

LORD BILLY BUNTER

By
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MR. HOOT DID NOT WAIT FOR BUNTER TO HOP INTO THE AUTO. HE PITCHED HIM IN, IN A SQUEAKING HEAP

CHAPTER 1

BILLY BUNTER KNOWS HOW

'AND a cake!'

Billy Bunter pricked up his fat ears.

'And a jam-roll!'

Bunter blinked at Bob Cherry, his little round eyes glistening behind his big round spectacles. 'Cake' was a magic word to Bunter. 'Jam-roll' was music to his ears. The Owl of the Remove was deeply interested.

'And a dozen dough-nuts,' went on Bob.

'Oh!' breathed Bunter.

Bob Cherry seemed to be giving quite royal orders, in the school shop at Greyfriars. Obviously, there was a feast toward!

It was after class, but not yet tea-time. Bunter, naturally, was thinking of tea. When Billy Bunter's thoughts ceased to dwell on his last meal, they moved on automatically to his next.

But his next, on this particular day, was still an unsolved problem. Not for the first time, the fat Owl had been disappointed about a postal order he had long expected. He had looked in at Lord Mauleverer's study; only to learn that Mauly was going out to tea. He had looked in at Smithy's, barely dodging a whizzing Latin grammar. Then he had rolled into the school shop, in the faint hope of persuading Mrs. Mimble to disregard, for once, the sordid consideration of cash. Mrs. Mimble proved deaf to the voice of the charmer, and it looked like tea in hall for Bunter: the 'doorsteps and dish-water', as some of the juniors described it,—the last resource of the stony. And then Bob Cherry came in and the fat Owl's hopes revived as he listened-in.

'And a pot of strawberry jam!' added Bob.

'Anything else, Master Cherry?'

'Yes; half-a-dozen of those meringues.'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

'And a dozen of the ham sandwiches.'

Billy Bunter's eyes almost popped through his spectacles, at the parcel Mrs. Mimble was wrapping up for Bob. It was quite a large parcel. No doubt it was a special occasion: and no doubt the Famous Five had clubbed together for the supplies—Bob's own limited resources would hardly have run to such munificence. Probably they were going to entertain some unusually honoured guest: but that guest's name, unfortunately, could not have been William George Bunter. Bob did not even glance at the fat Owl as he picked up the parcel and walked out of the tuck-shop.

The fat Owl rolled after him.

'I say, Bob, old chap!' he squeaked.

Bob Cherry was going with long strides. He seemed to be in a hurry: and, in fact, he was. His friends had already gone down to the cricket nets, and Bob was anxious to get through and join them there. The match with St. Jim's was due the following day, and Harry Wharton and Co. for the time at least, were living, moving, and breathing cricket. Even the gorgeous contents of the parcel swinging in his hand did not interest Bob so much as the willow and the leather: though Billy Bunter would willingly have swopped all the school matches, and the county matches, with the Test matches thrown in, for a single pot of Jam.

'I say, Bob, stop a minute—.'

'Can't stop!' answered Bob, over his shoulder.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

He accelerated: his little fat legs going like clockwork to keep pace with Bob's long ones.

'I say, old chap, in a hurry?' gasped Bunter.

'Yes, ass. The other fellows have gone down to the nets.'

'I say, I'll carry that parcel up to the studies for you, if you like, if you're in a hurry, old fellow.' Bob Cherry chuckled.

'Sure you'd land it in the right study?' he inquired.

'Oh, really, Cherry—.'

'I'll carry it, thanks all the same!' grinned Bob. He strode on more rapidly than before: and again the fat Owl had to step on the gas to keep pace.

'I say, old chap, is it a spread?' gasped Bunter.

'Sort of!' answered Bob, over a shoulder that over-topped Billy Bunter's fat head.

'Like me to come, old fellow?'

'Not at all!'

'I—I—I say,' gasped Bunter. Wind was always short with the fat Owl of the Remove, and he found it difficult to keep up the pace and talk at the same time. But the matter was urgent. 'I say, if you like I'll get it ready for you, when you come in from cricket. You'd like to find it all ready, wouldn't you?'

'Oh, quite!'

'I'll save you all the trouble of getting it ready—.'

'And all the trouble of eating it?' asked Bob.

'Yes—I mean, no,—. Look here, you beast—I mean look here, old chap, you might ask a fellow to a spread, when he's been disappointed about a postal order, and you've got lots.'

'So I would,' agreed Bob, 'but it can't be done. Mauly's coming to tea, and we've got to have enough to go round. Cheerio!'

Bob Cherry put on more pace. Billy Bunter's little fat legs fairly twinkled as he strove to keep up.

'I say, I'll tell you what,' gasped Bunter. 'I'll come, and I'll jolly well entertain you after tea with my wonderful ventriloquism. What about that?'

'Bow-wow!' answered Bob.

He put on still more pace. This time Billy Bunter accelerated in vain. He dropped behind, gurgling for breath, as Bob disappeared into the House.

'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

But he followed on. That parcel of tuck was lost to sight, but it was to memory dear! Cake, jam-roll, doughnuts, ham sandwiches, meringues, pots of jam, drew Billy Bunter like so many magnets.

He rolled into the House, and toiled up the stairs. He arrived in the Remove passage, just in time to see Bob Cherry emerge from No. 1 Study—without the parcel! The spread, apparently, was scheduled to take place in Harry Wharton's study, where the Famous Five generally gathered on such occasions.

Billy Bunter came to a breathless halt. Stairs told on Bunter. Bob Cherry gave him a cheery grin.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! Like a meringue, Bunter?' he asked.'

'Oh! Yes! Rather!'

'I've left one on the table for you!' Bunter blinked at him.

'Eh? How did you know I was coming up?' he asked. 'Sort of guessed!' chuckled Bob, and went on his way, cut across the landing, and disappeared down the stairs.

Billy Bunter blinked after him through his big spectacles. Bob was going to change into flannels and join his friends at the cricket nets—leaving that gorgeous parcel in Wharton's study. The Famous Five would all be off the scene for some time to come.

Bunter waited only until Bob's mop of flaxen hair had vanished down the staircase. Then he rolled on to No. 1 Study. That parcel was left at Billy Bunter's mercy. When he was among eatables, Bunter was as merciful as a shark among mullet. Really, it seemed rather careless of Bob, as he had evidently guessed that the fat Owl would follow that parcel home! That carelessness seemed likely to leave the chums of the Remove and their honoured guest spread-less, when tea-time came round.

On the table, in No. 1 Study, was a plate. On the plate lay a single meringue. Nothing was to be seen of the parcel. No doubt Bob had parked it in the study cupboard.

Billy Bunter's first proceeding was to grab the meringue, and transfer it to the most capacious mouth in the Greyfriars Remove.

It went down almost like an oyster, and whetted Bunter's appetite for more. With a grinning fat face, he rolled across the study to the cupboard, and jerked at the door.

That cupboard door did not open to the jerk.

The fat Owl gave another and more emphatic jerk at the handle, equally in vain. Then it dawned upon his fat intellect that Bob had locked the cupboard door on the parcel. And the key was gone! Bob had not been quite so careless as the fat Owl had happily supposed. He had locked up the spread out of the reach of fat fingers, leaving that meringue on the table as a sort of consolation prize!

'Beast!' hissed Bunter. 'Suspicious beast! Locking up the stuff—just as if he fancied a fellow might be after it! Yah!'

Billy Bunter glared at the locked cupboard. But the concentrated glare of two little round eyes and a pair of big round spectacles could not supply the place of a key!

'Beast!' groaned Bunter.

But his fat face brightened, as a sudden thought flashed into his mind. Bob had locked that cupboard on the parcel, and gone off with the key in his pocket. But he had gone to change for cricket. If he left that key in his pocket—and ten to one he would—!

'He, he, he!'

Billy Bunter chuckled at the idea. He ceased to glare at the cupboard: revolved upon his axis, and rolled out of the study. Hope springs eternal in the human breast: and there was still quite a healthy chance that that consignment of tuck might be parked in the fat Owl's extensive inside, before the Famous Five and their guest gathered in No. 1 Study to dispose of it. It was quite a cheery Owl that rolled away in search of the key. Bunter knew how!

CHAPTER 2

SO NEAR YET SO FAR.

LORD MAULEVERER raised his eyebrows.

He was mildly surprised.

It was really uncommon to see a Greyfriars fellow coming into a study backwards: backing into the room like a horse backing into the shafts of a cart.

But that was what Lord Mauleverer beheld.

Maully had strolled along to No. 1 Study, where he had been bidden as a guest to tea. Harry Wharton and Co. were at cricket, and not due yet for some time: but his lazy lordship had no urge whatever to join them at the nets. There was a comfortable armchair in No. 1 Study: and that was good enough for Maully. So there he was, stretched at ease in the armchair, with his usual placid expression on his face, and thinking of nothing in particular, when a fat figure appeared in the doorway, which he had left wide open. His glance turned on it: and then, as already related, he raised his eyebrows in mild surprise.

It would not have been surprising to see Billy Bunter roll into the study, with his accustomed roll. But Maully had only a back view of Bunter. He knew, of course, who it was, by a back view: Billy Bunter's circumference made him easily recognizable, whether seen from the north or south, the east or the west. But why he backed in instead of walking in, was for the moment a mystery.

But it did not take Lord Mauleverer more than a moment to elucidate that mystery.

Bunter was watching the passage, as he backed in.

Evidently he did not know that anyone was in the study, being aware that Harry Wharton and Co. were all at a distance from the House. But he did not want to be seen surreptitiously entering their study in their absence. The parcel in the study cupboard was going to disappear: and Billy Bunter was going to disappear along with it: and he did not want to leave a clue. He did not want—very much indeed he did not want—five exasperated fellows raging on his track, after he had disposed of the spread. There was a key in Bunter's fat hand. He was going to restore it to Bob Cherry's pocket in the changing-room, after annexing the parcel. The disappearance of that parcel from a locked cupboard was going to remain a mystery that might have baffled Sherlock Holmes—if Bunter could contrive it.

So the fat Owl was very careful not to be seen.

He had had to wait about a little. Skinner and Snoop and Stott had been on the Remove landing when he came back with the key: and he waited till they went down. Then Ogilvy and Russell had been talking in the doorway of their study: and he had waited till they went in and shut the door. Then Fisher T. Fish had come down the passage from No. 14, and once more he waited till the junior from New York had gone his way. Then, at last, the coast seemed clear; and Bunter made for No. 1 Study. But he was very wary,—backing into the study and watching the passage as he backed, to make assurance doubly sure that no eyes were upon him.

Lord Mauleverer, in the armchair, grinned.

Bunter, in the doorway, had a view of a vacant passage, absolutely untenanted, and was satisfied that he was unseen. Maully, in the armchair, had a view of a fat back and the plumpest trousers at Greyfriars School. He did not stir or speak: he just watched the fat Owl's antics with mild interest.

Having backed right into the study, absolutely unseen by human eye as he supposed, Billy Bunter shut the door. All was safe now!

'He, he, he!'

That unmelodious cachinnation announced that Bunter was relieved and satisfied in his fat mind.

The door shut, Bunter turned, and shot across the study to the cupboard. He did not cast a blink towards the armchair by the window. If he remembered Lord Mauleverer's existence at all, he did not suppose that Mauly would have arrived so early. Happily unaware that the armchair by the window was inhabited, Bunter hurtled across to the cupboard, and jammed a key into the lock.

Then Lord Mauleverer sat up and took notice.

There was a click of a key. The cupboard door flew open. Billy Bunter's eyes glistened through his spectacles at a parcel within. To grab that parcel in a pair of fat hands was the work of a moment. Still without looking round at the armchair, Bunter landed the parcel on the study table, closed and locked the cupboard door, and returned the key to his pocket.

'He, he, he!'

Bunter chuckled, as he picked up the parcel again, from the table. He was not remaining in Harry Wharton's study to devour his prey. A secluded box-room was a safer spot. Still without even a blink round the study, still happily unconscious of Mauleverer staring at him from the armchair, the fat Owl put the parcel under a fat arm, and rolled towards the door. It was then that Lord Mauleverer rose from the armchair, quietly, and went into action.

'Yaroooooooh!'

It was a sudden startled yell from Billy Bunter, as an unseen grasp, from behind, fastened on a fat ear. Utterly unaware that anyone else was in the room, the fat Owl was startled almost out of his fat wits.

He jumped almost clear of the study carpet: and the parcel, slipping from under the fat arm, bumped on the floor.

'Ow!' yelled Bunter. 'Who's that—what's who—which is what—wow! Oh, crikey! Who—what—wow—!' He spun round, with a finger and thumb still gripping his ear, and his eyes bulged through his spectacles at Lord Mauleverer.

'Ow! You! Beast! Leggo!' yelled Bunter.

Lord Mauleverer smiled and let go. Billy Bunter stood rubbing a reddened ear, and glaring at the schoolboy earl with a glare that might almost have cracked his spectacles.

Mauly picked up the parcel.

'I—I—I say, you gimme that parcel!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I didn't know anybody was here—I—I mean—I—I came to tell you that Wharton wants to speak to you, Mauly—he's waiting for you in the Rag—.'

'I'll wait till he comes up!'

'I—I mean, they're going to have the spread in the Rag, and—and Bob Cherry asked me to come up and fetch the tuck—.'

'Do you usually come into a study backwards, to fetch tuck?' inquired Lord Mauleverer.

'Oh! I—I—I mean—look here, old Bob gave me the key to the cupboard,' gasped Bunter. 'I didn't get it from his pocket in the changing-room, if that's what you think—he handed it to me and asked me to come up here and—yoo-hooop! Wharrer you banging that parcel at me for, you beast!' roared Bunter.

'Better travel!' suggested Mauly. 'I'm going to bang you with the parcel till you're gone. Hand over that key first.'

'Beast! Wow!' Billy Bunter dodged round the table. 'I—I say, Mauly, the-the fact is, I—I've come up here to get the spread ready for the fellows when they come in. I—I'm going to do some of my ventriloquism after tea, —so—so they specially want me—.'

'Hand over that key.'

'Here you are, old chap! I—I don't mind you having the key.' Bunter dropped it on the table. 'Now—now we'll get that parcel unpacked, shall we, old chap? They—they'll be jolly pleased to find it all ready when they come in. We—we might take just a snack, old fellow.'

Lord Mauleverer grinned, picked up the key, and unlocked the cupboard. Evidently that parcel was not going to be unpacked: it was going back where it belonged. Billy Bunter's eyes and spectacles were glued on it. His feelings were deep: indeed inexpressible. A lioness robbed of her cubs had simply nothing on Billy Bunter deprived of a parcel of tuck. Bunter simply could not see that parcel disappear into the study cupboard again. He made a desperate rush, and it fell to the floor as he crashed into Mauleverer.

'Oh, gad!' gasped Mauly, as he staggered.

Billy Bunter stooped to clutch up the parcel. But as he stooped, an elegant foot was planted on the tightest trousers at Greyfriars School.

'Wooooooh!' roared Bunter, as he sprawled.

Lord Mauleverer, grinning, picked up the parcel, placed it in the study cupboard, and turned the key on it. Billy Bunter sat up on the carpet, spluttering for breath, and blinked at him with an infuriated blink, as the key clicked in the lock. Once more that precious parcel disappeared from the view of a hungry fat Owl.

Mauly tossed the key to him.

'Take that back where you found it, if you don't want Bob to boot you all over Greyfriars,' he advised.

'Beast!'

'And get a move on. It's a lot of trouble kickin' you—.'

'Beast! Will you let a fellow get his breath?' howled Bunter.

Lord Mauleverer chuckled, and sat down in the armchair again, kindly giving the gaping fat Owl time to get his breath. Billy Bunter sat on the carpet, and glared at him with a glare compared with which the glare of the fabled basilisk was a sweet smile: hardly a couple of yards from that precious parcel,—so near yet so far!

CHAPTER 3

THE MAN FROM THE STATES

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!' ejaculated Bob Cherry.

'A stranger within the gates!' remarked Frank Nugent.

Harry Wharton glanced round.

At the moment, Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, the champion bowler of the Remove, was sending down the ball to Herbert Vernon-Smith, who was wielding the willow. The captain of the Remove was watching them, with keenly interested eyes. Smithy was one of the Remove's best batsmen, but he had plenty to do to keep his sticks up against Hurree Singh's bowling. Good batting and good bowling were always worth watching: but Harry Wharton was chiefly interested with a view to the morrow, when Tom Merry and Co. of St. Jim's were coming over to play cricket on the Greyfriars ground. The St. Jim's men were very good indeed at the summer game: and the home team needed to be at the top of their form to meet such cricketers as Tom Merry, Figgins, Blake, Talbot, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and the rest. The dusky nabob of Bhanipur was relied upon to take wickets: but Wharton was glad, all the same, to see Smithy putting paid to his bowling. His eyes, in fact, were glued on them, but he looked round as Nugent remarked that there was as 'stranger within the gates'.

Harry Wharton gave that stranger a glance, and then a second one. A good many other fellows were looking at him, too.

Why he was there was rather a puzzle. Members of the public, if the spirit moved them to do so, were at liberty to come along and watch the matches. But junior practice at the nets could hardly be considered an attraction for spectators.

The man looked a little out of the common. He was tall and lean, with a lean face and piercing eyes. He wore a lounge jacket rather long, and rather slim-waisted, and striped trousers that gave his long, lean legs somewhat the aspect of pipe-stems. His head resembled a bullet, and on it was clamped down a bowler hat, so tightly that it looked almost as if he must have had some difficulty in getting it off again. An unlighted cigar stuck out of the corner of his mouth like a brush from a gum-bottle. He walked with an easy saunter and an air of cool self-possession, not in the least disconcerted by the stare of many eyes.

'Who the dickens is that merchant?' asked Johnny Bull, 'and what has he wandered in here for?'

'Goodness knows,' said Peter Todd.

'Butted in at the wrong shop, I expect,' said Bob Cherry. 'I'll ask him.' And Bob walked across to meet the stranger within the gates.

'Say, bo.' The stranger spoke first, in a cool drawl which revealed at once the section of the globe from which he had come. Evidently he was a fellow-countryman of Fisher T. Fish of the Remove. 'I guess you young guys are playing cricket?'

'Sort of,' agreed Bob, with a grin.

'We don't play a heap of cricket over there,' said the lean man, apparently alluding to his native land. 'I'm kind of interested. I guess there's no harm in giving the show the once-over.'

'None at all, if you're interested,' answered Bob. 'But this is only practice. There's a match on Saturday to-morrow—.'

'I guess we're here to-day and gone to-morrow,' drawled the lean man. 'Mebbe I could take a shot or two while I'm around.'

'A shot?' repeated Bob, puzzled for the moment. The lean man tapped a bulging pocket. 'I'm sure fixed up with a camera,' he explained. 'Oh, a photograph!' said Bob.

'You said it! It sure would interest the folks back in my home-town,' said the lean man. He walked with Bob, as the latter returned to his friends. 'Say, you young guys belong to what they call the Remove, in this dump. I guess,' he went on.

'That's so,' assented Bob, wondering how the stranger knew.

'I had a chin with the old guy at the lodge, and he put me wise,' explained the lean man. Apparently he had been making inquiries of Gosling, the porter, before he wandered down to junior nets—the 'old guy at the lodge' could only be Gosling, the ancient porter of Greyfriars.

'I see,' said Bob. 'Yes, all the fellows here are in the Remove. That chap's Wharton, our form-captain.'

'Pleased to meet you, Mister Wharton,' drawled the lean man, as Harry looked at him inquiringly. 'I'm sure interested in this old dump and the game you play here. No objection to a guy looking on?'

'Not at all,' answered Harry, politely.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo! There goes Smithy!' exclaimed Bob.

'Good man, Inky!'

Vernon-Smith's sticks had gone down at last: the leather had beaten the willow. The Bounder came off, not looking in the best of tempers. Smithy did not like losing his wicket, even at practice, and to the bowling of the best junior bowler at Greyfriars.

'Feel up to a few more, Inky?' asked Harry Wharton. The nabob of Bhanipur grinned, with a flash of white teeth in his dusky face.

'The fewfulness is terrific, my esteemed Wharton,' he answered: a reply that made the lean man stare at him for a moment.

'Cut in, Bob, and let's see what you can do with Inky,' said the captain of the Remove. 'If you can stand up to inky, you'll put paid to that fat chap Wynn from St. Jim's to-morrow.'

'I'll try,' said Bob, with a grimace. It was not easy work for any batsman to stand up to the bowling of either Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, or Fatty Wynn of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

The lean man stood looking on, as the dusky nabob bowled to Bob Cherry. Harry Wharton, with his thoughts on the morrow's match, almost forgot that he was there, but he looked round at a tap on the shoulder.

'Mebbe you'd point out a guy that I'd like special to see!' said the lean man.

'Certainly, if you like,' answered Harry, in wonder.

Why this stranger from afar should be specially interested in any individual in the Greyfriars Remove, or interested in that junior form at all, was rather perplexing. But the man from the other side of the Atlantic proceeded to explain.

'Guy named Lord Mauleverer,' he said.

'Mauleverer!' repeated Harry.

'You said it! The guys back home would sure be tickled to death to see a picture of a real live British lord playing cricket.'

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Sorry,' he said, 'Lord Mauleverer isn't here.'

'Not here, sonny?' The lean man was plainly disappointed.

'No; he's in the House somewhere.'

'Whadyer know! Now ain't that jest too bad, when I was calculating on a picture of his lordship playing this game you call cricket. But mebbe he'll be along later, if a guy waits around.'

Harry shook his head. 'Not likely,' he answered.

'Mebbe he'll be playing in the match that that young guy allowed was scheduled for tomorrow?'

'No; Mauly isn't in the eleven.'

'Aw, search me!' said the lean man, discontentedly. He stood with his hands in the pockets of his long jacket, looking on. But he made no motion to produce his camera. His interest in the junior cricketers seemed to have evaporated now that he had learned that Lord Mauleverer was not among them. That interest, it appeared, was concentrated in the 'real live British lord': which perhaps was not wholly surprising in a citizen of the United States. Wharton's attention returned to Bob Cherry, who was standing up manfully to the bowling from the dusky nabob—every ball a narrow escape. But another tap on the shoulder caused him to look round again: not very patiently, perhaps, but as politely as he could.

'Say, bo, mebbe you'd tote a guy along jest to speak a word to his lordship!' said the lean man. 'I sure would be tickled to take a shot of him while I'm around. if he wouldn't object.' 'Sorry; I can't get away just now.'

'Mebbe some other young guy would oblige,' said the pertinacious gentleman from the U.S.A.

Harry Wharton glanced round. There was no harm, so far as he could see, in a visitor from the United States taking a photograph of the 'real live lord', if that real live lord had no objection for the delectation of the folks back in his home-town. It did not occur to him that the lean man might be anything but the usual American tourist, with the interest in the native nobility not uncommon on his side of the Atlantic. At a little distance, Fisher T. Fish was seated under a shady tree, with a little book open on a bony knee. Fishy was not in flannels, and he was not interested in cricket: he was interested in that little book, which was an account-book. One of Fishy's chief relaxations, in moments of leisure, was going through his accounts: Fishy always knew exactly how much money he had spent in a term, to the last cent.

'Here, Fishy!' called out Harry Wharton.

The junior from New York looked up, as he heard his name called.

'Say, whadyer want?' he called back. 'Come over here, fathead.'

'Okay!' grunted Fisher T. Fish, and he came. As he came, his narrow sharp eyes fell on the tall lean stranger. He gave a little start, as if of recognition, and stared harder and harder as he came nearer and nearer.

'This gentleman is from your country, Fishy,' said Harry. 'He would like to speak to old Mauly, if Mauly's about. Will you—?'

He broke off, in sheer astonishment.

Fisher T. Fish was not heeding him. He was staring at the lean man, with amazement dawning in his face.

Indeed, Fishy's sharp eyes seemed almost to be popping from his bony face, as he gazed.

'Say, whadyer know!' gasped Fisher T. Fish. 'I'll tell a man! Sure I will tell a man! This here is the bee's knee, and then some. What'll you be after in this locality, Mister Hoot?'

Evidently, Fisher T. Fish knew the lean stranger, at least by sight. A dozen fellows were staring at both of them.

The lean man stared back at Fisher T. Fish, catching his breath. With all his coolness and self-possession, he seemed quite taken aback. It was clear that he had not expected his face to be familiar to any eyes at a school in Kent. But he rallied from the shock at once.

'I guess you're making a mistake,' he drawled. 'Never heard the name.'

Fisher T. Fish grinned.

'Aw, pack it up, Hoot!' he said. 'You figure you can pull the wool over my eyes? Ain't your mug in every picture paper in the States? Ain't you stuck on T.V. so often that every guy over there knows your face as well as he knows his own? Ain't you the kidnapper that's

been sent up the river for roping in a guy and holding him to ransom? Say, what you doing on this side of the pond? You figure on getting away with the gangster game in this little island?"

'Wha—a—a—t—?' stuttered Harry Wharton. 'A—a—a kidnapper!' breathed Frank Nugent. 'Oh, my hat!'

'Fishy, you ass, if you're making a mistake—.'

There was a buzz of excited voices. Every eye now was on the tall, lean man, and the American junior who was grinning up at his lean face. That face had grown dark and savage in its expression. Evidently it was a blow to Mr. Hoot, if he was Mr. Hoot, to be so unexpectedly recognized by a junior of Greyfriars. Cricket was, for the moment, forgotten: even Hurree Jamset Ram Singh paused, in the act of bowling, with the round red ball in his dusky hand.

'Nary a mistake!' grinned Fisher T. Fish. 'I'm telling you that guy's Marcus K. Hoot, and any guy in the Yew-nited States, from Long Island to Frisco, could tell you the same. You here on business, Marcus? Looking around for a guy to cinch, whose popper could afford to shell out a thousand grand to see him again?'

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped Johnny Bull. 'Is that why he wanted to see Mauly—?'

'Phew!'

Fisher T. Fish chuckled.

'Mauly would be just his mark!' he said. 'If he ain't seen Mauly, I guess Mauly had better keep on not being seen. It ain't healthy for a millionaire to let Marcus K. Hoot meet up with him.'

'I tell you—!' snarled the lean man.

'Aw, can it!' said Fisher T. Fish, derisively. 'Your best guess is to burn the wind, Marcus, for I'm letting you know that I'm going straight to my form-master to tell him that you're around: and I'll say he won't be long in getting on the phone to the police station. And I'll jest say—yarooooooh!'

Smack!

Fisher T. Fish broke off, with a sudden frantic howl, as the lean man made a stride at him, and smacked his head. It was a vigorous smack, and it sent Fisher T. Fish staggering.

The next moment, the tall lean stranger was going.

Like the guests in Macbeth, he stood not upon the order of his going, but went at once! His long thin legs fairly whisked as he went, running as if in a race.

Harry Wharton and Co. stared after him blankly.

'Oh, gad!' ejaculated Vernon-Smith. 'A gangster from the States—here! What about collaring him?'

That suggestion from the Bounder came rather late.

Marcus K. Hoot was, as Fishy expressed it, burning the wind! Evidently he did not want to be 'around' now that he had been recognized. He vanished in the distance, leaving the Remove fellows staring, and Fisher T. Fish rubbing his head and spluttering.

CHAPTER 4

HIS MASTER'S VOICE

BILLY BUNTER, sitting on the carpet in No. 1 Study in the Remove, gave a little fat cough.

That, if Lord Mauleverer had noted it, was Billy Bunter's usual preliminary to a spot of ventriloquism.

But Mauly did not note it.

Reclining gracefully in the armchair, with a due regard to the crease in his elegant trousers, Mauly was gazing dreamily at the blue sky and fleecy clouds that sailed in the blue, from the study window. Sitting in an armchair, doing nothing whatever, suited his lazy lordship. Happily unaware of the existence of the lean stranger on the cricket ground who was so interested in him, Mauly was content to repose his noble limbs, and watch the flight of a seagull across the blue sky, and the shifting of silver-edged clouds, while he waited for Harry Wharton and Co. to come in to tea. Undoubtedly he would have awakened to activity if Billy Bunter had renewed his attack on the study cupboard. But that, the fat Owl had no intention of doing, while Mauly was there. Billy Bunter's fat brains were at work on a dodge to get Mauly out of the study: and he was debating in his fat mind whether a spot of ventriloquism would work the oracle.

'I say, Mauly!' squeaked Bunter. Mauleverer glanced at him.

'Eh! Get out!' he answered. 'Don't give me the trouble of gettin' up and kickin' you, Bunter. Just clear.'

'Oh, really, Mauly! I say, have you done your lines for Quelch?' asked Bunter. 'You know Quelch gave you fifty for skewing in con. Have you done them?'

'Forgotten all about them,' answered Mauleverer.

'Hadn't you better cut off to your study and do them?'

Lord Mauleverer smiled.

'Try an easier one!' he suggested.

'Beast! I—I mean, look here, if you don't take your lines down to Quelch, he may come up after them.'

Lord Mauleverer yawned. That was all the response he took the trouble to make to the fat Owl's remarks.

'If Quelch comes up—!' urged Bunter.

'Give a fellow a rest!' said Lord Mauleverer. 'You're not getting after that tuck again, you fat cormorant. Roll away before you're kicked.'

'Mauleverer!'

It was a sharp voice, not unlike a bark. It came, or at least it seemed to come, from the open doorway of the study.

'Oh!' ejaculated Mauleverer. He sat up and took notice at once, at the well-known voice of Quelch. Remove fellows were accustomed to sit up promptly and take immediate notice, when Quelch barked. 'Yaas, sir!'

'Have you written your lines, Mauleverer?'

'Oh! No, sir!'

Mauleverer rose from the armchair, expecting his form-master to appear in the doorway. Billy Bunter, still sitting on the carpet, grinned. He did not expect Quelch to appear in the doorway!

Neither did Quelch appear there! Apparently he was in the passage: his voice, at all events was! But he seemed content to call from the passage, without stepping into the study.

'Mauleverer, you are a very idle boy!' came the sharp bark. 'I will not allow such idleness in my form.'

'Oh! Yaas! No! I—.'

'Follow me to my study this instant, Mauleverer.'

'Very well, sir!' sighed Mauleverer.

He crossed to the doorway.

Billy Bunter watched him, his eyes gleaming behind his spectacles. Really, the fat ventriloquist could hardly believe in his good luck! Never had that peculiar gift come in so useful. Bunter, if he could do nothing else, could ventriloquise. No doubt it was a gift: the Remove fellows agreed that Bunter couldn't have done it, if it required brains! At any rate, Bunter could do it: and the fat Owl could imitate any voice that was a little out of the common, with amazing facility. Quelch's distinctive bark was merely pie to him. And the unsuspecting Mauly had fallen for it, without dreaming that that bark from the passage had in reality proceeded from a fat ventriloquist sitting on the carpet.

Bunter, breathlessly, watched Lord Mauleverer walk out of the study. Then he bounded to his feet. Key in hand, he rolled to the cupboard. Once more the precious parcel was at Bunter's mercy.

In the passage, Lord Mauleverer stared a little. He had been ordered to follow Quelch, and he naturally expected to see Quelch in the passage—at least a back view of him. But nothing was to be seen of the Remove master: it looked as if he had departed immediately after rapping in at the study doorway, and departed with unusual speed!

Quite surprised at not seeing Quelch in the offing, Mauleverer went down the stairs, to the middle landing. That landing was lighted by an immense window, which looked out on the quad, with a partial view of the playing-fields in the distance. Two masters stood at that window, looking out: Quelch, master of the Remove, and Prout, the portly master of the Fifth. Both of them seemed interested, indeed startled, by something visible without, and neither looked round as Mauly came down the upper staircase.

Mauly came to a stop. He had been told to follow Quelch to his study: not to precede him. So he halted. 'Extraordinary!' Mr. Quelch was saying, no doubt alluding to something in view at which the two masters were staring.

'Most extraordinary!' said Prout. 'Indeed, amazing!' Mauly, in his turn, glanced from the window.

He had a moment's view of the object at which the two masters were looking. He too stared at it. It was quite an unusual sight: that of a tall lean man with a bowler hat clamped down on a bullet head as if a permanent fixture there,—running!

Who the man was, and what he might be doing within the precincts of Greyfriars School, Mauly knew no more than Mr. Quelch or Mr. Prout. Certainly he was a most unusual apparition. For whatever reason he had come, he was evidently in a hurry to go: for his long thin legs twinkled as he ran.

He was in Mauly's sight only for a moment or two.

Then the corner of a building hid him, and he vanished.

'Upon my word!' said Mr. Quelch.

'Extraordinary!' said Mr. Prout. 'Indeed unprecedented!'

That unusual apparition having vanished, the two masters turned from the window. Then Mr. Quelch glanced at Mauleverer. Quelch did not seem to be going down to his study. As Mauly lingered, he gave him a second glance.

'Do you want anything, Mauleverer?' he rapped.

'Oh! No, sir!' stammered Mauly.

'Then do not loiter about the landing.'

'Am—am I to go to your study, sir?' stammered the surprised Mauly. 'I—I came down because you called me—.'

'I did not call you! What do you mean?' exclaimed Mr. Quelch, testily. 'Go away at once, and do not interrupt my conversation with Mr. Prout.'

'Oh!' gasped Mauly.

He stared blankly at his form-master for a moment, and then turned and went up the stairs again, almost dizzy with astonishment. Quelch, who never forgot a thing, seemed to have forgotten rapping in at No. 1 Study only a minute or two ago! Mauly almost wondered whether he had dreamed that bark from the passage. Then, all of a sudden, it dawned on him: and he ran up the upper staircase, almost as rapidly as the long-legged man from the States had covered the ground. It was not the first time that a fat ventriloquist had played tricks by imitating his master's voice. Lord Mauleverer flew up the stairs, dashed into the Remove passage, and hurtled into No. 1 Study.

'Oh, crikey!' came a startled gasp.

The cupboard door, with the key in the lock, was wide open. A fat junior, with a large parcel under a fat arm, was coming out of the study, as Lord Mauleverer hurtled in. They met with a crash. Bump!

Billy Bunter sat down on the floor. The parcel rolled under the table. Lord Mauleverer staggered from the shock.

'Oh!' roared Bunter. 'Oh! Ow! Oh, scissors! Wooooow!'

'You fat villain!' gasped Mauleverer.

'Ooooh! Ooow!' spluttered the fat Owl. 'Is—is that you, Mauly? I say, Quelch wants you! Ow!' He yelled, 'Stop kicking me, you beast—wow! Will you stop—wow! wow!'

Thud! thud! thud! Mauleverer did not stop!

Billy Bunter scrambled up frantically. He forgot even the precious parcel. He bounded to the doorway. A final thud landed him in the passage. He did not linger there. There was more to come, if he lingered: and the fat Owl fled up the passage as if for his fat life.

