awfully rich, Peter,” said Bunter impressively. “We call him uncle, but he isn’t exactly my uncle — sort of uncle twice removed, you know.”

“I know!” said Peter, with a nod. “Spot of trouble on quarter-day, what?”

“Eh! I never said anything about quarter-day! Wharrer you mean?”

“You said he was twice removed. That sounds like trouble on quarter-day,” said Peter. “Is he moving again?”

“You silly ass,” howled Bunter. “I don’t mean that sort of removed. I mean he’s a distant uncle — see?”

“Yes, I see!” assented Peter. “You’re the sort of nephew to make an uncle a bit distant, I should think.”

“I mean he’s a distant relation, you silly idiot. But we call him uncle because we’re fond of him, you know.”

“Well, that sounds as if he’s rich!” admitted Peter. “If that’s the lot I’ll go down to Quelch now ——.”

“I’m standing him tea in the study. I’ve simply got to do him well. He may ask me for the Christmas holidays,” explained Bunter. “I want to make a good impression on him, Peter. He’s got a magnificent place near Folkestone — magnificent ancestral hall, and all that. The Carters are a very old family, Peter. There were Carters here when the Conqueror came.”

“Must have been,” agreed Peter. “There weren’t any bus-drivers in those days, but there must have been lots of carters.”

“I don’t mean that sort of carter, you ass,” snapped Bunter. “You’re rather dense, Toddy. But of course you wouldn’t know much about high life,” added Bunter, condescendingly. “I’d like you to see that splendid ancestral hall, Toddy, only of course I couldn’t very well take you there. A chap has to be a bit particular, you know, before a magnificent butler, and hordes of liveried footmen, and all that. You’re hardly the chap I could take to Tankerton Hall. But never mind that — I want you to help me, Peter, and I’ll tell you how —.”

“Oh, do!” gasped Peter. “You put it so nicely, Bunter, you make a fellow simply yearn to help.”

“Well, I’m glad you feel like that about it, Toddy, because I’m rather in a jam. You see I’m a bit short.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that! You make up for it sideways.”

“I mean short of money,” yapped Bunter. “You’re really awfully dense, Toddy. Now, I’ve got my Uncle Carter coming to tea, and I’ve been disappointed about a postal-order. I think I told you that I was expecting a postal-order ——.”

“I think you did,” assented Peter. “It sort of sounds like something I seem to have

heard before.”

“Well, it hasn’t come, so I’m a bit short,” explained Bunter. “I want you to lend me some money. I’m not the fellow to borrow money as a rule, as you know ——”

“Eli?”

“But this is a very special Occasion. I believe my Uncle Carter’s going to ask me for Christmas, and I want to do him well. How much money can you lend me, Peter?”

“My dear chap, I’ll lend you my last penny, on an occasion like this,” said Peter Todd, genially.

Billy Bunter’s fat face beamed.

“Oh, good. I say, that’s jolly decent of you, Toddy.” The fat Owl extended a fat hand.

“That’s pally old chap! Hand it over.”

Peter Todd ran his hands through his pockets. Billy Bunter, with his fat paw extended, watched that process in happy anticipation.

Finally, Peter extracted a coin from his trousers’ pocket and dropped it into the fat palm..

“There you are, Bunter,” he said, heartily.

Billy Bunter blinked at the coin in his fat palm. Then he blinked at Peter Todd. Then he blinked at the coin again. He seemed to doubt his eyes and his spectacles.

“I — I say, wharrer you mean?” he spluttered.

“What’s that?”

“My last penny ——.”

“Wha-a-t —— ”

“Didn’t I say I’d lend you my last penny? There it is! Sorry it’s a bad one,” added Peter.

“Why, you — you — you ——!” gasped Bunter.

“Don’t trouble to thank me, old chap. You’re welcome to my last penny, on an occasion like this. I’d gladly lend you twice as much — if I had another bad penny!”

And Peter picked up his lines from the table, and walked out of No. 7 Study.

“Beast!” yelled Bunter.

A bad penny whizzed across the study, and banged on the door as it closed after Peter Todd. Peter chuckled as he went down the passage. Billy Bunter did not chuckle.

He breathed wrath.

Peter’s last penny was not of much use to the fat Owl — even had it been a good one.

Bunter rolled across to the study window and blinked out into the quadrangle. Any minute now the portly figure of Mr. Carter might appear from the direction of the gates — and his affectionate nephew had not so much as a penny bun to offer him after his journey.

That portly figure was not yet in sight. Billy Bunter blinked morosely at five juniors who were crossing towards the gates.

“Beasts!” he breathed.

Harry Wharton and Co. walked cheerily on, unaware of the eyes and spectacles fixed on them from the window of No. 7 Study in the Remove. Apparently they had finished the preparations for the reception in No. 1 Study, and were going down to the gates to meet their expected visitors — oblivious of Bunter.

Billy Bunter frowned — but suddenly a gleam came into the little round eyes behind the big round spectacles, and he grinned.

He watched the Famous Five eagerly. He saw them pass Gosling’s lodge, and stop in the gateway. At that

distance they were rather dim to the Owl of the Remove, but he could see that they were standing in a group, looking out into the road.

A few moments more, and they went out at the gates. Clearly, they were walking out to meet Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara on the way. Billy Bunter's fat grin widened till it extended almost from one fat ear to the other. His problem was solved!

He rolled out of the study. He blinked cautiously up and down the Remove passage. Nobody was in sight — few fellows, if any, were likely to be up in the studies on a half-holiday. The fat Owl rolled down the passage to No. 1 Study, and into that celebrated apartment.

"Oh!" he ejaculated, the next moment.

As he had watched Harry Wharton and Co. walk out of gates, Bunter had had no doubt that the coast was clear. He blinked in surprise and annoyance at a junior sprawling in the study armchair. It was Hazeldene of the Remove, and he stared at Billy Bunter. Apparently Hazel had been asked to the tea-party, as his sister was one of the coming guests, and he had arrived early.

"Looking for Wharton?" asked Hazel. "He's not here."

"Oh! No! I — I was looking for you, old chap! Smithy wants you in the Rag — I — I said I'd tell you —."

"Oh, rot! What does he want?" Hazel seemed disinclined to move from the armchair.

"I — I think he's got seats for the matinee at Courtfield on Saturday —."

"Oh! May as well go down, I suppose."

To Billy Bunter's great relief, Hazel detached himself from the armchair, and left the study. The fat Owl hardly waited for him to disappear, before he rolled across to the study cupboard. It was likely to be five minutes, at least, before Hazel discovered that Smithy didn't want him, and came back. Two minutes were enough for Bunter. He rolled out of No. 1 Study, with a parcel under his fat arm, and shot back to No. 7; and the door of that study closed on him and his plunder.

"He, he, he!" chuckled Bunter.

His problem was solved — a feast of the gods awaited Bunter's guest when he arrived. There was nothing left in No. 1 Study for Harry Wharton's guests, but that could not be helped. Thoughtfulness for others had never been one of Billy Bunter's weaknesses. He chuckled with satisfaction as he unpacked the parcel on the study table. Then he rolled to the window and blinked out again. A portly figure was coming towards the House from the direction of the gates, and the winter sunshine glinted on a silk hat under which gleamed gold-rimmed pince-nez. Uncle Carter had arrived — his dutiful nephew's problem had been solved only just in time.

CHAPTER III AWKWARD!

"OH!"

Frank Nugent uttered that ejaculation.

He was staring into the cupboard in No. 1 Study.

That study was rather crowded. It was roomy, for a junior study, but it was well-filled by the numerous company. There was a cheery buzz of voices.

Marjorie Hazeldene and Clara Trevlyn sat in the window seat, with Bob Cherry between them, telling them about a recent soccer match at Highcliffe — a subject of the deepest interest to Bob — and, perhaps, to Marjorie and Clara. While Bob thus entertained the fair visitors, the other fellows were engaged in preparing the festive board.

Johnny Bull spread a spotless cloth, specially borrowed from the house-dame, on the table, and Hazel helped him to arrange crockeries of a remarkable variety of patterns

borrowed up and down the Remove studies. Harry Wharton sliced a loaf, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a glowing dusky face, made toast at the study fire. Everybody was merry and bright — excepting Frank Nugent, as he stared into the study cupboard with an extraordinary expression on his face.

Harry Wharton glanced round at him.

“Trot out the butter, Franky.”

“The — the butter!” stammered Nugent.

“And the chicken sandwiches.”

Nugent did not reply to that. He stared into the cupboard again. Harry Wharton, puzzled, came over to him.

“What —?” he began.

He did not need to complete the question. He saw what Nugent had seen, or, to be more exact, he failed to see what Nugent had not seen.

There had been butter, there had been jam, there had been a handsome cake, there had been a bag of biscuits, there had been a large bundle of chicken sandwiches specially cut by Mrs. Mimble at the school shop; and there had been other things, all designed to grace the tea-table in No. 1 Study, in honour of the distinguished guests. But of all those excellent things, not one remained — not so much as a single, solitary biscuit. Empty space met the eyes of the two juniors staring into the cupboard. They stared blankly.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh rose from the fire, and unhooked toast from the pair of compasses that served as a toasting-fork. He glanced at Wharton and Nugent and came across.

“What is the upfulness?” he murmured.

“The grub!” muttered Nugent.

“Gone!” breathed Wharton.

“Oh! My esteemed hat!”

“Trot it out, you fellows,” called out Johnny Bull. “Anything up?” he added, and he came over, and made a fourth staring into a denuded cupboard.

“Smithy had the ball.” Bob Cherry’s cheery voice came from the window-seat. “He centred to Wharton, and it looked a sure thing — an absolutely sure thing — but the Caterpillar cut in, and took it away fairly from Wharton’s foot — as neat as you please. And before you could say blow, they were coming up the field —.”

“Anything up?” asked Hazel. He, too, added himself to the group at the study cupboard.

Clara Trevlyn, her blue eyes dancing, glanced across Bob at Marjorie, and smiled.

Marjorie remained carefully grave, giving sedate attention to Bob’s thrilling narrative of the doughty tussle on the Highcliffe football ground. Both the girls were aware that something had gone wrong, and that there was a hitch in the proceedings.

Bob, in fact, was the only person in the study unaware that anything unusual was in the wind. He carried on cheerily with soccer.

Hazel stared into the empty cupboard, and then stared at four dismayed faces, one after another.

“Haven’t you got anything —?” he began.

“We — we had,” murmured Nugent. “But —.”

“But it — it seems to be gone,” muttered Harry.

“Oh, my hat! Was that what Bunter was after?” ejaculated Hazel.

“Bunter!” repeated Wharton.

“By gum! He came into the study, and spun me a yarn about Smithy wanting me in

the Rag — and I found that Smithy had gone out with Redwing —. What did he want to get me out of the study for? ”

“Bunter!” hissed Johnny Bull.

“Might have guessed that one!” breathed Wharton. “Bunter —.”

“The terrific fat villain —.”

“Oh, crumbs! What are we going to do for tea?” murmured Nugent. “There’s nothing but dry toast —.”

“We’ll go and slaughter that fat brigand!” hissed Johnny Bull.

“Yes, come on!” whispered Harry. “Even Bunter can’t have scoffed that stack of tuck yet — come on.” He hurried to the door.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” Bob Cherry woke up, as it were, to the fact that something was amiss. “What’s up, you chaps?”

Oh! Nothing! It — it’s all right! Just got to see a chap about something for a minute.”

It was altogether too awkward to explain in the presence of the Cliff House guests.

Marjorie, apparently, was aware of nothing; and the more volatile Clara, taking her cue from Marjorie, assumed grave unconsciousness. In the happy belief that neither of the girls knew that anything had gone wrong, Harry Wharton and Co. hurried out of the study, leaving Bob Cherry to the task of entertaining the guests for the moment; and Bob, realising that some awkward corner had to be turned, carried on — and never had a fellow talking football received such interested attention from his listeners!

Outside the door of No. 1 Study — carefully shut — five fellows breathed fury.

Bunter had raided the feast, leaving not a crumb or a plum for the honoured guests in No. 1 Study. To slaughter Bunter, and recapture what might yet remain of the supplies, was the next item on the programme.

“Look in his study first,” muttered Harry. “If we draw that blank, the box-room, most likely. But the study first.”

“Come on!”

They ran up the passage to No. 7 Study. The door was closed. Johnny Bull was the first to reach it, and he hurled it wide open with a crash. There was a startled squeak in the study. Evidently Bunter was there.

“Here he is!”

“Collar him!”

“Scrag him!”

“Boot him!”

“Burst him!”

Five excited fellows rushed into the study. A chair went spinning, and a silk hat that rested thereon rolled on the floor. A startled gentleman of middle age, with a shining bald head, and gold-rimmed glasses gleaming on a prominent nose, stared round at the mob of juniors as they charged in.

“What — what — what —!” he ejaculated.

“Oh!” gasped Harry Wharton.

“Oh!” gasped his followers.

They came to a sudden halt.

The gold-rimmed gentleman was seated on one side of the study table, Billy Bunter on the other. The table between them was well spread. Billy Bunter blinked at the new arrivals with his little round eyes almost popping through his big round spectacles.

Billy Bunter did not seem to have expected this — it had not occurred to his fat and fatuous brain that the missing tuck would be inevitably tracked to No. 7 Study.

“I — I say, you fellows!” gasped Bunter.

The juniors did not look at him. They were looking at Mr. Carter, who had risen to his feet, and was staring at them in annoyed surprise. Harry Wharton and Co. had forgotten all about Bunter's uncle. They were reminded of him now. They did not hurl themselves on the fat Owl according to plan. They gazed at Mr. Carter, red and breathless and confused.

"Well!" rapped Mr. Carter, sharply. "What does this mean? Who are these boys, William? Do boys rush into a study like a horde of wild Indians at this school. William? Upon my word! My hat has been knocked over! Kindly do not tread on my hat! Upon my word! Such manners —."

"Oh!" Harry Wharton gasped. "Sorry, sir! We — we ——."

"We didn't know anybody was here, sir," stammered Nugent. "We — we— —."

"Sorry, sir!"

The sorrowfulness is terrific, honoured sahib."

Five confused fellows backed to the door. Mr. Carter regarded them with a stern and disapproving stare as they backed. Billy Bunter gasped with relief. He, if not Mr. Carter, realised what would have happened to him, but for the avuncular presence. Harry Wharton and Co. backed out of the study. There was no help for it. They simply could not deal with the fat Owl as he deserved in the presence of a visitor to Greyfriars, still less could they collect the supplies from the tea-table under Mr. Carter's astonished nose. They backed out, and Frank Nugent drew the door shut. They heard Mr. Carter grunt expressively, as he resumed his seat. In the passage, they looked at one another, with feelings almost too deep for words.

"Who's the old bargee?" asked Hazel.

"Bunter's uncle, I suppose. He told us he had an uncle coming this afternoon. We — we can't do anything, with a visitor there —." Harry Wharton breathed hard and deep.

"The fat villain —."

"The bloated brigand!"

"The pilfering porpoise!"

"By gum! We'll scalp him —."

"Can't do anything now!" muttered Harry.

His comrades nodded assent to that. Something was due to appearances, and to courteous regard for a visitor to the school. It was just impossible to deal with Billy Bunter as he deserved, while his uncle remained.

All the exasperated juniors could do, was to glare at the door of No. 7 Study. From within that apartment came the murmur of voices. Bunter and his Uncle Carter had resumed their talk over the tea-table, momentarily interrupted. It was only a murmur, but suddenly Mr. Carter's voice, in tones more emphatic than before, became audible through the door.

"Not a word about ghosts, William!"

A fat chuckle followed, and Bunter's voice,

"No fear!"

"Oh, come away!" growled Wharton.

What Mr. Carter's cryptic remark might mean, nobody knew or cared. The juniors moved away from the door of No. 7 Study.

They stood in an exasperated group. Bunter had to be left over till Mr. Carter was gone — and in the meantime ——.

"What the thump are we going to do?" asked Nugent. "We've got nothing but dry toast for tea —."

"I've got a pot of marmalade in my study," said Hazel.

"Cut off and get it, old chap," said Harry Wharton. "You cut off and see Mauly,

Frank — he's bound to have something. You go and ask Squiff if he's got anything, Johnny — and you ask Russell and Ogilvy, Inky — I'll try a few others." It was several long minutes before the juniors returned to No. 1 Study. Bob Cherry, with a slightly worried face, was still talking soccer, Marjorie and Clara listening with rapt attention. Five fellows came in at last, one after another, each with a package under his arm, which he introduced into the study as unostentatiously as possible. Friends up and down the Remove passage had played up nobly; and if tea was a little late, it was, after all, quite ample and nice — and the best of it was, from the point of view of the chums of the Remove, that the guests from Cliff House had noticed absolutely nothing! That, at least, was their happy belief.

CHAPTER IV BAT FOR BUNTER!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent stared at the fat figure in the armchair in No. 1 Study.

They had not expected to see Billy Bunter there. They had not expected to see him at all, so long as he could dodge out of sight. But there he was, sitting in the armchair, blinking at them through his big spectacles, apparently waiting for them to come in; and unconscious of the vials of wrath that were to be poured out over his fat head. The Famous Five had walked home to Cliff House with Marjorie and Clara, after tea. Bunter had to wait for what was coming to him. They walked back to Greyfriars anxious to see Bunter. At this very moment, Bob Cherry was looking for him in the quad, Johnny Bull was looking for him in the tuck-shop, and Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh was looking for him in the Rag. Wharton and Nugent had come up to draw the studies for him. And as they passed the open doorway of No. 1, a fat voice hailed them from within; and they beheld Bunter. He did not need looking for — there he was!

They came into the study.

"So you're here!" said Harry Wharton.

"Yes, old chap — waiting for you to come in," said Bunter, cheerily. "I've got something to tell you, old fellow."

"Quite a coincidence," remarked Frank Nugent. "We've got something to tell you, too. Never been so glad to see you."

"It's about Christmas," said Bunter.

"Never mind Christmas now," said Harry. He sorted a fives bat out of the cupboard.

"Get out of that chair."

"Eh! Why?" asked Bunter.

"I can't bat you while you're sitting down."

"Oh, really, Wharton —."

"Tip him out, Franky."

"What-ho!"

"I say, you fellows, no larks," exclaimed the fat Owl, anxiously. "I say, you ain't going to be shirty about that spot of tuck, are you?"

"We are!" assured the captain of the Remove. "You fat villain, we'd have scragged you this afternoon if your uncle hadn't been there. We had to go scrounging up and down the studies to get something for tea for our visitors —."

"He, he, he!"

"So you think that's funny, do you? Well, there's some more fun coming!" Wharton

flourished the fives bat. "Roll him out!"

"I say you fellows, chuck it! I'm going to settle for the tuck out of my postal-order tomorrow. Besides, I never had it! I never came near the study. I shouldn't wonder if Hazel had it!"

"Hazel!" ejaculated Wharton.

"Well, he was here when I came in," said Bunter.

"You never came near the study, and Hazel was here when you came in?"

"Oh! I — I — I mean —."

"Never mind what you mean. It's what we mean that matters. Tip him out."

"I say, you fellows, do listen to a chap!" yelled Bunter. "I think you might be civil to a chap who's been waiting for you to come in, to ask you to a Christmas party —!"

What?

Frank Nugent, about to tilt the armchair and tip the fat Owl out on the carpet, paused, and stared at him instead. Harry Wharton stared also. This was quite unexpected.

"That's what I came here for!" Billy Bunter blinked reproachfully at the two astonished juniors. "I've been waiting for you ever since my Uncle Carter went. Nice sort of way to treat a fellow who's asking you to a magnificent Christmas party. Jolly good mind not to ask you now."

"You fat burbling bloater —."

"If that's how you thank a chap for a generous invitation to a magnificent Christmas at a splendid mansion, Wharton —."

"Tip him out!"

"I say, you fellows, I mean it!" gasped Bunter. "I say, it's straight. I say, I'm going to my Uncle Carter's huge mansion for Christmas and I'm going to take a party with me. I thought of you fellows first, because we're such pals, you know."

"You thought you could pull our leg, and get out of a whopping for pinching our tuck?" asked Nugent.

"I tell you, I ain't pulling your leg!" hooted Bunter. "My Uncle Carter's asked me for Christmas, and he's going to ask my sister Bessie too, and he wants me to take my pals with me — as many as I like. I can tell you it will be tip-top at Tankerton Hall. Magnificent place near Folkestone, you know —."

"We don't know!"

"Well, I'm telling you, ain't I? Magnificent butler, crowds of flunkeys, skating on the lake in the grounds, motoring all day long if you like, splendid grub — the grub alone is worth the money — I mean it's magnificent. Turkey — goose — Christmas pudding — mince-pies — all you want and more — everything of the very best and plenty of it. Well, that's where I'm taking a party for Christmas — and I'm asking you chaps first of all."

Is that all? "asked Harry. "If it is, get out of that chair."

"Oh, really, Wharton! I tell you I'm asking you for the Christmas hols —."

"And I'm asking you to get out of that chair!"

"I mean it!" yelled Bunter.

"And I mean it!"

"I say, you fellows, do have a little sense! I'm inviting you to Tankerton Hall for the most magnificent Christmas party you ever heard of. Think you'd get anything like it in your own humble homes?" demanded Bunter, scornfully. "Why at Tankerton Hall they get unlimited bacon and eggs from the home farm, and game from the extensive woods, and fruit from the huge orchards, and grapes from the superb vineries, and pineapples from the vast pineries, and turkeys from the — the — the —."

"Immense turkeries?" asked Nugent.

“Oh, really, Nugent ——.”

There was a tramp of footsteps in the passage, and three fellows came into the study. “Can’t find the fat frump anywhere,” said Johnny Bull. “I suppose he’s trying to keep out of sight till the bell goes for roll.”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! Why, there he is!” roared Bob Cherry staring at the fat Owl in the armchair. “You’ve got him?”

“The gotfulness is terrific,” chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, “and the whopfulness is the next esteemed item on the programme.”

“Heave him out of that chair!” growled Johnny.

“I say, you fellows, hold on!” roared Bunter. “I say, I’m asking you all to my Christmas party — I want you all to come. I’ve just been telling these chaps about the magnificent Christmas party at Tankerton Hall — my uncle’s place, you know. I’m going to ask Smithy, and Mauly — but I’m asking you fellows first, because — because we’re such pals.”

“That’s the latest!” explained Wharton, as Bob, Johnny, and Hurree Singh stared blankly at Billy Bunter. “Bunter’s invented that specially to get out of a whopping for pilfering our tuck.”

“I haven’t — I didn’t — I wasn’t!” howled Bunter. “I tell you it’s the genuine goods. I’m inviting all of you to a magnificent Christmas party — biggest thing you ever heard of. My Uncle Carter will send the Rolls-Royce to take us there when we break up for Christmas, and you’re going to stay all through the hols — feeding on the fat of the land, I can jolly well tell you — no short commons at Tankerton Hall. I can tell you that my Uncle Carter keeps up tremendous style in his ancestral halls. Hunting, shooting, skating, motoring — everything you want. And I think,” added Bunter, indignantly, “that you might thank a chap. I do expect a word of thanks.”

“Then it’s the unexpected that’s going to happen,” said Bob Cherry. “Roll him out of that chair!”

“I say, you fellows — yaroooooh!” roared Bunter, as Frank Nugent, grasping the back of the armchair, tilted it, and he roiled out on the study carpet. “Ow! wow! Oh, crikey! Whoooooop!”

“Spread him out,” said the captain of the Remove.

“Leggo! Will you leggo?” raved Bunter. “Look here, I jolly well won’t take you home for Christmas, if you — yarooooop!”

Whop!

“Yoo-hoop!” roared Bunter.

Whop! whop! whop!

There was a sound like beating carpet in No. 1 Study, as the fives bat established contact with the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School. Billy Bunter roared and wriggled and yelled, waking most of the echoes in the Remove passage.

“Oh, gad!” Lord Mauleverer looked in at the doorway. “You fellows killin’ a pig in this study?”

“Not quite! Only batting one,” answered Harry Wharton.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“I say, Mauly, make ’em leggo!” yelled Bunter. “I say, I never had the tuck, and I only had it because I’d bees disappointed about a postal-order ——.”

Whop!

“Yaroooh! Stoppit! Look here, you beasts, if you don’t chuck it, I won’t let you come to my Christmas party.”

Whop!

“Oh, crumbs! Ow! wow! ow!”

“That’s six!” said Harry Wharton. “Quelch always stops at six! ” He paused.

“Rot!” growled Johnny Bull. “Make it a dozen. ”

“Ow! Leggo! Beast!”

“Leave it to Bunter!” suggested Bob Cherry. “What do you think, Bunter? Will six do? ”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

Billy Bunter seemed to think that six would do. He scrambled up, and made a jump for the doorway.

In the doorway he turned, to bestow a devastating blink on the Famous Five.

“Beasts!” he roared. “I told you I never had the tuck, and there was hardly enough for tea anyway. And now I jolly well won’t let you come to my Christmas party! I wash my hands of you, see? ”

“They could do with a wash!” remarked Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Mind, I mean it! I was going to have you for the Christmas hols — and now I won’t! You’re left out, so yah!”

And Billy Bunter rolled indignantly away, followed by a chortle from No. 1 Study, which indicated that Harry Wharton and Co. did not realise what they were missing by being left out of Bunter’s Christmas party.

CHAPTER V NO TAKERS!

“SMITHY, old chap!”

Herbert Vernon-Smith glanced round, as a fat voice squeaked into No. 4 Study. Prep was over, and the Bounder was slicing a pineapple at the study table, when Billy Bunter’s spectacles gleamed in the doorway.

“Wonderful, ain’t it, Reddy? ” said the Bounder.

“Eh! What? ” asked Tom Redwing.

“How did Bunter know we had a pineapple?” Redwing laughed.

“Oh, really, Smithy! I never knew you had a pineapple,” said Bunter, warmly. “I looked in to speak to you, old fellow. Still, I’ll have a slice, if you like. But I came in to speak to you about the Christmas hols, Smithy.”

“Did you?” said Smithy. “Well, you can help yourself to the pineapple, if you like, but keep off the Christmas hols. Nothing doin’.”

“Oh, really, Smithy —” Bunter helped himself to a slice of pineapple. “I was going to ask you —.”

“I know! Nothing doin’, old fat man.”

“I was going to ask you for Christmas!” yelled Bunter. “I’m having a big party at my uncle’s place, Tankerton Hall, and I want you to join up, Smithy.”

“Great pip!”

The Bounder stared at Bunter. Tom Redwing stared at him. Both were taken quite by surprise. It was only a few days to break-up at Greyfriars and it would have been quite normal for Billy Bunter to be seeking to land himself for the “hols” on some fellow at whose home plenty might be expected to reign. But for Billy Bunter to be asking other fellows for Christmas was not normal — it was quite abnormal. It was unprecedented. It was unheard-of. It made Vernon-Smith and Redwing stare at the fat Owl in blank astonishment.

“Is that a joke? ” asked the Bounder, at last.

“I mean it, old chap! My Uncle Carter came this afternoon, and asked me for

Christmas at his magnificent establishment,” explained Bunter. “He wants me to take a party of my friends — and the more the merrier. I’m asking you first, Smithy, because we’re such pals.”

“First I’ve heard of it,” said Smithy.

“Look here, you beast — I mean, look here, old fellow —.”

“You’re asking fellows for a Christmas party!” exclaimed the Bounder. “Well, the old order changeth, giving place to the new, and no mistake. You’ve actually come here to ask us for Christmas!”

“Only you, Smithy — not Redwing,” said Bunter, hastily. “Redwing wouldn’t do.”

“Thanks!” said Tom Redwing, laughing.

“You fat, foozling, frowsy fathead —!” began the Bounder.

“Nothing against Redwing,” explained Bunter. “Only he wouldn’t do, you see. He hasn’t got any money.”

“Any money!” repeated Smithy, staring. “Do you charge for admission at your Christmas party, you footling frump?”

“Oh! I — I — I mean — I don’t mean — that is, I mean — I —,” stammered Bunter.

“Well, what do you mean?”

“I — I — I mean, Redwing’s rather hard up, you know, and — and he’d be rather out of place in a wealthy and luxurious establishment like my Uncle Carter’s ancestral hall. See? I want you to come, Smithy. You’re a bit loud, I know —.”

“What?”

“But that’s all right — you’ll pass in the crowd, old chap! You’ll come?” asked Bunter.

Herbert Vernon-Smith gazed fixedly at Billy Bunter.

“Let’s have it clear,” he said. “You don’t want Reddy, because he’s not got any money, you want me, because I have — although I’m a bit loud. Is that how it is?”

“That’s it, old chap!” assented Bunter. “And — yaroooh! Leggo my neck! Wharrer you up to, you beast! Gone mad?” yelled Bunter.

It really seemed to Bunter that Smithy had suddenly gone mad. Why Smithy grabbed him by a fat neck, ran him to the doorway, and fairly hurled him into the passage, Bunter did not know — unless the Bounder had suddenly taken leave of his senses. But that was what Smithy did — and Billy Bunter bumped and roared in the passage, and the door of No. 4 Study banged after him.

“Ow! Oh! Oooooogh!” gasped Bunter, as he scrambled up. “Beast! Ow! Rotten-tempered brute — breaking out like that in the middle of a friendly chat! Wow!”

Billy Bunter turned his back on No. 4 Study. He was through with that study. Mad or sane, it was clear that Herbert Vernon-Smith was not joining Billy Bunter’s Christmas party!

The fat Owl rolled on up the passage. He tapped at the door of No. 12, and rolled into that study. Lord Mauleverer was taking a rest, after prep, on his study sofa. With his elegant limbs extended, and his hands clasped behind his noble head, resting on a silken cushion, Mauly looked a picture of lazy contentment. But the placid contentment seemed to fade out of his face at the sight of his visitor. It was like the sun going behind a cloud.

“I say, Mauly —!” began Bunter.

“Oh, dear!” sighed his lordship.

Bunter blinked at him, and frowned. Attractive fellow as Bunter was, the kind of fellow at whose approach faces ought to have lighted up, he could not feel that Lord Mauleverer looked glad to see him.

“Oh, really, Mauly! I say, I’ve looked in to speak to you about the Christmas

holidays —.”

“I guessed that one!” groaned Lord Mauleverer. “Look here, Bunter, will you do me a favour?”

“Certainly, old chap! Anything you like. What is it?”

“Go and speak to somebody else about the Christmas holidays.”

“You silly ass!” roared Bunter. “If that’s what you call civil, when a chap’s come to ask you to a Christmas party ——.”

“Eh?”

“A tip-top Christmas party, in the ancestral halls of my rich relations!” exclaimed Bunter, indignantly.

“Oh, gad!” Lord Mauleverer sat up, in astonishment. “I — I thought —.”

“Think I came here to fish for an invitation?” snorted Bunter, scornfully. “Am I the fellow to fish for invitations?”

“Eh? Aren’t you?”

“Why, you beast — I mean, look here, Mauly, I want you to come. I’m going to take a big party, but I’m asking you first because we’re such pals. Besides, look at the holiday you stood me in Brazil, last hols. I want to return your hospitality, Mauly — one good turn deserves another, you know. You did me well last hols, and I’m going to do you better these hols, see?”

“Oh!”

“It’s going to be a big thing,” said Bunter. “I believe you put on style at Mauleverer Towers, but it doesn’t come up to the style of the Carters, I can jolly well tell you. The Carters are awfully rich, Mauly.”

“Are they?” asked Mauly, in surprise. “It must be a jolly life, bein’ a carter, but I shouldn’t think they were rich.”

“You haven’t met them yet ——.”

“Yaas, I met one this afternoon,” said Lord Mauleverer.

“Eh! You didn’t see my uncle, did you?”

“Your uncle! No! I’m speakin’ of the carter I met this afternoon — a jolly good chap! I had a rather long walk, and he gave me a lift back — in his cart ——.”

“Look here ——.”

“Jolly decent chap,” said Lord Mauleverer. “Jolly life, too, sittin’ in a cart, with the horse doin’ all the work. I liked him no end, but he didn’t look rich so far as I noticed ——.”

“I’m speaking of my relations, the Carters!” shrieked Bunter. “Not carters who drive carts, you fathead ——.”

“Don’t all carters drive carts? What do your relations drive, then?” asked Lord Mauleverer.

“They don’t drive anything, you silly chump! It’s their name — Carter ——.”

“Oh! Is Carter a name?” asked Lord Mauleverer, innocently.

“You — you — you ——!” gasped Bunter. “The Carters are a very old family. Their ancestral seat is at Tankerton Hall — magnificent place near Folkestone. Hundreds of rooms, vast grounds, woods and paddocks, and a ruined wing, battered down by Cromwell’s cannon in the Wars of the Roses ——.”

“Oh, gad!”

“That’s the place I’m taking you to for Christmas. The west wing was bombed in an air-raid — I mean, it was battered down by Cromwell in the reign of King John — but the east wing is twice as big as Mauleverer Towers, and chance it,” snorted Bunter.

“I’m going to give you a jolly good time, Mauly. My sister Bessie will be there, too!” added Bunter, temptingly. “You’ll come?”

Lord Mauleverer gazed at Bunter. It seemed a little difficult for his noble brain to assimilate the fact that Bunter was asking him, and not himself, for Christmas. But he got it at last.

“You’re awfully good, old chap —!” he began. “It’s kind of you —.”

“I mean to be kind, Mauly. Kindest friend and noblest foe — that’s me,” said the fat Owl. “You’re coming?”

“Oh! No! Thanks all the same — thanks no end. But — I’m goin’ home for Christmas, old bean — my guardian expects me —.”

“That’s rot, Mauly! I wouldn’t worry about a stuffy old codger like that —.”

“Eh?”

“Stodgy old fossil,” said Bunter. “I couldn’t stand him at any price. You give that doddering old ass a miss, Mauly, and — yoo-hoo — whooop!”

Bunter had been surprised in Smithy’s study. Now he was surprised again in Mauly’s. Why Lord Mauleverer grasped the cushion on which his noble head had been reposing, and hurled it at the fattest head at Greyfriars, Bunter did not know, any more than he knew why Smithy had distributed him in the passage. All he knew was, that the cushion landed fair and square, and that he sat down in the doorway with a sudden bump that almost shook the study. He sat and roared.

“Ow! wow! Oh! ow! Look here, Mauly, you beast —.”

He did not stay for more. There was another cushion on the sofa, and Lord Mauleverer was reaching for it. Bunter squirmed out of the doorway, and the second cushion just missed.

“Beast!” roared Bunter.

It was an indignant and disgruntled Bunter that rolled down to the Rag. For the first time in history, William George Bunter was issuing invitations for the hols — and so far, at least, there were no takers!

CHAPTER VI DOUBTING THOMASES!

BILLY BUNTER, the following morning, wore a worried look. He wore, of course, other things as well, but the worried look was most prominent.

A most unusual problem was on the fat Owl’s mind. Often and often, at holiday time, Bunter’s problem was to land himself on other fellows for the hols. Now his problem had gone into reverse, so to speak. Bunter wanted to land other fellows on himself for the hols. And, like elusive fish, they declined to be landed.

He had asked quite a number of fellows — carefully selected, no doubt for good reasons, from the wealthier section of the form. He seemed to have no use for Skinner, or Snoop, or Fisher T. Fish, or even his own study-mate, Toddy. He baited his hook with gorgeous descriptions of Tankerton Hall and its glories. But he had not had a bite so far — not even a nibble.

Nobody, in fact, believed a word of it. Skinner described it as “Bunter’s Latest.”

Fisher T. Fish guessed that the fat clam was blowing off his mouth. Not a man in the Remove took Bunter seriously, whether asked to the Christmas party or unasked.

They had all heard, not once but many times, of the wealth of the Bunter clan. They had never heard of any of that wealth materialising at Greyfriars. They had heard all about Bunter Court, which, to fellows who had chanced to see it, boiled down to Bunter Villa. Tankerton Hall seemed to them merely a variation on the original theme. They believed in Tankerton Hall no more than in Bunter Court, and in the rich and hospitable relative who was prepared to welcome a crowd of schoolboys for

Christmas, no more than in Bunter's other wealthy relations of whom they had heard so often. They knew, in point of fact, that the Bunter wealth was extremely exiguous, and that there certainly were no ancestral halls or magnificent mansions among the possessions of the Bunter clan. So they concluded that the fat and fatuous Owl was "talking out of his hat" even more fatuously than usual; and that if he did actually find himself landed with a party for Christmas he would have to wriggle out of it somehow at the last minute with some improbable yarn.

But if that was so, Bunter seemed strangely in earnest. Whether Tankerton Hall had a real existence or not, there seemed no doubt that Bunter was anxious for fellows to join up for the Christmas party.

He was, in fact, quite worried about it. His fat brow was crinkled with thought in the form-room that morning. If Mr. Quelch noticed that unusual thoughtfulness, and supposed that Bunter was thinking about the lesson, he was undeceived when the fat Owl, in geography, gave him the valuable information that Poland was the capital of Russia.

When a fellow was worried, he could hardly be expected to pay much attention to mere drivel. Quelch, of course, did not know that what was going on in the form-room was drivel, such an idea could never have occurred to him. Quelch had the idea, common to schoolmasters, that a fellow in class should be thinking about the lesson and nothing else. Bunter, clearly, was not thinking about the lesson, but something else, and he was duly rewarded with lines.

But when the Remove were dismissed after third school, Bunter was not thinking about those lines, his fat mind was still concentrated on the unusual and somewhat extra-ordinary problem of getting fellows to join up for the most gorgeous Christmas party ever. For which reason, he rolled after the Famous Five when they went into the quad, and squeaked,

"I say, you fellows!"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! How's the jolly old Christmas party getting on?" asked Bob Cherry, with a cheery grin.

"That's what I'm going to speak to you fellows about."

"Time to punt a footer about before dinner," remarked Johnny Bull.

"Yes, let's!" agreed Nugent.

"Will you fellows listen to a chap?" hooted Bunter. "You treated me rottenly yesterday — making out I had your tuck —."

"You fat villain!" said Harry Wharton. "You had it, every crumb."

"Well, I told you my Uncle Carter was coming, and that I hadn't a thing in the study, didn't I?" said Bunter warmly. "He mightn't have asked me for Christmas if I hadn't fed him — you never know! Not that I had the tuck! But never mind that — you treated me rottenly, as you jolly well know, but I never was the fellow to remember a grudge — I'm going to ask you to my Christmas party, all the same! There!"

"Sort of heaping coals of fire on our heads, what?" chuckled Bob.

"That's it, old chap! You fellows were beastly mean about the grub, but I don't expect everybody to be generous. like me."

"Oh, crumbs!"

"I'm taking you to Tankerton Hall just the same," declared Bunter. "I was thinking of taking Smithy, but he's too jolly loud — and Mauly, only he's such an ass. I've decided not to take either of them now. But I really want you fellows. It's going to be a tremendous thing, you know — everything of the very best, all the grub you can eat, and more, gorgeous festivities in my Uncle Carter's ancestral hall — you fellows will have the time of your lives."

The Famous Five gazed at William George Bunter. He seemed to be in the most serious earnest. They could almost have believed that there really was such a place as Tankerton Hall, and that Billy Bunter was “throwing” a party there. But not quite!

“Chuck it, fathead!” said Johnny Bull, tersely.

“Wharrer you mean?” demanded Bunter, indignantly. “I’m asking you fellows to join my Christmas party for the hols, at Tankerton Hall. I’m overlooking the rotten way you treated me, you fellows being my old pals. My Uncle Carter will send the Rolls for us on breaking-up day —.”

“But there isn’t any Rolls!” pointed out Bob. “Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“And there isn’t any Tankerton Hall!” growled Johnny.

“Oh, really, Bull —.”

“And the whole thing’s gammon — just talking out of your silly hat!” said Frank Nugent.

“Oh, really, Nugent —.”

“The talkfulness out of your absurd hat is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Oh, really, Inky —.”

“And now you’ve done your funny turn, roll off and do your lines for Quelch!” suggested the captain of the Remove.

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Good-bye, Bunter!” said the Co. all together.

Good-byes had no effect on the Owl of the Remove. He stood blinking at the Famous Five through his big spectacles, with an expression on his fat face like that of the elder Hamlet — more in sorrow than in anger.