CHAPTER 5

THE ST. JIM'S MATCH

'BAI Jove!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's.

'How's that?'

'Out!'

Tom Merry, at the wicket, made a slight grimace. The ball had come down like a bullet from the dusky hand of Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, and Tom's bat had sent it on its journey,—only to land in the ready hand of Harry Wharton.

'Bai Jove !' repeated Arthur Augustus, standing with the waiting batsmen at the pavilion.

'There goes Tom Mewwy.'

'Out for fifteen,' said Jack Blake. 'Not too bad.'

'Wuff luck, deah boy,' said Arthur Augustus, as Tom came out, and Blake went to take his place.

'Rotten!' agreed Tom. 'That coffee-coloured chap can bowl.'

'I say, you fellows.'

Not one of the St. Jim's men looked round, as that fat voice was heard. They were concentrated on the game, and Billy Bunter was unheeded.

It was the last innings: and it had been a great game.

Greyfriars had taken the first knock, with a total of fifty-five. St. Jim's had a little exceeded that total, scoring sixty. Greyfriars came back with seventy-five in their second innings!

And now, after tea, St. Jim's were six down for fifty.

With four wickets to fall, and twenty-one wanted to win, it was really anybody's game: but Tom Merry's rough luck made prospects more dubious for the visitors. And there was no doubt that Hurree Jamset Ram Singh was a dangerous character—with the round red ball in his dusky hand. Jack Blake had all his work cut out to save his sticks.

'I say, you fellows! Oh! Here you are, Gussy.' Billy Bunter blinked over the St. Jim's men through his big spectacles, picked out Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, and joined that noble youth, where he stood at the rail.

It was not often that William George Bunter took the trouble to honour a cricket match with a blink through his big spectacles. And as a matter of fact, he did not bestow a blink on the cricket now. It was the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, in whom Billy Bunter was wholly and solely interested.

Twice that afternoon he had rolled down to Little Side to look round for him: but the first time, D'Arcy was batting, and the second time, he was fielding. Now, however, the persistent fat Owl had run him down.

'I say, Gussy, old chap!' squeaked Bunter.

And as Gussy watching his chum at the wicket, still did not heed. Bunter jabbed a fat thumb into his ribs, to draw his attention.

'Oooooh!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus, startled. And he looked round, at last.

Billy Bunter gave him an amiable fat grin. 'Jolly glad to see you again, Gussy,' he said.

'That is vewy kind of you, deah boy,' said Arthur Augustus. 'But pway wefwain fwom pokin' a fellow in the wibs.'

'You remember me, old chap?'

'Bai Jove! Have we met befoah?' asked Arthur Augustus.

'Oh, really, D'Arcy—.'

'Blake's got through!' remarked Monty Lowther. 'Now old Talbot's getting the bowling, and we shall see the fur fly.'

'Yaas, wathah!' said Arthur Augustus, turning back to watch the change over. 'Bai Jove, we need some wuns, you know, and—Wow!' he added, involuntarily, as another jab in his noble ribs drew his attention to Bunter again.

Talbot of St. Jim's was getting the bowling from Tom Brown of the Remove. He was a good man with the willow: but the New Zealand junior was giving him plenty to do. Really and truly, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy would rather have looked at the cricket than at the fat and fatuous countenance of William George Bunter. But the fat Owl was not to be denied. Arthur Augustus was, in Bunter's opinion, a fellow worth knowing: and Bunter was going to know him whether he liked it or not. They had met more than once, and on each occasion Bunter had claimed the swell of St. Jim's as an old pal. And Arthur Augustus's politeness was so extremely polished, that Bunter never even dreamed how obnoxious he was. He grinned cheerfully at D'Arcy, after the second poke.

'You remember me, old chap?' he squeaked. 'Bunter, you know—.'

'Yaas, I think I wemembah now, Buntah!' assented Arthur Augustus. 'Vewy glad to see you again.' That remark was perhaps more polite than veracious. 'But pway let me watch the cwicket.'

He turned to the game again, edging a little away from the fat Owl of the Remove. Bunter edged after him.

'Not much to watch,' he said. 'The bowling's pretty rotten—.'

'Bai Jove ! I thought it was pwetty good, Buntah.'

'Oh, Brownny can't bowl,' said Bunter. 'Wharton thinks he can, but Wharton doesn't know a lot about cricket. I could bowl Brownny's head off. But there's a lot of jealousy in cricket,' added Bunter, shaking his head. 'Wharton's left the best man in the Remove out of this match.'

'Bai Jove! Who's that, Buntah?'

'Me!' said Bunter.

'Oh!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

'But never mind that,' went on Bunter, airily dismissing cricket. 'I'd like to have a chat with you, old chap, now you're through. Come up to my study.'

'But I am not thwough, Buntah,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I am next man in.'

'Oh, all right, I'll stay here, then,' said Bunter. 'Your innings will be worth watching, old fellow.'

'Do you think so, Buntah?' Arthur Augustus thawed a little.

'Yes, rather,' said Bunter. 'Best of the lot, and chance it. I've seen you play, you know, and I know what a tremendous bat you are. You'll knock that bowling all over the shop.'

'I twust so, Buntah! But—.'

'Oh, you'll put paid to 'em!' said Bunter. 'Never seen a chap handle the willow as you do, Gussy! Magic, I call it.'

'Oh!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of St. Jim's, as a matter of fact, had a fairly good opinion of his powers as a batsman. He had little doubt, if any, that he was a tremendous bat.

Nevertheless, Bunter undoubtedly was laying it on a little thick; and D'Arcy's reply was monosyllabic: and he edged a little further away from Bunter. But the fat Owl was not to be shaken off. Possibly he did not even know that Arthur Augustus wanted to shake him off. Billy Bunter knew, if no one else did, what a fascinating fellow he was: and his self-satisfaction was a defence like unto the hide of a rhinoceros.

'Not long to the hols now, Gussy,' Bunter went on. 'Thinking about the hols, old fellow?'

'I am thinkin' about the cwicket, Buntah!'

'I'd like to see you in the hols, old chap! Might join up somewhere, what?' pursued Bunter.

'Weally, Buntah—!'

'We'll have a chat about it, what?' said Bunter, blinking at D'Arcy's profile, D'Arcy's eyes being on the game. 'Look here, I've nothing special on, on Wednesday—I'll run across and see you at your school, if you like. It's a half-holiday at St. Jim's same as at Greyfriars, isn't it?'

'Oh! Yaas! But—!'

'O.K.—it's a go, then,' said Bunter, breezily.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breathed rather hard. His polished politeness was being subjected to a severe strain. 'As it happens, Buntah, I am goin' to see a chap at Carcwoft on Wednesday,' he said. 'So you see—. I—I might not be in—!'

'Oh, I'd wait,' said Bunter, cheerfully. 'I shouldn't be very early anyway: it's a bit of a run into Sussex from here. That's all right, old fellow!'

'Bai Jove! Weally, Buntah, I—I must say that—that—!'

'There goes old Talbot!' exclaimed Herries.

'Man in, Gussy!' said Tom Merry.

Talbot had added ten in the over, Blake at the other end backing him up nobly. But Tom Brown of New Zealand, notwithstanding Billy Bunter's disparaging opinion of his bowling, had whipped out his middle stump with the last ball. Arthur Augustus was certainly sorry to see a St. Jim's wicket go down, but it was undoubtedly a relief to get away from William George Bunter. He went out cheerfully to his wicket.

Billy Bunter blinked after him through his big spectacles, grunted, and rolled away. His interest in the St. Jim's match and the St. Jim's cricketers had faded out. The fat Owl was not thinking of cricket as he rolled back to the House. He was thinking of a run across Sussex on a half-holiday, of tea in Study No. 6 in the School House at St. Jim's, and of—with luck—fixing up the 'hols' with Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. That was quite an enticing prospect for Billy Bunter, and ever so much more interesting than cricket.

But everyone else was concentrated on the game, now drawing to a rather exciting finish. With eleven wanted to win, and three wickets yet to fall, it was still anybody's game,—excepting in the noble opinion of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, who was feeling good for twice, thrice, or even four times the number of runs that were required to send St. Jim's triumphant home. But Hurree Jamset Ram Singh was bowling again, and never had the dusky hand of the nabob of Bhanipur seemed so deadly. Jack Blake, taking the bowling from that dusky hand, did not pull through this time.

'Bai Jove!' murmured Arthur Augustus, as Blake's wicket went.

Figgins came in next, and stole a single, which brought Arthur Augustus, much to his satisfaction, to the batting end. Arthur Augustus took his stand in the mood of a fellow prepared to do or die.

But cricket is, and always was, a most uncertain game.

The fifty for which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had hoped, and the century of which he had dreamed, were not needed: less than a dozen would have done the trick. Instead of which—!

Clatter!

'Bai Jove!' gasped Arthur Augustus. He gazed down at a wrecked wicket.

He screwed his eyeglass into his eye, and gazed again.

His leg stump lay on its back, and his bails were anywhere.

That Arthur Augustus was out, there was no shadow of doubt: no possible probable shadow of doubt: no possible doubt whatever! Even without the aid of his celebrated monocle, the swell of St. Jim's could have seen that. But really he seemed to doubt the evidence both of his eyes and of his eyeglass.

Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, at the other end, grinned a dusky grin. Some of the Greyfriars men in the field were grinning. But the noble countenance of Arthur Augustus was very serious: indeed solemn.

'Bai Jove!' he repeated.

And slowly and sadly he started on his trek to the pavilion.

It proved the finish. Last man in lived till the last ball of the over, when Hurree Jamset Ram Singh left him for dead, as it were. Harry Wharton and Co. had won the match by a margin of ten runs, which was very satisfactory to Greyfriars at least. But Tom Merry and Co. were good losers, and they were quite cheerful about it as they rolled on their homeward way: and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had, at least, one consolation: he did not see Billy Bunter Again before he left!

CHAPTER 6

IN BORROWED PLUMES

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

'Fan me!'

'We're dreaming this!'

'Where did you get that hat?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

The Famous Five seemed quite overcome.

They gazed at Billy Bunter, as if they could scarcely believe their eyes,—as, indeed, they scarcely could.

It was a surprising Bunter.

Bob Cherry, indeed, shaded his eyes with his hand, as if the aspect of the fat Owl dazzled him like the sun at noonday.

Billy Bunter, unheeding, stood on the House steps, with his little round eyes, and his big round spectacles, turned upward, anxiously scanning the sky.

It looked rather like rain! Clouds were drifting in from the west, only too likely to melt into showers: bringing the rain with them from the far-off Sussex downs. It was Wednesday afternoon, and Harry Wharton and Co., in the quad, were as interested in the weather as Bunter seemed to be. Cricket that afternoon looked a doubtful proposition.

They had had glorious weather for the St. Jim's match on Saturday. But, with the delightful uncertainty of the British climate, it had changed since then. It had rained on Monday: there had been showers on Tuesday: and now, on Wednesday afternoon, it looked as if rain in Sussex was spreading into Kent. Five pairs of eyes had been regarding the sky dubiously, when Bunter happened. But as the fat Owl rolled out, and also regarded the sky, the Famous Five forgot the weather for the moment, and regarded Bunter instead.

Billy Bunter, for once at least in his fat career, was spotless and speckless as a new pin. Generally, Bunter looked as if he had missed a wash—as in fact he often had. Only too often, his trousers were dusty, his elbows shiny, his wrist-bands soiled, his waistcoat crumby and even jammy his collar stained and his tie askew. But now—!

Really, it was enough to make any fellow who knew Bunter to stare and ejaculate. Bunter was well-dressed. He was clean and neat: a new pin had simply nothing on him. Elegant shoes encased his feet. A handsome coat encased his podgy person rather tightly. Under that coat, there was a glimpse of beautifully-creased trousers. His collar was spotless. On his fat head was a silk hat which gleamed back what sunshine there was. Only on very special occasions were 'toppers' sported at Greyfriars. This, it seemed, was a special occasion. Under that silk hat, a fat face fairly shone from soap and water. Bunter, amazing to view, had had a special wash! Such a Bunter had seldom, or never, been seen before: and it was no wonder that Harry Wharton and Co. could hardly believe the evidence of their eyes.

'It's Bunter!' said Johnny Bull, as if for a moment he had doubted the identity of the surprising apparition on the steps. 'It's Bunter! But he's washed.'

'He's brushed his clothes!' said Frank Nugent, in wonder.

'There's no jam on him,': said Bob Cherry.'

'And his topper doesn't look like a busby,' said Harry Wharton.

'O what a surprise!'

'The surprisefulness is terrific,' grinned Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'Why this thusfulness, my esteemed and idiotic Bunter?'

Billy Bunter transferred his gaze from the cloudy sky, to the grinning faces of the chums of the Remove.

'I say, you fellows, think it's going to rain?' he asked.

'Looks like it!' said Harry.

'Blow!' said Bunter, crossly. 'It would rain, blow it!

Still, I shall be in a train, and I can get a taxi at the other end. I don't want to get wet, blow it! I shall have to chance it. Oh!' added Bunter, making a sudden clutch at his top-hat. It was not only cloudy: it was windy: and a gust from the sea whirled across the quad, and the fat Owl clutched his hat only in time before it was blown off his fat head.

'Going places?' asked Bob Cherry. Bunter blinked at him.

'I'm giving my old pal D'Arcy a look-in at St. Jim's this afternoon,' he answered, loftily. 'He asked me when he was over here on Saturday—.'

'Did he?' grinned Bob.

'He jolly well did, and was jolly pressing, and I said I'd come ' said Bunter. 'I can't let him down, if it rains cats and dogs. After all, it may keep off, Anyhow, I'm going.'

The mystery was revealed now. It was not for the edification of Greyfriars that Billy Bunter was got up like Solomon in all his glory. He had dressed, and even washed, with special care, in honour of the swell of St. Jim's, and to make a good impression at the Sussex school.

Undoubtedly he had effected an enormous improvement on his usual aspect. Nobody, indeed, would have guessed that Billy Bunter possessed such expensive and elegant clothes at all: he had never worn them before at Greyfriars. They fitted him rather tightly: indeed, here and there, signs of strain could be discerned: but there was no doubt that they were both expensive and elegant. It was an extremely well-dressed Bunter.

'I say, you fellows—!' squeaked Bunter. 'If you've got a ten-bob note you don't want, you might lend it to me for the taxi at the other end.'

'Now's your chance, you fellows,' said Bob Cherry.

'Anybody here plastered with currency notes he doesn't want?'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

Apparently no such person was there: for no ten-bob note was forthcoming.

'Might do it on five bob,' said Bunter, moderating his transports, as it were.

But even five 'bob' did not seem to be available.

'I don't want to have to walk at the other end,' yapped Bunter. 'I believe it's nearly a mile from the station to St. Jim's. Might be raining, too. And a fellow wants to do a thing in style. If you're going to be mean—.'

'I've seen that coat before,' said Johnny Bull, who was staring hard at the well-dressed Owl.

'I've seen it on Mauly.'

'Oh, really, Bull—.'

'Oh, my hat!' yelled Bob Cherry, as enlightenment suddenly dawned on him. 'Have you been borrowing Mauly's clobber, you fat villain?'

'Oh, really, Cherry—.'

'Did Mauly lend you that hat?' grinned Nugent.

'Oh, really, Nugent—.'

'And those trousers—?' chuckled Bob.

'I suppose Mauly can lend a fellow a coat, if he likes when it looks like rain!' yapped Bunter.

'Oh, quite!' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'But does he know?'

'Yah!' retorted Bunter. 'I say, you fellows, don't you get telling Mauly that I've borrowed his coat and his Sunday hat—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Besides, I haven't,' added Bunter, 'and these trousers ain't his, or the shoes either.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Yah!' repeated Bunter. 'I—I—I say, is that Mauly over there? I—I'd better start, or I shall lose the bus. Don't you fellows get saying anything to Mauly.'

And Bunter started. The sight of Lord Mauleverer, strolling at a distance in the quad, seemed to alarm him. Mauly was as good-natured and tolerant as any fellow at Greyfriars School: but it was possible, indeed probable, that good-nature and tolerance might fail him, if he beheld Billy Bunter's fat form crammed into his best Sunday clothes, and his own handsome silk topper perched on Billy Bunter's fat head.

Bunter rolled off to the gates in haste. The Famous Five gazed after him with grinning faces.

'The jolly old jackdaw in borrowed plumes!' chuckled Bob Cherry. 'Hallo, hallo, hallo, there goes the topper.' A gust of wind caught Bunter as he hurried gateward.

The topper was fairly lifted from his head, and bowled away on the wind.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'Oh, crikey! I say, stop that hat!'

He plunged after the rolling hat. Lord Mauleverer glanced round, ran to the hat, and stopped it. He picked it up. Had he looked into it, he would have seen his own name: that being a rule at Greyfriars. But it did not occur to Mauly to glance into the hat. He held it out to Bunter as the fat Owl came plunging breathlessly up.

'Here you are, Bunter,' he said: and the fat Owl grabbed the hat, much relieved to get it out of the hands of its owner.

He jammed it on his fat head again, and rolled out of the gates, accelerating, in dread that Mauly might recognise the hat. Mauleverer gazed after him rather curiously. He too was struck by Billy Bunter's unusually and remarkably well-dressed appearance that afternoon. But it did not occur to him that Billy Bunter's gleaming topper and well-cut clothes were his own property. The Owl of the Remove rolled out of the gates of Greyfriars and rolled off to the bus stop on the Courtfield road, secure in his borrowed plumes.

CHAPTER 7

WET!

'I WONDAH—!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's, made that remark: or rather, began to make it, and paused.

He made it, or began to make it, in Study No. 6, in the School House.

Three other fellows were in the study: Blake and Herries and Digby. Blake was looking out of the window, at a sky over which clouds were scurrying. The weather that afternoon was no more promising at St. Jim's in Sussex than at Greyfriars in Kent.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy had been adjusting trouser-clips, which looked as if he intended to take out his jigger — as, in fact, he did. His friends were otherwise engaged that afternoon: there was going to be boxing, with Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell, in the gym. Arthur Augustus, as he had mentioned to Billy Bunter on Saturday, was booked for a visit to Carcroft School: about ten miles from St. Jim's, on the Sussex coast.

But Arthur Augustus seemed a little thoughtful: indeed a little worried. It was not the bike ride that worried him: ten miles on a bike were nothing to him. Neither was it the weather: he had not even noticed that it looked like rain. But something had brought a frown of thoughtfulness to his noble brow.

'I wondah—!' he repeated, and again paused.

Herries and Digby looked at him: and Jack Blake glanced round from the window.

'Wondering if it's going to rain?' he asked. 'Well, it is! You'll get wet before you get to Carcroft. Gussy.'

'I am not afwaid of a little wain, Blake.'

'It won't be a little—it will be a lot, when it comes on,' said Blake. 'Better chuck it, and come along to the gym with us.'

Arthur Augustus shook his head.

'I cannot vevy well chuck it, Blake, when I have pwomised Vane-Cartah to give him a look-in this aftahnoon,' he said. 'Nevah mind the wain, if it does wain—that won't wowwy me.'

'It will, if you get caught in it on Carcroft Heath,' said Herries. 'Not a spot of shelter for miles.'

'Better keep to the road,' advised Digby.

Again Arthur Augustus shook his head.

'The cut acwoss the heath saves miles,' he answered. 'That's all wight. Dig—nevah minds the wain. But—'

'But what?' asked Blake, as Arthur Augustus paused once more. Something, it seemed, was on his noble mind, quite unconnected with the unpromising weather. 'Anything up?'

'Not exactly, deah boy! But I wondah—I—I wondah whethah Buntah will blow in aftah I have gone out.'

'Bunter?' repeated Blake. 'Who's Bunter?'

'Nobody at St. Jim's named Bunter, that I've ever heard of,' said Herries.

'He is a Gweyfwiahs chap, Hewwies. He may wun acwoss fwom Gweyfwiahs to see me this aftahnoon.'

'You must be an ass. Gussy, to ask a fellow to come all that way to see you, when you're going out for the afternoon,' said Blake.

'Fathead!' said Herries.

'Goat!' agreed Dig.

'I did not exactly ask him to come,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'But he was vewy fwriendly, and he seemed to take it for gwanted.'

'Why didn't you tell him you would be out this after-noon, then?'

'I did! But he said he would wait, if I was out.'

'Oh, my hat!' said Digby.

'I remember him now,' said Blake, with a nod. 'Fat chap in gig-lamps, isn't he? Well, you'll be out of gates. Gussy, if you're going over to Carcroft: and if Bunter blows in, he can blowout again.'

'Yaas, wathah! But—I—I wondah whethah he will blow in. As I did not ask him to come, pwobably he will not. But as he seemed to take it for gwanted, pewwaps he will—and a fellow doesn't want to be uncivil. As you fellows are stayin' in gates this aftahnoon, pewwaps you would do me a favah, Blake.'

'My dear chap. anything you like, to the half of my kingdom!' said Blake, affably: a reply which caused Herries and Dig to grin though Arthur Augustus's noble countenance remained serious.

'Pway be sewious, deah boy,' said Arthur Augustus. 'It is wathah a sewious mattah to be goin' out, when a fellow may blow in to see a fellow, though pewwaps it is wathah impwobable when a fellow nevah asked a fellow—.'

'What a lot of fellows!' said Blake. 'If a fellow blows in to see a fellow who never asked a fellow, it's the fellow's own funeral, old fellow, and no need for a fellow to worry about a fellow—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' from Herries and Dig.

'Yaas, wathah, but a fellow would like to be civil to a fellow fwom anotheah school, so pewwaps, Blake, you would keep an eye open for Buntah—.'

'Two, if you like,' assented Blake.

'Weally, Blake, I wish you would be sewious on a sewious mattah.'

'Oh! Is this a serious matter?'

'Yaas, wathah.'

'My mistake!' said Blake. 'I hadn't guessed that one. I'll keep an eye or both eyes open for Bunter, just as you like. Which do you prefer?'

Herries and Dig chuckled, and Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breathed rather hard. Politeness came before all things with the noble Gussy: even to a fellow who barged in without waiting for the formality of being requested so to do. The matter was serious to Gussy, if not to his friends.

'If you see Buntah, Blake—.'

'I should see him if he blew in, with half an eye,' said Blake. 'He's wide enough to be seen. No need to keep a whole eye open for him.'

'You uttah ass—!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus. 'Will you be sewious? If that Gweyfwiahs chap blows in while I'm out of gates, will you look aftah him?'

'Look after him?' repeated Blake. 'Certainly, if you like,—I'd be glad to see his back, if he does blow in.'

'I mean look aftah him while he is heah, not when he goes, you ass! I feah you are wathah dense, Blake. Buntah will pwobably want a meal aftah a long journey—.'

'Very likely, from what I've heard of him,' agreed Blake. 'More than one, I shouldn't wonder.'

'Pway ask him to tea in the study and tell him that I am sowwy that I had to miss him—!' Arthur Augustus paused. 'No don't tell him that,' he added, on second thoughts. 'To tell the twuth, I am not vewy sowwy to miss him. Tell him I couldn't help missin' him as I had to go ovah to Carcwoft, as I mentioned to him at Gweyfwiahs the othah day. I wely on you fellows to be civil to him.'

'O.K.' yawned Blake. 'We'll take him in hand, Gussy, and kiss him on his baby brow if you like. Will that do?'

'Oh, wats!' said Arthur Augustus. 'Vewy likely he won't come aftah all: but if he does, I wely on you fellows to do the honahs of the study. Now I must be off.'

'You must be!' agreed Blake. 'Quite off. But you were always a little that way, weren't you?' 'Wats!' repeated Arthur Augustus: and with that he walked out of Study No. 6, leaving his chums grinning.

Having thus disposed of the uninvited guest, if that guest did, after all, turn up at St. Jim's, Arthur Augustus dismissed Billy Bunter from his noble mind. He walked down to the bike-shed, and wheeled out his handsome jigger: mounted thereon, and pedalled away for Carcroft.

It was quite a pleasant run, by leafy lanes, from St. Jim's to Carcroft, in the summer weather. But though it was summer, the weather, at the moment, was not quite summery. Thicker and thicker clouds were drifting over the sky, and the sun had shyly withdrawn from visibility. Arthur Augustus was a mile from the school when the first drops began to fall. And the first drops were followed by more, thicker and thicker, till, like the oysters in Wonderland, thick and fast they came at last, and more and more and more.

Arthur Augustus had been giving more thought to the problem of Bunter, than to the weather, before he started. Now his thoughts had to concentrate on the weather.

He turned up his collar, pulled his cap tight on his noble head, bent over the handle-bars, and ground at the pedals. The bike fairly flew. Arthur Augustus nourished a hope of getting in at Carcroft before it came down too hard. But it did not look like it.

While Blake and Herries and Dig, Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther, boxed in the gym, with the rain pattering on the roof, Arthur Augustus pushed on by wet and muddy lanes, with the rain pattering on his head!

By the time he reached Carcroft Heath, it was more than a shower. He turned from the road to the track across the heath, and pushed on. It was rough going, on the heath, but it saved two or three miles of distance, which was more than ever a desideratum with the rain coming down faster and faster.

But by the time he was in the middle of the heath, Arthur Augustus rather regretted that he had not taken Dig's advice, and kept to the road. The rain was coming down hard, and anything in the nature of a shelter, till the worst was over, would have been welcome.

But the wide heath stretched round him on all sides, dotted here and there with dripping trees, with a glimpse of the sea in the misty distance: and not a sign of anything like shelter.

'Bai Jove!' breathed Arthur Augustus. 'This is wotten! This is weally vewy wotten! I shall be feelin' like a ddowned wat by the time I weach Carcwoft!

Bothah!

There was a roll of thunder in the distance. A black battalion of clouds rolled overhead. The distant sea disappeared in veils of mist. And as if that thunder-roll had been a signal, the rain came down, not in drops, not in showers, but in sheets. Through the mist and the rain, the luckless swell of St. Jim's pushed on: till his bike suddenly skidded in a pool of water on the rugged track and tipped over. Arthur Augustus sat in wet grass, and ejaculated:

'Bai Jove!'

CHAPTER 8

TROUBLE WITH A TOPPER

BILLY BUNTER clutched at Lord Mauleverer's hat just in time.

'Blow!' hissed Bunter.

It was really very annoying.

Bunter was standing at the bus stop on the Courtfield road. The motor-bus for Courtfield was in view, coming along. Bunter was in good time for the bus, which was to land him at Courtfield Junction, in good time for his train. The rain was still holding off in the vicinity of Greyfriars: but the wind from the sea was strong. Twice already Bunter had had narrow escapes of losing Mauly's hat. Now he had a third. However, he clutched it and saved it just as the mischievous wind whirled it from his fat head. Once more it was jammed down on that fat head, and Bunter blinked anxiously through his big spectacles towards the approaching bus. He was anxious to get out of the wind and the threatened rain.

On such an occasion as a visit to the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, at St. Jim's, Bunter had naturally wanted to put up a good show: it was an occasion for a fellow to be dressed in his best. So there was Bunter, dressed, if not in his best, at least in Lord Mauleverer's best. But there was no doubt that Mauly's Sunday topper was a spot of bother in a high wind. Bunter was anxious to get that hat within the shelter of the bus.

On came the bus, and it stopped, at last. Bunter made a plunge for it, letting go the hat as he clambered aboard.

That did it!

Just as if the mischievous wind had been waiting for a chance at that hat, a sudden gust caught it, and before Bunter knew that it was going, it was gone.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

He had half-clambered on the bus. Now he jumped down again after the hat. He made a clutch at it and missed by a foot or more. The hat bowled along the road before the wind. 'I say, wait for me!' shouted Bunter, and he cut desperately after the hat. He did not want to lose the bus. But neither did he want to lose the hat.

"Urry up!" called out the conductor.

Bunter was hurrying up, as fast as he could! Conductor and driver and passengers on the bus looked after him as he went: most of them smiling. There was, perhaps, an element of the comic, in the fat Owl chasing breathlessly, puffing and blowing, after an elusive hat. If so, the comic element was quite lost on Bunter himself.

He almost reached the hat, when a twirl of the wind lifted it from the road, and blew it across the grass of Courtfield Common. After it charged Bunter.

There was a whirr as the motor-bus restarted after the interval. Motor-buses, like time and tide, wait for no man. The bus rolled on its way to Courtfield, leaving that intended passenger behind. That really could not be helped. Vehicles in the public service could not hang about indefinitely while a fellow chased a hat across a common.

A dozen yards from the road, Bunter came up with the hat. He made a frantic grab at it: just as the wild winds lifted it again and tossed it onward. It went rolling rapidly over the grass, whirled by the wind, the fat Owl panting after it in vain.

'Oooogh!' gasped Bunter.

He had to slow down. Breath was always in short supply with Bunter. He blinked round at the road, anxious to make sure that the motor-bus was waiting for him! He had a distant glimpse of it rolling off to Courtfield.

'Beast!' hissed Bunter.



"URRY UP!" CALLED OUT THE CONDUCTOR

Evidently, he had lost that bus: if he had not lost the hat. But it looked as if he had lost the hat also, as it bowled merrily away over the grass. At a slackened pace, the breathless fat Owl resumed the pursuit. Once more he nearly came up with it—once more a gust of wind whirled it away from his outstretched fat fingers. Then, as he caught sight of a man leaning on a tree, smoking a cigar, at some distance ahead, Bunter gave a yell:

'I say! Stop that hat!'

The man's eyes were fixed on him. Bunter had never seen him before, and who and what he might be, Bunter couldn't have cared less. But he seemed interested in Bunter.

He was a long, lean man, with a lean face and hawk-like eyes, and a bowler had clamped down so hard on a bullet head that it was in no danger from the wind. He was, in fact, the long-legged man from the States who had appeared on the junior cricket ground at Greyfriars the previous week, and who had been identified by Fisher T. Fish as Marcus K. Hoot, professional kidnapper. He had not been seen anywhere near the school since that occasion, and most of the juniors who had seen him had probably forgotten him. But he had not, evidently, departed from the vicinity: for here he was, leaning on the tree on Courtfield Common, with his hands in the pockets of his long jacket, his hawk-eyes fixed on Billy Bunter and the elusive hat.

'Here!' yelled Bunter. 'Stop that hat, will you?'

Mr. Hoot stepped from the tree, withdrawing his lean hands from his pockets. The hat was whirling almost directly towards him, and it was easy for him to step into its path and intercept it.

In a moment, the hat was in his hand, much to Bunter's relief. The fat Owl panted on.

Mr. Hoot stood with the hat in his hand, waiting for him. But he was not looking at Bunter now. He was looking into the hat. His sharp eyes were fixed on a name written in that hat.

The name, naturally, was MAULEVERER, as the hat was Lord Mauleverer's property.

Mr. Hoot's sharp eyes glinted at that name.

'Carry me home to die!' he breathed. 'Search me! If this ain't the bee's knee! If it ain't the elephant's whiskers, and then some!'

Mr. Hoot grinned—a grin of happy satisfaction. Since his recognition by his fellow-countryman on the cricket ground at Greyfriars, Marcus K. Hoot had not ventured near

the school. His attempt to get a view of Lord Mauleverer, in order to know his intended victim by sight, had failed: which rendered Mr. Hoot's task much more difficult. But now—!

He chuckled.

Bunter came panting up. He held out a fat hand. 'Thanks!' he gasped. 'Gimme my hat.' 'Your hat?' said Mr. Hoot. As he had seen a hatless schoolboy chasing a hat, he could hardly doubt that the hat belonged to the hatless schoolboy. But Mr. Hoot was wary and cautious. He wanted to be quite, quite sure.

'Yes,' gasped Bunter. 'It blew off at the bus stop. I've lost the bus! Oh, crikey!'

Mr. Hoot—his sharp eyes lingering for a last moment on the name in the hat—handed it to him, with a smile.

Bunter clamped it on his head again. Of the thoughts in Mr. Hoot's mind, he had not the faintest idea. He did not know that Marcus had seen the name in the hat, or that he would be interested if he did see it there. To Bunter, the man was simply a stranger who had picked up his hat for him.

The hawk-eyes ran over Bunter, keenly and searchingly. Personally, Bunter did not quite come up to what Mr. Hoot would have expected a British nobleman to look like. Still, there was no doubt that he was well and expensively dressed: those clothes had cost money. And the name in the hat was a clincher! It was no wonder that Mr. Hoot smiled. Hanging about the neighbourhood, expecting to see Greyfriars boys out of gates on a half-holiday, and hoping to be able to pick out Lord Mauleverer among them, Mr. Hoot had had to realise that the task he had set himself was no easy one, and likely to take time and trouble. Instead of which, here was the very guy walking right into his hands! No wonder Mr. Hoot guessed that this was the bee's knee, and indeed the elephant's whiskers!

Billy Bunter, quite unaware of Mr. Hoot's interest in him, and not in the least interested in Mr. Hoot, turned to tramp back across the grass to the road. He had lost that bus, and had to wait half-an-hour for the next: which meant losing his train at Courtfield. It was a very disgruntled and irritated Owl. But Mr. Hoot's drawling voice followed him, and what Mr. Hoot had to say, quite cheered the fat Owl.

'Say, mister, you said you'd lost your bus! I guess I'd give you a lift in my car if you was in a hurry.'

Billy Bunter turned back at once.

'Oh!' he ejaculated. 'I—I say, I've got to catch a train—I'd be jolly glad of a lift into Courtfield, sir.'

Mr. Hoot's smile grew more expansive.

He was prepared, if needed, to grip this fat schoolboy—Lord Mauleverer, as he supposed—by the back of the neck, rather than allow him to walk away. But that was a last and risky resource, in sight of a public highway where there were passing vehicles and occasional pedestrians. The methods of the spider with the fly were preferable—if the fat fellow fell for the bait! And evidently the fat fellow was not only going to fall for it—he jumped at it! Really, kidnapping a British nobleman was turning out much easier work than Marcus could have anticipated, when he transferred his peculiar activities to the old country. 'Sure!' said Mr. Hoot, heartily. 'I guess I left the auto parked in the lane yonder while I took a leetle paseo around. I'll sure be proud to give you a lift into the burg.'

'Oh, thanks!' gasped Bunter.

'This way!' said Mr. Hoot, genially. He started, and Bunter followed.

His fat face brightened very considerably as he rolled across the common with Mr. Hoot. This meant catching his train after all: if this long-legged man's car was at hand, it would land him in Courtfield as soon as the motor-bus, or sooner. Moreover, the rain, which had long held off, was beginning to spatter in light drops. A run in a car was infinitely

preferable to waiting about in the rain for another bus. Billy Bunter could not help feeling that he was in luck, in falling in with this American tourist, as he supposed Mr. Hoot to be. Mr. Hoot was also feeling that he was in luck, as he walked Bunter across the common, away from the road.

Both of them, in fact, were feeling very satisfied. And neither of them had the remotest idea that, in the fulness of time, they were going to discover that neither had the very least cause for satisfaction!

CHAPTER 9

INHOSPITABLE!

'BOTHAH!' said Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

He said it with some emphasis.

On Carcroft Heath, the rain was falling heavily. Mists from the sea hung thickly over the heath. The track, rugged at the best of times, was now thick mud, mingled with pools of water. Arthur Augustus having picked himself up after sitting in wet and muddy grass after his skid, jammed a damp eyeglass into his eye, and cast a longing glance round in one direction after another. Any kind of shelter, even a cattle-shed, would have been welcome—more than welcome. He was still several miles from his destination, and it was evident that if he kept on through the downpour, he would arrive at Carcroft soaked to the skin, dripping from head to foot, and feeling, as he had expressed it, like a drowned rat. But of shelter on the rainy, misty heath, there was no sign. Cattle grazed on the heath, and no doubt they had a shelter somewhere for such weather: and the swell of St. Jim's would have been glad to share its roof with them at the moment. But not even a shed was to be seen.

'Bothah!' repeated Arthur Augustus, more emphatically than before.

And he put a leg over his machine, and pushed on again. But he kept an eye, and an eyeglass, on the watch for a possible shelter, as he pushed on. He remembered that, since the War, speculative builders had been putting up holiday bungalows on Carcroft Heath: and he had a hope of catching sight of one of them. With that hope, Arthur Augustus gave more attention to the rainy horizon, than to the rugged muddy track he was riding on: with the result that his front wheel suddenly plunged into a deep rut, and once more the bike skidded, and landed its noble rider in wet grass.

'Oh, cwikey!' gasped Arthur Augustus, as he landed. He sat for some moments gasping for breath, before he picked himself up again, and picked up his bicycle.

This was getting altogether too unpleasant. Arthur Augustus wiped his eyeglass, jammed it into his eye, and once more scanned the rainy heath in search of a shelter. 'Bai Jove!' he ejaculated, suddenly, and his wet face brightened.

At a distance, a line of dripping willows indicated a lane that wound across the heath from the direction of the sea. And there was a glimpse of a red roof, shining with rain.

'Oh, good!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

Evidently, it was one of those holiday bungalows of which he had hoped to catch sight. Now he had caught sight of one, and it dawned upon his vision like a boon and a blessing. He lost no time. He remounted his muddy jigger, left the track, and pushed on towards the distant building. It was tough going, but the swell of St. Jim's put all his beef into it, anxious to reach that shining red roof before he was quite reduced to the condition of a drowned rat!

He emerged into the lane at last, pushed along it, and arrived breathless in front of the bungalow. It stood in a lonely spot: there was no other building in sight in any direction. Doors and windows were closed, no doubt on account of the rain: but there was a garage at one side, of which the double-doors were half-open. In that half-open doorway a young man stood, looking out at the lane, but keeping back from the rain-drops. Arthur Augustus had only a glimpse of him: for as soon as his eyes fell on the drenched schoolboy, the young man turned back into the garage, and disappeared from sight.

Arthur Augustus opened the gate. There was a muddy drive from the gate to the garage, and as the man of the house appeared to be in the latter, Arthur Augustus wheeled his bike

in that direction. The creak of the gate, at it opened, caused the young man to look out again, and he stared at Arthur Augustus, wheeling the bike towards him.

'Here! You!' he called out. 'Get out of it!'

'Bai Jove!'

'Beat it, you! You hear me?' rapped out the young man. 'Pronto!'

Arthur Augustus, came to a halt, staring at him. He thought he had never seen so unpleasant a young man in his life. Not for a moment had he dreamed of so inhospitable a greeting, in a heavy downpour of rain.

But he halted only for a moment. The rain was altogether too heavy for standing about in. He pushed on again, the young man staring at him from the garage doorway with a lowering brow. In looks, the young man was no more attractive than his manners. He had a bull neck, a low brow, a nose that slanted a little as if it had been knocked out of gear in a scrap, and a hostile expression on an unprepossessing face. He seemed surprised to see Arthur Augustus still coming on, after having been told to beat it: and still more displeased and annoyed than surprised.

'I twust you will excuse me!' said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity. 'But—.'

'I guess I said beat it, you,' snapped the young man.

'I am dwenched with wain,' said Arthur Augustus, in the same dignified tone. 'I am lookin' for sheltah fwom the wain.'

'Look somewhere else.'

'I would vewy gladly do so,' exclaimed Arthur Augustus, indignantly, 'but there is nowhah else to look. Surely you will not object to my takin' sheltah heah for a short time till the worst of the wain is ovah.'

'Sure thing!' answered the young man. 'Beat it, you, and make it snappy.'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy breathed hard and he breathed deep. He had reached the doorway now, and was anxious to push his bike into the garage and follow it in. But the bull-necked young man stood like a rock in the path. He had to come to a halt again, or run the bike into the unpleasant young man. He stood looking at that young man, while the rain dashed on his hapless head. Really he did not quite know what to do, in the circumstances.

'You going?' snapped the young man.

Arthur Augustus made up his mind. He was not going. Such inhospitality as this was beyond the limit. He was astonished as well as indignant. He could guess from the young man's accent and mode of speech that he was an American: and Gussy's experience of Americans was that whatever they might lack, they did not lack hospitality. But that inhospitable specimen of a hospitable race evidently meant what he said: he was not going to allow the drenched schoolboy to take shelter in the garage.

'Vewy well!' said Arthur Augustus, quietly. 'If you will not allow me to entah that gawage—.'

'You said it!' interrupted the young man. 'Then I will take sheltah in the porch.'

'I guess you'll go.'

'I shall not go!' answered Arthur Augustus, calmly: and he swung round his jigger, and wheeled it along to the wide wooden porch in front of the front door of the bungalow. There was ample room in that porch for the bike and for D'Arcy. The wooden roof was solid, and he was extremely glad to get under it. It was a great relief to get out of the rain. Whether there might be someone else in the bungalow he did not know: but after his rough reception at the garage, he did not feel disposed to knock at the door. The porch was a fairly good shelter, and he was content to remain there, till the rain cleared off sufficiently for him to go on his way. There was no sign of that, so far.

A bull neck was stretched out of the garage doorway, the young man projecting his head, rather like that of a tortoise from a shell, into the rain, to watch Arthur Augustus's movements. Probably he had expected him to depart as bidden. But as the swell of St. Jim's ensconced himself in the porch, the young man followed his bull neck out, and came along the building, with an extremely threatening expression on his face, heedless of the rain.

'Did I say beat it?' he snapped.

'Pway do not address me,' said Arthur Augustus, stiffly.

'What?'

'I wegard you as a wude boundah. Pway keep your distance.'

'You beating it?'

'Not till the wain stops.'

The young man looked at him. Then he looked out at the rainy lane again, which he had been watching from the garage when Arthur Augustus arrived. Apparently he was in expectation of some arrival: though it did not occur to Arthur Augustus that he did not want any eyes but his own to see that arrival. But the rainy lane was quite untenanted. He turned back to the schoolboy, with a threatening glitter in his eyes.

'Going on your feet, or on your neck?' he asked.

'I am not go in' at all until the wain cleahs off,' answered Arthur Augustus, calmly. 'I wefuse to take a step.'

'That cinches it!' said the young man, and he came into the porch with a rush, and grasped Arthur Augustus with both hands, with the evident intention of causing him to depart on his neck'.

No doubt that unpleasant young man expected to handle a schoolboy with ease: but if so, he had, as he might have said himself, another guess coming! So far from handling Arthur Augustus with ease, he could not handle him at all. Immediately his hands fell on D'Arcy, the St. Jim's junior hit out, and a crash on the chest sent the young man spinning out of the porch into the rain.

He landed on his back.

Arthur Augustus leaned the bike on the porch, and stood with both hands ready for the young man to come on again. His noble blood was almost at boiling point now.

'Aw! Wake snakes!' gasped the young man, as he sprawled in the rain. He sat up, quite dizzily, and stared at D'Arcy. 'Say, bo, I guess you pack a punch! I'll tell a man you do surely pack a punch, like it was a mule kicked a guy. Yup! You surely pack a punch.'

He scrambled to his feet. He did not come on again, but cut off in the direction of the garage. Arthur Augustus was glad to see him go. But that was only for a few moments.

The bull-necked young man dived into the garage, but he emerged again, with a thick short stick in his hand.

'Oh, cwikey!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

The young man did not speak again. He came into the porch lashing out with the stick.

Crack! crack! crack! Arthur Augustus, slim and elegant as he was, could have given a good account of himself with his hands. But a shower of swipes from the stick drove him headlong out of the porch. The bull-necked young man grasped the bicycle, and sent it spinning out of the porch after him.

'Now beat it, you!' he hooted. 'Snap out of it! You hear me talk!'

'You uttah wuffian—!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'Going?'

'You uttah indescwivable bwute—.'

'Search me! If you want some more I'm the guy to hand it over.' Stick in hand, the bull-necked young man emerged from the porch.

But Arthur Augustus did not want more. He had, in fact, had more than enough. It was simply impossible to argue with a lashing stick in a vigorous hand, and Arthur Augustus had to realise that he had met his Waterloo. The rain was still pouring: the open road less attractive than ever. But there was no help for it: and Arthur Augustus grasped his machine and wheeled it out at the gate. With feelings that could never have been expressed in words, he remounted in the lane, and pushed on through the drenching downpour.

CHAPTER 10

KIDNAPPED!

'STEP in, my lord!'

Billy Bunter blinked.

Why the long-legged man addressed him as 'my lord', the fat Owl had not the remotest idea. However, he was glad to step into the car.

Bunter had been getting a little impatient. The offer of a lift had been more than welcome: but he had supposed, from the lean man's words, that the car was quite near at hand.

Instead of which, they had had to cross the common to a lane at quite a considerable distance, and Bunter was wondering uneasily whether he would catch his train after all.

Really, he need not have wondered, as Marcus K. Hoot had no intention whatever of letting him catch any train. But so far the fat Owl had no suspicion of that.

The lane where the car was parked was near the river; a deep narrow lane shaded by trees, and quite solitary. No doubt Mr. Hoot had carefully selected that quiet and remote spot.

No one was in sight when he reached the car with his fat companion. He threw open the door for Bunter, and the fat junior, after a blink of surprise at his form of address, stepped in. Mr. Hoot followed him in, and shut the door.

Naturally Bunter expected Mr. Hoot to take the driving-seat, and start up the car. But it was the unexpected that was booked to happen. Mr. Hoot had, in fact, some preparations to make, before he started up the car.

He sat down, regarding Bunter with a cheery smile.

The fly had, so to speak, walked into the spider's parlour: and Mr. Hoot had reason to smile: at all events, he had no doubt that he had. Certainly, had the wearer of Lord Mauleverer's hat been Lord Mauleverer, Mr. Hoot would have won his game. And there was no doubt in his mind on that point.

'I'll say this is the opossum's eyelids!' remarked Mr. Hoot, agreeably. 'This sure is the elephant's hind leg, and then some.'

Bunter could only blink. He was glad to get that lift: but why this American, a stranger to him, should seem so extremely pleased about it, was quite a mystery to Bunter. 'I say, ain't we starting?' asked Bunter. 'I say, I don't want to lose that train. I've got a long way to go by train. If you're going to give me a lift—'

'Surest thing you know.'

'Well, I want to get to the station, you know—'

'Now ain't that jest too bad?' said Mr. Hoot. 'There ain't no railroad depots in the schedule, my lord.'

'Eh?'

'I'm sure taking you for a ride,' explained Mr. Hoot. 'You wouldn't be going so far as Sussex, I suppose?' asked Bunter.

Mr. Hoot gave quite a start.

'Whadyer know!' he ejaculated. 'How'd you know that Sussex was in the schedule?'

Bunter stared.

'I'm going to Sussex by train—!' he said.

'Aw! I get you!' said Mr. Hoot. 'You was going to Sussex by train, was you? Well, I guess you can wash out the train: you're going by auto, my lord. Make up your mind to that.'

Billy Bunter blinked at him with a vague uneasiness.

It began to dawn upon his fat mind that something was amiss somewhere. Mr. Hoot was still smiling: but there was something in his look and manner that made the fat Owl uneasy.

'I say—!' he began.

'I guess you needn't spill anything, my lord!' said Mr. Hoot. 'Cards on the table now I got you cinched. Don't you get the wind up—you ain't going to be hurt. Not if you behave, my lord. If you was to give me any trouble, sure I'd not think a thing of knocking you out cold with this—.' To Bunter's amazement, alarm, and horror, the lean man half-drew a short loaded stick from his pocket.

'Oh!' gasped Bunter.

Mr. Hoot, smiling, pushed the loaded stick out of sight again. One glimpse of it, evidently, was enough for his fat passenger.

'I—I—I say, you lemme get out!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I don't want a lift to the station. I—I'd rather walk! I—I say, you lemme get out—.'

'Forget it,' said Mr. Hoot. 'Squat where you are, my lord! You ain't going to be hurt if you don't kick: I guess your lordship is too valuable for that. You're jest coming for a ride with me, and staying awhile in a nice little place I got all ready for your lordship. I guess I know how to treat a nobleman, my lord. Don't you worry.'

Bunter's eyes almost popped through his spectacles. 'But I—I—I can't go!' he stuttered. 'I—I've got to get back to school by calling-over—I shall get into a row if I miss roll—I—I say, what do you want me to go for?'

It was so inexplicable to the fat Owl, that he wondered whether the lean man was 'crackers'. It had not yet dawned on his fat brain that he was kidnapped. It all seemed more like a nightmare than reality to him.

'Don't you worry!' repeated Mr. Hoot. 'I guess I'll put your schoolmaster wise by phone later, and he won't be expecting you.'

'But—but—but—!' stammered Bunter. 'What—what do you want to take me away for? I—I—I haven't any money.'

'I guess your folks have!' grinned Mr. Hoot. 'Lords ain't that poor in this old country, even with income tax and sur-tax and death duties and the whole bag of tricks. I guess your folks could cough up a thousand grand, my lord.'

'But—but—but—!' stuttered the hapless Owl.

'Aw, can it!' said Mr. Hoot. 'Can't you get it into your cabeza that Marcus K. Hoot has cinched you, and that it's you for ransom.'

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He knew now who the man was. He had never seen Mr. Hoot before that afternoon, but since the incident on the cricket ground, the name had been talked up and down the Remove. This was the man who Fisher T. Fish had declared to be known far and wide in the United States as a gangster and kidnapper: and whose visit to Greyfriars caused suspicion that he had designs on Lord Mauleverer. Billy Bunter blinked at him in horror. his little round eyes dilated behind his big round spectacles.

'You—you—you're Hoot!' he gasped.

'Yup!'

'I—I—I say, you lemme get out—,' gasped Bunter. 'If—if you don't lemme get out, I—I—I—I'll yell for help—I—I—.'

'I guess it would be your last yaup for quite a long time,' said Mr. Hoot, pleasantly. 'I advise you to pack it up, my lord.'

'I—I—I ain't a lord!' gasped Bunter. At any other time, and in other circumstances, Bunter would have been pleased and flattered by such an error. But in the present circumstances it was not at all gratifying. If Mr. Hoot's game was to kidnap a lord, Billy Bunter would have preferred Mr. Hoot to take him for the very commonest of commoners.

'Sez you!' said Mr. Hoot, derisively.

'But—but—but I really ain't!' howled Bunter. 'There's only one lord at Greyfriars, and I ain't him!' The fat Owl was too terrified to bother about grammar.

'Nope?' smiled Mr. Hoot. 'Say, I sure am surprised: I'll tell a man, I never calculated to hear a British nobleman coughing up pesky lies and denying that he was his own self! You figure you can get away with that, my lord? Not in your lifetime.'

'But—but I—I—I tell you—'

'Aw, wash it out,' said Mr. Hoot, contemptuously. 'I guess we've chewed the rag long enough. Now I got to fix you for the trip. I guess I don't want you to be spotted in this auto while I'm taking you for a ride.'

'Ow! Keep off, you beast!' yelled Bunter, as the lean hands grasped him. The smile faded from the lean face, and was replaced by a threatening scowl. The grip on the hapless fat junior was like iron.

'One more yaup from you, my lord, and you get yours!' said Mr. Hoot. 'You can be tied up in this hyer auto, or you can stretch out on the floor with a sockdolager on the crumplet to keep you quiet, jest as you like. I'm telling you to park it, or else—!'

Bunter decided to 'park' it! He was powerless in the strong lean hands: and though he did not quite know what a 'sockdolager' was, he certainly did not want one on his 'crumplet'. He was, in fact, wax in the hands of the kidnapper.

Mr. Hoot produced a cord, with which he tied the fat wrists of his unwilling passenger together. Then he produced a pear-shaped gag, with strings attached to it, at which the fat Owl blinked.

'Jest to keep you mum, in case you figure you might let out a yaup to some auto on the road,' explained Mr. Hoot, agreeably. 'I should sure hate to have to hand you a sockdolager. Open up that gap of yourn.'

'I—I—I——!' stammered Bunter. 'I—I—ooooogh! Groooooogh! Urrrrgh!'

Bunter's remarks were cut short by the thrusting of the gag into his capacious mouth. He gurgled into silence. Mr. Hoot secured the gag by fastening the strings round the back of his head.

During that brief operation, Marcus K. Hoof's sharp eyes constantly glinted round at the road, lest some passer might appear in sight. But the shady little lane was solitary, and the rain was coming down hard. The kidnapper was in no danger of observation.

Bunter blinked at him helplessly, while he arranged several cushions on the floor of the car, wondering what that was for. He soon learned: for Mr. Hoot, with a sudden heave, tipped him over on the cushions. For a person who followed the peculiar profession of kidnapping for ransom, Mr. Hoot seemed considerate in his methods. As the fat Owl sprawled on the cushions on the floor of the car, Mr. Hoot covered him with two or three ample rugs.

Anyone glancing into the car now, would have seen what appeared to be a rumpled pile of rugs on the floor, but would have seen nothing whatever of the fat Removite of Greyfriars. Having thus disposed of 'Lord' Billy Bunter, Mr. Hoot started up the car.

Bunter, under the rugs, heard it start up, and felt that it was in motion. He lay in a bemused state, hardly knowing whether he was on his head or his heels, or whether he was not after all dreaming this amazing happening, in bed in the Remove dormitory, or in an armchair in the Rag. Really, it was hard to believe that it was real!

But it was! The car jolted in rough lanes, and then ran more smoothly, no doubt on a high-road. Mr. Hoot was driving it away, at a good speed—where? Bunter had not the remotest idea.

It rolled on, and on and on. What distance it covered, and in what direction it travelled, Bunter did not know: but he knew it must be carrying him many a long mile from Greyfriars School.

Billy Bunter was not going to see Arthur Augustus D'Arcy at St. Jim's that afternoon! He was not going back to Greyfriars for calling-over! He was going on, and on, and on, to some unknown destination, in the hands of a kidnapper, who for some mysterious reason, unknown to Bunter, had mistaken him for a lord! Through driving rain and whistling wind, the car rolled on, and on, and on, swiftly, with never a stop, eating up the miles. In the strange circumstances, there was only one thing that Billy Bunter could do. He went to sleep!

WHAT A DAY FOR D'ARCY!

'OH, cwikey!' murmured Arthur Augustus D'Arcy.

Seldom, if ever, had the swell of St. Jim's been in so dismal and pessimistic a mood.

Undoubtedly, it was not D'Arcy's lucky day.

The rain came down, hard and fast. Nobody, looking over the misty, rain-swept Sussex landscape, could have guessed that it was summer! Lanes and woods and fields were weeping.

Pushing on to Carcroft under that swamping downpour was really impossible. But for the inhospitality of the bull-necked young man at the lonely bungalow, Arthur Augustus might have been sheltering under a roof: and his feelings towards that unpleasant young man were deep. Gladly, very gladly, he would have punched that inhospitable young man's head, and punched it very hard indeed. Such in-hospitality was even hard to understand: there was no reason so far as Arthur Augustus could see why he should not have sheltered in the garage attached to the bungalow, with his bike. The young man with the bull neck and the slanting nose seemed to have indulged in unpleasantness simply for unpleasantness's sake.

But there it was—there was no shelter to be had under a roof. Some distance from the bungalow gate. Arthur Augustus halted under a tree that shaded the lane. The thick branches and thick foliage above dripped with water, but they afforded some cover from the worst of the rain-storm. And there he waited, till the worst of it should be over.

It was a weary wait.

For quite a long, long time Arthur Augustus waited there, while the wind whistled round him, and the rain poured down in sheets. He was wet, he was uncomfortable, and for once he was in quite a bad temper. And he was going to be very late arriving at Carcroft, at this rate. But it could not be helped: and he had to make the best of it, as best he could. He simply could not push on through rain that was falling in torrents.

His bike leaned on the tree trunk. Arthur Augustus stood beside it, and watched the falling rain.

'Oh, cwikey!' he murmured. 'Oh, cwumbs! What a day, bai Jove!'

Even Billy Bunter's company, in Study No. 6 at St. Jim's, would have been preferable to this! Arthur Augustus rather wished that he had phoned Carcroft, and cut out that visit to Vane-Carter of the Fourth Form there, and stayed in to entertain the uninvited guest. But it was rather too late to wish that. Here he was, miles from everywhere, under a dripping tree, wet from head to foot, and waiting for the end of the rain that seemed as if it would never stop.

But at long, long last, the worst of it seemed over. The rain did not stop: but it fell less and less heavily, and even a gleam of sun came through the clouds banked over the sky.

Arthur Augustus resolved to chance it. He detached his bike from the tree, pushed it out into the lane, and mounted it. The country lane was a sea of mud, and it was heavy going. Mud splattered right and left as he pedalled on wearily. The lane was narrow, with a full ditch overflowing on one side, dripping hedges on the other. In pleasant weather it was quite a pleasant Sussex lane: but at the moment, it could scarcely have been more unpleasant.

Honk! honk!

With his head bent to the wind that was driving rain into his face, Arthur Augustus did not see a car ahead on the road, approaching him. But at the sharp honk of the motor-horn, he started, and looked up.

A car was coming on rapidly. He had a glimpse through the blinding rain of a man in a bowler hat who was driving it.

Honk! honk! honk!

Arthur Augustus was riding in the middle of the lane, far as he could get from the dripping hedge on his right, and the flowing ditch on his left. He had to shift quite swiftly to get out of the way of the car.

There was really not much room for getting out of the way, in a narrow lane between dripping hedge and flowing ditch. Arthur Augustus drew to the left, and almost rocked on the edge of the ditch. Naturally he would have expected the car to slow down, in such a spot, and pass him with some care. But the driver in the bowler hat did not seem to think of checking his pace. The car came rushing on at speed.

'Woad-hog!' breathed Arthur Augustus. Honk! honk!

Closer to the edge of the ditch Arthur Augustus steered his bike, at the imminent risk of toppling into it. His bike wobbled: and then he felt the wind of the car as it came rushing by. It whirled by with scarce a foot to spare, leaving the bike wobbling frantically on the edge of the flowing ditch.

'Oh!' gasped Arthur Augustus. Then it happened.

The wobbling bike slipped in the mud. The next moment there was a splash. The bike reeled over the edge and Arthur Augustus sat in the flowing ditch, the water rising to his shoulders.

'Gwoooooogh!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

He scrambled desperately up, clutching at muddy rushes.

He dragged himself headlong out of the ditch. Under a foot of water there was a good foot of mud, and there was a sound of suction as the unfortunate swell of St. Jim's dragged his feet out of it.

'Oh, cwumbs!' gurgled Arthur Augustus.

He stood in the rain, soaked from head to foot, and clothed in mud as in a garment. His trousers were hidden in mud: his shoes were full of it: from top to toe he was of the mud, muddy!

'Oh, goodness gwacious!' groaned Arthur Augustus, as he looked down at his muddy garments. 'Oh, holy smoke! My clobbah! Oh, cwumbs!'

The car was vanishing along the lane, in the direction of the distant lonely bungalow. Arthur Augustus, in great wrath, shook a muddy fist at it. At that moment, he would have punched the bowler-hatted driver's head, as gladly as he would have punched that of the bull-necked young man at the bungalow. But the car was gone, far beyond the reach of head-punching.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy picked up a muddy bike.

He sat in a muddy saddle, and squelched on his way.

As if to tantalize him, the rain eased to a mere shower, and the sun came out through the clouds. It came too late to afford much comfort to the wet and muddy swell of St. Jim's. He squelched on glumly, wondering what on earth the Carcroft fellows would think of a visitor arriving in such a state,—and almost ferociously resolved that, at some date in the near future, he would meet again that unpleasant young man who was the chief cause of all his woes, and make him feel as sorry for himself as he, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, was feeling now.

CHAPTER 12

THE PRISONER

SNORE!

'Jumping snakes'

Snore!

'Hyer, you!'

Snore!

'Wal, carry me home to die!' ejaculated Marcus K. Hoot. And a bull-necked young man, standing at his side, ejaculated, 'Search me!'

Bunter snored.

The car was in a garage. The door was open, and Mr. Hoot stood at it, staring at the fat figure reposing on the cushions. The long journey had come to an end at last: unnumbered miles had slid under the wheels, and the gangster was at his destination. He had pulled aside the rugs that covered Bunter, and revealed the Greyfriars junior sprawling on the cushions on the floor of the car. Probably he had not expected to find him asleep.

But asleep he was, and snoring.

Mr. Hoot stared at him, and grinned. The other man stared at him, and grinned. Then they looked at one another, grinning.

'So that's the guy, Marcus?'

'That's the guy, Andy.'

'No great shakes of a lord!' said Andy, disparagingly. 'You said it!' agreed Mr. Hoot. 'But looks ain't everything' I guess I wouldn't have picked that guy out of a bunch as a real live nobleman! But if that fat clam ain't Lord Mauleverer, I ain't Marcus Knickerbocker Hoot" The young man in the garage stared at the sleeping Owl again. Few fellows, with hands tied and mouth gagged, would have gone to sleep, in such circumstances. But Billy Bunter was always prepared to put in an extra forty winks. He had reposed quite comfortably on the cushions, and forgotten his troubles in slumber. And Bunter, once asleep, was never in a hurry to wake. In Greyfriars, the rising-bell often passed by his fat ears unheard and unheeded. In this particular line, Rip Van Winkle, or Epimenides himself, had little or nothing on William George Bunter of the Greyfriars Remove. He snored on, unconscious of the two grinning gangsters.

'I'll say he don't look the part. Marcus" said Andy, after a long and searching stare at the slumbering Owl.

'Did I remark that looks ain't everything?' answered Mr. Hoot. 'You figure that I'd tote the wrong guy a hundred miles by auto?'

'You sure-?'

'Aw, forget it, Andy! Figure I wouldn't make sure afore I picked up my passenger?' jeered Mr. Hoot. 'Look in that roof.'

The 'roof' to which Mr. Hoot referred was not the roof of the garage or the adjoining building. It was the silk topper that lay on the seat in the car.

Andy picked it up, and looked into it. 'Mauleverer" he read.

'Yup" said Mr. Hoot. 'And look at this wipe from his pocket.'

He held up a very elegant handkerchief, in the corner of which was a crest with the letter 'M'. Andy nodded. 'That sure cinches it" he remarked.

'I allow it do!' assented Mr. Hoot, 'and I'll confide in you, Andy, that I was in big luck cinching the guy. I had the car parked handy, but did I bank on picking up a passenger so easy and so soon? I did not, Andy! Why, I guessed I might have to rubber around that school for days on end, and mebbe weeks, afore I had a chance at his lordship! How'd I

know him from any other young guy, never having given him the once-over, like I planned to do? I'm telling you, Andy Pike, that if luck hadn't come my way, this here game might have kept us busy all summer, and then some! That's what I'm telling you, Andy Pike. And then, you can call me a coot if he didn't wander right into my hands, like he was glad to see me!'

'You don't say!' said Andy.

'I sure do!' asserted Mr. Hoot. 'Me, I figured he was a Greyfriars guy when he blew along, after his hat blew off, and I guessed I was going to know whether he was the bird I wanted, before he got much further. But there was his name in his hat when I picked it up! Was that luck, Andy Pike?'

'I'll say it was!' assented Andy.

'And I sure walked him to the auto to give him a lift!' grinned Mr. Hoot. 'Did he walk with me like he was a pet lamb? He did, Andy. I'll allow that these here British nobles ain't got more brains than the law allows. Now we got him safe here, Andy, and no galoot the wiser: and his schoolmasters can look for him anywhere they like in a hundred miles, Andy. They sure won't be rubbering around after him at this little dump, a hundred miles from his school, or as near as cuts no ice. You got everything ready?'

'Sure!'

'Nobody been around rubbering or asking questions, I guess?'

'Nope! This dump sure is as lonely as if it was somewhere in the Rockies,' answered Andy.

'I'll tell you, Marcus, I'll be glad to get through, and get some place where it's more lively. Not a guy in sight of the dump all this here day, except a young feller on a bicycle that wanted shelter from the rain—.'

Mr. Hoot interrupted him.

'Andy, you geck, you sure never let in any guy, rain or no rain!' he exclaimed, sharply.

'Did I?' jeered Andy. 'I did not, Marcus Hoot. I guess no guy was wanted rubbering around hyer, when you might have hit the dump any minute with a British lord headed up in the auto. I'll say I sent that young feller travelling like he was pressed for time.'

'O.K.,' said Mr. Hoot, relieved. 'By the great horned toad, that nobleman can snooze! He ain't woke up yet! I guess I'll wake him a few.'

Mr. Hoot leaned into the car, grasped a fat shoulder, and shook. Billy Bunter's snore changed into a mumble. 'Hyer, wake up, you!' snapped Mr. Hoot. He snapped the string loose, and jerked the gag out of the fat Owl's mouth.

Then Bunter sat up, blinking. He blinked dizzily at the two gangsters.

'Oooogh!' he mumbled. 'I—I say—what—oh, crikey!' His eyes popped at Mr. Hoot, and the bull-necked young man standing at his side. He realised that the car had stopped, and that it was journey's end.

'I—I—I say—!' gasped Bunter.

'Hop outer that auto, my lord!' said Mr. Hoot.

With a grasp on the fat shoulder, he hooked Bunter out of the car. Andy cut the cord that secured the fat wrists. Billy Bunter was once more at liberty, so far as his movements went. But he realised that that was all the liberty he had to expect. He gave a wild blink round him, and could see that he was inside a garage. But that was all he could see, for the doors were closed, and the window curtained.

'I—I say——!' stuttered the unfortunate Owl. He wondered dizzily where he was, and how many miles—or how many hundreds of miles—he might be from Greyfriars School. 'I—I say—what have you brought me here for?'

Mr. Hoot chuckled.

'You sure are going to be a guest in this dump,' he answered. 'Mebbe it won't be long—that depends on your folks. I guess I'll be chewing the rag about it to your schoolmaster tomorrow. Now you got to make yourself at home, my lord.'

'I—I—I ain't a lord!' groaned Bunter. 'I—I—I never was——. I—I—I've never been a lord in my life——.'

'Aw, park it!' said Mr. Hoot. 'Tote him along, Andy.'

'This way, my lord!' grinned Andy, dropping a hand on a fat shoulder.

'I—I—I say—!'

'Make it snappy!' said Andy, pulling at the fat shoulder: and the hapless Owl, as there was no help for it, rolled along with him.

A door at the side of the garage opened into the adjoining building. If Bunter had hoped to be taken out into the open, with a chance to bolt, he had to forget it. He was taken through the doorway, into a hall from which several rooms opened. As there was no sign of a staircase, he could guess that the building was a bungalow.

Still with a hand on his shoulder, Andy led him into a quite well-furnished room, in the corner of which was a bed. There was a large window: but it was shuttered outside with wooden shutters, which were closed and fastened, and the light in the room was dim, glimmering through the slats of the shutters.

Bunter blinked round dismally. 'I—I say—!' he mumbled.

'I guess you can squat if you want!' said Andy, indicating an armchair.

Bunter squatted.

'But I—I say—!' he mumbled again.

'I guess we're fixing you up comfortable, my lord!' grinned Andy. 'Nothing mean about this bunch! You'll sure be O.K. hyer till your folks come across with the dough.'

'But—but—but I've got to get back!' gasped Bunter.

'I say, I shall get into an awful row if I—I don't get back to Greyfriars.'

'Now isn't that too bad?' grinned Andy. 'Forget it, my lord! Anything you want right now? We ain't going to treat you rough.'

Bunter brightened a little. 'I'm hungry!' he said.

'I guess there ain't no limit on the eats in this dump!' said Andy. 'You're sure welcome to anything that ever came in a can out of the United States. I'm telling you we know how to treat a lord.'

Bunter was left sitting in the armchair, waiting for the 'eats'. He blinked at the shuttered window. There was no escape. Still, it was a comfort to learn that the kidnappers were not going to 'treat him rough': and Andy's statement that the 'eats' were unlimited, was undoubtedly good news. He began to take a little comfort.

Quite promptly, Andy returned with a well-laden tray, which he set on a table at Bunter's elbow. The fat Owl blinked over it with approval. He was a prisoner—he was kidnapped, far from Greyfriars: and he had no idea how this strange affair was going to turn out. But he had not lost his appetite. Knife and fork were soon busy: and the fat Owl took more and more comfort, as excellent foodstuffs followed one another on the downward path. Andy, sitting in a rocker in the hall, smoking cigarettes watched him, through the open doorway: with interest, surprise, and finally astonishment. Probably Andy Pike had never guessed, reckoned, or calculated, that members of the British nobility were blessed with such extremely good appetites.

CHAPTER 13

MISSING!

'BUNTER!'

No reply.

'Bunter!'

Mr. Quelch,, the Remove master, was calling the roll in hall at Greyfriars. He called the name of Bunter twice, without eliciting an answer.

His gimlet-eyes glinted over the ranks of the Remove.

Neither to the first nor to the second call came a squeak of adsum. Billy Bunter was not there with his form-fellows.

Mr. Quelch frowned, and marked Bunter absent.

Bunter was cutting roll. Mr. Quelch's expression indicated that Bunter would hear about it later.

The fact that Bunter had been given leave, that afternoon, to pay a visit to a school at a considerable distance, made no difference at all, in Quelch's opinion. Bunter could, and should, have returned in time for the calling of names at lock-ups.

However, Bunter was absent: and that was that.

'That fat ass!' remarked Bob Cherry, as the Famous Five came out after roll. 'Lost his train back, I expect.'

'He would!' agreed Johnny Bull.