“Well, this is rather thick!” said Bunter, at last. “Mean to say you think I’m just bragging and telling crammers?”

“You’ve got it,” assented Bob.

“Did you ever know me to brag?” demanded Bunter, hotly.

“Eh!”

“Or to tell crammers?”

“What?”

“I ask you!” said Bunter, with dignity.

“Oh, crumbs!” gasped Bob Cherry. “Did we ever, you men?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“I invite you to a tremendous Christmas party, and you make out it’s all gas!” exclaimed Bunter. “That’s your thanks, is it? Talk about a thankless serpent being sharper than a toothless child!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Oh, stop cackling!” yapped Bunter. “I tell you it’s straight. It’s straight as a —.”

“Corkscrew?” asked Bob.

“Beast! Straight as a die! Think I’d ask you to a Christmas party if there wasn’t any Christmas party?”

“Well, there isn’t, is there?” asked Johnny Bull. “Aren’t you just talking rot as usual, only a bit more idiotic than usual?”

“I wonder what he’d do if we said we’d come!” remarked Bob, thoughtfully. “Would you tell us on the last day of term that your jolly old uncle had gone to his own funeral, Bunter?”

“No!” yelled Bunter.

“Or that Tankerton Hall had been requisitioned by the Cauliflower Controller?”

“You silly ass—!”

“Or that it had been burned to the ground overnight? “

“Look here —.”

“Well, what would you tell us when we break up?” asked Bob. “You’d have to spin some yarn, as it’s all hot air, wouldn’t you?”

“You — you — you —!” gasped Bunter, with a devastating blink at five grinning faces. “Making out that a chap’s spoofing, after I’ve overlooked your rotten conduct and invited you to a tremendous holiday at my uncle’s ancestral hall. Look here, I want you to come to my Christmas party. You say there ain’t any party. Well, I’ll jolly well prove it, and then you’ll come. It’s up to you, after making out that a chap’s spoofing.”

Harry Wharton laughed.

“That’s fair!” he said. “But as there isn’t any party, and isn’t any Tankerton Hall, and isn’t anything but an escape of gas —.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Go it, Bunter,” chortled Bob. “If there’s a Tankerton Hall, we’ll come, won’t we, you chaps?”

“Pleased!” grinned Johnny Bull.

“Hear, hear!” said Frank Nugent.

“The pleasefulness will be terrific,” chuckled the nabob of Bhanipur. “But the provefulness is a boot on the other leg.”

“You silly ass,” hooted Bunter. “Why you can come in with me now and phone to Tankerton Hall, if you like. Quelch will let us use his phone if we ask him.”

Bob Cherry winked at his comrades.

“Let’s!” he said.

“Oh, yes! Let’s!” agreed Nugent. “What’s the telephone number, Bunter?”

“Oh! I — I — I don’t know the telephone number.”

“I fancied not!”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“What about getting it out of the telephone directory?” asked Bob. “We can find it — if it’s there.”

“If !” said Johnny Bull.

“The if-fulness is preposterous.”

“Of course it’s there,” howled Bunter. “Let’s jolly well go in and phone. I’ll jolly well show you! Come on.,”

Billy Bunter turned towards the House. The Famous Five stared at him. It really looked as if the fat junior was prepared to lead them to Mr. Quelch’s telephone, and put the matter to the proof, there and then. For a moment they wondered, quite dizzily, whether the fat Owl had been, for the first time in his fat career, stating facts. But the next moment Bunter turned back.

“Oh! I forgot —!” he began.

“You fat villain!” exclaimed Bob. “Blessed didn’t almost take me in, for a tick!”

“I mean I forgot my lines for Quelch! He said before dinner,” explained Bunter. “If I go to his study he will ask me for them. We’ll phone later —.”

“The phonefulness will probably be terrifically procrastinated,” chuckled Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

“Oh, really, Inky —.”

“Oh, come on, and let’s punt that ball,” exclaimed Johnny Bull. “We’ve heard about enough of that fat chump’s romancing.”

“I say, you fellows, don’t walk away while a fellow’s talking to you. I say —,” howled Bunter. “Beasts! I’ve a jolly good mind not to take you to my party after all! I

say, you fellows —”

But the Famous Five were deaf to the voice of the charmer. They punted a footer in the frosty air, regardless of Bunter, and the fat Owl snorted, and rolled into the House to do his lines. No member of the famous Co. expected to hear anything more of that telephone-call to Tankerton Hall.

But it was the unexpected that was destined to happen.

CHAPTER VII TAKEN ABACK!

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“COME on!”

“Eh? ”

“I said come on.”

“Where, which, and why?” asked Bob Cherry.

“Oh, really, Cherry! We’re going to phone, ain’t we?”

“What?”

After class that day, Harry Wharton and Co. had forgotten all about Billy Bunter and his Christmas party. There had been a fall of snow while the fellows were in class, and the old quad gleamed white. Looking from the window of the Rag, they spotted Coker of the Fifth tramping out, and the happy idea at once occurred to them of sallying forth and giving Coker the benefit of a few snowballs. But at the doorway of the Rag, as they came out in a cheery bunch, a fat figure interposed, and bade them “come on.” Billy Bunter, it seemed, had remembered that telephone-call, if the other fellows hadn’t.

“I’ve asked Quelch,” explained Bunter, blinking at five surprised faces. “He says we can use his phone to ring up my uncle at Tankerton Hall.”

“Oh; my hat!” said Bob. “Are you still spinning that yarn, Bunter?”

“Look here, we shall miss Coker,” grunted Johnny Bull. “Let’s get out — Bunter can tell us his funny story another time.”

“Oh, give him a chance,” said Frank Nugent, laughing. “Have you found the telephone number, Bunter?”

“Yes. I’ve looked it out in Quelch’s book,” said Bunters, briskly. “Come on, you fellows. Quelch has gone to Common-Room, and he will, expect us to get clear before he comes back.”

The Famous Five gazed at Bunter. Not for a moment had they expected to hear anything further on the subject of telephoning Tankerton Hall.

“You’ve looked out the number of Tankerton Hall!” said Bob, in a sort of gasping voice.

“Yes, old chap! Folkestone six-double-four-double-two.”

“Folkestone six-double-four-double-two!” repeated Bob. “Gentlemen, chaps, and fatheads, is there really such a place as Tankerton Hall? Do I sleep, do I dream, do I wonder and doubt — are things what they seem, or is visions about?”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Look here, don’t stand there cackling,” urged Bunter. “We’ve got to get through before Quelch comes poking into his study again. Come on.”

“Coker won’t wait for us —!” said Johnny.

“Blow Coker!” hooted Bunter. “You’ve been making out that it was a spoof. Well, now you can phone, and jolly well see. Come on, I tell you.”

“Oh, come on, you fellows,” said Harry Wharton. “It’s all gammon, of course — but it’s up to us.”

“Rot!” grunted Johnny Bull. “Look here, Bunter, if we waste time going to Quelch’s study, I’ll jolly well kick you if you’re spoofing —as I jolly well know you are.” “You can kick me as hard as you like, if we don’t get through to Tankerton Hall,” said Bunter, cheerfully.

“Mind, I mean it!” growled Johnny.

“You’re wasting time jawing, Bull. You’re like a sheep’s head, old chap — nearly all jaw. Do come on.”

Johnny Bull snorted, but he came on. The Famous Five followed Bunter to Mr. Quelch’s study, wondering a good deal. That they were going to get through to Tankerton Hall they did not believe for a moment, as they did not believe that that magnificent abode had a local habitation and a name. They wondered chiefly how the fat Owl was going to wriggle out of it, when they arrived at the telephone. But Billy Bunter rolled on ahead quite confidently, like a fellow who had no doubts. He certainly knew what to expect from Johnny, if they did not get through, but did not appear in the least uneasy.

They marched into their form-master’s study. Bunter waved a fat hand towards the telephone by the window.

“You can dial, Wharton,” he said. “Dial FOL six-double-four-double-two. Then you’ll jolly well see.”

The captain of the Remove looked at him. Then, without speaking, he went to the telephone, and dialled FOL 64422. In growing surprise and doubt his friends gathered round him to listen-in. Billy Bunter blinked at them serenely, with a fat grin lurking on his fat face. A voice came through. Wharton had the receiver, but the other fellows, pressing round, were able to catch the words.

“Hallo! Folkestone six - double - four - double - two. Who’s speaking?” came the voice.

“Oh, my hat!” murmured Wharton. Evidently there was, at least, such a number as Folkestone six-double-four- double-two.

“Eh! What did you say?” inquired the voice. “Who’s speaking?”

“Is that Tankerton Hall?” gasped Wharton.

“Tankerton Hall? No! Never heard of it! Wrong number.” And the unknown individual at the other end cut off.

Five fellows looked round at Billy Bunter. He blinked at them with cheerful inquiry.

“Got through?” he asked. “Is that the butler speaking?”

“You fat spoofers!” hooted Johnny Bull. “Now I’m jolly well going to boot you. I told you I would!”

“Eh! Wharrer marrer?” gasped Bunter, dodging promptly round Mr. Quelch’s study table. “Haven’t you got through, Wharton?”

“You jolly well know I haven’t, you fat villain! The man at the other end said it was the wrong number, and he’s never heard of Tankerton Hall,” answered the captain of the Remove.

“I’m going to boot him —.”

“Keep off, you beast!” roared Bunter. “I say, you fellows, there’s some mistake. You dialled the wrong number, Wharton.”

“I dialled FOL six-double-four-double-two.”

“You couldn’t have! Look here, let me dial, and I’ll jolly well show you,” snorted Bunter. “You keep off, Bull, you beast, while I ring up my uncle.”

“Oh, let him rip, Johnny,” said Bob. “Let him keep it up till the last minute. Then we’ll all boot him together.”

“Oh, really, Cherry! You’ll jolly well see!” snorted Bunter, and he took Wharton’s

place at the telephone, and dialled. "Now you listen, you beasts, and you'll jolly well hear Brown's voice — Brown's the butler."

A voice came through — the same voice as before.

"Hallo! Folkestone six - double - four - double - two.

Who's speaking? "

"Bunter speaking from Greyfriars School!" squeaked the fat Owl.

"Eh? Did you say Grunter? "

"No — Bunter! William George Bunter speaking from Greyfriars School."

"I get you, Mr. Bunter. Go on."

"Is that Brown speaking?"

"Brown! No. Green."

"Green!" repeated Bunter. "Well, ask my uncle to come to the phone, will you? "

"What? "

"Mr. Carter, my uncle —."

"Nobody named Carter here."

"Mr. Humphrey Carter —."

"Never heard of him."

"Look here, that's Tankerton Hall, ain't it?"

"What! No! This is Green's Sure-to-Fit Shoes, Pink Street, Folkestone. Do you want to order shoes, or what? "

"Oh, crikey!"

"We're busy here," came Mr. Green's voice, sharply. "What's wanted?"

"Look here, that's my uncle's number, and it jolly well must be Tankerton Hall, and you —. Why, the beast's cut off!" gasped Bunter.

The Famous Five had caught most of what was said over the wires. Now, as Bunter stood blinking at a dumb telephone in dismay, they looked at the fat Owl with very expressive looks.

"That's about enough, I think," remarked Johnny Bull. "Now let's boot him —."

"Beast!" hissed Bunter. "There's some mistake! I — I say, you fellows, perhaps — perhaps I didn't get the number right from Quelch's book."

"The perhapsfulness is terrific," grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"You look it out, Wharton —."

"Oh, don't be an ass," said Harry.

"Look here, you beast, you look out my uncle's number — Mr. Humphrey Carter, Tankerton Hall — and make sure I got it right."

"Still keeping it up, you fat ass?" asked Bob. "Let's look through the book, you fellows —."

"Are we staying in this study till calling-over? grunted Johnny Bull. "Look here, I'm jolly well going to boot him for spoofing us into coming here at all."

"Keep off, you beast!" roared Bunter. "I — I might have got the wrong number — you know I'm a trifle shortsighted, and it's beastly small print. Will you look out my uncle's number, Wharton?"

"Oh, all right," said Harry, resignedly. "Keep it up, if you like, you fat chump." He picked up the local telephone directory from Mr. Quelch's desk, and opened it at C.

"Here's Carter — lots of them —."

"Look among the H's," said Bunter. "It's Humphrey Carter."

"Well, here's the H's — by jove, there's a Humphrey here. Great pip!" Harry Wharton almost dropped the directory in his astonishment. He gazed at the printed page in wonder.

"What's up? " asked Bob.

“Not Tankerton Hall?” chuckled Nugent.

“Yes!” gasped Harry.

“What?”

“I say, you fellows, didn’t I tell you —? ” squeaked Bunter.

“You’re dreaming, old man,” said Johnny Bull.

“Blessed if it doesn’t seem like it!” said Harry, blankly. “But here’s the name — and here’s the address — and here’s the number —.”

“I say, you fellows —.”

“That fat Owl got the number wrong. It’s Folkestone six-double-two-double-four — the fat chump got it mixed —.”

“But —!” gasped Bob.

“But —,” stuttered Nugent.

“The butfulness is terrific.”

“Let’s look!” grunted Johnny Bull. Here it is,” said Harry.

They all looked. They gazed! They stared! They blinked! But seeing was believing! There it was,

Carter, H., Tankerton Hall, nr. Folkestone, FOL 62244.

In sheer wonder they gazed.

“Well,” said Bob Cherry, at last, “This beats the band! It beats Banagher ! I suppose we’re not all asleep dreaming this? ”

“Hardly,” said Harry Wharton, laughing. “There’s certainly an H. Carter, and he lives at Tankerton Hall near Folkestone, and his telephone number is Folkestone six-double-two-double-four. That’s that!”

“But that means that Bunter has been telling the truth!” said Bob. “It was like him to mix up the number but is it like him to tell the truth? ”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“Gammon!” said Johnny Bull.

“My dear chap, there’s the name, the address, and the number,” said Harry.

“Gammon, all the same,” said Johnny. “Bunter’s pulling our leg.”

“Oh, really, Bull —.”

“There’s an H. Carter lives at Tankerton Hall,” Johnny had to admit that much, after a concentrated stare into the directory. “But is he the Carter that fat Owl makes out? We’ve only got Bunter’s word that he’s the same sportsman in gig-lamps that we saw in Bunter’s study —.”

“Why, you beast!” roared Bunter. “I tell you —.”

“We can jolly soon settle that,” said Bob. “We’ll ring up Folkestone six-double-two-double-four, and ask. And if that fat villain has been spoofing, we’ll leave him all over Quelch’s carpet in small pieces.”

“I tell you —!” howled Bunter.

“Shut up while I dial!”

Bob Cherry dialled FOL 62244. A voice came through.

“ ‘Allo!”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo,” murmured Bob. “The Carter there’s got an H, but this chap seems to have lost one.”

“ ‘Allo!” repeated the voice, a rather sharp and not very pleasant voice. “Oo’s speaking?”

“Is that Tankerton Hall? ” gasped Bob.

“Yes, this is Tankerton ‘All.”

“Give me the receiver, old chap,” said Bunter. “That must be the butler.”

Bob handed him the receiver. The fat Owl squeaked into the transmitter.

“Hallo! Bunter speaking from Greyfriars School. Is that Brown?”

“Brown ’ere, Master William.”

The Famous Five, bunched round the fat Owl, heard that reply. They gazed at one another.

“Ask my uncle to come to the phone, Brown.”

“O.K. ’Old on, Master William.”

Billy Bunter blinked triumphantly at the Famous Five. His very spectacles seemed to gleam with triumph.

“Well, what about it now, you fellows?” chirruped Bunter.

The Co. made no reply. Even Johnny Bull had nothing to say. They were taken aback. A full-rigged ship, with all sails set, suddenly caught in a head wind, could not have been more thoroughly taken aback than were the chums of the Remove. They could only gaze at William George Bunter — completely flummoxed.

CHAPTER VIII STRAIGHT!

“WILLIAM!”

“Is that you, uncle?”

“Yes, William.”

“I’m speaking from the school, uncle. About the Christmas party.”

“I am glad to hear it, William.”

“I’ve asked a good many fellows, uncle —.”

“Very good, William! Can you let me know yet how many guests to expect here for Christmas?”

Dumb, the Famous Five listened-in.

They knew the voice from Tankerton Hall — the voice they had heard in No. 7 Study the previous day, the voice of the bald gentleman with the gold-rimmed glasses, Bunter’s Uncle Carter. It was altered in tone — quite pleasant and in fact rather fruity. In No. 7 Study Mr. Carter had been startled and annoyed, and had spoken sharply. Now, clearly, he was in a very good temper. But it was the same voice — and if a doubt had remained, it would have dissolved now, there was no doubt, not a possible probable shadow of doubt, that Mr. Humphrey Carter of Tankerton Hall was Billy Bunter’s Uncle Carter — no doubt, either, that he was hospitably looking forward to welcoming a crowd of Greyfriars fellows for Christmas at Tankerton Hall.

The Famous Five could almost have supposed that they were asleep in the dormitory and dreaming. But they weren’t — they were standing round the telephone in Quelch’s study, listening-in to the fruity voice of Mr. Humphrey Carter of Tankerton Hall, near Folkestone; and Mr. Humphrey Carter was, apparently, corroborating and confirming everything that Billy Bunter had told them.

Bunter chirruped on cheerily.

“I’ve got five so far, uncle. I’ll tell you their names — Wharton, Nugent, Bull, Cherry, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.”

Harry Wharton opened his lips — but shut them again.

Bob Cherry gave a subdued whistle. Johnny Bull gave a grunt. Nugent grinned, and his grin was reflected on the dusky face of the nabob of Bhanipur.

“One moment, William, while I write them down,” said the fruity voice.

“Yes, uncle.”

“Wharton, Nugent, Bull, Cherry, and — and — did you say Jampot?”

“Nunno! Jamset — Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, Nabob of Bhanipur. Sort of prince in

his own country, uncle. They call him Highness there, but we call him Inky.”

“His Highness the Nabob of Bhanipur!” The fruity voice was more fruity than ever — apparently Mr. Carter rather liked the idea of having a Highness on the premises.

“Very good, William! His Highness will be particularly welcome to Tankerton Hall. Assure his Highness that he will receive every attention, and that I trust that he will find everything to his satisfaction. If he has native attendants —.”

“Oh! No! Inky doesn’t put on side here, uncle, he’s just a Remove chap here — one of my pals.”

“Very good, William! His Highness will be most welcome. I am very glad you have rung me up, William. I shall select the best apartment for his Highness, with a view of the sea. Everything will be done for his comfort. I presume that he speaks English?”

“Oh! Yes — sort of,” said Bunter. “Queer sort of lingo that he learned in India — but you’ll be able to understand him.”

“My esteemed idiotic Bunter —,” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“That’s the lot so far, uncle, but I’m asking some more fellows. I’ll let you know later about the rest.”

“Very good, William. I trust that it will be quite a large party.”

“I want you to send the Rolls for us on breaking-up day, Uncle.”

The Famous Five exchanged glances. It seemed that there was a Rolls, as well as a Tankerton Hall.

“Certainly, William. I shall be very glad to send Hubert with the Rolls. It will of course be an extra.”

“Eh! Oh! Never mind that,” exclaimed Bunter, in great haste. “Just send the biggest Rolls, to take the whole party. That’s all, uncle —.”

“Yes, but you had better make it clear —.”

“I’ve got to ring off now — I’m using my beak’s phone, and he’s coming back to the study. Good-bye, uncle.”

“Good-bye, William.”

Billy Bunter shut down. His conversation with his uncle at Tankerton Hall ended rather abruptly, as the Famous Five recalled afterwards.

“I say, you fellows, that’s all right, what?” asked Bunter, breezily, as he turned from the telephone. “It’s all fixed up now — you’re my guests for the Christmas hols at my uncle’s palatial mansion.”

The Co. looked at him, and looked at one another.

“Oh!” said Harry, rather haltingly. “We — we hadn’t made any special arrangements about the hols so far —. But —.”

“You’ve made them now,” said Bunter.

“Oh! Yes! But —.”

“You’re not thinking of backing out, are you, after telling me you’d come?” asked Bunter, blinking reproachfully at the captain of the Remove.

“Oh! No! But —.”

“After I’ve told my uncle to expect you, too!” said Bunter, warmly. “You can hardly let me down. I think.”

“Nunno! But —.”

Harry Wharton broke off.

“I’ve spent the hols at your place, once or twice,” said Bunter. “Well, now I’m returning your hospitality. See?”

“Oh! Quite! But —.”

“It wouldn’t be like Christmas without my old pals,” said Bunter, shaking his head. “I

shouldn't enjoy it a bit without you fellows."

"Oh!"

"Look here —," began Johnny Bull.

But he stopped.

There was in fact, nothing to be said. Utterly unbelieving in Tankerton Hall and the Christmas party the Co. had declared that they would join up if there really was a Tankerton Hall and a Christmas party! And there was! On that point there was now no doubt. And after Bunter had given Uncle Carter their names as expected guests, could they think of backing out? They could not.

They did not yearn for the fascinating society of William George Bunter in the hols. They did not care a bean for the glories, real or imagined, of Tankerton Hall. Their brief view of Uncle Carter had not inspired them with any desire to see him again. But they were booked as Bunter's guests for the Christmas holidays, and that was that!

"You'll write home and tell your people you're coming with me," said Bunter, briskly, "and look here, if you want to ask any of your friends, I'll make them welcome — open house for everybody you like."

"Oh, my hat!" said Bob. "Think your jolly old uncle would stand for that, Bunter?"

"My dear chap, he's given me carty blank," said Bunter.

"He's given you whatter?"

"Carty blank, old fellow —."

"Oh! You mean carte blanche!" gasped Bob.

"I mean what I say — carty blank," answered Bunter, firmly. "Don't you try to teach me French, Bob Cherry."

"It's French — carty blank — and it means that I can do as I jolly well like. Well, my uncle having given me carty blank, I'm giving you fellows carty blank. Ask a dozen fellows if you like."

"Well, we won't do that, Bunter," said Harry Wharton, smiling. "But if — if — if you really want us to come —."

"Haven't I asked you?" said Bunter.

"Look here, why do you want us specially?" demanded Johnny Bull, bluntly.

Bunter blinked at him.

"Because I like you so much, old chap," he answered. "What I want at Christmas is the old familiar faces of my best friends round the festive board. See?"

"Oh!"

The Famous Five looked at one another, and at Bunter. They could not help feeling a little remorseful. They had taken Bunter's Christmas party as a joke — they had chuckled at the party, and chortled at Tankerton Hall, they had not believed a word of it, and had made no bones about saying so; and now, lo and behold! it turned out that it was the genuine goods after all — and Bunter, so far as they could see, wanted them to come, from no motive but friendly hospitality. If he had any other motive there was no clue to it. It was impossible not to feel that they had done Bunter less than justice, and that the fat Owl had had rather hard measure.

"Well, old bean, we'll come," said Harry. "Thanks for asking us."

"Oh! Yes! Thanks," said Bob.

"The thankfulness is terrific, my esteemed Bunter."

"That's all right," said Bunter, with a wave of a fat hand. "I'm glad to have you, and I shall treat you generously —."

"Oh!"

"Something a bit better than you're accustomed to, I fancy," said the fat Owl. "You'll find Tankerton Hall different from your own humble homes —."

“You fat ass!”

“Oh, really, Bull —.”

“O.K.,” said Bob Cherry, laughing. “We’ll try to play up to the jolly old grandeur, Bunter, and do you as much credit as we can — in our humble way.”

“That’s right, old chap — do!” said Bunter. “Ha, ha, ha!”

The chums of the Remove left Mr. Quelch’s study, Billy Bunter rolling after them with a fat smirk of satisfaction on his fat face. Whatever might be Billy Bunter’s reasons — whether open-hearted hospitality, or undying friendship, or some other unknown reason — there was no doubt that that he was extremely pleased by his success in bagging this quintette of guests for his Christmas party at Tankerton Hall. He rolled into the Rag in cheery mood.

Harry Wharton and Co. went into the quad. Coker of the Fifth had gone in — never dreaming of his narrow escape from snowballs. But the Co. were not thinking of Coker now.

“Well, we’re booked !” said Harry.

“The bookfulness is terrific,” agreed Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

“Blessed if I make it out yet,” said Frank Nugent. “I say, Bunter’s uncle must be a jolly old merchant, if he’s willing to crowd his house at Christmas with a mob of schoolboys he doesn’t know —.”

“Must be,” said Bob Cherry. “He didn’t quite look it — but he must be. I’ve got a couple of aunts I’d swop for an uncle like that.”

Grunt, from Johnny Bull.

“There’s a catch in it, somewhere,” he said.

“My dear chap —!” said Bob.

“Dash it all, give Bunter his due,” said Harry. “We’ve made a joke of it, and he meant it all the time — it was straight, after all —.”

“I know! But —.”

“But what ?”

“There’s a catch in it,” said Johnny, obstinately. “I don’t know what, and I don’t know how, but — there’s a catch somewhere.”

“Rot!” said his four friends, with one voice.

And Temple of the Fourth luckily coming along at that moment, the juniors betook themselves to snowballing, and the subject dropped.

CHAPTER IX

O.K.

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SAMPSON QUINCY IFFLEY FIELD, who was called Squiff in the Remove, stopped at the door of No. 1 Study, when the Remove were going in to prep that evening. He looked in, with a somewhat perplexed expression on his face.

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent, who were sorting out their books for prep, glanced at him inquiringly.

“You chaps pulling Bunter’s leg ?” asked the Australian junior.

“Eh! No! Why ?”

“He says you’ve fixed up the Christmas hols with him — you and your bunch going to Tankerton Hall.” Harry Wharton laughed.

That’s right,” he said.

“You’ve told him you’ll go ?” exclaimed Squiff.

“Yes.”

“Then you’re pulling his leg ?”

“No !”

“Then what ?” demanded the junior from New South Wales. “Mean to say it isn’t all gammon ?”

“We thought it was — but it turns out that it wasn’t,” explained the captain of the Remove. “We’re going to Tankerton Hall —.”

“Isn’t Tankerton Hall just a second edition of Bunter Court, that we’ve all heard about ?” grinned Squiff.

“Amazing to relate, it isn’t,” chuckled Frank Nugent. “We’ve been through on the phone, and listened-in to Bunter’s Uncle Carter. From what he said, it seems that he’s quite keen on seeing a party of Greyfriars men at Christmas — and he’s sending Hubert, whoever Hubert is, in the Rolls to fetch us.”

“Jumping kangaroos!” said Squiff, blankly.

He stood in the doorway, staring at the juniors in the study. He seemed to find it difficult to assimilate this !”

“Sure you’ve got it right ?” he asked, at last.

“Quite.”

“Well, it beats me,” said Squiff. “Mean to say it isn’t just Bunter’s latest, as Skinner called it, but the genuine goods ?”

“The genuine goods, A.1 at Lloyds, gilt-edged and hall-marked,” said Frank Nugent, laughing.

Squiff gave a long whistle.

“Well, he’s asked me,” he said. “I thought it was his usual bunkum, and told him to go to sleep and dream again.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“He said that you fellows were going, and Bob and Johnny and Inky —.”

“So we are !”

“Look here, are you fellows sure that he won’t hand out some yarn at the last minute, and wash it all out? — you know Bunter.”

“We do!” agreed Harry Wharton. “But it’s O.K. We didn’t believe a word of it, of course, as it came from Bunter. I feel rather sorry about that now, as he meant it all the time, and it’s genuine. So we’ve fixed up to go.”

“Dash it all, I wish I’d been a bit more civil about it, then,” said Squiff. “But of course, I thought it was only an escape of gas, same as you fellows did, and everybody else. He really seemed to want me to come. Blessed if I quite know why, but he seemed quite keen about it. Of course no fellow could be expected to guess that Bunter was telling the truth —.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“But if you fellows are going, I suppose it must be straight —!” Squiff still seemed to have a lingering doubt.

“Straight as a string!” assured the captain of the Remove.

“Well, if that’s so, I’m rather sorry I told him he was a fat chump and a blithering idiot and a footling fathead —.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“And if he still wants me, I’ll jolly well go,” said Squiff. “And I’ll jolly well go and tell him so now.”

And the junior from New South Wales went up the passage, to No. 7 Study, there to apprise the fat Owl of the Remove that one more recruit was secured for the Christmas party at Tankerton Hall.

Wharton and Nugent exchanged a grin, and sat down to prep. They rather wondered

whether there would be more inquirers, now that the news had spread that the Famous Five were booked for the party at Tankerton Hall. However, there were no more callers during prep.

But when prep was over, and there was a tramp of many feet in the Remove passage, the door of No. 1 Study flew open. This time it was Herbert Vernon-Smith that looked in.

Wharton and Nugent burst into a chuckle. They did not need telling that Smithy had heard, and they wondered whether he also was now on the list for the party at Tankerton Hall.

"You, too!" said Harry Wharton, laughing.

"Et tu, Brute!" chuckled Nugent.

Smithy stared at them.

"I've heard ——," he began.

"You've heard that we're joining Bunter's Christmas party, and you've come to ask us whether it's real, before you join up, too?" asked Nugent. "It's quite real, Smithy!"

"Strange but true!" said Harry.

"Mean to say you're really goin'?" asked the Bounder.

"We are — we is!"

"Well, my hat!" said Vernon-Smith. "Honest Injun — you're goin' to Bunter's Christmas party, thrown by his wealthy uncle at Tankerton Hall, and waitin' on breakin' up day for the Rolls to fetch you —."

"Just that!" assented Harry.

"Ha, ha, ha!" roared the Bounder.

Wharton and Nugent looked at him, not exactly pleased by that outburst of merriment.

"Well, where does the cackle come in, Smithy?" asked Harry Wharton, rather gruffly. "If you haven't heard, we've been on the phone to Tankerton Hall —."

"Real place?" grinned Smithy.

"Real enough to be in the telephone-book, with a telephone number," answered the captain of the Remove, tartly. "I believe the places listed in the telephone directory are generally real."

It was Smithy's turn to stare.

"Mean to say you believe that Bunter's got a rich uncle with a tremendous family mansion and all that?" he demanded.

"We've heard his Uncle Carter speaking from Tankerton Hall, and heard him say that he hoped Bunter would bring a large party for Christmas," said Nugent.

"Oh!" said Smithy. He looked quite blank for a moment. "You heard that — yourselves — on the phone?"

"We did!"

The Bounder looked puzzled. But he shook his head, decidedly.

"Gammon!" he said. "Blessed if I quite make it out, but — it's gammon! You can bank on that."

"We thought it was gammon, but it turned out straight as a string," said Harry. "If Bunter's asked you, you're quite safe in coming —."

"Oh, he's asked me," chuckled Smithy. "But I'm not coming! That fat chump won't pull my leg so easily as he seems to have pulled yours."

"Oh, don't be an ass! There's no leg-pulling about it — we know that now," said Wharton, impatiently.

"If it was anybody but Bunter —!" said the Bounder. He shook his head again. "But it is Bunter! It's all gammon — I know that! If there's a Tankerton Hall in the family,

why haven't we heard about it before? We've heard enough about Bunter Court."

"Oh!" said Harry, slowly. "Well, I don't know — might have been bought recently, or something — anyhow, there certainly is a Tankerton Hall, and Mr. Carter lives there, and he's expecting Bunter to bring a party of Greyfriars men for the Christmas hols. That's official, at any rate."

"You don't think that it's just swank, and that he'll wriggle out of it on the last day of term?" asked the Bounder, banteringly.

"No, I don't — now," answered Harry.

"Now he's pulled your leg!" chuckled Smithy. "I can't say I make it all out — but you can bet your Sunday socks on one thing — I jolly well know that there aren't any palatial mansions in the Bunter tribe — and you jolly well know it as well as I do. It's a spoof."

"It's nothing of the kind," said Wharton, sharply.

"O.K." The Bounder laughed. "Have it your own way! Merry Christmas at Tankerton Hall — if any! Good appetite for the turkey — If any! And —."

"Oh, rats!" said Wharton and Nugent, together.

Vernon-Smith, still laughing, left the study, and joined Redwing in the passage. He was still laughing as he went down to the Rag, evidently convinced that, in spite of all contrary evidence, Billy Bunter's Christmas party was a spoof."

Wharton and Nugent exchanged a rather uncomfortable look.

Their own doubts had been completely set at rest by the telephone talk in Mr. Quelch's study. Proof positive having been provided, they had felt remorseful for having doubted. They were not so distrustful as the Bounder and they were aware that they were not quite so keen and sagacious. Smithy's mocking scepticism had a discomfiting effect.

"It's all right, Franky," said Wharton, slowly. "It must be all right — after what we heard Mr. Carter say on the phone —."

"Must be," agreed Nugent. "Only — Smithy's jolly keen!" He paused. "And — and Johnny seems to think there's a catch in it somehow."

"How could there be?"

"Blessed if I know," confessed Frank.

"Smithy's an ass! The fact is, he's too clever by half! And Johnny takes about a year to make up his mind about anything — and another year to change it. It's all right," decided Harry.

And they left the study, to join their friends in the passage and go down to the Rag. If a faint doubt still lingered they banished it; it was settled that they were going to be members of Billy Bunter's Christmas party, and that was that!

CHAPTER X OFF FOR CHRISTMAS

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"HUBERT!"

"Sir!"

"Wait!" said Billy Bunter.

William George Bunter spoke with the air of one born to command, and for whom common mortals waited as a matter of course.

"Very good, sir!" said the chauffeur from Tankerton Hall.

Bunter rolled into the House.

Greyfriars School was in the process of breaking up for the Christmas holidays. The school omnibus had already rolled away with a crowd of fellows for the station

— somewhat to Billy Bunter's regret, for he would have liked every eye at Greyfriars to fall upon that handsome Rolls and that quite imposing chauffeur. But there were still plenty of fellows about, and there was no doubt that many of them were interested.

Even Wingate of the Sixth, the captain of Greyfriars, gave a glance in passing. Loder and Walker stared as they went in their taxi. Temple, Dabney, and Co. of the Fourth, lingered to look at the Rolls. Even Hilton of the Fifth, who was supposed to know all about the manners and customs of the wealthiest circles was seen to glance at the Tankerton Hall chauffeur with an approving eye! Quite a number of other fellows evinced interest.

Billy Bunter, and the six fellows who were going with him for the holidays, had been standing in a group on the House steps. Skinner and the Bouncer lounged near at hand both visibly amused.

Billy Bunter's guests had banished doubt — yet possibly just a shade of doubt lingered, kept alive as it were by the Bouncer's mockery and Skinner's jests, added to their own experience of William George Bunter and his little ways. Now, however, Smithy was looking quite puzzled and perplexed and Skinner staring blankly, all the wind taken out of his sails.

For who could doubt further when that expensive Rolls rolled in at the gates of Greyfriars, followed by a Ford, and the news spread that the cars had arrived from Tankerton Hall to convey Billy Bunter and his guests to that palatial abode? The Ford, perhaps, was not much to write home about. And its driver rather looked as if he might be a gardener when he was not driving a car. But the Rolls was undoubtedly the goods, and its chauffeur still more undoubtedly so. Even Lord Mauleverer's chauffeur did not make quite so handsome an appearance.

The chauffeur was a young man, with an upstanding figure, and pleasant features. His face, as he stood by the car, was almost expressionless, as no doubt a well-trained chauffeur's ought to be. His manner to Bunter was respectful, and if there was a faint glimmer in his eyes as the fat Owl gave his orders, it was imperceptible to Bunter. Harry Wharton, looking at the young man rather keenly, had an impression that Hubert the chauffeur had a sense of humour, and that Bunter appealed to it. But anything of the kind was lost on the happily self-satisfied Owl.

"I say, you fellows, you can wait a few minutes," squeaked Bunter, in passing, and he disappeared into the House.

Hubert stood like a statue. He seemed unconscious of the fact that almost innumerable eyes were upon him.

"Well," murmured Bob Cherry, with a grin, "it's come!"

And it's real," said Nugent.

"The realfulness is terrific," murmured the nabob of Bhanipur.

"Where's the catch now, Johnny?" chuckled Bob.

Grunt, from Johnny Bull. In Johnny's character there was the firmness of a rock, which his comrades sometimes likened unto the obstinacy of a mule. Johnny had said that there was a catch in it somewhere, and what he had said, he had said! Still, seeing was believing, and there was the Rolls, and there was Hubert! So Johnny, reserving judgment as it were, merely grunted.

"O.K.," said Harry Wharton, smiling.

"The okayfulness is preposterous!"

"Jolly good car," said Squiff. "Blessed if I thought — hem!"

"But where's Bunter?" asked Bob Cherry. "We're all ready — what are we waiting for?" He glanced in at the doorway.

“I can tell you the answer to that one,” said Vernon-Smith, sarcastically. “The car’s on view! Walk up, gentlemen! No charge!”

“Oh, chuck it, Smithy,” said Bob, half-laughing. “Anyhow there’s the jolly old Rolls, not to mention the jolly old Ford. Still think it’s a spoof?”

“Quite!” answered Smithy, coolly.

“Then you’re an ass!” said Bob.

The seefulness is the believfulness, my esteemed Smithy,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Vernon-Smith shrugged his shoulders. He was puzzled, and he was a little irritated. He persisted in his opinion that the whole thing was a “spoof,” yet what could be more convincing than the Rolls and the chauffeur, and the fact that Bunter’s party were about to start? Johnny Bull, certainly, adhered to his surmise that there was a catch in it somewhere, but Johnny had nothing to say. Smithy, irritated by a puzzle he could not solve, was vocal and sarcastic.

“Can you fellows make it out?” he asked.

“What is there to make out, Smithy?” asked Harry Wharton, smiling.

“Oh, don’t be an ass. That’s as good a car, and as creditable a chauffeur, as Mauly could trot out at Mauleverer Towers,” snapped the Bounder.

“So what?” grinned Bob.

“Not much like a Bunter turn-out, is it?” said Smithy.

“The likefulness is not terrific,” admitted Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “But the seefulness —.”

“Oh, rats! Bunter’s wangled this somehow,” said Vernon-Smith, “I’ve seen Bunter’s pater in his car — it looked as if it might have been left on Ararat when the Flood went down. And this —.”

“But this is the avuncular car, not the paternal one!” chuckled Bob. “Bunter told us his uncle was sending it, and his uncle has, and —.”

“You’re an ass, Smithy,” said Squiff.

“Not ass enough to let that fat spoofer pull my leg,” answered Smithy. “I’ll see what the graven image says.”

Smithy left the group of juniors, and stepped towards the statue-like chauffeur, standing impassive by the car.

Hubert’s eyes seemed to be fixed on vacancy, but he brought them to bear on Smithy, as the Bounder addressed him.

“Have you come here from Tankerton Hall?” asked Smithy.

“Yes, sir!”

Hubert had a pleasant and cultivated voice, quite different from that of Brown the butler on the telephone.

“Where is it?” asked Smithy.

“Near Folkestone, sir.”

“You’re Bunter’s uncle’s chauffeur?”

“Mr. Carter’s chauffeur — yes, sir.”

“Hired for the day with the car?” asked Smithy.



SMITHY LEFT THE GROUP OF JUNIORS, AND
STEPPED TOWARDS THE STATUE-LIKE CHAUFFEUR

Harry Wharton and Co. exchanged rather expressive glances. Smithy had not received his nickname of the “ Bounder ” for nothing, his manners were quite deplorable sometimes.

Hubert raised his eyebrows slightly, ever so slightly. Otherwise his impassive face was expressionless as he answered.

“I have been in Mr. Carter’s service for some time.” And Hubert fixed his eyes upon space again, politely but plainly ignoring the Bounder.

Smithy went back slowly to the group on the steps. He was more puzzled than ever, and perhaps more irritated. It really looked as if Smithy, with all his keenness and sagacity, had been quite wrong in his judgment, and that was a pill which Smithy found it difficult to swallow.

“Satisfied now, you ass ?” asked Bob.

“No !”

“My esteemed and idiotic Smithy —.”

“It beats me !” Smithy shook his head. “How the dickens has Bunter wangled this ?”

“Oh, chuck it, old man,” said Squiff.

“That’s a toppin’ car, and a top-hole chauffeur ! Did Bunter’s uncle win them in a raffle, or what ?”

“Fathead.”

Bob Cherry glanced in at the doorway again. Everybody was ready to start, but Bunter had not come out. More and more fellows had gathered, and Bunter’s party were getting restive. Coker and Potter and Greene, of the Fifth, came out to a waiting taxi — which looked like a very poor relation of Bunter’s magnificent Rolls, and all three paused to look. Temple, Dabney and Co. of the Fourth, gazed. Quite a mob were gazing. Had that Rolls rolled in for Lord Mauleverer, nobody would have given it much heed. But the fact that it had rolled in for Billy Bunter caused something like a sensation.

As there was no sign of Bunter, Bob went into the House to look for him. He did not have to go far. Almost the first object that met his eyes was a fat figure at the hall

window, blinking out into the quad through a pair of big spectacles, and grinning all over a fat face.

Evidently the Bounder was right, the Rolls from Tankerton Hall was “on view.”

Bunter did not intend to start until everyone had seen it. He was watching the mob of fellows outside with keen enjoyment.

A sudden smack on a fat shoulder caused the joyous grin to fade from his fat face, and he spun round with a yell.

“Yaroooh !”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo!” roared Bob. “Aren’t you coming ?”

“Beast !” roared back Bunter.

He rubbed a fat shoulder and glared. Bob, cheerfully impervious to glares, chuckled.

“Come on, old fat man,” he said. “Everybody’s seen the car —.”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“Unless you’d like me to go and call the Head to give it the once-over,” suggested Bob.

“Yah !” snorted Bunter.

He rolled out with Bob. He blinked round him at many faces. There was a good audience for the first act, as it were! On the whole Bunter was satisfied. He was ready to start.

“Some of you will go in the Ford,” he said. “Cherry, Bull, and Inky — you pop into the Ford, will you ?”

Bunter was going in the Rolls with a favoured trio. But the three assigned to the, Ford did not seem to take it to heart. Possibly they felt that they would have enough of Billy Bunter’s fascinating society when they arrived at Tankerton Hall, and did not yearn for it on the journey thither.

“Any old thing,” said Bob. “Come on, you men.”

Bob Cherry, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, packed into the Ford. Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and Sampson Quincy Iffley Field, sat in state with Billy Bunter in the Rolls. Many eyes watched the party when, at long last, they started — Hubert leading the way with the Rolls, the horticultural-looking driver following in his wake with the Ford. The Bounder watched them as they disappeared out of gates, and shook his head, as if he gave it up.

CHAPTER XI MYSTERIOUS!

“I SAY, you fellows !”

Bunter paused.

“Well ?” said Harry Wharton.

“Oh ! Nothing !”

Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and S.Q.I. Field, all looked rather curiously at William George Bunter.

Bunter seemed to have something on his mind.

It was not the first time, nor the second, that he had started to speak, and failed to continue. It was the sixth or seventh. And the three juniors in the car with Bunter wondered what it was that the fat Owl had to say, which he seemed to find it so difficult to utter.

During the first dozen miles or so, Billy Bunter’s fat face had registered only plump satisfaction. The Rolls rolled swiftly and smoothly through a wintry landscape of leafless trees and snow-ridged roofs, with the Ford rolling astern. In that magnificent

car, with that top-notch chauffeur, Billy Bunter felt that he had left Greyfriars in style — trailing clouds of glory, as it were. And he was happy and glorious. But after a time that happy mood seemed to change. A mood of thoughtfulness supervened.

He fell silent — which was unusual for Bunter. Every now and then a worried crinkle corrugated his podgy brow. And at intervals he began, “I say, you fellows,” without getting further than that opening gambit.

But for the fact that they were in the Tankerton Hall car, speeding on their way to Tankerton Hall, Bunter’s guests might perhaps have wondered whether the sceptical Bunder was right after all, and the whole thing a “spoof.”

For it was plain that Bunter had something on his mind, which seemed to weigh more and more heavily, the further they travelled from Greyfriars School. and the nearer they drew to Tankerton Hail. Had Johnny Bull been in the Rolls, certainly his opinion that there was a “catch” in it somewhere, would have been confirmed.

Wharton’s eyes met Nugent’s. Was there, after all, some sort of a “catch” in it? If not, what was the matter with Bunter?

“I say, you fellows —.” Bunter re-started after the interval.

“Go on,” said Harry, quietly.

“Oh! Nothing,” stammered Bunter. “I — I mean, jolly day, ain’t it?”

And there was silence again.

Squiff looked at Wharton, then at Nugent, then at Bunter. The Australian junior was a cheerful, unsuspecting fellow, and since the assurance he had received in No. I Study, he had not thought of doubting. But he could hardly fail to notice that the fat junior grew more and more perturbed, from some unknown cause, as the Rolls rolled on. Obviously, Bunter had something to say. Equally obviously he found great difficulty in saying it, and was undecided whether to say it at all. Six or seven times he had started — and stopped.

Squiff was a direct fellow, unaccustomed to beating about the bush. So, while Wharton and Nugent sat silent, Squiff came to the point.

“What’s the trouble, Bunter?” he asked.

Bunter gave a little jump.

“Eh! Oh! Nothing, old chap! I was only thinking — I — I mean, I wasn’t thinking — that is — oh! nothing! I mean, looks as if we shall have some more snow? What do you fellows think?”

The three juniors regarded him.

“You — you don’t have snow at Christmas in New South Queensland, do you, Field, old chap,” mumbled Bunter, obviously to change the subject.

“Not in New South Wales, if that’s what you happen to mean,” answered Squiff.

“Snow isn’t exactly the sort of thing we expect to see in the summer.”

“Queer that Christmas comes in the summer in Australia, ain’t it?” said Bunter.

“Queerer if it didn’t, in the southern hemisphere,” answered Squiff. “But I asked you what the trouble was, Bunter.”

“There ain’t any trouble, old chap. We’re going to have a topping Christmas at my Uncle Carter’s palatial mansion. You’re going to see one of the stately homes of England, Squiff.” It was the self-satisfied Owl again. “Sort of thing to interest you, you know — ancestral hall, with portraits of the Carters from the times of the — the Wars of the Roses — old armour worn by the Carters in the Crusades, and all that — ruined west wing battered down by Cromwell’s cannon in an air-raid —.”

“What?”

“I — I — I mean, not in an air-raid,” amended Bunter, hastily. “You see, the Carters

in the reign of Charles the Third held out for the King, and the Roundheads bombed them — I — I mean, cannoned them — that's how the west wing became a ruin. It's not haunted —”

“Haunted ?” ejaculated Squiff.

“Nothing of the kind — I expect Brown had been drinking when he said he saw the ghost of Sir Julius there. Besides, he never said so.”

“Oh, jumping kangaroos !” said Squiff.

“Anyhow you fellows don't believe in ghosts,” said Bunter. “So it wouldn't worry you if there was one. But there ain't any ghosts — nothing of the kind.”

Harry Wharton and Frank Nugent gave a simultaneous start. They had quite forgotten, but now they remembered, those cryptic words heard at the door of No. 7 Study, when Mr. Carter was there. That fruity voice had uttered, in emphatic tones, the words, “Not a word about ghosts, William !”

That strange remark was recalled to their minds by Bunter's mention — evidently inadvertent — of the “ghost,” and his red and stammering confusion.

Squiff stared blankly at the fat Owl.

“You needn't tell me that there aren't any ghosts,” he said. “I know that ! Ghosts are bunk ! But is there a ghost story ?”

“Oh! No! Nobody's ever been scared by a ghost at Tankerton Hall,” said Bunter, hastily. “Not in the ruined wing, or in the Oak Room, or — or anywhere. Guests haven't been frightened away by spooks or groans, or anything. Nothing of the kind. Brown's a blockhead — and whatever Miss Pike fancied she heard — well, you know what women are — they'd fancy anything. My Uncle Carter never mentioned ghosts, and never told me not to say anything about it. Why should he ?”

“Fan me !” murmured Squiff.

“Don't you fellows be frightened — I shall be with you, you know,” added Bunter, reassuringly.

“We breathe again !” said Nugent solemnly.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Well, if there's a jolly old ghost, we'll look for him and lay him,” said Squiff. “We don't have ancestral ghosts in Australia, and I'd like to spot one while I'm over here. What makes him haunt the place, Bunter — was he knocked out when Cromwell bombed the place with his cannon ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,” said Bunter, warmly. “I'll bet you wouldn't cackle if you woke up in the middle of the night and heard the ghost gliding about noiselessly——.”

“I expect we should sit up and take notice if we heard a noiseless ghost,” chuckled Squiff. “As good as seeing an invisible one !”

“Oh, really, Field ! There isn't a ghost, you know. Don't you fellows get that idea into your heads for a minute. My uncle's very particular about it, after guests have been frightened away, and all that. Besides there ain't such things as ghosts. Nobody's seen anything of the sort. Besides, I expect it was only the moonlight or something.”

The three juniors grinned at one another. It was clear that there was some sort of a ghost-story attached to Tankerton Hall, which Mr. Carter, as Wharton and Nugent knew had impressed upon Bunter not to mention to the Greyfriars guests — apparently because other guests had been scared away by ghostly manifestations.

“I say, you fellows, we shall be getting in pretty soon.” Billy Bunter's curious uneasiness seemed to return. “I — I say —.”

“Carry on, old fat man,” said Frank Nugent, as the Owl of the Remove paused. “Give

it a name.”

“Oh! Nothing !” stammered Bunter.

Billy Bunter seemed to have forgotten for a few minutes the secret worry on his mind — but now he remembered it again, whatever it was. Once more his fat brow showed crinkles.

“I — I say — !” he recommenced. a minute or two later.

“Cough it up !” said Squiff, encouragingly.

“Oh! Nothing! I — I mean —.”

“Fire away !” said Nugent.

“Oh! Yes! No! I — I mean —.”

“Well, what do you mean ?” asked Harry Wharton.

“Nothing, old chap! That is, I mean that if you think afterwards that I ought to have told you —.”

“About the ghost ?”

“Oh! No! Not the ghost ! But about —.”

“Well, about what ?”

“Oh, nothing ! I don’t want you cutting up rusty, and getting shirty, and all that — so — so I thought I’d tell you —.”

“What ?” demanded all three juniors together.

Billy Bunter blinked at them. Plainly he was in a worried state. Twice he opened his lips, without speaking. Finally he said,

“Oh ! Nothing !”

“Mysteriouser and mysteriouser !” remarked Nugent.

“Well, what I mean is, you’re going to have a tip-top Christmas holiday, so you can’t grumble,” said Bunter. “So when you find out —.”

“When we find out what ?” asked Harry Wharton, blankly.

“Oh ! Nothing.”

“What is there to find out ?” asked Squiff, staring at the fat junior.

“Nothing, old chap ! Besides, it’s jolly well worth it,” said Bunter.

“What’s worth what ?”

“Oh, nothing.”

With that, Billy Bunter clamped his fat jaws shut, and said no more. The three juniors looked at him, and looked at one another, in utter perplexity. Half-a-dozen times, Bunter had clearly been on the point of making some revelation, but he had finally decided not to make it, whatever it was, but to leave his guests to “ find out. ”

Apparently they were booked to make some discovery after arriving at Tankerton Hall — though what it was, they could not begin to guess, and they could not help wondering whether there was, after all, as Johnny Bull declared, a “catch” in it somewhere.

CHAPTER XII WELCOME TO TANKERTON HALL

“HERE we are !” said Billy Bunter.

The Rolls, with the Ford behind, had been following a country road, bordered by a park wall, within which rose the leafless, frosty branches of old trees. It was a very old wall, probably some centuries old, crumbling here and there with age; but here and there, also, it showed damages of more recent date — gaps and gashes which indicated that bombers had passed that way in the war time.

In some of the gaps, rubble had been tidied up and stacked, but apart from that no

repair work seemed to have been done. Bunter announced, “ Here we are !” as Hubert turned the Rolls in at a great gateway in the tumble-down old wall, and so his guests knew that they had arrived.

The gateway had suffered war damage even more severely than the wall. Of two great stone pillars that had flanked it, only short sections remained, and of the gate itself there was no sign. Within, a long curving drive led to the distant house, lined with ancient oaks, though at intervals only the stump of an old tree survived, giving the avenue rather a toothless look.

“They went through it here, in the war,” remarked Frank Nugent, as the Rolls glided up the long avenue.

“Looks like it,” agreed Harry.

“Rotten to knock out a jolly old show like this,” said Squiff. “Sort of historical. Those oaks look centuries old.”

The Australian junior was looking about him with great interest. Exactly what to expect at the residence of Mr. Humphrey Carter the juniors had not known, but they had not expected anything quite like this. True, Billy Bunter had told them, not once but many times, that Mr. Carter’s mansion was one of the “stately homes of England”; and indeed every fellow in the Remove had chortled over the fat Owl’s description of Uncle Carter’s imposing abode — yet it was now clear that Bunter, for once, had not exaggerated. Tankerton Hall was, or had been, one of the “stately homes of England.”

In the distance there was a glimpse of ancient roofs. The avenue was at least a quarter of a mile long. The old oaks looked as if they had been standing in Stuart, if not in Tudor, times. As the house came in sight, it was revealed as a long low building — partly in ruins, but still very extensive.

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Bunter gave a fat chuckle.

“I say, Wharton ! I told you that you could put Wharton Lodge into Tankerton Hall, and never notice that it was there, didn’t I ? What ?”

Harry Wharton turned a deaf ear to that polite remark.

All three juniors in the Rolls were gazing at Tankerton Hall as they approached it. So were the fellows in the Ford.

The long building faced south. The windows looked across wide park-land to the sea in the distance. The west wing — almost half the building — was in ruins. Broken walls, shattered casements, jutting remnants of roof, uprooted trees, deep craters, fragments of ancient oak-panelling, vast masses of shapeless rubble, made a scene of havoc. There were signs of damage about the surviving wing — cracked windows and missing chimney-pots. Perhaps legal restrictions had deterred the proprietor from undertaking extensive repairs, at all events, little seemed to have been done. Ancient ivy, which looked as old as the oaks in the avenue, clambered and clustered over most of the front of the building. From the ivy, innumerable windows glimmered in the winter sunshine.

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“By gum! They had a knock,” remarked Squiff, his eyes on the ruined wing. “Jerry must have dropped a packet.”

“Cromwell’s cannon, old chap,” said Bunter. “You see, the Carters of that time held the old Hall for the King, and Canwell — I mean Cromwell — came up with his crommons — I mean his cannons — and besieged the place, and Sir Hubert Tankerton was slewed — I mean slain — in the fighting with the Roundheads —.”

“Sir Hubert Tankerton ?” repeated Nugent.

“I — I — I mean Carter, of course,” said Bunter, hastily. “The Carters have been here for hundreds of years — very old family. Not so old as the Bunters, of course, but very old and historical.”

The three juniors exchanged a grin. Billy Bunter had a fertile imagination, and was accustomed to letting it rip.

Quite possibly Tankerton Hall might have had a spot of trouble with Cromwell in the far-off days of the civil war, for it looked as if it must have been an old building even in Stuart times, but that the ruin of the west wing had been caused by a direct hit from a bomb in a much more recent period was plain for all eyes to see. However, if the fat and fatuous Owl preferred Cromwell's cannon, it was not for his guests to say him nay.

"That's how it was," said Bunter. "You see, Cromwell came up with his ironclads —."

"His whatter?" ejaculated Squiff.

"His Ironsides, perhaps," said Nugent, laughing. "Do you mean Ironsides, Bunter?"

"No, I don't!" retorted Bunter. "If you fancy you know more about it than I do, Frank Nugent —."

"Fathead!"

"Look here, you cheeky beast —!"

"I — I — I mean, have it your own way, old bean," said Nugent, hastily, remembering that he was Bunter's guest. "Any old thing. Well here we are, you chaps!"

The Rolls and the Ford came to a halt, opposite a great stone porch massed with ivy. Hubert and the gardener-driver descended, and opened the doors of the cars. The Greyfriars guests got out.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! Here we jolly well are!" exclaimed Bob Cherry, cheerily.

"Topping run! What a jolly old place, Bunter."

"The jolliffulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

Johnny Bull made no remark. The expression on his face was one of thoughtful perplexity. Nobody had expected anything quite so imposing as this — Johnny least of all. He seemed to be thinking deeply — perhaps trying to think out how such a stately mansion could possibly appertain to one of the Bunter tribe. Possibly he still thought that there was "a catch in it somewhere."

The great door under the porch opened, and a rather tubby, stubby-looking man appeared in the doorway, staring at the Greyfriars party. He came slowly out and down the steps.

Bunter blinked round at him.

"That's Brown," he said.

"Who's Brown?" asked Squiff.

"The butler, you know."

"Oh!"

Harry Wharton and Co. glanced at Brown, the butler, whose voice they had heard on the telephone in Mr. Quelch's study at Greyfriars. For the butler of so extensive an establishment as Tankerton Hall, he did not look impressive — in fact, more than a shade shabby. Apparently all the household staff of Tankerton Hall were not on the same superb scale as Hubert the chauffeur.

"Old family servant, you know," said Bunter, breezily. Brown's been with the family for years and years and years. Faithful old retainer, and all that — very long service in the family."

"And worn the same clothes all the time, on his looks!" murmured Johnny Bull, unheard by Bunter.

"Shut up, you ass!" muttered Bob.

"Brown!" called out Bunter.

“Ere !” answered Brown.

“See that the bags are taken in, Brown.”

“O.K.,” said Brown.

Billy Bunter frowned. No doubt he realised that such replies from a butler were not in accordance with the best traditions of butlerhood.

“I say, you fellows, trot in.” said Bunter, hastily. “Brown will see to the baggage.

Where’s my uncle, Brown ?”

“In the ’all, Master William.”

“Come on, you chaps.”

Billy Bunter led the way into the porch and up the steps, his guests marching after him. Hubert was already taking the Rolls away round the corner of the building, doubtless to the garage. The gardener-driver and Brown remained to deal with the baggage. Leaving them to it, Harry Wharton and Co. accompanied Bunter in at the great doorway.

In the hall, a very small fire burned in a very large fireplace. It was a handsome old hall, the walls panelled in oak dark with age, with an old oaken gallery above, to which a wide curving staircase ascended. In front of the very small fire, with his back to it, and his plump hands folded under his coat-tails, stood a portly gentleman — whom they had seen before, in No. 7 Study at Greyfriars. Mr. Humphrey Carter was there to receive his guests — a hospitable smile on his face, and the firelight glimmering on his bald head and gold-rimmed glasses.

“Here we are, uncle !” chirruped Billy Bunter.

“So I see, William !” said Mr. Carter. He beamed on the Greyfriars juniors, and no one could have doubted that he was glad to see them there. Then he gave a slight start, as he recognised among them the mob who had burst into No. 7 Study so suddenly during his visit to Greyfriars. “Ah! I think I have seen some of your friends before, William.” He gave a genial fat laugh. “Well, boys will be boys — especially schoolboys, what ? I am very glad to see you at Tankerton Hall. I hope you will have a pleasant holiday here — a very pleasant holiday. Introduce your friends, William.” Billy Bunter proceeded to present the guests, in turn, each receiving a plump handshake from Mr. Carter. He beamed upon them all, and especially upon His Highness the Nabob of Bhanipur, In fact Mr. Carter seemed to be all beams, and the Greyfriars fellows could hardly have helped feeling pleased to see Bunter’s uncle so pleased to welcome them. There was no doubt, not a possible probable shadow of doubt, that Billy Bunter’s Christmas party were cordially and whole-heartedly welcome under the hospitable roof of Tankerton Hall.

CHAPTER XIII BUNTER ALL OVER!

“BROWN!”

“Ere, sir.”

“You will show the young gentlemen to their apartments, Brown.”

“Okay, sir.”

Mr. Carter had been chatting genially with the guests for about a quarter of an hour. Brown, having apparently dealt with the baggage by that time, appeared in the offing. The six guests rose to their feet as Mr. Carter spoke to Brown. Billy Bunter, who was ensconced in an armchair by the fire, remained where he was.

Bunter’s eyes, and spectacles, were turned on Harry Wharton and Co. in a slightly stealthy and watchful manner. There were traces of uneasiness in his fat face. For

some reason, best known to himself, the fat Owl was not at ease since the party had arrived at Tankerton Hall.

"Brown will show you your rooms," said Mr. Carter, with his fruity voice and beaming smile. "I trust that you will find yourselves perfectly comfortable. Our aim here is to give our guests every possible satisfaction."

The Greyfriars fellows could not help feeling that, for the master of a country house speaking to Christmas guests, Mr. Carter had a somewhat odd way of expressing himself. Such a remark might really have come more suitably from the proprietor of a boarding-house.

"Tea," continued Mr. Carter, "will be served in the drawing-room at five o'clock. May I suggest that you should be punctual. My house-keeper, Miss Pike, is somewhat precise."

"Oh! Certainly," stammered Harry Wharton.

"Esteemed punctuality is the procrastination of princes, as the English proverb remarkably observes," said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh, solemnly.

"Eh! Oh! Yes." Mr. Carter had not yet had time to get quite used to the somewhat exotic English that Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh had learned in his native land. "Quite! Exactly!"

"We won't be late, sir," said Bob Cherry, cheerily.

"This 'ere way!" said Brown.

Six fellows followed Brown up the great oak staircase. Billy Bunter did not stir from his armchair. But his eyes and, his spectacles followed the juniors with uneasy blinks, as they disappeared up the stairs.

"Jolly old place," remarked Squiff. as they came into the ancient oak gallery above the hall.

"Topping!" said Nugent.

The topfulness is terrific."

"Beats me, though," said Squiff. "I could hardly swallow it, even after you fellows told me you'd had it straight from the horse's mouth on the phone. But this jolly old show is the genuine goods, and no mistake about that."

Brown glanced back from the corner of a wide oak-walled corridor that led off the gallery.

"'Ere!" he said.

And he shuffled on.

The juniors smiled a little. There was no doubt that Brown was a little unusual in the butler line. Had they not known that he was butler, they would probably have taken him for a man-of-all-work, about the place. He certainly seemed to have manners and customs of his own.

They followed him into the corridor.

At the far end was a tall window, round which ivy clustered. Many doors opened on the corridor, which, with its walls of ancient oak black with age, was a little gloomy.

Brown stopped at the first door, and threw it open. He did not stand aside for the juniors to enter, but shuffled in, and they followed him.

"This 'ere is the Oak Room," said Brown.

The juniors glanced about them. It was a large and handsome apartment, with dark walls of oak panels, and great windows that looked towards the sea across the park. The furniture was all evidently old, but looked very comfortable. On a wide old hearth a log fire was piled ready for lighting, but it was unlighted, and the room seemed a little chilly.

"It's your sitting-room," added Brown.

“It’s what ?” ejaculated Nugent.

“Sitting-room.”

“Oh !”

“You ’as it to yourselves,” said Brown. “A party what takes these ’ere rooms always ’as this for a sitting-room.”

“Oh !”

The schoolboy guests at Tankerton Hail realised that they were to have a private sitting-room to themselves. They rather liked the idea, but it was a little unexpected.

“Like the fire lighted ?” asked Brown, glancing at them.

Yes, it’s a bit chilly,” said Bob.

“Okay ! Like a basket of logs brought up for the fire, too ?”

“Certainly.”

“Okay ! I’ll tell Sam to bring it up, and I’ll put it down.”

Exactly what Brown meant by that somewhat extraordinary remark, the juniors did not know. There seemed to be no reason why Sam, whoever Sam was, if he brought up a basket of logs, should not put it down unaided by Brown.

Brown extracted a match-box from his pocket, knelt before the huge old fireplace, and applied a match to the faggot under the pile of logs. There was a cheerful crackling, and leaping of flame, lighting up the lofty and shadowy room, and glistening on the old walls. Undoubtedly the fire made the Oak Room look a good deal more cosy and comfortable.

“Logs is dear,” Brown remarked, as he rose to his feet.

“Oh !”

“Well, if you don’t mind, I don’t,” said Brown. “Some does.”

“Jolly old room,” said Squiff, looking round. “Looks as if it might be centuries old.

We don’t have these historic spots in New South Wales. How old is this place, Brown ?”

“Undreds of years,” answered Brown. He stood before the fire, warming his hands behind him, and eyeing the Greyfriars party with a pair of very sharp and somewhat shifty eyes. “Fine old place it was, in the old days, too,” he added, reminiscently.

“They never knowed in them days what the old place would come down to, and you can lay to that.”

Brown gave a sniff, apparently expressive of his opinion of the present state of Tankerton Hall.

“Sir Julius often used this ’ere room,” he went on.

“Much of the time he was ’ere, in the last years.”

“Sir Julius?” repeated Bob Cherry. The juniors remembered that Billy Bunter had mentioned “Sir Julius ” in connection with the ghost story.

“My old guvnor,” said Brown.

“Sir Julius Carter ?” asked Squiff.

Brown stared at him.

“There ain’t no Sir Carters as I’ve ever heard on, and never was,” he answered. “My old guvnor was Sir Julius Tankerton.”

“But haven’t the Carters always lived here ?”

“Course they ain’t,” answered Brown. “Mr. Carter ain’t ’ad the place more’n six months.”

“Oh ” ejaculated all the Greyfriars guests, together.

“The Tankertons lived ’ere, right up to the war — leastways, Sir Julius did,” said Brown. “Old miser he was !”

Brown gave another sniff, indicative of anything but esteem for his old guvnor.

“Never spent a penny if a ’apenny would do — and ’im rolling in it. That was ’im !” Harry Wharton and Co. looked at Brown, and looked at one another. The news that Mr. Carter had occupied Tankerton Hall for only half a year had rather taken their breath away. They had, as a matter of course, believed little of what Billy Bunter had told them — but this was surprising news.

“Why, he’d be ’ere now, if he hadn’t got in the way of that there bomb in the west wing,” said Brown. “Counting over his hoard, he was, like an old miser, and up it went, and up he went. Or he’d be ’ere now, and you wouldn’t.”

“Aren’t there any Tankerton’s now ?” asked Bob.

“Only young Tankerton,” said Brown. “My old guvnor’s grandson, he is. That’s the only one left, as I knows on. He owns the place, and a fat lot of good it is to ’im.”

“He — he owns the place ?”

“Course he do, being the old covey’s grandson. Fat lot of good to an ex-officer without a bean in his trousis pocket,” said Brown, derisively. “I’ll bet he was glad to let it to Mr. Carter.”

“Oh !” the juniors almost gasped.

The talkative Brown was letting out things that Billy Bunter had quite omitted to mention.

According to the fat and fatuous Owl, Tankerton Hall was the ancestral home of his wealthy relatives, the Carters.

But perhaps it was not wholly a surprise to learn that Mr. Carter was not the proprietor, but only the tenant, of the Hall. In fact, now that they knew, they realised that they might have guessed that one!

“And didn’t the old bean leave his grandson anything but the house, Brown ?” asked Squiff.

“Not a bean,” answered Brown. “Cause why, it all went up in the west wing. Old miser he was, ’iding his money away. Young Tankerton got the place and the title, and not a ’arf-crown over and above.” Brown gave another of his expressive sniffs. “He don’t use the title — it would look pretty queer sticking it up over a garage along with ‘Cars of ’Ire !’ Wot ?”

“Oh, my hat! Does the new baronet run a garage!” exclaimed Bob.

“Man’s got to live,” said Brown. “He never got nothing from his grandfather, and he wouldn’t live on the fat of the land on the rent of this ’ere old show, neither, specially as Mr. Carter ain’t made much of a success of it.”

“Let’s go and see the other rooms,” said Harry Wharton, rather hastily. He did not want to hear about Mr. Carter’s affairs from Brown.

“Yes, let’s.” said Bob.

The juniors went out of the Oak Room, and Brown shuffled after them, and proceeded to show them their rooms. They were all on the same side of the old corridor as the Oak Room, with windows looking towards the sea, The many other rooms on the corridor, Brown explained, were unused, and locked up.

Then he shuffled away, and the Greyfriars fellows were left to themselves.

“We’re learning something,” chuckled Bob Cherry, after Brown was gone. “That benighted fat chump — !”

“ That frabjous Owl !” said Bob.

“That blithering bandersnatch !” growled Johnny Bull.

“Well, we jolly well knew that most of Bunter’s gas was gammon,” said Squiff. “And I suppose we might have guessed that Uncle Carter was only a tenant here.”

The mightfulness is terrific.”

“Ancestral hall of the Carters !” murmured Bob Cherry. “Oh ! The burbling blitherer !

Couldn't the fat chump understand that we should get wise to it when we got here ?”
“Can Bunter ever understand anything ?” grinned Nugent. “Mr. Carter can't have any idea that the bloated blitherer was spinning us that yarn. I suppose we can't kick him —.”

“The kickfulness is not the proper caper, under the esteemed and ridiculous avuncular roof! ” grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

Harry Wharton laughed.

“Bunter all over !” he said. “But Mr. Carter seems a jolly good sort, and he's made us welcome here, and anything else is no business of ours. It's a jolly old place for a Christmas holiday.”

“Hear, hear !” said Bob.

And it was a cheery party that went down to tea.

CHAPTER XIV GHOSTLY!

“JOLLY here!” said Squiff.

The hour was late, a good deal later than the accustomed bedtime of the Greyfriars juniors. Billy Bunter had gone to bed — perhaps feeling the need of repose after his exertions at supper. But the half-dozen guests had gathered round the fire in the Oak Room for a chat before turning in.

In the daytime the room was a little gloomy, but at night, with the electric light burning, the cheery blaze of the log fire glistening on old oak and the red berries of holly festooned here and there on the walls, it was bright and cheerful and cosy. Armchairs abounded, all very old but very comfortable. The juniors had drawn their chairs in a half-circle round the old hearth. Everyone was comfortable and cheerful, and not inclined to regret that they had allowed Billy Bunter to walk them off for Christmas.

They had found Mr. Carter a hospitable host — incessantly and invariably beaming and genial. Billy Bunter had impressed upon them that the “ grub ” would be good; a matter of the very first importance in Bunter's estimation. He had but stated the facts, for certainly it had proved very good and very ample.

Miss Pike, the house-keeper, had seemed to share Mr. Carter's' hospitable pleasure in seeing them there. She was a middle-aged lady with rather penetrating eyes and an efficient manner, a little reminiscent of a receptionist at an hotel. She did not, perhaps, quite seem to fit into the picture of a country-house. Still less did Brown, the butler, who undoubtedly had some unusual ways of his own. Several other servants whom the juniors had seen, seemed rather to recall a seaside boarding-house than a country mansion. Even Mr. Carter, genial and hospitable as he was, had an effect of not quite belonging to his surroundings.

In fact the only person they had seen, who seemed wholly to fit into the magnificent picture Billy Bunter had drawn of Tankerton Hall, was Hubert the chauffeur.

But all these little details, which might otherwise have perplexed them, seemed to be explained by what they had learned since their arrival, that Mr. Carter was, after all, only the tenant and not the proprietor of that historic abode, as the mendacious Owl had led them to believe.

“Jolly glad Bunter asked me here,” went on Squiff. “We haven't this kind of old show at home, you know, and I'm going to enjoy going over every foot of it. Bunter couldn't help telling crammers about it —.”

“It's his nature to,” agreed Bob.

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“Blessed if I quite make it out, though,” said Johnny Bull, slowly. “Bunter couldn’t tell the truth if he tried — not that he’s ever tried. But — here we are at Tankerton Hall.”

“We are!” said Bob. “We is !”

“It doesn’t matter a boiled bean to us whether his uncle is the owner or the tenant,” said Harry. “He’s made us very welcome, and he seems a jolly old boy.”

“But it’s queer,” said Johnny.

“What is the queerfulness, my esteemed Johnny?” asked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Well, why was Bunter so keen on getting us here?” asked Johnny. “He wangled it so that we practically had to come. Well, why?”

“Because we’re such jolly nice chaps, I suppose.” said Bob Cherry, with a cheery grin.

“It’s rather flattering, really,” said Nugent, laughing. “Bunter wouldn’t take no for an answer. Anyhow, here we are.”

Harry Wharton looked thoughtful. There was, perhaps, something a little perplexing in Billy Bunter’s eagerness to gather the Remove fellows at Tankerton Hall, and perhaps also in Uncle Carter’s unbounded hospitality to the crowd of schoolboys from Greyfriars. It was not what any man in the Remove would have expected from Bunter or the Bunter clan. Still, there it was.

“Still think there’s a catch in it, Johnny?” chuckled Bob.

Johnny Bull did not reply to that. But his expression indicated that he was by no means assured that there was not, somehow or another, a “catch” in it!

“Jolly old show, anyhow,” said Squiff. “Just the place I’d have picked out for Christmas, and I’m jolly glad Bunter asked me here. It’s decent of Bunter. He’s not on the make for once.”

“He’s always on the make,” remarked Johnny.

“Well, he can’t be on the make, now,” said Squiff. “We’re his guests here, aren’t we?”

“I don’t get it!” said Johnny.

“Oh, rot!” said Squiff. “We’re in the jolliest old show ever, for Christmas, and we couldn’t have had a warmer welcome. I only wish that the jolly old ghost would show up — that would put the lid on.” The Australian junior chuckled. “I’d like to tell them at home that I’d seen a genuine old family ghost, in a genuine old family mansion in the old country.”

Harry Wharton laughed.

“I hardly think that the ghost will walk,” he said. “This is exactly the sort of old place for a family ghost — or at least for a family ghost story. But —.”

“But family ghosts are out of date!” sighed Bob Cherry. “Grisly spectres are at a discount in these unromantic days.”

“One can just imagine a ghostly figure gliding along those dim old corridors,” remarked Nugent. “But —.”

“Or clanking its chains at midnight — the jolly old witching time of night when churchyards yawn!” said Johnny Bull. “But —.”

“Or groaning behind the wainscot,” said Harry.

“The butfulness is terrific,” remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

“But according to the absurd Bunter, other guests have been scarefully alarmed by a ridiculous ghost.”

“He won’t alarm us!” grunted Johnny.

“Hardly!” agreed Squiff. “I rather wish he’d walk while we’re here — but you can bet he won’t.”

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“Safe bet,” said Bob. “We shan’t hear any dismal old spectre groaning behind the walls in the dead of night — oh, my hat !”

Bob broke off with a gasp. All the fellows in the Oak Room started. For even as Bob was speaking, there came a strange sound in the silence of the night — a sound that was like a faint groan.

Startled, the juniors looked at one another, and cast hurried glances round the Oak Room.

“Oh !” gasped Nugent.

“What the thump —!” murmured Squiff.

“Did you fellows hear that ?” breathed Bob. He stared blankly at the old oak walls, glistening in the light.

“I — I heard —.”

“We all heard it,” said Harry. “It wasn’t the wind in the ivy —.”

“But — but it couldn’t have been —!”

“Listen !”

The juniors were all on their feet now. They stood in a startled group, their hearts beating rather fast. Faintly, but unmistakably, came the sound again — whence, they could not tell, but they all heard it — a low dismal groan.

It died away, leaving silence.

For almost a minute, nobody spoke. They stood listening, with painful intentness, but there was only silence. Squiff was the first to speak.

“That’s jolly queer !”

“The queerfulness is terrific,” murmured Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

“We — we heard it — !” muttered Nugent.

Harry Wharton quietly crossed to the door. Every fellow in the room had heard that strange eerie sound, but whence it came they could not tell. It seemed to Wharton that it must have come from the door, as that was the only way of approaching the Oak Room.

His comrades, grouped by the fire, watched him in silence.

He reached the door, grasped and turned the heavy old bronze handle, and threw the door suddenly open.

There was a light burning in the corridor. And the bright light from the Oak Room streamed out to the opposite wall. Every eye was on the doorway. But nothing was to be seen there.

Harry Wharton stepped quickly into the doorway, and looked to left and right, up the corridor to the tall window at the other end, down it to the oak gallery over the hall. But excepting for walls and doors, there was nothing to be seen — the corridor was empty and silent.

He turned back, breathing rather hard.

“See anybody ?” asked Frank Nugent. There was a faint tremor in his voice.

“Nobody’s there,” answered Harry.

“But — but we heard —.”

“There’s nobody !”

“Then it never came from the corridor !” said Squiff. “But — we all heard it ! It came from somewhere. What the dickens does it mean ?”

“Goodness knows.”

“The place can’t really be haunted,” said Bob Cherry.

“That’s rot.”

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“Utter rot !” grunted Johnny Bull. “It’s jolly queer — but it’s not a spook. That’s just rot.”

“The rotfulness is terrific,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “But the queerfulness is also great.”

“Well, it wasn’t a ghost, at any rate,” said Squiff. “If there’s anything in the ghost story Bunter let out, it’s somebody playing tricks — and now we’re here, we’re getting our turn.”

“That’s it — that must be it,” said Harry Wharton. “But who —?”

“And how ?” said Bob.

“And why ?” said Nugent.

To those questions no answer was forthcoming. For some minutes, the juniors stood listening, but there was no repetition of the ghostly sound. Only the moan of the December wind, and the rustle of the ancient ivy, reached their ears.

“Well, what about bed ?” said Squiff. “It’s jolly late.”

“Time we turned in,” agreed Bob. “No good sitting up and chewing it over, or we shall be getting nervy. I’m going to bed.”

And Bob went — and the others followed. But when their heads were on their pillows, they could not help listening, for some time, half-expecting to hear again that strange uncanny sound in the night. It was very late before the schoolboy guests at Tankerton Hall slept.

CHAPTER XV SMITHY IS AMUSED!

“I SAY, you fellows.”

“Say away !” said Bob Cherry, cheerily.

The Greyfriars guests were in the hall, after breakfast in the morning. Billy Bunter had lingered at the breakfast table, but now he joined the guests, with a smear of jam almost obliterating the smear of egg round capacious mouth.

He blinked at the six juniors, in the somewhat stealthy manner they had noticed several times since arriving at Tankerton Hall. They could hardly have failed to observe that the fat Owl did not seem easy in his fat mind.

“Like it here ?” asked Bunter.

“Fine,” said Bob.

“Jolly old place, and your uncle is a jolly old bean,” said Squiff.

“The likefulness is terrific, my esteemed fat Bunter.”

“The grub’s good, ain’t it ?” said Bunter.

“Tip-top !” chuckled Bob.

“Well, that’s the chief thing, after all. If the grub’s all right, everything’s all right, what ?”

“Couldn’t be anything in the jolly old universe more important !” said Bob Cherry, solemnly.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at ! I can jolly well tell you that the grub alone is worth the money,” said Bunter, warmly.

“Eh ?”

“What ?”

“I — I — I mean —,” Bunter stammered. “I — I don’t mean — that is, I — I mean — I mean no expense is spared — regardless of expense, you know.”

“Oh !”

“Wait till you see the turkey !” said Bunter. “And the Christmas pudding! Best of everything, and lots and lots! I don’t think you chaps ought to grumble afterwards, when —.”

“When what ?”

“Oh, I — I — I mean —,” Bunter stammered again. “I — I mean — oh ! nothing !” The juniors regarded him very curiously. Evidently Bunter had been, once more, on the verge of letting out the mysterious communication, which he had nearly let out in the car coming to Tankerton Hall. What that mysterious communication might be, they could not begin to guess. Whatever it was, it seemed to weigh somehow on the fat Owl’s mind.

“Look here, Bunter, what the dickens do you mean ?” asked Johnny Bull.

“Nothing, old chap! Nothing at all ! I —.”

Buzzzzzz! It was the ring of the telephone, from the cabinet adjoining the hall. Billy Bunter seemed rather glad of the interruption.

“I shouldn’t wonder if that’s Bessie,” he said. “Bessie’s coming for Christmas, you know. She hasn’t told me the time of her train yet.”

Miss Pike came to take the call. The juniors heard her efficient, staccato voice from the telephone cabinet.

“Tankerton Hall !” said Miss Pike, into the transmitter, really as if she were giving the name of a place of business to a potential customer. A moment or two later, she added, “Yes, Master Wharton is here! I will call him.”

Miss Pike stepped from the cabinet, leaving the receiver off the hooks. She glanced across at the group of juniors.

“Master Wharton ! Someone named Vernon-Smith is asking for you,” she said.

“Oh ! Thanks,” said Harry.

“Old Smithy’s rung up to wish us a Merry Christmas,” said Bob. “Looks as if he’s found out that there really is a Tankerton Hall after all.”

“Come and listen-in, you fellows,” said Harry.

Miss Pike rustled away, and the Greyfriars juniors crowded into the telephone cabinet, to hear what Smithy had to say. Harry Wharton took up the receiver, and spoke cheerily into the mouthpiece.