That was all the chums of the Remove thought about it. Certainly no one at Greyfriars was likely to guess what had happened to Bunter. Neither, in fact, was anyone particularly interested, so far. Nobody missed Bunter: when he was out of sight, he was also out of mind: his fat existence liable to be entirely forgotten.

But when the bell rang for preparation, some of the Remove fellows remembered him. No fat figure, no fat face adorned by a pair of big spectacles, was among the juniors who went up to the Remove studies. Peter Todd and Tom Dutton, Bunter's study-mates in No. 7, sat down to prep on their own, without their plump companion as usual. Bunter was not only cutting roll. He was cutting prep also.

Which really was quite a serious matter, and certain to lead to the vials of Quelch's wrath being poured out on his fat head, when he did turn up.

Still, no one supposed, so far, that anything had happened to him. Bunter was the fellow to lose a train, and to lose another one after it. So far as the Removites thought about him at all, they expected to hear his familiar grunt in the passage, as he rolled in late for prep.

But no such grunt was heard. No fat figure rolled up the passage to No. 7 Study. When prep was over, the fat Owl seemed to be still understudying the Invisible Man—he was not to be seen. Which was more and more serious, and likely to intensify Quelch's wrath.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, Toddy!' called out Bob Cherry, as he came down the passage after prep. 'That fat chump turned up?'

Peter Todd shook his head.

'Haven't seen him,' he answered. 'He's cut prep.'

'By gum! He's asking for it!' said Bob.

'Quelch will scalp him!' said Johnny Bull.

'The scalpfulness will probably be terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a shake of his dusky head. 'He can't be going to stick it out till dorm, surely,' said Vernon-Smith. 'He must have stayed jolly late at St. Jim's.'

'And Mauly's waiting to kick him for walking off in his clobber!' remarked Nugent.

'Yaas, begad!' said Lord Mauleverer. 'It's the jolly old limit, you know! My best bags—and I shouldn't wonder if he bursts them! And I picked up his hat for him in the quad, when it blew off, and never dreamed that it was my own hat—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'He will get enough from Quelch, Mauly, if he doesn't blow in soon!' said Harry Wharton, laughing. 'The fat ass must have missed train after train. I don't envy him when he rolls in.' In the Rag, when the juniors went down after prep, Bunter was, at last, an object of some interest. Fellows had missed roll before: and it was not unknown for a fellow even to cut prep: such things might happen. But 'sticking it out' like this was very unusual indeed. Even a reckless fellow like the Bounder never carried recklessness to such a length. And Bunter, though he certainly was a fellow to lose a train, and even another after it, was certainly not a fellow to out-do Smithy in recklessness. Yet he was staying out of gates, long after lock-ups, long after prep, while the hand of the clock in the Rag drew nearer and nearer to bedtime. Harry Wharton had remarked that he must have missed train after train—but missing trains really could not account for this. The juniors began to wonder whether something might have happened to Bunter. Either something must have happened, or the fat Owl was setting up to be a law unto himself, to a wider extent than even the Bounder had ever thought of.

Had it been Lord Mauleverer who had failed to put in an appearance, no doubt many fellows would have thought at once of the long-legged Mr. Hoot. But Lord Mauleverer, 'gated' as a precautionary measure by his form-master, had not been out of the precincts of Greyfriars that afternoon. Lord Mauleverer was there, his lazy limbs stretched in an armchair in the Rag. So no one, naturally, thought of Mr. Hoot in connection with the missing Owl. Mr. Hoot, it was suspected, was 'after' Lord Mauleverer: but he could hardly be suspected of being 'after' an impecunious fat Owl, who was worth nothing even to a small-time kidnapper. Everyone wondered what Billy Bunter was up to: but nobody dreamed for a moment that it was a case of kidnapping. As a rule, Billy Bunter's unimportance was unlimited: but now, as the minutes ticked away nearer and nearer to 'dorm', quite a crowd of fellows were interested in him, and wondering what had become of him.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo, here's Henry!' murmured Bob Cherry, as an angular figure appeared in the doorway of the Rag. 'Henry wants to know!'

Bob did not allow that remark to reach the ears of his form-master! Henry Samuel Quelch did not look in a mood for jesting. His expressive face wore a deep frown: but there was also a trace of anxiety in it.

Mr. Quelch was, in fact, in a mixed mood. He was angry with a member of his form for staying out to such an unheard-of hour. And he was worried by the possibility that it might be accounted for by something having happened to Bunter. He did not quite know whether to be angry or anxious: and his feelings were a mixture of the two.

His gimlet-eyes shot over the crowd of juniors in the Rag, perhaps with the hope of spotting a fat face among them. But no such fat face was to be seen, and he called to his Head Boy.

'Wharton!'

'Yes, sir,' answered Harry.

'Bunter has not come in,' said Mr. Quelch. 'It is very singular-indeed extraordinary. Bunter was given leave this afternoon to visit a school in Sussex, on the invitation of a friend there: but he should have returned in time for lock-ups. I must make inquiries, and I desire to ascertain whether he did actually visit St. James's School in Sussex, as I supposed. Can you tell me anything about it, Wharton?'

'Only that he started for St. Jim's soon after dinner, sir,' answered Harry.

'You are sure that he did so?'

'Oh, yes, sir! We saw him start,' said Harry. 'He was going to catch the motor-bus at the bus-stop, for the station.'

'Then there can be no doubt that he did take the train for Sussex,' said Mr. Quelch.

'No, sir: I suppose not.'

'Then he can scarcely have failed to arrive there,' said Mr. Quelch. 'It is very singular that he has not yet returned: I must make inquiries.'

With that, Mr. Quelch rustled away: evidently to get on the telephone to St. Jim's and 'make inquiries' at that end. He left the Rag in a buzz.

'The fat ass can't be at St. Jim's all this while!' said Vernon-Smith.

'Hardly,' said Harry.

'He must have got there,' said Bob. 'But they must have turned him out long ago. Where the dickens is he?' 'The wherefulness is terrific.'

It was quite mysterious. And the mystery had not been elucidated when the bell rang for dorm. When Wingate of the Sixth saw 'lights out' for the Remove, one bed in that dormitory remained vacant: Billy Bunter was still absent. And the Removites, until they had fallen asleep, could only wonder what had become of the fat ornament of the form.

CHAPTER 14

WRATHY!

'GUSSY, old man, forget it!'

'Weally, Blake—.'

'Wash it right out—.'

'Weally, Dig—.'

'Let it drop—.'

'Weally, Hewwies—!'

In Study No. 6, in the School House at St. Jim's, four fellows seemed to be engaged in an argument.

Prep was over in that study: but the chums of the Fourth had not yet gone down. Blake and Herries and Digby seemed to be reasoning with their aristocratic chum, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. The firm, in fact, obstinate, expression on Arthur Augustus's face indicated that he was not to be reasoned with. There was a frown on his noble brow, and a gleam in his eye behind his eyeglass. Arthur Augustus, evidently, was not in his accustomed genial and placid mood.

'What's the good of kicking up a row?' argued Blake. Arthur Augustus raised his eyebrows. 'I twust, Blake, that I am not the fellow to kick up a wow!' he said, with dignity.

'What do you call it, then?' asked Herries. 'Think you'll be able to punch a man's head without a row?'

'I shall certainly punch his head, Hewwies, and vevy hard, too!' said Arthur Augustus. 'I uttably wefuse to allow the mattah to wemain where it is. I am goin' to give that wottah a feahful thwashin'.'

'My dear man—!' urged Dig.

'I wepeat that I am goin' to give him a feahful thwashin',' said Arthur Augustus, raising his voice a little, for the moment forgetful of the repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere. 'I am goin' to thwash him till he cannot cwawl. I have been tweated with wuffianly wudeeness, and I should not dweam of allowing the mattah to wemain where it is.'

'Well, the brute ought to be kicked,' admitted Blake. 'But—.'

'I have told you what the wuffian did!' Arthur Augustus's voice almost trembled with wrath and indignation at the recollection. 'The wain was comin' down in towvents, and he wefused to allow me to stand undah sheltah, eithah in the gawage or in the porch of the bungalow—.'

'Pig!' agreed Blake. 'Still, the place was his, I suppose, and he could order a fellow off, if he liked.'

'I insisted upon standin' in the porch, as any fellow would, in such towvents of wain. And the uttah wascal had the nerve to gwab me and twy to thwow me out, into the wain. Of course I knocked him down.'

'Um!' said Blake.

'I should have been quite prepared to handle the bwute,' went on Arthur Augustus, 'but he wan into the gawage and fetched a stick, and whopped me wight and left—. What are you gwinnin' at?'

'Oh! Nothing! But—.'

'I have been whopped wight and left, by a bwute with a stick!' said Arthur Augustus, breathing hard. 'If you fellows fancy that I am goin' to let it west there, you have anothead guess comin'. I can assuah you that I am not the chap to be whopped wight and left with a

stick. I am vewy fah fwom bein' such a chap! Vewy fah indeed!' added Arthur Augustus, with emphasis.

'But—!' said Herries.

'There is no "but" in the mattah, Hewwies. I am goin' to thwash that cheeky scoundweI.'

'But—!' said Dig.

'Pway do not keep on buttin', deah boy, when I have qwte made up my mind. I was dwiven out into towwents of wain by a bwute with a stick, and had to sheltah undah a twee, and aftah that, I was neahly wun down by a woad-hog in a car, and tipped into the ditch, and—and I would like to know what you see to gwin at in that, if you will kindly explain!' said Arthur Augustus, sternly.

'You must have looked a picture, when you got to Carcroft!' said Dig.

'I looked howwid, Dig, and I felt howwid. The fellows there were vewy decent about it, but I could see them gwinnin'—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'Oh, laugh, by all means!' said Arthur Augustus, sardonically. 'I have no doubt that it was fwightfully funnay for a fellow to turn up on a visit smothahed with mud fwom head to foot and wet as a wag. My clobbah was pwactically wuined. I shall hardly be able to wear those twousahs again. And it was all thwough that wuffian dwivin' me out into the wain with a stick.' Arthur Augustus's eyes flashed. 'I am goin' to see that wuffian again, without his stick! And I am goin' to make him feahfully sowwy for himself.'

'But—!' said Blake.

'If you're goin' to keep on buttin' like a billy-goat, Blake, we may as well dwop this discuss,' said Arthur Augustus. 'My mind is quite made up. I am goin' to thwash that wottah. All I wequiah is a few fwriends with me, to see that he does not get hold of a stick again. I cannot deal with a wuffian who whops out wight and left with a stick. With you fellows standin' wound, he will have to give a fellow fair play. I twust I can wely upon my fwriends to back me up.'

'Better forget all about it,' urged Blake. 'Railton would be wary, if you hiked ten miles over to Ridgate Lane to scrap with a man at a bungalow.'

'I shall not mention the mattah to Mr. Wailton, Blake. It is not a mattah for a fellow to discuss with his house-mastah, that I know of.'

'Bet you that man at the bung will mention it to him, or to the Head, if you kick up a shindy at the bung,' said Digby.

'I shall take the wisk of that, Dig. Pwobably Mr. Wailton would wegard it as quite wight and pwopah to thwash a wuffian who whopped a fellow wight and left with a stick. In any case I am goin' to thwash him.'

'But—!' said Herries.

'But—!' murmured Dig.

'But—!' said Blake.

Study No. 6 could feel for their indignant chum. That inhospitable young man at the lonely bungalow did undoubtedly, in their opinion, deserve to be kicked. Probably a thrashing would have done him good. But—! They could not help seeing quite a lot of 'buts' to which D'Arcy seemed to be blind.

'Vewy well,' said Arthur Augustus, with a great deal of dignity. 'If you fellows don't want to come ovah with me next half-holiday, and back me up in dealin' with that wuffian, I will ask Tom Mewwy and Mannahs and Lowthah. And if they won't come, I will ask Figgins and Co. of the New House. And if I am let down all wound, I shall go alone, and chance it.'

'Fathead!' said Blake.

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus.

'But look here—.'

'Wats!' repeated Arthur Augustus.

There was a bang at the study door, and it flew open.

Tom Merry, of the Shell, looked in.

'Gussy here?' he asked. 'Oh, here you are, Gussy! Railton wants you in his study,—he's sent me up to call you.'

'Bai Jove! I wondah what Wailton wants,' said Arthur Augustus. 'I suppose I had bettah go.'

'Sort of!' agreed Tom, laughing.

'While you're there, ask Railton his opinion about going over to Ridgate to kick up a shindy,' called out Blake, as Arthur Augustus left the study.

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus, for the third time: and he walked away down the passage to the stairs.

Tom Merry glanced at three faces, in Study No. 6, one after another, when the swell of St. Jim's had departed. 'Not rowing in this study, surely?' he asked.

Blake sighed.

'Oh, no! Only Gussy on the high horse. He's got his jolly old back up. He seems to have had a wild time this afternoon—I dare say you've heard—.'

Tom Merry laughed.

'Gussy has been a bit eloquent on the subject,' he said. 'What about it?'

'Only he wants to go over to that bung next half-holiday, and wallop the man there for turning him out in the rain!' sighed Blake. 'He wants his pals with him to see that the fellow doesn't get hold of a stick again. We can't let Gussy wander about the countryside asking for trouble like that. But you know him-obstinate as a mule when his back's up.'

'May forget all about it by Saturday,' suggested Tom. Blake shook his head.

'Well, look here,' said Tom, after a moment's thought. 'We'll keep him busy on Saturday. We'll fix up a spot of cricket with the New House. Gussy will be wanted to bat, and if he's still thinking of wandering out of gates hunting for trouble, you fellows can explain to him that he simply can't let the House side down. What about that?'

Blake chuckled. Herries and Dig grinned. It was quite a simple solution of the problem.

'Good egg!' said Blake, 'That will work the oracle.'

Cricket will be ever so much better for Gussy, than punching a man's nose,—or more likely getting his own boko punched through the back of his head, with Railton ragging him afterwards for kicking up a shindy. It's a go!

Which settled the matter satisfactorily for Arthur Augustus D'Arcy's loyal chums: though not perhaps quite so satisfactorily for the aggrieved and incensed Gussy himself.

A TALK ON THE TELEPHONE

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY tapped at his housemaster's door and entered. He found Mr. Railton standing at the telephone, with the receiver in his hand, and a grave expression on his face.

'You sent for me, sir?' said Arthur Augustus. The housemaster glanced across at him.

'Yes, D'Arcy! I have had a very unexpected and surprising call from Greyfriars School,' he said.

'Gweyfwiahs, sir?' repeated Arthur Augustus, blankly.

He could not imagine why his housemaster had sent for him in connection with a telephone call from the school in Kent.

'I am told that a Greyfriars boy, named Bunter, came over to see you this afternoon, D'Arcy, and that he has not returned to his school,' said Mr. Railton. 'The boy cannot be still here.'

'Oh! No, sir!'

'At what time did he leave?'

'Bai Jove! He did not leave at all, sir—.'

'What? What? Kindly make me a sensible answer.'

'D'Arcy,' rapped Mr. Railton. 'Bunter's form-master at Greyfriars is holding the line, and he has asked me for information. You say that the boy is not still here, and that he did not leave—what do you mean?'

'I—I mean that he nevah came, sir!' stammered Arthur Augustus. 'He could not leave as he nevah came, sir.'

'He never came!' repeated Mr. Railton.

'No, sir! I was only half-expectin' him, weally, as he was awah that I was goin' ovah to Carcwoft this aftahnoon,' explained Arthur Augustus. 'I asked Blake to look aftah him, if he did turn up: but when I came in, Sir, they told me that he hadn't come aftah all.'

'Then Bunter has not been here!' exclaimed Mr. Railton.

'Not at all, sir.'

'This is very singular,' said Mr. Railton. 'His form-master certainly seems to have the impression that he came here. You are quite sure that he did not come?'

'Quite suah, sir! Blake and Hewwies and Dig were keepin' an eye open for him, if he turned up: but he did not turn up.'

'Extraordinary!' said Mr. Railton.

He spoke into the transmitter, addressing Bunter's form-master at the other end.

'I regret that! can give you no news of Bunter, sir—.'

'What? What?' Arthur Augustus, as well as Mr. Railton, heard the sharp bark from the Greyfriars end. It sounded as if the speaker was in a disturbed, not to say an irritated and annoyed, frame of mind.

'I have now questioned D'Arcy, and he states that the boy Bunter did not, after all, come here this afternoon.'

'I scarcely understand this, Mr. Railton. It is known that Bunter left here to catch his train for Wayland, in Sussex, the station for your school. Yet you tell me that he did not arrive.'

'It appears not, from D'Arcy's statement, sir. Perhaps you would like to speak to D'Arcy yourself. He is here.'

'If you please,' came the reply bark.

'Here, D'Arcy!' said Mr. Railton, and he handed the receiver to Arthur Augustus. 'Kindly state whatever you may know about Bunter—it appears that he is missing from his school, and his absence is causing anxiety.'

'Vewy well, sir.'

Quite astonished, Arthur Augustus took the receiver.

He had, as a matter of fact, quite forgotten Billy Bunter, and it was surprising to be reminded of him in this unexpected way. Bunter, it seemed, had started for St. Jim's, where certainly he had never arrived. The goods, so to speak, had been lost in transit! It was very surprising indeed.

'I am sowwy—!' began Arthur Augustus, into the transmitter. He was about to say that he was sorry he could give no news of Bunter: but he was interrupted by a sharp bark.

'Is that D'Arcy?'

'Yaas, sir. I—.'

'You are the junior boy whom Bunter, of this school, proposed to visit this afternoon?'

'Yaas, sir. But—.'

'This is Bunter's form-master, Mr. Quelch, speaking from Greyfriars—.'

'Good-evenin', Mr. Squelch.'

'What? what? What did you say?'

'I said good-evenin', Mr. Squelch—.'

'You stupid boy—.'

'Eh?'

'My name is Quelch, not Squelch—!'

'Oh! I—I beg your pardon, Mr. Squelch—I mean Mr. Welsh—I—I—I weally mean Mr. Quelch—.'

'Kindly refrain from talking nonsense, D'Arcy. This matter is serious. Cannot you understand that it is serious for a boy to be missing from his school?' came the bark from Greyfriars.

'Yaas, wathah, sir! But—.'

'Listen to me—.'

'Oh, certainly, sir! I—.'

'Bunter was given leave to visit your school. He is known to have gone for his train. There has been no accident of any kind on the railway. Did he or did he not arrive at your school?'

'I am vewy sowwy that—.'

'Will you answer me directly, D'Arcy?'

'Bai Jove! I was goin' to say that I am vewy sowwy —indeed I wegwet vewy much—that I don't know anythin' about Buntah—.'

'Did he arrive at your school or not?' almost shrieked Mr. Quelch from his study at Greyfriars.

'He did not, sir!'

'Are you sure of this?'

'Yaas, wathah! You see, sir, I was out all the aftahnoon—.'

'You were out all the afternoon?' repeated Mr. Quelch.

'Yaas, sir! I was goin' ovah to Carcwoft on my bike, and I was caught in the wain—.'

These details, it appeared, did not interest the Greyfriars master. Another bark interrupted Arthur Augustus. 'Kindly keep to the point. D'Arcy.'

'Weally, Mr. Squelch—I mean Quelch—.'

'You say you were out all the afternoon. How then can you be sure that Bunter did not arrive at the school during your absence? Will you try to make me a sensible answer, D'Arcy, or will you not try to make me a sensible answer?'

Arthur Augustus breathed rather hard. But he realised that the Greyfriars master was anxious about a missing member of his form. He answered mildly.

'My friends were lookin' out for him, sir! They were goin' to have him to tea in the study if he came. But he never came.'

'Then Bunter has not been seen at your school today?'

'Wathah not, sir.'

'You have heard nothing from him?'

'Nothin' at all, sir.'

'You know nothing of him?'

'Sowwy, sir, no. But pewwaps I may be allowed to make a suggestion, sir, if he has not returned to school—.'

'What? what? What do you mean, D'Arcy?'

'Pewwaps he changed into the w'ong twain, sir, and awwived somewhah else,' suggested Arthur Augustus. 'I have done such things myself, sir, I wemembah once gettin' into the w'ong twain at the w'ong station, sir, and it was an expwess, and instead of awwivin' at Bwighton I awwived at Cwewe—.'

'You are a stupid boy, D'Arcy.'

'Weally, sir—.'

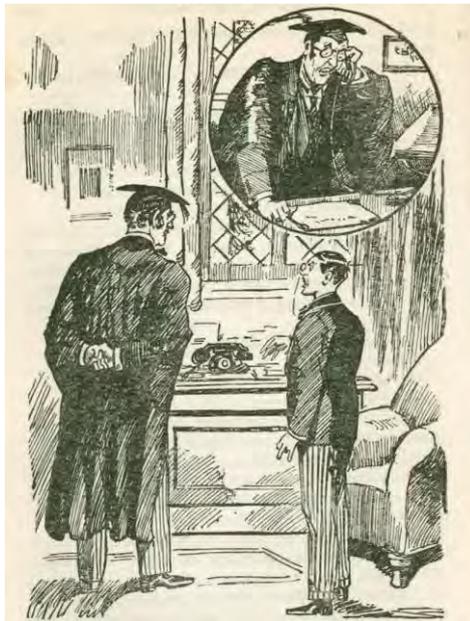
'A very stupid boy—.'

'Bai Jove!'

'That is all!' snapped the voice from the other end. Mr. Quelch, at Greyfriars, had apparently had enough of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, at S1, Jim's. The feeling was reciprocal. Arthur Augustus had certainly had enough of Mr. Quelch. He handed the receiver back to Mr. Railton, and retired from the telephone.

'You may go, D'Arcy,' said Mr. Railton, suppressing a smile: and Arthur Augustus left the study. The house-master spoke into the telephone again.

'I am sorry, Mr. Quelch, that we can give you no information at this end. I hope sincerely that no mischance has happened to the boy Bunter. If there is anything further I can do—.'



'THAT IS ALL!' SNAPPED THE VOICE FROM THE OTHER END

'Thank you, sir: nothing.'

'Goodnight, Mr. Quelch.'

'Goodnight, Mr. Railton.'

And they rang off.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy returned to Study No. 6, in the Fourth. Tom Merry had gone: but he found Blake and Herries and Digby there, with smiling faces. They were feeling at ease about Saturday now.

'What did Railton want?' asked Blake.

'Oh, that chap Buntah,' answered Arthur Augustus. 'It seems that he started to come heah aftah all, and got into the w'ong twain or somethin', and hasn't turned up at Gweyfwiahs yet. As a mattah of fact, he is not vewy bwight,—just the sort of chap to get into a w'ong twain and awwive anywhah. Now, you fellows, about next Satahday—is it settled?'

'Quite!' said Blake. 'It's settled, isn't it, you chaps?'

'Quite!' agreed Herries and Dig.

Which satisfied the Honourable Arthur Augustus D'Arcy—for the present, at least!

WHERE IS BUNTER?

'WHERE on earth is Bunter?'

'The wherefulness is terrific.'

'He never came back last night—.'

'And he isn't here today—.'

'What's happened to him?'

'Goodness knows.'

'Poor old Bunter! Something must have!'

A good many fellows remarked 'Poor old Bunter'. The possibility that 'something' had happened to the fat Owl made quite a lot of difference. What could have happened was a deep mystery: but it seemed clear that something must have. In such circumstances, fellows were disposed to forget the little faults of the Owl of the Remove—though their name was Legion. Even Lord Mauleverer no longer desired to kick him for walking off in his lordship's best clothes and his lordship's Sunday topper. Mauly had been rather concerned about those clothes—but now he was only concerned about their fat inhabitant. Smithy, who had missed toffee from his study the previous day, and looked for Bunter to boot him, was really glad that Bunter had been out of reach of his boot—in the circumstances. He would have been quite sorry to remember that he had booted him just before he disappeared!

And he had undoubtedly disappeared.

That he had started for the station, to go over to St. Jim's, on Wednesday afternoon, was assured. The Famous Five had seen him start—a dozen other fellows had seen him start: Gosling, at his lodge, had seen him start: Lord Mauleverer had picked up his hat for him as he started. It looked as if he must have disappeared somewhere along the railway: for if he had not gone by train, why had he not returned?

But Mr. Quelch, on the telephone to the station-master at Courtfield, could not get any news of any porter or other person who had noticed him at the station. Billy Bunter was, really, a person who, once seen, was to be remembered. But nobody at the railway station seemed to remember having seen him on Wednesday. Yet if he had not taken his train, it seemed that he must have remained somewhere between Greyfriars and Courtfield—which was hardly imaginable.

Everyone at Greyfriars was interested, and more or less concerned. Billy Bunter, the most infinitely unimportant member of a junior form, was the subject of discussion all over the school. His name was on every lip. Great men like Wingate and Gwynne of the Sixth discussed his strange disappearance. Coker of the Fifth discussed it with Potter and Greene of that form. Hobson and Co. of the Shell, Temple Dabney and Co. of the Fourth Form, all discussed it, and wondered and surmised. Even fags like Tubb of the Third and Nugent minor of the Second asked one another where on earth that fat swob, Bunter, could have got to. Sammy Bunter, of the Second Form, was questioned by Mr. Quelch, on the chance that he might know something of his major's mysterious movements. But Sammy of the Second knew nothing: he was as mystified as any other fellow at Greyfriars. It was rumoured that Quelch had even phoned Cliff House School, on the chance that Bessie Bunter, of the Fourth Form at that establishment, might know something. But Bessie knew no more than Sammy.

Neither was there any information to be elicited from the old folks at home. Quelch, naturally, was extremely unwilling to apprise Mr. Bunter that his son was missing from Greyfriars, his whereabouts unknown. But there was no choice in the matter: Mr. Bunter

had to know: besides, there was a remote chance that Bunter, for some reason known only to himself, had gone home on Wednesday. It would have been surprising: but not so surprising as his disappearing into space.

But nothing was known at Bunter Villa.

Mr. Bunter was surprised and perturbed by what he heard. But he had no news of his hopeful son. William had not been home. Mr. Bunter knew no more of his movements than Mr. Quelch.

That morning the Remove were not "up" to Quelch as usual. They had extra hours with Monsieur Charpentier and Mr. Lascelles: Quelch was otherwise occupied: chiefly on the telephone, or in consultations with the Head. Dr. Locke was deeply disturbed by the strange disappearance of a member of a Greyfriars form. He had apprised Inspector Grimes, at Courtfield, of the mysterious vanishing of W. G. Bunter, and Mr. Grimes had undertaken to make inquiries into that mystery. Those inquiries, however, did not seem to have led anywhere in particular, for as the day wore on, there was still no news of Bunter. At dinner, no fat face adorned by a big pair of spectacles was visible at the Remove table. Bunter's place was vacant.

'Poor old Bunter!' murmured Bob Cherry, when the juniors sat down to tiffin. It was sad about Bunter: and it seemed sadder, at a meal-time: the thought of Bunter missing a meal was quite pathetic. 'Steak and kidney pie, too—Bunter would have enjoyed this!'

'The enjoyfulness would have been terrific!' sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Enough to go round, without Bunter here!' suggested Skinner. The next moment he yelped, as Bob hacked him under the table. It was certainly no time for Harold Skinner's little jokes.

It had never occurred to Harry Wharton and Co. before, that they would miss Billy Bunter's fat face if it was not to be seen. But undoubtedly they did miss it now, now that it seemed that 'something' must have happened to Bunter. Yet what could have happened? Inquiries had been exhaustive, and their result was known to all—that is, that there was no result. Bunter had started for St. Jim's. That was certain. He had not arrived at St. Jim's. That was certain also. There had been no railway accident of any kind: that too was assured. Bunter, as D'Arcy had so brightly suggested to Mr. Quelch on the phone, might have wandered into the wrong train, and arrived at a wrong destination: but that, of course, could not account for so prolonged an absence. If he had arrived at Land's End, or Northumberland, or the Kyles of Bute, something would have been heard of him by this time. And nothing was heard—nothing could even be surmised.

Where was Billy Bunter?

Had he—as some fellows began to suspect, as the day wore on, and there was no news of Bunter, and none of any imaginable accident that could have happened to him—had he run away from school?

Was that it?

Really, it began to look like it. Was even Billy Bunter ass enough to do anything of the kind? Vernon-Smith pointed out, in the Rag, that Bunter was ass enough for anything: and the other fellows could only nod assent to that. It was admitted that Bunter was ass enough for anything. Schoolboys had run away from school at times: such things had happened, though nobody, certainly, expected them to happen at Greyfriars. Was that, after all, the explanation of William George Bunter's mysterious disappearance?

If that was not the explanation, what was? Nobody could even surmise.

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob Cherry for the umpteenth time. 'Poor old fathead! If he's run away, I wouldn't like to be in his shoes when he's brought back to face up to Henry!'

'But has he?' said Harry Wharton, doubtfully.

'If he hasn't, where is he?' asked Smithy.

'Ask me another.'

'O where and O where can he be?' chanted Skinner. 'There's only one thing we know for certain about where Bunter is.'

'What's that, then?' asked Bob. 'It's somewhere where there's food.'

'Kick him!' said Johnny Bull.

For the second time Skinner repented of cracking jokes on a subject which all the rest of the form regarded as serious.

The Remove were up to Quelch again in the afternoon.

Quelch had, apparently done all the inquiring that was practicable, and had time for his form once more. His face was frowning and it was easy to see that he was worried: as was natural in the strange circumstances: though whether he suspected that Billy Bunter had deliberately 'walked out' on Greyfriars, or not, the juniors could not guess. He was not only worried, but considerably tart, as was also perhaps natural in the circumstances: and the Remove, easily reading the danger signals in his speaking countenance, were on their very best behaviour that afternoon. And they were very glad when the hour of dismissal came. When they came out of the form, there was still no news of the missing Owl. Whatever had, or had not, happened to Billy Bunter, he had disappeared: and he stayed disappeared. Not a whisper of his whereabouts had reached Greyfriars: and really it almost seemed that Billy Bunter, like Mercury in the *Aeneid*, had vanished into thin air!

QUITE A PUZZLE!

Buzzzzzzz!

Dr. Locke suppressed a sigh.

The telephone bell had been ringing often in the Headmaster's study that day. It was not a musical sound: but had it been as melodious as the music of the spheres, Dr. Locke would have had enough of it by this time. But there it was again—buzzzzzzz!

The Head was standing at his study window, looking out into the sunny quadrangle. Quite a number of fellows were visible in the quad: many of them standing in groups discussing some interesting topic—which the Head easily guessed. Three Fifth-form men passed at a distance—too far off for the Head to hear what they were saying, had not one of them been Horace Coker. But Coker's powerful voice was audible at quite considerable distances, and his words floated in at the study window.

'Cleared off, of course! What else? That Remove tick has just walked out on his beak! Plain as anything.

Coker's companions. Potter and Greene, made some remark, in tones less resembling Stentor's, which the Head did not hear. Coker resumed:

'Rot! How could anything have happened to him without news coming in? Just walked off. The truth is, they're not whopped enough in the Remove. If their beak whopped them a little more—.'

Coker and Co. passed on, and the remainder of Horace Coker's valuable opinion was lost on his Headmaster. Dr. Locke's face was thoughtful. None of the innumerable rings at his telephone bell had brought any news of Bunter of the Remove. In twenty-four hours, Bunter had not been found or heard of—which was strange enough, if he wanted to be found or heard of. It looked more and more as if Bunter's absence was of his own volition. However, the telephone bell was ringing again, and the Head had a faint hope that, at long last, it might mean news of the missing junior. He turned from the window, and picked up the receiver.

'Dr. Locke speaking! Is that Inspector Grimes?'

A drawling voice, which seemed to travel through a nose for utterance, came back.

'Nope! It sure ain't! Not so's you'd notice it, mister.' Dr. Locke started. It was a strange voice to him, and the accent seemed transatlantic. Obviously it was not Inspector Grimes, or news of Bunter. Dr. Locke was in no mood for conversations with strangers: but he courteously inquired—what was wanted.

'I guess you're Headmaster of the Greyfriars dump!'

'I am Headmaster of Greyfriars School.'

'Then you're my mutton! You're Lord Mauleverer's schoolmaster, say?' The transatlantic caller seemed to want to have it quite clear.

'There is a Greyfriars boy of that name,' said Dr. Locke, puzzled. 'Will you kindly tell me who is speaking?'

'Sure! I guess you've heard of Marcus K. Hoot.'

'Marcus K. Hoot!' repeated Dr. Locke, puzzled. 'No, I do not think I know the name. It seems somewhat familiar, but I cannot recall at the moment where I have heard it. Please state your business with me, Mr. Hoot.'

'Pronto,' answered Mr. Hoot. 'I guess it's about that nobleman guy, Lord Mauleverer. You want him?'

'I do not follow—.'

'Wake snakes! Ain't you missed him yet?' exclaimed the nasal voice at the other end of the telephone-wire, in tones of astonishment.

'Missed him!' stuttered Dr. Locke.

'Yup! Don't you count your boys when they go to their little bunks O' nights? You got such a crowd of lords around you that you don't miss one of them?'

'I fail to understand you! Lord Mauleverer is not missing—.'

'Sez you!'

'Bless my' soul! I remember your name now!' exclaimed the Head. 'I recall that a member of my staff mentioned it to me, a few days ago, in connection with Lord Mauleverer. Are you the—the person who had the unparalleled impertinence to visit this school, and make inquiries after Lord Mauleverer, one day last week?'

'You said it!'

'And you have the audacity to speak to me on the telephone!' exclaimed Dr. Locke, indignantly. 'Sir, I desire to hear nothing from you! I refuse to listen to a word from you!' With that Dr. Locke jammed the receiver back on the hooks. Marcus K. Hoot was cut off quite suddenly.

With a heightened colour, Dr. Locke stepped back to the window. Whether the man whom Fisher T. Fish had recognised as a notorious gangster and kidnapper really had designs on Lord Mauleverer, the Head could not know, and probably he doubted it. He had agreed with Mr. Quelch that Mauleverer should remain within the school gates for the present as a precautionary measure, but that was all. He had never expected to hear of Mr. Hoot again—least of all on his telephone. Why the man had rung him up was a mystery—which he did not feel in the least inclined to elucidate. Most assuredly he did not want to hear a word from Mr. Hoot, on any subject whatsoever.

If Lord Mauleverer had been in peril from a kidnapper, the precautionary measures taken by his Headmaster and form-master had certainly kept him out of it: for at that moment, he was sauntering elegantly in the quadrangle, under his Headmaster's eyes from the study window. Dr. Locke's eyes fixed on him, and he heard him call to a group of juniors.

'Any news of Bunter yet, you men?'

'Not a whisper!' called back Bob Cherry.

Bzzzzzzzz.

It was the telephone bell again. Dr. Locke compressed his lips, as he turned from the window once more. If it was that man again—. However, he had to take the call: it might be Inspector Grimes this time, with news of Bunter.