“Hallo ! Wharton speaking ! Is that Smithy ?”

“Little me !” came back the rather strident tones of the Bounder. “You’re at Tankerton Hall now, what ?”

“Yes, we’re all here, Smithy.”

A chuckle was audible over the wires. Herbert Vernon Smith, at the other end, seemed to be amused about something.

“Staying over Christmas ?” he said.

“Eh ? Of course,” answered Harry. “We’re here for a couple of weeks. What do you mean, Smithy ?”

Another chuckle !

“Has Bunter told you anything yet ?” asked the Bounder.

“What the dickens —!” muttered Bob, and all the juniors stared at one another. That Bunter had something to tell them, which he had twice nearly told, but still refrained from telling, they could not help being aware. But how the Bounder knew anything about it was quite mystifying.

“Look here, Smithy, what do you mean ?” exclaimed Wharton.

“Then Bunter hasn’t told you ?” chuckled Smithy. “Ha, ha, ha! But haven’t you found out for yourselves ?”

“What is there to find out ?” demanded Wharton.

“Then you haven’t ! Ha, ha, ha !” It was almost a yell of merriment from the Bounder’s end. “Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, cut the cackle, Smithy !” exclaimed Harry Wharton, sharply. “We’ve learned that Bunter’s uncle is a tenant here, not proprietor, as that fat ass told us, if that’s what you mean.”

“Nothing else ?” chuckled the Bounder.

“Is there anything else ?”

“Oh, lots! That’s merely a detail !” chortled the Bounder. “Ha, ha ! Didn’t I tell you it was all spoof, as I jolly well knew it was.”

“You silly ass ! It’s nothing of the kind ! We’re at Tankerton Hall — we’ve had a jolly warm welcome, and everything is O.K. Mr. Carter is hospitality itself, and couldn’t have been more pleased to see us.”

“Bet he was ! Hasn’t he told you anything either ?”

“What was there to tell us ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Look here, Smithy, if you’ve rung up just to cackle like a chicken —.”

“Oh, my hat! This is a record, even for Bunter !” chuckled Smithy. “I was a bit flummoxed when that Rolls came — dashed if I didn’t almost begin to believe that Bunter had told the truth for once ! But, of course, he couldn’t.”

“But I tell you everything here is O.K.,” snapped Wharton. He was getting a little exasperated. “What the thump do you mean ?”

“You see, I’ve been making a spot of inquiry since I got home ! I couldn’t make it out, and I don’t like not making a thing out. So I looked out some information about Tankerton Hall. See ?”

“Well, what about it ?”

“I told you that fat villain was pulling your leg —.”

“Yes, you did, and you needn’t tell us again,” said Wharton, gruffly. “We’re Bunter’s guests here, and we don’t want to hear any more of it.”

“Hear, hear !” said Bob.

“Hoity-toity !” came the Bounder’s mocking voice over the wires. “But he was pulling your leg, just as I told you.”

“Rubbish!”

“The old bean can’t be in it !” went on Smithy. “I’ve no doubt he takes it for granted that Bunter’s told you.”

“Told us what ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Will you tell us what you mean, Smithy, you gurgling fathead ?” exclaimed the captain of the Remove, exasperated.

“Ha, ha, ha ! No — I won’t spoil the surprise you’ve got coming ! I wondered whether you’d got wise to it yet, that’s why I rang up —.”

“Wise to what ?” demanded Wharton.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Six fellows could plainly hear the Bounder’s yell of laughter. Billy Bunter had deposited his weight in an armchair by the fire, and was concentrated on a packet of toffee, unheeding the telephone. He was deeply interested in toffee, and not at all in Smithy. But all Bunter’s guests were interested, and puzzled and exasperated too. Evidently Smithy had found out, or fancied he had found out, something about Tankerton Hall, that was unknown to them. They could not even surmise what it was. And as they were still in the dark, it seemed that the sardonic Bounder was going to

leave them in the dark.

“Oh, my hat !” Smithy was gasping with merriment. “It’s rich — too rich! You innocent little ducks —.”

“Look here —.”

“I hope you’ll have a Merry Christmas! Make the most of it! After the feast comes the reckoning, you know.”

“What do you mean ?”

“Ha, ha, ha !” yelled the Bounder. “You knew better than I did, didn’t you? Ha, ha, ha! And you’ve let that fat spoofer diddle you —.”

“If that’s all you’ve got to say —.”

“That’s all! I won’t spoil the surprise! Ha, ha, ha! Don’t quite slaughter Bunter when you get wise to it! Ha, ha, ha! Oh, you innocent lambs —!” The Bounder went off into another yell.

“That’s enough,” snapped Harry Wharton, and he banged the receiver back on the hooks. And that was that!

CHAPTER XVI SIR HUBERT!

HALLO, halo, hallo!” ejaculated Bob Cherry.

“What— ?”

“Look !” said Bob.

“Oh !”

“Great pip !”

Six fellows came to a halt, and stared.

It was a bright frosty morning. The Famous Five and Squiff had turned out for a walk down the hill to the sea.

Billy Bunter preferred to frowst in an armchair by the fire. But the more strenuous members of the party at Tankerton Hall were full of beans, and enjoying the frosty air and the keen December wind.

They walked out in a cheery bunch at the gateway. The road was bordered on one side by the old stone wall enclosing the spacious grounds of Tankerton Hall. At a little distance, they passed another gate, which gave access to the garage.

And what they saw at that gate made them stop — and stare!

Big double-gates stood wide open. Within, was a large paved yard, with the garage beyond. In the yard they could see Hubert, the chauffeur, in overalls — looking rather less superb than on the previous day — busily occupied in cleaning a car.

But it was not at Hubert that the Greyfriars juniors were looking. They were looking at a board fixed over the garage gateway. They stared at it. They almost goggled at it.

Many little things at Tankerton Hall had already surprised them. But this was not a little surprise. It was a big one. For the board over the garage gate bore, in gilt letters, the legend

Deleted: :

TANKERTON GARAGE CARS FOR HIRE

They gazed at it !

Harry Wharton and Co. had already learned, from Brown the somewhat peculiar butler, that Bunter’s Uncle Carter was not lord and master of Tankerton Hall, as the fat and fatuous Owl had averred, but merely the tenant thereof. The old Hall, with its

wide grounds and lake and woodland, belonged to an ex-officer who had been left, as Brown had elegantly expressed it, without a bean in his trousers' pocket, and had been glad to let the place to Mr. Carter. But they had supposed, without thinking about it, that the tenant of the Hall was keeping up the place more or less in the old style. This did not look like it!

"Tankerton Garage!" murmured Nugent.

"Cars for hire!" said Squiff. "My hat!"

"Well," said Bob, blankly. "This beats it!"

"The beatfulness is terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

"Bunter never told us this!" chuckled Nugent.

"We're learning quite a lot of things that Bunter never told us," said Harry Wharton, drily.

"And I'll bet there's more to come!" grunted Johnny Bull. "I don't make this place out. But we've landed in a queer show."

The other fellows could not help agreeing with Johnny. It was quite an astonishing discovery that the garage appertaining to Mr. Carter's manorial residence was run as a public garage, with cars for hire. Really, it was most unexpected.

"Oh!" ejaculated Bob, suddenly. "I wonder —."

"Well?"

"Young Tankerton," said Bob. "You remember what Brown told us — old Sir Julius's grandson was left without a bean, and he runs a garage for a living. I wonder if this is the jolly old garage he runs."

"Oh!" said Harry. "I suppose that's it."

"That must be it," said Nugent, with a nod. "Can't be Bunter's flunky who's running the garage business, I suppose!"

Bob Cherry chuckled.

"That wouldn't quite fit into the picture of the jolly old wealthy uncle rolling in filthy lucre!" he remarked.

"Hardly," said Harry, laughing.

"That's all Bunter's gammon," said Johnny Bull. "Uncle Carter's a jolly old bean, and he's jolly hospitable, but he's no more rolling in oof than the Bunters are. I fancy he would smack Bunter's fat head if he knew the crammers that fat chump has been telling us."

"Well, I bet you this is young Tankerton's garage," said Bob. "I'll jolly well ask Hubert — he will know."

Bob stepped into the gateway. Hubert, busily occupied, had not looked round, and seemed unaware of the group of schoolboys.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob.

Hubert looked round at that! He touched his cap to the Greyfriars fellows.

"Good morning, sir!" he said, politely.

"Top of the morning!" said Bob, affably, and Hubert smiled. The young man had a very pleasant smile.

"If you have come for a car, sir —!" he began.

"Oh, no! Just wandering around," answered Bob. "We've been looking at that board over the gate!"

"Have you, sir?" said Hubert. His expression indicated a faint surprise. Hubert, apparently, saw nothing unusual in the board announcing that cars were for hire at the garage of Tankerton Hall.

"It was a bit of a surprise, you know," said Bob.

"Was it, sir?"

“Well, yes, rather. Have you ever come across young Tankerton, Hubert ?”
 Hubert gave quite a start.
 “Who, sir ?” he ejaculated.
 “Young Tankerton — grandson of the old bean who used to own this place,” said Bob. “We’ve been told that he runs a garage.”
 Hubert gave him a very curious look.
 “What you have been told is quite correct, sir,” he answered.
 “You know the chap?” asked Bob.
 “Very well, indeed, sir.”
 “Then you know whether this is the garage he runs?”
 “Quite so, sir. This certainly is the garage he runs.”
 “Didn’t I jolly well tell you fellows so ?” exclaimed Bob. “This is young Tankerton’s garage. Do you drive for him, Hubert ?”
 “Certainly, sir.”
 “But you’re Mr. Carter’s chauffeur, aren’t you ?” asked Nugent.
 “When required, sir ! At other times I am at the service of the public.”
 “Oh !”
 “Sort of part-time job, what ?” said Bob, grinning.
 “Just so, sir.”
 “But these are Mr. Carter’s cars, aren’t they ?” asked Nugent, puzzled.
 “Oh, no, sir ! They belong to the garage. Mr. Carter and his guests use them as required, and they are for hire at other times.”
 “Oh, jumping kangaroos !” murmured Squiff. The juniors could not help smiling. The garage doors were open, and they could see that there was accommodation for only two cars. It was the Rolls that Hubert had been cleaning, and the Ford was in the garage. The cars that were for hire, were the two that had conveyed the Greyfriars party from the school to Tankerton Hall the previous day. That magnificent Rolls, which Billy Bunter had been so anxious to show off to all Greyfriars, was for hire by the general public, with the services of the superb chauffeur thrown in as driver! Which certainly did not fit into the picture drawn by the egregious Owl of his rich relative’s palatial abode and its sumptuous appointments!
 “I see,” said Bob. “When young Tankerton let the place to Mr. Carter, he kept the garage to run his car business. Is that it ?”
 “Exactly, sir.”
 “Rough luck on a chap owning a jolly old place like this, to have to set up Cars for Hire in a corner of it,” remarked Bob.
 Hubert gave a slight shrug of the shoulders.
 “There is rough luck for many people in these postwar days, sir,” he answered. “Many ex-officers have set up in the garage business. It’s not a bad show, and there’s the advantage of open air.”
 “Doesn’t he grouse a lot ?” asked Bob.
 Hubert smiled.
 “No, sir, I don’t think he grouses a lot. Perhaps a little when there are difficulties about petrol.”
 “And he’s a jolly old baronet, isn’t he ?” said Bob, “Does he ever drive the cars himself, Hubert ?”
 “As often as I do, sir.”
 “Well, he must be a jolly sensible and level-headed chap, to make the best of things, instead of grouching about what can’t be helped,” remarked Bob. “Lots of chaps in his shoes would be pulling a thumping long face about it.”

"I believe that he is, as you say, a level-headed chap, sir," said Hubert, with a glimmer of amusement in his eyes. "And always at your service when you require a car!" Always on the spot and ready for business, sir."

"Oh! Does he live here?" asked Bob.

"Yes, in rooms over the garage."

Bob whistled.

"With another Johnny living in his jolly old ancestral hall!" he said. "And he's the owner of the whole show, and descended from no end of Tankertons. Must be a fearfully sensible and good-tempered chap to take it smiling. Well, we'd better push along, you chaps — we're interrupting Hubert, and he's got work to do. Cheerio, Hubert."

"Cheerio, sir!" said Hubert. There was a faint grin on his face. As the juniors turned to go he added, "I gather from your remarks, young gentlemen, that my name has not been mentioned in your hearing."

Bob glanced back.

"Eh! Only Hubert," he said.

"An old family name, sir," said the chauffeur. "My other name is Tankerton."

"Eh!"

"What!"

"Oh, my hat!"

Harry Wharton and Co. gazed blankly at Hubert the chauffeur. He touched his cap, picked up the rag with which he had been polishing a mudguard, and resumed that occupation. And the Greyfriars fellows resumed their walk down the hill, in a state of considerable astonishment, leaving Sir Hubert Tankerton industriously polishing the mudguard.

CHAPTER XVII NOT FOR BUNTER!

"NONSENSE, William!"

"Oh, really, sir —."

"I said nonsense, William!"

But it's Christmas Eve —."

"I am aware of that, William."

"And Bessie's coming to-day —."

"I had not forgotten that your sister is coming to-day, William."

"I told her I'd meet her at the station —."

"Certainly you should do so, William. I trust that you are not too slack and lazy to walk a mile downhill."

"Oh, crikey!" said Billy Bunter. Apparently the prospect of walking a mile, even downhill, had a dismaying effect on the Owl of the Greyfriars Remove.

Harry Wharton and Co. certainly had no desire to overhear that colloquy between William George Bunter and his Uncle Carter. But really, they could not help it.

They were in the hall. Mr. Carter was in the library. The library opened from the hall, and Bunter, when he went in, had left the door half-open. So it was quite unavoidable and inevitable that every word uttered in the library should reach every ear in the hall.

"But I say —!" recommenced Bunter.

"That will do, William."

"I mean, it's uphill coming back," explained Bunter. "I'm not thinking about myself, of course, I never do. But Bessie —."

Deleted: :

“There is a bus from the station regularly every hour, William. The fare is fivepence
“I — I’d rather have the car ! I mean, Bessie would, if — if you don’t object —.”
“I had better speak plainly to you, William!” came Mr. Carter’s fruity voice, with a
severe tone in it. “You are here for the holidays. That is just and fair, after the service
you have done me. But it does not include expensive motoring. You cannot expect
that.”

The Greyfriars fellows in the hall were looking, and feeling, a little uncomfortable, far
from enjoying this unexpected glimpse behind the scenes, as it were, at Tankerton
Hall. Bob Cherry jumped up.

“Slide !” he whispered.

“The slidefulness is the proper caper, my esteemed chums !” murmured Hurree
Jamset Ram Singh.

And the six juniors lost no time in going out on the terrace. The remainder of that
somewhat peculiar colloquy was lost on them.

A few minutes later Billy Bunter came out through the old stone porch, blinking
round him through his big spectacles.

“Oh, here you are,” he said.

“Here we jolly well are, old bean,” said Bob. “Coming skating ? I’ve had a look at the
ice on the lake, and it’s topping.”

“Never mind that now,” said Bunter. “I say, you fellows, you remember I told you
Bessie was coming to-day. She’s coming by train to Folkestone, and I was going to
meet her at the station, but it’s a mile away — I — I mean, I’ve got a pain in my
leg —.”

“Oh, my hat !” ejaculated Bob.

The juniors tried hard not to smile.

“I can hardly walk,” said Bunter, pathetically. “It’s a touch of plumbago, I
think — came on quite suddenly.”

“I — I hardly think I could step into the car. In — in fact, I know I couldn’t !”

“Oh !”

“I shan’t be able to go to the station,” said Bunter. “I shall have to rest my foot — I
mean my leg. Which of you fellows would like to go and meet Bessie’s train ? Nice
run in the Rolls to Folkestone and back, what ?”

“In the Rolls !” repeated Bob.

“Is the Rolls available ?” asked Nugent.

“Eh ! Oh ! Yes, of course. Whenever you fellows want the car, you’ve only to say the
word. I’ve told you so before. Everything you want, here,” said Bunter, breezily. “Did
you say you’d like to go, Bob ?”

The juniors gazed at Bunter. Obviously he had no idea of what they had heard in the
hall. But unless their ears had deceived them, they had distinctly heard Mr. Carter
state that the car was not available to fetch Miss Elizabeth Bunter from the station. If
Bunter went, Bunter had to walk, and return by bus with Bessie. That, evidently, was
the reason why Bunter was not going. It seemed a little odd, if the car was available
for the other fellows, but not for Mr. Carter’s nephew.

“You’d like the run, Bob, old chap,” urged Bunter.

“I wouldn’t mind,” said Bob. “But —.”

“Bessie will be pleased to see you at the station, old chap. She likes you, you know,”
said Bunter.

“Oh! Does she ?”

“Oh, yes, quite a lot. She doesn’t think you’re a clumsy ass with great big feet, old
fellow —.”

“What ?”

“If she’s said so, it was only a joke. Besides, she never said so.”

“You fat ass —.”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“If we’re going to skate —!” began Johnny Bull. “Shut up a minute, old chap,” said Bunter. “Somebody’s got to go and fetch Bessie. I can’t go with this awful pain in my foot —.”

“As well as in your leg ?” asked Bob, sarcastically.

“Eh ! I mean, in my leg,” said Bunter, hastily.

“Mind, it ain’t because my Uncle Carter won’t let me have the car —.”

“Oh ! Isn’t it ?” gasped Bob.

“Not at all ! I can have the car whenever I jolly well like, of course. I’m Uncle Carter’s favourite nephew, you know, and he’d do anything for me. If I wanted the car, I should simply ask him to ring up Hubert at the garage and he would do it like a shot.”

“Oh !”

“But I can’t get about with this sprained ankle —.”

“That what ?”

“I mean this pained foot — that is, this awful pain in my leg. I say, you fellows, you’re having a good time here, ain’t you ? Well I think one of you might run down in the car for Bessie. Will you go, Bob ?”

Bob made a grimace. The other fellows were going skating on the frozen lake that morning, and Bob wanted to skate with his friends. Neither was he yearning for the fascinating society of Miss Elizabeth Bunter of Cliff House School. But he was all good-nature.

“I’ll go if you like,” he said. “But I don’t want the car.”

“Eh ! Why not ?” asked Bunter.

“Well, I don’t,” answered Bob, without explaining why not. “I’ll walk down and come up by bus.”

Billy Bunter shook a fat head.

“Bessie wouldn’t like that,” he said decidedly. “She doesn’t like scrambling about on crowded buses any more than I do. Take the car.”

“Look here, Bunter,” said Bob Cherry. “I’ll walk down to Folkestone if you like, and bring Bessie up in the bus. But I won’t ask Mr. Carter for the car — and that’s that !”

“You needn’t,” said Bunter. “I’ll tell him you want the car, and he’ll ring Hubert at the garage. That’s all right.”

“But I don’t want the car,” hooted Bob.

“Bessie does if you don’t,” said Bunter. “Don’t be selfish, old chap. I never could stand selfishness.”

“You blithering owl —.”

“Oh, really, Cherry —.”

“I — I mean —.” Bob remembered that he was Bunter’s guest, and that politeness not necessary in the Remove passage at Greyfriars was required at Tankerton Hall. “I — I mean — I’ll go with pleasure, but never mind the car —.”

“But I do mind,” said Bunter. “I’ll go and mention it to Uncle Carter now.”

“Look here —.”

“Bessie forgot to mention what time her train was so the sooner you get off, the better. You might as well put your tie straight, as you’re going to meet a lady. He, he, he.”

“You footling — hem !”

“The car will be round in a minute or two,” said Bunter, and he rolled back into the

porch, and disappeared into the house.

Harry Wharton and Co. exchanged rather curious glances. After what they had heard only ten minutes ago, it seemed unlikely that the Rolls would be available to go down to the station for Bessie Bunter; and assuredly no member of the party would have cared to ask for it. Yet it seemed that Billy Bunter had no doubt on the subject. It really was puzzling.

“Bother !” said Bob. “I suppose I’d better take the car, if it comes round. But it seems dashed queer that Bunter’s the only fellow here who can’t have the car if he wants it.”

“Thumping queer,” said Squiff.

“The queerfulness is preposterous.”

“Blessed if I make it out,” said Johnny Bull. “But there are a dickens of a lot of things here that a fellow can’t make out.”

“Well, we’ll see if the car comes round,” said Bob.

The juniors did not have to wait long to see. In a few minutes there was the buzz of an engine, and the Rolls appeared from the direction of the garage, with Hubert at the wheel.

Hubert halted the car, stepped down, and touched his cap to the Greyfriars fellows. He opened the door of the car, and glanced at Bob.

“Mr. Cherry —!” he said.

“Did Mr. Carter order the car for me ?” asked Bob.

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, then,” said Bob. “See you fellows later.” The Rolls rolled away with Bob Cherry, down the hill to Folkestone, and the other fellows proceeded to the lake to skate — in a somewhat perplexed frame of mind. Why Billy Bunter couldn’t have the car, which was at the disposal of every other member of the party at Tankerton Hall, was a puzzle — to which no answer was apparent.

CHAPTER XVIII

BESSIE!

“OH !” gasped Bob Cherry.

He jumped.

It was a sudden poke in the ribs, with some sharp instrument, that made him gasp and jump. Luckily, his overcoat was some protection. But it was rather a painful jab, all the same.

The station platform was crowded. There was plenty of Christmas traffic. Bob, with a platform ticket, was on the spot, waiting for Miss Elizabeth Bunter. He had already waited over an hour, owing to the trifling circumstance that Miss Bunter had omitted to mention the time of her train. Three trains had come in, and disgorged their passengers without producing Bessie. Now a fourth was in and Bob was looking round for a figure resembling that of the Owl of Greyfriars, among some dozens of passengers who had alighted, when that sudden jab in his ribs made him gasp, jump, and spin round.

He gazed at a plump figure, and a plump face which was adorned, like Billy Bunter’s, with a pair of big spectacles. Apparently, while he was looking in one direction, Bessie Bunter had materialised from another — for there she was! She had a bag in one hand, a rug over her arm, and in the other hand an umbrella, with the business-end of which she had jabbed Bob, to draw his attention.

“Oh !” repeated Bob, with a wriggle. He raised his cap, with another wriggle. Bessie really had rather a heavy hand with an umbrella.

“I thought it was you,” said Bessie, cheerfully.

“Where’s Billy ?”

“Oh! I came instead of Billy —.”



THAT SUDDEN JAB IN THE RIBS MADE HIM GASP, JUMP,
AND SPIN ROUND

“Lazy as usual ?” said Bessie. “Take this bag, will you? It’s heavy! You needn’t call a porter! They want tipping! I don’t believe in tips! Here !”

Bob took the bag. It was, as Bessie said, heavy. Miss Bunter draped the rug over his other arm. She retained the umbrella — perhaps for further use as a weapon if required.

“Why hasn’t Billy come ?” she demanded.

Bob hesitated. Unofficially, he knew why Billy hadn’t come — it was because Uncle Carter wouldn’t let him have the car. Officially, from Bunter, it was because Bunter had a pain in his leg. Bob decided on giving the official reason.

“He said he had a pain,” he answered.

“Eaten too much, I expect,” said Bessie. “Or too jolly lazy! He said he would come in the car. I wondered whether Uncle Carter would let him have the car !”

“Oh! Did you ?” murmured Bob.

“Well, he would have to pay for it,” said Bessie. “Uncle Carter doesn’t like paying bills. He’s close.”

“Oh !”

“We shall have to get a taxi,” said Bessie.

“That’s all right,” said Bob. “I came down in the car, and it’s waiting outside the station.”

“Oh, good !” said Bessie. “Mind you don’t drop that bag! And don’t drop that rug to be trodden on. Boys are so clumsy.”

Bob made no reply to that. He was careful not to drop the bag, or the rug, as they pushed through the crowd to the exit, and emerged from the station.

There was a keen wind from the sea, with tiny snowflakes whirling on it. Bessie drew her scarf a little closer about her plump ears.

“Hold that broolly a minute,” she said.

“Oh! Certainly.”

Bob had a heavy bag in one hand, and a rug draped over the other arm — but he had a disengaged hand, into which Bessie pushed the umbrella. Miss Bunter proceeded to rummage in a pocket, and disinterred therefrom a paper bag. Bob waited. His cap was nearly blowing off, and he wondered how he would recapture it, if it went, being heavy-laden port and starboard. Miss Bunter extracted a peppermint from the paper bag, and transferred it to her mouth.

“Have one ?” she asked, extending the bag to Bob.

It was not quite clear how Bob was to have one, unless he dived for it with his teeth. He shook his head.

“No thanks! Shall we get to the car? It’s rather windy here.”

“Wait a minute,” said Bessie.

One plump cheek bulged with a big peppermint. Bessie added another, producing a similar bulge in the other plump cheek. Then she restored the paper bag to her pocket, and resumed possession of the umbrella.

“Where’s the car ?” she asked, blinking round through the big spectacles that were so like Billy Bunter’s.

“This way,” said Bob.

He was glad to get to the car. The playful wind threatened every moment to detach his cap from his head, and whirl it away into space.

Hubert relieved him of the bag and the rug — just in time, as a particularly fierce gust came blowing round a corner, and lifted his cap. Bob clutched at it just as it went, and saved it, while the wind blew out his mop of flaxen hair into a sort of halo.

“He, he, he!” chuckled Miss Bunter. She seemed amused. “I say, you look funny with your hair sticking out like that.”

“Oh! Do I ?” gasped Bob.

“Yes! He, he, he!”

Hubert opened the door of the car, and his two passengers got in. Hubert closed the door on them. Bob restored his rumpled hair to some order, and jammed the cap back on it. The Rolls rolled off, threading busy streets. Miss Bunter settled down comfortably, chewed peppermints, and gave a blink at the back of the driver.

“That young man’s a baronet,” she said. “You wouldn’t think it, seeing him drive the car, would you ? I don’t know what Uncle Carter pays him for his place, but you can bet it isn’t a lot. He’s close.”

“Oh !”

“Not that it’s worth much,” said Bessie. “What’s the good of being left a tremendous place with no money to keep it up? He couldn’t have lived in it. But I’ll bet Uncle Carter made a good bargain. That young man doesn’t know much about business.”

“I — I suppose he wouldn’t.”

“He won’t make much of that garage of his,” said Bessie, shaking her head. “If he fancied that Uncle Carter’s guests would mean good trade, I expect he’s found out his mistake by this time. Look at the way they cleared off.”

“Oh! Did they ?”

“Every one of them,” said Bessie. She blinked at Bob.

“Heard anything about ghosts ?” she asked.

“A — a little! Billy said something —.”

“He’d better not let Uncle Carter hear him,” chuckled Miss Bunter. “ Uncle Carter don’t like the subject, Of course, he never knew anything about it when he took the place over a few months ago. It rather flummoxed him.”

“Oh! Did it ?”

“Well, look at it,” said Bessie. “He fills the house, and then this ghost stuff gets about, and they all leave him in the lurch. I say, you don’t believe in ghosts ?”

“Hardly,” said Bob.

“Well, I don’t either,” said Bessie. “I shouldn’t have come here if I did. All the same, I don’t half like it. Lots of people believe that misers haunt the place where their hoard was hidden. Of course there isn’t any hoard there now — it was all blown to bits in the air-raid.”

“Was it ?” said Bob.

“Must have been,” said Bessie. “Sir Julius Tankerton kept it in the west wing, and the west wing went to bits when the bomb fell. Of course there was a lot of searching for it, but there was nothing but rubble. Fifty thousand pounds —.”

“What ?” ejaculated Bob.

“I suppose he was a bit cracked,” said Bessie. “He lived in that big place with only his man Brown to look after him, never spending a penny if he could help it. Hoarding it all, and then the bomb blew it up, and him too! Fifty thousand pounds! It would all have come to his grandson, if he’d had sense enough to keep it in the bank. But he was a miser! And the new baronet had to take to driving a car!”

“Rough luck,” said Bob.

“I expect he was jolly glad to let the place. It was shut up after the air-raid — nobody there except Brown. He was kept on as caretaker. I don’t like him.”

“Don’t you ?” said Bob.

“Too shifty !” said Bessie. “I wouldn’t have kept him on! I know why Uncle Carter did,” added Miss Bunter, with a sniff. “Cheap !”

“Eh ?”

“You see, Brown didn’t want to go, after being there so long. Sort of attached to the place. So Uncle Carter got him cheap. See ?”

“Oh !” gasped Bob.

He rather wished that Miss Bunter would not impart these confidences. To Billy Bunter he would probably have said, “Oh, chuck it!” But he did not feel that he could say “Oh, chuck it !” to Miss Bunter. So he changed the topic.

“Looks like more snow,” he remarked, glancing from the window. Folkestone had been left behind, and the Rolls was whizzing up the hill, between fields over which light snowflakes whirled on the wind. But Miss Bunter did not seem interested in snow. She replenished the supply of peppermints, from the paper bag, and resumed, with a voice slightly muffled by peppermints.

“Mouldy old place, isn’t it ?”

“Oh! I thought it a rather jolly old place,” said Bob.

“Too old and mouldy,” said Bessie. “All that dark oak — hundreds of years old. If I had the place, I’d have it all fresh painted. A pretty pink.”

“Oh, crumbs!” gasped Bob. “I — I — I mean, would you?”

“I’d brighten it up a bit,” said Bessie, nodding. “Gloomy old place — just where you’d expect to see a ghost. Not that I believe that Brown ever saw the ghost of old Sir Julius. He said he did.”

“Might have fancied he did !” suggested Bob.

“Drink, more likely,” said Bessie.

“Oh !”

“Miss Pike thinks she heard groans behind the walls. I heard her talking about it when I was there. Uncle Carter just sniffed.”

Bob started a little. He had not forgotten the strange sounds in the Oak room on the first night at Tankerton Hall. Apparently Mr. Carter’s housekeeper had also heard strange sounds in the night.

“I expect it was echoes,” said Bessie. “Those mouldy old places are full of queer echoes. But I’ll bet Uncle Carter’s sorry he took it on.”

“Eh! Why ?” asked Bob.

“Well, look how it turned out. He had more than a dozen guests, and they all went one after another. He was let down.”

“Let down ?”

“And it’s happened a lot of times, too. I don’t half like it,” said Bessie. “I don’t believe that Billy would half like it, either, if he thought about anything but the food.

“The food’s good, isn’t it ?”

“Fine !” said Bob, with a smile.

“Uncle Carter knows what’s what !” said Bessie, nodding her head sagely. “Feed them well, and they come again — that’s what he always says.”

“Oh!” gasped Bob. “Does he ?”

“Six of you there, from what Billy told me,” went on Miss Bunter. “I fancy there won’t be any more —.”

“Billy seemed to think there would be a lot of guests —.”

“Well, I fancy there won’t. Six isn’t too bad, after the last lot let Uncle Carter down. They just cleared off, and left him in the lurch after the ghost walked — or they fancied it did! Sort of brain-wave of Uncle Carter’s getting Billy to bring a crowd from his school, wasn’t it ?”

“Oh! Was it ?”

“Well, he was left with the house empty, and expenses running on,” said Bessie. “But I expect you’ll clear off, too, if you fancy you see a ghost. Don’t tell Uncle Carter I’ve said anything about ghosts, though,” added Miss Bunter. “I forgot that it wasn’t to be mentioned. He would be waxy. He just hates that story getting round, and frightening guests off.”

“Oh! Well, here we are,” said Bob, as Hubert turned the Rolls in at the old gateway of Tankerton Hall, and whizzed up the long avenue.

“I hope lunch will be ready,” said Bessie. “I’ve finished my peppermints. I had some toffee I was going to put in my handbag, but Sammy ate it. Boys are so greedy. Have you got any toffee ?”

“Sorry — no.”

“Well, I hope lunch will be ready. I’m hungry. I had nothing on the train but some sandwiches, and a few buns, and some butterscotch, and it was a whole hour.”

“Oh !”

The car stopped before the old stone porch, and Miss Bunter, and her bag and her rug, were safely landed. Brown came out for the bag, and Bessie blinked after Hubert, as he drove the car away, and then blinked at Bob.

“You haven’t paid him !” she remarked.

Bob Cherry jumped.

“What? Eh! Oh! No !” he stuttered.

“Well, I wouldn’t run a bill at a garage,” said Miss Bunter, with a wise shake of the head. “They pile it On! I know ’em !”

And Bessie Bunter rolled in, after Brown and the bag leaving Bob Cherry absolutely astounded by her last remark.

CHAPTER XIX THE EXPLORERS

“A HIDDEN hoard !”

“Just that !”

“Fifty thousand pounds !”

“So Bessie said !”

“Phew !”

The Famous Five and Squiff were strolling on the oak avenue after lunch, when Bob Cherry related the interesting information imparted by Bessie Bunter. The idea of so

huge a sum, lost amid the rubble of the ruined west wing. was rather exciting to the juniors.

“Sounds a bit steep,” said Squiff, dubiously.

“The steepfulness is a little terrific,” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Bob. “Brown told us that old Sir Julius was a miser, hiding away his money, and that that was how young Tankerton came to be left without a bean.”

“Yes, that’s so,” assented Harry Wharton. “But —.”

“Bunter never told us anything about it,” remarked Nugent.

“The fat villain never told us anything about the Tankerton’s,” snorted Bob. “He was spoofing us that this place was his Uncle Carter’s jolly old ancestral hall — till we got here! Now, from what Bessie said, the hoard was blown up in the air-raid. But suppose it was still spotted about somewhere! Might put our finger on it, what?”

Harry Wharton laughed.

“Not likely! They must have searched for it pretty thoroughly, if it was ever there —.”

“If !” said Johnny Bull.

“Bank on that,” said Squiff. “Young Tankerton would go over the place with a small comb, before he settled down to run a garage for a living.”

“Sort of !” grinned Nugent.

“Well, yes,” admitted Bob. “But you never know! Misers park their hoards in safe corners — might have been buried or something. What about a hunt for the jolly old hoard ?”

“But they must have searched every foot of the place —.”

“Might have missed it, all the same. We might give the place the once-over, at any rate,” said Bob. “I rather like that chap Hubert, and it’s tough on a giddy baronet to be hard up, with a pot of money lying about belonging to him. Fancy his face if we spotted it, and walked round to the garage and handed it to him on a plate !”

“Fancy !” chuckled Nugent.

“Well, wouldn’t it be topping ?” demanded Bob.

The topfulness would be terrific, my esteemed Bob, but the spotfulness is probably a boot on the other leg,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a dusky grin.

“Well, let’s have a look round, anyway,” said Bob.

“Oh, let’s !” said Squiff. “Might spot the cheery old ghost, too, if he happens to be walking early !”

“We’re about as likely to spot the ghost as the hoard, I think,” said Harry. “But we’ll have a look round, anyhow.”

“Come on,” said Bob. And he led the way, and his comrades followed him, in the direction of the ruined west wing of Tankerton Hall.

Bob, evidently, was keen. The other fellows were quite interested; though they did not seem quite to share Bob’s optimistic view that the hidden hoard might have survived the bombing, and that they might discover it, and walk it round to the garage as a happy surprise for Hubert!

The ruined west wing was a desolate spot. Fragments of the old walls were still standing, but almost all was rubble. An old arched doorway was blocked with the fragments of the fallen arch, and the bricks of an old chimney. The juniors scrambled in over the debris, and found themselves almost on the verge of a vast crater, that had been torn out by the exploding bombs. Heaps of rubble, broken chimney-pots, smashed slates, shattered remnants of old oak panels, were piled in and around the yawning crater.

“By gum! It must have been a bang !” said Bob, looking round. “Mind your step, you

fellows — some of this stuff might tumble over. Hallo, hallo, hallo ! Somebody's here already !”

From beyond a great mass of rubble, further along the edge of the crater, there was the sound of shuffling footsteps. The juniors all looked in the direction of the sound, and the next moment a stubby thick-set figure came into view, and they stared at Brown.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo !” called Bob.

Brown stared at the juniors. His expression did not indicate that he was pleased to see them.

“Oh! You !” he said.

“Little us !” agreed Bob, cheerily

“This 'ere ain't a safe place for schoolboys to scramble about,” said Brown. “You'd better keep out of this.”

“It doesn't look too safe, but we're going to explore it all the same.”

“Nothing 'ere to look at, except ruins,” said Brown. “I was jest looking round the place where my old guvnor was blowed up !” he added, as if he felt that his presence there needed some explanation.

“Well, we're going to look round for your old guvnor's hoard !” said Bob.

Brown gave a start.

“There ain't nothing left of that,” he said, staring. “It was all blowed to bits when the bomb fell. They never found a spot of it.”

“Then it really was here ?” asked Harry Wharton.

“Oh, it was 'ere all right. Everybody knowed it was 'ere. All the countryside knowed that my old guvnor was a miser, and cracked at that ! Every quid he had in the world, packed in the brass box, and there was a good many and you can lay to it.”

“Fifty thousand pounds ?” asked Squiff.

“So they said,” answered Brown. “It came out that he'd took all he had from the bank, after selling out investments and so on, and all in 'undred-pound notes. Often I see him with that brass box in his 'ands, and him gloating over it, the old miser. Cracked he was — thinking it would be safer in his own keeping if the Germans came !”

Brown gave a derisive snort. “All blowed up in the air-raid, and 'im too — that's 'ow safe it was.”

“I suppose there was plenty of searching for it afterwards ?” said Harry.

“You can lay to that,” said Brown. “Why, there was searching and searching for that there brass box, all over the 'ouse, though it was knowed that he kept it in this 'ere wing, cause why, the safe was there. They found some bits of the safe scattered about. Young Tankerton was rooting over these ruins for days on end, after he came back from the war, and me 'elping, me being caretaker 'ere at the time.”

“And you found nothing ?”

“There wasn't nothing to find. Only all this 'ere rubble,” said Brown, with a grunt.

“Looks hopeful, Bob!” remarked Nugent.

“Oh, you never know your luck,” said Bob, cheerfully. “We'll have a look round — might drop on something they've missed.”

“You'd better get out afore you break your necks tumbling about among all this 'ere rubble,” said Brown.

“Bow-wow !” said Bob.

Brown stared at him, and shuffled away. He scrambled over the debris in the shattered old doorway, and disappeared.

“Cheerful sort of johnny,” remarked Squiff. “Well, let's get going — it will be dark before long. I'll give you twopence a time for all the hundred-pound notes you pick up, Bob.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Br-r-r-r- !” said Bob.

Really, now that they were upon the spot, even the optimistic Bob had to admit that it did not look very hopeful. However, the juniors proceeded to root about among the rubble, staring into crevices, groping in cavities. displacing bricks and stones which rattled down with plenty of noise and dust. But of a brass box or banknotes they did not find — or really expect to find — a trace.

They scrambled down into the crater, which was still more wildly piled with rubble and wreckage. Falling stones and clouds of dust accompanied them.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo !” ejaculated Bob, as he stared round.

“Found anything ?” yawned Johnny Bull.

“Look ! This is a passage or something.”

Bob stared into an opening in the side of the crater, on the side towards the other wing of Tankerton Hall. It was the opening of a bricked passage, which evidently led away underground to the east wing.

A good deal of the rubble had been cleared away from the opening, no doubt by earlier searchers.

“An underground passage — sort of thing you’d expect to find in an old place like this,” said Bob. “I suppose it’s been searched — it looks as if a lot of this rubbish has been cleared away on purpose. Anybody got a torch ?”

Five heads were shaken.

“Well, I’ve got some matches,” said Bob. “We’ll see where it goes. Looks as if it goes right under the house. Might find something here.”

“Might !” murmured Nugent.

“The mightfulness is terrific.”

“Young Tankerton must have searched this tunnel,” said Johnny Bull. “He must have searched every inch of the place, hunting for the hoard.”

“We’re going to search it, too,” said Bob.

“Not with matches, fathead,” said Nugent. “I’ve got a flash-lamp in my bag — I’ll cut off and get it, if you like.”

“Good man,” said Bob. “Go it ! We’ll go ahead, and you can follow on.”

Frank Nugent hurried away and Bob, holding up a lighted match, stepped into the brick passage. His comrades followed him. The floor was of level brick, the passage about six feet wide, with an arched bricked roof. Ahead of the juniors was the blackest darkness.

A dozen paces from the opening, the match went out. The juniors came to a halt.

“Jolly here,” murmured Squiff. “If the jolly old ghost happens to be walking ——.”

“Fathead!” said Bob. “Hold on while I strike another match. Oh !” He gave a sudden jump. “Wha-a-at was that ?”

From the black darkness of the underground passage came a strange, eerie sound, that made the hearts of the juniors beat suddenly and unpleasantly, as they stared into the clinging gloom. It was the sound of a low groan, echoing eerily in the dark.

CHAPTER XX

THE GHOST OF TANKERTON HALL

HARRY WHARTON and Co. stood quite still, staring into the darkness of the underground passage.

Their hearts were thumping.

No member of the party was afflicted with “ nerves. ” None of them had the smallest spot of superstition. But there was something so strange, so uncanny, in that unexpected sound from the gloom, that it sent a startled thrill through every heart, as when they had heard it in the Oak Room.

“What — what was that?” Bob spoke in almost a whisper.

“Somebody’s here —,” muttered Harry.

“An echo —!” said Squiff.

“That wasn’t an echo — Oh! Listen!”

The sound was repeated — a low, groaning sound, faintly from the gloom. Nothing could be seen — the darkness was impenetrable. But they knew that there was someone — or something ! — in the dark passage, and not far away from them.

“Another match, Bob — quick !” breathed Wharton.

“Quick, old chap,” said Squiff.

There was a scratch of a match. Bob held it up, and the little flame flickered in the gloom. It made hardly a patch of light in the dark passage. But it enabled the juniors to see — and they stared round, hardly knowing what they expected to meet their eyes.

But nothing met their eyes except the level brick floor and the brick arch over their heads. They were alone in the underground passage.

Bob Cherry struck another match, and another. But there was nothing to be seen.

They looked at one another with startled eyes.

“Must have been some sort of an echo,” said Squiff, at last.

Harry Wharton shook his head.

“It wasn’t an echo,” he said. “It wasn’t — the other night —.”

“There’s nobody here —.”

“Must be somebody —.”

“Well, who the dickens ?” said Squiff. “And where ?”

“The wherefulness is terrific.”

“It’s a trick !” growled Johnny Bull. “Same as the other night. We know people have been scared here by some ghost bunk. It’s some silly ass leg-pulling.”

“Why the thump should anybody be hanging about in this dismal hole, to play tricks?” said Squiff.

Johnny had no answer to make to that.

“Look here,” said Bob. “If that wasn’t some queer echo, somebody’s here trying to frighten us. We’re not going to be scared.”

“No fear!” agreed Squiff. “Push on — and if there’s anybody here playing tricks, we’ll jolly well scrag him. And if it’s the jolly old ghost of Tankerton Hall, we’ll be the chaps to put salt on his tail !”

“Come on !” said Bob.

He tramped on up the passage, scratching one match after another to light the way.

His comrades followed him, alert and watchful, and perhaps not wholly easy in their minds.

“Oh! Look !” Johnny Bull fairly yelled. “Look !”

“Oh !”

“What —!”

“Good heavens !”

The Greyfriars fellows came to a sudden stop. They stared, with their eyes almost starting from their heads. In the light of a flickering match in Bob’s hand, a strange and startling vision met their eyes — a dim, shadowy figure, and a face white as chalk, half-hidden by bushy white eyebrows, a bushy white beard, and a tangle of

white hair. It was the face of an old, old man, with no vestige of the colour of life, staring at them from the dark.

Spell-bound, rooted to the floor, the juniors stared at that strange and terrible vision from the darkness. It was only for a moment — the match went out, and the apparition was swallowed up in the gloom.

For a moment longer they stood, as if unable to move. Then, with one accord, they turned, and scampered back to the opening of the passage in the crater. They came stumbling out into the open, panting for breath.

It was a relief to get into the open air, and feel the keen December wind on their faces. They came to a halt among the rubble at the bottom of the crater, panting. Then they stood looking at one another. For several minutes there was silence. Squiff broke it.

“The ghost of Tankerton Hall !” he said. “No wonder Uncle Carter’s guests were scared — if they saw — that !”

“No wonder,” said Bob, with a shiver.

“The wonderfulness is not terrific,” murmured Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

Johnny Bull gave a snort.

“It’s all bunk,” he said. Johnny had been as startled as the rest, but his solid common-sense soon rallied from the shock. “We don’t believe in ghosts in the daylight, so where’s the sense of believing in them in the dark ? Look here, let’s go back, and see what it was.”

“Wait till Franky gets here with the flash-lamp,” said Bob. “I don’t want to run into that again in the dark.”

“It must be a trick of some sort,” said Harry Wharton, slowly. “It can’t be anything else. But who — and why? It beats me.”

“Nobody knew we were coming to explore this place,” said Bob. “It can’t have been fixed up to scare us. And would a silly ass playing tricks, hang about in that black hole on the chance of somebody coming along ?”

“Not likely.”

“I can’t make that out,” said Johnny. “But it’s all bunk, and if people let it frighten them away, they were silly owls.”

“Well, they did,” said Bob. “We’ve had it from Bunter and from Bessie, too, that Uncle Carter’s guests were scared away —.”

“We’re not going to be scared, at any rate. Somebody’s there, and we’ll root him out when we get a light.”

“Here comes Franky,” said Bob.

There was a clatter of falling debris, as Frank Nugent came scrambling down the crater, with a flash-lamp in his hand.

“Here you are,” he said. “Why — what — anything up? “ He stared at the group of juniors. It was easy to see that something had happened during his brief absence.

“You haven’t landed on the hoard —.”

“We’ve landed on the ghost,” said Squiff.

Nugent laughed.

“Honest Injun, Franky,” said Bob. “We’ve seen it — a horrid white face — enough to make your flesh creep —.”

“Oh, my hat! The ghost walking over his hoard, what? Sure you didn’t fancy it ?”

“No, we didn’t,” growled Johnny Bull. “We saw it — only a glimpse, but we saw it, and we jolly well bolted. Now we’re going back to look for it.”

“Must be somebody larking,” said Nugent.

“We’ll give him larks ! Hand me that lamp.”

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Johnny took the flash-lamp from Nugent's hand, flashed on the light, and marched doggedly into the underground passage. The other fellows followed on. That dark, gloomy recess was not attractive, after what they had seen. But they had made up their minds to discover who — or what — lurked there in the dark. That some trick had been played, they could hardly doubt — but their hearts were beating a little faster, as the daylight disappeared behind them.

Johnny Bull marched on steadily, holding up the light. They reached the spot where that strange, deathly face had been seen — but there was nothing to be seen now. The bright light gleamed on damp old brickwork, and nothing else.

"Keep on," said Bob. "We'll follow it to the end."

They pushed on, and in a few minutes more, reached the end of the passage. Johnny Bull flashed the light upon a low, iron-banded oak door, set in a doorway of stone blocks. The juniors came to a halt. There was no further progress to be made. Bob Cherry shoved hard at the oak door, but it did not stir.

"Fastened on the other side," said Bob. "Looks as if it's never opened."

Snort from Johnny Bull.

"Must have been opened," he said. "It's the only way out of this passage — and we've found nobody here. Whoever it was, went through that doorway."

"I — I suppose so," said Harry slowly.

"No supposing about it — he did!" snorted Johnny. "Unless you think it was a spook!"

"Well, the dashed door won't open," said Squiff. "We must be under the east wing of Tankerton Hall now. I expect that door leads into a vault or something. There'd be a way out, if we could get through."

"Only we can't," said Harry. "We've got to go back."

There was evidently nothing else to be done. Johnny Bull gave the door a final glare — but glares had no effect on iron bands and solid oak. He turned, and the juniors retraced their steps along the shadowy passage.

They were rather glad to emerge into the open air again. The December dusk was falling, as they came out into the crater in the west wing.

"Well," said Bob. "We haven't spotted the jolly old hoard, and we shan't be able to walk round to the garage and hand it to Hubert on a plate. But we've spotted the ghost of Tankerton Hall — we know now that the ghost does walk!"

"But who —?" said Harry.

"And why —?" said Squiff.

"The whofulness and the whyfulness are terrific," remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But the walkfulness is a deadly cert."

"And next time we catch him walking, we'll jolly well collar him, and scrag him," growled Johnny Bull. "If he wants to frighten us away from Tankerton Hall, he's got another guess coming."

"Hear, hear!" said Bob.

And the juniors scrambled up out of the crater. They were puzzled and mystified, but one thing was quite certain, they were not going, like Mr. Carter's earlier guests, to be scared away by the ghost of Tankerton Hall.

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CHAPTER XXI NOT AN EXTRA!

“MERRY Christmas, sir !”

Mr. Carter beamed.

He was standing in his favourite attitude, with his plump back to the fireplace in the hall, his plump hands folded under his coat-tails, when Harry Wharton and Co. came in a cheery crowd down the old oak staircase.

Wintry sunshine gleamed on the old diamond-paned windows, on ivy ridged with snow, and on the bald crown of Mr. Carter’s head. But his plump features shone even more brightly than that shining crown.

The master of Tankerton Hall, whose hospitable geniality had never failed for a moment since the Greyfriars guests had arrived, seemed more genial than ever that morning. The presence of the Greyfriars fellows under his roof obviously gave him satisfaction, and really that was very pleasant and flattering.

“A Merry Christmas to you, young gentlemen,” beamed Mr. Carter. “You find yourselves comfortable here, I trust ?”

“Oh, quite.”

“Your Highness finds everything to his satisfaction ?” asked Mr. Carter, with a special beam at the nabob of Bhanipur.

“The satisfactfulness is terrific and preposterous, esteemed sahib,” answered Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

“Very good,” said Mr. Carter. “Very good, indeed! If anything should be amiss, you have merely to mention it to Miss Pike. A most efficient manageress, Miss Pike. Service is not what it was before the war — but Miss Pike manages wonderfully. She had had experience in the best hotels before she came to me. A very efficient woman! We aim to make Tankerton Hall a home from home.”

The juniors hardly knew what to reply to that. Several times it had struck them that Mr. Carter had a somewhat odd way of expressing himself. Now it struck them once more. However, Mr. Carter did not wait for a reply.

“You find that you sleep well ?” he inquired.

“Like tops,” answered Bob.

“Not disturbed in any way ?”

“Not in the least.”

“Good —very good!” said Mr. Carter. obviously pleased to hear it.

The juniors could not help wondering whether Mr. Carter was thinking of the ghost story. So far they had said nothing, outside their own circle, of the strange sounds in the Oak Room, on the first night, or the eerie vision in the underground passage. They were aware that the ghost story was an unwelcome topic to Mr. Carter — both Billy and Bessie had made that clear.

“This is a very old place,” went on Mr. Carter. “There are sometimes strange echoes — creaking wainscot, rustling ivy, the wind in the chimneys, and so on. Foolish superstitious people might translate these perfectly normal sounds into something unearthly and ghostly. If you should hear any absurd tattle from the servants on the subject of ghosts —” Mr. Carter paused, fixing his eyes, and his gold-rimmed glasses, on the juniors, in a rather penetrating way.

Harry Wharton and Co. exchanged glances. They could see that Mr. Carter surmised that the ghost story might have reached their ears — as indeed it had — and they wondered whether they had better speak out.

“Have you heard anything of the kind ?” asked Mr. Carter. There was an almost sharp note in his voice.

“The fact is, sir, we’ve both heard and seen something,” answered Harry Wharton,

making up his mind. "Of course we don't believe in ghosts, and we haven't been alarmed, but we did hear a queer groaning behind the panels in the Oak Room —." "Echoes," said Mr. Carter. "Even Miss Pike, practical as she is, fancied that she heard some such sound. Is that all?"

"I'd better tell you what we saw yesterday," said Harry. "As you ask us —."

"Please tell me." Mr. Carter's voice had a sharp note again.

Harry Wharton described the adventure in the underground passage. Mr. Carter listened intently, his plump brows knitting. The juniors could see that he had heard a similar story before. His manner grew rather less genial.

"Absurd!" he said, when Wharton had finished. "Quite absurd."

Harry Wharton made no reply to that.

"Imagination, undoubtedly," said Mr. Carter. "Imagination can play very strange tricks."

"It wasn't imagination, Mr. Carter," said Johnny Bull. "We all saw it except Nugent, who'd gone for a flash-lamp. But we didn't believe that it was a ghost."

"No fear!" said Squiff, emphatically.

"The no-fearfulness is terrific."

"Oh!" said Mr. Carter. "You did not?"

"We're not silly fatheads, sir," grunted Johnny.

Mr. Carter smiled.

"Then you were not frightened, any of you?" he asked.

"We were startled," said Harry. "I think any fellow might have been.

And — and ———."

"May as well own up that we bolted," said Bob Cherry, cheerily. "But we jolly well went back, Mr. Carter, when we got a light, to see what it was."

"And what did you see?"

"Nothing," answered Bob. "We never found anything. We couldn't get further than the door at the end of the underground passage. It was fastened."

"Whoever it was, had cleared off by that door," said Johnny Bull. "But we jolly well knew that it was somebody playing a trick."

Mr. Carter pursed his lips, thoughtfully.

"I have heard such stories before," he said. "And I have wondered whether some ill-disposed person might be playing tricks. I am very glad to see that you take so sensible a view of the matter, at all events. I should have been very disappointed, had such an occurrence had the effect of frightening you away from Tankerton Hall."

"We're not so jolly easily frightened, sir," said Squiff, with a grin. "And we rather like a jolly old ghost at Christmas."

"Seasonable, and all that," said Bob.

"Oh, quite, quite," said Mr. Carter. "But some previous guests were somewhat alarmed and disturbed, by something of the same kind, and they left. Possibly you may have heard something about it, since you have been here. It was very disagreeable to me, apart from the loss involved."

What "loss" was involved by Mr. Carter's guests leaving, the juniors had no idea, unless Mr. Carter meant the loss of their company.

"If you young gentlemen had followed their example —."

"Not likely," said Johnny Bull.

"Then you had not thought of leaving, on account of this?" asked Mr. Carter, and again his glance was very penetrating

"Of course not, sir."

"Very good, very good." Mr. Carter was quite genial again now. "I am glad to hear it.

| We shall have a merry Christmas ghost and all, what ? What ?” He laughed. “As you remarked, Master Cherry, a ghost is seasonable at Christmas time! The ghost will not be charged as an extra — ha, ha !”

Mr. Carter laughed heartily, and the juniors, though they did not quite see the joke, dutifully laughed also.

Brown came into the hall, and banged on a gong. This was the signal for breakfast, and two plump figures came hurrying down the oak staircase. Mr. Carter was still chuckling, apparently very much amused by his own somewhat mysterious joke, the point of which was quite lost on the Greyfriars fellows.

At the breakfast-table, Mr. Carter beamed on the guests with effulgent geniality. It was clear to them that he was both pleased and relieved by the circumstance that the “ghost” was not frightening them away from Tankerton Hall. That was very flattering, no doubt, but at the same time it was a little perplexing. Harry Wharton and Co. had a reasonably good opinion of themselves, but they would hardly have expected Bunter’s uncle to place so high a value upon their company.

Over his coffee-cup, Mr. Carter chuckled again. Miss Pike, from the other end of the table, glanced at him inquiringly. Billy Bunter and Bessie Bunter, busy with eggs, blinked at him, through two pairs of big spectacles.

“Our young friends fancy they have seen the ghost of Tankerton Hall, Miss Pike,” said Mr. Carter.

“Indeed !” said Miss Pike.

“No fancy about it, Mr. Carter,” said Johnny Bull. “We did see somebody playing ghost.”

“Oh quite, quite!” said Mr. Carter. “But they are not going to be frightened away like our other guests, Miss Pike.”

“Very good,” said Miss Pike.

“Greyfriars men are made of sterner stuff, what ? what ?” said Mr. Carter. “I have told our young friends, Miss Pike, that the ghost will not be charged as an extra ! Ha, ha !” Evidently Mr. Carter thought that the joke, incomprehensible as it seemed to Harry Wharton and Co. was worth repeating. Miss Pike smiled, and Bessie Bunter giggled.

But the effect of Mr. Carter’s words on Billy Bunter was startling. Bunter gave a sudden jump — so sudden, that his egg-spoon slipped into his mouth.

“Groooogh !” gasped Bunter. “Urrrrggh !”

“William !” said Mr. Carter, severely.

“Urrrrrrggh !”

“Really, William —!”

“Wurrrrrggh !”

Billy Bunter spluttered and choked. A considerable quantity of egg seemed to have gone down the wrong way. Mr. Carter, from one end of the table, frowned at him; Miss Pike, from the other, eyed him with disapproval. Bob Cherry jumped up to pat him on the back, as a present help in time of need.

“Urrrggh ! Wurrrrgh —!”

Smack!

“Yarooooh !”

“That better ?” asked Bob.

“Urrrggh ! Beast ! Wharrer you hitting me for ? Urrggh —!”

“Only trying to help, old chap ! Feel better ?”

“Urrggh ! Ow ! No ! Worse !” yelled Bunter. “Gerraway, you beast !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Billy Bunter seemed to find the remedy worse than the disease ! Bob had, perhaps, a

rather hefty smack.

However, the fat Owl, after a series of gasps, gurgles, and guggles, recovered, and resumed his breakfast.

But he was plainly uneasy in his mind. From moment to moment, he bestowed stealthy surreptitious blinks on the Greyfriars guests. Mr. Carter had dropped the subject of ghosts, and was talking about a pantomime on Boxing Night — a topic of interest to the juniors. But it did not interest Billy Bunter. Something on his fat mind was worrying the Owl of the Remove.

After breakfast, Harry Wharton and Co. gathered in the hall. Mr. Carter went into the library, and Bunter waited till the door had closed on him. Then he approached the group of juniors, blinking at them warily.

“I — I say, you fellows — !” stammered Bunter. “I — I say, if you’re going to be waxy —.”

“Eh ! What ?”

“I — I mean, if you’re going to be shirty, now you know —.”

“Now we know what ?” asked Harry Wharton, blankly. And all the Christmas party stared at Billy Bunter.

“Oh ! Don’t you ?” gasped Bunter. “I — I thought, from what Uncle Carter said — I — I thought you knew —.”

“What and which ?” asked Squiff.

“Then you haven’t found out ?” gasped Bunter. “ I — I thought —.”

“What is there to find out?”

“Oh ! Nothing ! Nothing at all, old chap !” answered Bunter, evidently relieved in his mind. “I thought, from what Uncle Carter said, that you had, but if you haven’t — I — I — I mean — I — thought you’d be waxy — that is, I — I mean —.”

“Well, what do you mean ?”

“Oh! Nothing !”

And Billy Bunter rolled away, to escape further inquiry, leaving the Christmas party staring after him in blank perplexity.

CHAPTER XXII

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW!

“The mistletoe hung in the old oak hall,
The holly-branch hung on the castle-wall,
The Baron’s retainers were blithe and gay.
Keeping their Christmas holiday.”

BOB CHERRY was singing. That, at all events, was his belief, in which he was encouraged by his loyal chums.

Frank Nugent at the piano, accompanied; putting on speed when Bob shot ahead, slowing down when Bob lingered — a really creditable feat of time-keeping. Harry Wharton, Johnny Bull, Squiff, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, joined in the chorus with a cheery roar, even Billy Bunter adding a fat squeak. The old oak hall at Tankerton re-echoed with “ The Mistletoe Bough. ”

Outside, the December dusk had fallen. A wild wind rustled the clustering masses of ivy, and stirred the branches of the ancient oaks. Snow-flakes whirled on the wind, and fluttered against the diamond panes of the windows. But within, all was bright

and cheery.

Uncle Carter, nursing his coat-tails before the fire, beamed. Miss Pike, sitting bolt upright, had allowed her severe features to relax into an amiable smile. Bessie Bunter's plump cheek bulged with a big chocolate-cream and another, in her plump fingers, was ready to follow it on the downward path. Billy Bunter, outspread in a comfortable armchair, had an expression on his fat face indicative of beatific contentment. It had been Bunter's really happy day.



THE OLD OAK HALL AT TANKERTON RE-ECHOED WITH "THE MISTLETOE BOUGH"

Dinner had been early on Christmas Day. It could not be too early for Bunter. In fact he had been thinking about it ever since breakfast. And the Christmas dinner, when it came, had fulfilled Billy Bunter's rosiest anticipations.

Harry Wharton and Co. had walked out, through whirling snowflakes, to the village church for morning service, and returned with keen healthy appetites. But Billy Bunter's did not need a walk in the wintry air to give it an edge. Bunter's was always in the highest state of efficiency.

Since their arrival at Tankerton Hall, Billy Bunter had not been at his bonniest. Many times he had shown signs of some secret doubt or misgiving that preyed on his fat mind. All the guests knew that Bunter was keeping something dark. They could not guess what it was, though from what Smithy had said on the telephone, it seemed that Smithy knew. Whatever it was, it worried the Owl of the Remove. But at dinner, Bunter was all himself again. The mere sight of the noble turkey would have consoled him, had the crack of doom been impending. A glimpse of the glowing Christmas pudding was enough to banish all lesser matters from his mind. Bunter had dismissed his secret misgiving, whatever that mysterious misgiving was, and concentrated on the real joys of life.

Now Bunter filled an armchair, as amply as turkey, Christmas pudding, and mince pies filled Bunter. He was disinclined to move. He was loaded well up to the Plimsoll line, if not a little over. His thoughts dwelt with happy satisfaction on that dinner. Though lost to sight, it was to memory dear !

Bessie had done almost as well as Brother Billy. But she was still able to negotiate chocolate-creams. Billy had to realise that he could not have dealt with a single one — not a fraction of one. Indeed he was not quite sure whether his sixth helping of Christmas pudding had not been, after all, an error of judgment. But it had been a gorgeous pudding. It had been worth a spot of extra effort.

Every face in the old oak-panelled hail was cheery. Most heads were adorned with

paper caps, extracted from Christmas crackers. Even Uncle Carter's was surmounted by a rather remarkable pink paper hat with gold tassels. Bunter's had slipped down over one eye and one lens of his spectacles. But he did not feel equal to the exertion of putting it straight. He sat with it aslant, giving him rather a rakish look.

"O! The mistletoe bough!

"O — O — O the mistletoe bough !"

"What's the next, Franky ? I never can remember the dashed words."

" 'I'm weary of dancing now,' she cried," said the accompanist."

Bob re-started.

"I'm weary of dancing now, she cried,

If you'll tarry a moment I'll slide, I'll slide."

"Ha, ha, ha !"

"Hallo, hallo, hallo ! Haven't I got it right ?" inquired Bob, breaking off.

"Near enough, old chap," said Harry Wharton, laughing. "Carry on."

"The nearfulness is terrific, my esteemed Bob," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

"Only it is not the slidefulness, but the hidefulness."

"Oh ! Of course," agreed Bob. "O.K. Go it again, Franky.."

Frank went it again, and Bob cheerfully recommenced.

What he may have lacked in tune he more than made up in vigour. He did not remember quite all the words, but blanks were happily filled in with an occasional rum-te-tum which after all was just as good. And the oak rafters rang to merry young voices when the chorus came.

"Oh! the mistletoe bough!

O — O — O the mistletoe bough!"

The chorus died away, followed by a howl of the winter wind from without, and the crash of a mass of snow tumbling down the shaking ivy. And following that howl of wind, came another sound that made everyone start, and look round. It was a low, deep groan.

"Oh !" ejaculated Billy Bunter. He sat up suddenly, his paper cap slipping a little lower down over his eye, making him look more rakish than ever.

"Ooooooooooh !" gasped Bessie.

"What the dickens —!" exclaimed Nugent, staring round. The Greyfriars fellows exchanged startled looks.

They had heard that sound before, and now they heard it again, in the brightly-lighted hall, coming apparently from nowhere.

Mr. Carter gave quite a start. But he recovered himself in a moment.

"The wind," he said. " It is blowing hard ! The wind makes strange sounds in the ivy."

"I — I — I say, that wasn't the wind !" stuttered Bunter. He pushed back the paper cap, and blinked round him in alarm, his little round eyes popping behind his big round spectacles.

"Ooooooh !" repeated Bessie.

"It was the wind, William !" rapped Mr. Carter, firmly. Whatever strange sights might be seen, or strange sounds heard at Tankerton Hall, Uncle Carter was evidently determined that they should not be considered ghostly. He had no use for ghosts.

"Listen !" breathed Bob, as the sound came again.

Groan !

"That came from the window !" said Squiff. And the other fellows nodded. This time they had been listening, and they were sure of the direction of the sound. Uncle Carter stared towards the window, startled.

"The wind !" he repeated, but rather less firmly than before.

Miss Pike half-rose, but sat down again, compressing her lips. Evidently Miss Pike did not think that it was the wind. Bessie Bunter gasped, and Billy Bunter squeaked. "There's something at the window !" whispered Nugent.

"Something — or somebody!" said Johnny Bull.

"Absurd!" said Mr. Carter. "How could anyone be outside the window, in the snow. Quite absurd! I ——"

Groan!

Mr. Carter broke off. It was an unmistakeable groan, and it came from the thickly-curtained window. Uncle Carter stood staring, his mouth open.

"I'm going to see what it is !" said Squiff.

The Australian junior tramped across to the window, grasped the heavy curtains, and dragged them aside. Bessie Bunter clamped her eyes shut behind her spectacles. If it was the ghost of Tankerton Hall, Bessie did not want to see it. But every other eye was fixed on the window, as Squiff dragged aside the curtains.

For a moment only the glimmering glass and the glistening snow outside were visible. Then something else was seen — something that sent a startled thrill to every heart. A face was pressed to the window.

It was an old, old face — white as the snow that ridged the sill, half-hidden by a white beard and shaggy white eyebrows, and tangled white hair that seemed to float in the wind. The face of an old, old man, a face of death that stared in from the December darkness. It was the face that had been seen in the underground passage. Whether mortal, or a visitant from another world, it was the ghost of Tankerton Hall whose deathly face stared in from the dark.

"Oh !" gasped Squiff.

He stood transfixed, holding the curtain. There was tense silence. No one stirred.

Silent, still, they gazed at that strange unearthly vision, with pale and startled faces — till it faded out, and was gone.

CHAPTER XXIII UNEXPECTED!

SQUIFF was the first to move.

Everyone had stared, spell-bound, as if petrified by that strange unearthly face at the window. But as it vanished, the spell was broken.

"Come on !" shouted Squiff. And he rushed at the window, and dragged the casement open wide.

There was a rush of wind, and snowflakes scattered over the oak floor. But the Australian junior did not heed the snow or the wind. Careless of both, he scrambled headlong through the low window, brushing masses of snow from the broad stone sill outside.

"After him !" exclaimed Bob Cherry.

"Come on !" said Harry Wharton.

And the Famous Five rushed after Squiff as one man, Mr. Carter stared after them blankly. Miss Pike ejaculated, "Goodness gracious !" Bessie's eyes were still clamped shut behind her spectacles. Billy Bunter blinked after the juniors, without stirring.

Bunter had no fancy for plunging hatless and coatless into falling snow, neither was he keen to get to closer quarters with the ghost of Tankerton Hall. But six fellows, regardless of snow and wind, tumbled out one after another into the December night. Squiff was first out, but the Famous Five were only a matter of seconds behind him.

The light from the windows glimmered on whirling flakes, and on the thick carpet of

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snow that covered the ground. They stared round them, in search of the unknown. But in the glimmering light, there was no one to be seen. It was less than half-a-minute since the ghostly face had vanished, and the strange visitant had had little time to escape — unless, indeed, it was a visitant from the shades, which they did not think of believing for a moment. But mortal or phantom, it was gone.

“Gone !” said Harry Wharton, between his teeth.

“Sold again !” muttered Bob.

“By gum, I’d like to get my hands on him !” breathed Johnny Bull. “This is the second time he’s dodged us.”

Squiff was bending under the window, looking for tracks in the snow. But if the ghost of Tankerton Hall had left tracks, the fast-falling flakes had already dimmed them.

“Any sign, Squiff ?” asked Nugent. as the Australian junior rose.

“No — it’s coming down too thick! Look here, scatter and hunt for him — he can’t be far away yet.”

“Good egg !” exclaimed Bob. “Scatter, you fellows ! Get cracking.”

Feet in light shoes were already wet, bare heads damp, with snow. But the Greyfriars fellows paid no heed to that. If there was a chance of laying hands on the unknown who was playing ghost at Tankerton Hall, they were not going to lose it.

They scattered in all directions, keen and eager. There was a sudden yell from Bob Cherry.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! This way, you men !”

A flitting shadow in the dark was enough for Bob. He shouted to his comrades and hurled himself at the shadow.

That it was no ghostly form, but solid flesh and bone, was clear enough, as his grasp closed on it.

“Got you !” gasped Bob.

There was a panting breath, and the shadowy figure struggled. But Bob’s charge was too much for it. Over it went in the snow, sprawling, with Bob sprawling over it.

There were shouts, and running footsteps, in all directions. Bob’s shout had been heard by all his comrades, and they were speeding towards him, tramping through snow and frosty shrubs.

Who it was he had grasped, Bob could not see in the dark. But by the feel he knew that it was someone in a thick overcoat. The unseen man wriggled under him, panting and gasping.

“Got him, Bob?” shouted Squiff.

“I’ve got somebody !” panted Bob. “He’s wriggling like an eel. I’ve got him — buck up —.”

Five fellows came panting out of the darkness. Five pairs of hands groped and grabbed at the sprawling figure in the overcoat. Then there was a general jump, as a howling voice came from the wriggling figure.

“ ’Ands off. You young idiots, will you leggo? I’ll complain to Mr. Carter of this ’ere! I’ll give in my notice. I won’t stay ’ere to be man-’andled by a lot of mad schoolboys!

’Ands orf, I say !”

“Oh my hat!”

“Great pip !”

“Brown !”

“The esteemed and ridiculous Brown !”

“Oh, crumbs! Let him go, Bob.”

Every hand left the wriggling figure in the overcoat, as if that figure had suddenly become red hot.

Brown sat up in the snow, spluttering. He was dim and shadowy to the view, but they knew him now. It was undoubtedly Brown.

“Urrrggh !” gurgled Brown. “Gone mad, or what? What you mean by jumping on a man and dragging ’im over! Look at me — smothered with Snow ! I’ll complain to Mr. Carter ! I won’t ’ave it! I’ll smack your silly ’eads all round! Dragging a man over —.”

“Sorry !” gasped Bob. “I didn’t see you, Brown —.”

“What you mean by it ?” yelled Brown. “Spose you could see me, or spose you couldn’t, what did you jump at me for like a blinking lunatic ? Gone mad ?”

The juniors looked at one another. Bob’s face was embarrassed. They had been hunting the ghost, and Bob naturally had jumped at a shadowy form in the dark. He had not stopped to reflect that possibly someone else might be about. Really, he had had no time for thinking.

“You see, we were after the ghost,” stammered Bob. “I couldn’t see you in the dark, only just a shadow, and — and — and ——.”

“You young lunatic !”

“Hem !”

“I’ll complain to Mr. Carter.” Brown dragged himself to his feet, still spluttering.

“Dragging a man over — I thought at first it was some lunatic broke out of a blooming asylum —.”

“Hem !”

“Look here, it couldn’t be helped, Brown,” said Harry Wharton. “We’re sorry, as it turns out to be you, but we were hunting the ghost —.”

“You young idiot ! Look at me — all over snow ! Can’t a man step out to post a letter without being grabbed in the dark by a gang of mad young idiots ?” roared Brown.

“Blow you and your ghosts ! Urrrggh !”

Brown, spluttering and snorting with wrath, tramped away towards the lighted windows. The juniors followed in rather a subdued mood.

“Not much good looking for the giddy ghost now,” murmured Nugent. “He’s far enough off by this time.”

“The farfulness is probably terrific.”

“Rotten luck,” grunted Bob. “I — I thought I’d got him ! I — I never thought of anybody else being about — I — I suppose I might have —.”

“Can’t be helped, old chap,” said Harry Wharton. “It’s rotten luck — we might have had him but for Brown.”

“Bother Brown !” growled Johnny Bull.

“Bless him !” said Squiff.

The great door of Tankerton Hall was wide open now, and light streamed out into the night. In the lighted doorway stood Mr. Carter, gazing out into the snow. Brown tramped up to the door, with the juniors following him, and Mr. Carter gazed at all of them.

“What ? what ?” he ejaculated.

“Look at me !” roared Brown. “Look at the state I’m in. Mr. Carter! I’ve been man-’andled by that there gang of schoolboys — dragged over in the snow — sprawled over by a mad young idiot — and I’m telling you this, sir, I ain’t standing it ! I don’t get such ’igh pay ’ere that it’s worth being man-’andled by larking schoolboys, and you can lay to that ! Look at me, I says !”

“That is enough, Brown —.”

“Is it ?” roared Brown. “Praps you’d like to be dragged over ’ead first in the snow, Mr. Carter! Look at me !”

“You look in a shocking state,” said Mr. Carter.

“What has happened ?”

“A young lunatic jumping at a bloke in the dark and dragging him over in-the snow—.”

“That will do, Brown ! You have said enough.”

Brown snorted, and tramped in. Mr. Carter eyed the Greyfriars juniors, as they crowded in at the doorway.

“What has happened ?” he asked.

“A mistake in the dark,” said Harry. “It’s rough on Brown, but —.”

“I couldn’t see who it was, in the dark,” said Bob. “I saw somebody, and jumped at him. Brown says he had gone out to post a letter, but I — I never thought of anybody being out of the house, and — and —.”

Mr. Carter smiled.

“We must make some allowance for Brown’s excitement in the circumstances,” he said. “He must have been very startled. My dear boys, you must be wet through — you had better go and change at once.”

That advice was too good not to be taken, and the Greyfriars fellows acted upon it without delay. When they came down again, they heard sounds of merriment. Mr. Carter was chuckling, Miss Pike smiling, Billy Bunter grinning, and Bessie Bunter giggling — apparently finding the unexpected result of the ghost-hunt amusing!

CHAPTER XXIV AN ALARM IN THE NIGHT!

HARRY WHARTON awoke suddenly.

He sat up in bed, his heart beating.

Some sound in the night had awakened him. It was not the wind that wailed among the ancient chimneys of Tankerton Hall, but some sound nearer at hand.

He stared into the darkness, with a feeling like a cold trickle at the back of his neck. He knew that something or somebody was in the room.

He had been fast asleep, but in his sleep the ghostly face at the window had haunted his dreams. It was still in his mind as he sat staring into the dark. He could see nothing — but he could hear shuffling movements, and a gasping sound. A chill draught of air warned him that the door was open. It was perhaps the opening of the door that had awakened him.

For a second he sat, with beating heart — then his jaw set hard, and he grasped his pillow. Something or somebody was at his doorway — in the dark. His arm swung, and the pillow whizzed through the air in that direction, with all the force he could put into it.

The result was startling. There was a crash as the whizzing pillow struck some solid body — certainly not an impalpable phantom — and a bump, as that unseen solid body went over. And a frantic yell awoke the echoes.

“Yarooooh !”

“Oh !” gasped Wharton.

“Ow ! Beast ! Wow !”

“Bunter, you fathead —.”

“Ooooooh ! Beast ! Wow !”

Harry Wharton groped for the bedside light, and flashed it on. The light revealed a fat figure, almost bursting out of its pyjamas, sitting on the floor at the doorway, roaring. Obviously it was not the ghost of Tankerton Hall ! It was William George Bunter of

the Greyfriars Remove.

“You fat idiot !” exclaimed Harry.

“Ow ! Beast ! Wharrer you knock me over for ?” roared Bunter.

“You mad porpoise, what are you barging into my room for in the dark ?” howled Wharton. “Why couldn’t you turn the light on ?”

“Ow ! I was trying to find the switch, you beast, when you knocked me over, you smudge ! Wow !”

Billy Bunter scrambled to his feet. He spluttered for breath. Harry Wharton glared at him from the bed.

He had had rather a shock, if not a scare, and it was exasperating to discover that it was only Bunter. He was strongly tempted to turn out of bed, and apply his foot to the fat Owl’s pyjamas. No doubt he would have done so, in the Remove dormitory at Greyfriars. But he remembered that he was Bunter’s guest at Tankerton Hall.

“What on earth are you out of bed for ?” he demanded.

“It was the gig-gig-gig-ghost ——!” stuttered Bunter. “I — I wish I hadn’t come to this beastly place. Even the grub ain’t worth it ! Oh, crikey !”

“You’ve seen it ?” exclaimed Harry.

“I — I — I heard it,” gasped Bunter. “It was in my room. I — I woke up, and — and it was there. I — I didn’t see it — I can’t see in the dark — I left my light on, you know, but — but it was out when I woke up — Oh, lor’! I — I say, It — it — it was in my room — I ain’t going to stay alone ! I’m going to stay here. I — I suppose you wouldn’t mind sleeping on a chair, if — if I have the bed —.”

“You can sleep on a chair, if you like, while I stay in bed.”

“If you’re going to be a selfish beast —.”

“Look here, don’t be a silly ass!” said Harry. “Go back to bed, and go to sleep —.”

“I— I — I kik-kik-couldn’t sleep there,” shuddered Bunter. “I tell you it was in my room — I — I heard it! The gig-gig-ghost —.”

“More likely too much turkey !”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Or too many mince pies —.”

“Beast! I tell you I heard it, close to my bed,” howled Bunter. “Groaning away like anything — close to me —oooogh !”

“Well, why didn’t you buzz your pillow at it, same as I did? That would have given him something to groan for.”

“ You silly ass !” howled Bunter. “ I — I say, it — it’s there — I’m not going back to my room. It’s the gig-gig- gig-ghost —.”

“Well, what did you do ?” asked Harry.

“Jumped out of bed on the other side,” gasped Bunter. “I — I bolted out of the room and kik-kik-kik-came here, and you knocked me over, you beast ”

“Halo, hallo, hallo !” Bob Cherry, with his pyjamas tucked into his trousers, looked in at the doorway, which Bunter had left wide open, “Is that an escaped rhinoceros in the house, or was it Bunter bellowing ?”

Bob’s room was next to Wharton’s, and Bunter’s roars, evidently, had awakened him. He came in, staring alternately at Wharton and Bunter.

“What’s up ?” he asked.

“That fat ass has been frightened,” growled the captain of the Remove. “He thinks the ghost was in his room —.”

“I tell you I heard it !” howled Bunter. “I ain’t going back. Look here, if you’re too jolly selfish to let me have your bed, you go and fetch my blankets, and I’ll turn in on the settee here. I ain’t going back to that room.”

Harry Wharton uttered an impatient exclamation, and Bob Cherry grinned. But it was plain that the fat Owl, in such a state of palpitating funk, was not going back to the room where he had heard, or fancied he had heard, the ghost of Tankerton Hall.

"You — you stay here with me, Bob, while Wharton goes for my blankets," squeaked Bunter. "I — I don't want to be left alone. I — I heard it — oh, crikey !"

Harry Wharton turned out of bed, and bundled on his trousers.

"Stick here a few minutes, Bob," he said.

"O.K.," said Bob, cheerily.

Wharton hurried out of the room. Bob had switched on the passage light. Wharton went quickly up the corridor to Bunter's room, which was the last of the occupied seven.

The room was in darkness when he looked in. If Bunter had left the light on when he went to bed, it had been turned off.

Wharton flashed it on and looked quickly about him, as he entered the room. But there was nothing unusual to be seen there — excepting that Bunter's bedclothes sprawled half on the floor, where the fat Owl had rolled frantically out of bed.

Wharton gathered up blankets and quilt, and bundled them over his shoulder. Thus laden, he tramped out again, and down the corridor to his own room.

He had almost reached his door, when he came to a sudden stop, and the bundle of bedclothes slipped from his shoulder, and tumbled over the corridor floor. Harry Wharton stood stock-still, staring towards the door of the Oak Room, at the corner where the corridor joined the gallery over the hall.

For a moment he wondered whether his eyes were deceiving him.

The door of the Oak Room was wide open. In the doorway, with the darkness behind it, and the corridor light glimmering on its deathly face, stood a strange figure, cloaked in black from neck to feet, the colourless face with its tangle of white hair staring at the transfixed junior.

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Wharton caught his breath.

It was the ghostly figure of the underground passage — the ghostly face that had been seen at the window. There it stood, clear in the light — clearly and plainly seen.