He lifted the receiver from the hooks.

'Say, we was cut off sudden, mister!' came the nasal voice he now knew. 'You Dr. Locke?' 'Is that Mr. Hoot?' asked Dr. Locke, breathing hard.

'Sure thing! Now I guess we got to talk business, mister—.'

'I have said that I refuse to listen to a single word from you, Mr. Hoot. I regard you with repugnance and contempt as a disreputable character!' exclaimed the Headmaster of Greyfriars, hotly.

'Aw, now ain't that jest too bad!' said Mr. Hoot.

'I cannot imagine why you persist in ringing my telephone,' continued the Head. 'Kindly desist from doing so.'

The telephone rocked, as the Head jammed the receiver back again. He stood with a flushed face. Seldom was the Headmaster of Greyfriars angry: but he was angry now. He found the persistent Mr. Hoot very annoying. Billy Bunter's absence was worry enough for one day, without incessant telephone calls from such a lawless and disreputable person as Mr. Hoot. However, he hoped that he was done with that persistent person now.

That hope was unfounded.

Buzzzzz!

Dr. Locke breathed hard, and he breathed deep. He was tempted to leave the receiver on, and let the instrument buzz itself out. But it might, after all, be Inspector Grimes, or news of Bunter from some other quarter: or some harmless and necessary parent of a Greyfriars boy: really, he could not leave the telephone unheeded. But his feelings were deep, as he picked up the receiver for the third time.

'Who is speaking?' he breathed.

'Little me. Mister—.'

'Is that Mr. Hoot again?' gasped the Head.

'You said it. I'll say the telephones in this here country want some sort of first-aid,—it don't seem easy to long-distance a guy, it sure don't! We been cut off twice—:

The Head was about to jam the receiver back: but he paused. Evidently, it was useless to cut off an interlocutor who lost no time in ringing up again.

'Listen to me. Mr. Hoot—!' said Dr. Locke, in a deep voice.

'Sure!'

'I cannot imagine what is the motive of this—this persecution,' said the Head. 'But I desire to hear nothing from you. Will you have the kindness to cease ringing my telephone?'

'Feller, we got to talk business,' replied Mr. Hoot. 'I guess I'd drop in for a chat, nice and friendly over a cigar, but I sure do reckon that you'd have cops around, which wouldn't be good for my health. Come down to brass-tacks, mister. You want that lord back?'

'Wha-a-at?'

'Don't I speak plain?' asked Mr. Hoot, with a touch of impatience. 'Me, I'm Marcus Knickerbocker Hoot, and I'm doing business. I got your lord parked safe and sound where all the cops in the British Islands couldn't dig him up. That noble guy is sure as safe as if he'd dropped into a hole and shut it down after him. And don't you figure that your cops can trace him by this long-distance call—I'm telling you, confidential, that I'm talking from a spot more'n a hundred miles from that noble lord's parking-place. You sure won't see that noble guy again till he's paid for, fair and square.'

Dr. Locke felt almost as if his scholarly head was turning round, as he listened to this. Had not his own eyes fallen on Lord Mauleverer, in the quad outside his study window, he might have feared that that noble youth had fallen into the hands of the kidnapper. But that, obviously, could not be the case, since Lord Mauleverer was, at that very moment, walking in the Greyfriars quadrangle. So he failed to make head or tail of Mr. Hoot's communication. He just stood gazing at the telephone.

'Say, you get me?' went on Mr. Hoot from his long distance. 'I guess that noble lord's folks want him back, what? Ain't any of them been around yet asking about that noble lord? Search me! I'll mention that you'd better put them wise to it that Marcus K. Hoot is entertaining that noble lord at his own dump, and that he will never be seen again under ten thousand of your British pounds: and not a continental cent less. Get me?'

'Bless my soul!' said the Head, faintly.

'I'm giving you the office.' said Mr. Hoot. 'I've sure given you time to miss him, and get wise to it that you can't find him. Now I'm ready to talk turkey. The figure's ten thousand of what you call Pounds in this country: and as soon as that noble lord's folks agree, I'll put you wise how to pay over the dough, and after it's paid, you get that noble lord back safe and sound, this side up with care. If it ain't paid, I guess there's going to be a vacancy in the British peerage. Chew it over with that noble lord's folks, Mister Schoolmaster: and wait for another ring from me tomorrow. That's the whole heap!'

This time it was Mr. Hoot who cut off.

Dr. Locke was left with the receiver in his hand, gazing at the telephone like a man in a dream. It was a full minute, before he stirred, so utterly was he astonished. Then, at last, he hung up, and stepped to the window, and looked out.

If what Marcus K. Hoot had said over the wires meant anything, it meant that he had Lord Mauleverer kidnapped in his hands, and was demanding ransom for Lord Mauleverer's release. And the Head, looking from his window, beheld Lord Mauleverer in the quadrangle, chatting with Harry Wharton and Co. in a group. It was altogether too puzzling for the Head to make out, and he gave it up.

SPOT OF VENTRILOQUISM

BILLY BUNTER sat in the armchair, in his room at the lonely bungalow, and blinked through his big spectacles at the doorway on the hall.

There was a thoughtful and worried wrinkle in Bunter's fat brow.

In the hall, opposite the doorway, was the rocker in which the little bull-necked man spent a great deal of time, smoking cigarettes. But the rocker was vacant now. Andy 'Pike was not on view.'

It was evening. Billy Bunter, whom the kidnappers so unaccountably supposed to be a lord, had been more than twenty-four hours in his new quarters.

In some respects, Bunter was not dissatisfied.

The food was good and ample. That, with Bunter, was the primary consideration at all times. It was Bunter's view, as a rule, that if the food was all right, everything was all right. And the food certainly was all right.

He had slept quite comfortably in a comfortable bed, in the corner of the room he now inhabited. There was no rising-bell in the morning, and he had stayed as long as he liked in bed: which was all to the good, from the point of view of a lazy fat Owl. He had not turned out till after nine o'clock: and probably would not have turned out then, had not Andy appeared with a tray, well-laden and appetizing. Meals, during the day, had been ample: and no doubt supper, to come, was going to be equally enjoyable: the kidnappers were not stinting that supposed member of the British peerage.

And there were no lessons that day!—no Quelch, barking at a fellow for skewing in con. There was no prep that evening. And there was going to be no rising-bell next day!

All these things were good,—distinctly good. If that had been all, Billy Bunter would have found little of which to complain, in the life of a kidnapped nobleman!

But—! There was a 'but', and a large one!

He was kidnapped, and held to ransom. For some mysterious reason, the kidnappers believed that they had got hold of a lord: but he was in fact a mere commoner: and so far from being wealthy, as they evidently supposed, the exact reverse was the case.

The demand for ransom would, of course, go to the old folks at home. He could picture the expression on the face of Mr. William Samuel Bunter, stockbroker, of Bunter Villa, Surrey, if a demand for a large sum of money reached him. Remove fellows, at Greyfriars, often heard magnificent accounts of Bunter Court—but the fat Owl was sadly aware that Mr. Bunter, so far from being able to command a large sum of money, often found considerable difficulties in raising a small sum.

Those kidnappers were going to be disappointed about that ransom! On that point there was no doubt whatever.

And what was going to happen to Bunter then? What did gangsters in the United States do with their prisoners, when no ransom was forthcoming? Bunter did not know: but he could not help thinking that it would be something very unpleasant.

'Beasts!' murmured Bunter, as he reflected on it.

He had to get out of this somehow!

That was borne in upon his fat mind. He was in lawless hands, and he had to get out of them—if he could!

Food, good and ample as it was, the absence of lessons, the silence of the rising-bell, no bark from Quelch—all these things were good: nevertheless, Billy Bunter would have given all the postal orders he had ever expected, just to be safe back at Greyfriars.

But there seemed no escape.

Very often an eye was on him. Andy's headquarters seemed to be the hall of the bungalow, on which his doorway opened. When Andy was in the kitchen, he kept the kitchen door wide open, which came to much the same thing. At night he had slept in a camp-bed just outside Bunter's room, cutting off any attempt at a nocturnal venture. Bunter wondered whether the beast never went out. So far, the beast had shown no sign of doing so. Now, however, he was out of sight, and had been out of sight for some time. Bunter could not see him in the hall, or hear him in the kitchen. Possibly he was in the adjoining garage: or perhaps outside the building, looking for the return of his confederate. The other man, Hoot, seemed to be absent: Bunter had seen nothing of him since the previous night. If Bunter had a chance of getting away, it was evidently while only one of the rascals was on the spot. And as he sat in the armchair, blinking into the hall, he wondered whether this was his chance.

But he hesitated long.

Andy might appear at any moment. True, Andy was a little man, and did not look much of an athlete: a fellow like Bob Cherry, or the Bounder, could probably have knocked him out in single combat. But Billy Bunter couldn't. Moreover, gangsters were gangsters: very likely the beast had some weapon about him—a loaded stick, like the other beast, or perhaps—Bunter shuddered—perhaps even a 'gun'. From many visits to the films, gangsters and guns were closely associated in Billy Bunter's fat mind. Bunter was not of the stuff of which heroes are made: and he had not the remotest idea of trying conclusions with Andy Pike in combat. But if the beast was off his guard for once—

No doubt he had work to do in the garage sometimes.

If he was there, and if he was busy—

Billy Bunter rose from the armchair at last.

His fat heart beat fast. But he was going to try it on!

Once outside that bungalow, he could take to his heels and hope to dodge pursuit. He could thumb the first car he saw on the road and get a lift. If only he had a chance of getting out—!

On tiptoe, he stepped out into the hall. Two other rooms opened from the rather large hall of the bungalow: one was the kitchen, the other doubtless a bedroom. Both doors were closed, and no sound came from either. Andy was not there. Another door was on the garage: and this was wide open. From that direction came a sound or two.

Andy was there!

But he was not in sight of the open doorway. Bunter was not under observation.

His heart thumped! But this was a chance, and he was going to make the most of it.

Silently he crept to the front door, which opened directly from the lounge-hall into a porch.

There he made the uncheering discovery that the door was locked and the key taken away. 'Beast!' breathed Bunter.

Keeping his eyes and his spectacles on the open doorway which gave on the garage, he circled cautiously round the hall, and reached the kitchen door. Escape by the kitchen window was his idea.

'Beast!' he breathed, again. The kitchen door too was locked.

He had little hope, after that, of finding the bedroom door unlocked. However, he tried it.

It was locked. 'Beast!' moaned Bunter, inaudibly.

There was a sound from the garage. It sounded like someone moving petrol cans. Billy Bunter stopped, dead, and listened, with beating heart. If the beast was coming back to the hall—

But the beast did not appear, and he breathed again. Next he approached the hall-window. But that was a forlorn hope. Shutters were locked over it.

Feeling rather like a fat rabbit in a trap, Billy Bunter stood blinking round him through his big spectacles, a dismayed and dolorous Owl.

But there was no further sound from the garage, and he wondered whether Andy might have stepped out. If so, possibly there lay the way of escape. On tiptoe he approached the doorway, listening with both his fat ears. Still there was no sound, and he ventured, at least, to peep round the corner of the doorway, blinking into the garage through his big spectacles.

The double-doors stood wide open, on the garage drive.

Sunlight streamed in: a rainy day had been followed by bright summer weather. Had Andy, tempted by that fine sunny weather, gone out for a walk—leaving the garage doors wide open behind him?

It did not seem probable. Still, he was not in sight: he was not in the garage at all. He had certainly stepped out into the open, whether he had gone far or not. Then suddenly Bunter had a glimpse of him, passing in the sunlight. He was strolling to and fro in front of the garage, smoking a cigarette.

The fat Owl could have groaned, if he could have ventured to make a sound.

The double-doors stood invitingly open: but there was no escape that way. Andy was outside them! He was far too wary a kidnapper to dream of leaving the way open for a prisoner's escape.

He disappeared: but Bunter could hear faint sounds of footsteps on gravel. He was still there.

Bunter blinked round the garage. Was there a chance of hiding in some corner, and dodging out when Andy came in—if only the unspeakable beast left those double-doors open and went into the bungalow? There was a bench at the back of the garage with a stack of petrol cans on it, and another stack, doubtless empty, under it. If he dodged behind that bench, he would be out of sight, and if—if—if—

But the hapless Owl shook a fat head.

Andy, when he came in, would first of all close and secure those double-doors, if he was going into the bungalow. And he showed no sign whatever of intending to come in. As likely as not, he was expecting the return of his associate, and was watching the road for him, and had the double-doors open ready for the car.

Anyhow, there he remained, lounging and loitering, and smoking cigarettes, in front of the garage, his shadow occasionally falling across the sunlight.

'Beast!' mumbled Bunter.

Billy Bunter did not often feel the call of the open spaces. But now he did, very strongly. That wide-open doorway, and the red glare of the setting sun, drew him like a magnet. If only that beast would go—!

But the beast, evidently, was not going: and there was nothing for Billy Bunter to do, but to return defeated to his armchair.

But was there not?

A sudden gleam came into the little round eyes behind the big round spectacles. Billy Bunter remembered that he was a ventriloquist. He couldn't punch Andy out of the way. But could he trick him out of the way?

There was at least a chance that he could.

The fat ventriloquist could imitate any voice of a distinctive kind: and there was no doubt that the nasal drawl of Marcus K. Hoot was distinctive. Marcus was away in the car:

Andy, as Bunter could guess, was watching for him: but his voice was at the disposal of the Greyfriars ventriloquist.

For a long, long minute the fat Owl pondered, before he ventured to make the venture. But he made up his fat mind to it.

He blinked across at the garage doorway: and stood quite still as a shadow passed in the sunlight. It passed and disappeared. Then the fat junior, with thumping heart crept into the garage, and crept behind the bench at the back, where he was hidden from view by the array of petrol cans.

He gave a little fat cough, his preliminary to ventriloquial stunts. Peering through a narrow space among the cans on the bench, he saw Andy's shadow reappear at the sunlit doorway. 'Say, Andy, come right here.'

If that was not the voice of Marcus K. Hoot it was its twin.

Certainly Andy Pike recognized it, or believed that he did. Bunter heard him utter an exclamation of astonishment, as he hurried in at the double-doors.

'That you, Marcus?' he called out, blankly. 'Say, how'd you get here, and me watching the road for you?' He came tramping in.

'I guess I hit the back of this dump, and left the auto.' If Marcus K. Hoot's voice did not come from the interior of the bungalow, it certainly seemed to do so.

'But what's blown up?' gasped Andy, as he came running across. 'You been hitting trouble, Marcus?'

'Surest thing you know! Make it snappy, you geck—we got to get that noble lord away from this dump, pronto.'

'Say whadyer know!' gasped Andy.

He ran through the doorway into the bungalow hall, in a state of great astonishment and alarm. Bunter, watching through the petrol cans, could hardly believe in his good luck.

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

Andy disappeared into the bungalow, in the full belief that his confederate was there. How long it would take him to discover that Marcus K. Hoot's voice had been there without its owner, and that the prisoner's room was vacant, Bunter did not know. Neither did he wait to learn. He jumped out from behind the bench, and ran for the double-doors.

'Say, Marcus, where you got?' he heard Andy's voice from the bungalow, as he sped.

He heard no more. He fairly hurtled out of the garage doorway, hurtled across the garden to the gate, hurtled out of it, and flew down the road. An amazed Andy was left to look for the owner of the voice he had heard, what time Billy Bunter puffed and blew, and blew and puffed, going all out for the open spaces.

OUT OF THE FRYING PAN——!

'OH, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He gasped. In fact, he gurgled. He was out of breath.

Wind, never in very good supply with the fat Owl, failed him.

For a hundred yards or so, from the gate of the lonely bungalow, Bunter had covered the ground at a pace which would have done him credit on the cinder-path. The knowledge that Andy Pike must quickly discover that Mr. Hoot was not there at all, and that the prisoner was gone, spurred him on. Immediate pursuit would be on his track,—every second, he dreaded to hear the tramp of feet behind him. But that burst of speed tested the fat junior to the limit. He gasped, he gurgled, and he tottered, and he slowed down. He turned a fat head, and blinked back, as he gasped and gurgled. He had raced away down the lane: a narrow lane, with a hedge on one side and a ditch on the other, winding like many leafy Sussex lanes. Across the hedges and fields he could glimpse the red roof of the bungalow, but the winding of the lane hid the garden gate. No doubt, if Andy had come out of the building, it also hid Bunter from his view. At all events, he was not in sight, chasing in pursuit as the fat Owl dreaded.

'Urrrrggh!' gurgled Bunter. 'Oh, crikey! Oooogh!' He gasped and panted, and panted and gasped, and rolled on again.

But it was borne in upon his fat mind that he could never out-pace Andy, if that bull-necked young man followed on. Andy, perhaps, would not know whether he had run up or down the lane. But if he followed in the right direction, his footsteps would soon be pounding in the rear. Peril seemed to sharpen Billy Bunter's fat wits. Leaving the lane he plunged through a gap in the hedge, forcing his way through hawthorns, heedless even of the thorns, and moved along behind the hedge. There he halted to pump in breath. He really had to halt, for there was not a run left in his fat little legs. Behind the hedge, he mopped a streaming brow. He gasped and gasped: but he made a frantic effort to still his gasping, as he heard the sound of pounding feet in the lane.

Andy was coming!

The thick hedge hid Bunter. There was not a glimpse of his fat form from the lane. 'Unless Andy heard him, Andy was likely to pass on, without guessing that he was passing his~quarry.

Bunter hardly breathed.

The rapid footsteps drew nearer, and nearer—and passed. They died away further on, in the direction of the distant high road.

'Oh, scissors!' gasped Bunter.

Andy had taken the right direction in pursuit. Had the fat Owl remained in the lane, Andy would have had him. But Andy was speeding on, leaving the escaped prisoner behind him. It was an immense relief to Bunter.

But he did not stir from his cover.

It was fairly certain that Andy would discover, ere long, that the 'noble lord' was not ahead of him. And he would try back. Bunter's best guess was to remain where he was, out of sight, and pump in a much-needed supply of breath.

In a few minutes, there were running footsteps in the lane again, approaching from the direction of the high road. Andy was coming back.

Again the fat Owl strove to still his breathing. Andy was running, but the footsteps slowed down, and stopped. An awful dread seized Bunter that the gangster guessed where he was.

But that really was impossible, for there was nothing to indicate that Bunter was behind the hedge. Possibly Andy was getting short of breath, after that spot of rapid exercise.

'Aw, carry me home to die!' Bunter heard a voice from the lane. 'Search me! I guess that fat geck never got as far as the high road. With me burning the wind on his tail! Nope! He sure did not! I guess he hit the horizon the other way, dog-gone him, and then some.'

Bunter heard a sound of panting, following those remarks. He listened for Andy to get into motion again, fervently hoping that the gangster would 'hit the horizon' in the wrong direction, and leave the way clear for him to the high road, which Andy had inadvertently revealed lay ahead.

'Whadyer know!' came Andy's panting voice again. 'Mebbe he's tuck to the fields—mebbe parked himself behind a hedge—.' Bunter trembled. 'How'd I know? I'll tell a man. I'm all flummoxed. I heerd Marcus toot—if I wasn't loco, I heerd Marcus toot. But he wasn't there—hide or hair of him! But that dog-goned nobleman lit out—he sure lit out—and it must have been when I skipped in to see Marcus—sure thing, and so he can't be fur off. But which way did that dog-goned nobleman skip? Search me!'

Andy, evidently, was in a state of bewilderment. Marcus K. Hoot's voice in the bungalow, when Marcus was not there, was undoubtedly enough to bewilder Andy, and make him wonder whether he was dreaming or 'loco'. And really, now that the 'noble lord' had taken cover behind a hedge, Andy had little chance of running him down: he might have fled in almost any direction. It was a problem for Andy Pike.

However, having recovered his breath, the gangster started again, keeping on back to the bungalow. Apparently he was going to pursue in the other direction—up the lane instead of down.

His footsteps died away.

Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

Andy was gone.

Not till he was quite, quite sure that Andy was gone, did the fat Owl venture to stir. Then, at length, he projected a fat head through the hawthorns, and blinked up and down the lane.

It was quite deserted. The red roof of the bungalow could be seen in the distance, but there was no sign of Andy. Bunter grinned breathlessly. If Andy was going up the lane, as doubtless he was, the more speed he put on, the further and further it took him from Bunter. Anyhow there was no sign or sound of him, and Billy Bunter ventured, at last, to emerge into the lane again.

He resumed his way down the lane, at a trot.

It was not a rapid trot. Still, it covered the ground, and with Andy, trotting in the opposite direction, the space between them widened more and more. Bunter knew now that a high road lay ahead, at some distance: and he hoped, at least, that the high road would be more populated than that solitary lane. Where he was, except that he was somewhere in Great Britain, Bunter did not know—but he knew that a high road must lead somewhere, and had no doubt that there would be cars passing along it. And no motorist could fail to stop when a hatless, excited, terrified schoolboy yelled to him for help.

Bunter trotted on, with a glance every now and then over a fat shoulder. Andy might change his mind and come charging back, if he saw nothing of the 'noble lord' in the other direction. Bunter was in haste to get out of that lonely lane, where the only building of any kind seemed to be that lonely bungalow, the headquarters of the kidnappers. No doubt they had selected it especially for its lonely location, in the midst of heath and pasture-land. Bunter's pace was far from swift: but he extracted all the speed he could from his fat little legs. And at length he glimpsed the high road ahead of him, and his eyes beamed behind his spectacles as he saw a car flash past the end of the lane.

That car vanished in a second: but there would be others. The fat junior toiled on, panting and perspiring, and at length emerged into the open high road.

There he halted, quite spent, and gurgling for breath.

But he was feeling reassured now.

There was no sign of Andy in the rear. And even if Andy showed up, in the distance behind, he would have time to thumb the next passing car. At long, long last, 'Lord' Bunter seemed on the way out of his troubles.

And he had not long to wait for a car.

Only a few minutes had elapsed, when a car came in sight, at a whizzing speed. As if for Bunter's special behoof, it slowed down as it approached the opening of the lane.

The fat junior rushed into the road, and waved frantically, yelling at the top of his voice.

'Stop! Help! Stop! Help! Help! Stop!'

He had a glimpse of a driver in a bowler hat. There was a sudden jamming of brakes. The car almost rocketed to a stop, only a couple of yards from the yelling Owl.

'I say, help! I say, help, help!' yelled Bunter.

'Search me!' ejaculated the bowler-hatted driver.

He jumped down.

Billy Bunter's eyes popped at him. He knew that lean, long-legged figure, and the lean face and hawk eyes under the clamped-down bowler hat. His fat brain fairly swam. He made one wild jump to escape: only to be swung back by the grasp of a lean hand on a fat shoulder.

'Carry me home to die!' exclaimed Marcus K. Hoot. 'I'll sure talk to that geck Andy, letting that noble lord skip this-a-way. Great jumping John James Brown! Hop into that auto, my lord.'

Mr. Hoot did not wait for Bunter to hop into the auto.

He pitched him in. in a squeaking heap. Billy Bunter huddled there, squeaking and gasping, while Mr. Hoot resumed his seat, turned the car into the lane, and shot away for the lonely bungalow.

CHAPTER 20

WHEN ROGUES FALL OUT

'ANDY!' roared Mr. Hoot.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

'Andy! You geck! You gink!' Marcus K. Hoot's voice rang and echoed through the lonely bungalow. 'You locoed bonehead. Andy! Show up, you dog-goned gump!'

Mr. Hoot was a little excited.

The car had come up to the bungalow with a rush.

Marcus had twirled it in at the gateway, and driven it into the garage—where the double-doors stood wide open. Then he shouted for Andy. Billy Bunter, sprawling in the car, could have told him that Andy was hitting the open spaces in a vain pursuit of an elusive Owl. Mr. Hoot no doubt expected to find him in the bungalow, as he was not outside or in the garage. Marcus was both angry and perplexed.

'Andy! Where you parking yourself, you dumb gink? You let that guy slip through your fingers, you geck! I'm telling you to show up.'

No Andy showed up, however.

'Search me!' ejaculated Mr. Hoot, in great exasperation. 'I'll sure talk to that geck! I'll sure talk to him a few! Moseying off and leaving doors open for that noble lord to beat it! Search me!'

He jerked open the door of the car.

'Here, you! Hop out of that, pronto,' he rapped.

'I—I—I say—!' gasped Bunter.

'Did I say hop out?' snorted Mr. Hoot. And evidently not feeling disposed to wait while the fat junior moved to slow motion, he grasped Bunter's collar, and hooked him out of the car like a fat winkle from a shell.

'Oooogh!' gasped Bunter, as he sagged in that lean but muscular grasp. 'I—I say, groogh—you're chik—chik—choking me—oooogh!'

Ruthlessly disregarding that protest, Mr. Hoot marched Bunter through the doorway from the garage into the bungalow. The fat Owl gurgled and wriggled as he went.

In the bungalow hall, Marcus glared round, in search of Andy. Failing to see Andy, he marched Bunter into his room, and with a swing of his lean arm, landed him in the armchair, with a crash. Mr. Hoot did not seem to be in a good temper. That unexpected and alarming condition of affairs at his headquarters had 'got his goat'.

'Squat there!' snapped Mr. Hoot.

'Urrrrrggh!'

'I guess I sure don't hone to give a noble lord the rough stuff,' said Mr. Hoot, glaring at him, 'but you try this here game on again, my lord, and if I don't knock the sawdust out of you, you can call me a Chinaman! I sure will make you feel like you was something the cat left over—on the plate. Get me?'

'Urrrrrggh!' gurgled Bunter.

Leaving Bunter gurgling in the armchair, Marcus strode back into the hall, more and more puzzled and exasperated by Andy's inexplicable absence.

'Oh, lor!'

It was a crushing blow! From the fact that Andy had been watching for the car, he might have guessed that Marcus's return was expected at the bungalow any moment. But Marcus had materialised at a most unlucky moment for the escaping Owl. He had thumbed the first passing car—never dreaming that it might be Marcus's! But it was!

Marcus had had the narrowest possible escape of losing Lord Billy Bunter. But a miss was as good, or as bad, as a mile: and there was Bunter again, back in his old quarters, gasping in the armchair.

'Beast!' murmured Bunter. But he murmured it very low. Mr. Hoot did not look in a humour to be tolerant of fancy names.

Mr. Hoot was, in fact, almost stamping, in the hall. He had almost lost his prisoner, who was—in his belief at least—worth an enormous ransom to him. And Andy, apparently, had gone out and left the bungalow unguarded, with doors open, which was inexplicable. 'That dog-goned geck! That pie-faced, humpbacked gump! Where'd he be? This sure is the bee's knee! It's the rhinoceros's side-whiskers! Where's that geck? Where's that gink? Where's that gump?'

Mr. Hoot addressed these questions to space. Space gave no answer, save the echo of his angry voice.

But there was a sudden sound of hurrying footsteps and panting breath. It was Andy at last. He came breathlessly into the hall by the door from the garage.

'Say, you here, Marcus!' he panted. 'You got the auto in the garage now. Say, what game you been playing? You sure let that noble guy skip with your fooling around.'

'You pesky, pie-faced gink!' roared Mr. Hoot. 'That noble guy sure did skip, and we'd never have seen a grease-spot of him agin, if I hadn't horned in jest in time to pick him up on the road.'

'You got him?' gasped Andy. 'I sure got him.'

'Say, that's fine!' gasped Andy. 'I been burning the wind after that guy.'

'What in thunder you let him skip for?' roared Mr. Hoot.

'I sure did not!' roared back Andy. 'It was you let him skip, Marcus, with your fooling around. I guess he must have got as fur as the garage, when you called me into this dump, and lit out when my back was turned—.'

'I called you into this dump!' repeated Mr. Hoot.

'You sure did. How'd I know he was skipping, when you was here, and him right under your eye—.'

'You gone loco?' gasped Mr. Hoot. 'Ain't I jest got back, after ninety miles in the auto to long-distance that schoolmaster guy at the noble lord's school?'

'Aw, can it!' snapped Andy. 'I'm telling you you called me—you figure that I don't know your toot? Less'n half an hour ago, and me watching the road for you, and you called me into this dump—.'

'You been imbibing!' said Marcus. 'You been hitting the hooch, Andy Pike. I'm telling you I've jest got back, after ninety miles in the auto, and found the dump wide open—.'

'You was here—.'

'I sure was not here, till I jest got back,' yelled Mr. Hoot. Andy Pike blinked at him, bewildered.

'If you wasn't here, who called me?' he demanded. 'I sure was called in, and it was your voice, and you said—.'

'You been fancying things, you locoed gink. How'd I call you, when I was miles away on the road?' shrieked Mr. Hoot. 'I tell you I hit the corner of the lane jest in time to cinch that noble lord, and he sure flagged me for a lift, that noble lord did. You let him skip, and he was looking for an auto to make his get-away. And if it had been some other guy's auto, where'd he be now, and where'd we be? Answer me that, Andy Pike.'

'I sure don't get this,' said Andy. 'But you was here—.'

'I was not here!' raved Mr. Hoot.

'You called me in—!'

'Great jumping John James Brown!' gasped Mr. Hoot. 'You been hittin' the hooch and dreaming: that's what you've been doing, Andy Pike. And if you say jest once more that I called you, when I was forty miles away, I'll hand you such at sockdolager that will mebbe put your nose straight agin.'

'You sure did call me in—.'

'That cinches it!' said Mr. Hoot: and he made a rush at Andy: apparently at the end of his patience. The next moment the bull-necked young man was whirling in the grasp of his long-legged associate.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped. Billy Bunter, as he blinked into the hall at the whirling kidnapers, and listened to the sounds of strife, his eyes almost popping through his spectacles.

Crash!

Hoot was handing out what he called 'sockdolagers'.

Andy was struggling frantically. They bumped into the rocker, and sent it spinning, and stumbled over in a heap, still struggling and hitting.

'Say, let up, you locoed geck,' yelled Andy.

The exasperated Mr. Hoot did not 'let up'. He continued to hand out sockdolagers. Billy Bunter emerged from the armchair, his eyes and spectacles fixed on the struggling figures on the floor in the hall. If there was a chance of tiptoeing past while they were so busily engaged—!

He had reached the doorway, on tiptoe, when Mr. Hoot, perhaps thinking that Andy had had enough to go on with, released him, and rose panting. His hawk-eyes shot round to Bunter.

One glare from those hawk-eyes was enough for the Owl of Greyfriars. He turned to bolt back into his room. After him rushed Mr. Hoot, letting out a large foot.

'Yaroooh!' roared Bunter, as that fat foot landed on Lord Mauleverer's best trousers.

He fairly shot into the room, landing head first in the armchair. He roared frantically as he landed. Mr. Hoot, with a final glare, slammed the door of the room, leaving him to roar.

MAULY THINKS IT OUT

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!'

'Trickle in, Mauly.'

Lord Mauleverer 'trickled' into No. 1 Study in the Remove.

Five juniors, in that study, were looking very thoughtful: discussing what was now almost the sole topic at Greyfriars School: the inexplicable, unaccountable disappearance of William George Bunter.

For two whole days, a place in the Remove form-room had been vacant. No fat figure had rolled in the Remove passage. Nobody had missed tuck from his study.

Absence is said to make the heart grow fonder. Certainly the Remove fellows were more concerned about Billy Bunter now that he was absent, than they had ever been when he was present.

There was no clue.

All that was known was that Bunter had started for St. Jim's on Wednesday afternoon, and disappeared somewhere en route, as he had never arrived there. That, which had been known on Wednesday evening, was all that was known on Friday after class. It was just a mystery.

Inspector Grimes had the matter in hand: but he had had nothing to report so far. Mr. Bunter, had paid a visit to Greyfriars, but that had not contributed to the solution of the mystery. Something must have become of Bunter, but what, nobody knew. Unless he had run away from school, and was deliberately keeping out of sight, there really seemed no explanation of his strange vanishing. But had he?

'Poor old Bunter' Bob Cherry was saying, as Lord Mauleverer arrived. 'Where the dickens can he be, all this time?'

'The wherefulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'You fellows talkin' about Bunter?' asked Lord Mauleverer, as he trickled in. 'I've been thinkin' about it. It's doocid queer, isn't it, Bunter disappearing like this.'

'The queerfulness is—.'

'Terrific and preposterous!' said Bob Cherry. 'Can't make head or tail of it, Mauly. Bunter's ass enough to run away from school, just as he's ass enough for anything else. But—!'

'But—!' said Frank Nugent, shaking his head.

'But why?' asked Harry Wharton. 'Why should even Bunter play the goat like that? You think he's bolted, Mauly?'

'No!' Mauly shook his head. 'I've been thinkin' it over, and I don't think that's the answer.'

'He hasn't been home,' said Johnny Bull. 'His people haven't heard anything of him. He couldn't carry on, wherever he is, without cash. He hasn't run away.'

'Then what—and how—and where—,' said Bob.

'I give that up!' said Johnny. 'You got any idea, Mauly?'

'I just wonder!' said Lord Mauleverer.

'You've got an idea about it!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'Well, sort of,' said Mauly.

The Famous Five concentrated their attention upon his lordship at once. So far as they could see, the mystery of Bunter was quite impenetrable. Few fellows in the Remove would have expected Lord Mauleverer to penetrate a mystery which was a blank puzzle to every other fellow in the form. Perhaps Harry Wharton and Co. did not expect Mauly's idea, whatever it was, to be particularly bright. Still, they were eager to hear it.

'Carry on, Sherlock Holmes!' said Bob Cherry. 'Here's five faithful Watsons waiting for the jolly old solution of the jolly old mystery.'

'Well, what about that kidnapper?' said Lord Mauleverer.

'That what?'

'That which?'

The Famous Five stared.

'You remember that johnny from the States who butted in last week,' said Lord Mauleverer. 'Man named Coot—or was it Root?'

'Hoot!' said Nugent. 'What about him?'

'Fishy recognised that johnny as a professional kidnapper in his own remarkable country. Quelch has been keepin' me in gates ever since, because he was inquirin' after me. I didn't really think there was anythin' in it—.'

'Well, there might have been,' said Harry. 'Quelch was quite right to take care of you, Mauly, with a kidnapper hanging about.'

'Oh, quite! As I said, I didn't think there was anythin' in it: but since Bunter has disappeared, I just wonder.'

'The man cleared off, Mauly, about as fast as he could go,' said Nugent. 'He hasn't been seen since.'

'Might have stayed spotted about, all the same, if he really was on a kidnappin' stunt. Look at it!' said Lord Mauleverer. 'Chap disappears all of a sudden, and there's a kidnapper about. Put two and two together, what?'

'Oh!' exclaimed the Famous Five, all at once.