Wharton stood rooted to the floor, staring; and, as he stared, the figure faded into the darkness of the Oak Room, and vanished.

"Oh !" breathed Wharton.

His heart was beating in great throbs. He stood with his eyes fixed on the dark doorway where that strange figure had stood, and from which it had vanished into the Oak Room.

"Bob !" In spite of himself, his voice shook as he called.

"Hallo, hallo, hallo !"

"Come here."

Bob Cherry came out into the corridor. He stared at Wharton's face.

"Harry, old chap ! What on earth's happened ? You're as white as a sheet."

"I — I've seen it."

"You've seen what ?"

Wharton set his lips.

"The ghost of Tankerton Hall ! I mean, the rotten trickster who's playing ghost here. He's in the Oak Room — and we've got him now ! Call the other fellows, while I watch here — and he can't dodge us."

"Oh, gum !"

"Quick, old chap !"

"I say, you fellows !" came a fat squeak.

Neither Wharton nor Bob heeded it. Bob hurried along the corridor to call the others, and Harry Wharton stood outside the doorway of the Oak Room, keeping watch and ward till they came.

CHAPTER XXV VANISHED!

“You’ve seen it ?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“The ghost —.”

“The rat who’s playing ghost,” said Harry Wharton, between his teeth. “He’s in the Oak Room — and we’ve got him now.”

“Good !” said Squiff.

The Co. were all on the spot, they had not been long in coming at Bob’s call. Half-dressed, eager, excited, they gathered round the captain of the Remove, outside the Oak Room.

Within that room, all was darkness. Nothing could be seen as the juniors stared in. But the strange figure that haunted Tankerton Hall was there — there could be no doubt of that. Wharton had seen the phantom fade into the darkness within, and it had not

emerged again, and if it was not a phantom, if it was a being of flesh and blood, it was there, and cornered at last.

“Come on !” said Harry.

He stepped in at the doorway, and switched on the electric light. The Oak Room was flooded with sudden illumination.

Bunched in the doorway, the Greyfriars fellows stared in. Whatever it was, they expected to see it — the dark-cloaked figure, the deathly face.

But nothing of the kind met their eyes.

The Oak Room had its usual aspect. The old oak panels, the old furniture, the holly hung on the walls, glimmered and glistened in the light. Nothing else was to be seen.

“Sure he went in here ?” asked Johnny Bull, dubiously.

“I watched him.”

“Well, where —?”

“He’s in the room,” said Harry. ‘He’s dodged out of sight — but he’s here. I saw him go in, and he never came out again — I never took my eyes off the doorway while Bob was calling you. He’s here.’”

The juniors scanned the room. Among the massive old furniture, there was plenty of cover for anyone to duck out of sight. Across one corner of the room stood a massive old wooden screen, and all eyes turned on it. That was the likeliest spot for cover.

“You keep in the doorway, Bob, and head him off if he tries to dodge out,” said Harry.

“I’ll stop him fast enough,” said Bob.

Bob Cherry stood in the middle of the wide doorway, watchful and ready. Ghost or no ghost, he was prepared to tackle anybody or anything that tried to rush the doorway.

The other five fellows advanced into the room.

Hurried glances among the armchairs and behind the window curtains, showed that no one was there. And in a body the five juniors converged on the screen in the corner. If anyone was hiding in the Oak Room, he was there — and they had no doubt that he was there.

The heavy old screen, more than six feet wide, stood across the corner, well out from the walls. There was ample space to walk round behind it without moving it.

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“Stand ready to collar him,” breathed Wharton.

“We’re ready.”

Harry Wharton stepped to the side of the screen. There was no escape for the hidden man if he was there. Four fellows were watching for him when Wharton rooted him out, and Bob Cherry was watchful in the doorway. It looked as if the ghost of Tankerton Hall would be inevitably laid at last. Harry Wharton had no doubt of it, as he looked round the corner of the screen — his eyes alert, ready to stop a rush. Then he gave a gasp.

In the dusky corner where the walls met, behind the screen, there was no hidden figure. In blank amazement, the captain of the Remove stared into empty dusky space.

“Oh !” gasped Harry.

“Is he there —?” breathed Nugent.

“No !” gasped Frank.

Harry Wharton stared behind the screen from one side. Squiff stared behind it from the other. Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh joined them, and stared too. Bob Cherry called from the doorway.

“Found him ?”

“He’s not here —.”

“Oh, my hat ! But you said you saw him come into the room —.”

“I did !”

“Well, if he came in, he’s here now,” said Bob. He came across from the doorway, and stared behind the screen. Then he whistled. “Where is he ?”

The juniors looked about the room again. But it was useless to look — they knew now that no one but themselves was in the Oak Room.

“Good heavens !” breathed Harry Wharton. “What does it mean? What can it mean? I tell you I watched him — he was in here — he never got out again — and yet —!” He broke off, utterly at a loss.

The juniors looked at one another, with startled eyes. The ghost of Tankerton Hall had vanished — how?”

“A window —!” muttered Bob.

“They’re all shut —.”

“A — a — a ghost could vanish, of course.” Frank Nugent’s voice faltered a little.

“But — but we’re not going to believe that.”

“That’s rot !” said Johnny Bull. But even Johnny spoke with rather less conviction than was his wont.

“The rotfulness is terrific,” muttered Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. But his dark eyes roved uneasily about the Oak Room.

“By gum !” said Squiff.

An eerie, creepy feeling was coming over all the Greyfriars fellows. But the hard-headed Australian junior pulled himself together.

“Look here,” he said. “We’re not going to get nervy. Ghosts are bunk.”

“Yes,” muttered Bob. “But how —?”

“If he was here —!” said Squiff.

“He was here,” said Harry.

“Well, if he was here, he got out !” said Squiff.

“He never got out at the door, and the windows are shut and fastened. I can’t understand it. It seems impossible —.”

“When a thing’s impossible, it doesn’t happen,” answered Squiff. “What it means is, that there’s some way out of this room that we don’t know of.”

“How — and where ?” asked Bob.

“Ask me another ! But I’ll bet that’s it,” said the junior from New South Wales. “Somebody’s playing a game on us, and he knows more about this old place than we do.”

“I — I suppose so —!” said Bob, slowly.

“No supposing about it — that’s it !” said Squiff decisively. “These walls are hundreds of years old. They used to make secret doors in those days — they needed them. There’s a secret way out here.”

Harry Wharton nodded.

“That must be it,” he said. “We’re not going to believe that it was a ghost — we’ve got too much sense for that, I hope.”

“There’s some sort of a secret door in these old walls, and we’re jolly well going to hunt for it to-morrow, and find it,” said Squiff. “We ought to have tumbled to it before — the first night here, when we heard that groaning behind the walls. Some rotter is playing a ghost game, and he knows the secrets of the place — and we’ll root him out before we’ve finished with him.”

“I say, you fellows,” came a howl from Wharton’s room. The juniors had forgotten Billy Bunter. The howl reminded them of him.

“Nothing more we can do now,” said Squiff. “We’ll hunt for the secret door tomorrow — it won’t be found in a hurry. Better go and shut up Bunter before he wakes everybody from Folkestone to Ashford.”

“I say, you fellows !”

The juniors left the Oak Room. The Co. had little doubt that Squiff was right — it was, indeed, the only explanation of the vanished ghost, unless they were to abandon common-sense and admit the supernatural.

Billy Bunter blinked at them indignantly, as they looked in at the doorway of Wharton’s room.

“Look here, I ain’t going to be left alone,” howled Bunter. “I — I ain’t scared, of course, but — but I ain’t going to be left alone —.”

“It’s all right, old fat man,” said Bob. “Only some joker playing ghost. Better get back to your bed —”

“Beast !”

“Tumble into my bed — I’ll take the settee,” said Harry.

“I shan’t be able to sleep a wink !” groaned Bunter.

But the fat Owl was mistaken on that point. Sleep did not come easily to any member of Billy Bunter’s Christmas party, least of all to Harry Wharton, who, rolled in blankets on the settee, had the full benefit of Bunter’s deep snore from the bed. But Billy Bunter slept, and he snored — and his musical effects were still going strong, when the dawn of Boxing Day glimmered in at the windows of Tankerton Hall.

CHAPTER XXVI ON THE ICE

BESSIE BUNTER giggled.

Miss Bunter seemed amused.

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry did not seem to share her amusement, as they walked on either side of the plump figure of Miss Elizabeth Bunter.

The snow had ceased to fall, with dawn. Wintry sunshine gleamed on the white carpet that covered the grounds of Tankerton Hall. Wharton and Bob, carrying skates were heading for the lake with Bessie.

The other fellows were indoors. Billy Bunter had come down late, and was disposing

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of a late breakfast under the disapproving eye of Miss Pike. Squiff was keen on exploring the Oak Room, in search of the secret exit which he declared must exist in that apartment. Johnny Bull and Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh had joined him. Truth to tell, Wharton and Bob would have been glad to join up also, but Bessie wanted to skate, so it was necessary, as the Lord High Executioner remarked, "for a victim to be found." Two fellows sacrificed themselves on the altar of politeness to the charming Miss Bunter.

Miss Bunter rewarded them with remarks on the subject of boys who were scared by ghosts, which were neither grateful nor comforting. Bessie's giggle, which had a strong family resemblance to Billy's fat chuckle, was not music in their ears.

"But we weren't scared," murmured Bob Cherry. "We jolly well knew it was somebody playing a trick."

"And I saw it quite plainly, whatever it was," said Harry.

"Just fancy," said Miss Bunter, calmly. "If you're scared, you fancy things, you know. I wouldn't have come here if I believed in ghosts."

"But we don't believe in ghosts."

"Do you fancy you see them, without believing in them?" asked Bessie.

Harry Wharton breathed rather hard.

"Everybody saw the face at the window last night, at least," he answered.

"I didn't!" said Bessie.

"Then you couldn't have looked."

"How could I when I had my eyes shut?"

"Oh!"

"If there was a face at the window, I expect it was Brown looking in. You caught Brown, when you ran after the ghost! He, he, he."

"Why on earth should Brown look in at the window?" asked Bob.

"Well, he might have heard you singing, and wondered what it was!" suggested Bessie, brightly.

"Oh!" gasped Bob.

"It's silly to fancy you see things," said Bessie, shaking her head. "Uncle Carter doesn't like it, I can tell you. I could see in his face, when you were telling him at breakfast, that he was wondering whether you were going to be frightened away like the last lot."

"Well, we're not going to be frightened away," said Harry.

"Uncle Carter loathes that ghost story. It's bad for business."

"Business?" repeated Harry, blankly.

"Well, he's not running this place for his health, you know. He will lose money on it, if all that goes on. I believe he's thinking of asking Hubert Tankerton to let him off the lease."

"I — I don't quite see —"

"It wasn't only the last lot that let him down. People before them, too. It's been going on ever since he took the place. Just as if the ghost wanted to keep the house to himself." Bessie giggled. "Silly of people to be scared! They wouldn't get the same food, in most places. I'm not going to be scared, I can tell you. Miss Pike's rather an old sketch, but she can cater. Don't you think the food here is, good?"

"Topping! But —"

"I expect you'll get scared," said Bessie. "Billy was scared, I know that. I'm not scared. Boys are rather silly, aren't they?"

"Like skating, Bessie?" asked Bob Cherry, feeling an urge to change the subject.

"Yes! I'm a good skater," said Bessie. "Much better than Marjorie or Clara or

Barbara. More graceful on the ice, you know.”

“Oh ! Ah !”

“More sense, too,” said Bessie. “ It’s a mistake to think that a girl can’t be sensible, merely because she’s pretty.”

“Oh ! Yes ! Ah ! Quite.”

“You can take me round, Harry. Bob’s too clumsy,” added Miss Bunter, as they arrived at the lake.

Bob Cherry, not deeply dismayed to learn that he was too clumsy to take Bessie round, shot off on the ice on his own. Harry Wharton helped Bessie on with her skates, manfully prepared to do his best, though he was far from assured that Miss Bunter was quite so good a skater as she averred. Billy Bunter was always assured that he could do a thing in a masterly manner, until he came actually to do it, and there was a very strong family resemblance between Brother Billy and Sister Bessie. “I haven’t had a lot of practice,” said Miss Bunter, cheerfully. “But I don’t need it. I just skate. Mind Bob doesn’t run into us.”

“Oh, Bob won’t run into us,” said Harry, reassuringly. “Well, I’ve been run into, more than once,” said Bessie. “Clara fairly crashed into me on the pond at Cliff House. She said I crashed into her.”

“Oh! Did she ?”

“So did Marjorie, when she ran into me,” said Bessie. “Some girls are like boys — they’ll never own up. Miss Bullivant said it was me. She’s rather a cat.”

“Oh! Shall we get going ?”

“Mind you hold me safe, till I get my feet. I hope you’re not clumsy.”

“I — I hope not.”

“Well, it’s no good hoping not ! If you’re clumsy, you’re clumsy. All boys are clumsy. Ooogh — hold me — I’m slipping — ooogh !”

“I’ve got you —.”

“Ooogh! — Don’t twist my arm off.”

“I — I’ll try not,” gasped Harry.

Holding Miss Bunter, on slippery ice, was no easy task. Once on the ice, Miss Bunter seemed to plunge and tack and wear, like a rudderless ship. Her confidence, which had been unlimited till then, seemed to waver. There was undoubtedly a great likeness among the Bunters.

“Oooogh! I’m going !” shrieked Bessie.

“Oh, my hat ! Look out !”

Bessie’s right foot shot away in a northerly direction. Her left favoured the south-east. She clutched wildly at her companion. A plump arm was flung round Harry Wharton’s neck, and he rocketed.

“Oooooogh!” shrieked Bessie. -

“I say — look out — you’ll have me over — oh, great pip !” spluttered the captain of the Remove, as he strove frantically to right himself. Bessie had his head in chancery, and his skates clattered as he struggled. But he strove in vain — over he went, and Bessie released his unfortunate head, just in time to avoid going over in company.

“Oh !” gasped Harry Wharton, as he sprawled on the ice.

“Oooooogh !”



BESSIE HAD HIS HEAD IN CHANCERY, AND HIS SKATES
CLATTERED AS HE STRUGGLED

It seemed a miracle that Bessie did not sprawl too. But she did not sprawl — she shot away. Harry Wharton sat up dizzily, and stared after her as she went. Bessie was fairly whizzing.

“Look out, Bob !” yelled Wharton.

But the warning came too late. Bob’s eyes were in another direction, as Bessie came, full steam ahead, on his port quarter. Before he knew what was happening, the plumpest junior at Cliff House School had charged him in the flank, and Bob Cherry went spinning.

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“Oh !” he roared, as he crashed.

“Oh, scissors !” gasped Harry.

By another miracle, Bessie did not lose her footing. She shot away towards the bank. There was a bump as she landed suddenly in a mass of frozen rushes.

“Ooooooh !” shrieked Bessie, as she landed. Bob Cherry sat up.

“Who — what — who — oh, crumbs !” he spluttered. “Hurt, old chap ?” gasped Harry.

“Ow! Yes! Oh, jimmy!”

They sat and stared at one another across the ice.

Bessie Bunter sat up in crackling rushes, and gasped for breath. She gave the two hapless juniors a devastating glare through her big spectacles.

“Ow! Ooogh! Are you coming to help me, or ain’t you coming to help me ?” shrieked Bessie.

Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry scrambled up, and sped to the fair Bessie’s aid. Her very spectacles gleamed with indignation.

“Call that skating ?” demanded Bessie.

“Oh! No! I — I don’t call it skating exactly,” stammered Wharton. “Will you try again?”

“No,” said Bessie. “I won’t! I’m not safe on the ice with clumsy boys barging about. You dragged me over —.”

“Oh! Did I ?”

“And then Bob rushed into me —.”

“Oh, my hat! Did I ?”

“If that’s the way you skate at Greyfriars, you’d better come over to Cliff House next term, and let me teach you.”

“Oh, holy smoke! I — I — I mean, thanks.”

“Boys are all clumsy, but you two are the limit,” said Bessie. “Take these skates off! I’m not going to skate any more. I’m not going to be dragged over, and crashed into.

Why didn't you tell me you couldn't skate ?”

“Oh! I — oh — ah — um —.”

“You could have told me,” said Bessie, indignantly. “But boys never own up that they can't do anything — and they never can! I'm going in, and you two can crash into one another as much as you like.”

Miss Bunter departed with a fat little nose in the air. Harry Wharton and Bob Cherry gazed at one another. Then they grinned.

CHAPTER XXVII BESSIE TOO!

Harry Wharton and Co. looked round.

The December dusk had fallen. The Greyfriars juniors were in the Oak Room, industriously searching for the secret door which they suspected was there — or rather, which they were convinced must be there. So far they had found no trace of it. Mr. Carter had smilingly given them permission to search wherever they liked, so long as they did no damage to the old oak panelling. Uncle Carter evidently had no belief in secret doors or secret passages, but he genially gave the schoolboys their heads, so to speak.

Billy Bunter had come up with the other fellows to help. He was helping by sitting in the most comfortable of the armchairs, cracking and eating nuts. That was the full extent of the exertion to which William George Bunter seemed disposed.

Squiff and the Famous Five were more energetic. They were determined to find the secret, if it was to be found.

That evening, the Christmas party were booked for the pantomime, which opened at Folkestone on Boxing Night. In the meantime they were busy. They spread about the Oak Room, tapping and punching at the ancient panels, and listening — in vain — for a hollow sound beyond. They groped in search of secret springs, but no secret spring had so far come to light. If the secret was there, it was well hidden, and patience was required — lots of patience. So they exercised patience, and tapped, and punched, and smacked and groped; while Billy Bunter sat and ate nuts and watched them through his big spectacles.

But at the sound of a plump giggle, the half-dozen searchers ceased to tap, and punch, and grope, and looked round.

Bessie Bunter stood in the doorway of the Oak Room, blinking in through the big spectacles that were so like

Billy's. Her fat face was wreathed in smiles as she gazed at the eager searchers.

Miss Elizabeth Bunter seemed amused, once more.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo !” ejaculated Bob.

Giggle!

“Mind telling us what's the joke?” inquired Johnny Bull, a trifle gruffly.

“You are !” answered Bessie, with another giggle.

“Oh !” grunted Johnny.

“How's that ?” asked Frank Nugent, mildly.

“Is the jokefulness terrific, esteemed and beauteous Bessie ?” inquired Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Looking for the ghost ?” giggled Bessie. “He, he, he !”

Bessie Bunter's “he, he, he,” was remarkably like Billy Bunter's “he, he, he.” It was neither grateful nor comforting. It bore no resemblance whatever to the music of the spheres. But Miss Bunter seemed to be satisfied with it as a musical effect for

she repeated it several times.

Bessie rolled into the Oak Room, giggling. Bessie had seen nothing of the ghost of Tankerton Hall. She was persuaded that nobody else had seen anything, either, of that mysterious apparition. It was, Miss Bunter maintained merely fancy — just nerves, in fact.

Miss Bunter was welcome to her opinion, so far as that went. But it was not gratifying to fellows who just loathed the idea of being considered “nervy.” Really and truly, they were not nervy. Bessie persisted that they were !

She found it amusing, and did not see any reason for keep in her amusement to her plump self. Had she been Billy instead of Bessie Bunter, her remarks on the subject would doubtless have elicited forcible replies. But as she was Bessie Bunter and not Billy, she had to be allowed to run on.

“Found any spooks yet ?” inquired Miss Bunter, merrily.

“No luck yet,” answered Harry Wharton. “We’re not exactly looking for spooks at the present moment. We think there’s a secret door, or something, in this room, and that’s what we’re looking for.”

Giggle !

“The ghost last night, or whatever it was, got out of this room somehow,” said the captain of the Remove.

Giggle.

“We’ve really seen it, Bessie,” said Bob. “And Wharton saw it again last night, and it dodged in here —.”

Giggle.

“And we’re jolly well going to find the way it went, if we can,” said Squiff, emphatically.

Giggle.

“Look here, Bessie, I’ve jolly well heard it,” said Billy Bunter. “I haven’t seen it, but I’ve jolly well heard it — it woke me up — last night — and I cut along to Wharton’s room — not that I was scared, of course —.”

Giggle !

“I — I came along to Wharton’s room, to keep him company, in case he was nervous,” exclaimed Bunter. “But I jolly well heard it groaning —.”

“Rubbish !” said Bessie, decidedly. “Only an echo or something.”

“But we all heard it in the hall last night,” said Bob Cherry. “Didn’t you hear it then, Bessie ?”

“Uncle Carter said it was the wind. I expect it was !” said Bessie, cheerfully. “I say, I wouldn’t be nervy, if I were you.”

“The nerviness is not terrific, esteemed and ludicrous Bessie,” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “But the beholdfulness of the absurd ghost, and the hearfulness of the ridiculous groaning, was a deadly cert.”

“Just fancy !” said Bessie.

“I tell you —!” squeaked Bunter.

“You can tell me till you’re black in the face, Billy, and it won’t make any difference,” declared Bessie. “My advice to you all is to brace up, and forget all about it. It’s rather silly to be scared. Don’t you think so ?”

“Who’s scared ?” growled Johnny Bull.

“Aren’t you ?” giggled Bessie. “He, he, he ! You’ll all be pelting off like the last lot soon, at this rate, if you don’t pull yourselves together.”

Six fellows breathed hard, but said nothing. Billy Bunter bestowed an indignant blink on Sister Bessie.

“Think I’m scared ?” he demanded, warmly.

“Don’t I just ?” chuckled Bessie.

“Look here, Bessie, don’t you be a cat !” hooted Bunter. “The other fellows were a bit upset, but I fancy I’ve got nerve. I never turned a hair ! I jolly well heard that beastly groaning, but did it scare me ? Of course not. If I heard it again, I should — yaroooooh! I say, you fellows, what’s that ?” Billy Bunter broke off with a yell of alarm.

Bessie Bunter jumped.

“Oooogh !” she gasped.

Groan!

It was a deep, dismal, hair-raising groan, proceeding from nobody knew where. It echoed eerily through the Oak Room.

Harry Wharton and Co. started, and stared round them. That strange eerie sound came from somewhere quite close at hand. It might have been imagined that some invisible presence in the room had uttered that uncanny groan. The Famous Five were not likely to imagine that, neither was Squiff, but they were startled and perplexed.

Groan !

“Ow ! I — I — I say, you fellows !” squeaked Billy Bunter, blinking round him with starting eyes. “I — I say, — oh, crikey !”

Nuts from his bag scattered over the oak planks unheeded. Bunter had forgotten even eatables — for the moment at least.

Bessie screamed. She screamed on her top note. Gone now were the giggles — there was not the vestige of a giggle about Miss Bunter. She screamed and screamed.

Evidently Bessie did not think that that hair-raising groan was the wind ! Probably Mr. Carter would not have thought so. had he been present to hear it. There was no mistaking that unearthly groan, so close at hand, for anything but what it was — and Bessie Bunter screamed and screamed, waking the echoes far and wide.

Groan !

It came again — echoing eerily.

“What the thump —!” exclaimed Bob.

“Where the dickens —!” muttered Squiff, staring blankly round the Oak Room. “It’s quite close — but where —?”

“The wherefulness is terrific,” gasped Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh.

Scream, scream, scream, from Bessie. She stood in the middle of the Oak Room, her eyes shut and her mouth open, screaming. The juniors listened for the groan again, hoping to trace its direction. But it was not heard again. Whoever or whatever it was that had groaned, was gone. But that seemed to bring no comfort to Bessie. She screamed on as if for a wager.

“It’s all right now, Bessie,” exclaimed Harry Wharton. “It’s stopped — it’s gone — nothing to be afraid of —.”

Scream !

“It’s gone — quite gone —!” exclaimed Bob.

Scream !

“The gonefulness is terrific, beauteous”

Scream !

Bessie was putting on steam. The juniors gathered round her, sympathetic and soothing. They made sympathetic noises and soothing gestures. But it booted not!

Evidently Bessie felt that, in the circumstances, she was entitled to scream — and she did scream, and went on screaming.

“I say, it’s really all right, Bessie,” gasped Bob. “It was really only some spoofer

larking —.”

Scream !

“We’ll look after you, Bessie —!” urged Nugent.

Scream !

“Safe as houses, old dear !” said Squiff.

Scream !

“I — I say, you fellows,” stuttered Bunter. “I — I heard it — just like I heard it last night — oh, lor’! I — I’ve a jolly good mind to go home — I — I — I don’t like gig-gig-ghosts —.”

“Cheese it, you fat ass,” said Johnny Bull. “Look after Bessie.”

“Beast !”

“Bessie, old dear, do be quiet,” implored Bob. “You can be heard all over the house —.”

Scream !

“For goodness sake, Bessie —!” urged Harry Wharton.

Scream !

“Oh, my hat !” gasped Bob. “Look here, can’t you do something, Bunter ?”

“Oh, crikey ! Oh, lor! Oh, dear ! I wish I hadn’t come here ! Oh, jimmy !” Bunter, evidently, was of no use for soothing purposes.

“Bessie, I tell you it’s all right now — right as rain —.”

Scream !

“What on earth can we do ?” exclaimed Bob, desperately. “Shall I get some cold water and throw it over her face ? Think that would help ?”

“Yes ! Quick !” exclaimed Nugent.

Bob rushed from the Oak Room. Bessie screamed on. In a few seconds Bob was back with a jug of cold water from the nearest bedroom.

“Here —!” he gasped.

Bessie suddenly ceased to scream.

“Don’t you throw that cold water over me.” she exclaimed. “I’ll scratch you.”

“Oh, my hat !” Bob hurriedly backed away.

Scream !

“Here’s Miss Pike,” exclaimed Nugent, as the somewhat severe features of the Tankerton Hall house-keeper appeared in the doorway.

“I say, Miss Pike — here ———.”

Miss Pike stared, or rather glared, into the Oak Room.

“What is all this dreadful uproar ?” she exclaimed. “What is the matter? What has happened here —?”

“It’s Bessie —.”

“The ghost —.”

“She’s scared —.”

Scream ! scream ! Safe from Bob’s well-meant ministrations, Bessie had re-started.

Scream ! scream ! scream !

Miss Pike led her away, still screaming. Squiff shut the door of the Oak Room.

Bessie’s top note died away in the distance. There was silence at last. And never had silence seemed so golden !

CHAPTER XXVIII PLUCKY BUNTER!

“BEATS me !” said Bob Cherry.

“I give it up !” said Nugent.

“We jolly well know that somebody’s playing ghost !” growled Johnny Bull. “We know that it isn’t a spook.”

“We know that,” agreed Bob. “But it doesn’t get us much forrader . What the thump is he doing it for ?”

“What on earth can be his game ?” exclaimed Harry Wharton. “It’s not a ghost — that’s rot ! But why should anyone want to play ghost, and frighten people away from Tankerton Hall ?”

“Beats me hollow !” grunted Bob.

“If we could guess why he’s doing it, it might help in spotting him,” went on Wharton. “But why —?”

“Echo answers why !”

“Esteemed echo answers that the whyfulness is terrific !” sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

The Famous Five were hopelessly puzzled.

They had given up searching the Oak Room. Tapping and punching and thumping panels in the old oak walls had led to nothing. Squiff was still tapping away, in the hope of being rewarded by some hollow sound behind the wall. But that hope was very faint.

Billy Bunter in his armchair, listened to the discussion with both fat ears. The fat Owl drew comfort from the unhesitating certainty of the other fellows that the ghost was a “spooof.” He had recovered sufficiently to resume munching nuts. Conversation in the Oak Room went on to an accompaniment of cracking and munching.

“May as well chuck it, Squiff,” called out Bob.

“Blow !” said Squiff.

He gave the oak wall a last smack, and joined the group of juniors, with a frowning brow.

“We don’t know who, and we don’t know how, and we don’t know why !” said Bob.

“It’s a jolly old problem, and beats anything in maths.”

“We don’t know who,” said Squiff, slowly. “But I think I can guess why.”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! Mean to say that you’ve guessed that one !” exclaimed Bob, staring at the Australian junior.

“I think so,” answered Squiff.

The Famous Five gave him all their attention at once. The ghost of Tankerton Hall was a hopeless puzzle to them. If Sampson Quincy Iffley Field had any solution to offer, they were keen to hear it. Squiff apparently had been thinking it out while he was punching the panels.

“Go it, Squiff !” said Harry Wharton.

“Cough it up, old man.”

“Advance, Australia !” grinned Bob.

“Well, look here,” said Squiff, slowly. “Somebody’s playing ghost. We’re agreed on that. It scares people away from the place — and that’s what he wants.”

“True, O King!”

“Whoever he is, he’s got a motive,” said Squiff. “It seems to have been going on ever since Mr. Carter took the place. The house was empty for years before then, excepting for a caretaker. It didn’t suit somebody for Mr. Carter to take it, and crowd it with guests. Somebody wanted a free run of the place on his own.”

Harry Wharton nodded.

“Looks like that,” he said. “But why ? What can that ‘ somebody ’ be up to, to want to

keep the place empty ?”

“He’s up to something that he can’t carry on easily — perhaps not at all — with a lot of people buzzing about the place.”

“But what ?”

“Might be looking for something !” said the Australian junior.

“Looking for something !” repeated Bob, blankly.

“Something that doesn’t belong to him, but which he would freeze on to if he found it,” said Squiff. “Otherwise there would be no need to be secret and surreptitious about it.”

“But what —!” exclaimed Nugent.

“Oh !” Harry Wharton gave a start.

“The hidden hoard !” exclaimed Bob. “The hoard !”

“That’s it !” said Squiff with a nod.

“By gum !” Bob Cherry whistled. “If somebody thinks that it never went up in the air-raid, and that there’s a chance of finding it —.”

“That would account —!” said Nugent.

“Exactly,” said Squiff. “Goodness knows who he is, and whether he belongs to the place, or sneaks in from outside — lots of people about here must have known about old Sir Julius being a miser and hoarding his money. But whoever he is, that’s his game. He can’t carry on with a crowd about the place — and he wants the coast clear. That’s why there’s a phantom scaring people away. He’s after the hoard.”

“Blessed if I don’t think Squiff’s hit the nail on the head,” said Bob. “Somebody’s after the hoard, and that’s why —.”

“But it must have gone up in the air-raid if it was in the safe in the west wing,” said Johnny Bull. “That wing’s all rubble.”

“Mightn’t have been in the safe,” said Squiff. “There’s somebody that thinks very likely it wasn’t, or he wouldn’t be hunting for it now. And I think very likely it wasn’t. Safes can be cracked by burglars, and with only a doddering old bean and one servant here, there wasn’t much to stop them. And misers like to keep their hoards under their noses. I wouldn’t wonder if old Sir Julius never kept it in the safe at all, but had some secret hiding-place for it. That’s more like a miser — and he was a miser, and half cracked at that.”

It’s possible,” said Harry, slowly.

“Anyhow, there’s somebody who thinks that it may have survived, and he’s after it,” said Squiff. “And he doesn’t mean to hand it over to young Tankerton, if he finds it — he could search for it openly if that was the idea. He’s after it to keep it. And he’s playing ghost to keep everybody else off the grass. That’s how it looks to me.”

“I believe you’ve got it right,” said Nugent. “And if you’re right, we’ve found out why — but who — ?”

“The who-fulness is terrific.”

Bob Cherry chuckled.

“Have another go, Mr. Sherlock Holmes of New South Wales, and guess that one !” he said.

Squiff laughed.

“We don’t know who,” he said. “But we’re going to know. We’re going to lay that ghost before we leave Tankerton Hall.”

“Hear, hear !” said Bob.

“I say, you fellows.” It was Bunter’s fat squeak. Bunter had finished his bag of nuts, and now he heaved his weight out of the armchair. “I say, you feel sure it ain’t a real ghost ?”

“Of course it isn’t, fathead.”

“Well, I don’t believe in ghosts,” said Bunter. “There ain’t any real ghosts, of course. It gave me a turn — I mean, I could see that it gave you fellows a turn — I’m not afraid of ghosts —.”

“You didn’t look it !” agreed Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, really, Cherry ! I fancy I’ve got as much pluck as any fellow here,” said Bunter, disdainfully. “I jolly well ain’t scared, and I ain’t going home. Catch me being scared by a ghost ! I’m sticking it ! I mean to say, look at the grub we get here —!”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at,” said Bunter, warmly. “You can cackle, but you jolly well wouldn’t get the same grub anywhere else for the same money, I can jolly well tell you.”

“What? ”

“I — I — I mean — I mean, it’s the best that money can buy. That’s what I meant to say. Well, I’m not scared, and I’m sticking to the grub — I mean, I’m sticking it out. Ghosts are all gammon. Don’t you fellows get nervous.”

“You fat ass —.”

“Nothing to get nervous about, while I’m with you, you know,” said Bunter. “If you see it again, don’t panic. I shall be here, you know. Pull yourselves together. You’re looking a bit pale, Wharton.”

“Fathead !”

“You’re looking rather green, Bull —!”

“Am I ?” asked Johnny Bull, in a deep growling voice reminiscent of the Great Huge Bear.

“Yes, old chap! Keep a stiff upper lip, you know. You look a bit pecky, Bob. So do you Nugent ! I wouldn’t give way to nerves !” advised Bunter. “I say, I’ve finished my nuts. I’m going down. Don’t get frightened while I’m gone ! He, he, he.”

“Look out,” roared Bob Cherry, suddenly. “There’s something behind you, Bunter.”

“Yaroooh !”

Billy Bunter bounded clear of the floor. He spun round, his eyes popping behind his spectacles.

“Ow! Help ! Keep it off !” he yelled. “I say, you fellows, help — keep it off — keep it away — help ———!”

“Ha, ha, ha !” shrieked the juniors.

“Why, you — you — you beast ! There isn’t anything !” gasped Bunter “You said there was something behind me, you beast.”

“Only your armchair,” said Bob, affably. “Ha, ha, ha !”

“Beast !” roared Bunter. And he rolled out of the Oak Room, and banged the door after him, leaving that ancient apartment echoing with merriment.

CHAPTER XXIX THE GHOST’S LAST WALK?

SQUIFF listened.

The last stroke of twelve died away. The sound, as the clock in the hall below chimed the hour, was not loud, but it sounded loud to listening ears, in the deep, dead silence of midnight.

Stillness followed.

The Christmas party had gone to bed later than usual that night. They had returned

rather late from the pantomime. They were all in bed and fast asleep — excepting Squiff.

The Australian junior had not gone to bed.

He was sleepy, like all the other fellows at that hour. But he did not intend to sleep. He turned off the light in his room, and sat on the edge of his bed — to wait. As twelve chimed out, he stirred.

Silently, he crossed to the door, opened it, and peered into the passage. All was dark and still.

He stepped out, closing the door after him.

As silently as if he had been a phantom haunting the dim shadows of Tankerton Hall, he glided down the corridor towards the Oak Room. He pushed open the heavy oak door without a sound.

The interior of the Oak Room was pitchy black. The windows were thickly curtained, the last ember of the log fire had died out. Squiff could not see an inch before his nose.

But he did not need to see. He closed the door noiselessly, and stood in the dense darkness, his heart beating a little faster than usual.

There was no sound, save a faint rustle of the old clustering ivy round the windows, in the winter wind.

Squiff drew a deep, deep breath. The silence, the solitude, the deep darkness, the knowledge that a ghostly figure might appear at any moment in the gloom, might have shaken even a stout nerve. But the Australian junior's nerves seemed of steel. The task he had set himself was far from attractive, but he was going through with it. Noiselessly, with outstretched hand, he groped his way to the table. He ducked and slipped under it. There he was out of sight, if a light should be turned on. And there he intended to wait — till the ghost walked ! — if the ghost of Tankerton Hall walked again that night.

There was no doubt, in Squiff's mind, that the old oak walls of that room had a secret — which the mysterious unknown who played ghost knew, and which no one else knew. Searching for it had failed. But if the secret door opened while he was on the watch in the Oak Room, the secret would be a secret no longer.

He could have wished, as he listened, still as a mouse, in the darkness, that he had called one of his comrades to keep watch with him. But it was possible enough that the vigil would lead to nothing. The ghost might not walk that night. One shout would awaken his friends if they were needed. And, much as he would have liked company, he was not afraid of the darkness, or of the ghost.

It was a weary business, waiting, listening, watching. When, at length, the quarter chimed faintly from the distance, he could hardly believe that only a quarter of an hour had passed. It seemed like hours.

But his determination did not slacken. More than once, he almost found himself nodding. But he was determined to keep wide awake, and he did.

Never had minutes seemed so long to him. He could tell the passage of time only by the chime from the clock in the hall below, faint in the distance. It seemed to him that the clock must have stopped — so endless an age elapsed before he heard the chime again.

But the half-hour came at last.

Squiff rubbed his heavy eyes. Half an hour of this was more than enough for any fellow, and he wondered rather dismally how he would be able to stick it out for two or three hours more, if that was necessary. But he had set himself the task, and he had to grin and bear it — or bear it, at all events, little as he felt like grinning.

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Another age — and another chime. It was a quarter to one. By that time, Squiff was not only wondering how he would be able to stick it out — he was beginning to wonder whether it was, after all, such a jolly good idea as it had seemed, to keep watch for the ghost of Tankerton Hall. The other fellows were fast asleep in warm beds; and he was cold, and tired, and fed up to the back teeth; and a temptation assailed him to give it up, and creep quietly away to bed. Never had a warm bed seemed so attractive as it did then. After all, the ghost might not walk — it was very likely all for nothing ! And as the night grew older, he could hardly prop his eyes open. It was a strong temptation — but Squiff did not fall to it. With grim determination, he pinched himself to keep awake, and waited and watched and listened.

And suddenly, he was wide awake — as wide awake as he had ever been at noonday. His eyes, no longer drowsy, glinted in the dark. For there was a sound in the silent room — a sound that was not the wail of the wind, or the stirring of the ancient ivy at the windows.

His heart gave a sudden leap. Every vestige of drowsiness left him. In an instant he was alert and taut.

He could see nothing. The sound that had reached his ears was faint, indefinable. But he knew that there was a presence in the room other than his own. And he knew that that faint sound had come from the corner of the Oak Room, where the cumbersome old screen stood across the angle, a few feet out from the walls.

“He’s coming !”

Squiff breathed the words inaudibly.

His vigil had not been for nothing. The ghost was walking. Something — someone — unseen, was behind the screen in the corner. It had come — it must have come — through the wall, and that meant that the secret door was there, and that it was open. A sudden flash of light came like a stab in the darkness. It was the gleam of a flash-lamp.

A hand emerged from behind the screen, holding the light. An arm followed, and then a face. The light circled, flashing into every corner of the room.

Squiff was glad that he had foreseen that possibility, and taken cover. The ghost of Tankerton Hall was wary. Had he been in the open, he would have been revealed by the light, and there was no doubt that the “ghost” would have vanished promptly, and the secret door would have closed — leaving the secret still undiscovered. The mysterious visitant was taking no chances. Nearly an hour after midnight, it was little likely that anyone would be about, but he was assuring himself — making assurance doubly sure — that the coast was clear.

Squiff, under the table, was invisible, and silent as a mouse with the cat at hand. But as the light circled, he had a glimpse of the face that looked from behind the screen. In spite of his nerve, in spite of the obvious fact that the use of the flash-lamp was a proof that the strange visitant was a thing of flesh and blood, he felt a shudder run through him — so ghostly and eerie was that deathly face, white as chalk, with its wild white beard and shaggy eyebrows and tangled mass of white hair. In spite of his own senses, Squiff could almost have believed that it was the phantom of the old miser haunting the scene of his hoarding.

The light shut off.

The darkness seemed blacker than before. Faintly, to the Australian junior’s straining ears, came soft sounds, telling that the strange figure had emerged from behind the screen, and was crossing to the door.

There was barely a sound as the door opened. But faint as it was, Squiff's intent ears heard it. The "ghost" was about to pass out of the Oak Room into the corridor —

pausing in the wide doorway to listen, to make sure that the way ahead was clear — and little dreaming of what was behind him in the Oak Room !

With beating heart, but head quite cool and steady, Squiff crept out from under the table. Silently, but swiftly, he reached the doorway — he knew exactly where to lay his hand on the lighting-switch in the dark.

He heard a startled gasp.

Silent, as he was, the strange figure within a few feet of him had heard, or sensed, something — and turned in the doorway, startled. At the same moment there was a click, and the Oak Room, and the corridor outside, were flooded with light.

Full in the light stood the phantom figure — dark-cloaked, the deathly face staring at Squiff, the eyes gleaming, startled, under the shaggy white brows. The next instant Squiff had rushed and leaped, and the ghost of Tankerton Hall went over backwards with a crash to the floor.

A sharp cry escaped him as he crashed, sprawling on his back, with the Australian junior on top of him, grasping him, and shouting at the top of his voice, "Help! Wharton Inky! Bob! Help! I've got him!"

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CHAPTER XXX CAUGHT!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo !"

"What — ?"

"Who —?"

"Help !" roared Squiff. "I've got him — help !"

His voice rang far and wide.

It woke all the echoes of Tankerton Hall. It woke the Famous Five on the instant, and answering voices called, lights flashed on, and doors were dragged open.

But the "ghost" was struggling now, and Squiff had his hands full.

For some moments the mysterious trickster, taken utterly by surprise, and winded by the crash on the hard oak floor, seemed helpless in the grasp of the sturdy Australian junior. But now he was wriggling and twisting and struggling wildly to escape.

But there was no escape for him. Squiff's sinewy knee was planted on him, and his strong hands grasped hard and fast. He heaved, and struggled, and twisted in vain. Squiff had him down, and he kept him down.

And before the "ghost" had a chance of throwing him off, five doors had crashed open, and five fellows in their pyjamas rushed into the corridor. There were many hands to help Squiff's.

"The ghost !" yelled Bob Cherry.

"Squiff's got him !"

"The gotfulness is terrific."

"Bag him !"

The strange figure still struggled, panting, gasping, in a frantic effort to escape. But if he had little chance with Squiff alone, he had none at all with the Famous Five all round him.

Harry Wharton grasped one arm. Frank Nugent the other. Johnny Bull got a grip on his neck, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh on a wildly-kicking, leg. Bob Cherry fastened both hands in the mop of tangled white hair.

Squiff rose panting to his feet.

“Hold him !” he gasped.

“We’ve got him —!”

“Safe as houses —.”

“He won’t get away, unless he goes without his topknot,” grinned Bob. “Oh. holy smoke ! Great pip !”

Bob gave a yell of astonishment, as the white mop of hair suddenly became detached from the head it covered. He staggered back, with the hair in his hands, almost falling down in his surprise.

“Oh, crumbs !” he stuttered. “Look !”

A close-cropped head was revealed. Evidently that tangled mass of white hair was a wig, part of the ghostly disguise of the phantom of Tankerton.

Squiff gave a breathless laugh.

“There’s more than that to come off,” he said. “He’s made up for the part. Keep him safe, you fellows.”

“We’ve got him pretty safe,” said Harry Wharton. “Chuck it, you rascal, whoever you are — you won’t get away.”

The hapless “ghost” seemed to realise that himself. He gave up the ineffectual struggle, and lay panting and gasping for breath in the grasp of the Greyfriars juniors.

“Got him, by gum !” said Johnny Bull. “The jolly old ghost has walked once too often. He won’t walk again.”

“And you got him, Squiff.” Harry Wharton stared at the Australian junior, the only one of the Greyfriars fellows in his clothes. “You haven’t been to bed —?”

“I’ve been sitting up for this beauty,” said Squiff. “He didn’t know that there was a chap from New South Wales under the table in the Oak Room, when he came through the secret door — waiting and watching for him.”

“Hallo, hallo, hallo, here’s Mr. Carter,” exclaimed Bob.

The light flashed on in the oak gallery over the hall and there was a sound of hurried footsteps. A portly figure in a voluminous and decorative dressing-gown appeared at the end of the corridor, staring blankly at the startling scene. The wild uproar in the middle of the night had evidently awakened Uncle Carter.

“What — what — what — ?” Mr. Carter, in his amazement, seemed scarcely able to find his fruity voice. “What — what — what is this? What has happened?

Who — who — who is that ?”

His eyes fairly popped at the panting figure in the grasp of the schoolboys. The jerking off of the white wig had revealed a head sparsely covered with tallowy hair. But the face was as ghostly as ever, with its shaggy white eyebrows, its streaming beard, and its deathly hue. What the man was like in his own proper person it was hardly possible to guess.

“It’s the ghost, sir !” said Harry Wharton.

“What ? What ?”

“The oily old ghost of Tankerton Hall, Mr. Carter,” chuckled Bob Cherry. “He’s taken his last walk — into our hands.”

“Upon my word !”

Mr. Carter came along the corridor. He stared blankly at the captured ghost.

“The — the ghost!” he stuttered. “Then — then someone has been playing ghost here — what? what? Who can this man be — how can he have obtained admittance to the house —?”

“He came through the wall of the Oak Room, Mr. Carter,” said Squiff.

“What ? What ?” ejaculated Mr. Carter.

“There’s a secret door in the wall. We couldn’t find it, searching for it — but I guess we’ll find it now all right. It’s in the corner behind that old screen.”

“Extraordinary! So — so this man has been playing ghost, and he got in by a — a — a secret door !” gasped Mr. Carter. “Hold him securely, my dear boys — I shall telephone to the police-station, and give him in charge.”

“Oh, corks !” ejaculated the ghost of Tankerton Hall. It was not a very ghostly remark, but he seemed dismayed by the idea of being given in charge.

“Take care that he does not escape — do not let him go for a moment,” exclaimed Mr. Carter.

“We’ve got him safe, sir.”

“The safefulness is terrific.”

“Stand him up,” said Squiff, and the juniors jerked their prisoner to his feet. He stood gasping, and sagging, in the grasp of many hands.

His eyes, under the shaggy white eyebrows, turned, with a hunted look, to the doorway of the Oak Room. But he had no chance, or hope, of dodging back to the secret door in that apartment. The ghost of Tankerton Hall had, as Bob Cherry put it, taken his last walk. Not for a moment did the juniors relax their grasp on him.

Mr. Carter adjusted his gold-rimmed glasses, and stood staring at the strange black-cloaked figure and the deathly face. Thunder was gathering in his portly brow. His eyes, and his gold-rimmed glasses, gleamed at the captured ghost.

“Who are you ?” he rapped.

No answer.

“He’s somebody who knows his way about this place,” said Squiff. “Goodness knows what he looks like with his ghost outfit off, but we’ll soon see. You may know him, when we see what he’s really like.”

Bob Cherry held up the tangled white wig.

“This came off his napper,” he said. “I expect his beard will come off, if you give it a tug. And his jolly old complexion will come out in the wash ! It’s chalk.”

“No wonder we thought he looked white as chalk, in the underground passage,” grunted Johnny Bull.

“Extraordinary !” said Mr. Carter. “He is evidently disguised, and made up to bear some resemblance to Sir Julius Tankerton, the — hem — recluse, who owned this house years ago. But why he should play such an extraordinary prank is quite beyond my comprehension. If that disguise will come off, my dear boys, please remove it. and let me see whether I know the man.”

“Hold him !” exclaimed Squiff, as the “ghost” made a sudden desperate effort to break loose.

So desperate was that effort, that for a few moments, the whole party rocked to and fro. But it was in vain, the prisoner was too securely held to have a chance of breaking away. He was slammed against the corridor wall, and pinned there, helpless.

“Oh, corks !” he gasped. “’Ere, don’t choke a man ! Leggo my neck, will you ? You want to ’ave a blinking inquest on a bloke ? Urrrghh.”

“What ? what ? I — I think I know that voice,” stuttered Mr. Carter. “Upon my word ! Is — is — is it possible —?”

Harry Wharton grasped at the streaming white beard. it came off with a jerk. Johnny Bull grabbed at the shaggy eyebrows, and they came away in his hand.

Then there was a splutter of amazement from Mr. Carter, and a yell from all the Greyfriars fellows. The face was still deathly white — with chalk — but with wig and beard and eyebrows gone, it was recognisable. Harry Wharton and Co. gazed at a face they had seen every day at Tankerton Hall, and they all yelled in chorus, Brown !”

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CHAPTER XXXI
THE ORDER OF THE BOOT!

“BROWN !”

They stared at him.

It was Brown! Once Sir Julius Tankerton’s “man”, caretaker of the deserted Hall after the bombing; butler since Mr. Carter had taken over; now revealed as the “ghost” of Tankerton Hall !

He leaned on the corridor wall, his chalk-smearred face savage and sullen, his little shifty eyes glinting, as he panted for breath.

“Brown !” Mr. Carter stuttered. “Brown ! You rogue ! You rascal ! I can hardly believe it ! Brown !”

“The jolly old butler !” breathed Bob Cherry.

“The esteemed and ridiculous Brown !”

“Brown — by gum !”

“Brown — my only hat ! Brown !”

“Jumping kangaroos !” said Squiff. “I wondered whether the spook belonged to the place — !”

“We ought to have guessed !” exclaimed Bob. “Brown all the time! Didn’t we jolly well collar him after we saw that face at the window —.”

“So we jolly well did !”

“And Brown was in the ruined wing when we went there to look for the hoard — that’s why the ghost was on the spot in the underground passage — he knew we were there —.”

“Plain enough now,” said Harry Wharton. “We might have guessed —.”

“Only — we didn’t !” grinned Bob.

“Brown !” gasped Mr. Carter. “Upon my word ! Then if was you — you — you — you who played ghost to alarm my guests — you who alarmed them at night — you who scared them away — you who have caused me such losses — you rogue, you rascal, you shall be given into custody for this —.”

“Oh, come off !” said Brown.

“What ? what ?”

“You can’t run a man in for larking,” said Brown. He was recovering himself now.

“Jest a lark, playing ghost at Christmas time. There ain’t no law agin it, and you can lay to that.”

Mr. Carter spluttered.

“Why have you done this ? What was your object ? It has been going on for months — ever since I took the place over. All my plans have come to nothing, owing to this trickery ! Why have you done it ?”

“Jest a lark,” said Brown.

“A — a — a lark !” spluttered Mr. Carter. “You call it a — a — a lark, when my guests have been disturbed — scared—alarmed — frightened away — when I have been left with an empty house, after all my expenditure here — you — you — you call it a — a — a lark ?”

“Jest that !” said Brown coolly. “And now I’ll thank you to take your ’ands off me, you young fellers. I’ve ’ad enough of your ’andling, and you can lay to that !”

“Keep him safe,” said Harry.

“You bet !”

“Will you let a bloke go ?” snarled Brown. “You ain’t got nothing on me — jest larking in a set of white whiskers ! You’ve laid the blinking ghost, if that’s what you

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wanted — now take your 'ands off a bloke.”

“Larking !” repeated Mr. Carter, in a gasping voice. “I do not believe you for one moment, Brown. You must have had some motive for this imposture — for doing so much harm — for causing me such loss. What was it ?”

Exactly what “ losses ” the ghost of Tankerton Hall had caused Mr. Carter was not clear to the Greyfriars guests. But it was clear that Mr Carter was very angry.

His eyes and his gold-rimmed glasses gleamed wrath at Brown. He shook a plump fist under Brown’s nose, causing him to jerk his head back so suddenly that it banged on the solid oak of the wall behind him, with a sharp and painful bang.

“Wow !” roared Brown.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Ow! My 'ead! Wow !”

“Why have you done this ?” roared Mr. Carter, still shaking the plump fist, regardless of the damage to the back of Brown’s luckless head. “You rogue — you impostor — why have you done this ?”

“Wow ! I’ve got a pain in my 'ead! Wow !”

“You may as well tell Mr. Carter, Brown,” said Squiff, with a grin. “You see, we all know already.”

“The knowfulness is terrific, my esteemed and disgusting Brown !” chuckled Hurree Janset Ram Singh.

Brown stared at them.

“Wot you getting at ?” he growled. “I tell you it was jest a lark.”

“You can tell that to the Marines,” remarked Bob Cherry.

“You wanted to keep people away from Tankerton Hall, because you were looking for something, and couldn’t carry on with a house full,” said Squiff.

Brown gave a violent start. His shifty eyes glittered at the Australian junior.

“Wot you s’pose a bloke was looking for ?” he snarled.

“Something that’s supposed to have gone up in an air-raid — but which you believe to be parked somewhere in Tankerton Hall,” answered Squiff, coolly. “That’s your real business here — and you didn’t want others around while you were hunting for the miser’s hoard.”

“You young limb, ’ow’d you know ?” gasped Brown, staring blankly at Squiff. “I ain’t said a word — ‘Ow the ’oly poker —?”

Bob Cherry chuckled.



HE SHOOK A PLUMP FIST UNDER BROWN'S NOSE,
CAUSING HIM TO JERK HIS HEAD BACK

“This is Mr. Sherlock Holmes of New South Wales, Brown,” he explained. “He does these things.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“What ? what ?” ejaculated Mr. Carter. He stared at Squiff, stared at Brown, and stared at Squiff again.

“What —?”

“That was his game, Mr. Carter,” said Squiff. “He was hunting for the miser’s hoard, and wanted the place to himself, same as when he was caretaker here. We’d guessed that one — though we didn’t guess that it was Brown —.”

“Upon my word ! Utterly absurd !” exclaimed Mr. Carter. “The safe in the west wing and all that it contained, was destroyed in an air-raid in the War. Is it possible, Brown, that such an absurd idea was the cause of this trickery ? Was that your object ?”

“Find out !” growled Brown.

“You have done so much damage — caused me such loss — for such nonsense as this !” exclaimed Mr. Carter. “Are you in your right senses, Brown ?”

“Mor’n you’ll ever be, old covey,” answered Brown.

“What what? Upon my word! I shall give you in charge — I shall —.” Mr. Carter spluttered with wrath.

“Forget it,” jeered Brown. “Don’t I keep on telling you that there ain’t no law agin a bloke walking about in a set of white whiskers if he wants to? You can’t do nothin’ but sack me — and I can get twice the screw anywhere else, and you can lay to that.”

Mr. Carter’s plump face became purple. He looked for a moment on the verge of apoplexy. His fruity voice failed him, and he spluttered breathlessly.

“Rogue !” he gasped, at last. “Rascal ! Trickster ! You shall not remain in this house five minutes longer. I — I — I will kick you out —.”

“You got to give me my notice, old covey !” said Brown, with cool impudence. Splutter, from Mr. Carter.

“That’s enough from you, Brown,” said Squiff, grinning. “You won’t do any more buttlng here, at any rate. Like us to chuck him out, Mr. Carter ?”

“Upon my word ! I — I will kick him out with my own hands !” spluttered Mr. Carter. “I — I mean, with my own foot. Upon my word ! There is nothing to laugh at — this is not a laughing matter. Brown, you rascal, you leave the house this instant — .”

“Look ’ere —.”

“Silence !” thundered Mr. Carter. “Not another word of impudence from you. Whether you can be charged with this, I do not feel certain — but you shall not remain here a moment longer. I will kick you out with my own — I mean, I will kick you out at once. Bring him down !”

“Just a tick while we get some clobber on,” said Bob. It’s rather parky, sir.”

“Oh ! Ah ! Yes ! Certainly ! Quite !”

“Look ’ere —.”

“Silence ! Another word, and I will knock you down !” roared Mr. Carter.

Brown did not utter another word. Mr. Carter was looking quite dangerous. Brown stood scowling, between Mr. Carter and Squiff, while the Famous Five rushed to their rooms for clothes. Then the whole party gathered round Brown and escorted him along the gallery to the stairs, and down the staircase to the hall.

Mr. Carter opened the door. A wintry blast blew in.

“Look ’ere —!” howled Brown.

“Silence.”

“A bloke can’t go in this ’ere rig, and without a blinkin’ ’at !” yelled Brown.

Mr. Carter snorted. But he was prevailed upon to allow Brown to exchange the ghostly black cloak for an overcoat, and to put on a hat. Then he pointed to the open doorway.

“Go !” he hooted.

Brown eyed him uneasily, and made a jump for the doorway. He knew what was coming. He was quick — but not quite quick enough. A large foot landed, with a heavy thud, on the tail of the overcoat, and Brown, with a yell, flew through the doorway. He yelled again as he landed. The door slammed after him.

The ghost of Tankerton Hall was well and truly laid !

CHAPTER XXXII THE SECRET OF THE OAK ROOM

“A now for the jolly old secret passage!” said Squiff.

“Yes, rather !”

Harry Wharton and Co. came up to the Oak Room in a cheery crowd, after the sudden and unceremonious departure of Brown.

Mr. Carter had said good-night to them in the gallery, and gone back to his room, considerably perturbed, but no doubt relieved also to know that the ghost of Tankerton Hall was a thing of the past. But the chums of the Remove were not thinking of bed yet. Late as the hour was, they were very wide awake, after the spot of excitement with the “ghost,” and they were very curious to see his secret means of ingress into the Oak Room.

“I say, you fellows !” came a fat squeak along the corridor.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! Bunter’s woke up,” ejaculated Bob Cherry.

“Wonders will never cease !” remarked Nugent.

Evidently, Bunter had woke up ! Perhaps he had not been sleeping quite so soundly as usual ! Anyhow there he was. His door had opened about a foot, and a fat head, a fat face, and a big pair of spectacles were projected into the corridor.

He blinked at the bunch of juniors at the door of the Oak Room.

“I say, you fellows, what’s up ?” he squeaked.

“We are !” answered Bob.

“You silly ass !” howled Bunter. “Look here, something woke me up ! I heard somebody yelling help — !”

“And you came at once ?” asked Bob.

“Ha. ha, ha !”

“I — I — I was just going to, but I couldn’t find my — my trousers. I say, what’s happened ?”

“Only the ghost —.”

“Oh, crikey !”

Slam! Bunter’s door closed quite suddenly.

“Ha, ha, ha !” yelled the juniors.

“Come on,” said Squiff, and he switched on the light in the Oak Room. But perhaps that yell of merriment reassured Billy Bunter, for his door opened again, and once more the fat head, the fat face, and the big spectacles, emerged.

“I say, you fellows —” squeaked Bunter.

“It’s all right, Bunter,” called out Harry Wharton, laughing. “We’ve caught the ghost and your uncle has kicked him out.”

“Caught him !” gasped Bunter.

“Snatched him bald-headed,” answered Bob.

“The catchfulness was terrific, my esteemed Bunter.”

“Oh !” Billy Bunter, the whole of him, emerged into the corridor. Apparently he had found his trousers, after all, as he had them on, as well as most of his other garments.

“I — I say, you really got him ?”

“Yes ! Why didn’t you come and lend .a hand ?”

“I — I was just going to, but I couldn’t find my socks. I — I was hunting everywhere for my braces — I mean my socks — that is, my trousers. I — I was just coming to help. Sure you’ve got him ?”

“Sort of, as Mr. Carter has just kicked him out at the front door,” chuckled Bob. “It was Brown playing ghost.”

Bunter jumped.

“Bob—bob —bob — Brown!” he stuttered.

“I don’t know whether his name’s Robert, but it was Brown.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Oh, crikey!” said Bunter. Quite reassured now, the fat Owl rolled down the corridor.

“I say, you fellows. I wasn’t sticking in my room because I was scared, or anything of that sort. The fact is, I’ve only just woke up. Catch me being scared !”

“Easy catch !” remarked Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

Oh. really, Cherry —.”

“Come on.” said Squiff, and the juniors followed him into the Oak Room. The Australian junior dragged aside the cumbersome old screen that stood in the corner. Then there was a general exclamation. There was no need now to search for the secret door. It was revealed to all eyes. Brown had left it wide open ready for prompt retreat. A section of the panelling, on hidden hinges, opened like a door. It was of massive oak, a couple of inches thick. Wide open, it revealed an orifice in the old oak wall.

“By gum!” said Bob Cherry. “We’ve tapped and punched that very panel — no wonder it didn’t sound hollow. It’s as solid as Bunter’s nut.”

“Yah !”

Squiff turned on a flash-lamp, and flashed the light into the cavity.

“That’s where the sportsman stood to do his groaning stunt.” he remarked. “ Come on — and mind how you step. Might be pitfalls, in a place like this.”

“Oh !” ejaculated Bunter.

“Lead on, Macduff !” said Bob.

The Australian junior stepped into the cavity in the wall. It was just as well that he stepped carefully, for beyond the opening was the top step of a steep, narrow stairway, built in the thickness of the ancient wall. The stairway led down into impenetrable gloom.

Squiff flashed the light down.

“Looks pretty steep,” he said. “Not the ghost of a hand-rail. We’re going down, though.”

“What-ho !” said Bob.

“I — I say, you fellows, those steps don’t look any too safe,” squeaked Bunter.

“That’s the way Brown came and went,” said Harry.

“Oh ! Yes ! But ——.”

“The butfulness is terrific,” murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

“Come on,” said Squiff. He stepped down, flashing the light before him. “Mind how you tread.”

Billy Bunter blinked down the steep stair. He was as curious as the other fellows to

see what lay beyond that mysterious hidden stairway in the ancient wall. But for once curiosity did not predominate. The more Bunter blinked at those steps, winding away into utter darkness, the less he liked them.

“Come on, old bean,” said Bob, cheerily. Harry Wharton followed Squiff, and Johnny Bull followed Wharton, and then Frank Nugent and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh stepped down. Bob Cherry lingered good-naturedly for Bunter. “I’ll give you a hand if you like.”

“Fat lot of good that would be if a fellow tumbled down,” said Bunter.

“That’s all right,” said Bob. “If you fell, you’d most likely fall on your head.”

“Think I want to fall on my head, you silly chump?” yapped Bunter.

“Well, it wouldn’t hurt you to fall on something soft, would it?”

“You cheeky ass !” hooted Bunter.

“Careful, you men,” came Squiff’s voice, from below. “There’s a step here badly worn — mind how you tread.”

“The mindfulness is preposterous, my esteemed Squiff.”

“Well, are you coming, old fat man ?” asked Bob.

“Oh! Yes! I — I’ve got to tie up my shoe-lace!”

“Don’t wait for me,” stammered Bunter. “I — I’ll follow on.”

Bob Cherry chuckled. He had no doubt that it would take the fat Owl a long time to get that shoe-lace tied.

“Blessed if I see anything to cackle at. If you’re going to make out that I’m finking it, Bob Cherry —.”

“Come on, Bob,” called out Harry Wharton. “You’ll be left in the dark.”

“Coming !” called back Bob. And he stepped down after the rest.

“Is Bunter coming?” asked Nugent.

“He’s stopping to tie his shoe-lace.”

The sound of a chuckle floated up to Billy Bunter’s fat ears. He cast a wrathful blink down the shadowy stairway, down which the six juniors had now disappeared. There was a spiral turn in the stairway, and they had passed out of sight, and all was black darkness now. That did it, if Billy Bunter had felt any inclination to follow on.

“Beasts !” breathed Bunter.

He backed through the opening into the Oak Room, on the safe side of the secret door. There was a deep frown on his podgy brow. He knew what that chuckle meant.

Those beasts were making out that he funkled following them down the dark stairway into the unknown depths below.

“Beasts !” repeated Bunter, frowning.

Then he grinned. Quite a bright idea had flashed into his podgy brain. He grasped the open panel in a fat paw, and slammed it shut. It closed like a part of the oak wall, leaving no sign that a door was there.

“He, he, he !” chuckled Bunter.

They could make out that a fellow was scared! Perhaps they would be scared themselves, when they came back, and found the panel shut ! Billy Bunter could

picture them hammering on the panel, and shouting with alarm, and that mental picture irradiated his fat face with a grin so wide that it stretched almost from one fat ear to the other.

“He, he, he !”

In a state of happy anticipation, Billy Bunter sat down in an armchair, with his eyes and his spectacles fixed on the secret panel, grinning gleefully while he waited for the sounds of alarm from the other side.

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CHAPTER XXXIII A SURPRISE FOR BILLY BUNTER

“FACILIS descensus Averno !” remarked Bob Cherry.

“Not so jolly facilis !” grunted Johnny Bull. “It’s steep.”

“The steepfulness is terrific.”

The hidden stairway wound downward into darkness. Squiff, flashing the light before him, led the way, treading with care. The Famous Five followed him in Indian file, also stepping very carefully. The steps were narrow and steep, and there was nothing to hold on to in case of a slip.

“Just as well that Bunter isn’t rolling on behind,” said Bob. “If he took a tumble and landed on us —.”

“Oh, my hat !” ejaculated Nugent.

“Let’s hope it will take him a long time to tie that shoe-lace,” chuckled Bob.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

It was really quite unattractive to think of the fat Owl rolling on behind, on that steep stairway, for there was no doubt that if a fellow behind tumbled, he would set the whole file tumbling down into unknown depths. Which would have made the descent into Avernus altogether too facile for comfort. But the juniors had no doubt that Bunter would remain in the Oak Room — though they doubted the shoe-lace!

“I wonder how the dickens far this goes !” said Harry Wharton, as step after step receded underfoot.

“Looks as if Squiff’s going home,” answered Bob, Bit of a surprise for your people, Squiff, if we come out in New South Wales.”

“Well, Brown came this way every time he played ghost,” said Nugent. “It can’t be much further.”

“Sister Anne! Sister Anne! Can you see the end yet ?” called out Bob.

“Yes — there’s a floor — a passage or something.” called back Squiff. “Only a few more steps now.”

“Oh, good !”

“Here we are!” exclaimed the Australian junior, a minute or two later. He stood on a floor of ancient cracked flag-stones, holding up the light.

One by one the Famous Five emerged from the narrow stairway, and joined him there. Squiff circled the light, and they looked round them curiously.

They stood in a passage, dark and damp, with stone floor, and bricked walls that met in an arch overhead. It was wider than the stairway, but only by a couple of feet.

There was slime on the floor and the walls, and the air was heavy, damp, and chilly.

“Push on,” said Bob.

Squiff led the way again with the light. Tramping feet woke strange echoes in the dim passage.

“Hallo, hallo, hallo! There’s a doorway!” exclaimed Bob.

“Journey’s end !” said Squiff.

The passage ended at an open doorway, leading into a room. The door stood wide open, and as Squiff flashed the light on it, the juniors could see that it was a thick oak panel in an oak wall, like the secret door they had left behind in the Oak Room.

Brown had left it open for his return, little guessing that his feet had trodden that hidden way for the last time.

Squiff stepped in through the doorway, and circled the light. An electric switch on the

wall of the room caught his eye, and he switched it on. Bright light illuminated the room in which the explorers now found themselves.

It was a furnished room, evidently used by a member of the Tankerton Hall household. They did not need telling who that member was.

"Brown's room," said Bob.

"No doubt about that," said Harry Wharton. "This is where he fixed up his ghost outfit."

"And if we'd spotted that panel in the Oak Room, we could have walked in on him," said Nugent.

The juniors looked round the room. On the opposite side was an ordinary door, locked and bolted. Brown had evidently guarded against the possibility of anyone entering his room while he was using the secret passage.

"We've come to the end of the jolly old trail," said Squiff. "I suppose the servants' quarters are on the other side of that door."

"I wonder how Brown found out the secret passage," remarked Nugent. "Mr. Carter knows nothing about it."

"He's a newcomer," chuckled Bob. "It's only been his ancestral hall for a few months, you know. Brown's the oldest inhabitant."

"Yes — he was here for years on end," said Harry. "He was the old miser's man, then caretaker. Might have found the secret passage by chance, in hunting for the miser's hoard — he's been at that game ever since the bombing in the war-time."

"Might be lots of other secret places in a queer old pile like this," said Nugent.

"And the miser's hoard hidden in one of them, perhaps!" exclaimed Bob. "Might tumble on it by luck, if Brown tumbled on this by luck, what? Might take it round to Hubert on a plate after all."

"The mightfulness is terrific, my esteemed Bob," chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "But the probablefulness is a boot on the other leg."

"Well, this is the lot!" said Johnny Bull. "What about getting back. Nothing more to see here."

"And Bunter may be getting anxious about us!" grinned Bob.

"More likely gone to sleep."

"No need to go back the way we came," said Squiff. "We can get out here and go round by the hall — unless you fellows are anxious to clamber up that stairway again?"

"Not a lot," said Bob. "Facilis descensus Averno — sed revocare gradum — what's the rest?"

"Ask Quelch next term. Come on."

Squiff crossed the room to the door opposite, and turned back the key in the lock, and withdrew the bolt. The Co. followed him. Obviously Brown's room opened on the servants' quarters, from which it would be easy to reach the hall by the service door, and the staircase in the hall was a much easier proposition than the secret stairway to the Oak Room.

The Australian junior threw open the door. Outside was a wide corridor. The Co. followed him out of Brown's room — and a minute later Squiff pushed open the service door in the hall, and they found themselves in familiar territory again.

The hall was dark, but from above came a glimmer of light over the old oak gallery, from the open doorway of the Oak Room.

"Bunter hasn't fallen asleep!" remarked Bob.

"Eh! How do you know?"

"We should hear the sounds of revelry by night from here."

The juniors chuckled.

They trod lightly up the staircase. Whether Billy Bunter had fallen asleep or not, everyone else in Tankerton Hail was buried in slumber, and they did not want to disturb sleepers.

It was fairly clear that Bunter was not asleep in the Oak Room, as no sound of a snore greeted their ears as they approached. But whether Bunter had waited for them, or gone back to bed, they did not know — till they glanced into the Oak Room. Then they stared.

Bunter was there! He had not gone back to bed, or fallen asleep where he was — he was sitting in an armchair, his eyes fixed on the secret panel in the corner of the room, and an extensive grin irradiating his fat face. He was there — he was awake — and he was amused; though what amused the fat Owl they did not see for a moment. Then they noticed that the secret panel was shut.

Why, the fat villain !” breathed Bob. “He’s shut the panel — we couldn’t have got out if we’d come back that way —.”

“The fat tick —!” muttered Johnny Bull. “Scrag him !”

“Quiet !” murmured Bob. “Guests don’t scrag their jolly old hosts, in the best circles! Keep mum, you fellows.”

Bob Cherry tiptoed into the Oak Room. The other fellows remained at the doorway, watching him.

Bunter, his attention concentrated on the panel in the corner, did not look round. Not the remotest idea entered his fat mind that the explorers might return by another route. He was expecting them by the way they had gone — as, indeed, they had themselves expected, at the start. Evidently the grinning fat Owl was anticipating hammering, and shouting, and general discomfiture. But it was the unexpected that was going to happen.

He sat watching and grinning, while Bob Cherry, on tiptoe, circled round behind his armchair.

Having reached the back of the armchair, Bob leaned over it, and bent over the fat head of the Owl of the Remove.

Then there was a sudden roar that Stentor himself might have envied.

“HALLO, HALLO, HALLO !”

“Oooogh !” gasped Bunter.

The fat Owl fairly bounded. Never in all his fat career had Billy Bunter been so startled and astonished.

He bounded from the armchair with a spluttering gasp, and spun round. His eyes almost popped through his spectacles at Bob Cherry, smiling cheerily at him over the back of the armchair. He blinked at him unbelievably. He could hardly believe either his eyes or his spectacles.

“Oh ! Ooogh ! Oh, crikey !” stuttered Bunter. “Is — is — is that you ?”

“Sort of,” agreed Bob.

“But — but you ain’t here,” gasped the bewildered Owl.

“I — I mean, how did you get here? You ain’t come up yet, have you? Oh, crikey !”

With his eyes popping, and his mouth wide open, Bunter stared at Bob Cherry — he almost gibbered at him.

“Ha, ha, ha !” came from the doorway.

Bunter’s spectacles shot round towards the door. He blinked dizzily at Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, and Sampson Quincy Iffley Field, looking in at the doorway and laughing.

“Oh, crikey !” gasped Bunter.

He blinked at Bob Cherry again. Then he blinked once more at the crowd in the doorway. The bewilderment in his fat face made the juniors yell.

“Oh !” gurgled Bunter. “It — it — it’s you fellows ! How did you — why, I haven’t taken my eyes off that panel for a minute — how — oh, crikey !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“How did you get here ?” spluttered Bunter.

“Oh, just walked,” answered Bob.

“But how —?” howled Bunter. “I — I thought you’d come hammering and yelling at that panel —.”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“How —?” yelled Bunter.

“Think it out, old fat top,” said Bob. “You’ll work it out by morning, I shouldn’t wonder! Good-night, you scheming old bloater !”

And the Greyfriars fellows, laughing, marched off to their rooms, leaving Billy Bunter blinking.

CHAPTER XXXIV A THUNDERBOLT!

“HARRY —.”

“Anything up ?”

“My esteemed Wharton —.”

“What’s the jolly old trouble?”

Harry Wharton did not answer. He sat at the well-spread table, in the breakfast-room at Tankerton Hall, with a letter in his hand, and an absolutely stunned look on his face.

It happened to be the only letter for the Greyfriars guests that morning. It was addressed to Harry Wharton in the hand of Hazeldene, of the Greyfriars Remove. He was in no hurry to open it. A letter from Hazel, in the Christmas holidays, was welcome, but of no particular urgency. And over breakfast there was a topic of the greatest interest — the capture of the Tankerton Hall ghost and the discovery of the secret stairway and passage leading to Brown’s room. So Hazel’s letter was left by Wharton’s plate till breakfast was finished.

Then, carelessly enough, he opened it.

And then —!

Bob Cherry and Johnny Bull, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh and Sampson Quincy Iffley Field, gazed at him. Uncle Carter turned his gold-rimmed glasses on him. Miss Pike gave him a very curious look. Bessie Bunter’s spectacles gleamed at him. Even Billy Bunter paused, with egg-spoon poised, to blink at him across the table. The captain of the Greyfriars Remove was the cynosure of all eyes. He sat staring, as if mesmerised, at the letter in his hand.

He did not speak. It seemed that he couldn’t. He stared at the letter — his eyes almost bulged at it. It looked as if something in that letter had completely and utterly winded him.

Why a letter from a Greyfriars fellow in the hols should produce such an effect, was a mystery to his comrades. But it did !

“My dear boy !” It was Uncle Carter’s fruity voice. “You seem upset — no bad news in your letter, I hope ?”

“Oh!” Wharton seemed to come out of a sort of trance. “Oh! No.”

“It’s only from Hazel, isn’t it ?” asked Nugent.

“Oh! Yes!”

“Marjorie’s all right, I suppose ?” asked Bob.

“Hazel doesn’t mention Marjorie ! But —.”

“But what ?”

“Oh! Nothing.”

Harry Wharton so evidently did not want to be questioned, that his friends said no more. Miss Pike and Uncle Carter politely withdrew their glances from him. He read through the letter a second time, as if not quite sure that he had read it aright the first time. Then, with a deep breath, he put it into his pocket.

Whatever it was that had startled, or rather petrified him, in that letter, plainly he was going to say nothing about it at the breakfast table.

Billy Bunter blinked at him inquisitively. Bunter was now helping himself to jam, but he delayed even that important operation for a moment. Bunter wanted to know.

Bunter always wanted to know.

“I say, you might tell a chap what’s in that letter,” he squeaked. “I say, what’s Hazel got to say ?”

Harry Wharton gave him a look. It was a very expressive look. But he did not answer; and Bunter grunted, and commenced operations on jam.

Miss Pike and Mr. Carter rose from the table. Breakfast was over — except for Billy and Bessie Bunter. Both of them generally lingered.

Six fellows gathered in the hall. A motor trip had been arranged for that morning, and Hubert was to bring the car round at half-past nine. Mr. Carter chatted a few minutes on that subject, with his usual beaming geniality, and then departed to consult with Miss Pike on the subject of despatching Brown’s belongings after him. The juniors were more interested now in Hazel’s letter than in motoring. They were quite mystified.

“Come up to the Oak Room,” said Harry, in a low voice, when Mr. Carter was gone.

“I’ve got something to tell you.”

In wonder, the juniors followed the captain of the Remove up the staircase. They went into the Oak Room, and Harry Wharton closed the door.

“This is getting jolly mysterious !” remarked Squiff.

“Mysteriouser and mysteriouser !” grinned Bob Cherry.

The mysteriousness is terrific,” murmured Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. “We are all on the tender hooks, my esteemed chum.”

“Cough it up !” said Bob.

“What on earth can Hazel have had to say ?” asked Nugent. in blank wonder. “Give it a name, old bean.”

“What the thump —?” said Johnny Bull.

Harry Wharton took the letter from his pocket. He looked at it again, reading it over a third time, before he spoke, as if doubt still lingered, and he wanted to make assurance doubly sure. His chums watched him in wonder. Hazel of the Remove was nobody in particular, except that he was Marjorie’s brother. It was just amazing that a letter from Hazel should have knocked the captain of the Remove into a cocked hat. Even after the third reading, it really seemed that Wharton could hardly believe what he saw in that letter.

“That fat villain!” breathed Wharton.

“Eh ?”

“That podgy scoundrel —.”

“What ?”

“That — that — that bloated brigand —.”

“Are you talking about Bunter ?” asked Bob blankly. It was clear that these remarks could not apply to Hazel.

“Yes! That spoofing porpoise —.”

“Is Bunter mentioned in that letter ?”

“Yes — the diddling dithering dummy —.”

“But what —?” yelled Bob.

“Johnny said there was a catch in it!” said Harry. “We might have known there was, without Johnny telling us. Smithy knew —.”

“Smithy ?”

“You remember what he said on the phone! He was killing himself with laughing at the other end. No wonder.”

“But what —?” shrieked Bob.

“We’ve been as good as told! Lots of things Bunter let out — lots of things Mr. Carter has said — and Bessie — and even Brown. But — who could have thought it ? Who could have thought —.”

“Who could have thought what ?” roared Bob.

“By gum! I’ll boot him all over Tankerton Hall! I’ll burst him! I’ll scrag him! I — I — I’ll —!” gasped Wharton. “We’ll make an example of him.”

“Draw it mild,” grinned Squiff. “A jolly old guest can’t boot his jolly old host, old scout! We’re Bunter’s guests —.”

“We’re not !” hooted Wharton.

“Eh! What? Not ?”

“No! We’re not guests at all. We’re boarders.”

“Bub — bub — boarders!” stuttered Bob.

“We’ve been taken in! That fat idiot — that fat frump — that fat fozzler — that frabjous fibber — that spoofing octopus —. Look at that letter!”

Wharton slammed the letter on the table. Five fellows fairly jumped to read it. What Wharton had said simply bewildered them; they could not begin to make head or tail of it. But the letter enlightened them, though they had to read it once and twice, and thrice, before they quite got it in.

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It ran

Dear Wharton,

I hope you and your pals are having a jolly time at Tankerton Hall. Have you found Bunter out yet? I’m jolly glad I didn’t let him pull my leg as he pulled yours. Goodness knows what the pater would have said when the bill came in.

If you haven’t spotted it yet, the enclosed advertisement cut from the newspaper will put you wise. You bet it made me stare when I saw it in the paper. I couldn’t help laughing. Won’t they yell over this in the Remove studies next term?

Yours,
Hazel.

Pinned to the letter was the advertisement, which Hazel had kindly cut out from a newspaper to send along, no doubt “killing himself with laughing,” like the Bounder, when he did so.

The Greyfriars fellows gazed at that advertisement. They goggled at it. The ghost of Tankerton Hall had not startled them more. Indeed a whole tribe of phantoms could hardly have startled them so much. It was no wonder that it had petrified Harry Wharton, when he opened Hazel's letter at the breakfast-table. it petrified his friends now.

They knew now what it was that the fat Owl had nearly revealed in the car coming to Tankerton Hall. They knew now the secret misgiving that had been weighing on his fat mind since they had arrived. They knew now what Brown had meant when he said he would "put down" the logs for the fire in the Oak Room. They knew now the inner meaning of Mr. Carter's hitherto incomprehensible joke about "extras." They knew now the meaning of Bessie's mysterious remarks. They knew now why cars that were not available for Bunter were available for the Greyfriars guests. They knew, in fact, the whole thing, and could only wonder that it had never dawned on them. Really, it had been plain enough, if only they could have seen it. But they had never even dreamed of it. Well as they knew their Bunter, often as he had spoofed them, they had let him spoof them once more. Johnny Bull had persisted that there was a catch in it. But even the doubting Johnny had never dreamed what the catch was. Now they knew that advertisement told them the whole story.

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TANKERTON HALL
Near Folkestone.

Home from Home for a Holiday!

High altitude. Sea views.
Excellent cuisine.
Spacious grounds. Skating.

Garage with cars for hire, chauffeur or self-driven.

Experienced manageress.
Every comfort and attention.