'That's what I was thinkin'!' said Lord Mauleverer. 'But—but that kidnapper, if he was really after anybody was after you, Mauly, not Bunter,' exclaimed Nugent. 'He wouldn't have taken Bunter at a gift!' said Johnny Bull.

'You see, old chap, you're a jolly old lord, and a jolly old millionaire,' said Bob. 'You'd be worth his while. Bunter wouldn't,—even if his postal order had come.'

'The worthfulness would not have been terrific, my esteemed Mauly,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'No!' said Lord Mauleverer. 'Unless—.'

'Unless what?'

'Unless he's got the wrong pig by the ear!' explained Lord Mauleverer. 'He never knew me by sight—that was why he barged in here, to give me what I think he would call the once-over, if he could. But he never got away with that, and he doesn't know me from any other Greyfriars man. Might be a case of mistaken identity, see?'

'Oh, my hat!' said Bob Cherry. 'Think he took Bunter for a lord, Mauly? What a compliment to the jolly old peerage!'

There was a chuckle in No. 1 Study.

The matter was serious, undoubtedly: and all were concerned for the missing Owl. But the idea of Billy Bunter having been mistaken for a peer of the realm could not but evoke a chuckle. Really, it did not seem probable.

'Well, peers are much the same as other johnnies, I suppose,' said Lord Mauleverer, 'but the point that came into my head is this—Bunter was wearin' my hat and my clothes—!'

'Oh!' exclaimed the Famous Five again.

'We have our names in our hats, and initials spotted about over all our things,' said Mauleverer. 'If that man Skoot—.'

'Hoot!' said Nugent.

'I mean Hoot—if that man Hoot grabbed Bunter, and found my name and initials sprinkled all over him, what would he think?—not knowin' me by sight?'

'By gum!' said Bob, with a whistle.

'But why should he grab Bunter anyhow?' asked Johnny Bull. 'He couldn't have fancied, on his looks, that he was a peer and a millionaire.'

'Hardly!' grinned Bob. Then he whistled again. 'By gum, though. Bunter was jolly well-dressed the day he started for St. Jim's—dressed in Mauly's best. If the man was hanging about looking for a Greyfriars chap who looked as if he could afford to chuck money away on clobber—!'

'Might have grabbed him on spec!' said Nugent. 'It's possible! And then he would find Mauly's name on him—phew!'

'Well, we don't know, and can't guess, how he might have happened to nobble Bunter.' said Lord Mauleverer, 'but if he did, he would think he had got the right bird, from the evidence on him.'

'He jolly well would,' said Harry Wharton.

'But Bunter would tell him he wasn't the lord he wanted,' said Johnny Bull.

'That kind of rascal wouldn't believe him, if he did,' answered Lord Mauleverer. 'People—especially rogues—judge others by themselves. He would expect a fellow to tell lies, to get away from him, being that kind of a blighter.'

Another whistle from Bob Cherry.

'Gentlemen, chaps, and fatheads,' said Bob. 'I jolly well believe that old Mauly has put his finger on the spot.'

'Blessed if it doesn't look like it,' said Nugent. 'I'd forgotten about Bunter borrowing Mauly's clobber. But it might have happened just like that. With Mauly's name all over him—.'

'Looks like it,' said Johnny Bull.

'The lookfulness is terrific.'

The Famous Five were quite excited now. Mauly might be right or wrong: but at least his theory was the only one that accounted for Billy Bunter's mysterious disappearance. If the kidnapper had been lurking in the vicinity, on the look-out for Lord Mauleverer—if he had contacted Bunter, and somehow discovered Lord Mauleverer's name 'sprinkled' all over him, as Mauly expressed it—then the mystery was a mystery no longer.

'Think there's anythin' in the idea?' asked Lord Mauleverer.

There was a general nodding of heads. Undoubtedly, the Famous Five did think there was something in the idea.

'I think so, Mauly,' said Harry Wharton, 'and I think that Quelch ought to know. It might be a clue for old Grimey.'

'I thought I'd chew it over with you chaps before goin' to Quelch,' said Lord Mauleverer. 'I needn't tell him that Bunter borrowed my hat without mentionin' it to me ! Just that he borrowed my hat, what?'

'Just that!' said Harry, laughing.

'I'll bet Quelch will bite on this, when he hears,' said Bob. 'You'd better go and put it to him, Mauly.'

Lord Mauleverer nodded, and left the study. The Famous Five were left in a buzz of excited discussion. The more they discussed it, the more they felt the conviction grow that Mauleverer had found the clue to Billy Bunter's mysterious disappearance. Billy Bunter, a lord for once in his fat life, was in the lean hands of the long-legged man from the States. The daw in peacock's feathers had been mistaken for the peacock, with the result that Marcus K. Hoot, instead of kidnapping Lord Mauleverer, had succeeded only in kidnapping 'Lord' Billy Bunter.

THAT MAN AGAIN!

Buzzzzzzzzzzzz!

Dr. Locke frowned.

Mr. Quelch set his lips in a tight line.

They were seated in the Head's study, when the telephone bell rang: deep in discussion. As Bob Cherry had predicted, Mr. Quelch certainly did 'bite' on what Lord Mauleverer had had to tell him: and he had lost no time in acquainting Dr. Locke with this new light on the mystery of Billy Bunter. That was the matter under discussion, between the Headmaster and the form-master, when the unmelodious jangle came from the telephone. 'If that is that man again—!' breathed the Head.

'He said that he would ring up again today—.'

'It will be an opportunity, sir, of discovering whether a Greyfriars boy actually is in his hands,' said Mr. Quelch.

'True! He distinctly stated so, yesterday: but as I did not think of Bunter in connection with him, I was merely perplexed.' said Dr. Locke. 'Mauleverer was under my own eyes when he stated that he had kidnapped him, and I simply did not know what to make of such a random statement. But if Bunter—.'

Buzzzzzzzz!

'I will take the call, at all events,' said Dr. Locke, and he lifted the receiver from the hooks. 'Say, that Greyfriars School?' came a well-known nasal drawl over the wires. It was certainly 'that man again'.

'Dr, Locke speaking!'

'I guess I put you wise that you'd hear me agin today, mister. You been confabbing with that noble lord's folks about that ransom?'

'That is Mr. Hoot speaking?'

'Yup!'

'You stated yesterday that Lord Mauleverer was in your hands.'

'Sure!'

'You are mistaken on that point, Mr. Hoot. Lord Mauleverer is, at the present moment, here, safe under the care of his schoolmaster.'

'Aw, can it, old-timer,' came back Mr. Hoot's drawl. 'You figure you can fool a guy that-away? Ain't I got that noble lord cinched, and parked away in a safe spot where all the cops in the Yew-nited Kingdom, with all the cops in the Yew-nited States at their tail, could never root him out?'

'I repeat that Lord Mauleverer is here at Greyfriars—.'

'You can sure repeat it like you was a parrot, old-timer, if you get a kick out of it,' said Mr. Hoot, 'but I'll mention that you're wasting time. I got that noble guy where his hair is short, feller. I'm ready to talk business, if his folks want him back in one piece. Ten thousand of what you call pounds in this here country is the figure. And I'll confide in you, Mister Schoolmaster, that if that leetle sum ain't paid, pronto, somethin' will happen to that noble lord.'

'Kindly listen to me, Mr Hoot. If you indeed have a Greyfriars boy in your hands—!'

'Wash out the if, old timer.'

The Head breathed very hard.

'If he described the boy, sir—!' murmured Mr. Quelch.

'Oh! Yes! Quite!' assented Dr. Locke. He spoke into the telephone again. 'You say that you have taken away a boy belonging to this school, Mr. Hoot. Kindly tell me what he is like.'

'Sure!' said Mr. Hoot, amiably. 'If you got any doubts about what's become of that noble lord, I'll sure put you wise. Short and fat—.'

'Short and fat!' repeated Mr. Quelch. He was standing beside the Head now, listening-in. 'That is nothing like Lord Mauleverer, but it certainly applies to Bunter, sir.'

'Undoubtedly,' said the Head.

They exchanged those remarks in low tones, while Marcus K. Hoot's drawl ran on from the other end.

'I'll say the plumpest guy going, and can that noble lord eat? Search me! And if he don't look like own brother to a dog-goned owl, blinking through them spectacles of his'n, you can call me a geck from Gecksville! Satisfied now that I got him?'

Both Dr. Locke and Mr. Quelch were satisfied, now, on at least one point: that Mr. Hoot had 'got' Billy Bunter. The description was quite unmistakable. It was clear now that Billy Bunter, in his borrowed plumes, had been kidnapped in error for Lord Mauleverer.

Marcus's perplexing statement of the previous day was explained. He had no doubt that the 'noble lord' was in his hands.

'That makes it clear, I think, sir!' murmured Mr. Quelch.

'Quite!' said the Head.

'That foolish boy Bunter has been kidnapped—'

'—in mistake for Lord Mauleverer—'

'—and is now in that man's hands—'

'—who is quite unaware, apparently, of his mistake.'

'Say, you gone dumb?' came Mr. Hoot's voice, interrupting the murmured colloquy. 'Ain't I described that noble lord, like you wanted, and ain't you satisfied now that I got him cinched?'

'Nothing of the kind, Mr. Hoot!' said the Head, icily. 'You are making a very strange mistake—.'

'Sez you!'

'The description you have given me is not that of Lord Mauleverer,' said Dr. Locke, 'and I repeat that Lord Mauleverer is not missing from school.'

'I'll say you got heaps of time on your hands, feller, to waste it like this, trying to string a guy along,' jeered Mr. Hoot. 'I'm giving you my advice to come down to brass tacks. I'm here and ready to fix up that ransom for the noble lord. What about it?'

'Listen to me! A boy is missing from the school, but it is not Lord Mauleverer—.'

'Can it!'

'Bless my soul!' gasped the Head. The Headmaster of Greyfriars was far from accustomed to being told to 'can' his remarks. And the bare idea that any man, even a lawless gangster and kidnapper, could doubt his word, was inexpressibly shocking and amazing to him. He gasped for breath.

'You figure you can string me along that-a-way?' came Mr. Hoot's derisive voice. 'You like me to swallow it down that I got the wrong guy? My! That sure is the elephant's side-whiskers! And then some.'

'Rascal!' gasped the Head.

'Feller, if you get any kick out of blowing off your mouth, blow it off and don't mind me,' said Mr. Hoot, 'but I ain't hanging on to this long-distance for ever. Do that noble lord's folks want him back in one piece or not?'

'The boy you have apparently kidnapped is not a lord—.'

'Forget it.'

'His parents are in moderate circumstances, and certainly could not furnish such a sum as you have named, even if the law permitted dealings with a kidnapper, Which in this

country it does not. I recommend you to release the boy at once, as he can be of no profit to you—.'

'Haw, haw, haw!'

'Bless my soul!' said the Head, again. Mr. Hoot, at the other end, was laughing. He was evidently amused.

'Say, mister, you surely do take me for a boob from Boobsville!' chuckled Mr. Hoot, over the wires. 'You want me to figure that I've roped in the wrong cayuse, and let him run? Feller, you make me laugh! You sure do make me laugh like I was tickled under the chin! Haw, haw, haw!'

And Mr. Hoot laughed: vigorously though very unmusically. Evidently, he was not to be convinced!

Mr. Hoot dealt in the truth himself only when it suited his purposes: and it never even occurred to him that there existed persons more particular in such matters. Mr. Hoot was far too cute a guy to be taken in! —far too spry to be 'strung along'. He laughed loudly, and for several moments, there was a sound as of rusty hinges, over the telephone.

However, he checked his merriment at last, and went on:

'Nope! You won't get by with that, mister. I sure ain't letting that guy hit the horizon,—not so's you'd notice it, mister. I got that noble lord in the can, and I'll say I'm keeping him in the can till paid for. I guess you want to meet up with Simple Simon to tell your funny stories. They don't go, with me,—they sure don't go worth a cent—not a continental red cent, mister.'

'I repeat—!' gasped Dr. Locke.

'Aw, keep it parked!' rapped Mr. Hoot. 'I allow I ain't no use for funny stories,—I'm after cold business, mister. Mebbe you figure that your British cops can dig up that noble lord? Forget it.'

'The boy is not a peer—I repeat that he is not a lord—his name is not Mauleverer,—his name is Bunter'

'Eh?'

'Bunter—!'

'I'll mention that I'm wise to that noble guy's name,' chuckled Mr. Hoot. 'I'll tell a man that a guy don't carry another guy's name wrote in his hat.'

The Head and Mr. Quelch exchanged a quick glance, at that. Evidently, Lord Mauleverer had hit the right nail on the head. It was Billy Bunter's borrowed plumes that had been his undoing.

'Nope!' went on Mr. Hoot. 'Nor a guy don't carry another guy's initial and crest on his nose-bag! Nope for sure! Forget it, mister.'

'I can explain—.'

'Explain nix!' rapped Mr. Hoot. 'I'm telling you I ain't no use for funny stories. I'm after the dough. If you ain't ready to talk business, Mister Schoolmaster—.'

'Listen to me! I repeat—.'

'Pack it up! You hear me!' said Mr. Hoot. 'I ain't in this here business for my health. It's the dollars I want. You fix it up with that noble guy's folks to come down to brass tacks about the ransom. Get me?'

'I shall do nothing of the kind! I—.'

'You fix it up, and I'll put you wise how I'm going to collect it. You better, if that noble lord's folks want to see him agin! If that ain't fixed up, mister, that noble lord has got something coming to him where it will hurt.'

'I repeat that the boy you have kidnapped is not a lord, and—.'

'Swaller it!' interrupted Mr. Hoot. 'I guess I'll make that noble lord write you a letter in his own noble hand, mister, and I'll sure make him tell you what's coming to him if the ransom ain't paid! And that's all for now!'

Whirrrrr! Mr. Hoot cut off.

'Bless my soul!' said the Head, faintly.

The two masters looked at one another, rather blankly.

Marcus K. Hoot's belief was unshaken that he had Lord Mauleverer in his lean hands. Lord Mauleverer was still safe and sound within the walls of Greyfriars School: but 'Lord' Billy Bunter certainly was in those lean hands: on that point there was no doubt: and parked in some remote, unknown spot, to which there was not the ghost of a clue. And there could be little doubt that Mr. Hoot would discover his mistake, when the 'noble lord' came to write that letter! The mystery of Billy Bunter's disappearance was solved: but the mystery of his whereabouts remained as deep and impenetrable as ever—and what was going to happen now to Billy Bunter?

BILLY BUNTER WRITES HOME

BILLY BUNTER pricked up his fat ears, as the sound of a car came through the dismal silence of the lonely bungalow.

It was not a happy Bunter.

Outside, the red sunset shone down on green meadows, leafy woods, and the expanses of the wide heath. It glimmered through the slats of the thick wooden shutters locked over Bunter's window. It was a pleasant summer's day—outside that bungalow. Within, it was far from pleasant—at least to 'Lord' Billy Bunter.

Another day had passed, and Bunter was more than tired of his surroundings.

Andy Pike had been quite unpleasant. Since the morning, Bunter had seen nothing of Marcus K. Hoot. But he had seen a great deal—much more than he desired—of Andy. The fact that the two rogues had fallen out, and pommelled one another, had been rather satisfactory to their prisoner. They could not have pommelled one another too hard, in Bunter's opinion.

But the outcome of that rough-and-tumble had not been quite so satisfactory. Andy's features bore some very plain traces of the 'sockdolagers' Mr. Hoot had handed him: and they seemed to have had quite a deplorable effect on his temper.

Andy was still puzzled and perplexed by the recollection of the mysterious voice, so exactly like Marcus Hoot's, which had called him into the bungalow, and given the prisoner a chance to escape. He could not make it out: and certainly it never occurred to him that he was entertaining a ventriloquist unawares.

That perplexing mystery, added to Mr. Hoot's vigorous sockdolagers, worried Andy, and considerably sharpened his temper. And he was doubly and trebly watchful now over his prisoner. If there had been the remotest chance before of eluding his vigilance, there was none now.

When he was in the hall, Bunter's door was left wide open, Andy preferring to keep an eye on him. When Andy quitted the hall, even for a few minutes, he closed and locked Bunter's door. When he came back, he opened it again, and glared in, making assurance doubly sure that the prisoner was safe. Most of the time, however, he sprawled in the rocker, smoking cigarettes, with a glinting eye on Bunter.

Once, when he nodded in the rocker, in the hot afternoon, Bunter ventured to make one step outside his room. But he made only one!

If Andy slept, he slept with one eye open! Bunter had made only one hesitating step, when Andy made a bound with no hesitation at all. He smacked a fat head right and left, and Bunter retired yelling into his room. And if he nodded again, the fat Owl of Greyfriars did not think of taking another chance.

At the present moment, in the evening of Friday, Bunter's door was wide open, and Andy, in the rocker in the hall, had a vigilant eye on him. Bunter sat in the armchair, and blinked inimically at Andy.

The day had seemed almost endless to Bunter. Even the circumstance that there were no lessons had ceased to be a comfort to him: even the prospect of missing prep in the evening was no longer a consolation. Gladly, very gladly, would Billy Bunter have been sitting at the study table in No. 7, in the Remove passage at Greyfriars, even at prep!

It was a relief to hear the sound of the approaching car.

No doubt it meant that Marcus K. Hoot was coming back: and little as Bunter liked the lean gangster, at least it was a change from sitting blinking at Andy, with Andy glaring back at him.

Andy, as he heard the car, sat up scowling in the rocker, and took notice. Mr. Hoot was returning: and Andy's brow was black as he listened. Probably his feelings towards the associate had been somewhat embittered by those 'sockdolagers'. He did not rise from the rocker. He sat where he was, smoking, and scowling, while the car was run into the garage adjoining. Having put up the car, Marcus Hoot came through the doorway from the garage.

He gave Andy a nod: receiving a black look in return.

Mr. Hoot seemed to have returned from his long drive in a, good humour. No doubt his long-distance call to the Headmaster at Greyfriars had left him with the impression that all was going well: Mr. Hoot being too cute and spry to believe a single word of what Dr. Locke had told him over the wires. But if Mr. Hoot was in a good humour, his associate was not. No doubt these 'sockdolagers' lingered longer in Andy's memory than in Marcus's.

'Aw! You're around, Andy!' said Mr. Hoot. 'You ain't wandering all over the landscape this time, Andy Pike.'

Grunt, from Andy.

'I ain't took a step outside this dump!' he snapped. 'And I allow I've had jest about enough of sitting around and keeping tabs on that pesky fat gink.'

'You ain't been hearing any more ghost voices, while I've been away?' inquired Mr. Hoot, sarcastically.

'Aw, forget it!' snapped Andy.

Marcus Hoot glanced through the open doorway of Bunter's room. He grinned as he met the fat Owl's inimical blink. There was no doubt that Andy had the 'noble guy' safe this time: for there he was, in the armchair, his little round eyes blinking at Mr. Hoot through his big round spectacles. Mr. Hoot gave him a cheery nod.

'Okay,' said Mr. Hoot, 'I guess if I'd found that he'd beat it again, Andy, I'd have pulled a gun on you.'

'Can it!' snapped Andy. 'Jest tell a guy how it's worked with that dog-goned schoolmaster. I'm mentioning that I ain't honing to stay a fixture in this dump, Marcus Hoot.'

'Sure!' assented Mr. Hoot. 'But we got to earn them British pounds, old-timer. You ain't got no kick coming. All you got to do is to sit around, and smoke cigarettes, and keep tabs on that noble lord, while I have to tote the auto hundreds of miles, to long-distance that pesky schoolmaster of his 'n.'

'How's things, now you've long-distanced the schoolmaster?' snapped Andy.

'That schoolmaster guy sure is some bonehead,' answered Mr. Hoot. 'They don't understand cold business, in this here little island, Andy. Did he come down to cases? He did not.'

'Then it ain't fixed yet?' grunted Andy.

'Not so's you'd notice it,' agreed Mr. Hoot. 'Instead of coming down to cases, and fixing things, that schoolmaster guy figured that he could string me along, telling me a funny story.' There was a sound as of rusty hinges, as Mr. Hoot burst into a laugh. 'He sure wanted me to swaller it that the guy we've cinched wasn't a noble lord at all. I guess I cut my eye-teeth too early, to fall for that. Andy Pike. I guess a schoolmaster guy couldn't put that across easy-not with Marcus Knickerbocker Hoot. Nope!'

'If it ain't fixed—.'

'It's sure going to be,' said Mr. Hoot. 'That schoolmaster guy don't seem to hone to come down to brass tacks: but I guess that noble lord is going to put it to his folks in a way that will wring their hearts, sposin' they got any. I guess they'll come down with the dough, when they're notified that the noble lord ain't going to chew any more eats till the ransom's paid.'

There was a sudden splutter of alarm from Billy Bunter's room as those dire words fell on fat ears.

Billy Bunter blinked at Mr. Hoot, through the doorway, in sheer horror. That professional gangsters and kidnappers were capable of extremely drastic measures, Bunter could guess. But he had never envisaged anything quite so alarming as this.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

Mr. Hoot looked round at him, and grinned; Billy Bunter goggled at him, through his spectacles, with a horrified goggle.

Marcus grinned: and Andy gave a sour chuckle. The expression on Billy Bunter's fat face was extremely expressive. If that dire threat had anything like the effect on the 'noble lord's folks', that it evidently had on the 'noble lord' himself, it was plainly a winner.

'I—I—I say,' stuttered Bunter, as Mr. Hoot lounged into his room. 'I—I say—.'

'You don't want to spill anything, my lord,' drawled Mr. Hoot. 'All you got to do, is to indite a billy-doo to your folks, like I tell you:

'But—!' stammered Bunter.

'Nix on your butts!' interrupted Mr. Hoot. 'Get the doings, Andy.'

Andy placed pen, ink, and paper, on Bunter's table.

The fat Owl blinked at them, blinked at Andy, and then blinked at Mr. Hoot.

He realised that he was to write a letter to his 'folks', on the subject of the ransom Mr. Hoot expected to 'cinch' in exchange for his prisoner. Mr. Hoot, being fully persuaded that his captive was a lord, and a wealthy one, had no doubts of the result. Billy Bunter couldn't help having doubts.

'Now, swaller this, my lord!' went on Mr. Hoot. 'I've long-distanced that schoolmaster of yourn agin, and he don't play up worth a cent. Did he talk business? Nope! He jest told me a funny story about your lordship being somebody else, which don't go with me—not a whole lot it don't! I'll say he is the geck from Gecksville, if he figures that he can pull the wool over the optics of Marcus Knickerbocker Hoot. Yup! I got you, my lord, and I guess I'm freezing on to you till I get the dough.'

'But—!' gasped Bunter.

'I'm talking!' interrupted Mr. Hoot. 'Ten thousand British pounds is the figure. I guess a noble guy like your lordship is cheap at the price.'

'But—but I ain't—!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I ain't a lord—.'

'Keep it parked,' said Mr. Hoot. 'You can't fool this baby, any more'n that schoolmaster of yourn. Take that pen in your fist my lord.'

Billy Bunter picked up the pen.

'Now,' said Mr. Hoot. 'You jest write that billy-doo, and tell your folks you're in a safe place, you don't know where, and that you ain't getting any more eats so long as you stay. You put 'em wise that the longer you stay, the thinner you're gonna get! Savvy?'

'Oh, crikey!'

'I'd give a guess that you're sure the fattest lord in the British peerage,' said Mr. Hoot 'but if that ransom ain't paid, and ain't paid pronto the living skeleton at a circus won't have a thing on you, my lord.'

'Ow!'

'Get busy!' said Mr Hoot 'I guess you want some eats after my trip: I guess can write that letter while I chew. And you want to remember that you got to pitch it strong, my lord, and make them old folks at home come clean. It's for a thin time if they don't.'

'But—!' mumbled Bunter.

That's the whole packet!' said Mr Hoot, and he lounged back into the hall with Andy.

'Oh, crikey!' moaned Bunter.

He sat with the pen in his fat hand, blinking at the two gangsters, sitting at the table in the hall, disposing of what Mr. Hoot called 'eats'. He was in no hurry to begin the letter home. Really, it presented difficulties. Often and often had Billy Bunter written home, on the subject of cash: but it had seldom produced any tangible result in the way of coin of the realm. Often and often as he had expected a postal order, it was not often that one arrived. And ten thousand pounds—!

He could picture Mr. Bunter's face' at Bunter Villa, when he received that extraordinary demand! He could remember remarks Mr. Bunter had made, when a demand for a twentieth part of that sum dropped in from the Inspector of Taxes!

But he had to write the letter. As he sat blinking at a blank sheet of paper, the pen in an idle fat hand, Marcus K. Hoot glanced round from his 'eats'.

'You getting busy, my lord?' he yapped.

'Oh! Yes! I—I'm just going to begin!' gasped Bunter. 'You better!' advised Mr. Hoot. And he resumed his 'eats'.

'Oh, lor!'" mumbled Bunter.

But he had to get going: and he got going. With a wrinkled and worried fat brow, he produced at last the required epistle. It ran:

Deer Father,

I am a prisoner in some plaice I don't kno as I have bene kiddnapped and they think I am a lord with lotts of munny. They will not lett me goe till the ransom is pade, and it is ten thowsand pownds. I am not to have any more phood till it is pade wich is awful.

Yore affeckshunate Sun, William.

Having completed that epistle, the fat Owl addressed an envelope to William S. Bunter, Esq., Bunter Villa, Reigate, Surrey. Then he laid down the pen, and waited till Mr. Hoot had finished his 'eats'. Then Mr. Hoot lounged into the room, and picked up the letter and the envelope with a grin of satisfaction,—which, as soon as he looked at them, was wiped from Mr. Hoot's lean face as if by a duster.

CHAPTER 24

NOT A NOBLE LORD!

BUNTER quaked.

What was the matter with Mr. Hoot, he did not know. But he could see, only too plainly, that something was the matter.

The look that came over Mr. Hoot's face was indeed alarming!

He stood with the letter in his hand, staring at it. He read it through twice, as if he could hardly believe the evidence of his own hawk-eyes. Then he looked at the envelope again: and then back to the letter. Both seemed to have given Marcus a shock: why, was quite a mystery to Bunter.

He had written home as Mr. Hoot had directed him to do.

He had stated what Mr. Hoot had bidden him state. What more could he have done? But he could see that Marcus was fairly knocked over by it.

Andy, staring from the hall, was as surprised as Bunter by the remarkable effect of that letter upon Mr. Hoot. 'Say, big boy, what's got you?' called out Andy.

'Carry me home to die!' gasped Mr. Hoot, finding his voice at last.

Andy Pike came into the room. Marcus held out the letter and the envelope. Then it was Andy's turn to register amazement and wrath.

'Search me!' he stuttered.

Both glared at the alarmed fat Owl.

'I—I—I say,' stammered Bunter. 'Wha—a—t's the matter?'

'You pesky piecan!' roared Mr. Hoot.

'I—I—I'll write it over again, if you like, if I've left anything out: stammered Bunter. 'I—I've written what you told me, haven't I?'

'You slab-sided, ornery gink!' spluttered Mr. Hoot.

'Who are you? Say?'

It was dawning upon Marcus at last.

Dr. Locke, at Greyfriars, had told him that the missing schoolboy was not Lord Mauleverer and that his name was Bunter. Mr. Hoot had been far too cute and spry to believe a word of it.

But really, he had to believe it now.

There was the name of 'Bunter' staring at him from the envelope. And the letter spoke for itself. It dawned on Mr. Hoot's cute, spry mind that he had been altogether too cute and spry. It was not Lord Mauleverer who was a plump prisoner in the lonely bungalow by the Sussex shore. It was some unknown and quite valueless person of the name of Bunter! It was too much for Mr. Hoot. He could almost have danced with disappointment and fury.

'You pie-faced pesky left-over, who are you, anyway?' he roared.

The fat Owl blinked at him.

'Eh? I'm Bunter,' he answered.

'Bunter!' repeated Mr. Hoot. 'Bunter? Who's Bunter?'

What's Bunter? You make me believe that you was a noble lord, and you allow your name's Bunter! What you mean by moseying around with another guy's name in your hat?' Bunter jumped.

He was aware that the gangsters fancied that he was a lord. Why they fancied so, he did not know and could not guess. Now it dawned on him. He remembered how Mr. Hoot had picked up that hat for him on Courtfield Common. Evidently Mr. Hoot had seen the name in the hat, and jumped to the wrong conclusion.



'YOU PIE-FACED PESKY LEFT-OVER, WHO ARE YOU ANYWAY?'
HE ROARED

'Oh!' gasped Bunter. 'I—I didn't—I mean, I wasn't—I—I—I mean, that wasn't my hat—!' 'Search me! Do the guys at that dump walk around in other guy's hats?' hooted Mr. Hoot. 'Don't a guy at that dump wear his own roof?'

'Oh! Yes! No! You see, I—I borrowed Mauly's hat,' stammered Bunter. 'It—it was Mauleverer's hat, but I—I—I just borrowed it—.'

'You borrow his nose-bag too, you gink, what I seen a crest on?' snorted Mr. Hoot.

'His—his what? Oh! Yes! I—I borrowed his hanky,—you—you see, it was in his pocket when I borrowed his coat—!' stuttered Bunter.

'Aw! If this ain't the bee's knee!' gasped Mr. Hoot. 'If this here ain't the elephant's side-whiskers, and then some! I guessed I got a noble lord by the short hairs, I surely did: and did I figure I was lucky when he moseyed right into my hands the way he did? I'll tell a man! And it was only a fat piecan who'd snozzled his roof! I'll say this is the opossum's eyebrows, Andy Pike! '

'It sure is the rhinoceros's hind leg!' said Andy.

'And then some!' almost groaned Mr. Hoot.

The two gangsters glared at Bunter.

Really, it was not Bunter's fault. He had not asked the kidnapers to mistake him for a peer of the realm, and waste time and trouble in 'toting' him to their 'dump'. He had not had the remotest idea that they supposed him to be Lord Mauleverer, whom he did not resemble in the very least. Had they asked him who he was, he would certainly have told them that he was Bunter,—Billy Bunter,—merely that and nothing more! But they hadn't asked him! But Marcus and Andy glared at him as if they could almost have eaten him!

It was, in fact, a very unfortunate state of affairs for a pair of kidnapers who had transferred their peculiar activities across the Atlantic. It was, as they declared, the bee's knee, the elephant's side-whiskers, the opossum's eyebrows, and the rhinoceros's hind leg! And then some!

'We ain't cinched no noble lord!' said Andy, dismally.

'We sure ain't!' sighed Mr. Hoot.

'We got that fat gink!' said Andy.

'And what's that fat gink worth?' hissed Mr. Hoot.

'Not more'n the price of his weight in tallow, I guess. You sure have slipped up on this deal, Marcus.'

'How'd I know?' howled Marcus. 'Did I read that guy's name in his hat, or did I not, Andy Pike? How'd I know a guy was taking a paseo in another guy's hat? Great jumping John James Brown! I sure do feel like strewing that fat gink around this dump like he was potato-scrapings! I sure do feel jest like that!'

Billy Bunter could only hope that Mr. Hoot would recover from those dire feelings, before he put them into action.

'Well, we got him!' snarled Andy. 'And we ain't got the noble lord! He ain't any more use than he is ornament, and that's spilling a bibful. But if we let him skip, he sure will chew the rag, and bring the British cops nosing around this dump.'

'We got to keep him till we got that noble lord!' snarled Mr. Hoot. 'And I'm telling you, Andy Pike, that I'm going to get that noble lord, if I have to go over that pesky school with a small comb to comb him out. I'm telling you that I'll get him, if I have to go through the joint with a gun!'

With that dire declaration, which probably expressed his feelings more than his intentions. Mr. Hoot stamped back into the hall-much to Bunter's relief. Andy gave the fat junior another glare, as if meditating reducing him to the state of potato-scrapings. However, he contented himself with glaring, and slouched away after Mr. Hoot.

'Oh, crikey!' gasped Bunter.

He mopped perspiration from a fat brow. From the bottom of his fat heart, Billy Bunter wished that he had never set out to pay Arthur Augustus D'Arcy a visit at St. Jim's on that inauspicious Wednesday: and still more fervently did he wish that he had never borrowed Lord Mauleverer's hat! Unluckily he had done both: and now he could only wonder dismally what was going to be the end of it.

UNEXPECTED!

'OH!

Bob Cherry uttered a sudden roar. It sounded as if he was damaged. And, as a matter of fact, he was!

No fellow could run, suddenly and unexpectedly, into a stationary car, without getting a little damaged. And that was what Bob, quite unintentionally and inadvertently, had done. It was morning break at Greyfriars on Saturday. 'Break' was brief, and during that brief respite from lessons, Greyfriars fellows were not supposed to wander out of gates. But Greyfriars fellows, like other mortals, sometimes did that which they were not supposed to do. On the present occasion, five members of the Remove had either forgotten, or omitted to remember, the rule on the subject.

Certainly, there was no harm in slipping quietly out by the Cloister wall, for a ramble in the scented woods on a sunny summer's morning. Mr. Quelch, had he heard of it, would probably have taken a lenient view. Still, the Famous Five did not want Quelch to hear of it. They could not precisely depend on the lenient view! It was very pleasant rambling in Friardale Wood: till the sound of a distant bell, faint and afar, warned them that they had cut it rather fine, and that it behoved them to get back by the shortest possible route in the shortest possible space of time.

That was why they were proceeding, at a very rapid trot, by the leafy little lane that cut off a corner of the wood, winding among trees and bushes and bracken. No fellow could have expected, or dreamed of, a car parked in that almost hidden little lane. The lane was narrow, rutty, over-shadowed by branches, with thickets encroaching on it on either side. It was never used by cars—no motorist had ever been known to penetrate it: not even a farm-cart ever used it: and, as it led nowhere in particular, few pedestrians ever trod its rutty track. The last thing the Famous Five would have expected to find in that hidden little lane was a vehicle of any kind—and least of all, a car. So Bob Cherry, as he came charging round a winding turn, naturally had no doubt that the course ahead was clear. But it wasn't! It was far from clear. Before he even knew that the way was blocked from side to side. Bob crashed into the back of a car.

He was a little ahead of his comrades: which was no doubt fortunate for four members of the Co. A moment later, Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, Johnny Bull, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, came charging round the turn, —but they checked themselves in time, as they found Bob standing on one leg like a stork, clasping the knee of the other with both hands, and expressing his feelings at the top of a powerful voice.

'OH!' roared Bob. 'Ow! My knee! Wow! Oh! Look at that! What blithering idiot has parked a car here? What howling lunatic has blocked up the way with a car? What footling fathead—Ow! wow! Oh! Ow!'

'Oh, my hat!' ejaculated Harry Wharton. 'A car—.'

'Hurt, old chap?' asked Johnny Bull.