Terms, £2 12s. 6d. per day.
Phone, FOL 62244.
Proprietor, H. Carter.

COME FOR CHRISTMAS!
A HOME FROM HOME.

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CHAPTER XXXV
PAYING GUESTS!

"I SAY, you fellows!"

The door of the Oak Room opened.

Billy Bunter rolled in.

Bunter looked rather sticky. He had lingered for jam. But he wanted to know. So he had come up to inquire.

He blinked at six expressive faces, through his big spectacles.

Johnny Bull kicked the door shut. Bunter wanted to know — and he was going to

know. When he knew, it was probable that he might consider that a prompt retreat was indicated.

"I say, you might tell a fellow," said the inquisitive fat Owl. "You looked as if that letter knocked you right over, Wharton."

"It did !" said Harry.

"It's rather knocked us all over, Bunter," said Bob Cherry.

"The knockfulness has been terrific."

"I told you fellows there was a catch in it," growled Johnny Bull. "We jolly well know now! And that fat villain —."

"Look at that, Bunter!" said Harry Wharton, pointing to the letter on the table.

Billy Bunter blinked at the letter. He blinked at the attached advertisement. He jumped.

"Oh, crikey !" he ejaculated.

Six fellows eyed him. They eyed him almost wolfishly. The fattest face at Tankerton Hall registered dismay and alarm.

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

"Well ?"

"I — I — I say, you — you — you — you know now —!"

"Yes, we know now," said Harry Wharton.

"The knowfulness is preposterous," said Hurree Jam- set Ram Singh. "And the kickfulness is the next item on the esteemed programme."

"Oh, really, Inky —."

"What have you got to say, Bunter ?" asked Harry.

"Oh! I — I — I — I say, you fellows, I — I hope you ain't going to be shirty," gasped Bunter. "I — I was going to tell you in the car coming, you know, only — only — only I — I didn't —."

"If you had, you fat scoundrel, we shouldn't have come," said Harry.

"That — that's why I — I didn't, old chap! I — I thought you might change your minds and not come, if — if I mentioned it — so — so I — I didn't! I — I've been going to tell you every day since, only — only I haven't — I — I thought you might be shirty about it —."

"Right on the wicket," said Bob Cherry. "We're going to be shirty — no mistake about that."

"The shirtfulness is going to be terrific, my esteemed spoofing Bunter."

"I — I say, there ain't anything to be shirty about, you know," said Bunter, feebly.

"You're getting a jolly good time — think of the food! Think you'd get the same food anywhere else, for two and a half guineas a day! People get awful food in boarding-houses these days! Uncle Carter stands jolly good food. I — I wonder how he makes it pay, really."

"You fat fozzler !" roared Johnny Bull. "Think we wanted to go out boarding for Christmas ?"

"Well, lots of people do," said Bunter. "Uncle Carter runs a special line in Christmas boarders, you know. He would have had the house full but for that beastly ghost business. The — the ghost scared everybody off, and — and when Uncle Carter asked me whether I could bring a Greyfriars party, of — of course I played up."

"So that's what he came to see you for at Greyfriars !" exclaimed Nugent.

"Well, of course — I — I mean he came to see me because I'm his favourite nephew. But — but he mentioned that he'd been let down, and — and that there wasn't time before Christmas to — to get a new lot of guests —."

"Guests !" snorted Johnny Bull.

“Paying guests, you know,” explained Bunter. “You’re paying guests, see? Uncle Carter was jolly nearly left with the house empty over Christmas — and — and then he thought of a schoolboy party, and — and asked me if I could fix it. So I — I said I — I could. See? It wasn’t because Uncle Carter said I could come myself, if I — I brought a party of paying guests —.”

“Oh !” gasped Bob. “That was it, was it ?”

“Yes, old chap — I — I mean, no, old fellow! Nothing of the kind. Still, knowing what the food was like —.”

“And why didn’t you tell us we were to be paying guests — that is, boarders in a boarding-house ?” hooted Johnny Bull.

“Eh !” Bunter blinked at him. He seemed to consider that question frivolous. “You wouldn’t have come, if I had, would you ?”

“Of course we shouldn’t, you fat frump. You know that.”

“Well, I wanted you to come, see ?” said Bunter. “Being my dear old pals, I — I shouldn’t have felt that it was really Christmas without you! I — I’d have told you like a shot, if you’d have come after I told you. But — but I knew you wouldn’t! I — I jolly nearly told you, in the car, but — but I jolly well knew you’d turn back if I did, so I — I didn’t.”

“You frumptious frump,” said Bob. “So Uncle Carter came to the school to get you to bring a party of paying guests to his show. And you had the nerve to diddle us into coming, without telling us —.”

“Mr. Carter must have supposed we knew,” said Harry. “He told Bunter not to say anything about the ghost, but he must have supposed that Bunter would tell us that Tankerton Hall was a boarding-house —.”

“Of course he did,” said Bunter. “But I jolly well knew you wouldn’t come if I told you you were going to be paying guests. So — so I — I didn’t mention that bit. Tact, you know.”

“Tact !” stuttered Bob.

“Well, some fellows can be tactful,” said Bunter. “I’ve always had tact.”

“Why, you — you — you ——!” gasped Squiff.

“What are you grouching about, I’d like to know? demanded Bunter, warmly. “Here you are in my Uncle Carter’s ancestral hall —.”

“Which belongs to Hubert the chauffeur !” hooted Johnny Bull.

“— first-class grub, and plenty of it! Why, the grub alone is worth the money,” said Bunter, indignantly, “and you’ve got my company —.”

“Oh, scissors !”

“And Bessie’s! Waited on hand and foot by a caretaker — I mean a butler — a jolly good car whenever you want it —.”

“I know what Bessie meant now!” gurgled Bob Cherry. “That car to the station goes down to the account, does it ?”

“Of course it does! Think you can hire a magnificent Rolls, and a first-class chauffeur, for nothing? Cars are extras, of course.”

“We ought to have tumbled,” gasped Nugent, “Remember what Mr. Carter said on the telephone in Quelch’s study — I couldn’t make head or tail of it then ——”

“We ought to have tumbled — knowing Bunter,” said Squiff.

“Well, we couldn’t,” said Harry. “It’s all been plain enough, so far as that goes — but we couldn’t see it — how could we? — never dreaming of anything of the kind. I — I suppose we’ve been rather asses —.”

“Remember Brown saying he would put the logs down, when Sam brought them up ?” said Squiff. “The logs go down on the account, Bunter ?”

“Oh, really, Squiff, of course they do! Think you can have expensive log fires for nothing in a boardinghouse ?”

“And the cars from the school — !” roared Johnny Bull.

“I don't think you can grumble at twelve pounds for two jolly good cars to take you away at Christmas! Be reasonable !” urged Bunter.

“Twelve pounds! Oh, crikey!”

“Cheap, I call it,” said Bunter. “You should see what they charge at some places !”

Look here, you fellows, don't you go getting me into a row with my Uncle Carter — telling him I never told you. He would be waxy.”

“I fancy he would !” said Bob.

“He — he mightn't understand that it was tact,” explained Bunter. “I don't think you fellows ought to make a fuss. You're my guests here —.”

“Paying guests!” yelled Johnny Bull.

“Well, don't be sordid, Bull.”

“Wha-a-a-t?”

“All this talk about money disgusts me,” said Bunter. “It's sordid ! I prefer not to think about it. Of course, you will have to pay your bills. There may be extras — cars, and fires in the rooms, and all that; telephone calls, and so on. But for goodness sake don't let us have any sordid discussions about money. It disgusts me — it does really.”

And Bunter sniffed.

Harry Wharton and Co. gazed at him. Billy Bunter's Christmas party had discovered that they were “paying guests”; that the hospitable uncle was nothing more or less than a boarding-house keeper; that bills were running up, with unnumbered “ extras,” which in due course would have to be presented to astonished old folks at home for payment. And they had been diddled in that remarkable manner for no reason except that Billy Bunter wanted Christmas at Tankerton Hall, and that that had depended upon his securing a number of “ paying guests ” from his school ! And he had tactfully kept them in ignorance of the real facts; they had been, as the poet puts it, tenderly led by the nose as asses are ! In the circumstances they were not prepared to be so indifferent to the sordid question of cash as Bunter was. Bunter had nothing to pay. They had — or at any rate their people had ! Neither was it grateful or comforting to reflect that, as Hazel had said, the fellows would be yelling in the Remove studies, next term, over the story of that extraordinary Christmas party. They gazed at William George Bunter as if they could have eaten him.

There was one ray of consolation.

They were not, after all, Billy Bunter's guests. They were Mr. Carter's boarders !

Guests could not kick their host. But boarders could kick a spoofer. That was a comfort.

“Well,” said Bob Cherry. “We're paying guests ! — and we shall have to pay, I suppose. We can't diddle Bunter's uncle as Bunter has diddled us. As we're paying guests, we'll begin by paying Bunter.”

“And the payfulness will be terrific!” said Hurree Jamsset Ram Singh. “The lockfulness of the stable door is too late after the cracked pitcher has gone to the well, as the English proverb remarks. But the kickfulness is the proper caper.”

“Collar him !”

“Bag him !”

“Scrag him !”

“Boot him !”

Billy Bunter made a frantic bound doorward. He had dreaded that the paying guests

would be shirty when they found out. His dread had been well-founded. Only too plainly, they were fearfully shirty, Billy Bunter promptly imitated the guests in Macbeth, who stood not upon the order of their going, but went at once. He flew. After him rushed the paying guests. Bob Cherry's foot was the first to land. But the others followed it fast.

"Yaroooh !" Bunter dragged the door open. "I say, you fellows — yoo-hooooop! Beasts! I say —whoooooop! Oh, crikey! Oh, gum! Oh, scissors! Oh, jimmy! Oh, lor'! Yaroooooooop!"

"Give a fellow room —."

"Lemme get at him —."

"You fat brigand, take that —."

"And that —!"

"And that —!"

Billy Bunter bounded through the doorway like a fat kangaroo. He roared as he bounded. How many kicks he collected before he escaped. Bunter never knew. They seemed innumerable. Really it seemed as if every member of Billy Bunter's Christmas party had half-a-dozen feet and that they were all landing on his tight trousers. It was borne in upon the fat Owl's podgy mind, as he fled for his fat life, that the way of the transgressor was hard!

CHAPTER XXXVI HUBERT THINKS IT FUNNY!

HUBERT touched his cap, as Harry Wharton and Co. came into the garage yard. His eyes dwelt rather curiously upon their faces.

There were signs about the Greyfriars fellows that they were not feeling their usual cheery and good-tempered selves. As a matter of fact, they weren't !

The discovery of the " true inwardness " of Billy Bunter's invitation for the Christmas holidays had amazed, excited, and exasperated them. And they were still a little breathless after booting Bunter.

In the new and strange circumstances they hardly knew what they were going to do.

They had come to Tankerton Hall as guests. But so far as Uncle Carter was concerned, they were paying guests. Paying guests, naturally, had to pay their bills !

Mr. Carter knew nothing, and suspected nothing, of the " tact " Bunter had exercised in getting those guests to Tankerton Hall. Mr. Carter, it was certain, would expect his bills to be paid when he presented them, As Bessie had expressed it, without the juniors understanding what she meant, he was not running the place for his health.

Those bills, with innumerable extras, were likely to be impressive! They would have to be passed on to the old folks at home! The hapless " guests " would not decline to pay. Indeed, they realised that Uncle Carter, whose boarding house business had suffered severely from the antics of the Tankerton " ghost, " probably could not afford to let them off. A boardinghouse keeper had bills to meet, just as boarders had !

Neither were they inclined to tell Uncle Carter anything about Bunter's trickery.

It was an extraordinary, disconcerting, and dismaying situation. Nobody was anxious to write and tell astonished parents that he had been running up unexpected bills.

Nobody was anxious to reappear suddenly at home and explain why the stay at Tankerton Hall had been suddenly cut short.

They had to think it out. In the meantime, Johnny Bull pointed out that it was only common-sense to wash out extras like cars — the bills were likely to be impressive enough in any case. So the juniors walked round to the garage to cancel the car

ordered for that morning.

Hubert scanned their faces, with a slight smile on his own. It was easy to see that the Christmas party had been deeply disturbed — and Hubert had no doubt that he could guess the reason. During the past few months, Hubert had seen a good many guests at Tankerton Hall looking disturbed in the morning, and departing after a very brief stay.

“Oh! Here you are, Hubert,” said Bob Cherry.

“Yes, sir,” said Hubert. “Not yet quite time for the car, sir, I think. But it is ready if you wish to start —.”

“Oh! No!” said Bob. “You see —.”

“The fact is —!” said Harry.

“Yes sir,” said Hubert, inquiringly, as he paused.

“The fact is, we shan’t be wanting the car after all as it happens. It’s a bit late to tell you so, I know —.”

“Quite immaterial, sir!” said Hubert, urbanely.

“We don’t want you to lose on it, if you’ve turned down anybody else for us, you know,” said Bob.

“That is quite all right, sir! Perhaps you would like the car to the station?” suggested Hubert.

The juniors looked at him. It was true that they were thinking of going, but they could not imagine how Hubert had guessed that one.

“We haven’t quite decided yet,” said Harry. “But — something rather unexpected has happened, and we may be going —.”

Quite so, sir,” said Hubert. “Not at all surprising, sir, in the circumstances.”

They stared, quite failing to see how Hubert could know anything about the “circumstances.” They had not said a word, excepting to Billy Bunter.

“Probably you had heard little about Tankerton Hall, before you came here for Christmas,” said Hubert, “so no doubt you have had rather a shock.”

“The shockfulness has been terrific,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “But how the absurd dickens do you know anything about it ?”

Hubert raised his eyebrows.

“Naturally I know all about it, sir,” he answered. “I could hardly fail to know.”

“You know all about it!” exclaimed Bob Cherry, blankly.

“Certainly, sir.”

“Well, my hat! You might have put us wise, then.”

“Look here,” roared Johnny Bull, angrily. “You knew how that fat villain was diddling us, and you never said a word?”

Hubert’s eyebrows went up further.

“I should hardly call it ‘diddling,’ sir,” he said, mildly. “If Master Bunter did not mention it, no doubt he regarded it as a mere trifle; probably he did not take it seriously at all.”

“No doubt he didn’t.” said Harry Wharton, sharply. “But Bunter’s a silly ass, and hasn’t the sense of a bunny rabbit. You have, I suppose ?”

“I hope so, sir !” murmured Hubert.

“Well, then,” said Bob Cherry, hotly. “If you knew, you ought to have tipped us. You knew we were being taken in —.”

“You knew that he was asking us here for Christmas, without telling us that it was a dashed boardinghouse —!” hooted Squiff.

“Spinning us yarns about his uncle’s ancestral hall, when all the while we were to get bills coming in!” exclaimed Nugent.

“Asking us here as a Christmas party, and keeping it the dark that the place was run as

a business for boarders !” snorted Johnny Bull.

“Landing us with bills that goodness knows how we shall pay, without our knowing anything about it !” exclaimed Harry Wharton. “Bunter’s too fatheaded to understand that it was diddling. But you —.”

“If you don’t call it diddling, what do you call it ?” bawled Johnny Bull.

“The diddleness was terrific.”

Hubert stared blankly at the excited juniors. The expression on his face, as he listened, was thunderstruck.

“Look here, we’ve jolly well booted Bunter for it.” roared Johnny, “and if Hubert was a party to it, we’ll jolly well boot him too.”

Hubert backed away hurriedly.

“Oh, holy smoke!” he gasped. “I — I — I never knew —.”

“You’ve just told us that you know !” snorted Johnny Bull.

“You said that you knew !” snapped Nugent.

“Not that, sir !” stuttered Hubert. “Indeed, I never knew — never dreamed —. Oh, suffering cats! D-d-do you mean to say that you never knew that Tankerton Hall was a boarding-house ——?”

“How could we know, when we weren’t told anything of the kind ?”

“Of course we never knew —.”

“And — and — and Master Bunter asked you here as guests, without telling you ?” gasped Hubert.

“Not a word ! We’ve only just found out !”

“Oh, great Scott !”

“You said you knew all about it —!” exclaimed Bob.

“Oh! No! I was speaking of something else — there’s a spot of misunderstanding. Oh, my sainted Sam! Ha, ha, ha !” roared Hubert.

The juniors glared at him.

“Ha, ha, ha!” Hubert seemed quite overcome.

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“Think it’s funny ?” roared Johnny.

“Oh, dear! Oh, dear!” Hubert tried to control his merriment. “Oh, dear! It has its comic side, sir! You never knew — ha, ha! — that fat young rascal spoofed you — ha, ha! — you had your legs pulled to that extent — ha, ha! — you’ve only just found out that there are bills to pay — ha, ha, ha!” Hubert went off into another roar.

“But you said you knew —!” howled Bob.

“Not in the least, sir.” gasped Hubert. “Please excuse me — I really should not have laughed — ha, ha! — I really ask your pardon — ha, ha! But it struck me as a little funny !” He was on the verge of another roar, but he checked it. “It must have been a shock to you when you found out — it is too bad — ha, ha ! — that young rascal ought to be kicked —.”

“He’s been kicked !” said Johnny Bull, grimly. “and he’s got more coming.”

“The kickfulness has been terrific.”

“Certainly I should have put you wise, if I’d known that you didn’t know there were bills to pay at Tankerton Hall,” gasped Hubert. “But how could I imagine anything of the kind ? People come here as paying boarders, and I supposed that you came like the others. When you told me that something unexpected had happened, of course I thought it was the ghost —.”

“The ghost ?”

“Yes sir! The ghost has continually scared people away from Tankerton Hall, and I supposed that it had happened again, that is all.”

“Oh !”

The juniors realised that there had been a misunderstanding. Hubert had been alluding to the ghost, which of course he knew all about. They had supposed that he was alluding to the subject uppermost in their own minds. But they saw now that he had known nothing of the fat Owl’s trickery — until they told him!

“Oh, gum !” Bob Cherry whistled. “We weren’t going to let it out — we don’t want to upset Mr. Carter. It’s not his fault, of course — he supposed that we knew. But we’ve let it out now.”

“You have indeed, sir,” grinned Hubert.

“We don’t want to say anything about it to Mr. Carter,” said Harry Wharton, hastily.

“It’s business with him, and we can’t put him to loss. We shall manage somehow. No need for you to mention this, Hubert.”

“Not a word, of course, sir,” said Hubert. He was grave again now. “So it is not after all on account of the ghost that you are thinking of leaving —.”

“Nothing of the kind. The ghost wouldn’t frighten us away, even if he was still walking. But he isn’t! We’ve bagged him —.”

“You have — what ?” ejaculated Hubert. He stared.

“Squiff — I mean Field — sat up for him last night, and got him — and we all turned out, and collared him,” said Harry. “You’ll hear about it — it was Brown playing ghost, and Mr. Carter kicked him out, on the spot —.”

Hubert whistled.

The telephone bell rang in the garage.

Hubert touched his cap.

“Excuse me — a customer!” he said. And Sir Hubert Tankerton went into the garage to answer the phone, and Harry Wharton and Co. left the yard.

CHAPTER XXXVII BUMP!

“OH, lor’ !” breathed Billy Bunter.

He sat up suddenly, in his armchair in the Oak Room, his fat ears cocked to listen, like an alarmed rabbit.

Having seen the Greyfriars guests walk round to the garage, Billy Bunter had naturally supposed that they were safe off the scene. They were going motoring that morning, and it did not occur to his fat brain that they had gone, not to get into the car, but to cancel it.

Bunter did not expect to see them again till lunch, when — he hoped at least — the beasts might be in a more reasonable and pally temper! So the fat Owl had ensconced himself in the most comfortable armchair, before the log fire in the Oak Room, with a bag of nuts on his fat knees, a wrinkle of unaccustomed thought in his fat brow, and a worry on his fat mind — but glad, at least, that the disgruntled guests were at a safe distance.

Billy Bunter seldom gave thought to the future. But even Bunter had felt that the Greyfriars guests would very likely cut up rusty when they discovered that they were “paying” guests. It had been a worry.

Now they had made the discovery — and undoubtedly had cut up very rusty indeed.

And that was a worry, too ! In fact, the new worry was as bad as the old one !

He drew comfort, for the moment, from the fact that they were miles away — till the sound of footsteps and voices in the corridor suddenly apprised him that, so far from being miles away, they were quite close at hand, and in fact coming to the Oak Room!

He sat up so suddenly that the bag of nuts slipped from a fat knee. His eyes, and his spectacles, shot round to the door, in alarm.

Bunter did not want to see his guests again so soon ! Very much indeed he didn't ! But it was too late to bolt ! They were almost at the door. Bunter crumpled himself deep down in the big armchair, hidden by the high back from general view, hoping that the beasts wouldn't come round the chair and see him there.

A moment or two later, there was a tramp of feet in the doorway, and Harry Wharton and Co. came in. They were speaking as they came, and their remarks were neither grateful nor comforting to the fat Owl in the armchair.

"That fat villain —!"

"That bloated brigand —."

"That terrific toad !"

"That diddling octopus !"

Squiff kicked the door shut. Billy Bunter quaked in the armchair. It looked as if they had come to stay.

"We'd better jaw it over, and decide what's going to be done," said Squiff.

"We're going to be done !" growled Johnny Bull.

"That dithering diddler —!" said Bob Cherry.

"That preposterous porker —!"

"That fibbing, fozzling fathead —."

"All that and more, but slanging that fat chump won't get us anywhere," said Harry Wharton. "We're landed in it."

"I wonder what the bill will come to !" said Nugent.

"Pretty steep," said Squiff.

"Hubert seemed to think it funny !" growled Johnny Bull.

Squiff laughed.

"Well, it is funny, in a way," he said. "No wonder Smithy was chortling over the phone the other day. He knew."

"We shall have to pay up," said Harry. "Bunter's pulled our legs, and landed us in it — but we can't jib at a bill we've run up. Mr. Carter's acted in good faith — we can't let him down. It's business with him — and now we know how the matter stands, we know that he has been losing money here. I don't suppose he could afford to let us off, if you come to that."

"That pernicious porpoise —."

"That dunderheaded diddler —."

"Pay up and look pleasant, what ?" said Bob Cherry.

"I don't see what else we can do," said Harry. "The fact is, we ought to have known that there was a catch in it, knowing Bunter as we do —."

"I told you so !" remarked Johnny Bull.

"That's seven !" said Squiff.

"Eh ?" Johnny stared at him. "Seven what ?"

"Seven times you've told us you told us so."

"Ha, ha, ha !"

"Well, I did tell you so, didn't I ?"

"That's eight," said Squiff. "Don't make it nine, old chap. Passed unanimously that you told us so. Now chuck it."

Grunt, from Johnny Bull. However, he refrained from telling his friends, for the ninth time, that he had told them so.

"The question is, what are we going to do ?" said Frank Nugent. "We can't go on running up tremendous bills for our people to pay."

“We shall have to cut it short,” answered Harry. “I think we’d better speak to Mr. Carter, and go this afternoon.”

“Well, he won’t think that the ghost has frightened us away, like the last lot,” grinned Bob. “The ghost has gone West.”

“Blessed if I quite know how to put it to him though,” went on the captain of the Remove. “We don’t want to tell him about Bunter’s trickery — that wouldn’t do any good, anyway. But it was understood that we were here for a fortnight —.”

“That fat scoundrel !”

“That diddling walrus —!”

“That podgy piffler —!”

“Well, what about it ?” asked Harry. “If you’re all agreed, I’ll go down and speak to Mr. Carter now, and put it as nicely as I can, and we’ll go to-day.”

“Oh, crikey !” came a sudden ejaculation, which caused six fellows to jump, and stare round in the direction of a big armchair.

A fat figure rose into view. A fat face and a big pair of spectacles looked at them over the back of the armchair.

“Bunter —!”

“You fat villain —.”

“So you’re here —.”

“I — I — I say, you fellows,” gasped Bunter. “That won’t do! Don’t you go down and say anything of the kind to Uncle Carter, Wharton! That’s important.”

Billy Bunter was looking alarmed.

The fat Owl had not intended to reveal his presence. But what he had just heard seemed to alarm him more than the apprehension of another booting.

The Greyfriars guests gave him grim looks. Billy Bunter did not heed them. He fixed his eyes and his spectacles on the captain of the Remove.

“I say, Harry, old chap —.”

“You fat fozzler! If you call me ‘Harry, old chap,’ I’ll burst you all over Tankerton Hall.”

“Oh, really, Wharton —.”

“Burst him anyway !” said Johnny Bull.

“Beast! I — I mean, dear old fellow —.”

“Scrag him !”

“Will you listen to a chap ?” hooted Bunter. “You can’t go and tell my Uncle Carter you’re going, Wharton! You’re jolly well not going. Look at the grub we’re getting here —!”

“You frumptious chump, do you think we’re bothering about the grub !”

“Well, if you’re not, I am. I’m only here as long as you fellows stay — and I’m jolly well not going.”

“Oh, my hat!”

“You can’t let a fellow down like that !” argued Bunter.

“Let a fellow down !” repeated Wharton, quite dazedly.

“Well, what do you call it ?” demanded Bunter, hotly. “Uncle Carter asked me here if I brought a party. I’m staying as long as the party stays. If you let me down —.”

“Why, you — you — you —.” gasped Wharton.

“You can’t do it,” said Bunter. “You came for a fortnight. You jolly well know you did! You can’t change your minds now and clear off — and let me down, and let Uncle Carter down ! Not Greyfriars style ! Greyfriars men don’t let a man down ! I’m surprised at you !”

Harry Wharton and Co. gazed at him.

Pretty thick, I call it," said Bunter, indignantly. "I don't expect you fellows to be so particular as I am — but I expect you to play the game. I really do expect that ! You can't let me down in that rotten way. Play the game, you know."

They gazed at him — speechlessly. Bunter seemed to have taken their breath away. Then Bob Cherry found his voice.

"Bump him !" he gasped.

"I — I say, you fellows !" Billy Bunter dodged, as six infuriated guests rushed at him.

"I say — leggo! Oh, crumbs! I say — yaroooooh!"

Bump!

Bunter was a hefty weight. He was not easy to swing off his feet. But six pairs of hands sufficed. The fat Owl, yelling frantically, swung — and bumped! He landed on polished oak, with an impact that almost shook the Oak Room.

"Wow !" roared Bunter.

"Give him another !"

"Give him a dozen !"

"Bump him !"

"I say, you fellows — oh, scissors! I say, I'll pip-pip-pay the bills if you like — I'm expecting a pip-pip-postal order — I say —. Oh, crikey!"

Bump !

"Yaroooooh !"

"Give him another !"

BUMP !

Billy Bunter landed for the third time. He roared — and the next moment, there was a yell of amazement from the bumpers. For under that last terrific bump of the fat Owl, a section of the oaken floor collapsed under him, like a falling trap-door, and Bunter went through !

CHAPTER XXXVIII THE HIDDEN HOARD!

"WHAT —!"

"Look !"

"Oh. great pip !"

Harry Wharton and Co., for a moment, stood petrified. Billy Bunter sat — equally petrified — or rather more so, wedged in an opening in the floor, folded up almost like a pocket-knife.

It was quite an amazing sight !

Dumbfounded, the juniors stared at him. But the next moment, they understood.

Billy Bunter was a good weight. He had bumped hard. But it was incredible, unimaginable, that ever so hard a bump, from ever so heavy a Bunter, could have caused a collapse in a floor of solid oak. And it hadn't !

It was not solid oak planking that had collapsed under the bumping fat Owl. It was a section of the floor that formed a hidden trap-door.

That secret trap had covered a cavity under the floor about a foot deep. Bunter sat in the cavity, with his legs sticking up in the air !

No doubt that trap was fastened by a secret spring, which held it securely enough — in normal circumstances. It had been solidly firm to the tread. The juniors had walked over it dozens of times, and there had never been a quiver to indicate that it was not as solid as the rest of the floor of the Oak Room. There was no visible outward sign of the existence of the trap. Nobody had dreamed of it. It had been a secret — one of the

secrets of Tankerton Hall that Brown's searchings had not discovered. And it might have remained a secret so long as Tankerton Hall stood on its ancient foundations. But Bunter had bumped on it fair and square, and that terrific bump had done the trick. The hidden spring had snapped under that tremendous shock. The trap had fallen — and with it Billy Bunter — and now he sat in the cavity — yelling!

"Ooooooooooooooh !" yelled Bunter.

"Oh !" gasped Harry Wharton.

"A — a — a secret trapdoor —!" stuttered Bob.

"Jumping kangaroos !"

"Yow-ow-ow-ow ! Help! I'm stuck!" shrieked Bunter. "I say, you fellows, help ! The floor's broken — I'm jammed — wow! I'm stuck — ow ! Beasts ! Wow !"

"Oh, crumbs !" gasped Johnny Bull.

"Yow-ow-ow ! Help ! Beasts! Wow! Yaroooooh !"

"Lend a hand," gasped Harry, and the juniors gathered round the wedged fat Owl to render first-aid.

It was not a large cavity. Really it was not large enough for Bunter. Only the impetus of that heavy bump could have wedged his fat form into it. But, once wedged in, extraction was not easy. Bunter was jammed in — stuck fast!

Harry Wharton grasped his fat shoulders. Nugent took one plump arm — Hurree Jamset Ram Singh the other. Squiff and Johnny Bull grasped a leg each. Bob Cherry got a grip on the back of the fat Owl's collar. And they all pulled together.

"Ow! ow! ow! wow!" yelled Bunter. "Wow! You're pip-pip-pulling me to pip-pip-pieces! wow! Don't twist my arms like that you beasts — don't twist my legs, you rotters — you're chook — chook — choking me, Bob Cherry, you ruffian — don't pinch my shoulders, Wharton. you fathead — ow! wow! I say, I'm sitting on something hard — wow! Gemme out !"

"A long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together !" gasped Bob Cherry. "Put your beef into it."

"All togetherfully !" panted Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. "Many hands make the bird in hand go to the bush, as the proverb remarks !"

"Heave ahead, my hearties !" gurgled Squiff.

"Yow-ow-ow-ow-ow-ow !" roared Bunter. "Beasts! Rotters! Smears! Smudges! Ticks! Wow! Oh, crikey! Ow!"

A combined effort did it. All the half-dozen exerted themselves, and the wedged Owl came out of the cavity like a cork from a bottle. He rolled over on the floor roaring.

"Oh! ow! wow! Oh, you rotters! Ow! you ticks! Wow! Beasts!"

"That's Bunter's way of expressing thanks," remarked Johnny Bull. "Let's jam him in again!"

"Beast!" roared Bunter.

He bounded to his feet. The idea of being jammed in again seemed unattractive to him. He hurtled towards the door.

"Hold on, Bunter!" roared Bob Cherry. "We haven't finished bumping you yet."

Bunter did not hold on. The door of the Oak Room opened, and slammed again behind a fleeing fat Owl.

Harry Wharton and Co. were left staring at the cavity in the floor. Quite unexpectedly — with the inadvertent aid of Billy Bunter — they had discovered one of the strange secrets of Tankerton Hall. That hidden cavity under the floor of the Oak Room was evidently a sort of secret cupboard — no doubt, in ancient days of wars and alarms, a hiding-place for valuables. The juniors forgot other matters, in their interest in that unexpected discovery.

“Might be something there —!” said Bob.

“Bunter said he was sitting on something —.”

“We’ll jolly soon see !”

Harry Wharton groped in the dark cavity. His hand came into contact with something hard and square that lay there. That, evidently, was the “ something ” on which the fat Owl had sat — uncomfortably. It felt like a small box. With a sudden excitement, he jerked it out into view.

“A box — !”

“A brass box !”

“Phew !”

Harry Wharton held it up. His face was excited now — and his excitement was reflected in five other faces. For the object he held in his hand was a small brass box — and one thought was now in every mind.

“The brass box !” breathed Squiff. “Have we found the hoard ?”

“Tain’t possible !” gasped Bob Cherry. “But — but — but it’s a brass box —!”

“We know the hoard was in a brass box —!”

“And we know the miser used this room —!”

“Get it open, for goodness sake! By gum, if we’ve found the jolly old hoard —.”

“What terrific luck !”

The box was fastened by a simple catch. Under the eager gaze of all eyes, Harry Wharton opened the lid. Within the brass box lay a number of rolls of flimsy-looking paper, secured by elastic bands.

“Banknotes !” breathed Nugent.

“Bank of England notes !” said Johnny Bull. “Then —!”

“It’s the hoard !”

“The miser’s hoard !”

Bob Cherry picked out one of the rolls, removed the elastic band, with fingers trembling with excitement, and flattened out the roll, so that the imprint could be plainly seen. The figures “£ 100 ” leaped to every eye !

“Oh, gum !” said Bob.

“Suffering snakes !” said Squiff. “That’s what Brown was after! That’s the miser’s hoard, and no mistake !”

Almost dizzily, Bob counted the notes in the roll. There were fifty of them, each for a hundred pounds. There were nine other similar rolls in the brass box. It was hardly necessary to look at them. The Greyfriars fellows knew what they had found — the hidden cavity under the floor of the Oak Room had been the miser’s hide-out. Brown had suspected, though he had not known for certain, that the hoard had not been in the safe in the west wing on the night of the bombing — and he had been right. It was not surprising that his long search for it had failed — for only chance could have revealed such a hiding-place. Where Brown had failed, Harry Wharton and Co. had succeeded. Many a time had Billy Bunter been bumped, for his sins — but never with such happy results !

What would have happened to the hoard, had Brown discovered it, the juniors could not guess. What was going to happen to it, now that they had made the discovery, was very different. That vast sum of money — the whole fortune of Sir Julius Tankerton, which the half-cracked old miser had turned into banknotes and hidden — belonged to the ex-officer who was running a garage for a livelihood. And it was going to the owner without delay.

Bob Cherry burst into a breathless chuckle.

“Well, I said it would be jolly to spot the hoard, and hand it to Hubert on a plate !” he

said. "Let's go and do it! I daresay he can lend us a plate!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

And the Greyfriars guests, in a cheery bunch, quite forgetful of Billy Bunter and his sins, and Mr. Carter and his bills, and everything else but the excitement of that wonderful discovery, quitted the Oak Room, and walked round to the garage, Harry Wharton with the brass box under his arm.

CHAPTER XXXIX ON A PLATE!

"HALLO, hallo, hallo!" roared Bob Cherry.

Hubert was standing by the petrol pump, glancing after a car that had just filled up and driven off. He gave quite a jump at that sudden roar behind him, and turned.

"Oh!" he ejaculated.

"Here we are, here we are, here we are again!" sang Bob. Bob was in a merry mood, as indeed were the whole party, all of them enjoying the joyful surprise they had in store for Hubert.

Hubert smiled.

"If you want the car after all —!" he began.

"No, we don't want the car — we want the chauffeur!" explained Bob. "Can you lend us a plate?"

"A — a plate?" Hubert stared. "Did you say a plate?"

"P-L-A-T-E, plate!" said Bob. "P for Pericles, L for Lysander, A for Archimedes, T for Thucydides, E for Electra — PLATE!"

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"If that is a joke —!" said Hubert, mystified.

"The jokefulness is not terrific, my esteemed and ludicrous baronet," said Hurree Janset Ram Singh. "There is a requirefulness of an absurd plate."

"Just a plate!" grinned Squiff. "Any old plate!"

"Crockery or tin or wooden — anything you like, so long as you cough up a plate!" said Nugent.

"Must have a plate!" said Johnny Bull. "Trot out a plate."

Harry Wharton laughed.

"You can lend us a plate, Hubert," he said. "Only for a minute or two — but we really want a plate."

Hubert looked at them hard. He noticed, without heeding, that Harry Wharton had something under his arm, but it was almost hidden by his overcoat, and he did not see what it was. For what reason the Greyfriars fellows could possibly want to borrow a plate, he could not imagine, and obviously he suspected a leg-pull. But he was a good-tempered and cheery young man, and he smiled, and nodded.

"I'll certainly get you a plate," he said, and he went into the garage, and emerged with a large tin plate in his hand. He handed it to Bob Cherry.

"Good man," said Bob, as he took it. "You see, we just had to have a plate for the presentation."

"The presentation," repeated Hubert, blankly. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what you mean, if you happen to mean anything."

"Just going to," said Bob. "It's like this, Hubert! As soon as we heard of the hidden hoard, we thought it would be a jolly good idea to find it while we're on the spot, and hand it to you on a plate. See?"

"No," said Hubert. "I don't quite see! If that is a joke —."

“Sober as a judge !” said Bob. “Your jolly old grandfather parked all his worldly wealth in a brass box, which was supposed to have gone up in the air-raid — but didn’t! Being on the spot, we thought we’d sort it out for you — we take that kind of thing in our stride, you know. Elementary, my dear Watson !”

“Ha, ha, ha !”

“And here it jolly well is !” added Bob.

He held up the plate. Harry Wharton placed the brass box on it. And Bob held out the plate to Hubert.

The young man stood quite still for a moment. The expression on his face was quite extraordinary.

Then, quietly, and without a word, he opened the brass box.

He gazed at the rolls of banknotes inside it.

Still, without a word, he examined the rolls. The colour wavered a little in his handsome face. But he was quite calm. He dropped the banknotes back into the box, and stood staring at the juniors.

“You found it ?” He recovered his voice at last. “You — you — you have found my grandfather’s fortune — it is still in existence, and you have found it — and — and — and brought it to me .”

“On a plate !” said Bob.

“I — I had hoped —.” Hubert’s voice was a little husky. “I — I’d hoped that it might have escaped the air-raid — and I hunted for it for three months — and then gave up hope. And you — you — you’ve found it.”

“Quite by chance, to own up to the exact facts,” grinned Bob. “We happened to bump something rather heavy on a secret trap-door in the Oak Room, and it busted the spring, and the trap came open — and hey presto —!”

“Thank goodness you came to Tankerton Hall this Christmas,” said Hubert, with a quiver in his voice. “Do you understand what this means to me ? My old home — it will be mine again. There will be a Tankerton of Tankerton Hall once more. I — I can’t quite believe this, yet !”

“The seefulness is the believfulness, my esteemed Hubert,” said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. “It is a long lane that has no turn-table, as the English proverb remarks.”

Hubert grinned.

“Gratters, Sir Hubert !” said Bob Cherry.

Hubert started.

“By gum !” he ejaculated. “Yes, I shall hear that again! Well, Hubert the chauffeur hasn’t had a bad time, really — but he won’t be sorry to be Sir Hubert Tankerton once more. And — I owe it to you lads! It seems rather like a dream, but —.” He glanced into the brass box again. “It’s real! I don’t begin to know how to thank you — .”

“Speech taken as read !” said Squiff.

“But,” said Hubert, “there is a detail you seem to have overlooked, my dear boys.”

“Eh! What’s that !”

“As finders, you must take a fair share —.” said Hubert.

“Chuck it !” grunted Johnny Bull.

“You can wash that right out,” said Harry Wharton. “We found the hoard by sheer chance, and it belongs to you. That’s the lot !”

“But —.”

“Forget it !” said Squiff.

“Go to sleep and dream again,” said Nugent.

“There must have been a billy-goat in the Tankerton ancestral line, by the way Sir Hubert keeps on butting !” remarked Bob Cherry.

“Ha, ha. Ha !”

Hubert stood looking at them.

“Well, he said at last. “If you won’t take a reward —.”

“The won’t-fulness is terrific.”

“Well, look here ! At the very least, you must let me see you through the spot of bother that young scamp Bunter brought upon you. I will ask Mr. Carter to hand the bills to me — and you will finish your holiday here as the guests of Sir Hubert Tankerton. You won’t say no to that !”

“Oh !” said Harry.

“Oh !” said Bob.

The juniors looked at one another. There was a general nodding of heads, and a murmur of assent.

“That’s fair,” said Johnny Bull.

“Right as rain!” said Squiff.

“The rightfulness of the absurd rain is terrific.”

“Done !” said Bob Cherry. “Hubert — I mean Sir Hubert — you’re a broth of a boy, and then some. It’s a good offer, and we jump at it.”

“The jumpfulness is —.”

“Preposterous !” chuckled Bob.

“So that is that !” said Sir Hubert Tankerton, smiling.

AND that was that ! and the days that followed at Tankerton Hall were merry and bright for Billy Bunter’s Christmas Party!

THE END.