'Eh?' Bob acknowledged that sympathetic query with an almost ferocious glare. 'Oh! No! I've busted my knee on the back of that dashed car, but I'm rather enjoying it! I'm dancing on one leg because I like the exercise! Wow! Fathead!'

'What the dickens is a car doing here?' exclaimed Frank Nugent, in wonder. 'Nothing on wheels ever comes this way.'

'Some silly ass parked it here. I suppose,' said Harry. 'There doesn't seem to be anybody about.'

'Queer place to park a car,' said Johnny Bull.

'The queerfulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. The nabob of Bhanipur was staring hard at that unexpected car, with a very thoughtful expression on his dusky face.

'Ow! wow!' Bob Cherry rubbed a damaged knee tenderly. 'I jolly well wish the owner was about,—I'd like to punch his silly head! Wow!'

'We shall have to get round it somehow,' said Johnny Bull. 'A rabbit couldn't push by. We've got to squeeze through those hawthorns. Blow!'

'Ow! My knee! Wow!'

'Well, come on,' said Johnny. 'We don't want to be late for Quelch, you know. Come on.'

'Ow! Cut on if you like! Wow!'

Bob continued to caress his damaged knee. He did not want to be late for Quelch: but that knee was not, for the moment, a going concern.

'What born idiot could have parked his car here?' he exclaimed 'It's nearly a quarter of a mile off the road, and he must have backed it the whole way. What blithering, dithering ass—!'

'Beats me,' said Harry Wharton. 'Looks as if somebody wanted to park it out of sight—blessed if I know why.'

'The lookfulness is preposterous!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'The esteemed person must have had some reason for taking so much trouble, but the knowfulness why is a boot on the other leg.'

'Bother him anyway!' said Nugent. 'If he were about, we'd tell him what we think of a silly ass blocking up the way with a car like that! But he isn't—and we're going to be late for Quelch.'

'Oh, get on!' grunted Bob. 'I shall have to go dot-and-carry-one, but you fellows can cut in on time. Leave me to hop it.'

'Rot!' said Harry Wharton, tersely.

'The rotfulness is terrific, my esteemed Bob. The sinkfulness or swimfulness together is the proper caper.'

'Cut on. I tell you!'

'Rats!' said four fellows in unison.

Bob Cherry grinned, in spite of the pangs in his damaged knee. He put his foot tenderly to the ground, testing that knee.

'I can limp it,' he said. 'By gum! It was a bang, though! I'd jolly well like to give that dithering idiot one of the same right on his boko! What the thump does he want to hide his car for in a place like this? Blow him! Some ass wandering about, and leaving his car for fellows to run into! Br-r-r-r!'

'If you can come on, old chap—!' said Harry, soothingly.

'I tell you I can limp it! If we meet that motorist on the way, I'm going to punch his silly head! Wow!'

'Come on, then!' said Harry.

It was impossible to get past the car, in the narrow overgrown lane. There was not, as Johnny had said, space for a rabbit to push by. It could not have been an easy matter for the unknown motorist to back the car by such a route, such a distance from the road, and the juniors could only wonder why he had done it at all,—unless, for some mysterious reason, he desired to park the car in a hidden spot where no eye was likely to fall on it. They pushed into the hawthorns at the side of the little lane. Bob Cherry bringing up the rear now, limping painfully on his damaged leg. It was rather rough going, through the tangled bushes, but they were round the car at last, and free to resume their way by the lane.

But progress was slow. Bob Cherry was quite willing to limp in late and take lines from Quelch, while his comrades hurried in on time. But 'sink or swim together' was the motto of the Famous Five: and the other four members of the Co. had no idea whatever of leaving him to it. They accommodated their pace to Bob's limp.

Greyfriars was still at a distance, but eleven strokes from the old clock-tower floated faintly to their ears, on the summer breeze, as they came out into the Friardale road.

'That does it!' grunted Bob.

'O.K. old bean,' said Johnny Bull. 'We've had lines from Quelch before,—and we can stand it.'

'Wouldn't I like to punch his head!' breathed Bob.

'Eh? What do you want to punch Quelch's head for?' asked Johnny. 'Beaks have to give fellows lines when they're late for class.'

'I don't mean Quelch's head you ass—I mean that blithering dummy's head, chump, who left that rotten car for me to bash into, fathead. Wow!'

Bob's usually sunny temper seemed a little overcast!

It was ten minutes before the Famous Five were within the walls of Greyfriars School. The forms were in the form-rooms, the quadrangle deserted, as they went into the House.

A gimlet-eye gleamed at them, as they presented themselves in the Remove form-room.

Mr. Quelch did not look pleased with them.

'Wharton! Nugent! Bull! Cherry! Hurree Singh!

You are twelve minutes late for class!' rapped Mr. Quelch. 'Go to your places at once,—and take one hundred lines each. You will bring them to me this afternoon.'

The five juniors went to their places, in silence. Mr. Quelch was not in his bonniest mood: possibly thinking that the affair of Billy Bunter was trouble enough, without delinquency in his form over and above. Five fellows were booked for 'lines' on a half-holiday, which was not an agreeable prospect: but one of them, at least, was, not thinking of the lines—Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's dusky face was very thoughtful: and the subject of the keen-witted nabob's reflections was something that had not occurred to his comrades.

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS MAKES A DISCOVERY

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY frowned.

He was displeased.

Arthur Augustus was an equable fellow, blessed with the best of tempers. Seldom did a frown wrinkle his aristocratic brow. But the most equable fellow could hardly be pleased, when the voice of a bosom pal floated to his ears, making such a remark as 'That ass, Gussy!' And that disparaging remark floated to his noble ears, as he sat at the open window of the junior day-room in the School-House at St. Jim's, on Saturday afternoon. Obviously, Jack Blake, when he made that remark in the quad, did not know his noble chum was sitting at an open window within hearing of the same. Gussy, leaning back in the window-seat, was invisible from the quad. Blake's remark floated in at the open window to unseen ears.

Arthur Augustus sat up, frowning.

He was not, as a matter of fact, in quite so equable a mood as usual that day. He had fixed that Saturday afternoon for a ride over to the lonely bungalow on Carcroft Heath, with the full intention of bestowing a thrashing on the bull-necked young man who had handled a stick on his noble person. And that plan had been knocked on the head by the cricket match Tom Merry had fixed up with the heroes of the New House at St. Jim's. It had to be left over till the next half-holiday to be carried out, if it was going to be carried out at all. And that, as Arthur Augustus had told his friends, was as settled and unalterable as the laws of the Medes and Persians.

Not that Arthur Augustus was the fellow to bear grudges or to remember offences for long. But this was an exceptional case. That bull-necked young man had been so very offensive, for no reason at all that Gussy was able to fathom. He had pitched into the swell of St. Jim's with a stick, and driven him headlong out into pouring rain. If ever an offensive person deserved to undergo a thrashing, that bull-necked young man at the bungalow did. He had asked for it: and that for which he had asked, he was going to get. Arthur Augustus's determination on that point was unalterable. And Arthur Augustus was not at all keen to leave that deserved chastisement over till the following week.

However, there seemed no help for that. Cricket, as Tom Merry had said was cricket, and had to come first. Arthur Augustus was going to play cricket that afternoon, in the House game, and contribute, if he could, the century which had somehow misfired at Greyfriars the week before.

'That ass Gussy!' Jack Blake's voice had a note of exasperation. And he went on, unaware of a frowning pal at the window of the day-room. 'That chump! That mule!'

'What's the row?' came Tom Merry's voice.

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy shifted his position a little, and turned his eyeglass on the fellows in the quad. There were six of them, in a group, — Tom Merry and Manners and Lowther of the Shell: Blake and Herries and Digby of the Fourth. It was not yet time to change for cricket: stumps were not to be pitched for half an hour yet.

'The ass!' said Blake.

'The fathead!' said Herries.

'The chump!' said Dig.

This was not really news to Arthur Augustus: he was aware that his loyal pals regarded him sometimes, if not always, as an ass, a fathead, and a chump. They had in fact often told him so in Study No. 6.

'But what—?' asked Monty Lowther.

'Oh, he makes me tired!' said Blake. 'Look at the trouble we've taken to keep him from hiking over to that bung to kick up a shindy. And now—!'

'Well, that's all right,' said Tom Merry. 'Gussy's safe for the afternoon—with a cricket match fixed up specially and solely to keep him out of mischief.'

'Bai Jove!' breathed Arthur Augustus. He gave quite a start.

He had regarded that cricket match as distinctly inconvenient, washing out as it did his plans for the day. But it had not occurred to his unsuspecting mind that it had been fixed up wholly for that purpose.

The frown on his aristocratic brow deepened. His eye, and his eyeglass, gleamed at the group in the quad.

'That's all right,' said Blake. 'He's safe for today, but—.'

'The ass!' said Herries.

'The goat!' said Dig.

'The mule!' said Blake. 'As he's fixed for cricket today he's going over on Wednesday,—so he says. Now, how are we going to bottle him up on Wednesday? We're jolly well not going to let him hike over to that bung and get his face pushed in.'

'No fear I' said Herries.

Tom Merry chuckled.

'Oh, we'll think that out by Wednesday,' he said. 'If Gussy hasn't forgotten all about it by that time, we'll pull his jolly old leg somehow, and keep him clear of Carcroft Heath.'

'I've a jolly good mind to punch his head,' growled Blake. 'But I couldn't punch any sense into it. And—!'

At this point there came an interruption. The group of juniors had not noticed a face at the window. But they noticed a head that was projected from the window, and an eyeglass that gleamed in the summer sunshine. And they had to notice an indignant voice:

'You uttah wottahs!' exclaimed Arthur Augustus.

'Oh!' ejaculated Blake.

All the group stared round. Six pairs of startled eyes fixed on the wrathful, indignant face of the swell of St. Jim's.

'Oh, my hat!' said Tom Merry.

'That ass—!' said Blake.

'Bai Jove! I heard evewy word you fellows were sayin!'

 exclaimed Arthur Augustus, with almost breathless indignation. 'You have fixed up the cwicket simply to pull my leg.'

'You see, we had to keep you away!' explained Blake, 'and it was no use talking sense to you! It never is, is it?'

'Woolly, Blake—.'

'All for your own good, Gussy!' said Tom Merry, soothingly. 'You couldn't expect your pals to let you go out collecting thick ears and black eyes!'

'Weally, Tom Mewwy—.'

'Forget all about it, old chap!' advised Manners.

'Weally, Mannahs—.'

'Well, the fat's in the fire now!' sighed Blake, 'but you're not going over to that bung next Wednesday. Gussy. If we can't keep you in by pulling your leg, we'll sit on your head in the study.'

'I am not gain' ovah to that bung next Wednesday, Blake!' said Arthur Augustus, sternly.

'Oh, good!' said Bake. 'That will save us the trouble of sitting on your head.'

'I am not goin' ovah on Wednesday, Blake, because I am goin' ovah this aftahnoon!' rapped Arthur Augustus.

'Cricket—!' began Tom Merry.

'Wats!' interrupted Arthur Augustus.

'My dear chap, we want that century—!' said Lowther.

'Wats!'

'Look here—!' said Blake.

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus, for the third time. 'I am awah now, Tom Mewwy, why you have fixed up the cwicket, and I uttahly wefuse to have my leg pulled in such a mannah. I shall not play for the House this aftahnoon. You will have to find anothah man.'

'Now, look here, Gussy—.'

'I wefuse to look there!' said Arthur Augustus, 'and I uttahly wefuse to discuss the mattah furthah. I am goin' ovah to that bung to thwash that wottah who walloped me with a stick. And as I cannot wely on my fwiends to back me up, I am go in' ovah on my own, and chancin' that wottah gettin' hold of a stick again. Wats!'

'Look here, Gussy—!' exclaimed six voices in chorus.

'Wats!' said Arthur Augustus, for the fourth time. And he disappeared from the window. Evidently, Arthur Augustus had said his say, and had nothing more to add. 'Gussy, you ass—!' roared Blake.

'Gussy, you chump!' exclaimed Herries. 'Gussy, you fathead!' howled Dig.

But answer there came none. Arthur Augustus was gone. Tom Merry and Co. looked at one another rather blankly. The fat, as Blake had remarked, was in the fire now. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was wise to the measures his anxious friends had taken to keep him off the war-path: and, cricket or no cricket. Arthur Augustus was going on the war-path that afternoon, after all, and that was that!

THE CAR IN THE WOOD

'BLOW!' said Bob Cherry.

He spoke with deep feeling.

It was a glorious summer's afternoon. Blue skies and balmy breezes,, green woods and a winding river, called to the open spaces. Almost every Greyfriars man was out somewhere that afternoon. Only one Remove study was tenanted. Even Lord Mauleverer would have walked abroad had he not been gated: Mauly was sauntering in the quad. Even Fisher T. Fish found the sunshine, for once, more attractive than counting his money. Even Billy Bunter, had he been in his accustomed place, might have rolled out into the open instead of adhering to the most comfortable armchair in the Rag. But five luckless juniors had lines to write before they could get out: and they gathered round the table in No. 1 Study to scribble them, in a mood much less cheery than was the wont of the Famous Five.

Bob was still feeling twinges in his knee from the morning's crash. But those twinges would not have kept him indoors. Lines from Quelch, however, did what nothing else could have done.

'Blow!' repeated Bob. 'That silly ass, parking his silly car where a fellow had to run into it—Blow!'

'Bother him!' said Frank Nugent. 'But for that idiotic car, we should have been in on time for class.'

'Wouldn't I like to punch his silly head!' sighed Bob. 'Still that wouldn't get these dashed lines done. Blow!'

'The blowfulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, 'but what cannot be cured must go longest to the well, as the English proverb remarks.'

'Get on with it,' said Harry Wharton.

They got on with it. Virgil was propped open on the table, and five pens proceeded to transcribe his deathless verse. Seldom, if ever, had Virgilian verse appealed less to the chums of the Remove. From *arma virumque cano* to *correpta sub undis* was the task, and it was too laborious for any member of the Co. to think of adding another line, or even another word, to the quantity specified by their form-master: though one more line would have brought them to a full stop. Neither were they interested by the fact that Line 102 would have brought them to the justly-celebrated shipwreck episode. Line 100 was the limit, and quite enough for them.

It was rather a race. Harry Wharton was the first at the goal of *sub undis*. Nugent was a good second. Johnny Bull was 'placed', as a racing man would express it: he was in the first three! Hurree Jamset Ram Singh finished fourth. Bob, who was not a rapid worker, and who paused every now and then to give his knee a rub, was still at *haec ubi dicta* when his comrades one after another had arrived at *sub undis*.

They waited for him to get through. Bob laboured on.

But even the weariest river winds somewhere safe to sea, as the poet has remarked: and Bob, at long last, scribbled *sub undis* with immense relief. He threw down his pen, hurled Virgil across the study, and jumped up,—rather forgetful of a twingeing knee, which however he remembered the next moment.

'Wow!' gasped Bob. 'Wow! My knee! Blow!'

He rubbed that knee.

'I'd like to meet that idiot who parked his ear in the wood—and give him just one good one, right on the boko!' he remarked.

Harry Wharton laughed.

'Never mind him and his boko,' he said. 'Let's get this impot, down to Quelch, and get out. What about a pull up the Sark as far as Popper's Island?'

'Good!' said Bob.

'The goodfulness is terrific,' remarked Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'but—.'

'But what?' asked Bob.

'Now that the absurd lines are done, and we can get outfully. I have something to say before we go,' said the nabob. 'If you will lend me your idiotic ears, my esteemed chums—' Four fellows looked at him inquiringly. Now that their task was done, they were very keen to get into the open. However, they wanted to hear what the dusky junior had to say.

'Carry on, Inky,' said Harry Wharton.

'I have been thoughtfully reflecting on the subject of the absurd car in the wood,' explained Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'It occurred to my debilitated brain that it was preposterously peculiar for the car to be there at all.'

'That's so,' said Harry. 'What about it?'

'If it is still remainfully in the same spot—.'

'That's not likely,' said Frank Nugent, with a stare. 'Who'd leave a car hanging about for four or five hours, stuck away in a wood?'

'The person might have a reason, my esteemed Franky.

He might want a car handy, out of view of the esteemed public. The esteemed and execrable Hoot must have had a car handy last Wednesday when the absurd Bunter disappeared. Otherwisefully, how did he get him away unseefully?'

Four juniors jumped.

'Inky!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

The Co. stared at Hurree Jam set Ram Singh. They had been puzzled, as well as exasperated, by the presence of that car in the hidden lane near the school. But they had not given it much thought: and certainly it had not occurred to them to connect it with the long-legged man from the States who had kidnapped the Owl of the Remove. Apparently Hurree Jamset Ram Singh surmised a connection.

All Greyfriars knew now that Billy Bunter had been kidnapped in mistake for Lord Mauleverer. His borrowed plumes had led to that error on the part of Marcus K. Hoot. That Mr. Hoot would discover his error sooner or later was hardly to be doubted. Mr. Quelch had warned Lord Mauleverer, with redoubled impressiveness, that he must on no account whatever take a single step outside the school gates: evidently considering it possible that the gangster might make another attempt, when he learned that the 'noble lord' was not after all in his hands. Indeed it was known that the Head had requested the prefects to keep an eye on that distinguished member of the Greyfriars community, to make assurance doubly sure as it were. Neither Dr. Locke nor the Remove master desired to run the slightest risk of Mauuly joining Billy Bunter in his place of captivity, wherever he was.

'Inky!' repeated the captain of the Remove. 'You think—!'

'By gum!' said Bob, with a whistle. 'Inky, old man—.'

'The thoughtfulness is terrific,' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, quietly. 'That absurd car was not merely parked, my esteemed chums,—it was hidden—.'

'Looked like it!' said Johnny Bull, with a nod. 'Ten to one nobody would come on it there—if we hadn't run into it this morning. But—.'

'Holy smoke!' said Nugent. 'You think that that kidnapper may be prowling about, looking for another chance at Mauuly?'

'He must have been prowling about, looking for a chance at Mauuly, the day he nobbled the esteemed and idiotic Bunter and he must have had a car handy in some secludeful spot.'

said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'If the absurd car is still park fully hidden where we saw it—.'

'We can jolly well soon find that out.' said Bob Cherry. 'We'll jolly well trot along, and see. what?'

'That is the idiotic idea!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, with a nod of his dusky head. 'If the car is gone, the walkfulness in the wood will not hurt us: but if it is still there, the suspiciousness will be terrific.'

'I wonder!' said Harry. 'Anyway, we'll jolly well look into it. Let's cut down with these lines, and get going.' The juniors lost no time. The lines were duly delivered in Mr. Quelch's study: and they went out into the quad. Lord Mauleverer ambled up as they headed for the gates. 'Goin' out?' he asked. 'Think Quelch would be awfully shirty if I came along, what?'

'Bank on that, fathead!' said Bob Cherry. 'You stick in gates, Mauly. Why, Inky thinks that kidnapper may be prowling round looking for you this very minute.'

'Oh, gad!' yawned Mauleverer. 'That man Coot—I mean Shoot—is beginnin' to be a bore, you fellows. I really wish that Mr. Grimes would nobble that man Boot.'

'We may be nobbling him ourselves this afternoon,' grinned Bob.

'Oh, gad!' repeated Lord Mauleverer, staring. The Famous Five went out of gates and left him to stare.

The Co. were in a state of mild excitement, as they headed for Friardale Wood. True, they more than half expected to find that the car was gone, after such a lapse of time. But the bare possibility of getting a clue to Billy Bunter's kidnapper was exciting. And they all agreed that if the car was still there, in that hidden spot, it would look extremely suspicious. They threaded the little narrow lane, almost like a dusky tunnel under the thick overhanging branches, excitement growing as they neared the spot where they had seen the car in morning break.

'Hallo, hallo, hallo!' ejaculated Bob Cherry, suddenly.

'Look!' He pointed.

'The car!' exclaimed Harry Wharton.

'By gum!'

There it was—ahead of them, blocking the narrow lane, exactly as they had seen it in the morning. It was still there, and it still had no occupant: evidently it had not stirred since Bob had crashed into it four or five hours ago. The Famous Five stood looking at it, and at one another. They had agreed that if the car was still there, it would look suspicious: but they felt now that it was something more than suspicion—something more like certainty: that the keen-witted nabob of Bhanipur had, in fact, hit the right nail on the head! And if that was so, the long-legged gangster was prowling somewhere in the vicinity of Greyfriars, the car in that hidden spot waiting for him—and a passenger!

CHAPTER 28

AFTER HIM!

'GUSSY, you ass!'

'Gussy, you goat!'

'Stop, will you!'

Arthur Augustus D'Arcy did not stop. He did not even turn his head. All he turned was a deaf ear.

Blake and Herries and Digby had been looking for him.

They had not seen him since he disappeared from the window of the junior day-room.

Now they saw him again—wheeling out his bike!

Regardless of cricket, regardless of the fact that his name figured in the School House list for the House match that had been fixed up for his special behoof, the swell of St. Jim's was going out. And his chums did not need telling where he was going. He was going across Carcroft Heath,—on his own! He was going to thrash that obnoxious young man with the bull-neck: taking chances—rather long chances—of the obnoxious young man getting hold of a stick again, in which case Arthur Augustus's last state was likely to be worse than his first. Apparently he did not care. His noble blood was up, and he was going. Three juniors stared after him, in exasperation, and shouted. They might as well have whispered. Arthur Augustus did not heed.

'Gussy!' roared Blake. 'Come back, you ass!'

'Hold on to his ears!' suggested Herries.

As if in anticipation of such a move, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy put a leg over his machine, and shot out on the road.

'Oh, the ass!' breathed Blake.

'Oh, the fathead!' sighed Dig.

The three stood exchanging wrathful looks. All their plans for keeping their aristocratic chum out of trouble had failed: and Arthur Augustus had taken the bit between his teeth, as it were. It was too late even for the extreme resource of sitting on his head in the study! He was gone! Blake and Co. were booked for cricket. But could they let Gussy ride off over Carcroft Heath hunting for trouble on his lonely own? They could not.

Tom Merry came up. He was in flannels: and evidently thinking more of cricket than of the vagaries of Arthur Augustus D'Arcy. He called to D'Arcy's worried chums, as he came.

'Time to get changed, you men. Gussy gone?'

'Yes, the ass!' growled Blake.

'Well, Gussy wouldn't guess it, but we can fill his place all right.' said Tom, laughing.

'We'll pull through somehow without that century he wasn't going to make. I've told Glyn he'll be wanted. Come on.'

The three Fourth-formers did not stir.

'We can't let that ass butt into trouble on his own,' grunted Blake. 'We're going after him.'

'Must!' said Herries, with a nod.

'Get out the jiggers.' said Dig.

'Oh, my hat!' exclaimed Tom Merry. 'Look here, cricket's cricket, you men—and I've got one place to fill already—.'

'You'll have to fill three more, somehow. Think we're going to let that fathead rip!' yapped Blake.

'Might get his nut cracked, if that hooligan at the bungalow handles a stick on him again!' said Herries.

'The ass!' said Tom.

'We've got to see him through!' said Dig.

'The fathead!'

'Get the jiggers out,' said Blake.

'The dithering duffer!' exclaimed Tom. 'After we've fixed up the cricket specially to keep him out of mischief—the howling ass!'

'All that, and more!' agreed Blake. 'But we've got to go after him, all the same. From what he's told us, that blighter at the bung is the sort of hooligan who wouldn't care if he cracked a fellow's nut with his stick. We just can't leave Gussy to it.'

'Bother him!' said Tom. But he nodded. 'All right, you'd better go. Give him a kick from me, when you catch him. I shall have to sort out three more men—bother!'

'Get to it, you fellows,' said Blake, and the three hurried into the bike-shed for their machines.

'Bother!' repeated Tom Merry, and he hurried away, to look out three more recruits for his team. There was, after all, plenty of cricketing talent in the School House at St. Jim's: and it was not a game that figured in the records. That game, which had been specially designed to keep Arthur Augustus D'Arcy out of mischief, had to be played: and it had to be played without him, and without any other member of Study No. 6. But it could not be helped: and Tom Merry lost no time in making the best of it.

It was exasperating enough to Blake and Herries and Dig, who were keen on cricket, and not at all keen on chasing off across Carcroft Heath, on the trail of their obstinate chum, with a shindy awaiting them at the end of the chase. But friendship's call was not to be passed unheeded: they simply could not leave Arthur Augustus to his fate.

They pushed out the bicycles without delay, and started.

Nothing was to be seen of Arthur Augustus: he had lost no time, and was already out of sight. But there was no doubt of the way he had gone, and his anxious friends pedalled in pursuit.

While feeling powerfully inclined to boot their noble chum when they came up with him, they were nevertheless very keen to join him before he encountered that ruffianly fellow at the lonely bungalow. If that fellow was anything like Gussy's description of him, Gussy was quite certain to need his friends at hand when the encounter took place. They put on speed, and the miles whizzed under the whirling wheels.

But Arthur Augustus seemed to be putting on speed also: possibly in anticipation of pursuit: and further argument, which might perhaps take the drastic form of sitting on his head! He was out of sight, and he continued out of sight: and it was not till they reached Carcroft Heath that they had a glimpse of him.

Far away across that open sunny expanse, they spotted a St. Jim's cap, in the far distance. Blake released one hand from a handle-bar to point.

'There he is!' he grunted.

'There's the silly ass!' said Dig.

'There's the dithering dummy!' agreed Herries.

'Put it on!' growled Blake. 'Goodness knows what will happen, if he gets there first! Oh, won't I jolly well boot him for this!'

They put it on! But the swell of St. Jim's, little more than a speck ahead, was putting it on also. The distance between did not diminish.

Carcroft Heath, on a sunny summer's afternoon, presented an aspect very different from that of the previous Wednesday, when Arthur Augustus had ploughed through a weeping wilderness of rain and mud. The track was rough and rugged, and the bikes jolted and bumped: but it was really quite a pleasant ride across the heath, under a sunny blue sky: had not Blake and Co. been so deeply concerned for their obstinate chum, who was seeking trouble which was obviously more than he could handle.

Arthur Augustus slowed down a little, as a line 'of willows came in sight across the heath. Those willows indicated the lane in which was situated the lonely bungalow where he had had so very unpleasant an experience on Wednesday afternoon. Perhaps it occurred to him that it would be prudent to arrive in a not too breathless state, considering his fell intentions towards the bull-necked young man at the bungalow.

'Put it on!' breathed Blake, as the distance between diminished.

The bikes fairly flew.

Arthur Augustus turned from the track, to cut across to the lane marked by the willows. It was then that he glanced back, and for the first time beheld his three anxious friends in pursuit.

He stared back at them, his eyeglass gleaming in the summer sun. Blake waved a hand, as a signal to him to stop.

That signal had the opposite effect. Instead of stopping, Arthur Augustus shot on again, and vanished beyond the willows in the lane.

'Oh, the ass!' breathed Blake.

'Oh, the goat!' hissed Herries.

'Oh, the chump!' breathed Dig.

They raced on. They were quite near their destination now: though by no means so near as Arthur Augustus. They could see the red roof of the bungalow along the lane— and that, they had no doubt, was the building for which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was heading. He was almost there: and they were still a good distance behind.

But they came out into the lane at last, and turned their machines in the direction of the bungalow. A wind of the lane, banked by willows, hid it from them, excepting the roof and chimney-stack. Arthur Augustus was no longer to be seen ahead, and they did not doubt that he had already reached the bungalow. They fairly whizzed down that winding lane: and as they whizzed, their ears, though not their eyes, apprised them that Arthur Augustus had already arrived there, and found the trouble for which he was hunting. For a well-known voice, on its top note, floated over the willows.

'Yawwooh! Oh, cwumbs! You wottah! You wuffian! You wat! Oh, cwikey!'

Evidently, Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was in sore need of pals at hand!

THE KNOCKING AT THE DOOR

'BEAST!' murmured Billy Bunter.

His little round eyes gleamed at the bull-necked young man, loafing and smoking cigarettes in the rocker, through his big round spectacles. Never in his fat life had Billy Bunter loathed any person so much as he loathed that bull-necked young man from the U.S.A. He would have given much, very much, to punch that young man's head.

Often had Billy Bunter desired to establish contact between a fat fist and an offending head. Often he had wanted to punch Smithy's, for booting him when tuck was missing: and Harry Wharton's, for rounding him up for games-practice: and even-shocking to relate-Quelch's, for ragging a fellow over deponent verbs. But never had he so intensely desired to punch any head, as he desired to punch Andy Pike's. It would have been absolutely enjoyable to rush out into the hall of the bungalow, and land Andy a really good one, and send him spinning over, rocker and all.

But the fat Owl of Greyfriars did not think of trying it on. It remained a happy thought and an ungratified longing. If only he could have handed out 'sockdolagers' like Marcus K. Hoot! But he couldn't! So far from Bunter punching Andy's head, Andy had smacked Bunter's, more than once. Andy seemed fully to reciprocate the fat junior's antipathy. Saturday was bright and sunny: but the sunshine was not reflected in Bunter's fat face, which was gloomy and pessimistic.

Sunlight filtered in through the slats of the shutters at his window. By putting his fat face and spectacles close to the shutters, Bunter could get a glimpse of the outside world—the long garden, with the garage drive, the gate on the willow-lined lane, and rolling pasture-lands beyond. But he never glimpsed anything but the beauties of Nature, which had absolutely no appeal for him in the circumstances. Nobody ever seemed to come along that solitary Sussex lane: neither, if anyone had, would it have been of any use to Bunter, as he was too far from the road for a yell for help to be heard by any passer,—in the improbable event of his venturing to yell, with Andy in the offing.

The day was dragging by; to the kidnapped Owl time in the lonely bungalow with Andy seemed to drag, even more than in the Remove form-room at Greyfriars with Quelch! Early in the morning, he had heard the car depart, and had not seen Marcus K. Hoot since. The long-legged gangster was gone: and from snatches of talk he had heard between the two rascals, Bunter surmised that Greyfriars School was his objective.

Having now learned that he had kidnapped, not the wealthy Lord Mauleverer, but an absolutely valueless Bunter, Mr. Hoot apparently still had a hope of setting the matter right. At all events he was going to try it on.

Mr. Hoot guessed, reckoned, and calculated that he was not going to come out at the little end of the horn. He was going to cinch that noble lord, by hook or by crook—if he could! Billy Bunter realised that unless, and until, he did, a fat Owl, valueless as he was, had to remain a prisoner at the lonely bungalow. The gangsters could not afford to let him 'skip' and 'chew the rag', They did not want him—and indeed Andy left him in no doubt that he was sick of the sight of him—but they had to keep him, for safety's sake, till they were through with the kidnapping game. It was a dismal prospect for Bunter.

True, they had not carried out that dire threat of stopping the 'eats'. But since the discovery that he was not after all a noble lord, but only an irritating fat Owl upon whom they had wasted time and trouble, hospitality had sadly deteriorated. Andy was not wasting either 'eats' or civility on an unwelcome lodger whom he would gladly have kicked out of the

bungalow, and whom he promised himself the pleasure of kicking out when it was no longer necessary to keep him there.

There had been balm in Gilead, so to speak, so long as the food was good and ample. Now it was neither. At dinner time, Andy slapped a plate of beans from a can on Bunter's table, accompanied by a hunk of bread and a scowl. It almost drove Bunter to tell Andy what he thought of him. He refrained, however, for clearly Andy wanted only the slightest excuse to smack a fat head again.

Andy was in a very bad temper that day. Probably he doubted whether Marcus, after having so very thoroughly given the alarm at Greyfriars, had anything like a healthy chance of 'cinching' that noble lord. Possibly he doubted whether Marcus himself might not be 'cinched' in seeking to carry out that difficult task: when the kidnapping game would be up. Really, it was an anxious time for a young man who preferred kidnapping to honest work as a means of gaining a livelihood: and it was perhaps no wonder that it told on Andy's temper.

Whenever he glanced into Bunter's room, he scowled.

Billy Bunter murmured 'Beast!' but not loud enough to reach Andy's ears. He blinked at Andy, as he sat and smoked one cigarette after another, and longed to punch him.

Knock!

Bunter jumped. Andy bounded, in the rocker, as that knock came at the front door of the bungalow, in the drowsy summer's afternoon.

It was the first time Bunter had heard a knock at the door, since he had been a prisoner in the bungalow, and it startled him. It could not be Mr. Hoot returning: there had been no sound of a car, and the gangster would have come by way of the garage. Some stranger, it seemed, must have come along, and knocked at the door, for some reason best known to himself.

Bunter caught his breath, and his eyes danced behind his spectacles. Someone was at the door—someone was only a few yards from him—and if he could make his presence known—.

A fierce glare from Andy drove that idea from his mind, as soon as it germinated there. It was not necessary for Andy to tell him to be silent. That look was sufficient: added to the stick that Andy caught up, as he leaped from the rocker. Billy Bunter had no desire whatever for that thick stick to contact his fat head.

Knock! knock!

Andy stood still, staring at the door. Someone was standing in the porch outside, where that schoolboy had sheltered from the rain a few days ago, and knocking at the door. Who he was, and what he wanted, Andy did not know and could not guess: but he did not approach the door, and he made no sound, no doubt hoping that the unknown person, whoever he was, receiving no answer, would go on his way.

Evidently, however, the unknown person did not go on his way. He knocked again, with more emphasis than before.

Knock! knock! knock!

Andy breathed hard, and his eyes gleamed. He was quite prepared to treat any unwelcome visitor as he had treated that schoolboy earlier in the week, and his grasp closed hard on the stick of which Arthur Augustus D'Arcy of St. Jim's had once felt the weight.

Knock! knock! knock! knock!

Andy stepped to the door at last. He did not open it, or unlock it. But he shouted to the unseen person without.

'Say, who's there? What you want in this dump?'

No answer came from the person outside. Perhaps it occurred to that person that the bull-necked young man might not open the door, if he knew who was there! The unseen person did not speak: but he knocked again, harder than before.

Knock! knock! KNOCK!

There was an iron knocker on the front door. It was being wielded in a quite vigorous hand. The knocking fairly rang through the bungalow. It woke every echo in the building. It was as alarming as the knocking on the door in Macbeth, to a rogue who was never quite free of the fear of feeling a policeman's hand on his shoulder.

Andy, gripping the stick, glared at the door. He yelled through it again.

'Say, what you want?'

Knock! knock!

'Get out of it! You hear me yaup?' shouted Andy.

Knock! knock!

Bunter almost gasped with excitement. Whoever was at the door, evidently did not intend to go. If only it was a policeman—!

Billy Bunter had no great love or esteem for the police force. He had once had quite a painful interview with Police Constable Tozer, at Friardale, who had caught him in an orchard. He still remembered how very unpleasant that had been. But at the present moment, the sight of the familiar helmet would have overjoyed him. If only it was a policeman—!

But Andy Pike, after his first alarm, realised that it couldn't be an officer of the law. An officer of the law would not have contented himself with knocking. He would have become vocal. It was not that: but who the John James Brown it could possibly be, who persisted in hammering at the door, had Andy guessing.

Knock! knock! KNOCK!

'Say, you going to beat it, you gink, whoever you are?' roared Andy.

Knock! knock!

'Carry me home to die!' breathed Andy. 'I'll sure make that guy tired of hammering at a galoot's door!' He glared round at Bunter. 'Say, you! You give so much as a whisper, and you get yours, and I'm telling you it will hurt!'

With that, he tramped savagely across to the door on the garage. There was no danger of Bunter giving so much as a whisper. Andy and his thick stick were altogether too dangerous for that. The gangster tramped into the garage, slammed and locked the door after him, and then tramped out by the double-doors, stick in hand, to deal with the persistent knocker at the door.

Knock! knock!

Then there was a yell outside.

'By the great horned toad! You agin!' Andy, having emerged from the garage and gone along to the porch, had apparently recognised the caller there. His voice rose in an exasperated roar. 'You! Didn't I give you enough of this here stick? You come back for more you young gink? Search me! I guess you're going to get what you come for, and get it hard! Yup!'

'Oh, crikey!' breathed Bunter.

He glued his eyes, and spectacles, to an interstice in the shutter slats. He had a view of Andy Pike, with a face red with rage, brandishing the stick. Then he had a glimpse of an elegant figure that bounded out of the porch, just in time to elude a slash from the stick. And as he glimpsed that elegant figure, Billy Bunter wondered whether his eyes or his spectacles were deceiving him—or was he blinking, through the shutter, at the St. Jim's junior he had set out to visit on Wednesday, with such unlucky results?

'Oh, crumbs!' gasped the fat Owl.

Neither his eyes nor his spectacles deceived him. There, full in view in the bright sunshine of the summer afternoon, was Arthur Augustus D'Arcy, of the Fourth Form at St. Jim's,—hopping and jumping like a kangaroo in frantic endeavours to dodge the slashes of Andy's stick!

BUNTER'S CHANCE

ARTHUR AUGUSTUS D'ARCY yelled.

Seldom, if ever, did Arthur Augustus express his feelings in so emphatic a manner. The repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere was Gussy's long suit. Not often did his well-modulated voice rise. But it rose now—to its top note! It rose frantically. Arthur Augustus hopped, and jumped, and bounded, and yelled. Hopping and jumping and bounding saved him from some of Andy's swipes with the stick. But not from all. And when they landed, they landed hard.

'Oh, cwikey! Oh, cwumbs! You wotten wuffian! Wow!'

'You pesky young gink!' hissed Andy.

Why that schoolboy, whose existence he had forgotten, had come back again, Andy couldn't guess. Apparently he had come back for more of the same! If that was so, the exasperated gangster was more than ready to hand it out. He handed it out with vigour and vim.

The knocking on the door had given Andy alarm—brief, but very perturbing. And it was only that schoolboy again! Andy's idea was that he was going to make that schoolboy tired of moseying around that particular dump!

'Keep off, you wottah!' yelled Arthur Augustus. 'Oh, you wuffian! You wat! Bai Jove! Oh, cwikey! Wow!'

'Take that—and that—!' hissed Andy.

'Yawoooooh!'

'—and that—!'

'Wow! ow! Whoop!'

Arthur Augustus made backward jumps towards the gateway, where he had left his bicycle. He had come there to give the bull-necked young man the thrashing he so richly deserved. But he had to forget it now. He was fully occupied in dodging swipes from the stick. Back and back he went, followed up by Andy, swiping.

It was fortunate for Arthur Augustus that his loyal pals had followed on, and that Blake and Herries and Digby were coming up as fast as they could drive at the pedals. But for that, there was no doubt that a terrific thrashing would have been administered—but the bull-necked young man would not have been the person to whom it was administered!

But help was at hand.

Blake was the first of the three to reach the gateway.

One glance was enough for him, and he leaped off his machine, leaving it to spin where it would, and rushed in to the rescue. He shot at Andy almost like a bullet, and Andy hardly knew that he had arrived, before Blake's knuckles crashed on his slanting nose, and toppled him over.

'Oh, cwikey!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'Oh, cwumbs! Oh, scissahs!'

'Search me!' panted Andy.

He jumped up almost like a jack-in-the-box, and turned on Blake, with a savage glare, brandishing the stick. But two more breathless cyclists had arrived in the gateway now, and Herries and Dig rushed in. One crack from the stick landed on Blake, and then Andy was swept over by a rush.

This time he did not get on his feet again.

Arthur Augustus, in quite a dizzy state, was tottering and panting. But three sturdy St. Jim's juniors piled on Andy, grasping him on all sides. Blake wrenched away the stick, and sent it whizzing through the air, to fall a dozen yards away. Herries inserted both hands

into the back of Andy's collar, and held on: and, as Andy kicked out, Digby trampled recklessly on his legs. Who the man was, what he was, Blake and Co. had not the remotest idea: but the way he had been handling the stick on their aristocratic chum was enough for them. They could not have been more unceremonious with that bull-necked young man.

'Bai Jove!' gasped Arthur Augustus.

He recovered himself a little, and recaptured his eye-glass, which was floating at the end of its cord, and jammed it into his eye. He gazed at his three friends, and at Andy, struggling in their grasp, and almost spitting with rage.

'Say, you gecks, will you let up on a guy?' howled Andy. 'Pway, welease him, deah boys.' said Arthur Augustus. 'I am goin' to thwash that wottah, and all I wequiah is for you fellows to see that he doesn't get hold of that stick again.'

'Fathead!' said Blake.

'Weally, Blake—.'

'Ass!' said Herries.

'Weally, Hewwies—.'

'Goat!' said Dig.

'Weally, Dig—.'

'Chump!' said his three friends, all together.

Arthur Augustus disdained to reply to that. He pushed back his cuffs, with a warlike gleam in his eye.

Now that his friends were on the spot to see fair play, Arthur Augustus saw no reason why the thrashing should not proceed as per schedule. The renewed application of Andy's stick had not diminished his determination. Rather it had intensified it.

Andy eyed him almost like a wolf. There was undoubtedly a yellow streak in Andy: but he was alarmed less by Arthur Augustus's warlike intentions, than by the presence of the little crowd of schoolboys so near the bungalow in which a kidnapped prisoner was held.

Probably he would never have emerged with that stick, had he guessed that three other fellows were so near at hand.

'Let that wuffian wise, you fellows,' said Arthur Augustus.

Andy was allowed to get on his feet. He scrambled up panting. Blake and Herries and Dig watched him, ready to collar him again at once if he gave trouble. But Andy had had all the trouble he wanted, and a little over. He backed away towards the bungalow.

Arthur Augustus followed him up.

'Put up your hands you wottah!' he snapped. 'I have come ovah heah this aftahnoon to thwash you—.'

'You pesky gink—!' hissed Andy. He backed further and again the swell of St. Jim's followed on.

'Look here, Gussy—!' howled Blake. 'Wats!'

'You're not going to scrap with that hooligan!' roared Herries.

'I certainly am, Hewwies! He is the wottah who dwove me out into the wain the othah day with a stick—.'

'Let him rip, you ass,' said Dig.

'I wefuse to let him wip! I am goin' to give him a feahful thwashin'. I am goin' to—Bai Jove!'

Andy made a backward jump, turned, and ran for the open doors of the garage. Blake and Herries and Dig grinned. They were, as a matter of fact, rather relieved to see him go.

But such was not the feeling of the wrathful Arthur Augustus. He rushed in pursuit.

'Stop, you wottah! Stop, you wat! Stop, you wuffian!' shouted Arthur Augustus, in great wrath. 'Will you stop, you wascal?'



'LET THAT WUFFIAN WISE, YOU FELLOWS,' SAID ARTHUR
AUGUSTUS

Andy did not stop. He tore on. After him tore Arthur Augustus. Blake and Co. grinning at the gate, watched the chase. But they ceased to grin as Arthur Augustus, within a couple of yards of the garage doorway, overtook the fleeing Andy, grasped him by the back of the collar, and dragged him to a halt.

'Now, you wottah—!' panted Arthur Augustus. Andy gave a panting yell, and turned on him like a tiger. The next moment quite a terrific scrap was raging. 'Oh, my hat!' gasped Blake. 'Come on, you men—we've got to stop this!'

The three juniors rushed forward. But before they reached the spot, that wild and whirling scrap ceased suddenly, as Andy went over on his back. Arthur Augustus D'Arcy was slim and elegant, but there was plenty of beef in his punch. His knuckles crashed on a slanting nose, and Andy almost flew. He landed on his back with a crash, and sprawled spluttering. 'Oh, cwikey!' Arthur Augustus rubbed his knuckles. 'Oh, cwumbs! Wow! I have barked my knuckles on his boko! Wow!'

'Man down!' grinned Blake. 'Now, you fathead, you've done enough, if not a little too much, and—.'

'I say, you fellows!'

Blake broke off suddenly, at that unexpected voice. He stared round at the shuttered window of the bungalow. Herries and Dig and Arthur Augustus stared round. Never had four fellows been so taken by surprise. That sudden squeak through the slats of a shutter was startling. 'What—!' stuttered Blake.

'Who—!' ejaculated Arthur Augustus.

'I say, you fellows! Help! I say, Gussy—I say, help! I'm kidnapped, and they're keeping me here! I say, you fellows, let me out!'

It was Billy Bunter's chance: and he was taking it.

ST. JIM'S TO THE RESCUE!

BILLY BUNTER put on steam.

He roared.

Bunter had hesitated long. His terror of Andy and the big stick was deep. But even Bunter screwed up his fat courage to the sticking-point, at what he glimpsed through the slats in the shutter. There were four St. Jim's fellows on the spot. They were easily near enough to hear him, now. Andy, deprived of that big stick, was sprawling on his back, knocked down by the warlike swell of St. Jim's. Obviously those fellows could handle him. Billy Bunter couldn't: but Arthur Augustus, plainly, could: and there were four of them. And the fat Owl was not letting this chance like the sunbeams pass him by. He shouted—he roared—he bawled.

'Help! I say, you fellows, come and let me out! Keep that beast off! I say, I'm kidnapped! Help!'

Stentor of old could hardly have put on more steam than Bunter at that moment. He fairly bellowed.

'Bai Jove!'

'Oh, my hat!'

'Great pip!'

'Who—what—?'

Blake and Co., staring blankly at that shuttered window, almost stuttered, in their astonishment. Billy Bunter roared on.

'I say, Gussy—I'm Bunter!—help! I'm kidnapped! Keep that beast away! Come and let me out of this! Help!'

'Gweat Scott!' gasped Arthur Augustus. 'I wathah think I know that voice—it's Buntah—'

'Bunter!' repeated Blake, dazedly.

'You wemembah—that Gweyfwhahs chap who was comin' ovah to see me on Wednesday, and nevah came—you wemembah his beak phoned to Wailton and said he was missin'—'

'I say, you fellows—!'

'I thought he had turned up—I mean, I should have thought he had turned up if I had thought about him at all—Bai Jove ! Collah that wat!'

Andy was scrambling up. What he fancied he could do, in the present circumstances, was not clear: for Andy's game undoubtedly was up, now. But Blake and Co. gave him no chance of doing anything. They collared him promptly. Hands grasped him on all sides and pinned him.

'Hold him,' said Blake. 'Goodness knows what all this means—but he's got a Greyfriars chap shut up in that bung, and we're letting him out—.'

'Yaas, wathah!'

'Keep him safe.'

Andy struggled savagely. He could hardly have hoped to turn the tables on the party of four. Probably, at this stage, he was thinking of escape. Anyhow he struggled and wrenched like a wildcat. But four pairs of hands were more than enough for Andy.

'Bang his head on that door if he doesn't keep quiet!' panted Dig.

Bang!

'Aw! Wake snakes!' yelled Andy, as his head contacted the garage door. 'You pesky gecks, let up! Let up on a guy! Ooooooooooh!'

'I say, you fellows!' Bunter, still understudying Stentor, bellowed on. 'I say, come and let me out! I say, he's got the key—there's a door from the garage, and he's got the key! Help! I say—.'

'Comin', deah boy,' called out Arthur Augustus.

'Come on!' gasped Blake. 'Bring that rat along—if the door's locked, he can unlock it for us! Get a move on, you brute.'

Andy had no choice about getting a move on. Blake and Digby had hold of his arms, Herries on his collar. They marched him into the garage. Arthur Augustus following on behind, prepared to knock Andy down again if he broke loose. But Andy had no chance of breaking loose.

The discovery that there was a Greyfriars fellow locked up in the lonely bungalow was utterly amazing to the St. Jim's juniors. In fact, it was more than merely amazing, it was astounding. Never had four fellows been so astonished. But now that they knew, they were prompt to act. Andy was hustled across the garage to the door that led into the building. It was locked, and no key was visible.

'Open that door!' rapped Blake. 'I guess—!'

'Will you open that door?'

'Nope!' yelled Andy. 'I'm telling you—yaroooooooooop!'

Bang!

Blake and Co. were wasting neither time nor ceremony on a rascal whom they now knew to be a kidnapper. Andy's head smote the door with a terrific bang.

'Now will you open it?' asked Blake.

'Aw! Carry me home to die!' gasped Andy. 'Yup—I guess I'll open that dog-goned door—give a guy time to get hold of the key.'

Andy groped in his pocket for the key, and unlocked the door. Blake kicked it wide open. From within came the dulcet tones of William George Bunter of the Greyfriars Remove.

'I say, you fellows! Help! I say—.'

'Here we are!' roared Blake.

'Oh, crikey!' Billy Bunter rolled out of his room into the hall, blinking at the St. Jim's juniors through his big spectacles, 'I say, you fellows, I'm jolly glad to see you! Oh crumbs! Oh, lor! I say—.' Bunter blinked uneasily at the scowling Andy. 'I say, keep that brute off! I—.'

'Bai Jove! It's Buntah!' said Arthur Augustus, his eye and eyeglass fixed in wonder on the Owl of Greyfriars. 'It is weally Buntah—.'

'It's Bunter!' said Blake. 'How on earth did you get here, Bunter?'

'I've been kidnapped!' gasped Bunter. 'That beast and another beast—the other beast brought me here in a car, and that beast has been keeping me here ever since—I've been here weeks and weeks—.'

'Bai Jove! Isn't that wathah an exaggewation, deah boy?' asked Arthur Augustus. 'It was only last Satahday we saw you at Gweyfwiahs—.'

'I mean days and days!' gasped Bunter. 'And I haven't had enough to eat! They kept me short of grub—.'

'Awful!' said Herries: perhaps sarcastically.

'Well it was all right at first,' said Bunter, 'but after they found out who I was, they cut down the grub! I'm hungry now.'

'You've been kidnapped?' said Dig, blankly. 'What on earth did they kidnap you for, Bunter?'

'You see, they took me for a lord—.'

'Bai Jove! Did they weally?' Arthur Augustus gazed at the fat Owl in great astonishment. 'Wemarkable! What could have put that ideah into their heads, Buntah? What a vevy wemarkable ewwah!'

'Oh, really, D'Arcy—!'

'Look out!' exclaimed Dig, as Andy made a sudden wrench, followed by a kangaroo-like bound. The grasp on Andy had slackened, and Andy was watching for a chance. He tore loose, and leaped for the garage doorway.

'Bai Jove! That wottah—!'

'Collar him!'

'Oh, let him rip!' said Blake. 'We don't want him! I expect the police will be looking for him, when they hear of this.'

'Yaas, wathah! Let the wottah wip!'

Andy was already 'ripping' as fast as his legs could move. He fairly whizzed through the garage, and ran like a hare for the gate. Now that the game was up, the kidnapped prisoner rescued, and the next item on the agenda a visit from the obnoxious persons whom Andy called 'cops', Andy was anxious to hit the open spaces. Andy vanished.

'Well, this beats Banagher!' remarked Blake. 'Gussy came over here to play the giddy ox—.' 'Weally, Blake—.'

'—and we came over to stop him, and it turns out that there was a kidnapped Greyfriars chap here all the while. Jolly glad we found you, Bunter. We'll see you safe off the premises now.'

'Yaas, wathah! They must have bwrought Buntah heah that vevy aftahnoon I came heah for sheltah fwom the wain!' said Arthur Augustus. 'He may have been in that vevy cah that tipped me into the ditch—.'

'Ha, ha, ha!'

'There is nothin' funnay in bein' tipped into a ditch, that I can see.' said Arthur Augustus severely. 'My clobbah was wuined, and the Carcwoft fellows were gwinnin' like any thin' when I got in. Bai Jove, you know. I shouldn't wondah if that was why that wat cut up so wusty and dwove me out into the wain—they did not want anyone awound if they were kidnappin' a chap! Buntah, deah boy. I am vevy glad that we have wescued you, and we will walk to Carcwoft station with you and see you safe on your twain for Gweyfwiahs.'

'Good egg!' said Blake, 'and the sooner the better—we shall have to tell Railton about this, and he can phone the police. Come on, Bunter.'

'Hold on though,' said Bunter.

'Eh! Don't you want to get out as soon as you can?'

'Oh! Yes! But—.'

'But what?'

'Didn't you hear me say that I was hungry?' asked Bunter, peevishly.

'Oh!'

'Bai Jove!'

'I had only a plate of beans for dinner!' said Bunter, pathetically. 'That was the way they treated a fellow, after they found out that I wasn't Lord Mauleverer. They've got lots of grub here—lots and lots! ' .

'Oh!'

It was an unavoidable delay! When Billy Bunter was hungry, and there was lots and lots of food at hand, obviously it was impossible to make an immediate start! Not till the inner Bunter was loaded well up to the Plimsoll line, did rescuers and rescued quit the lonely bungalow, and head for the railway station at Carcroft.

CHAPTER 32

'CINCHED!'

'HALLO, hallo, hallo!'

Bob Cherry uttered that exclamation, not in his usual cheery roar but in a low subdued whisper.

He held up his hand, in sign of silence.

'What—?' began Johnny Bull.

'Quiet!' whispered Bob.

Johnny, staring, was silent. Harry Wharton, Frank Nugent, and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, were silent too, staring at Bob. For the moment, they did not understand. Then they caught the rustle in the wood that Bob Cherry had been the first to hear.

The Famous Five were standing in the little dusky lane in Friardale Wood, in front of the car debating their next step. There was the car, standing where it had stood since the morning, parked and deserted in that remote and almost hidden spot. Someone, obviously, must have had a purpose in leaving it there, out of the public view: it was left there in readiness for—what?

If Hurree Jamset Ram Singh's surmise was correct, it was there to bear off a passenger whom the long-legged man from the States hoped to pick up. Certainly if Marcus K. Hoot was prowling in the vicinity of Greyfriars School, it behoved him to be very wary: and to keep his car well out of sight of anyone connected with the school. And but for the misadventure of the morning, certainly no Greyfriars eye would have fallen on it in that obscure corner of the wood. All the Co. agreed that it looked as if the nabob had it right. But—

The next step was dubious. It looked suspicious—more than suspicious—to Harry Wharton and Co. On the other hand, there might be absolutely nothing in it. It was easy to walk back to the road, take the bus to Courtfield, and apprise Inspector Grimes that the car was there—but would Mr. Grimes attach any importance to it? It was still easier to walk back to Greyfriars, and report the matter to Mr. Quelch, leaving him to judge whether to communicate with Mr. Grimes on the subject. But Quelch might not attach any importance to it either. The Co. were very keen indeed to root out any clue to the kidnapper who was on the trail of Lord Mauleverer: but they were aware that what they had discovered might turn out to be nothing but a mare's nest. Certainly they were going to do something about it: but what they were going to do, was not yet decided, when that rustle came from the thick greenery of the wood beside the little lane.

'Listen—!' breathed Bob.

Someone was coming through the wood—not by the lane from the road, the way the juniors had come, but pushing through the wood from another direction. The wood was thick, and brambles and briars and branches stirred and rustled, as the unseen newcomer approached. That he was approaching the lane was clear, for the rustling grew nearer and more audible every moment. Whoever it was, he was coming through the wood to that spot in the lane where the car stood parked.

Harry Wharton caught his breath.

'If—!' he breathed. He did not need to finish: his comrades understood: If it was the long-legged kidnapper—!

'He's coming here, at any rate.' whispered Bob Cherry.

'It's the man the car belongs to, you can be,—and he's coming here. Whether it's that spindle-shanked merchant or not, he's coming here to the car.'

'Looks like it,' muttered Nugent.

'The lookfulness is terrific, my esteemed chums!' murmured Hurree Jamset Ram Singh, 'and we shall soon see whether it is the esteemed and execrable Hoot.'

Johnny Bull knitted his brows, and clenched a pair of useful fists.

'Look here, if it's that blighter, why not collar him?' he whispered. 'We could handle him—the five of us. He's a hefty brute but all together—.'

'He won't show up if he spots us—if he's Hoot!' breathed Bob. 'Get out of sight before he gets any nearer.'

'Cover!' whispered Harry Wharton.

The rustling in the wood was drawing very near: but there was no vestige to be seen, yet, of the man who was coming. Whether it was indeed Marcus K. Hoot, coming back to his car: or whether it was some inoffensive motorist who had parked his car there for reasons known only to himself, the chums of the Remove could not tell. But it was easy enough to ascertain, by keeping out of sight until the unseen man emerged into the lane. And they lost no time now in taking cover.

Five fellows backed across the narrow lane, into the trees on the further side: taking excessive care that no rustle of twigs should betray them. In a few moments, they were out of sight: and watching the lane through interstices in the greenery. Their hearts were beating fast now. It was possible, indeed perhaps probable, that the man who was coming was some stranger with whom they had no concern. In a matter of minutes now, they were going to know. But if it was Marcus K. Hoot—their minds were already made up about what they were going to do, if it was Mr. Hoot. They waited and watched in almost breathless excitement.

A tall figure emerged from the thickets on the other side of the little lane.

They glimpsed first a bowler hat, which looked as if it was screwed down on a bullet head. And as they beheld that hat, they exchanged excited glances. They remembered the clamped-down bowler that had adorned the head of Marcus K. Hoot on the occasion of his visit to Greyfriars.

There was no doubt now. If there had been further doubt, it would have been gone the next moment, as the remainder of Mr. Hoot emerged into view in the lane. Five pairs of eyes, through the thick cover beside the lane, fixed on the long-legged figure, the lean face, the hawk-eyes, of the man they had seen on Little Side at Greyfriars the previous week. There was no doubt now to whom that hidden car belonged. The dusky nabob had had it right! Under the clamped-down bowler hat was a scowling, discontented face.

Mr. Hoot looked like a man who had not found things going to his satisfaction. He was coming back to his car: but he was coming alone! There was no passenger for Marcus to pack in this time! The wrong bird had been taken quite easily in the net, a few days ago: but the right bird was not so easy for Marcus to 'cinch'. If he had been prowling about the precincts of Greyfriars School, as no doubt he had, he had prowled in vain.

He emerged into the lane a few yards ahead of the stationary car. He was not more than six or seven feet from the hidden juniors, as he came to a halt. But the shadowed little lane presented its usual solitary aspect, and evidently it did not occur to Mr. Hoot that anyone was at hand. He gave a glance along the lane, from habitual caution, that was all. His hawk-eyes did not even turn towards the thickets that concealed five Greyfriars juniors a few feet away from him.

'Search me!' An angry mutter from Marcus reached the ears of the breathless five. 'Aw! Search me! I allow that this surely is the bee's knee! I'll tell a man, it's the opossum's eyebrows! By the great horned toad, I'll sure get that noble lord, if I have to go through the joint with a gun! Dog-gone that fat geck! Dog-gone him,—fooling a guy with another guy's hat on his dog-goned cabeza! How'd a guy guess that that fat, pie-faced, ornery gink wasn't the guy whose name was in his hat? Search me!'

The hidden juniors exchanged glances.

Every muttered word from the discontented Mr. Hoot reached their ears: and this, evidently, was an allusion to Bunter. Mr. Hoot's feelings towards 'Lord' Billy Bunter were plainly not amicable.

'But I'll sure get him!' went on the mutter. 'Marcus Knickerbocker Hoot ain't the guy to come out at the little end of the horn! Nope! If I have to hang around that dump till the cows come home, I'll sure get that noble lord. But it ain't easy! I'll tell a man, it ain't jest pie! Nope! But I'll sure get him! I guess I got the bearings of that dump now, and mebbe after dark, a galoot about my size will be inside that joint instead of outside, and if I don't cinch that noble lord, I guess I'll buy me a stand and sell peanuts! Yup!'

Mr. Hoot finished his muttered meditations with an angry grunt. Then he inserted a cigarette into his mouth, and struck a match on his pipe-stem trousers. Leaning on a tree at the side of the lane, behind which he did not begin to guess that there were five Greyfriars juniors, Marcus K.

Hoot began to smoke a cigarette which he was not destined to finish.

Harry Wharton made a sign to his comrades.

Mr. Hoot, leaning on that tree with his back to the ambushed juniors, was in point of fact just where they wanted him. He could not have placed himself more favourably for their purpose. That purpose was fixed: they were going to collar Mr. Hoot, and detain him for an interview with Inspector Grimes. And the gangster, all unconsciously, was fairly asking for it.

At the sign from Harry Wharton, the whole party moved, all at once: and they moved swiftly.

Mr. Hoot, cigarette in mouth, blew out a little cloud of smoke. He was taking another draw at the cigarette, when the shady little lane, a moment before quite solitary, became all of a sudden quite thickly populated!

Five figures appeared, as it seemed, from nowhere: five pairs of hands were laid on Mr. Hoot, and before he knew what was happening, or indeed knew that anything was happening, Mr. Hoot was up-ended, coming down on his back on the grassy earth. And as he opened his mouth to utter a startled howl, the cigarette slipped into it: and to judge by the frantic howl that escaped Mr. Hoot, he found the burning end of it very hot.

'Ooooooooooooooooooh!' raved Mr. Hoot.

'Got him!' grinned Bob Cherry.

'The gotfulness is terrific!' chuckled Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'Pin him!'

'Hang on to him!'

'Yooo-hooooop!' yelled Mr. Hoot. He spat out the cigarette. He heaved in the hands of the Famous Five.

But he heaved in vain.

They had him—by the short hairs, as Mr. Hoot might have expressed it in his own dialect. Mr. Hoot was 'cinched'. Johnny Bull and Harry Wharton had a lean arm each,—Bob Cherry grasped one long leg. Nugent grasped the other—and Hurree Jamset Ram Singh planted a knee on a bony chest. Never was a 'guy' more efficiently and thoroughly 'cinched'. Mr. Hoot's hawk-eyes popped, at the Greyfriars juniors, as he heaved and heaved. For a long minute, Marcus K. Hoot heaved under the Famous Five like a stormy sea. Then he gave it up.

'Search me!' gasped Mr. Hoot. 'You young ginks—Aw! Whadyer know! Great jumping John James Brown! You got me! You young ginks have sure got a guy! I'll tell a man! A bunch of schoolboys,—and they got Marcus Knickerbocker Hoot! If this ain't the elephant's side-whiskers, and then some!'

It was the elephant's side-whiskers, and no doubt the bee's knee and the opossum's eyebrows also! At all events the Famous Five of Greyfriars had Mr. Hoot, and they held him fast. And four members of the Co. continued to hold him fast, while the fifth cut off at top speed to the school with astonishing news for Mr. Quelch.

CHAPTER 33

BUNTER!

'POOR old Bunter!' said Bob Cherry.

'Poor old porpoise!' said Frank Nugent.

'The poorfulness of the esteemed old Bunter is terrific!' sighed Hurree Jamset Ram Singh.

'I wonder where on earth he is!' said Johnny Bull.

'Goodness knows!' said Harry Wharton, with a shake of the head.

'Not a word about him from that long-legged johnny!' remarked Lord Mauleverer. 'Not a word!'

'Poor old Bunter!'

Six fellows, sitting round the table at tea in No. 1 Study in the Remove, were feeling quite concerned.

It was not often that fellows in the Remove cared two hoots, or one, where Billy Bunter might be. If Bunter was absent, any fellow who thought of him at all was only likely to wish that he would continue absent. But circumstances alter cases. In the present circumstances, everyone was concerned about the fat Owl: wondering where he was, and what might happen to him.

They were having a late tea in No. 1 Study. It had been rather a busy afternoon for the Famous Five. Needless to say, Mr. Quelch had been considerably astonished when a breathless junior arrived in his study with the news that Marcus K. Hoot had been collared in Friardale Wood, and that four fellows were sitting on him to keep him safe till called for and collected, so to speak. Astonished as he was, the Remove master had lost no time in ringing Inspector Grimes: and Mr. Grimes had lost no time in collecting the kidnapper. Marcus K. Hoot, who had successfully kept outside so many cells in his native land, was now safe in a cell at Courtfield Police Station: probably deeply regretting that he had ever transferred his activities across the Atlantic.

Which was very satisfactory,—so far as it went.

Lord Mauleverer, undoubtedly, was now secure from the unwelcome attentions of the kidnapper. It was no longer necessary for Mauly to keep within gates. So far as Mauly was concerned, Marcus K. Hoot was a back number.

But Bunter?

Billy Bunter was still missing! The capture of Mr. Hoot made no difference to that. The Owl of the Remove was still absent from his accustomed place, his fate unknown. What had become of Bunter?

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob' Cherry. 'That gangster must have parked him somewhere,—miles away, of course. Might be a hundred miles away, for all we know.'

'But where?' said Nugent.

'The wherefulness is terrific!'

'Not a clue!' said Harry Wharton, 'and that brute has said nothing, and it's pretty plain that he won't say anything. They're holding him on a charge of kidnapping, but—!' He shook his head.

'We all know that he kidnapped Bunter in mistake for Mauly,' said Nugent. 'He phoned the Head—.'

'But there's no actual evidence, unless Bunter's found,' said Harry, 'and that's why the brute is keeping mum, of course. He hopes that Bunter won't be found, and that will give him a chance of wriggling through, when he comes up for trial. They won't get a word out of Hoot about Bunter.'

'Poor old Bunter!'

'Where on earth can he be?' said Bob. 'It's all right for Mauly, now Hoot is laid by the heels—but—poor old Bunter!'

'Poor old Bunter!' sighed Lord Mauleverer. 'I was goin' to kick him for walkin' off in my hat, but—poor old Bunter! How is he goin' to be found, if that brute won't own up where he is?'

'Goodness knows!'

There were six very serious faces round the tea-table in No. 1 Study. The unknown fate of Billy Bunter was undoubtedly a matter of deep concern. Obviously it was to Mr. Hoot's advantage to profess that he knew nothing of him. There was no help from that quarter. And the fact that there had been absolutely no news whatever of Bunter since he disappeared from Greyfriars, demonstrated that, wherever he was packed away, it was in a very secure spot—probably watched by some confederate of the kidnapper. Where was Bunter? What was going to happen to him?

'Poor old Bunter!' said Bob Cherry, once more, as he picked up a knife to cut the cake that was to wind tip tea in No. 1 Study. 'If he were at home, he would be nosing into this study, this very minute, after this cake! And I jolly well wish he was doing just that!'

'Yes, rather!'

'Poor old Bunter! He would enjoy this cake!' said Bob. 'Blessed if I ever thought I'd be glad to see Bunter butt in at tea-time—but now—.'

'Now—!' sighed Nugent.

'Now the gladfulness would be terrific!' said Hurree Jamset Ram Singh. 'The sight of his absurd face would be a boonful blessing.'

'Yaas, begad,' said Lord Mauleverer. 'If the old barrel could only roll in now, I wouldn't kick him, not even if he's burst my best trousers.'

'I say, you fellows!'

It was a familiar fat squeak. Six fellows fairly bounded.

Six faces spun round towards the door. The door had opened. In the doorway stood a familiar fat figure! A pair of little round eyes blinked at them through a pair of big round spectacles.

For a moment, Harry Wharton and Co. almost wondered whether they were dreaming. Billy Bunter was a prisoner in kidnappers' hands, hidden away in some unknown spot far from Greyfriars School. Or was he? It appeared that he wasn't,—for there he was, blinking at the astounded juniors through his big spectacles. The ghost of Billy Bunter could not have startled them more.

'Bunter!' gasped Bob Cherry.

'Bunter!' stuttered Harry Wharton.

'Bunter! It's Bunter!'

'The Bunterfulness is terrific.'

'Oh, gad! It's Bunter!'

'Glad to see me back, what?' grinned Billy Bunter, as he rolled into the study. 'I say, you fellows, I've had a rotten time. It wasn't too bad so long as those beasts fancied that I was Mauly, but after they found out, they kept me short of grub! I say, that looks a jolly good cake! Mind if I have a slice?'

They gazed at him.

Without waiting to ascertain whether anyone minded.

Billy Bunter helped himself to a slice of the cake. He proceeded to cut the cake down the middle in order to detach that slice. It was quite a generous slice.

'You—you—you've got back!' stuttered Bob. 'How the thump—!' exclaimed Nugent.

'What the dickens—!' ejaculated Harry Wharton. 'Turned up like a bad penny!' remarked Johnny Bull. 'He's come back in my trousers, begad! Where's my hat, Bunter?'



IN THE DOORWAY STOOD A FAMILAR FAT FIGURE!

'But howfully, my esteemed idiotic Bunter—?'

'I've been kidnapped, you know! They took me for a lord, that's why. I suppose they thought I looked like one—' explained Bunter.

'Eh?'

'Must have been that,' said Bunter. 'It wasn't because of the name in Mauly's hat—.'

'Oh, gad!'

'You should have seen Quelch's face, when I walked in,' Billy Bunter grinned, as he sliced at the cake. 'Did he jump?'

'But what—how—?'

'You'd have thought Quelch would have been pleased to see a chap, after all I've been through,—kept short of grub, and all that! Well, he jawed me for borrowing Mauly's hat—making out that it was all my own fault! Quelch all over! I say, you fellows, I've been hours and hours on the train, and I've come in jolly hungry,—and then Quelch jawed a chap, instead of asking him whether he'd had his tea.' Bunter munched cake. 'I say, this ain't bad—I can tell you I'm jolly hungry—mind if I finish it?'

'But how—?'

'Why—?'

'What—?'

Questions rained on Bunter. But the fat Owl's jaws were too busy now for speech. Again without waiting to ascertain whether anyone minded, Bunter proceeded to finish the cake. And not until the last crumb and the last plum had disappeared within the fat Owl's extensive circumference, did Harry Wharton and Co. hear the strange tale of the unexpected kidnapping and still more unexpected rescue of 'Lord' Billy Bunter.

THE END